

# Destiny's Desire



E. J. Anderson

©Copyright 2020 by Liz Severn - All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Any characters or names, other than historical figures and their place in the novel, are purely from the imagination of the author.

## PROLOGUE

Gabriel Freeman stood on the corner watching the two youngsters argue. He wished he had siblings like that. Even though he was an only child, he knew enough families to realize that brothers and sisters had many disagreements, but he didn't care. He would give almost anything to have a little blonde sister like the one squabbling with the redheaded boy.

Without warning, she punched her companion in the face. The boy knocked her into the street. She landed on her back, scrambled to her knees, grabbed his ankle, and pulled him into the dirt with her.

Gabe watched in disbelief as the pair wrestled. Then, realizing that neither was going to stop, he strode over to them. Wrapping his arms around the little girl's waist, he pulled her off the redhead. She squirmed in his arms, trying to free herself. But Gabe tucked her under one arm and held her while he grasped the boy's upper arm and pulled him to his feet.

"Let go of me!" the boy shouted.

"Not until you agree to sit on the boardwalk and settle down," Gabe replied in his most fatherly tone.

The boy dropped onto the edge of the boardwalk and glared up at him. Finally, the girl stopped squirming. Gabe was glad, because he was starting to lose his hold on her. Resituating her so he could put his other arm under her knees, he sank onto the boardwalk beside the boy and set the girl on his lap.

Without looking to see if the girl was hurt, he scolded the boy, whose nose was bleeding, in a kindly tone. "How old are you, young man?"

"Nine," he mumbled.

"Then you should know better than to fight with girls. It isn't nice."

"She hit me first!" he proclaimed.

"It doesn't matter. A man never, *ever* hits a woman."

"She's bigger than me."

"I don't care. Now you apologize to your friend."

"But she started it."

"Apologize," Gabe demanded, beginning to lose his patience with this youngster. "Then run along home."

"I'm sorry," the boy said before he raced down the street and around the corner where Gabe had stood earlier.

Turning his gaze to the child on his lap, he noticed that she stared up at him. Her blue

eyes, as pale as her hair and skin, were wide with awe. Her medium blue gingham dress was only slightly rumpled from the tussle. He brushed off a little dirt then returned his gaze to her oval face. Her lips parted slightly, revealing the tips of a few new teeth growing in. He smiled at her, and she returned it.

This little girl was going to break a lot of hearts when she grew up, Gabe decided. She was the most beautiful child he'd ever laid eyes on, and she would only get more attractive as she matured.

But he needed to think of other things, like why he'd stopped the fight in the first place.

"And how old are you, pretty lady?" he asked.

Her face reddened, but she didn't break her stare. "Seven. How old are you?"

"Sixteen. Don't you know that boys don't like girls who fight with them?"

"I don't *want* him to like me, because I don't like him."

Startled by her speech pattern, which sounded older than seven years old, he stared down at her. This youngster knew exactly what she wanted and didn't want, and she didn't have any qualms about revealing her feelings. He hadn't known that they made little girls like that. But then he hadn't had a lot of experience with children, either.

"It's still probably not a good idea to fight with him. Other men might see you—men you might want to like you. What would you do if one of them saw you fight and decided not to like you because of it? You might not get married when you grow up."

She shrugged. "That's okay. I don't want to get married, anyway."

Gabe stifled a chuckle, sensing that the little girl would only get angry if he laughed at her. "That will probably change when you get older. Then what would you do? Most boys won't have anything to do with you if you're going to fight with them."

She examined him for a moment then jumped off his lap and stood before him. With a toss of her long, platinum braids, she straightened her shoulders.

"*You* don't mind," she declared. "In fact, I think you *liked* that I could take care of myself. I'll bet you like it when a girl doesn't let boys bully her."

Gabe gasped in shock. How had she known that? But before he could reply, she said, "When *I'm* sixteen and you're twenty-five, you'll probably *still* think it's good that I don't let boys bully me. Right?"

"What I think doesn't matter," he said, a bit unnerved by such an insightful child. "Besides, you're changing the subject."

"No, I'm not. You said boys don't like girls who fight, and you're a boy who doesn't care if I fight."

"Hey!" a male voice shouted from nearby. "What are you doing with my little sister?"

Gabe released a sigh of relief. He didn't want to answer—no matter how accurate she was. Scrambling to his feet, Gabe stood in the street beside the little girl. A boy about his own age glared down at him from the boardwalk. The teen had pale blond hair just like the girl's,

but his eyes were green rather than blue. He also had more color in his skin.

"She's your sister?" Gabe finally asked.

"Just answer my question. Why are you talking to her? You're too old for her."

"He is not!" she shrieked. "He's sixteen, and so are you. And *you're* not too old for me."

"Shut up, Fan," the teen said sharply.

"She was having a fight," Gabe replied, ignoring the child, "and I stopped it. I was just telling her that little girls shouldn't fight."

"No, you weren't," Fan corrected. "You were telling me that boys don't like girls who fight. That's different than telling me I shouldn't fight."

The teen laughed then proclaimed, "That's my sister! There's absolutely no arguing with her logic. And she's only seven years old!"

"So she told me," Gabe said.

"I'd hate to be the man to marry her," the teen said as though Gabe hadn't responded. "*She* would be the one to wear the pants in that family, because her husband won't be able to contradict her without looking foolish."

"You know I'm not getting married," she proclaimed.

"Oh, you'll get married, all right." Gabe smiled down at her and winked. "The pretty ones *always* get married."

"There, you see? That's what I've been telling you all along," the teen told his sister. Turning his gaze to Gabe, the teen extended his right hand. "I should probably thank you for stopping the fight. Ma'd tan *both* of our hides if she heard what happened. I'm supposed to be watching the little imp, but I was talking to a girl *my* age instead. My name's Nels."

"Gabe," he replied, shaking Nels' hand. "I'm glad I could help. I just wish I had a little sister like yours."

Nels laughed and jumped off the boardwalk. Grasping the girl's hand, he said, "No, you don't. She's much too smart for her big brother. You new in town?"

"I'm visiting my aunt."

"Who's that?"

"Florence Miner."

"Nope. Don't know her. You wanna meet me here tonight, and we'll go do something?"

"What kind of something?"

Nels shrugged. "Don't know. Something."

"Nothing you'll get in trouble doing," Fan announced with a giggle, "because Mama wouldn't like that."

Again, Nels laughed, this time at what must have been the obvious expression of surprise Gabe hadn't been able to suppress when Fan relieved his only concern about meeting her

brother. Gabe slammed his mouth shut and tore his startled gaze from the little girl.

"What time should I be here?" he asked.

"I can probably get back to town by eight."

"All right. And thank you for offering."

"My pleasure. Let's go, imp," Nels said as he started off down the street with her tagging along. "Ma's gonna be furious if I don't get you home soon."

As Gabe watched them depart, the little girl turned around and walked backward to smile and wave at him. He returned her smile and waved back before she turned again and skipped along beside her brother.

Too bad he and his parents were headed west to start a cattle ranch. He would have liked to stay here in Moline, Illinois, and watch that little girl grow up. He'd known a lot of children, of course, but none of them had been as bright or as outspoken as she was. He wondered what she would be like as an adult.

\*\*\*

Fanchon Sten stood on the front porch with Nels and her identical twin sister.

"Please take me, Nels," she said without even a hint of pleading in her tone.

"Me, too," Astrid begged.

"You can't go," Fanchon declared. "He's *my* friend."

"But you said he's handsome, and you never think *any* boy's handsome. I want to see for myself."

Fanchon bristled. "You can't go because he was nice to *me*. Boys are *always* nice to you. They just fight with me." She turned her gaze to her big brother. "Don't take her, Nels. The boys don't like me because I'm smarter than she is. They *all* like her because she's prettier. Why can't I talk to a boy who thinks I'm smart?"

"Neither of you can go," Nels said, shaking his head, "because you're both supposed to be in bed. If Ma sees you out here, she's going to blame *me*."

"No, she won't," Fanchon argued. "She always blames *me* for everything." She shrugged. "But I don't care. I know she just doesn't like it because I'm so smart."

"It's not because you're smart, imp. It's because you're so damned ..." He glanced around to see if his parents had been watching. "It's because you're so independent. She worries that you're going to get into a situation you can't handle someday." With a hand on Fanchon's left shoulder and one on Astrid's right, he turned them in opposite directions and gave them a little shove toward the house. "Now both of you get back to bed before Ma sees you."

"This is *your* fault," Fanchon declared, glaring at her twin. "Nels would have taken me if *you* hadn't wanted to go, too."

“No, he wouldn’t have,” Astrid returned. “That boy is *his* friend—not yours. You just *think* he was nice to you. I bet he wasn’t.”

“He was, too! He was nice, and he likes me because I’m smart. He practically said so.”

“Practically isn’t saying so,” Astrid said as the pair stalked into the house.

Chuckling, Nels shook his head and started toward town. Until his sisters had been born, he hadn’t realized that two people could look so much alike and be so completely different—not to mention constantly at each other’s throats like a couple of stray dogs wanting the racoon one had killed.

## ONE

Fanchon passed the Moline House at least twice a day. Each time she waved to her friend who clerked the registration desk on weekdays. At six-foot, Byron Wood was an attractive man with brown hair and eyes. But the man across the counter who turned around when Byron returned her greeting was much more handsome.

Stunned by the sight of the sandy-blond Union soldier, she stopped short to rest her fingertips on the window. The man was at least three inches taller than Byron, and he stared back at her with his mouth agape, his eyes wide in astonishment. Many Rebels had been brought to the Rock Island Prison Barracks, but not one soldier—Union or Confederate—nor any civilian compared to the gentleman in the Moline House. If more men like him came to the prison noncontagious diseases hospital where she worked, ...

The hospital! If she didn't drag herself from the stranger's captivating gaze, she would be late to meet the train with the incoming prisoners.

Long ago she'd learned to ignore ogling men, but the expression in the officer's eyes wasn't a lustful leer brought on by her unwanted beauty. It was a look of astonishment, and she could scarcely bear the thought of leaving. Unfortunately, she had no choice. Maybe he was on his way to his new duty station at the barracks on Rock Island. Or maybe he was going to the Arsenal on the same island in the Mississippi River between Moline, Illinois, and Davenport, Iowa.

To save time, Fanchon waved down a hansom cab driver. Settling into the seat, she told him to take her to the train depot. Now if she could just dismiss the new man in town from her mind and concentrate on her nursing duties.

The clerk interrupted his unexpected daydream of meeting that young woman back to the transaction by saying, "Major?"

The officer turned back toward the clerk, Byron Wood according to the wooden sign on the counter. If he worded it right, a cheerful observation might get him an introduction later. "You grow them tall and beautiful in Moline, don't you."

"I don't understand, sir," Byron replied.

"The young lady you waved to. She's the most ravishing creature I've ever set eyes on."

"Also the busiest," Byron admitted with a grimace, "and the least interested in men. Probably has something to do with her job."

"What does she do?" the major asked, not at all surprised that she worked. Women all over the country had taken employment to substitute for the men who went to fight.



“She’s a nurse at the prisoner of war camp.”

“Is that why she wears men’s clothing?”

“She says she has more freedom of movement in pants, and she doesn’t have to worry about blood getting on her dresses. People say a lot of nasty things about her, but she doesn’t care. She does what she wants no matter what other people think. I’ve never met such an independent girl.”

Byron’s confession reminded him of the little girl he’d met when he’d been in Moline nearly eleven years ago, the little blonde whom he hadn’t been able to get out of his mind in all that time. Now he wanted to meet that woman even more.

But what would he do if he *did* meet her? What if she wasn’t the fantasy he’d built her into? She was the reason he’d ridden to Moline on his way to Washington, D.C. He’d wanted to know how she’d grown up.

He shook the notion from his head. That woman probably wasn’t even the same person.

To conceal his thoughts, he said, “I didn’t know women like that existed. Maybe stopping over in Moline isn’t such a bad idea after all. With women like her around, this could be an interesting couple of days.”

“There’s only one more like her in Moline, and even *she’s* not quite the same.” To the soldier’s dismay, Byron changed the subject. “If you want a room, major, you’ll have to sign the register.”

Dipping the pen into the ink, the officer scribbled Gabriel Freeman in the book before him. “So far, we’ve established that she’s beautiful, smart, and one of a kind. What else can you tell me about her?”

“She’s more than just smart, sir,” Byron insisted with a heavy note of pride in his voice. “She finished school two years ahead of the other children her age.”

“Then she’s beautiful, *brilliant*, and one of a kind.” Even as Gabe replied, an idea came to his mind. Whether she was the girl of his fantasies or not, she sounded perfect, but he needed more information before he could be sure. “You’ve already staked a claim on her, haven’t you.”

Byron shot his startled gaze to the soldier. “No man will ever stake a claim on *her*. She won’t let him. You’ll never meet anybody as independent as she is. How many nights do you need the room?”

At least, she wasn’t taken. Things were coming together in a very positive way. “Make it three. Maybe somebody will introduce me to her, and I’ll want to spend the extra night. Unfortunately, that’s all I can spare.”

“All right, Major Freeman. Three nights.”

\*\*\*

Why couldn't she concentrate? Why did her mind continually return to the Moline House and the unconcealed appreciative stare of the officer? Had her own expression been as revealing as his? Quickly scanning the vicinity around the depot, Fanchon noticed that he had yet to take his position with the troops.

What a ridiculous notion! Of course, he wouldn't appear. He was only passing through Moline—either on his way to war or on his way home. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been in the hotel. To her amazement, the thought disappointed her. He was one man for whom she would have made time to indulge in a courtship.

"Come here, Fanchon," Dr. Watson said impatiently.

Startled from her thoughts, she hurried to the surgeon-in-charge. "Yes, sir?"

"This man needs my standard dosage of laudanum, but double it for the man over there."

Glancing in the direction he pointed, Fanchon nodded. At the moment, she didn't want to speak. She just wanted to dwell on the soldier and her fantasy of meeting him. He was the first man she'd felt an interest in, and she would probably never get to know him. What a distressing thought! Dr. Watson's voice filtered into her daydreams, and she turned her blank gaze upon him.

"What's the matter with you tonight?" he asked. "You're acting like your mind is across the river.

"That's how I feel, too," she answered as she measured the correct amount of laudanum into a syringe. "I can't seem to concentrate."

"If I didn't know better," he said, teasing her. "I'd say that you have man-trouble."

"You know that's never my problem, doctor."

"You're the best nurse I've ever had, Fanchon, but you're young. One of these days you're going to lay those beautiful baby blues on a man who'll turn your head and steal your heart."

"What nonsense!"

Finishing her instructions for that patient, she went to the other man as she reconsidered Dr. Watson's observation. Was it really nonsense?

\*\*\*

Between her inability to keep her mind off the soldier and an extremely busy day, she was mentally and physically exhausted. All she wanted to do was stroll to her uncle's house and relax over a cup of cocoa before bed. Thank goodness, her relatives had offered her a place in town to sleep. She dreaded walking to the farm after dark. Enough danger lurked in the streets of Moline—especially with the threat she'd been issued.

As she wandered along the boardwalk, her thoughts returned to the officer in the Moline House. Why couldn't she get him out of her mind? Yet her intuition cried out that she would meet him. How could that be? He was just a traveler seeking a comfortable place to stay.

An arm encircled her from behind; a hand clamped over her mouth to muffle her scream. What had she done? She'd let her guard down and been captured. And to think of all the times that she'd been warned!

Even as a child she'd prided herself on being bright and levelheaded. But that night those traits had failed her—at the mere sight of a handsome man. Her whole life could be destroyed because of a fantasy. She might not even live long enough for her dreams to come true.

Terror turned to fury. Fanchon battled her assailant with a vengeance. Despite her continuous squirming, the man dragged her down a dark, dirty alley toward an open door where a light shone from within.

No man could treat her like this without recrimination. When the door closed and the man released her, Fanchon shrieked for help. A knife point pricked the skin just under her chin. She froze. Fear returned along with the racing of her heart. The man was armed, and she was at his mercy with no hope of freeing herself soon.

The sharply honed blade slid down the front of her shirt, neatly rending the fabric to expose her firm, naked breasts. In an instant, the cool metal pressed against her throat. Then a hot, husky voice spoke into her ear.

\*\*\*

Gabe Freeman wandered along the boardwalk. According to the Moline House clerk, the nurse was unique. Would she fit his idea of perfection? Was that why he had to find her? Or was it because he desperately needed to know if that was the same little girl he'd met all those years ago?

Disappointed that he hadn't been able to locate her during his hours-long meandering, Gabe rounded the corner on his return to the Moline House. There she was. He could tell by the distinctive light blonde plait hanging down the middle of her back. In the next moment, the gas streetlight on the opposite side of the road revealed an encounter she obviously didn't want.

The assault on this woman infuriated him. He didn't care if it was the woman he'd seen earlier that day or not. Racing down the street, he stopped short at the dark alley down which the pair had disappeared. A door slammed, and a faint shriek for help came from inside one of the five store backs. He hesitated, unsure what to do but desperate to help her. Where had they gone? Unless she screamed again, he could waste a lot of time trying to find her. But he *had* to. In a frantic effort to locate her, he raced from door to door.

\*\*\*

"I told you it wasn't safe to walk alone after dark," the man holding her growled.

"Trevor!" she exclaimed. "Stop this!"

The door banged open, and Fanchon glanced up in astonishment. The officer from the Moline House loomed in the portal. An irate accusation burst forth from him. "You bastard!"

Using Trevor's surprise to her advantage, she jerked downward on his knife-wielding hand. The sharp point sliced across her right breast, leaving a three-inch gash on the upper-middle portion of her cleavage. Too angry to be slowed, she ignored the stinging pain and dipped under Trevor's right arm. At the same time, she twisted his wrist, raised her leg, and slammed his forearm across her thigh, disarming her opponent.

Then she was on the defensive again. He drove his shoulder into her abdomen, forcing a gush of air out her mouth. As they tumbled against the brick wall, Fanchon hit her head. The incredible pain sent sparks in a field of black before her eyes, and she unwillingly gave herself over to the darkness engulfing her.

Everything happened before Gabe could react. It was as though he was reliving that moment eleven years ago when he'd pulled the little blonde girl off the redhead boy when they were fighting. He'd already seen that this woman was beautiful, had already learned that she was intelligent and independent. But this young woman was more than that. She was also scrappy enough to fight for her freedom, waiting until just the right moment to defend herself.

This nurse was a woman he could depend upon to take care of herself. Unfortunately, she wasn't able to do it right now. His only recourse now was to protect her.

Enraged beyond control, Gabe slammed the door while the woman's assailant scrambled to his feet.

"God damn you to hell for that!" Gabe roared, sprinting toward his opponent.

The man sidestepped him, and Gabe crashed into a table of dry goods. It toppled over, and thrown off balance by the impact, Gabe tumbled to the floor. As he scrambled to his feet, a chair shattered over his back. But the pain didn't stop him. He grabbed a chair leg and rose completely, swinging it at his opponent.

The smaller man with dark red hair ducked under the wood then rammed a stick into Gabe's stomach. Doubling over in agony, Gabe clutched his abdomen with both arms. The redhead had to be crazed to fight so furiously against someone a good half foot taller than he. When Gabe started to straighten up, blinding pain shot through the side of his head. A moment later he collapsed to the floor.

A low groan from deep within his throat was the next thing Gabe heard. Opening his eyes, he saw the man kneeling over the nurse with his trousers around his knees! Thank goodness, the nurse was still clothed in her trousers, although the redhead's fingers were working the buttons at the waistband.

For several moments, Gabe couldn't piece together the fragmented scene. When he did, though, he scrambled to his feet with an irate expletive. But before he could reach the redhead, the man raced from the building, holding up his unbuttoned trousers with one hand.

Gabe stared down at the young woman in wonder. Her skin was pale right down to the pinkish tip of her one exposed breast. Her hair was light blonde, but not just like the little girl's he had stopped from fighting all those years ago. Her hips appeared wide, an ideal quality for bearing children.

Yes, this nurse's body was his idea of perfection. She was beautiful, intelligent, independent, and spunky. But could she bear him a lot of offspring? That was the last requirement on his list, and he would get an answer to that by midday tomorrow. With any luck, he would have her by the time he left Moline.

But first he had to hide what had happened before she woke up. Thank God, she was still unconscious. He rebuttoned her trousers, he brushed against the soft bare skin beneath them. As much as he wanted to caress her, he couldn't. She had been assaulted, and he had to show her that she could trust him if he wanted to spend any time with her. At the same time, he couldn't let her know that he likened her to a little girl he'd met when he was younger.

Stripping off his shirt, he put it on the woman backwards, scooped her into his arms, and fled into the alley. He stopped short. What was he doing? If he took her to the Moline House, people would talk about her even more than Byron Wood already claimed. He couldn't take her to a doctor, either, because then he would have to ask directions. No doubt remained. He had to tend to her himself.

Fanchon drifted into consciousness feeling the tender caress of a hand under her breast. A moment later a gentle pressure stung her cut. An entirely new sensation swept over her, a pleasurable undercurrent of desire, and a soft, blissful moan slipped from her throat.

The hand under her breast moved to caress her cheek. It was a touch unlike any she'd ever experienced, and she longed to remain in the dreamlike state forever, until she remembered the major. Now she needed to know. Was it he or Trevor? What a ridiculous question! It couldn't be her life-long enemy; he didn't know how to be gentle. It had to be the major. Opening her eyes, she gazed up at the officer, who the most endearing smile she'd ever seen.

"I'm not going to hurt you, miss," he said in a deep, melodic voice as caressing as his touch. "I'm only trying to stop the bleeding."

His classically featured face was marred by a large red mark on the left side. Reaching up, she laid her fingers on the swollen, bloody wound between his temple and ear. "You've been hurt."

"I've been hurt a lot worse than this," he replied. "I took a Sioux arrow in my chest then pulled two of my troops and my commanding officer to safety. A little bump on the noggin is nothing."

"Let me examine you."

When she started to sit up, he gently pushed her back to the floor by her shoulder. "No, you don't, nurse-lady. You lie still until I get this bleeding stopped."

To her surprise, Fanchon felt no embarrassment. This stranger had seen her nearly naked to the waist, and she hadn't given it a second thought. From everything Astrid had told her, most men enjoyed looking at and fondling women with firm breasts like theirs, but the major's actions weren't those of a man overwhelmed by desire. At least, she didn't think they were.

Still, she should feel at least some emotional discomfort. Why didn't she? Maybe it was because he didn't seem to care that her breasts were slightly larger than most women's. He had gallantly covered her other breast with his shirt. Another possibility was that he had become her hero—just like that hero who had come into her life then disappeared when she was only seven years old. Whatever the reason, she didn't mind him aiding her so intimately. She enjoyed it!

Had he ever been wrong! Going into the house the day his mother died *wasn't* the hardest thing he would ever have to do. Tending to this young woman's injury was a mixture of pleasure and fortitude. He was glad for the opportunity to gain her confidence by showing concern. But restraining his growing desire to show her how wonderful making love could be was nearly impossible.

She was even more beautiful than he'd realized, and he needed all of his mental strength to concentrate on his task. Still, he longed for a taste of her pouty lips. Despite his agonizing battle against the overpowering urge, his emotional and physical arousal grew. He'd started his first aid while she was unconscious. Now that she was awake, he questioned the advisability of checking her wound.

"I wonder if the bleeding has stopped," he said.

"There's only one way to answer that."

Gabe stared at her in astonishment. Given the stunned expression on her oval face, she hadn't intended for the words to come out in the sensual tone that they had. Given the circumstances and his growing arousal, it was better to ignore that she sounded willing to accommodate his desire even though she'd just been assaulted.

Returning his gaze to the piece of cotton shirt covering her breast, he struggled to conceal his true emotions. "I suppose there is."

"It's all right," she assured him with a smile. "Somehow you know I'm a nurse, and I know that your intentions are honorable."

Honorable hell! Gabe thought. He was only doing this to get what he wanted—her. No, that wasn't completely true. He would have helped her even if she'd been ugly. But he certainly wouldn't be having so much trouble stopping himself from taking her right then and there.

Slowly removing the material, he glanced at her injury then announced, "The bleeding's stopped." As she sat up, he held his uniform shirt toward her. She slipped into it then buttoned it while he watched with a mixture of distress and interest. "You'd better take care of that cut when you get home."

“Do you think it needs stitches?” she asked.

“Probably not.”

“Thank goodness. It’s bad enough having a cut there without more people than necessary examining it.” She glanced around the storage room then returned her gaze to his face. “I see you scared him off. Thank you.”

“I wanted to get you away from here in case he came back, but I didn’t know where to take you. I locked the door instead.”

“You still saved me from an awful fate,” she insisted. “And I’m very grateful.”

Gabe frowned at the thought of his secret. If she knew that he had ulterior motives, she wouldn’t be grateful. A tug of guilt gripped his heart, and he changed the subject. “My name is Gabriel Freeman.”

She extended her hand toward him. “How do you do, Major Freeman. I’m Fanchon Sten.”

“What an unusual name. Fanchon. It’s pretty.” Flashing a bright smile, he shook her hand and added, “But not as pretty as you are.”

Fanchon gasped at the shock of excitement that shot through her when he grasped her hand. Why had he said that? She didn’t *feel* pretty—not like Astrid claimed to feel, anyway. But she couldn’t admit that to this handsome soldier. To avoid more personal conversation, Fanchon bowed her head. “It’s Teutonic, meaning free. Dad decided it was better than Anna, which means gracious, because I’m so independent. I am, too. Free, I mean. I’ll never kneel before any man or woman who isn’t injured.”

How embarrassing! She’s always prided herself on being concise with words. Now she was babbling like a nervous schoolgirl. Again, his expression prohibited any prolonged introspection on her part. A severe frown accentuated his face, making him appear desolate, when a moment earlier he’d been equally happy. Gabriel Freeman was a man of extreme mood fluctuations.

“Is something wrong, Major Freeman?” Fanchon asked.

“Wrong?” he repeated. Then he grinned again. “Only one thing. My friends call me Gabe not Major Freeman. That’s reserved for the troops. You aren’t in the Army, are you?”

Fanchon giggled. “Of course not.”

Why was she acting like this? She’d never flirted with a man before, yet she was doing exactly what Astrid would do when she confronted a handsome fellow.

“Then I guess that makes you my friend,” he said. “You’re a little young to be a nurse. Does that have anything to do with you finishing school early?” When she stared at him in shock, he laughed, a rich, full sound that made her heart flutter. “Your admirer at the Moline House told me about you; although, I practically had to interrogate him to get answers.”

“What admirer?” she asked.

“The desk clerk at the Moline House. I believe his name is Byron Wood.”

“Byron Wood?” she repeated, stunned by this revelation. “My admirer? That’s nonsense. We’ve been friends too long for that.”

“Now *that’s* nonsense. Any man can admire a woman no matter how long they’ve been friends.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

Gabe’s mind spun with excitement. This was the part of courtship that he liked the best. All his life women had flocked to him, but he still loved to charm them. And from the look in Fanchon’s pale blue eyes, she would love to have him do it.

The only thing that bothered him was this feeling of being out of control that swept through him. His heart constricted at the memory of the promise he’d made himself. When he’d vowed to marry a beautiful, intelligent, independent woman unafraid to demonstrate those qualities, he’d believed it meant that he would stay single forever. He never believed any woman would commit herself to being free—with the possible exception of that little girl who had claimed she could take care of herself. Then again, he’d never been in very close contact with women to learn much about them. Thus far, his life had been spent either on a farm or ranch, or on Army posts at Fort Laramie and Fort Bridger.

To avoid his thoughts, he said, “You can’t be that naive, Fanchon. Would you consider it ridiculous if I announced that *I’m* an admirer?”

“That’s different. We just met. I’ve had many men infatuated with me, and it passes when they realize I’m not interested in courtship. The same thing will happen to you.” Obviously, she realized what she’d insinuated, because she blushed and rushed on in a flurry of words. Gabe grinned, delighted to know he could fluster this lovely young woman. “*If* you meant it when you told me that you’re an admirer. Did you?”

“Oh, I meant it, all right, Fanchon. Now it’s time for you to answer my question. How old are you?”

“Seventeen. Eighteen in a couple of weeks.”

His chest tightened at her reply. Not quite eleven years ago, the little girl had been seven. Good Lord, the possibility was becoming closer to reality! But how could he possibly convince someone that young to marry him in one day? “Eighteen? I was hoping you were at least a *couple* years older than that.”

“You’re not that old, are you?” she returned. “You seem awfully young for a major, too.”

He shrugged. “I suppose I am, but I feel old enough after all the campaigns I put in to earn the rank. I’m twenty-seven. That’s still quite a bit older than you, especially at your age. Now if you were twenty-one and I were ...” Gabe stopped midsentence, stunned by what he’d almost said. Thank God, he realized what he was thinking before he finished. He shouldn’t be telling this young woman that he would initiate a physical liaison. Now that he knew how old she was, even suggesting it would be difficult. He would have to be very careful how he approached her.

“If I were twenty-one and you were thirty, ... what?” she asked.



"The age difference wouldn't matter," he explained, despite the excitement coursing through him.

She hesitated then asked, "Are you saying that because you don't want me to be disappointed when you leave?"

"That's right. I don't want you to be disappointed. I'll take you home now."

"I'm not going home tonight. I'm staying at my uncle's. My brothers are at war, so they can't escort me home after dark."

"Then you have no one to protect you from that man I took care of a while ago?" he asked.

"No. I don't dare tell Dad, because he might do something irrational."

"In that case, I'm staying at least through tomorrow. Can you make arrangements for me to show you how to protect yourself?"

"Probably, but you don't need to."

"Yes, I do. Now let's go."

"Before we do, may I ask you a question? Are you going to the war?"

"As a matter of fact, I am."

"Is that why you don't want me to be disappointed?"

To avoid answering, he grasped her hands and pulled her to her feet. The smile on his lips disappeared as he stared down into the large, baby blue eyes pleading for him to answer. Honesty would come easily, too. Going to war *wasn't* the reason he didn't want her to be disappointed. If he told her that, though, he would have to give her a plausible explanation—and he didn't know how to explain his logic, because he wasn't sure logic was even involved.

His mind drained of all thoughts except one. He wanted to embrace her, to devour her with a kiss so passionate that she would never forget him.

## TWO

Confused by the tantalizing emotional charge that Gabe created in her, Fanchon studied the expression in his brown eyes. She bit her bottom lip gently as she tried to read his thoughts. He appeared as though he wanted to kiss her, and she would accept it if he did. What was she thinking? Gabe wouldn't kiss her now; he was too much of a gentleman. He would never consider such an intimate act when he'd rescued her from Trevor minutes earlier.

"I imagine you're right," she agreed. "We should probably leave."

Gabe draped his arm around her shoulders. Grasping her upper arm, he held her against his body as he escorted her from the storage room. In his protective embrace, Fanchon felt comfortable and safe, as though she belonged there. Gabe seemed to be a man who wouldn't bind her in a relationship where he expected her to give up her freedom to satisfy his masculine needs. But his restraint didn't prove that he would let her be free.

Glancing up, she realized for the first time that this kind, understanding stranger was naked above the waist. Had she become so accustomed to men's nude bodies at the hospital that she'd lost all attraction toward them? Impossible! Now that she felt his skin against her cheek she had an even stronger attraction to him. How would it feel for him to hold her in his arms, to hug her close, to run his fingers through her hair? How would he taste if he bent over her and kissed her?

They stopped, and Fanchon stared at the door of her aunt and uncle's house in a daze. They were standing on the porch, but she had no recollection of their walk. They could only have arrived there if she'd led the way, but she didn't even remember that. Her normally realistic mind had been centered on a fantasy the entire fifteen-minute walk. Without hesitation, she grasped his arm and pulled him downward to plant a light kiss on his beard-stubbed cheek.

"Thank you for rescuing me, Gabe," she said. "If I can ever do anything for you, just ask."

Gabe considered her offer. From her desirous expression, she knew what she had suggested. But she was only eighteen. Most likely, she was still a virgin. He'd never been in such a quandary. Given everything he'd learned about her, Fanchon had everything he wanted in a wife—plus some. And he wanted her so badly it hurt, physically as well as emotionally.

An unexpected thought crossed his mind. If Fanchon was as intelligent as he'd heard, maybe she had the same type of realistic outlook on marriage that he did. And if that were

the case, he might have met his mate. His fantasy might become reality. But he needed more information before he could give serious consideration to her suggestion.

“All I want from you,” he said, “is your promise to meet me tomorrow. I want to teach you to protect yourself.”

Fanchon smiled and bowed her head. “I promise.”

“Terrific! Let’s get you inside.”

“You can’t come in,” she denied, shooting her panicked gaze back to his face. “If you do, Uncle Hal will be suspicious. He’ll have questions that I don’t want to answer. He works for a local newspaper, Gabe. I don’t want what happened made public.”

Smiling, Gabe trailed the backs of his fingers across her blemish-free jawline and sighed. At last, he caressed her shoulders and gazed into her pale eyes, saying, “I don’t blame you, Fanchon, but they’ll know whether I go in or not. You can’t hide your assault, even if you return my shirt right here. Yours was destroyed, remember?”

She stared up at him. The expression of despair etched on her face compelled him to draw her against him and stroke her soft, baby-fine hair while her cheek rested on his upper chest. After kissing the top of her head, he said, “Don’t worry, Fanchon. I’ll help you con—”

Fanchon sighed. His embrace was so warm, his voice so reassuring, that she didn’t want to move for the rest of her life. Being in his comforting arms was her most wonderful experience. She longed for him to lay her down and make her a woman right there on her uncle’s porch. As she slid her arms around his back and gazed up into his dark eyes, the door beside them opened. Fanchon shot her startled stare toward it.

“I thought I heard ...” The tall man with thick gray hair narrowed his green eyes. “What the hell’s going on here?”

“Uncle Hal!” Fanchon gasped. Her astonishment froze her while she looked up at him. This situation was going to be worse than she’d thought now that they’d been caught in an embrace. She averted her gaze to Gabe and saw that he was staring at her uncle with wide brown eyes. Apparently, he’d been startled into immobility as well.

“You were supposed to be working tonight, Fanchon,” Hal Osterberg scolded. “Our home’s not open to you if you’re having clandestine meetings so your mother doesn’t know.”

Beside her Gabe inhaled as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders and turned toward Hal. Fanchon gazed up at him, disappointed that he’d released her from their full embrace.

“Excuse me, sir,” he said, “but it’s not what you think. Fanchon was assaulted. I was only giving her ... brotherly support.”

*Brotherly support?* she thought. *It was only brotherly support?* How could she have responded like she had if that’s all it had been? How could she have experienced such intense, unrestrained emotional turmoil if his embrace had been nothing more than a brotherly action. Unless, perhaps, his brief pause meant that his words were said merely to pacify Hal.

“If that was your idea of brotherly support, young man,” Hal said, “I don’t think I should be around to see how you support a woman you love.”

Fanchon gasped in shock and exclaimed, “Uncle Hal!” She had to say something to take Hal’s mind off having found her in Gabe’s embrace. Desperate to say anything, she explained, “Gabe saved my virtue tonight—not to mention my life. You could at least be polite.”

Hal examined her before returning his gaze to Gabe. “Fanchon’s right. I’m sorry, young man. Our family tends to be a bit overprotective of my sister’s daughter. Won’t you come in and sit a spell? Maybe you’d like a glass of brandy.”

Smiling, Gabe acted as though Hal hadn’t voiced such bitter words. This whole scene made Fanchon uncomfortable, but Gabe didn’t seem phased. More than anything, she wanted to start the evening over so they could have a pleasurable first meeting, but that could never happen.

Then his voice drifted to her ears with such levity that it stunned her. “My aching body and I would appreciate that, sir.”

Aching body? She hadn’t noticed any wounds other than the lump on his head, but he’d apparently been hurt worse than he’d said. Guilt for not taking a more active interest in his injuries rushed through her.

Now she understood Dr. Watson’s warning against becoming involved with her patients. All the attraction and wonderful sensations blocked one’s ability to concentrate on anything else. Or was it those sparkling brown eyes that made all logical thoughts drain from her mind? How many other females had fallen prey to his captivating gaze?

“Are you going to stare at your hero all night, Fanchon?” Hal teased. “Or are you going to let him have that drink?”

Reacting quickly, she preceded the men into the sitting room where a stout, gray-haired lady was crocheting. Holding his hand, Fanchon introduced Gabe to Harold and Emily Osterberg then led him to the well-padded Chippendale sofa.

Fanchon glanced around as Gabe sat down. She’d always loved this room. It was cozy and reflected the tastes of her aunt. Like the sofa, two Chippendale wing chairs were covered with beige wool. The Boston rocker in which Em sat was padded with colorfully flowered pillows. All the wood was polished to a bright shine.

Steeling herself for the job at hand, Fanchon stepped in front of Gabe. Even though she longed to touch him forever, she focused her attention on examining his wounds. She glanced behind him. Across his broad back were several abrasions, and there was a large bruise near his narrow waist. At least, the bleeding from his head wound, which had matted his sandy-blond hair near his temple, had stopped. A deep purple bruise on his abdomen was partially hidden by the hair running down the middle of his hard, muscular stomach. What a wonderful specimen of a man!

Then Fanchon noticed the signs of previous battles—a scar on his upper right chest, one on each side of his left arm, one close to his left side and another in his back, both just under his ribs. Gabriel Freeman had flirted with death on more than one occasion. And he’d been both strong and brave enough to fight back from his injuries.

“Would you please get a cold, wet towel, Aunt Em? And put some water on to boil. I need warm, soapy water, too. I’ll go change out of Gabe’s shirt and get my supplies.” Nearly knocking Hal down in her rush to leave the room, Fanchon halted. “Don’t just stand there grinning, Uncle Hal. Get Gabe the brandy you offered him.”

Gabe smiled as Fanchon hurried up the stairs. This was more interesting than seduction. Her relatives couldn’t say a word about her touching his body, and he had every intention of letting that happen for as long as she would do it.

“Our nurse-in-residence is a lovely, young lady,” Hal observed, wandering to a cabinet to his left. “Brandy, Gabe? Or would you prefer scotch or whiskey?”

“Scotch, please.” Watching Hal splash some liquid into two glasses, Gabe replied, “She’s more than that, sir. She’s remarkable. Your family must be very proud of her.”

“Em and I are, but the rest? There are nearly seventy-five Osterbergs and Stens spanning three generations in and around Moline. There are seven children and seven grandchildren in her family alone—and *she’s* the third from the youngest child. But Fanchon’s the most controversial of either clan.” After handing Gabe his drink, Hal sank into a nearby wing chair. “I can tell by your voice that you need a word of advice, and you’d better take it to heart. Fanchon won’t be shackled by *any* man, so don’t get involved.”

“But the way she looks at me ...”

“Infatuation with a hero, son,” Hal interrupted, “which isn’t uncommon in girls her age.”

“He’s right, Gabriel,” Em agreed. Joining the men, she placed the rag, icy cold from the pump water, against Gabe’s head. “Hold that there. Fanchon’s a dear child and very intelligent. We couldn’t love her more if she were our own. But when it comes to men, she’s an innocent. And she’s certainly not ready for courtship.”

As Em left again, Gabe took a long drink of the throat-burning liquid then released a sigh, which came out louder than he’d anticipated. In despair, he collapsed back against the sofa. His wounds stung when they scraped on the rough material, and he lurched forward. He took another drink, hoping to still his anxiety.

How had he gotten himself into this mess? He’d never believed that he would find a woman as independent as he wanted. Then, without warning, an eighteen-year-old beauty walked into his life and admitted to having exactly that quality. If that wasn’t enough, she was intelligent and sensitive. Now he learned that she had a large family. But according to Hal, she was only infatuated! According to Em, she wasn’t ready for courtship. How could he possibly make her fall in love with him in the short time he had? How could he convince her to accept his proposal?

Gabe stared at the remaining quarter glass of scotch and groaned. Lifting the glass to his lips, he downed the liquor in one large gulp. What was he thinking? One day wasn’t enough to convince *any* woman he’d just met to marry him, let alone a young one who worshipped her freedom.

"It's not the end of the world," Hal said as he refilled Gabe's glass. "There are plenty of other women out there."

"Not like Fanchon. Or do you know something about women that I haven't learned yet?"

"Probably a lot. But you're right about Fanchon. I doubt there's another female like her."

At that moment, Gabe heard her footsteps on the stairs and stopped talking.

Fanchon worked silently as she cleaned Gabe's injuries. Her touch was so tender that he could liken it to no other woman's he'd ever known. Only two things kept him from becoming aroused in front of her relatives—the stinging peroxide and sheer willpower. Had they been alone, though, he would have had her in his arms and tasted the sweet depths of her mouth within minutes.

Listening as Gabe convinced Hal to withhold an article about her attack, she tended to his injuries. Her preference to conversation that night lay in concentrating on the muscular body over which she had free rein. She delighted in the sight and feel of the large muscles, hard from years of strenuous labor, as she applied the peroxide. Despite the pain the medicine had to produce, he bore it admirably. His voice didn't even falter when he spoke.

Finished with his head and back, she said, "Put your shirt on, Gabe. I don't want you to get peroxide on Aunt Em's settee." Without a word, he slid into his shirt. When he started to button it, Fanchon grasped his wrists. The new excitement flooded through her, but she didn't dare let it show. Struggling to control her emotions, she kept her tone formal as she spoke. "Now lie down."

"Why?" he asked as she gently pushed him backward by his shoulders.

"I want to examine the bruise on your stomach," she explained. "There could be internal bleeding. If so, I should take you to the doctor."

Kneeling on the floor, Fanchon laid her hands on Gabe's stomach with a casualness she hoped deceived the others. But there was nothing casual about the nervous anticipation eating at her. She had no reason to suspect internal bleeding; she only wanted to handle his hard body a while longer. Probing tenderly around the bruise, she focused her attention on her motions. It was the only way to resist the temptation to see if he was experiencing something other than a "brotherly" reaction.

With Fanchon on her knees beside him, her words of earlier that night echoed through his memory: *I'll never kneel before a man or woman who isn't injured*. Hal's warning that Fanchon wasn't the type to be restricted in a relationship came to his mind. But her hands said something different—from what Hal believed and certainly from her attendance to the wounds on his back. She no longer caressed him as a nurse, rather as a woman with a deep-seeded interest in a man.

The realization aroused him to the point where he had to get out of that house—fast. Drawing up his courage to speak, he forced levity into his voice. "What's your professional opinion, nurse-lady?"

"You're fine," she said, rising to her feet.

"Then I'd better leave."

"I'll see you out."

As they strode to the front door, Gabe buttoned his uniform shirt then took his cap from under his arm and set it on his head. When they got to the portal, he reached around her and opened it. Stepping onto the porch with Gabe, Fanchon closed the front door behind them. Since she first saw him, she'd fantasized about him kissing her; and she was determined to get what she wanted, like she had with everything else she'd set her mind on.

"I suppose it's time to say good night," he said.

"I suppose," she agreed. "I want to thank you again for rescuing me."

Cupping her ears, he gazed down at her unfalteringly as he slid his hands down her neck to her shoulders. "Thank *you* for nursing me. I feel better already."

Although she opened her mouth slightly, she couldn't respond. The apprehensive anticipation of an embrace she sensed would soon follow prohibited it. If she said something now, he might remember that she was an innocent adolescent and break his stimulating caress. Until she met Gabe, she'd never given men more than a passing thought. Now all she could think of was this handsome soldier changing her undefiled status.

"Will you meet me tomorrow so I can teach you to take care of yourself while I'm gone?" he asked.

Again, she nodded in response. While he was gone! Maybe that meant he would return to her. Finally finding some semblance of a voice, she said, "I'll pack a picnic if you'd like."

"Don't tell me that you can cook, too," he teased with a grin. Then his smile dropped into a frown. "This is probably terrible to say after the way we met, but I *have* to say this. You're very special to me, Fanchon. You remind me of someone I met years ago. And I guarantee that's a *good* thing."

He gave her no time to reply before his lips met hers in a firm kiss that set her mind spinning with joy. His arms slid around her back to hug her. The embrace was neither deep nor extended, but it left her euphoric. She was special to him—*very* special!

"I asked if eleven tomorrow morning is all right, Fanchon," he prompted with shining dark eyes. "Are you going to answer me?"

"It's fine," she replied.

"Should we meet here or at the Moline House?"

"Here is better."

"Then I'll be here at eleven. Good night."

\*\*\*

As a bi-level city, Moline was divided into three major sections. The business district began at the Mississippi River extending south to Sixth Avenue and east from Twelfth to Fifteenth Streets. The lower residential area was on the flat land between River Drive and Eighth Avenue. The upper residential area sat atop the hill, which sloped steeply upward where Fanchon and Gabe mounted it.

They rode across Moline's hill for quite a distance before they arrived at the other side. In the beginning, Gabe felt a twinge of homesickness. The hill itself reminded him of the Laramie Mountains where he had gone hunting and fishing when he was young. But when they came out of the trees, the terrain was much different. Instead of being a mountainous desert, the valley below was lush and green. In the distance, another river, much smaller than the Mississippi, caught his attention.

"Is that the Rock River you told me about?" he asked when they stopped to view the scene.

"Yes."

"When you want to go out of the way, you do a good job."

Fanchon giggled. "It isn't as far as it seems."

At the bottom of the hill, Fanchon urged her horse into a run. Gabe reined up his horse to watch her long, wavy hair blowing behind her. Showing her how attracted to her he was would be an absolute joy! He spurred his mount and followed her at a gallop.

Fanchon sped ahead of him most of the way. Less than fifty yards from the Rock River, she stopped. Turning in her saddle, she watched him approach. A smile brightened her entire face. From the look in her pale blue eyes, she enjoyed seeing him move in the saddle, maybe because he was so relaxed that he felt like part of the horse. An unexpected sense of happiness and pride swept over him. In his mind, she was the most beautiful woman alive, and he was determined to make her his.

When he caught up with her, she teased, "What took you so long, slow poke?"

Gabe smiled. "I wanted to watch all that gorgeous hair flying in the wind. I *could* have been way ahead of you, too, if I hadn't been carrying our food. It smells so good that I didn't want to lose it."

"You were lucky you didn't lose *me*," she taunted as she nudged her horse into a walk beside his. "I could have been at the river long ago."

Gabe frowned. The very thought of losing her bothered him more than he wanted to admit—even to himself.

What would she do after he left Moline? That was an asinine question! She'd go back to work. But would she be upset? Would she miss him? Would she worry about him? Then an even more distressing question entered his mind. Would another man marry her while he was away? No! He couldn't let that happen. She was his perfect woman, and he had to marry her—*before* he left town.



## THREE

At the Rock River, they dismounted and tied their steeds to a tree. There, Gabe reached into his saddlebag and withdrew a small pistol. Fanchon's eyes widened in horror when she saw the derringer.

"You can't be serious!" she exclaimed, shocked by his words. "I couldn't use a *gun*, not even to protect myself."

"You're going to learn how to handle this derringer, Fanchon," he insisted. "And we're not leaving this spot until you do."

"Then I'll go back alone," she declared. "I could never shoot somebody, Gabe—not even Trevor Riley. He may be a bully, but I could *never* lift a weapon against him."

A distant memory flashed through the back of his mind. Could it be possible that the redhead who had assaulted Fanchon last night had been the same red-haired boy who had attacked the pretty platinum blonde girl all those years ago? He'd never learned the little girl's name, but the boy's name had been Trevor. For some reason, he remembered that very clearly.

To take his mind off the past, he said, "He sure as hell could lift a weapon against *you*. And not only are you going to learn how to handle it, I expect you to carry it with you at all times."

Fanchon glared at him. "Nobody forces me to do something I don't want to, Gabriel Freeman, and I refuse to even *touch* that thing."

Gabe offered her a brief smile. "You're only learning to use it, sweetheart. You won't be shooting at anything but knots on trees and rocks. I won't even make you shoot an animal."

Gazing at the derringer laying on his palm, she reached out and gingerly took the small weapon from his hand. "Is it loaded?"

"That's lesson number one."

Stepping nearer to her, he reached into his pocket. As soon as he slid two bullets into the chambers then snapped the butt back into place, she spun away and trained the weapon on him. "Don't you *ever* tell me what to do again."

He stared at her stunned disbelief for several moments, then a slow grin crossed his lips. Raising his hands in surrender, he vowed, "Absolutely never. Now can we continue?"

For over an hour Gabe battled against the desire growing in him. He found himself drawn to Fanchon like no other woman he'd ever known, and he constantly narrowed his proximity to her in the hope of convincing her to give herself to him. By the end of the lesson, he had

her in his arms. Unfortunately, it was only in an effort to show her how to aim the derringer. What he really wanted to do was hold her and kiss her with a passion that would get her to accept him for the rest of her life.

Even though she didn't reject his advances, she didn't encourage them, either, which concerned him. He was inexperienced in dealing with women like Fanchon. The women he knew all played silly love games, but at least, he knew how to react to them. Fanchon was different. He had no idea how far or fast he should move with her. His heart told him to sweep her into his embrace and take her to an ecstasy like she'd never before known, but his rationale told him to let her lead their liaison. And something inside him said that she eventually would.

Fanchon was furious with herself. Had she paid more attention to the finer points of courting, she would know how to show him that she was open to more than his subtle flirtations. And she sensed that Gabe wasn't used to unseasoned young women like herself making clumsy advances. When he drew away to announce in a faltering voice that it was time to eat, disappointment engulfed her. She'd expected him to at least give her a reticent kiss, but he hadn't. All he wanted to do was eat!

During their silent meal, she stole quick, timid glances at him, blushing whenever their eyes met. She felt so ridiculous each time her face heated that she averted her gaze. Astrid did the same thing, but for her it was a game. Fanchon was embarrassed. Here she was an intelligent, self-assured young lady who'd never been embarrassed about anything she'd done. Now she couldn't stop blushing.

What must Gabe think of her childish reactions? Her face flushed again, this time at the unexpected fantasy of Gabe wearing only his trousers. How would she ever make it through the day with images like *that* one? A smart woman would leave, but she wasn't smart around Gabe. Her brain turned to mush just being near him!

She glanced up again, only to see him staring at her. Embarrassed, she bowed her head and concentrated on spooning some honey onto a biscuit.

Gabe smiled at her reaction. How many women had he known in his twenty-seven years? At least fifteen, most of them prostitutes. But not one of them possessed the charming modesty that Fanchon had. It was hard to believe that the woman he wanted more than any other was in effect unapproachable. Why? Was it because she was so young, so innocent? Or was it something different? At least, Fanchon was mature. He would have felt guilty about setting his plan into action if she weren't.

Life was strange at times. He'd come east for what he had considered almost certain death in a war that was ripping the country apart. Instead he found life in the form of a beautiful woman—and the prospect of losing everything he'd ever wanted by riding off to protect a cause in which he deeply believed.

His eyes stung at the onset of tears, and he forced them away. He would *not* cry over the loss of a woman, not even Fanchon Sten, whom he hadn't even caught yet. He refused to pitch

himself into a situation that would take away his emotional freedom, like his father had. Granted, he was planning to ask for her hand in marriage, but it was purely a logical choice. Fanchon possessed every quality he wanted in a woman, and he was going to ask her for only that reason.

Studying his expression, Fanchon passed him another piece of fried chicken. Should she ask him what he was thinking that made him appear so distraught? Probably not. He didn't seem interested in conversation, and she didn't want to encroach upon his introspection. If she knew how to begin a serious discussion with a man, maybe she could help him.

With a sigh, she wiped her mouth and hands on a napkin then lay down beside the tablecloth on the riverbank. Linking her fingers, she used her hands to cushion her head on the hard ground. "It's a gorgeous day today, not overly hot and humid like it can be this time of year."

"Gorgeous," he drawled.

With a knowing smile, she watched his eyes take in the long, slender body offered before him. "We're lucky it's July. This is my favorite place. It's so pretty."

"Not nearly as pretty as the woman I'm with."

Fanchon stared up at him in surprise. He dropped his unfinished chicken on the cloth and wiped his mouth and hands. Then he moved to kneel beside her.

"Do you honestly think I'm pretty?" Although she was glad to hear the words, she felt that he was only voicing them because he thought it was necessary. Astrid was the beautiful twin, not herself. "Or are you only saying it because you think it's what I want to hear? If you are, it isn't necessary. I don't like people patronizing me."

"I never say or do anything I don't mean," he assured her. "Like I told your friend at the Moline House, you're the most ravishing creature I've ever laid eyes on."

His unfaltering stare and sincere words sent waves of embarrassment so strong over Fanchon that her face heated. No one had ever proclaimed her ravishing before. Astrid's gift for flirtation flashed across Fanchon's mind. She could be complimentary, too—and men liked compliments. At least, that's what Astrid had told her. "I think *you're* very handsome."

Gabe shrugged his broad shoulders. "That's a matter of opinion but thank you. It helps knowing that you find me attractive."

"I don't understand. How does it help?"

"You don't know how hard it is for me to be with you." With a heavy sigh, he lay down on his side next to her. A desirous gleam lit his eyes, and his hand slid over her stomach. "You're the most beautiful, most intelligent woman I've ever met."

Despite the tenderness of his caress, Fanchon panicked. She scrambled to her feet, her mind reeling. Everything was happening so fast! Twenty-four hours ago, she wasn't interested in men. Now she wanted Gabe to make her a woman. But she was afraid, too. He was only passing through Moline—on his way to a war from which he might never return.

“What’s wrong, Fanchon?” he asked as he also rose.

“*This* is wrong,” she insisted. Without warning, tears sprang to her eyes and continued down her cheeks. “*We’re* wrong because you’re only passing through Moline. You won’t be stationed here.”

Approaching her at a slow pace, Gabe extended his arms. She hurried into his protective embrace. Her arms encircled him.

For several minutes, he smoothed down her soft hair. He had no arousal as he held her; she was so close to his body that she would have known if he did. When her sobs turned to intermittent hiccups, he said, “We’re not wrong, Fanchon.”

He caressed her head and gazed down into her eyes. Then he planted a soft kiss on her lips. “In fact, I honestly believe that we *belong* together.”

Before she could respond, Gabe lowered his head to capture her lips with his. The heat he created in her was so intense from the onset that she slid her arms around him in acceptance. With her embrace, the slow trickle of desire seeped into her veins.

He returned her embrace, crushing her body against his. Her breasts flattened against his muscular chest as one arm held her around her ribs. His other arm went lower, to her hips. He pinned them against his pelvis, and she could feel his throbbing excitement. As she sighed, his tongue dove into her mouth to meet hers for the first time.

The trickle of desire broke the dam of restraint within her. The floodwaters burst forth in a torrent of lust unlike anything she’d dreamed possible. Oh, how she wanted him!

Giving herself over to his masculine power, she moved with him as he maneuvered her backward. As soon as she felt the tree against her back, his arms released her, and he pinned her to the trunk with his long, hard body.

Fanchon inhaled when he wedged his leg high between her legs. To her amazement the dam disappeared. The flood within her went deeper—to her loins.

His hands slid from her hips to her waist, massaging her, then continued over her ribs and stopped. His thumbs rested under her breasts. His mouth pushed her head back against the tree and ground its hungry desire deeper into her body. His tongue taunted hers. Then, without warning, he started to pull it back into his own mouth. Frantic at the thought of losing this wanted intruder, she sucked gently until his tongue again collided with hers.

Gabe’s heated groan drifted to her ears. He undoubtedly wanted her as much as she did him. Like everything else she set her sights on, she was going to get what she wanted.

One of his hands slid over her shoulder blade to the back of her neck. While his long, slender fingers taunted the skin under one of her ears, his thumb tickled her beneath the other. She shrugged at the unexpected chill it sent down to her elbows but didn’t try to escape.

He pulled back far enough to slip his other hand between them. After massaging the pliant mound for several seconds, he tenderly pinched the tip to harden it. Her chest constricted with something she’d never experienced, and she moaned into his mouth. Gabe moved his hand upward and unfastened the top button on her shirt. Then when she didn’t complain, he

slid the button through the second hole.

An unexpected wall of fear slammed down within Fanchon, damming up the lustful flood. Instinctively, she pushed him away. At the same moment, she drove her knee into his groin.

Pain shot through Gabe's body, and he dropped to his knees with a masculine cry of agony. One hand grasped his manhood as he bent forward to still the nausea and dizziness. He propped himself off the ground with his other hand. No woman had ever done that to him before; no woman had ever made him fall to his knees before her. The thought stunned him, and he shot his startled gaze to her face.

Fanchon stared down at him, her eyes wide and her mouth gaping in shock. At that moment, he knew she hadn't planned to attack him. Attack him, hell. She'd disabled him! Rage erupted in his voice, Gabe demanded, "What the hell did you do *that* for?"

"I ... I ..." she stammered.

"That was a damned stupid thing to do," he proclaimed, not caring if she answered him or not. "How the hell am I supposed to consummate our marriage in *this* condition?"

Her eyes widened even further, and she repeated the word in a monotone. "Marriage?"

"That's right." He straightened up enough to stand on his knees but rising completely was still impossible. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but *you're* the woman I want for my wife. You have every requirement I listed eight years ago."

Her stunned expression didn't change for even a moment. "What requirements?"

Gabe sat back on his knees and gazed up at her. With a heavy sigh, he decided it was best to explain everything. She was a rational woman, and he had no doubt that she would understand if he approached his confession in that manner.

"I want a woman who's intelligent, Fanchon," he explained. "My father and I own a ranch, and someday I'll inherit it. I need a wife who can do the accounts and handle the business while I'm gone. That leads to my second requirement—a woman who's independent. You need to understand that the Army's my life. I'll never give it up, so I won't be home for months on end. That's why I need a wife who comes from a ..." He paused a moment to try and find the right word to explain. When one came to mind, he added, "... *prolific* family. I'm an only child, and there aren't anymore males to carry on my family name. You come from a big family, so you could probably make a lot of babies for me. I really do love children, too. Finally, I wanted a beautiful woman—because I certainly don't want homely children. But you have an extra quality that I like. You're strong." He grinned lighten the mood. "I probably know that better than any other man in existence."

But Fanchon didn't return his smile. Instead, she stared down at him blankly. "What about ..."

"... love?" he interrupted. "That's an emotion that distorts the senses. How could one possibly make a lifetime decision with love destroying the rational process? There's a possibility that someday I could grow to love you, but I must be honest. It isn't very likely. The

most I can promise emotionally is total commitment and loyalty.” Pausing, Gabe glanced down at his body. With the pain diminishing, he felt as though he could move a little easier. *What the hell*, he thought. *As long as I’m down here, I may as well do this the romantic way—to please Fanchon.* Rising slowly to one knee, he took her hand in both of his and gazed up at her. “Will you marry me, Fanchon?”

She considered his proposal for several seconds, although it sounded more like a business proposition the way he worded it. He was being very logical, which she liked. Unfortunately, she couldn’t be logical right now. During the long sleepless night, she’d come to admit her love for Gabriel Freeman. She’d relived a fleeting scene from about ten years earlier when another man—a *boy* really, but he’d seemed like a man to her—had saved her from Trevor. He’d held her on his lap as he chastised Trevor, and she’d known that he liked her. But she’d never seen him again because Nels hadn’t let her go to town with him when he’d met the boy that evening.

When she’d finally fallen asleep, she’d dreamed of being Gabe’s bride. And that dream had somehow melded into her childhood dream of her hero asking her to marry him. Now Gabe had said the words and made her dream come true—and she didn’t know what to say! Or did she?

Sinking to her knees so she was on his level, she replied, “Yes, Gabe. I’ll marry you on— one condition. We have to elope. I don’t want my family to know yet. This happened so fast, and my family knows how logical I am. And marrying you so soon after we met is definitely *not* logical. I refuse to be embarrassed by my behavior before I can accept it myself.”

He put his other knee on the ground, and his lips captured hers in a passionate kiss that sent wild desire raging through her. Instinctively sliding her arms around his neck, she molded her body against his. The small doubt remaining in her mind slipped away. If this was a hint of what it was like to be intimate with one’s husband, she *loved* it. Complete intimacy must be wonderful.

Disappointment flooded through her a moment later when he broke the kiss. She’d been enjoying it so much! She didn’t want it to end. Without a word, she stared into his dark eyes. Then she felt herself moving backwards as he tenderly lowered her to the ground.

Neither spoke while Gabe lay down beside her and draped his leg over hers. He gazed down into her eyes, his lustful stare filled with adoration. Sliding his fingers into her hair, he sighed at length.

“God, Fanchon,” he said heatedly, “I want you more than any woman I’ve ever met. I need you desperately, but I’ll wait until tonight for that. For now, I’ll give you a taste of what consummating our marriage will be like.”

And his lips caught hers again in a kiss filled with promise of better things to come.

\*\*\*

As they sat astride their mounts on the boundaries of the Sten farm, Fanchon gazed over at Gabe. Saying good-bye for even this short time was one of the hardest things she'd ever done. Gabe smiled at her as he reached over and patted her hand reassuringly. He seemed so sure of himself. And she was a mature person. She should be equally sure of herself. But love was new to her. She wasn't sure how to react to the emotion.

To her amazement, Gabe toyed with the cameo ring her father had given her that she wore on her left finger and asked, "Do you mind if I look at this for a minute?"

Stunned, she shook her head as she removed the ring and passed it to him. "Why would you want to do that?"

Instead of explaining, Gabe slid the ring onto his little finger with the cameo toward his palm and made a fist. Examining his finger, he opened his hand to study it again then returned the cameo to Fanchon, and she slid it back onto her finger, asking, "What *were* you doing?"

"I can't take a bride without a wedding band," he explained with a grin, "and I can't buy a band without the bride there to try it on. I had to know what size to get."

"I hadn't thought of that."

"Obviously. You were too busy planning your surreptitious escape into the night. But I still don't understand why you don't want your folks as witnesses."

"Witnesses?" she repeated in shock.

"We're planning a wedding, nurse-lady. That means witnesses and rings and preachers."

"Preachers!"

"Good Lord, Fanchon," he teased, "a preacher's important for a wedding. I'll get the ring and the preacher if you'll get the witnesses. Do you know any trustworthy people who can keep your secret?"

Fanchon considered his question. All her life she'd dreamed of having a double wedding with Astrid. Even though they didn't get along well, it only seemed appropriate. Now that dream would never come true. She could ask Astrid to be a witness, but she was planning to elope. Astrid couldn't stay quiet about it for fifteen minutes. If Nels was there, she could ask him, but that wasn't possible, either. There was only one other person in whom she felt she could confide.

With a heavy sigh, she dropped her shoulders in exasperation and said, "Maybe my sister and her husband, but they'll want to meet you first. And Bianca will be suspicious because I've never been impulsive."

"How can I meet them? We spent an awful lot of time this afternoon practicing the preliminaries of consummating our marriage—not that it wasn't worth it." He grinned. "But we should have been making plans. It's nearly five already. I need to get a ring, rent a carriage, bathe, get a haircut and shave, find a preacher, and eat. I can't do all that *and* go to your sister's."

"Bianca can cut your hair, Gabe, and you could bathe there, too. She'll probably even let

us use their carriage. But we're still going to have to sit down with them and explain everything first."

"You should know something before we say our vows, Fanchon," he admitted. "I've never had trouble refusing women—until now. All right, I'll talk to them with you. But I still need to get the ring and eat first."

"Will you have enough time if I meet you here at seven?"

\*\*\*

"You're going to *what*?" Bianca Morgan asked in astonishment. "Fanchon Sten, have you lost your senses?"

Gabe draped his arm around Fanchon's shoulders and answered for her. "Actually, I've stolen her heart."

Fanchon stared at him in shock. How did *he* know that? Had he read her feelings despite the care she'd taken to hide them? If so, is that why he'd asked her to marry him when he knew he didn't love her in return?

Recovering some of her composure, Fanchon returned her gaze to her sister, who studied them with obvious suspicion.

"What's that overactive mind of yours thinking this time, Fanchon?" Bianca asked.

"Nothing. We're in love and want to get married before Gabe goes to war. We want a son to carry on the Freeman name in case Gabe doesn't come home." Turning her gaze to the attractive man in a wheelchair, Fanchon spoke pleadingly. Her gift for persuasion had always worked before, and there was no reason it couldn't that night. "You can understand, can't you, Ben?"

"Quite frankly," the brown-haired man replied, "no."

Beginning to lose her temper, Fanchon declared, "Well, *I* don't understand your inability to empathize with what we're experiencing. You two were married before Ben went to war. Why is it so hard for you to understand that *we* want to be husband and wife?"

"Because we know you." Rising, Bianca started toward the kitchen. "Come with me, Fanchon. It's time for our first sisterly talk."

Now *this* was the reaction Fanchon had expected. Bianca's "sisterly" advice was an accepted custom among the Sten siblings. Even though she'd mentally prepared herself, she still dreaded the conversation; but if she didn't agree, Bianca would press until she told everything. Now was the time to convince Bianca that she knew what she was doing.

"Excuse me, Gabe," she said as she followed her shorter, darker blonde sister. "If we're going to get married, I have to do this."



The moment the door shut behind the sisters, Gabe began to pace. What if Bianca convinced Fanchon to change her mind? Would he be able to convince her to change it back? Did he dare even try? Fanchon was his idea of the perfect woman, and he didn't know what he would do if he had to leave Moline without her official vow to wait for him.

"It's something important, isn't it," Ben observed.

"What is?" Gabe asked, startled by the question.

"The reason for this quick wedding. There's something awfully important behind it or Fanchon wouldn't have been so secretive about your courtship."

Gabe stopped at the fireplace and laid his arm across the mantle. "I'm being transferred to the front lines. I hate the thought of leaving Fanchon, so I did the next best thing. I asked her to marry me. That way I'll know she'll be here if I come back."

"That's a bad attitude, Gabe," Ben said. "If I'd felt that way, I never would have survived losing one leg above the knee and one below."

"I can't help it. I've already cheated death too many times. How do you think I got to be a major so young? Valor above and beyond the call of duty. Valor!" Gabe huffed. "It was a hell of a lot closer to stupidity. One of these days the Grim Reaper's not going to walk away without me."

"Fanchon will worry about you even more if she knows how you feel."

"Fanchon understands because of her job. She's independent, intelligent, sensitive, caring, brave, and most importantly, a free woman. I won't have to worry about what will happen to her when I'm gone. She'll more than survive; she'll prosper with what I can leave her. Everything I have will go to her as my widow."

"*If* anything happens to you. It sounds like Fanchon's everything you've always looked for in a woman."

Deep inside, in a place that he couldn't name, he was worried about the future, about if this marriage would last the lifetime that he hoped it would. But Gabe spoke with a conviction that he could only hope Ben believed. "Exactly. I want her to bear my child, too. So, either you two be our witnesses, or our baby will be born out of wedlock."

## FOUR

Fanchon dropped onto a chair at the kitchen table. She hated having to endure this conversation, but she knew it was inevitable. If she didn't convince Bianca that she knew what she was doing, Bianca would run straight to their parents and tell them everything. The best way to avoid that was take control of the discussion from the onset, so she said, "The first time I saw Gabe was yesterday afternoon, ..."

Fanchon's blue-eyed sister stared at her in shock. "*What?*"

Already Fanchon regretted her words, but she couldn't show her sister. She needed to be honest yet show her conviction that she was doing the right thing. Steeling herself with a deep breath, she said, "Don't interrupt. Gabe's the most handsome man I've ever seen."

"I won't argue about that."

"He was in the Moline House when I passed it. I tried, but I couldn't concentrate on my work, because I wanted to meet him so badly." Fanchon's voice became more animated at the memory of the previous night. "I've met a lot of attractive men, Bianca, but none have taken over my mind like Gabe does. We weren't even close when we stared at each other. He was at the desk with Byron, and I was walking by outside. The second I saw him I knew he was special. I couldn't take my eyes off him."

"What do you know!" Bianca exclaimed. "My little sister finally learned that men are interesting. Go on."

"On the way to Uncle Hal's after work, I was still thinking about Gabe. I should have been paying attention, but I wasn't." Squeezing her eyes shut, she relived those terrifying minutes. She could still feel Trevor's hand over her mouth, the knifepoint under her chin. With a shudder, she returned her distraught gaze to her sister. "It was awful, Bianca. I was attacked last night, and Gabe rescued me. That's how his head got bruised. I was knocked out, and he was kneeling over me when I woke up. He was very concerned, very gentle, very comforting."

"Destiny! How romantic!"

Fanchon couldn't believe how lightly Bianca was taking her explanation. Could Bianca's excitement be a trick to get her to change her mind? Or was Bianca honestly this delighted? Unsure what to say or how to react, Fanchon continued with her story. "There's more. When he found out Nels and Peter aren't here, he took me to Uncle Hal's. And today he taught me to defend myself while he's gone."

"While he's gone? I hope that means he'll come back to you, no matter what." Stunned by her sister's attitude, Fanchon examined her. She didn't know Bianca was such a romantic. As though she could read Fanchon's thoughts, Bianca continued. "You probably didn't know I *adore* romantic stories—even after a husband and three children. You probably don't even

remember what I was like at your age. You always had your nose in a book. I doubt you even knew you had brothers and sisters until you were done with school."

"Yes, I did," Fanchon returned with a smile. "I just *wished* I didn't. Anyway, Gabe and I spent the whole day together today. He taught me to shoot his derringer and gave it to me for protection. Then he asked me to marry him. But our marriage will be one of convenience. I meet every criterium he has for a wife—and then some."

Bianca's baby blue eyes narrowed. "You always swore that you would *never* marry for convenience. Why did you accept his proposal?"

Excitement unlike she'd ever known gushed through Fanchon. She was admitting something that she never thought she would, and she couldn't believe how good it made her feel. "I *love* him, and I'll do anything for him—including bearing his children. He wants many."

"He *told* you that?" Bianca asked in amazement.

"Yes."

Bianca wandered to the counter where she prepared meals and leaned back against it. "What did Mom and Dad say about this?"

"We aren't telling anybody but you and Ben, because we don't know each other very well." Fanchon fought back tears. What was happening to her? A moment ago, she was the happiest of her life; now she felt as though somebody was ripping out her heart. Turning her sorrowful gaze on her sister, she replied, "I love Gabe, Bianca. I want his name, and I want his child. I don't think anything could mean *more* to me."

Bianca returned to the table and grasped Fanchon's hand. "That's love, all right. And who am I to stand in the path of destiny?"

Returning her sister's hold, Fanchon admitted her innermost feelings. "I'm terrified, Bianca. I'm afraid my voice won't work when the time comes."

"That's normal," Bianca assured her with a smile.

"Gabe's calm," Fanchon insisted.

"I doubt it. In fact, he's probably more nervous about this than you are."

Fanchon flashed her sister a quick smile. "I hope I don't change my mind at the last minute and disappoint him."

"If Gabe loves you, ..."

Knowing that now was the time to admit the whole truth, Fanchon interrupted. "No one said he loves me, not even Gabe. In fact, he told me that he could *never* fall in love. This is a purely logical decision on his part, and you know how much I admire a person with logic. I only wish I had the same logic in my decision. Unfortunately, mine comes from the heart. Actually, his inability to believe in love might be what frightens me. But I agreed to marry him, and I shall ..." Fanchon paused and offered Bianca another brief smile. "... if I can say the words."

Bianca smiled—a smile that said she knew something Fanchon herself didn't. Although she was a bit disconcerted by her sister's expression, Fanchon chose to ignore it. She had

enough on her mind without concerning herself with Bianca's reaction.

\*\*\*

Trevor crooned into Astrid's ear as they lay together on a blanket they had spread on the bank of the Rock River. "You're so beautiful, my dear. There's a big difference between you and Fanchon. You're a hot-blooded woman; she's a cold-blooded little girl."

Sliding her hand across his bare stomach, Astrid smiled. His muscles rippled under her seductive caress. Even though she liked him, he wasn't the man she had longed to be with since her childhood. That man was married, so she let Trevor court her as second best. He was nice and always willing to be with her, even if he didn't satisfy her very often. Could he satisfy her this time? She'd spoken with the man of her dreams that day, and she desperately needed some release.

With a contented sigh, she trailed her fingertips up his stomach and over his chest. "You have a wonderful body, Trevor. I love the feel of you, and I love what you can do for me."

"And I'll do it again." His whispered reply was hot in her ear.

Trevor took his time to unbutton her blouse then her camisole. Astrid released a plaintive moan of pleasure despite her boredom. His actions were so redundant! But that was the way he liked it—to expose her firm breasts then lie in her arms and suckle on her nipple like an infant. She felt nothing this way. But sometimes, when he was particularly aroused, his movements were more aggressive.

Those were the times that she enjoyed him, the times that kept her coming back. Unfortunately, this wasn't one of them. Already he positioned himself above her to satisfy himself. Damn! She needed complete release that day, but she was getting nothing. A slight pain shot through her shoulder when she moved, and she cried out in surprise.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I'm lying on something."

Helping her to sit, Trevor tossed the blanket aside. Beneath it, he discovered several spent cartridges from a small caliber gun. "It looks like you're not the only person who likes this place. Somebody's been doing a little target practice since we were here the other day."

Astrid glanced around the area as she frantically covered her exposed bosom. "And he could come back any minute."

"Yeah," he sighed, his voice filled with the heat of getting caught.

Grabbing her wrists, he pulled her arms apart then forced her down again to crush her against his body. A second later his lips bore down on hers, grinding passion into her once-numb body.

Oh, yes! This was the way she liked it. Apparently, Trevor liked it that way, too. His hands scorched her torso for several minutes before moving her skirts to expose her heated womanhood. All thought drained from her mind as she focused her attention on the man entering

her silken cavern. He burrowed into her over and over, until she released a small cry of fulfillment.

Already sated, she let her mind wander as she rotated beneath him, meeting him thrust for thrust. That was another problem. It almost always took him a long time. As Astrid glanced around to see if they were being watched, her gaze fell upon a handkerchief about four feet from her head. What was Fanchon's hanky doing there? It wasn't like her twin to lose things; she was too organized. Trevor came to a growling satisfaction and rolled off her.

"What's wrong with you tonight?" he asked, massaging the soft, white flesh of her thigh. "You seem distracted."

Astrid sat up and buttoned her camisole. "Fanchon was here." She nodded toward the white material on the ground not far from them. "That's her hanky."

Bolting up, he leaned back on his hands while he stared at the cloth. Astrid gazed up at him, her mind reeling with suspicion. What an odd reaction! He seemed afraid of something. But what could possibly frighten him about Fanchon? Her twin didn't even like Trevor.

While she examined him, he questioned her with a hint of panic in his voice. "Are you sure, Astrid?"

"Positive. I embroidered it." Returning her concern to her twin, Astrid rose and wandered over to retrieve the soiled hanky. "I wonder what happened. It's not like Fanchon to get upset enough to cry, and that's exactly what it looks like."

"Maybe she was attacked," Trevor suggested. "There are used bullets here, too, you know."

Astrid gasped in horror. No, it couldn't be possible. She would know if Fanchon had been attacked there; she would be able to *feel* it. The night before, she'd felt a stinging pain in her breast, but nothing that would indicate the use of a hanky. Yet what other explanation could there be?

"Do you think so?" she asked.

Trevor shrugged. "It's possible. Maybe one of the soldiers she works with attacked her. She was probably so upset she didn't even realize she dropped her hanky."

If that were the case, Astrid decided, she needed to find Fanchon and try to help her. Knowing Fanchon, she was beside herself with grief; she had probably hidden from everybody—except the one person she could never fool, the only person who felt almost every pain, both physical and emotional, that Fanchon had.

"Take me home, Trevor," she demanded. "I have to talk to my sister."

"Since when are you so interested in Fanchon's affairs?" he asked.

"I'll admit that we don't get along very well," Astrid admitted, "but that doesn't mean I don't love her. For God's sake. We're identical twins. There's something between us that makes us more like one person. When she's hurting, I feel it; when she's upset, so am I. Just last night—about ten-thirty—I had a sharp pain, like a knife cut, and a strong feeling that she was in trouble. I need to know if I was right. Now take me home."

Trevor granted her request with an inner relief that he'd successfully manipulated Astrid. Even if Fanchon told her twin that he'd attacked her, Astrid would never believe it. He'd always told Astrid that he wanted nothing to do with Fanchon.

But he had a very reasonable theory of what had happened on the riverbank. The major who had interrupted him had probably brought Fanchon to the river and taught her to shoot. Maybe he'd even told her what had happened while she was unconscious. If that damned major hadn't regained consciousness so soon, things would have ended the way Trevor had intended. Instead, Trevor had left.

\*\*\*

"You're home early tonight," tall, blond Carl Sten said to his daughter.

"I didn't want to stay out late," Astrid explained. "I heard about something that happened at the hospital. It sounded awful, so I'm going to ask Fanchon if it's true."

Her mother Jane shook her head. "You should curb your appetite for gossip, dear. It can hurt people."

"That's why I want to know the truth. Since it happened at the hospital, Fanchon might know something."

"All right, as long as you're looking for the truth. Carl? Are you ready for bed now?"

Carl set aside his book and pulled his wife to her feet with a desirous gleam in his eyes. "Have you forgotten, my darling wife? I'm *always* ready for bed when you're around."

"Not again," Astrid groaned as she left the room. "You two are too old for that."

"You're never too old for love, Kitten Two," he returned.

Hurrying upstairs to Fanchon's bedroom, Astrid entered without knocking. Across the room, her twin rummaged through a dresser drawer, giving Astrid the perfect opening for the conversation. "Looking for this?"

With a gasp of shock, Fanchon slammed her drawer and spun to face her sister. Oh, no! She'd been caught getting ready to elope by the most prolific gossip she knew. Now the whole town would hear about it. Somehow, she had to convince Astrid, who knew her better than anybody else, of a lie. Then she saw the handkerchief in Astrid's hand and gave a mental sigh of relief. Astrid didn't suspect a thing. "Where did you find it?"

"Where you left it—out by the Rock." Dropping the dirty hanky on the bed, Astrid sat down beside it. "Why don't you tell me what happened?"

"I don't know how it got there," Fanchon said, ignoring Astrid's question. "I haven't been to the river in weeks."

"I was at the same spot the day before yesterday," Astrid said, "and your hanky wasn't there. I saw the bullets, too, Fanchon. Maybe I'm not as smart as you, but I can add two and two. You were attacked, weren't you."

"At the *Rock*?" she asked, startled. "Heavens no! I picnicked there with a friend."

"Then explain the bullets."

"I don't know anything about them."

"For God's sake, Fanchon," Astrid said in exasperation. "When are you going to learn that you can't lie to me any easier than I can lie to you? I know you were attacked, because I sensed it, and you do know about the bullets, too. I can tell by the look in your eyes. Why don't you confide in me? You'll probably feel better."

Angered by her sister's interference, Fanchon glared at her. She hated people intruding in her life—especially Astrid, who seemed to think it was her right simply because they were twins. Determined not to give in to Astrid's nosiness, Fanchon snapped, "I *wasn't* attacked."

"Then why won't you explain your hanky?"

Fanchon cringed when Astrid wandered to the dresser and looked to see what her sister was doing. Astrid's expression of suspicion told Fanchon that her sister had caught a glimpse of the blue material in Fanchon's medical satchel. Oh, no! She'd seen Fanchon's favorite dress in the bag.

"Going somewhere?" Astrid asked.

"Not tonight." She had to lie carefully. Astrid knew her too well and would know it was a fabrication. Despite her deep love for him, Gabe's emotions were nonexistent, and she hated the thought of people learning she had married someone merely to give him a child because he wanted one. Given Astrid's scrutinizing gaze and suspicious tone, Fanchon needed a realistic, although fictitious, confession. "I have an appointment tomorrow, but I have to work tonight. I don't know when I'll be done, so Bianca said I could change at her house."

That could happen. If Astrid learned the truth, she would do everything she could to stop Fanchon. The only way to avoid that was to think of something to convince Astrid that she knew what she was doing—without admitting the truth

But before she could do that, Astrid demanded, "What were you so upset about? Did you go the Rock River to be alone?"

Fanchon sighed in disgust. "All right. I was upset, so I went to the Rock. You know how I hate anybody seeing me cry. And I like solitude. Why do you have a sudden interest in my whereabouts?"

Astrid shook her head. "We're twins, Fanchon. I'm supposed to worry about you when something's wrong."

"This is no time to play the doting twin," Fanchon snapped. "Stay out of my life. I've managed fine without it since we were born, and I *don't* need your concern now."

Astrid started toward the door then stopped with her hand on the handle and turned to face Fanchon. "I was only trying to help. If you ever need to talk, I'll be there. I care about you,

Fanchon. You've just never given me reason to worry before."

\*\*\*

Gabe took Fanchon's bag and laid his hand on the small of her back while they strolled away from the barn.

"Did you find the place I told you to hide the carriage?"

"Without a hitch," he replied, adding, "if you'll excuse the expression. Did anybody see you leave?"

"I don't think so."

Dropping the satchel, he spun her into his arms and pressed her to his body. Stunned, she stared up at him in surprise until his lips met hers. Then her eyelids slid shut. The instantaneous excitement she experienced was almost too strong to endure. With her breasts crushed against him, a tingling of desire awakened within her chest. And she was startled to realize that it wasn't desire alone constricting her heart. It was combined with love, deep and abiding. No matter how Gabe felt, she could easily spend the rest of her life being devoted to him. Maybe someday she would even convince him to love her back.



## FIVE

Gabe broke the kiss but continued his intimate caress. He didn't want to release her for even a moment. "When all this is over, Fanchon—when we're actually husband and wife—I'm taking you back to my room. Then I'll show you how much I appreciate what you're doing tonight. You're a special woman to agree to my marital terms."

"I'm *not* a woman, though," she denied with a slight pout. "I'm a frightened adolescent who knows nothing about pleasing a man."

"You may be frightened, but you're mature beyond your years. There's never been a woman like you in my life." In the moonlight, he watched a tear escape from her eye. A smile crossed his lips as he wiped it away with his thumb. "You're supposed to be saving those for the ceremony, which won't take place if we don't leave."

"Before we go, there's something I need to know." She paused while he picked up her satchel. As he draped his arm around her shoulders, she asked, "Are you sure that what we're doing is right?"

"I've never been more sure about anything in my life." He grinned to relax her. "From the second I laid eyes on you, I was completely intrigued."

"Being intrigued has nothing to do with matrimony," she insisted. "Are you absolutely positive that this is right for you? And don't tease."

Gabe hesitated. If he was as positive of this in his heart as he was in his mind, he could tell her the truth. But for some reason he didn't understand, he wanted Fanchon to marry him out of love, not logic. When he responded, he hid his anxiety from his voice and said, "Yes. Are you?"

"Yes," she agreed, her tone flat. "Let's go do it."

Frowning, Gabe escorted her away from the barn toward the carriage. From the sound of her voice, the prospect of becoming his wife didn't please her. He'd tried to tell her that he loved her, but the words wouldn't come out of his mouth. Although, that was most likely because it wouldn't be true.

Maybe it was an omen. If he had any courage, he would call off the wedding and leave town as fast as he could. But he couldn't leave Fanchon standing at the altar. No matter how quickly it had happened, no matter how unexpectedly, more than anything, he wanted her to be his wife.

Fanchon was embarrassed to silence by the unimpressed tone of her voice. Fear and nervousness had withheld even the most minute emphasis from her speech. How could he

be so casual about getting married? She was so terrified that her head reeled! But her love was genuine, and that was all that mattered.

Unfortunately, Gabe was her first love, and she had no idea how to hold his interest—or to make him love her back. Now that she was about to wed, she wished she'd paid more attention when her older brothers and sisters were courting.

Courting! Fanchon almost laughed aloud. Bianca was right; she *had* lost her senses. She'd had no courtship with Gabe—only a few hours in his company. But those hours had shown her that he had stolen her heart, like he'd proclaimed. They'd been hours of innocence and desire, of comfort in his arms. Mostly they'd been hours of joy at the prospect of lying in those same strong arms as his wife. Suddenly, she knew beyond a doubt that she was doing the right thing.

Awareness of her surroundings returned as Gabe reined up the horse in front of Bianca's narrow two-story home. Beside their carriage was a second, unfamiliar buggy. Fanchon froze, mildly shocked by the sight of it.

"Gabe," she said, unable to hide how frantic she was to see the buggy, "somebody's here."

"Relax, nurse-lady," he explained, patting her arm. "It's the preacher."

"How can you be so casual about this?" she demanded.

"*Casual?*" he exclaimed. "I'm scared as hell. I've been in seven Indian battles. I almost died from injuries three times. Now I'm headed out to a new battle, one that's already taken thousands of lives. But I've never been as afraid as I am right now."

Fanchon offered him a nervous smile and responded in a calmer tone. "It's the same with me. Are you confused, too?"

"Of course. I keep asking myself why I'm doing this. We're getting married under a lot of stress. You're a little young, but at least you're mature. I'm leaving town practically the second the ceremony ends. None of this makes sense. Even considering all that, though, I keep getting the same answer. I'm marrying you because I want to."

Her heart lightened in excitement. His rational doubts had also been defeated by the illogical desperation. "I'm glad we discussed this. Everything you mentioned has been on my mind, too, and I keep getting with the same answer. I *want* to marry you."

"Then let's go in and get hitched, Miss Sten."

\*\*\*

After Bianca helped her into her dress, Fanchon pirouetted. "What do you think, Bianca?"

"You look more beautiful than ever," Bianca praised.

"Maybe I should pin my hair up." Lifting her long locks, Fanchon studied herself in the full-length mirror. "What do you think?"

"Is this the same Fanchon Sten who was here earlier? Or are you Astrid playing another trick? Fanchon never worried about her appearance before."

"I'm different," Fanchon returned, "because Gabe is as frightened as I am. He has the same questions—and the same answer. He's doing it because he wants to."

"Then I'll go down and tell them you're ready. You brush out your hair." Bianca hugged Fanchon. "I hope you'll be happy."

"I *will* be," Fanchon proclaimed.

But in her heart, Fanchon was worried. As much as she loved Gabe, she fretted that he would change his mind. She could only hope that it wouldn't happen before he left town, because she was inexperienced in marital liaisons.

Gabe was downstairs, probably watching the steps for her descent. Would he be happy to see her festive taffeta frock of powder blue that enhanced her baby blue eyes? Would he be awed by the off-the-shoulder style, low-cut yet high enough to conceal all but a small portion of the knife wound she'd received the previous night?

Shaking with anxiety, Fanchon clutched the banister and watched the steps until she reached the bottom. There she hesitated. Everything was happening so fast! Was she ready for marriage? Was she ready to carry a man's child? She sighed then straightened her shoulders to get control of her nervousness. Mumbling in a low whisper, she told herself, "Calm down, Fanchon. You can do this, and you'll be happy for the rest of your life. All you have to do is relax."

She inhaled deeply, looked up, and stared at Gabe in amazement. He was immaculately dressed in light blue trousers with a gold stripe down the outside of each leg. His dark blue double-breasted frock coat with gold buttons had a gold braid draped across the front. On the shoulders were epaulets of gold material. She'd expected him to be in uniform but not the dress uniform she'd seen at parties. Why would he bother to bring it to the front lines?

Taking another deep breath, she straightened her back then meandered toward Gabe, Bianca, Ben and the white-haired minister. When both couples faced the clergyman, Ben and Bianca on either side of Gabe and Fanchon, he began the short service. To her surprise and pleasure, Gabe gazed into her eyes and recited the words as soon as the preacher prompted, "I, Gabriel Jacob Freeman, ..."

He stated each word such deliberation and passion that Fanchon was moved to tears. Knowing that he had memorized his vows gave the ceremony a special meaning.

When the minister asked her to repeat after him, she attempted to follow Gabe's example. "I, Fanchon Anna Sten, take thee, Gabriel ..." From there, she stumbled over the words. Flustered at her inability to remember Gabe's middle name, she repeated the words after the minister.

Again, Fanchon was amazed at Gabe's calm exterior as he slipped the ring to her second knuckle. But his cracking voice betrayed his nervousness when he pledged his constant faith and abiding love. Then he slid the narrow gold band the rest of the way to her hand and said, "With this ring, I do thee wed."

In that instant, her anxiety disappeared. Tears of relief streamed down her cheeks. No wonder brides cried at their weddings. Once the vows were spoken, the explosion of relaxation was impossible to bear any other way. It was almost over now—only a couple minor details remained.

With her hand still in Gabe's, they faced the preacher before he offered a brief prayer of blessing. At last, he spoke the words Fanchon had longed to hear all day: "I now pronounce you man and wife. That which God hath joined together, let no man put asunder. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen. Major, you may ..."

Gabe wasted no time with formalities. Instead, he embraced Fanchon and kissed her passionately. It was done! She was his wife. When he finally pulled back, much earlier than she'd envisioned, he whispered, "You're the most beautiful woman I've ever met, Mrs. Freeman."

Fanchon nearly burst with happiness when she heard her new name. Mrs. Freeman—Mrs. Gabriel Freeman. Only a short time ago he had called her Miss Sten. But unfortunately, that wouldn't be the last time she heard it. She had to keep the marriage secret until she could explain without her entire family fighting over her decision. Until then, she would hear Miss Sten many more times. Right now, though, the only thing that mattered was that *he* called her Mrs. Freeman. And nobody would ever change her status—not if she had any say about it.

Before they left the house, Gabe excused himself to go upstairs. When he returned, he wore his work uniform and carried Fanchon's satchel.

Unable to contain her curiosity, she asked, "Where's your dress uniform?"

"Upstairs. I left it on the bed, Bianca. I hope you don't mind."

"That's fine. I'll hang it up later. You two go now. You have a wedding night to get underway before it's morning." Bianca kissed Fanchon on the cheek then hugged her. "I wish you all the best, sis."

"Thanks, Bianca. Your support means a lot to me."

"Do I get to give your groom a hug and kiss, too?"

"Only if I can give yours one," Fanchon returned before bending over to embrace Ben.

As Gabe slid his arm around her waist, Fanchon noticed the minister off to one side of the room, grinning. Gazing up at her new husband, she questioned him in a low tone. "Aren't we supposed to pay the preacher?"

"I already took care of it, and I gave him extra for the inconvenience." Leading his bride to the minister, Gabe extended his right hand. "We appreciate your performing the ceremony, Rev. Johnson. I'm sorry it was such short notice."

"This wedding was a pleasure," Rev. Johnson said as the men shook hands. "I've officiated many rushed weddings since the outbreak of the war. But I've never been completely at peace with myself afterward until tonight. In all my years of ministry, I've never seen a couple so much in love. I'm confident you and Mrs. Freeman will thrive in matrimony."

“Thank you for saying so, sir.” Gabe turned his gaze to Fanchon, and her face heated in embarrassment. “Your words give us hope for the future.”

“I’ll pray for both you and your beautiful bride,” Rev. Johnson offered as he smiled at Fanchon. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a wife of my own at home. Good night.”

“Good night, Rev. Johnson,” Fanchon replied. “And thank you again.”

\*\*\*

The closer they strolled to the Moline House, the more anxious Fanchon became. She loved Gabe and wanted to give herself to him, but she had no idea of how to behave in a man’s bed. As a nurse, she’d been trained in all aspects of anatomy and physical functions. Yet she knew virtually nothing about what to expect of intimacy. Naked men were no mystery to her; she’d disrobed many injured and ill soldiers in the line of duty. But viewing Gabe’s nude body would be different.

Then the entrance to the Moline House loomed before her. Halting, she battled against the intense urge to flee into the darkness. Beside her, Gabe’s deep, soothing voice filtered into her mind to draw her gaze upward to his face.

“It’s all right, Fanchon. I’ll divert the clerk.”

Incapable of offering a response to his quick kiss, she watched while Gabe hurried inside to speak with the night desk clerk. Now would be the perfect time to leave, while the clerk retrieved the room key from a hook behind the desk. But her body was as numb as her mind, her thoughts disjointed and irrational.

She had no reason to run. She was Gabe’s wife, and it was normal to accept the key he placed in her hand. Glancing around, she noticed that the clerk was gone, somehow distracted by her husband so she could sneak upstairs. At the foot of the steps, Gabe gave her a gentle push, and she vaguely heard his plea for her to hurry.

In what seemed to be the next second, she stared at the number on the door of room seventeen. Going into Gabe’s room was moral now, completely legal and natural. But it was also completely frightening! Behind the door was a bed where he would want her to lie in his arms.

That morning she was expected to stay out of men’s beds. Now she was expected to get in one after seventeen years of purposely avoiding it. From Daddy’s little girl to Gabe’s wife—in less than twenty-four hours. Reaching out with her right index finger, she traced the brass numerals. Seventeen—the same as her age. Her thoughts were so deep that even Gabe’s quiet voice in her ear startled her.

“Symbolic, isn’t it. I rented room seventeen, and you’re seventeen years old. That must mean only good things will happen for us.” After unlocking the door, he kicked it open with his foot then swept Fanchon into his arms. “I’m glad you didn’t go in. I’ve been looking forward to this all day.”

While Gabe lit the kerosene lamp on the dresser, Fanchon stared at his small arsenal in the corner near the window. Beside his saddle, bridle, bit, and saddle bags were an Army-issued Starr Double-Action .44 pistol, its holster, two derringers similar to the one he had given her, and a Henry .44 rifle like the ones Nels and Peter used for hunting. Although she saw no ammunition, she assumed he must have more than enough in his saddle bags.

A question began to form in her mind, but he answered it before the thought was complete. "When you live on the frontier, you learn to protect yourself. I always hide derringers on my person. They've saved my scalp more than once. They aren't regulation Army, of course, but I feel a hell of a lot safer with them. If you can count on anything, Fanchon, it's me being a survivor. Never believe the Army if they show up on your doorstep and tell you that I'm missing and presumed dead. Only believe them when they can show you my body."

"I'll remember that," she responded. When Gabe approached with his arms extended toward her, Fanchon stepped sideways. She wasn't ready for this—not at all. Dear Lord, what had she done? She wasn't ready to be anybody's wife, not even Gabe's.

Desperate and anxious, she executed a perfect about-face. Her eyes widened in horror when she saw the double bed directly before her. Somehow, she had to divert his attention from that bed until she could relax enough to consummate their marriage. What should she say to keep his mind off the subject? Ah, yes, she could tell him when her birthday was. "August 11."

"What?" he asked, stunned by her words.

"August 11 is my birthday. When is yours? I don't even know that much about you."

"October 15."

So much for *that* line of conversation. It was amazing how quickly one could deplete a topic when one was nervous. Given all the possibilities, she should have little trouble choosing another subject to discuss. After all, she was an intelligent individual. That's right, she was going to ask about his uniform. "Why did you bring your dress uniform? I was surprised to see it."

"Sit down and I'll explain," he offered in a gentle voice.

Panic overtook her as she scanned the room. There were no chairs! The only two places she could sit were on the floor and on the bed. And Gabe certainly wasn't suggesting the former! Now what was she going to do? She started nervously when he grasped her upper arm with a tenderness she'd never felt. She turned her gaze to his rugged, tanned face.

"It's all right, Fanchon. All we'll do is sit, and I'll try to relax you. But I can't promise I'll be successful. I'm as nervous as you are. I want things to be perfect for you, Fanchon. I don't want you to be afraid, because that could only hurt our marriage."

Without thinking, she wrapped her arms around him and hugged him. "How did I get so lucky to find you, Gabe? You're so understanding that it's hard for me to stay afraid very long. Yes, let's sit down—on the bed."

"My dress uniform isn't the only unnecessary item I brought," he admitted as he stroked her bare forearm. "I brought a lot of money that I never dreamed I'd be spending. I knew it

was insane. I even tried to talk myself out of it, but I couldn't. The dress hat is too bulky, so I left it with Pa. I'll admit that some things I do are against regulations, but I never go out in public without my full uniform. That reminds me. Do you know anybody at the prisoner barracks who might have a major's full-dress hat? I need one for tomorrow."

"Yes, but I doubt it would fit you." Curious, she asked, "Why do you need it?"

"We have a ten o'clock appointment with a photographer. I won't have to wear the hat, but I do want to hold it. Do you think you can get it in time?"

"If Bianca helps me."

"Good. I brought more than the extras I already told you about, too. I had an uncontrollable urge to buy another derringer." He chuckled at the notion. "As if I needed it. None of it made any sense. I couldn't understand why I felt the need for so much money. I didn't understand why I wanted to bring my uniform, but when I bought that weapon and more than enough ammunition for it as well as my others, I was completely baffled. I thought I was going mad."

"Destiny," Fanchon mumbled.

"What?"

"Destiny," she repeated. "That's what Bianca called our meeting. You didn't realize it at the time, but you had an appointment with destiny."

"That certainly describes us, doesn't it," he said, letting his hand wander up her arm to her shoulder.

This was it! He wanted to take her as his wife and was going to seduce her. The moment she'd dreamed of had finally arrived. Then why was she so scared?

His warm hand slid across her bare back, scarcely touching her on its trek to her other shoulder. When he drew it back toward himself, just above the material of her dress, the tickling sensation caused her to shudder. That movement felt wonderful! Her fear disappeared in that moment, eradicated by her uncontrollable reaction. All that remained was the deep desire to make him happy.

To demonstrate her new feeling, she laid her hand on the back of his neck and drew him toward her. Their lips met, tenderly at first; but in the next instant, Gabe embraced her and kissed her with what she could only describe as hunger. He drew from deep within her a reaction so filled with love that it consumed her with need for him.

His hands moved again—over her breasts just above the material of her frock. She moaned behind his kiss. She was ready now, ready to be his wife in every sense of the word. Reluctantly breaking away, she rose to reach for the buttons on the back of her dress. When she stretched, her breasts strained to be freed from the fabric of her bodice.

Grasping her waist, he stood to pull her against him. "Here, Mrs. Freeman. Let me do the honors."

His lips again captured hers; his fingers worked the buttons until all of them were opened. Her breath caught when he caressed her bare back. His very touch caused her nerves

to scream for more masculine embraces—strong embraces that would create even more longing within her. Sliding her dress down her arms, Gabe fondled each breast in turn. Then he bent to kiss each pale tip as he slid the frock over her hips to the floor. The sensation was incredible! Her nipples hardened with increased desire that swept through her at the slight touch of his lips against her.

“Step out of your dress, my dear,” he whispered. After she did as he requested, he hung it in the cupboard before facing her. “Do you want me to blow out the lamp?”

“No,” she replied in a faltering voice. “I want to see you.”

Before Gabe could move toward her, she slipped her petticoats to the floor. Stepping out of them, she picked them up and tossed them carelessly aside. Across the room, his dark eyes admired her nude body.

“Now undress for me,” she said as she returned to the bed. Gabe stripped quickly, showing Fanchon every inch of his long, hard body. Once he was naked, she turned down the covers and lay back on the bed. “Come to me, Gabe.”

His hands skimmed over her body. He covered her face, neck and shoulders with feathery kisses so light that she grabbed his head to embrace his lips with hers. A second later his arms slid under her to hug her against him. She never dreamed intimacy could be so fulfilling without even having enveloped him with her womanhood.

Gabe withdrew an arm to caress her breast, pinching the tip gently until it hardened. Then his hand slid lower, past her waist and stomach until it stopped at her womanhood. His caress was tentative, as though he was uncertain that he should stop there. But the moment sent a flame raging through Fanchon’s loins, like a piece of paper catching fire. His hand moved on to her firm, soft-skinned thighs. Longing for the return of his intimate touch, she laid his hand back on her pleasure. He caressed her, sending the flames higher and higher. Waves of desire lapped over her body until she could no longer bear the intense urgency.

Lying between her spread legs, he used his free hand to position his manhood at the opening to her body. He kissed her hotly, hungrily tasting her mouth with his tongue. Fanchon grabbed his head. Between her legs searing desire engulfed her, and she knew only Gabe could douse it. Suddenly, the desire was gone, replaced by equally hot pain as Gabe dove into her.

But she merely moaned in displeasure. She didn’t want Gabe to know that she’d never done this before. She didn’t want him to think that she didn’t know what she was doing, because in her mind she did. She just didn’t understand the total emotional commitment that a liaison could bring about.

He was moving within her, as if he wanted to take away her pain. But he couldn’t possibly know that she was a virgin just by taking her one time—could he? That was something medical books didn’t explain.

Then the feeling of excitement began to return. Her body tingled with new sensations of feeling her husband deep inside her. And the experience was more incredible than anything she’d ever known. She sighed heatedly and increased the passion in her kiss.



Gabe tried to hold back, tried to make it pleasurable for her, but he couldn't now that she was reacting in such a passionate way. After over twenty-four hours in a nearly constant state of arousal, he erupted into her body only moments later. With a groan of distress, he collapsed beside her.

An unexpected notion flashed to the front of his mind. As he gazed over at her in shock, he rued his actions. She could soon be pregnant. He could die in battle and leave her to raise his daughter alone. Now he would never meet his little girl. What was he *thinking*? Fanchon probably wouldn't conceive after one time. But deep in his heart he knew he was only deceiving himself.

Drawing her to him, Gabe cradled her head on his shoulder and stroked her fine hair with a gentle touch. "I'm sorry it wasn't pleasurable for you, Fanchon."

She released a contented sigh and snuggled against him. "But it was—in the beginning and at the end. *You* couldn't help it that pain replaced pleasure; that was a biological fact of life. And you saw to it that the pleasure returned. I can't begin to tell you how much I appreciated that."

"I know it was part of my plan, but it didn't fully register as a possibility until it was too late for me to turn back. You could get pregnant, Fanchon. It's possible you could have to raise our child alone." Pausing, he reveled in the feel of her soft body. After several minutes, he asked the question that had plagued him since their last words with the minister. "Something Rev. Johnson said tonight bothers me, Fanchon. I didn't think it would matter when I asked you to marry me, but I found out that it does. I can't leave without knowing the answer. Do you love me like Reverend Johnson thinks?"

"Yes, Gabe, I love you—very much—even if I don't understand why."

"Thank God," he sighed. "If you're interested, I wish I could tell you that I love you, too. But I can't deceive you. Our marriage is strictly logical on my part."

"I know." Lifting her head, she gazed down at him. "Maybe someday you'll learn to love me."

"I can't promise that I will."

"I'm not asking you to."

"I don't know what brought us together, Fanchon. Maybe it was destiny's desire that we get married. But I did it because I *wanted* to. I won't back out on it, and I'll absolutely *never* be unfaithful to you. Do you believe me?"

Fanchon smiled and hugged him. "If I didn't, I never would have agreed to marry you. Now could we get some sleep? I'm not used to all these emotions, and I'm exhausted."

## SIX

A knock startled Fanchon from her dreams. Beside her, Gabe didn't stir. Gazing over at him, she smiled. He looked like a child while asleep. With a contented sigh, she rolled onto her stomach and whispered his name into his ear. When he flicked his hand at the irritation, she blew softly into his ear then pressed her lips against his.

Gabe embraced her, crushing her naked breasts against his chest. Then he skillfully flipped her onto her back and covered her with his body. Again the flame in her loins sparked almost instant arousal. She loved kissing her husband and knew she would never tire of it. Unfortunately, now wasn't the time for the excitement. Sliding her fingers into his hair, she pushed his head away.

"I want you, too," she whispered, her voice hoarse with desire, "but somebody's at the door."

The person outside knocked louder. "Major Freeman! It's seven-thirty. You left a message for me to wake you now."

"Byron," Fanchon whispered in horror.

"I'm awake," Gabe returned. "Thank you."

"How am I going to leave with Byron at the desk?" she asked when his footsteps faded. "I was so excited about being your wife that I forgot he works here."

"He knows you nursed my wounds the other night, so dress in your usual clothes. Tell him you came to examine me before I leave, and he won't suspect a thing."

"How did I get up here without him seeing me?"

"His back was turned, of course. Since you were in a hurry, you decided to wait until you left to say hello."

"All right, mister. If you're so smart, why didn't you answer the first time he knocked?"

"Because, nurse-lady," he explained, rolling over and dragging her atop him, "I was so overwhelmed by your beauty that I didn't hear him."

Fanchon giggled. "I believe it, but Byron won't. I'm very professional. I *always* spurn the advances of men under my care."

His hands skimmed over her body as he grinned with an impish gleam in his eyes. "Ah, but the second you walked into the room, I grabbed you. There was no escape—until he knocked the second time."

Grinding her hips against him, Fanchon called forth the wonderful new sensations that

he'd shown her she possessed. "Even a man who's holding somebody can speak."

"Not this way."

While Gabe slid his fingers into her hair, Fanchon gazed down at him with a soft smile. He was so handsome, so understanding, so charming. And best of all he wanted her. That was more than obvious from the look in his deep brown eyes. His eyes were another thing she loved about him. They had color, unlike those of half the Sten clan. His hair had color, too—and his skin was a rich golden tan. Her complexion was so pale that she looked sick next to him.

As he embraced her head, he gently forced it down until their lips met again. In that instant, all thought disappeared. Her motions became instinctive. She worked her hand between them to caress his manhood. With their lips locked in a heated kiss, she squeezed him slowly as he rolled her onto her back.

She was so excited that she could scarcely contain herself. When he entered her this time, she felt no pain, only the joyous desire of being in Gabe's arms again. He was her husband, and he was making her feel as no other man could.

His hands skimmed over her body, caressing her, taunting her, driving her into a frenzied arousal unlike any before it. Her mind drained of thought as his lips left hers. His tongue slid down her neck, flicking its way along to her shoulder. His hands massaged her breasts with such heated tenderness that she could hardly restrain her passion.

A small moan of pleasure escaped from her as his tongue circled her hardened nipple. Then his lips covered it to suckle gently. His thumb taunted the other one while she writhed on the bed.

He thrust into her several times then released her nipple and lay atop her. His mouth captured hers again; his tongue explored its recesses. Their bodies ground in unison, as though they'd been intimate many times and knew each other's actions.

Then something new happened. Between her legs, deep within her body, an unexplainable wave of need flooded her body. She couldn't breathe, so she jerked her head from Gabe's. Her heart pounded so hard in her chest that she was afraid she was having heart failure. But the sensation wouldn't go away—it only got stronger. Her last morsel of control disappeared as her body leapt into a trembling climax. Unable to help herself, she cried out lustfully.

Gabe's lips captured hers, cutting off her squeal of joy. His body went rigid for several seconds before he relaxed upon her, panting. "It's *never* been like that before."

Again Gabe was filled with a sense of having conceived a child—a daughter that he would never see. As much as he wanted to discuss it with Fanchon, he couldn't bring himself to say anything. Apparently, he wanted an heir so much he was imagining things. That was the only logical explanation for his feelings.

He kissed Fanchon's forehead and stroked her hair several times. He'd never felt so content with a woman before, and he knew at that moment that he'd made the right choice in a spouse.

Fanchon loved lying in Gabe's arms. She felt complete—like she did on the rare occasions when she and Astrid agreed. Only this was a different kind of completeness. No matter how much she hated to admit it, she and her twin were two people with one soul. But she'd shared something with Gabe that she never would with Astrid. She and her husband had united and been joined as one.

Content, Fanchon sighed again and slid her fingertips through the dense forest of hair covering his muscular chest. His arms tightened around her as he kissed her hair.

"I'd like to stay right where we are, Fanchon," he said, rising from the bed and striding to the washstand, "but we have to get out of here. Bianca's expecting us for breakfast. You get dressed while I shave. Bianca said you can change into your dress there while I run some errands. I'll change at the photographer's shop. And another thing. I don't think I'll use a hat after all. I didn't have one at our wedding, so I'd rather not have it for the photograph. I want my father to see exactly what we looked like."

"You're sending your father a photograph?" she asked as she sat up in bed. "Why?"

"Proof of our wedding," he explained. "Pa's been badgering me for five years to give up the Cavalry and get married. He'd been married a year and a half by the time I came along, and he's twenty years older than I. But I refused to get married until I found my perfect woman. And *that*, my dear nurse-lady, is you."

Sauntering to him, Fanchon slid her arms around his waist to press her body against his. "Tell me, my darling husband, do you always talk so much in the mornings?"

He turned in her embrace and hugged her. "Only when I'm trying to avoid upsetting you. I have to leave as soon as the photographs are developed."

She pouted. "So soon?"

"I'm afraid so. I rented the room for three nights, but I knew I'd never use it the last one. I should leave *now*, but I want a photo of you and one of both of us. And I want you to have one of me and one of both of us. That way these last two days won't seem like nothing more than a wonderful dream. We'll have proof that they were real."

"I understand. I'll dress so you can get ready." Her distress too great for further words, she wandered to her satchel on the dresser. Facing her new husband, she admitted, "Now I know how Bianca must have felt when Ben left."

\*\*\*

When the newlyweds let themselves in the kitchen door, Bianca greeted them. "I should have known you two wouldn't get here until noon."

"It's hardly past nine," Fanchon countered with a grin.

"Sit down and eat, or you'll be late to the photographer's. You still have to get ready. I'll press your dress to save time."

“Thank you,” Fanchon said, “but I’m not hungry.”

“I certainly am.” Gabe sat down at the table and pulled Fanchon down into the chair beside his. “And you’re going to eat, too, Mrs. Freeman. Contrary to what you may have heard, you cannot live on love.”

“I won’t starve to death missing breakfast this morning,” Fanchon replied, “and I *won’t* let you make me eat if I don’t want to.”

Leaning over, Gabe kissed her then chuckled. “*That’s* the woman I married. You’re free, all right. And that’s exactly what I wanted. Are you going to stand there with your mouth gaping, Bianca? Or are you going to feed your brother-in-law?”

Fanchon smiled. She liked knowing that he wanted her to be free. With an unexpected idea, Fanchon questioned her sister. “Is Ben still in bed? I want to wash up in your room.”

Bianca set a plate of bacon and eggs before Gabe, exclaiming, “At this hour? Definitely not.”

Without a word, Fanchon pumped some water into a pitcher beside the sink then left the room. On her way through the living room, she greeted Ben before racing up the stairs two at a time.

“What were you so surprised about, Bianca?” Gabe asked when they were alone.

“Your attitude.” Bianca shook out her sister’s dress then slipped the bodice over her ironing board. “I’ve never heard anyone praise Fanchon for being independent, especially not a man. Even our brothers don’t praise her.”

“I *want* her to be free,” Gabe proclaimed. “That way I know she’ll be fine if I don’t come back from the hell I’m going to.”

“Letting her be free isn’t always easy,” Bianca explained as she sank onto the chair across from him. “There are some things I need to know, Gabe. She has to tell our family about you eventually, and I want to be prepared.”

“Prepared for what?”

“To support her. We come from a family of stubborn Swedes who all have their own opinions and aren’t afraid to voice them. She’s the most controversial, but all of us worry about her.”

“Is it really that bad?” he asked in concern.

“Worse. I’m not even sure she understands why. I’ve heard her give friends some story about not having a childhood because she was always studying, but we didn’t start to worry until she wasn’t studying anymore. She finished school at fourteen, and no university would accept her. She’d take long walks—for hours on end. It took a while, but she and Dad convinced the doctor to let her help him. That’s how she learned nursing, and she’s very good at it. She delivered my youngest child—and all of Ilka’s. That’s another one of our sisters.”

“What’s this have to do with me?”

“Nothing directly, but I think you should know everything. You should understand how frightened she is. She loves you and wants to be with you, but she also knows she can’t. Fanchon’s a logical person, and that kind of love defies logic. I could take it in stride because I’m a romantic, but Fanchon’s afraid of anything she can’t explain.”

“What does that have to do with your family worrying?”

“She’s going to be upset, then she’ll start going off by herself again. One of our brothers always called her a free spirit. We got word that he was injured in the war, too. Thank God, he should be coming home soon. He’s the only one who can reason with her, but I’m not sure even *he’ll* be able to do that this time. If he’d been here, by the way, I wouldn’t know about your marriage. She would have turned to him long before she came to me. The point I’m trying to make is that she’s going to start going off alone again. She was attacked the other night, Gabe. It happened once before, and it could happen again. Since you’re the man who rescued her, you should understand why we worry.”

“Then your worries are over,” Gabe responded. “I gave her a derringer and told her to carry it all the time. I also taught her how to use it so she can safely be as free-spirited as she wants.”

“You don’t think she’ll carry it just because you told her to, do you?”

Gabe stared at Bianca, shocked by her question.

Before he could respond, Fanchon’s voice came from upstairs. “Gabe! I need you!”

Scrambling from the table, he toppled his chair in his rush to her. When he reached the top of the steps, she called for him again. Throwing open the door of the room from which her voice came, he raced in.

“Fanchon!” he cried out as the door slammed shut. Spinning, he examined her in astonishment while she locked the door. When she turned toward him, she wore nothing but a mischievous grin. The panic he initially felt drained away, replaced by rapidly increasing arousal. Even though he tried to scold her, his voice came out husky with desire. “For God’s sake, Fanchon, you scared me to death. What were you doing?”

Her fingers worked the buttons on his shirt as she replied, “Something I’ve never tried before. I don’t even know if I’m doing it right, so I hope you’ll forgive me if I’m a little clumsy. What I’m doing, my darling husband, is seducing you.”

Her fingers trailed upward through the hair on his hard stomach and chest to his broad shoulders. Oh, how she loved the feel of him, the smell of him, the taste of his lips against hers. At last, she pushed the shirt down his arms, unbuttoned the cuffs and dropped it to the floor.

“Sweetheart,” he said, taking her into his arms, “we don’t have much time.”

“I want you to ... be intimate with me again.”

Gabe couldn’t deny her, doffed the remainder of his clothes, and embraced her. As they kissed, he backed up to the bed, turned and laid her down on it. And they made love one more time, quickly but just as passionately as before.

Minutes later and exhausted from their tryst, he held her in his arms, and said, “God,

you're wonderful. Fanchon, you don't know how much I wish I could stay and be a real husband to you."

"I wish you could, too, but that's not our destiny."

"Give me your sister's address, Fanchon—so I can write to Mrs. Gabriel Freeman while I'm gone." Gabe shivered as she trailed the fingers of her right hand over his chest. With a soft smile, he lifted her hand and toyed with her cameo ring. "And one more thing. I purposely got a narrow band so your cameo would hide it. If you want this secret marriage, you'd better put that cameo back on your left hand."

Without another word, he took the cameo from her right finger. Fanchon didn't speak, either, as she gave him her left hand, and he slid the cameo up her left finger. As he had hoped, the band was barely noticeable.

"Why are you being so supportive when you want to meet my family?" she asked.

"Bianca said it frightens you when you can't find logic in something. Unfortunately, love isn't a logical emotion."

"So I'm discovering."

"As much as I adore holding you, I have to get up," he announced, getting out of bed. "Don't forget to meet me at ten."

As Fanchon left the house, Astrid entered with Bianca's children. The moment they met in the doorway, Astrid told their nephews and niece to go find their mother.

But Fanchon was still angry at Astrid for having involved herself in her life the previous night. "I don't have time to talk, Astrid. I have an appointment."

"Then we'll talk on the way," Astrid insisted as she examined Fanchon's attire. "But I've never heard of someone wearing a party dress to an appointment."

Preferring a brief conversation at Bianca's house to a lengthy one on the street, Fanchon sighed in resignation. "I'm getting my photograph taken. Is that all right with you?"

"You're acting awfully strange lately."

"I have a lot on my mind."

"So I see." Pointing to Fanchon's breast, Astrid asked, "How did you get cut?"

"That's none of your affair," Fanchon snapped.

"You *were* attacked out by the Rock, weren't you?"

"I appreciate your concern, Astrid," Fanchon replied, glad that she could answer truthfully, "but I wasn't attacked at the Rock. I don't know what you saw there, but it had nothing to do with me."

"Who was the soldier you met about midnight?"

Staring at her twin in shock, Fanchon struggled to maintain her composure. She should have known Astrid would spy on her, but she hadn't even considered it. She'd known Astrid

suspected her, so she should have expected Astrid to watch her. All she could do now was keep lying and hope for the best. “He was my escort to the hospital.”

“I’d love to have him kiss *me* like that.”

“You spied on me, you witch!” Fanchon accused. “That’s why I never tell you anything. That and you can’t keep a secret. You’re the worst gossip I know. I have to go now. Good-bye.”

\*\*\*

The portraits took longer than Gabe had anticipated. Each plate for the photograph had to be prepared immediately before exposure and developed promptly thereafter. To save room in his belongings, Gabe decided upon the cheaper Ambrotype, the negatives backed with black paper. But he insisted that Fanchon have the more expensive tintypes, negatives backed with black lacquered metal, for a more permanent record.

When he arrived at Bianca’s, he and Fanchon went to bed one last time. As they lay together afterward, Fanchon began their parting conversation with more conviction than he’d ever heard—even from her. “I’m going to have your child, darling.”

As she toyed with the hair on his chest, he recalled his own irrational belief in her pregnancy. “That would be wonderful, but I don’t like the idea of burdening you with a child.”

“What if I were to die in childbirth? Would you consider our baby a burden?”

“Never!” he exclaimed, horrified by her question. “I’d consider it an extension of *you*.”

“Which is exactly how I feel.” During a momentary pause, she kissed him. “Would you rather have a son or a daughter?”

“A daughter who looks exactly like her mother, of course.”

“Let’s hope we *both* don’t get our wish then, because I want a son who looks exactly like his father.”

Gabe chuckled. “Twins! What a marvelous idea.”

“It’s very possible. For about a hundred years our family has produced at least one set of twins in every generation. Although, that *is* unusual.”

His grin disappeared. From the look on her face, she was serious. What had he done? Instead of possibly leaving her with one baby, he could leave her with two! “Why didn’t you tell me?”

A lustful gleam came to her eyes, and she replied in a voice that was closer to a sensual whisper. “I’m not a fool, Gabe. I don’t want you to worry, though. I’ll keep both myself and our baby safe. But I know what war can do to men, and I’ll worry about you constantly until you’re back in my arms.”

“With *my* arsenal?” he teased. “No Reb is going to get me.”



"I'm serious, Gabe," she insisted.

Gabe sighed before he responded. "This isn't wishful thinking for you, is it, Fanchon. You truly believe you're pregnant already."

"Nothing else has been logical. It makes no sense that I'm so sure, but it fits with everything else that's happened to us. Destiny brought us together; it's taking us apart; it'll give us a product of our union. And it will bring us back together. I promise you, Gabe. We *will* find each other again."

Gabe stared at her in stunned disbelief. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Fanchon fought to keep her voice calm and reassuring. She didn't want Gabe going into battle concerned that they might be separated longer than they anticipated. "I mean that you'll come home." But despite her soft, easy voice, her heart was disturbed. What *had* she meant by the remark?

"Thank God," he sighed.

When he got out of bed, she watched him dress. She was more frightened now than when she married him. Her words had sounded as though theirs would be a very long separation. Maybe she subconsciously believed the war would continue for years. Nonsense! It couldn't go on forever. She was probably upset about Gabe going to the front lines. That had to be it. She was afraid he would be killed, and she would never see him again. It was a perfectly normal, *logical* reaction when one was in love.

Gabe sat on the edge of the bed, pulling on his boots before turning toward her to speak. "I never thought I'd say this to a woman, Fanchon, but I'm going to miss you."

"I'll miss you, too," she said, sliding her arms around his neck when he bent over her. "I love you."

He smiled at her softly and caressed her head. Somehow she knew he wanted to say the same words but couldn't. Instead, he said, "I'll write when I get to the last town before I go into battle. I'll send all mail to Bianca's house, addressed to Mrs. Freeman."

Again, he kissed her. Breaking away, he rushed to the door of Bianca's bedroom. As he reached for the key to unlock it, he halted at the desperation Fanchon discovered she couldn't keep from her voice. "Don't ever be afraid to come back to me, Gabe. No matter what happens, I'll stay faithful until I have proof that you're gone. I love you too much to give up on you."

When he disappeared through the door, Fanchon burst into tears. Yes, she was sad that he was leaving, but there was more behind it. Something was going to happen. Something was going to threaten their happiness, to turn their lives into upheaval—to divert their destiny.

## SEVEN

"Trevor!" Astrid exclaimed as she raced into the mercantile store. "I need to talk to you."

"In a minute," he said from behind the counter where he was assisting a customer.

"I don't *have* a minute," she insisted. "Where can we talk privately?"

"Wait in the back. I'll be right with you."

Astrid hurried down a short hallway and slipped into the storage room. The second she closed the door, fear surged through her. Why? She'd been in that room dozens of times without that kind of reaction. Glancing around, she looked to see if she was alone. No one else was there, and nothing was out of place. Still, something was wrong with the room. It felt ominous, foreboding, like it would come to life and attack her.

Fanchon's image flashed across her mind. The fear became terror. She wanted to run, but she couldn't—she was frozen in place. Then there was a stabbing pain in her right breast. And her heart! It was breaking. Unexpected tears streamed from her eyes. When her blurred gaze fell upon the back door, she saw a tall Union soldier, his face set in rage, looming in the doorway. From somewhere in the room a woman screamed.

Behind her, the door banged open. In that instant, the soldier vanished, along with the fear and the pain in her breast. But the heartbreak remained. The tears refused to stop even when Trevor took her into his arms.

"What happened, Astrid?" he asked.

"I don't know." Throwing her arms around his neck, she burrowed her face on his shoulder. "It must have been awful. It wasn't at the Rock. It was here—in this very room. I can *feel* it. No wonder she wouldn't talk about it. I wouldn't want to, either."

"Calm down, honey. You're not making any sense."

"I *can't*. And you wouldn't make sense if you went through what I just did, either."

"Then tell me about it."

Breaking away from him, Astrid wandered to the dry goods table and sat on it. The second she did, a rush of apprehension swept through her, and she hopped off again. She tried another table, sitting very still for a few moments. There was nothing wrong with that table, so she took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Although the apprehension was gone, the tears and heartache remained.

"Do you feel better now?" he asked, grasping her hands in his.

"A little," she replied. "Fanchon wasn't attacked at the Rock, Trevor. It happened right

here.”

Trevor almost panicked. Had Fanchon told Astrid everything? Impossible! They weren’t that close. To be sure, he questioned Astrid. “Something happened in *my* storeroom? Is that what she told you?”

“She didn’t tell me anything,” Astrid admitted, “except that she was upset and had been crying by the river.”

“Then why do you think something happened here?”

“I felt it when I came in. We don’t have to tell each other some things. We just *know* them. Besides, Fanchon said she wasn’t attacked *at the Rock*. She didn’t say she wasn’t attacked. And I know who did it. I saw his image on the back of the door. It was the same soldier she met by our barn about midnight.”

“A *soldier*?” Trevor exclaimed. Could it be the soldier he’d tangled with in the storage room? If it was, he could be in serious trouble. Fanchon would probably keep quiet like she had a year earlier, but that soldier wouldn’t.

“I’ve never seen my twin kiss a man like that. Not ever.”

“Why would they be kissing if he attacked her?” Trevor asked.

Baffled by the question, Astrid gazed at him. “I don’t know. Maybe things got better between them. But it was the same soldier. I’m positive. I saw him again this morning, and I got a really good look at him this morning. I asked Fanchon about him when I saw her at Bianca’s, and she was furious that I’d spied on her. She left in a huff, so I followed her to the photographer’s shop. And guess who went in a few minutes later.”

“The soldier,” Trevor inserted.

“And he was whistling like the happiest man in the world. I waited until he came out so I could follow him, too. And where did he lead me? Straight to Bianca’s house. He walked right in the front door—like he was expected. I didn’t want him to see me, so I went in the back. When Bianca saw me, she made me leave.”

“What did you do?”

“I left, of course. I stayed outside for about an hour before he came out, then I came here. What do you think?”

Feigning disinterest, Trevor shrugged. “I’ve never been able to understand Fanchon. Maybe she has a suitor.”

“A very handsome one.”

Battling his anxiety, Trevor envisioned the soldier he’d fought against. That soldier had been handsome, too. But his desperation to learn the truth overruled his caution. The best way to verify his suspicions was to question Astrid. Her love for gossip would surely outweigh her sisterly devotion to her twin. “What did he look like?”

“He’s quite tall—well over six feet—with dark blond hair. And from the way his uniform

fit, I'd say he's a man any woman would *love* to have hold her. Too bad he has such an ugly bruise on his head. He's one man I could easily steal away from my sister for a few hours of fun. Our taste in men is identical where *he's* concerned."

No doubt remained. The soldier Astrid described was the same one who had rescued Fanchon, and he was probably stationed at the Rock Island Arsenal barracks. If he was as interested in Fanchon as it sounded, he would probably want revenge, too. Somehow, Trevor realized, he had to divert Astrid's attention from the topic before she deduced the truth of that evening's events.

"Come now, Astrid," he said. Moving her legs apart, Trevor stepped between them while his hand sought out her covered breast. "Don't *I* please you anymore?"

"Of course, you do," She pushed him away, "but not now. If you'll excuse me, I want to go home and have a good cry."

\*\*\*

"Fanchon?" Bianca's voice filtered through to her consciousness as a hand grasped her shoulder. "Fanchon, are you all right?"

Waking, she rolled onto her back and stared at Bianca's concerned expression. After a moment to collect herself, she sat up, and hugged her knees with both arms. "I'm fine."

"First I let you cry, then I let you sleep," Bianca said, sinking onto the edge of the bed. "Now it's time to talk."

"How long was I asleep?" Fanchon asked.

"At least two and a half hours."

Gazing at her sister, Fanchon swallowed back a renewed lump of sorrow in her throat. Wouldn't she *ever* get over Gabe's departure? "You know what it's like to have your husband go to war. Does it get easier?"

"As the days pass. Then it's only the waiting and worrying. And the fear every time there's a knock on the door."

"The official military visit, right?"

Bianca nodded. "That was the hardest part for me. That's why I told family to walk in."

"I hope I never get a visit. There's so much I want to learn about Gabe, so much I want him to learn about me. We didn't have time for courting, and I didn't even tell him about Astrid. I told him twins run in our family, but not that I *am* one."

"There'll be plenty of time when he comes back."

"*If* he comes back."

"Don't even *think* that," Bianca declared. "It only makes things harder. Besides, you're the most optimistic person I know. Now's not the time to change."

"I've never been in love before." Fanchon paused. She'd never felt so sad in her life, and she didn't see an end to that distress. "How do I control the heartache, Bianca?"

"You'll do fine. If it's any consolation, I know it must be harder on you than it was on me. I had several years with Ben before he had to leave, plus a year of courting. You had less than forty-eight hours. Your love is just blossoming. By the time Gabe gets back, it will be in full bloom. This war *can't* last much longer. It's already been going on for three years. It *has* to end soon."

Fanchon offered Bianca a brief, sad smile. "I hope you're right. I'm tired of sending the men I love off to war just to have them injured. First Ben lost his legs, then Nels was wounded. You don't know what it's like dealing with the physical pain those prisoners endure. Every day I envision one of my brothers—and now my husband—in the same agony. When are we going to hear the next bad news, Bianca? Is it Pete's turn? Or Gabe's?"

Bianca sighed, and Fanchon examined her. She wasn't in the mood for another of Bianca's talks. All she wanted to do was go home, hide away in her room, and think about what life could have been like if Gabe hadn't gone to war. But to Fanchon's surprise, Bianca said something unexpected.

"Gabe asked me to give you some things tomorrow, but I think I should do it now. I'll be right back." Leaving the room for several seconds, Bianca returned and set a pile of items on the bed in front of Fanchon. "Would you like to be alone?"

"Please."

"I'll be in the kitchen if you want to talk."

Fanchon waited for Bianca to close the door before she set aside the thick envelope and gold pocket watch. Crossing her legs, she toyed with the epaulets on Gabe's uniform jacket. He looked even more handsome when he wore it—almost regal. She'd been proud of his appearance when she first saw him in his dress uniform, even though she was too nervous to realize it at the time. Holding the jacket against her face, she inhaled. It still smelled of the men's lotion he'd used after shaving the night before. If only she could find a way to preserve the scent for a more realistic memory of their wedding.

Laying the jacket down again, Fanchon opened the watch and read the inscription in the lid: *To my son, Love and God-speed. Pa* How sweet of Gabe to leave such a cherished possession in her safekeeping. After slipping the watch into the jacket pocket, she broke the seal on the envelope and withdrew a thick letter. When she unfolded the paper, she gasped in astonishment. The small, neat writing in the letter took less than a page. What made the packet thick were the sixteen fifty dollar bills that fluttered to her lap!

*Dear Mrs. Freeman,*

*I dread leaving you more than I dread going to war. I want to be with you, protect you, care for you, and provide for you like other husbands. But the best I can do is give you \$800. I'll write Pa and have him send you a monthly allotment of \$500.*

*The watch is for you to give our child if I don't come home. It's my legacy to her*

*(or him, if you prefer). The uniform is a reminder for you to trust our destiny.*

*The pain of parting is agonizing, and I haven't even left the house. I heard you crying, and it tore my heart to know that I couldn't comfort you.*

*If nothing else will soothe the hurt, remember this. I'll be back as soon as possible.*

*Yours forever,*

*Gabe*

Her tears streamed as she hugged Gabe's jacket. Her heart ached so much that she felt it would be easier to die. But she would survive for Gabe and their baby. She would overcome the heartache, except at night—when the memory of her one night in his arms would bring back the pain of his absence.

\*\*\*

Fanchon entered the house with a package tucked under one arm and her satchel in the same hand. In the parlor Astrid, Carl, and their younger sister Elsa played cards while Jane mended a shirt nearby.

"If it isn't our long-lost daughter," Carl teased. "You're working very long hours."

"A lot of prisoners have died lately," she said. "One hundred two prisoners died in June. The death-toll will probably reach at least seventy by the end of this month."

"Then how could you have your photograph taken today?" Jane asked.

Shooting Astrid an irate glance, Fanchon collapsed into a wing chair. Now that her twin had gossiped again, she had to think of another lie. What was that saying about lies? Something about how they keep snowballing? Whatever it was, it was true, because hers were running rampant. After a long, weary sigh, Fanchon returned her gaze to her mother. "I already had an appointment, so Dr. Watson let me keep it."

"Let's see the picture."

"See the picture?" Fanchon repeated. Now what should she do? How could she extricate herself from the lies she'd so badly contrived? Her following words were so instinctive that even she didn't know what would come. "I didn't have time to wait for the developing process. I told him I'd get it tomorrow." To hide her tension, she strolled toward the stairs. Lying had never been her most noted accomplishment, and she had to leave before her family realized what she was doing. "I'm going to bed. I'm exhausted."

When Fanchon's door closed, Carl and Jane gazed at one another in concern as Carl asked, "What do you think she's hiding this time?"

"I don't know," Jane replied, "but whatever it is must be important."

“Maybe it has something to do with a man,” Astrid observed. When her father glanced at her suspiciously, she threw her cards onto the table. Carl always sided with Fanchon, and she was always the outsider. But this time she was right, and she wasn’t going to let him intimidate her. “She works with them all day long. All night, too, sometimes.”

“Astrid could be right, Carl. I’ll see if Fanchon wants to talk.”

\*\*\*

As badly as Fanchon wanted to go through Gabe’s belongings again, it would have to wait. In a few minutes, someone would come to discuss her problem. It happened every time she was upset. When would they learn that she never wanted to talk when she was in a bad mood?

A knock threw Fanchon into a panic. Scanning the room, she saw no safe place to hide Gabe’s possessions. Not knowing what else to do, she slid them under her bed. A moment later the door opened, and Fanchon scrambled to her feet.

Jane entered and closed the door behind her. “May I come in for a few minutes? Astrid suggested something I want to discuss.”

“I’m not interested in Astrid’s suggestions, Mom,” she said. “I’m only interested in sleep.”

“I’ll be quick then.” Jane glanced around the room then returned her gaze to Fanchon. “Where’s the package you brought home? I was going to ask to see what you bought.”

“I didn’t buy anything,” Fanchon replied, “and I already put the package away.”

“Under the bed, no doubt. What are you hiding?”

“Nothing. I don’t like people invading my privacy. You *know* that.”

“Astrid thinks your problem has to do with a man. Is it the soldier that Hal told me rescued you from an assault?”

Her mouth agape, Fanchon stared at her mother. If she’d been thinking clearly, she would have made her uncle promise not to tell her family about the incident. At the time, though, she was more interested in Gabe’s body.

“I thought so,” Jane said. “Don’t get involved with him just because he came to your rescue, Fanchon. It’s foolhardy and reckless.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about—and neither does Little Miss Gossip.” Her instinct to keep her wedding secret had been right. And to think she’d almost said something when Jane had trod so close to the truth! Having the deception out in the open would have been a relief, but she couldn’t announce her wedding now. Jane would say something to her father, and they would eventually bring it to a family discussion. Then, once again, she would be the focus of controversy. Oh, how she hated being the center of family discord!

Fanchon decided to avoid the inevitable. “He helped me when I needed it, Mom. That’s all.”

But Jane continued as though Fanchon hadn't spoken. "Any man who takes advantage of your good nature just because he rescued you isn't worth your attention. It isn't wise to let gratitude take over the logic you've always had, Fanchon, especially where a man is concerned."

"Major Freeman only escorted me back to Uncle Hal's house so I wouldn't be attacked again. I nursed his injuries, then he left. Didn't Uncle Hal tell you *that*?"

"He also told me how he found you on his porch."

"Oh, for Pete's sake," she raged. "Don't I have *any* privacy? Major Freeman explained that to Uncle Hal, too. He was consoling me."

"A decent man would never put a young lady in a position where gestures can be misconstrued. Hal told me that he wasn't wearing his shirt—and that you were happy in his arms. Ladies don't do that, no matter how upset they are."

No longer able to control her anger, Fanchon shouted at her mother. "Then maybe I'm not the lady you think I am! Maybe I'm a street slut who is intimate with any man who looks at me twice. Maybe I'm not a nurse at all. Maybe I only go to the barracks so I can prostitute myself! Maybe I'm a *whore*!"

"That's uncalled for, Fanchon," Carl said from the open doorway. "We're only trying to protect you."

"When the hell are you people going to learn that I don't *need* protection? I have my own life, and I *don't* need you to tell me if I live it right or not." Unexpected tears of frustration clouded her vision. Oh, no! She was going to cry again. They were accusing her husband of something he would never do, and she couldn't even protect his name by telling them the truth. If she could, she would open her mouth and blurt it out. But the words were stuck in her heart. It wasn't fair! Gabe had just left, and she couldn't even be alone in her sorrow. "Why won't everybody leave me alone?"

"Go downstairs, dear," Carl said to his wife. "Let me see if I can make some sense of this."

"Go with her, Dad," Fanchon insisted. "I want to be alone."

While Jane closed the door behind her, Carl strode to his daughter. Gently pushing her to sit on the bed, he sank down beside her. "I know it's upsetting to be rejected, Kitten One, but that happens occasionally."

Fanchon lifted her head and straightened her shoulders. "I wasn't rejected."

"What happened, honey?" he asked in concern. "What's causing you so much pain? You've never used such harsh language in your life."

"*Nothing* happened." Her voice cracked as her defenses crumbled under her father's gentle questioning. "Honest."

"I can't believe that. You're always logical, but you're not right now. That's how we know something's wrong."

"Oh, Daddy!" she wailed, flinging herself into her father's arms. "Why me? Why did this happen when I wasn't expecting it? I didn't ask for it. I didn't look for it. I didn't even *want* it."



But I got it, anyway. How could something like this happen?"

Carl embraced her and smoothed down her hair. "Life isn't always fair. I heard what you and your mother said, and I have a question that she didn't ask. Were you raped the night of your assault?"

"No."

"I hope you aren't lying again, because if you are, I'll have to do something I won't be proud of. This soldier who supposedly ..."

"Supposedly!" Fanchon pushed away from him and scrambled to her feet. Now her beloved father was accusing her husband, but she wouldn't allow it. Gabe was a good man, and she refused to let even her closest relatives malign him. "What does *that* mean? That you think Major Freeman was my assailant? He helped me, Dad. He didn't hurt me, and he never would."

"Then you are interested in him."

"He saved me from a terrible fate," she continued, ignoring his observation. "I would give my life for him. Don't make him into a horrid man, because he's *not*. He was kind and sensitive. And he *didn't* question me like I was on trial."

"We're worried about you, Fanchon."

"There's too damned much concern for me around here. I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself, and I'm going to find a way out of this house to prove it. Now leave me alone. I need some sleep."

When Fanchon turned her back on her father, Carl wandered to the door. "Don't forget that we're always here if you need to talk."

Once alone, she opened her satchel and withdrew Gabe's tintype. "How am I ever going to tell them, darling? Mom's opposed to me falling in love, and Dad thinks you assaulted me. I *want* to tell them, Gabe. I truly do, but I can't—not under these circumstances. I'm afraid of how they'll react. I'd feel terrible if they decided that they hate you simply because of how we came to be married."

Taking out the tintype of them both, she stared at it. The ache returned to her heart. Gabe had insisted that she lay her left hand on his arm at just the right angle so her wedding band showed. He'd been gone less than twelve hours, and she already missed him desperately. If only they'd had more time together. Returning both pictures to her satchel, she slipped off the cameo ring and gazed down at her wedding band. Oh, how she loved Gabe! If she had an idea of when he would return, her mind would rest easier. Maybe!

Fanchon strolled to her window and stared out at the late evening sunset. It would have been more beautiful with Gabe at her side, because they could watch it together. The door opened, and she slid the cameo on again. As Fanchon turned around, Astrid entered.

"Get the hell out of my room!" she exclaimed, her rage no longer containable. "And get out of my life while you're at it."

"I know you didn't lie about not being attacked at the Rock," Astrid said. "And I don't

blame you for being mad. But you *were* attacked the other night—in Trevor’s storeroom.”

Fanchon’s anger was still too strong to react any way but instinctively. “Who told you?”

“Nobody. I was there today, and I felt it. You can’t hide things like that from me.”

Fanchon collapsed on her bed in distress. Astrid was right. Whenever one twin got hurt, the other knew it. When one was upset, the other knew. If Astrid had been in that room, she knew that Fanchon had been terrorized there. The best thing to do was admit it and avoid another confrontation.

“All right,” Fanchon mumbled. “I was attacked in Trevor’s storeroom. Now leave me alone.”

“I can’t. There’s more, and I think it has to do with that soldier who kissed you by the barn last night. From the way you’ve been acting the last couple days, I’d say you lost your heart to a man who won’t take it. He can accept a kiss here and there, maybe even some loving on the side. But he won’t accept anything permanent. I could give you advice on how to win his heart without him realizing it.”

“If I *did* need advice,” Fanchon said, “I certainly wouldn’t ask you. I know what kind of person you are, Astrid. I won’t tell Mom or Dad how close you and Trevor are, but I do know. And since I’m keeping your secret, you have to keep mine. The second you try to interfere in my life, Mom and Dad will hear everything about your many intimacies with Trevor. Then you’d have nobody to satisfy your sexual needs. Or do you have more than one man waiting in bed for you?”

As Fanchon had hoped, Astrid stormed from the room. Once more alone, she locked her door to delight in her memories of Gabe.

## EIGHT

The first of Gabe's letters arrived two days after he left. They were long epistles telling Fanchon about his childhood memories, his inner-most secrets, his dreams for the future. Once he even expressed his anxiety about going into battle with the prospect of leaving her a widow. Several times he wrote that he'd never known such a fear and couldn't understand why he did now. Her independence should keep him from worrying, he'd mentioned once, but he was still deeply concerned for her well-being.

In one letter, however, he mentioned the distant memory of having broken up a fight between a pretty, seven-year-old blonde and a ten-year-old red-haired boy. He'd been traveling from the East to the Wyoming Territory when he was a teenager and his family had stopped to visit a relative who had lived in Moline.

*Anyway, he wrote, the moment I saw that redhead attacking you in the storeroom, I saw that fight of years ago. But when I learned his name was Trevor Riley, I wondered if it was possible. The boy's name had been Trevor, but I could never remember the girl's name. In fact, I'm not sure I ever knew it.*

A nearly identical memory returned to Fanchon when she read his words. Had destiny brought them together more than once? Had that one time on the city street been a mere prelude to their life together? Wouldn't Bianca think *that* was a romantic incident!

Fanchon found comfort in all of Gabe's letters, though—not just that one. All of her life she'd wanted to marry a man like herself, a man she would never have to worry about. But once she'd found one, she learned that concern and anxiety were directly related to love.

Twelve days after Gabe left, Bianca appeared at the hospital. When Fanchon came out of a room with Dr. Watson, Bianca raced down the corridor to greet her. Without saying a word, Bianca pulled Fanchon aside then took a piece of paper from her purse and handed it to Fanchon.

"I brought this as soon as it came," she said in a loud whisper.

Fanchon stared at the name on the envelope of the telegram—Mrs. Gabriel Freeman. It *had* to be official. Nobody but the military would send her a telegram with that name on it. They'd been married less than two weeks, and Gabe had already been hurt. He might even be dying. No wonder she'd been so worried about their destiny.

"I know what you're feeling right now, Fanchon," Bianca said, drawing her from her thoughts. "It's hard to open. But that's the only way to find out what it says."

Nodding her head, Fanchon withdrew the paper from the envelope and read it. The second she saw Gabe's name as the sender, she sighed with relief. He hadn't been hurt; he'd sent the message. Overcome with joy, Fanchon hugged Bianca.

"It's from Gabe!" Backing away, she read the entire telegram aloud. "*Named company commander. Awaiting troops two weeks. Let me know. Gabe. Thank God, he's safe!*"

Bianca smiled, her own relief obvious in her pale eyes. "I can't tell you how happy I am for you. What does he want you to let him know?"

Grasping Bianca's upper arm, Fanchon led her down the corridor for more privacy. "He wants to know if we're going to be parents."

"I guess you *would* have a good idea before he goes."

"I'm already having symptoms, Bianca, but before I make an appointment with a doctor, I want to be sure I'm not imagining them. Sometimes a woman will be so desperate for a child that she'll have a false pregnancy, showing all the symptoms without actually having conceived. Since that's how badly I want to carry Gabe's child, I should give myself more time."

"Do you really think you're pregnant?"

"I suspected before he left. I'm trying to be logical about this, Bianca. My mind keeps telling me it's too early to be sure. But in my heart, I'm positive."

Bianca chuckled. "With the way your marriage started out, you should listen to your heart."

"I know. And that's just the beginning. Gabe and I have a similar memory—from different views. When I was about seven, a boy Nels' age stopped a fight between Trevor and me. I was completely infatuated, but I never saw him again because Nels wouldn't let me go when he met the boy that night. The thing is Gabe remembers breaking up a fight between a blonde girl and a redheaded boy named Trevor. He doesn't know about our shared memory yet, though, because I've been so busy at the hospital that I can only find a few minutes before I fall asleep at night to write to him. But we decided you were right when you called our meeting destiny. We think the baby is destiny, too." Pausing to glance behind her, Fanchon discovered more men lingering in the hall. "Can we talk tonight? I want to tell you everything."

"And I want to hear it. You don't know how hard it's been not to ask questions. Come around eight. Then the children will be in bed, and we won't be interrupted."

"I'll be there, but right now, I'd better get back to work."

\*\*\*

In the background, children played, and adults talked at the family celebration. But Fanchon felt no joy—only loneliness. Destiny had been unfair to give her love then take it away so soon. She'd firmly believed that Gabe would mail a letter to arrive on time, but Bianca hadn't brought one. Had Gabe already tired of being her husband? Sitting alone by the front window, she stared at the barn door where Gabe had waited to escort her to their wedding.

When Jane announced that dinner was ready, Fanchon took her place at one end of the table while gazing blankly at her other half at the opposite end. That was exactly how she felt

about Astrid, too. Despite their quarrels, Fanchon knew she could never feel complete without her twin nearby. When Astrid winked at her, Fanchon offered her a fleeting smile. They were two individuals, but they were still one. The special bond they shared was too strong to be broken—even by them.

Fanchon thought the meal went rather well. After all, she hadn't thrown up on her plate, no matter how badly she'd wanted to. Of course, she didn't eat much. For the most part, she shifted her food from one spot to another. Once the cakes were cut, a white for her and a chocolate for Astrid, she excused herself from the table and returned to the window. She simply couldn't bear seeing so much food any longer.

When it came time for opening gifts, she did so, thanked everyone, then returned to the window. She knew she was putting a damper on the party, but she couldn't help it. The only thing she wanted for her birthday was a letter from Gabe. No, that wasn't the *only* thing. She wanted Gabe to be there more than a letter, but a letter was the most she could hope for.

"Fanchon?" her father asked as he stood beside her. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Not particularly," she admitted. "Ignore me and have fun. I don't want to spoil Astrid's evening."

"You can't help but spoil it when you sit off by yourself."

"I want to be alone. I have a lot on my mind tonight, and nothing has anything to do with a party."

Fanchon watched Carl stride back to the party. What was Gabe doing at that minute? Was he thinking of her, wishing he could be there for her birthday? All of the signs pointed to his growing disinterest, but her heart insisted that his letter had merely been delayed. Then Bianca's voice startled her from her introspection.

"What did you say?" Fanchon asked as she turned toward her sister.

"I said it's not what you think, so quit sulking."

"I'm not sulking," Fanchon insisted. "I don't feel well. Just the *smell* of food makes me sick."

"That's what I thought. I had Daphne take my handbag to your room. Why don't we go talk?"

"All right. Then I'm going to bed."

Wandering to the couch, Fanchon explained that she didn't feel well then excused herself. With Bianca offering to help her undress, the pair mounted the stairs to Fanchon's room. There, Bianca reached into her handbag and withdrew an envelope and a small package.

Fanchon's heart swelled with happiness. Gabe *hadn't* forgotten. Ripping off the wrapping, she took off the lid on the box to reveal a piece of paper. Curious, she picked it up. Beneath the paper was a gold heart locket approximately an inch and a half in length. Tenderly lifting the pendant, she caressed the etching of a single rose bud on the front. No one had ever given her a present as beautiful or expensive as this. Releasing the small clasp, she opened the heart expecting to find a picture of him. Instead she found a tiny inscription: *Destiny's Desire*. How sweet! Gabe had used two appropriate words to describe their belief, and

they had more sentimental significance than an entire message, or even his picture. Fanchon passed the necklace to Bianca then unfolded the paper.

*Dear Mrs. Freeman,*

*I haven't left Moline as I write this, but I will as soon as I finish.*

*For the first time, I hate army life. When I requested a transfer, I had nothing to lose. Now I could lose you. I don't know why, but the thought distresses me. I want us to have a long, happy life together.*

*I wish I could be with you today, but I'm there in spirit.*

*The locket is a token of my commitment and loyalty. Remember one thing: our marriage is destiny's desire.*

*Happy Birthday, Mrs. Freeman,*

*Gabe*

"Isn't he wonderful, Bianca?" Fanchon crooned. "*Destiny's Desire*. It's so appropriate—and so perfect. And he says in his letter that our marriage is destiny's desire. I wish he were here so I could show him how much I love him."

"He already knows. The telegram came today, by the way."

Fanchon read the telegram as well: *Happy birthday. Wish I were there, as are my thoughts. Always yours. Gabe.*

"Have you told Mom and Dad yet?" Bianca asked.

"No. Every once in a while I hear them discussing the change in me. Actually, discussing is the wrong word—they argue. They both think Gabe's my problem, but Mom thinks it's unrequited love, which in all honesty it is, and she's glad he doesn't want anything to do with me. She thinks I need experience in love before I get married. With Dad it's even worse. He thinks Gabe raped me and wants his head on a platter, just like Herodias demanded she receive John the Baptist's head. He's so angry he even said those words. How can I tell them under those conditions?"

"How can you *not*?" Bianca asked. "If you are pregnant—and we both know that you probably are—things will only get worse. The longer you wait, the harder it will be."

"Don't you think I know that? I *want* to tell them. I want to tell the *world*, but I don't know how to broach the subject."

"Maybe I can help."

Fanchon shook her head. "This is something I have to do myself. Besides, if you tell them, you'll be in as much trouble as I am."

"I'm only going to see what they're thinking. If I do, maybe you can think of a way to tell them yourself."

“Oh, Bianca, would you do that?” she asked.

“That’s why I suggested it.” During a brief pause, Bianca grinned. “Now I have a secret for *you*. Ben might have a job—as a bookkeeper at the new Moline Plow Company. They interviewed him today, and it sounds encouraging. Until he actually has the job, though, you have to keep our secret.”

“You’ve been keeping mine, so it’s only right that I return the favor.”

“Thanks. I’d better unbutton you so you can get to bed.” When Fanchon turned around, Bianca continued their conversation along another line. “What did you do with the money Gabe gave you?”

“I hid it with the other things. Why?”

“You should bank it, Fanchon.”

“How can I? A couple of the clerks are my friends. I can’t suddenly deposit eight hundred dollars without them asking questions.”

“You still have to do something with it. Gabe’s father will be sending you five hundred a month for your support. That’s going to add up pretty quickly.”

“I know that, too,” Fanchon admitted.

“Then put it in the bank.”

With a long, sorrowful sigh, Fanchon faced her sister again. No matter how right Bianca was, Fanchon still had reservations. Rumors moved fast around Moline. “I could think of another lie and hope my friends don’t gossip. I’ll take the money over on my way to work tomorrow.”

“Good. I’d better get back downstairs. Night.”

When she was alone, Fanchon lifted her mattress to take Gabe’s picture from its hiding place. Sitting down, she spoke to it as she did every night before she retired.

“I hope things are easier for you than they are for me, Gabe. I had to go back and have my picture taken again because Mom and Dad were suspicious. I hate deceiving them, but they’re stone walls where you’re concerned. They both suspect you made me unhappy, and they both have different theories as to why. If they’d stop arguing about it, maybe I could explain. But the way Dad’s acting right now I don’t dare. He needs to calm down first or he won’t care *where* the Army sends you. He’ll find you and hang you from the nearest tree.

“By the way, thank you for the locket. I’ll wear it all the time.” After kissing the picture, she added, “Good night, my darling husband. And keep safe.”

\*\*\*

Her stomach churned, but she couldn’t find the nearest alley so she could throw up again. Eight hundred dollars was a lot of cash to carry around.

Fanchon chuckled. At least, she still had a *little* rational thought after meeting Gabe. Financially her mind was as clear as ever, and concentrating on her duties helped keep her mind off Gabe during the days.

As she reached the door of the First National Bank, a man called her name. Turning, she saw Byron Wood hurrying toward her. "Good morning, Byron."

"Morning," he returned, his dark eyes dancing in reflection of his mood. Then they drooped downward as a frown crossed his face. "You look awful. Are you feeling all right?"

"Not particularly."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing that time won't heal." Fanchon smiled. "Now that we've established that I look horrendous, how are you feeling? You look well enough."

"I'm fine. What are you doing here?"

"Starting a savings account. And you?"

"Haven't you heard? I'm buying Fred Blankenship's old house. His family got too big for it, so he built on the hill."

"I'm glad he's doing so well. That's a nice little house, too. I've been there several times. I'd give anything to have a house like that some day—when I have a family, of course."

"Maybe that day won't be very far off."

Fanchon stared at him. Did he suspect that she and Gabe had been intimate? The day of her wedding he'd given her a strange, rather suspicious look, even though he'd responded in kind to her cheerful greeting. Had he examined the room to see if there was any indication that something had happened between her and Gabe? Had he discovered that there were no soiled towels that could be attributed to her nursing of Gabe?

"I'm sorry, Fanchon," she heard Byron saying. "I shouldn't have said that. You haven't even agreed to let me court you. I hope you will, though. I know you're busy at the hospital, but I'd appreciate it if you'd at least consider it."

Still too stunned to speak, she continued to stare at him. He didn't suspect her marriage to Gabe. He wanted to court her—and marry her from the sound of things! No wonder he'd bought that house. She'd made it no secret that she adored it and had actually told Patience, who had probably told Fred who had in turn told Byron.

Neither Patience nor Fred was particularly close to Fanchon, but Fred and Byron were best friends. Once the Blankenships had even invited both her and Byron to dinner on the same night. Several months earlier she'd thought nothing of it, but now the night surfaced to haunt her like a nightmare. They'd been trying to help Byron! Now what was she going to do?

"Will you let me court you, Fanchon?" he asked.

"This is so sudden," she replied. "I didn't even know you were interested in anything more than friendship. Let me think about it for a few days. Right now, I'd better do my business so I can go to work."



In the bank, Fanchon explained that she'd been saving for several years. To her relief, her friend understood and didn't question her. Apparently, he wasn't even suspicious that the cash was all in fifty-dollar bills. Now she only needed to think of a suitable explanation for depositing five hundred dollars every month!

\*\*\*

Returning home after a long day at the hospital, Fanchon greeted her mother with a yawn then mounted the stairs for a nap before dinner. Things had been so hectic at work that she only had time for the soup Dr. Watson had brought her. At the time she thought she would throw it out after he left the room. Unfortunately, he sat down and wouldn't leave until she'd finished. When she first started eating, it was so he wouldn't question her. But after a few bites, she felt a little better and emptied the bowl.

Upon reaching her room, she opened her door and stopped short. Across from her, Astrid was rummaging through her dresser drawer. Of all the nerve! They may be twins, but this time Astrid had gone too far. Nobody would invade her privacy without her getting revenge. Folding her arms under her breasts, she demanded, "And *what* are you doing?"

Astrid slammed the drawer and spun around to lean against the bureau. "I was putting away some of your laundry."

Fanchon shook her head. "I'm surprised, Astrid. You're usually better than that at lying. Now what are you doing?"

"You've been acting strange lately," Astrid answered while Fanchon closed the door and wandered to sit on her bed. "I was trying to find a reason."

"Did you?"

"You should know. All that's in your drawers are the same things that were always there."

"And how many drawers did you go through before I came in?"

"I'm trying to help you," Astrid said in a hurt tone, "and you're acting like I've committed a sin. I'm your twin, Fanchon. I care. I only want to help."

"I know you too well to believe you, Astrid. You've never cared about what happens to me. Why are you suddenly interested in my welfare?"

"You've never acted so strange before, and I know you as well as you do me. We may not always get along, and we may not always agree. But I still know you best. You're hiding something, and I think it has to do with a man. I want help you with your problem."

"You never do anything that doesn't directly benefit you. How could my having a problem with a man possibly concern you, unless ... That's it! You want to steal him from me, don't you."

"You know I already have Trevor. You made that perfectly clear the other day. Which reminds me, I'm beginning to wonder how *much* you know. You said Trevor and I meet at

the Rock, but I have a feeling you're bluffing."

"Then let me explain. I know because I saw you two there a couple of months ago."

"What did you see? Nothing, because nothing happened."

"Do you honestly think I would say that I saw something if I didn't?" Fanchon asked. "Since when have you known me to lie and get away with it? I saw you, Astrid—very clearly. In fact, as far as I'm concerned, it was a little *too* clearly."

"You've been lying a lot lately, Fanchon—more than you've done in your entire life. So yes, I have known you to lie. And I want proof of what you know about Trevor and me. I want you to tell me exactly what you think you saw."

"All right, but remember that you asked to hear it. First, he kissed you. Then he unbuttoned your shirt and squeezed your naked breasts. But you didn't look very excited. You didn't look happy when he lay in your arms and suckled at your nipples like an infant, either. When he finally laid you down and pushed your dress out of his way—*then* you were very receptive. That's exactly what I saw, sister. You wanted to hear it, and you did."

"You spied on me!" Astrid accused. "How dare you!"

Fanchon struggled not to reveal her shock. She'd relied on their bond to describe an encounter, but she never dreamed it would be so accurate. Apparently, their sixth sense was a lot stronger than she'd thought. Astrid had learned of her attack in the storeroom that way, and she'd learned the details of a liaison between Trevor and her twin.

Doing her best to hide her amazement, Fanchon said, "I wouldn't call it spying. I was already there when you and Trevor arrived, so I hid. I didn't know that I would be forced to watch you and Trevor show each other your love—if you can call it that. It looked too boring to be called anything but sex. Anyway, by the time I realized what was going to happen, it was too late."

"You didn't have to look," Astrid declared.

"I didn't have much choice."

"Damn it, Fanchon." Astrid's baby blue eyes narrowed with rage. "I know why you stayed. You were taking lessons."

"I've known about intercourse since I was fourteen. I read all about it in one of the medical books Dad borrowed from the doctor. We discussed it at the time, and I decided that I don't need it in my life. If you'd grow up a little, you'd realize the same thing."

"All right. I believe you saw us. Now what?"

"If I ever find that you've been going through my belongings again, I'll go straight to Mom and Dad and tell them."

Astrid sighed in defeat. "What next?"

"There is no next. If you mind your own business, we'll get along fine. But the second—the very *second*—I learn that you've been invading my privacy again, I'll go to Mom and Dad. Have I made myself clear?"

“Perfectly,” Astrid mumbled as she left the room.

Fanchon sighed. That was close. But at least, she could keep Astrid from snooping in her room again.

## NINE

“Mother, please,” Fanchon protested, “I don’t want to go to a dance tonight.”

“I won’t let you spoil Astrid’s evening,” her mother insisted. Sitting at the kitchen table, Jane pulled her daughter down into the chair beside hers. “I know that soldier hurt you, but you can’t stop living. The first love usually doesn’t last, anyway. I’d fallen in love twice before I met your father. I had experience. So did Bianca and Ilka. Nels had one serious interest before he learned to love Sadie.”

“That was different. Sadie married another man when Nels went to war. She couldn’t even wait for him to come back. As far as I’m concerned, that’s not love.” Impatient, Fanchon struggled to remain calm. Her mother had no right to tell her whether or not she should love Gabe. Whom one fell in love with should never be anyone else’s decision. “What does all this have to do with a dance, anyway?”

“You’re hiding in a hole. The man helped you when you needed it, and you’re grateful to him. But you can’t turn that help into more than it was.”

“Are you saying that you don’t think I know my own mind?” Fanchon asked, her anger growing.

“I’m saying that you don’t know your own heart. You don’t know what true love is. You haven’t had any experience in it. And before you say anything, it takes experience to recognize if what you’re feeling is love that will last forever.”

“Thank you so much for the lesson, Mom.” Fanchon’s tone was filled with sarcasm, “but Major Freeman didn’t hurt me. And he didn’t reject me. Maybe I don’t know much about love, but I do know when I can’t be with a man. My mind didn’t stop working when he rescued me. My problems stem from more important facts, such as not feeling well lately. I’m exhausted from the workload I’ve had. I don’t even have time to *think* about unrequited love.”

“Then take time to relax. Go to the dance tonight.”

With a soft smile, Fanchon thought of the real reason behind her illness. Gabe had given her his child. Even though she couldn’t be positive yet, the symptoms kept accruing. If she wasn’t pregnant, she was having the most realistic case of false pregnancy on record!

“I hope that smile means you’ll go,” Jane observed.

“Oh, all right,” she agreed, offended that her mother had intruded on her introspection. “I’ll go, but don’t expect me to stay late.”

“Wonderful. I’ll get your new dress. You were so busy Astrid made one as a surprise.”

Remembering how Astrid loved to fool people by imitating her twin, Fanchon questioned her mother suspiciously. "It's not identical to hers, is it?"

"Astrid wanted it to be, but I wouldn't let her. Astrid's is pastel green, and yours is peach. But they are the same style. I hope you don't mind the compromise."

"I suppose not. I'll go get ready."

To Fanchon's horror, the dress bodice was cut even lower than her sister usually patterned the neckline. About two-thirds of the three-inch sore on her breast was visible. She could never wear that dress—not to a dance and not in the privacy of her own home. At least, not until Gabe could see her in it. Even if the gown hadn't been too snug in the bust, the bright pink mark was much too noticeable. People were bound to question its origin.

So far she'd hidden the wound from everyone except Gabe and Bianca. Astrid had noticed it, but she'd apparently forgotten that it existed. Fanchon had also been able to conceal the change in her body, since her normal attire of trousers and shirts hid her enlarging breasts. But having been so sick the last several days had taken a toll on her weight. All of their lives she and Astrid had been the same size. The new dress, measured to fit her twin, was too loose in the waist and too tight in the bodice.

The frock was beautiful, and she envisioned Gabe's brown eyes sparkling with pleasure when he saw it. Fanchon forced the daydream from her mind and changed into a white dress with pale blue trim. Before leaving her room, she clasped her locket around her neck.

"Fanchon!" Jane exclaimed sternly. "Why aren't you wearing your new dress? Don't you like it?"

"It's beautiful," she replied, "but it's cut too low for me. I was too embarrassed to wear it. Can you imagine how I would have felt with all the men ogling me? Astrid may like that, but I don't."

"I should have thought of that," Jane admitted. "Is that necklace new?"

Fanchon's hand moved to caress the heart-shaped locket. Knowing someone would eventually see Gabe's gift, she had already thought of a lie. "As a matter of fact, it is. I had some money saved and decided to buy myself a birthday present. Do you like it?"

"It's very nice. Your father and sisters are already in the carriage. Let's join them before they leave without us."

In the carriage, Astrid's smile sank into a pout when she saw that Fanchon wasn't wearing the dress she designed. After Carl helped Fanchon then Jane into the carriage, Astrid questioned her sister in a whiny voice. "Why didn't you wear the dress I made?"

"I don't feel comfortable in it," Fanchon admitted. "I wish I did, though. It's a beautiful dress."

"I designed it myself. I do it all the time, but you never want to wear anything I design."

"That's because we're different people."

"I thought for sure that you'd like this one. When I sat down to draw it on paper, I was *sure* you'd agree with me this time."

"I do, but I can't wear it. I'm not accustomed to my breasts exposed so much. I'm not the kind of person you are, Astrid. But I will wear it—eventually."

"I'm glad you like it." Astrid grinned. "Do you know how hard it was to put both of our tastes into one dress? You wouldn't believe how many sketches I made before I found one that looked halfway decent. Then I had to keep working to get something that looked better than anything else I dreamed up. I wanted this dress to be the best one I've ever designed."

"You succeeded," Fanchon praised, glad that she and her sister were so close at that moment.

How many times had they been at odds? Too many to remember. Fanchon didn't like fighting with Astrid, and it bothered her that they could never be the close twins that people expected them to be. But that was impossible because they had so little in common. Astrid was a flirtatious young woman who enjoyed the excitement of living life in a stylish manner. Fanchon was happy with books, nursing, and the simple things of life. Not that she didn't enjoy parties. She did! She would even have accepted an invitation to the one that night—if Gabe had been the man inviting her.

As badly as she wanted her family and friends to understand him, that wouldn't happen for quite a while. When the war was over, he would return, then they would have their family and home. The thought of the child growing within her again brought a soft smile to her lips. Monday she would send Gabe a telegram announcing that he would be a father. By then no doubt would remain; by then she would know for sure that she wasn't imagining the symptoms.

"Fanchon?" Elsa asked, drawing her from her thoughts. "Do you think Tim will ask me to dance tonight?"

Smiling at the youngest Sten child, Fanchon dared to offering her opinion. Before she met Gabe, she would have referred such a question to her more experienced twin, but that night she was filled with an inner peace that she believed gave her wisdom in all areas. "As pretty as you are? He certainly will."

"I hope so," Elsa said. "If he does ask me, should I tell him that I love him?"

"I think you should do whatever is right for you," Fanchon said. Then she leaned over to whisper in Elsa's ear, "But if I were you, I'd do it. You never can tell what will happen if the woman takes a little initiative."

"Don't encourage her, Fanchon," Jane said from the front seat of the carriage.

"Elsa needs experience," Fanchon replied as she winked at youngest sibling. "You don't think *I* have enough, so that's what I'm encouraging Elsa to do. If you want it badly enough, Elsa. Go out and get it."

"Yeah," Astrid said in a dreamy tone. "That's not a bad idea."

"You're not thinking again, are you, Kitten Two?" Carl asked cheerfully. "We always end up in trouble or in debt when you do that."

"As a matter of fact, I was. I was thinking that Fanchon's right." Leaning forward to see around Elsa, who sat between them, Astrid grinned at her twin. "*This* time. I've been thinking

of opening a seamstress shop. Maybe I will.”

“With what? We don’t have the kind of money it takes to open a new shop like that.”

A pout returned to Astrid’s lips. “Why is it when *I* want to do something, we can’t afford it? But when Fanchon wants to do something, you support her.”

“When *you* want something, you need money. All Fanchon needs is moral support. We can afford that.”

“Dad?” Fanchon asked. “How much do *you* think a seamstress shop would cost?”

She could only hope her voice concealed the plan formulating in her mind. Astrid was a talented seamstress with a gift for design, and Fanchon could afford to invest in a seamstress shop. It would be a good way to increase the money Gabe had given her and help her sister at the same time.

“I’d think the minimum would be about a thousand dollars,” he replied.

“A thousand dollars!” Astrid wailed. “That’s like asking for a million.”

“Which is exactly why I said we couldn’t afford such a thing,” Carl explained.

But Fanchon could make Astrid’s dream come true, and she wanted to do it. To keep her secret for the moment, she smiled at her twin. “Don’t get upset, Astrid. We’re on our way to a party, and you’ll spoil it for yourself.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Astrid grinned again. “That’s twice in one night. Either we’re getting along better, or I’m mellowing in our old age.”

“Personally,” Fanchon said, “I hope we’re getting along better. Now enough sentimentality. Let’s enjoy the night, not make ourselves sick.”

\*\*\*

Upon their arrival at the large house on the hill, Fanchon finally realized the size of the party. If Hal had to convince his friend, John Deere, to host the social, all of her and Astrid’s acquaintances must have been invited. When Carl reined up the horse, Fanchon saw Byron leaning against the doorjamb while Trevor sat on the top porch step. Staring at the men in disgust, she watched them scurry down the path to meet the buggy.

Trevor and Byron glanced at each other in wonder. No doubt, both had been requested to escort the twins into the dance, but neither could tell the young women apart. Irritated by this minor deception forced upon her, Fanchon hopped out of the carriage. Byron raced around the buggy to assist her. Fanchon decided it was because Astrid would never get out of a carriage herself. When he grasped her elbow to escort her into the house, she jerked her arm away.

“Thank you, Byron,” she said, “but I’m perfectly capable of walking into a building alone.”

“Fanchon!” Jane scolded.

"How could you do this, Mom?" she demanded as she rounded the carriage. "I didn't even want to come tonight, yet you still arranged for me to have an escort."

"I thought Byron would take your mind off ..."

"It's all right, Mrs. Sten," Byron interrupted. "I told you this wasn't a good idea. I'll see you inside, Fanchon."

By then, Trevor had lifted Astrid from the carriage. While they stood silently beside Fanchon, Byron climbed the five steps leading to the front door. Astrid shot her sister an exasperated glance.

"I suppose you're right," Fanchon agreed, not needing verbal communication. "Wait a minute, Byron."

Stopping on the top step, he waited for Fanchon as she hurried toward him. "What is it?"

"I'm sorry," she said from one step below him. "This isn't your fault, and I shouldn't have taken my anger out on you. I'll let you escort me inside, but I'd rather be free once we're there."

"All right," he agreed, offering her his elbow.

As she linked her arm with his, she glanced behind her. While Astrid did the same with Trevor, Jane, Carl and Elsa started toward the house. Farther back, the Deeres' stable hand led the horse and buggy away.

"Do you want to go first, Astrid?" Fanchon asked.

Astrid grinned and winked at her twin. "Age before beauty, sister. You go first."

Mr. and Mrs. Deere greeted the guests of honor at the door then led them into a grand room, where dozens of the twins' friends and relatives waited to wish them a tumultuous happy birthday. Astrid's girlfriends rushed to surround her while Fanchon watched with a sad smile.

If she'd finished school with her twin, they would probably be hurrying to her side, too. As it was, the few soldiers she knew approached her, clearly uneasy in the company of so many civilians. After thanking them for their best wishes, she made her way to the punch bowl in the adjoining dining room. For several minutes, she stood alone, watching Astrid while she sipped on a cup of punch.

"Miss Sten?" she heard from behind her.

Turning to face the man, she smiled. "Why, Lt. Gibson. What a pleasant surprise. You're so new here, I thought you would have to work tonight."

"Captain Hogendoble wanted to play poker with some of the prisoners, so he traded shifts with me." The brown-haired man of about twenty fidgeted with the gloves in his hand. "I know you have an escort, but I'd be honored if you'd dance with me sometime."

"I'd like that, lieutenant, but my escort was only a friend who brought me into the room. We've already parted company."

"Then may I have the first dance?" he asked.



“By all means.”

Fanchon danced with several different men, as did Astrid. But the more Fanchon was whirled around the room, the more nauseous she became. During a dance with Byron, she fled through the open verandah doors and into the rose garden. By the time he caught up with her, she'd already thrown up in an inconspicuous location. When she heard his voice nearby, she bolted upright.

“Are you all right, Fanchon?” he asked in concern.

“I felt a little weak and thought some fresh air would help.”

“You aren't well, are you.”

“Not very.” Fanchon sank onto a nearby bench that overlooked the Mississippi River. “I love watching the rivers. They're so free. Nothing can stop a river, Byron. Did you ever think of that?”

“Dams do.”

“A dam only slows a river down. Eventually, the water behind it will rise until it spills over.” Fanchon paused a moment, her thoughts on Gabe and her deep desire to be with him. “Sometimes I feel like a dammed river, Byron. I feel like I'm being held back and can't quite make it to the top so I'm free to move on.”

“I know it's none of my business, Fanchon,” Byron said hesitantly, “but this has gone on long enough. We've been friends quite a while now, and I want to help.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Something happened between you and that major who passed through Moline a couple of weeks ago. You haven't been the same since the morning you treated him in his room.” Her mouth dropped open in shock. How could he have known such a thing? But before she could ask, Byron continued with a cautious tone in his voice. “I was suspicious of him when he brought you downstairs because he practically dragged you out of the building. You were friendly, but you didn't say a lot. I didn't want to upset you, though, so I waited until he came back for his things to question him.”

“What did you two say?”

“First, you should know that I didn't believe him. He told me that you'd come to check his injuries before he left town—and that you both got carried away. He was awful nervous about my questions, and I didn't believe a single answer he gave me.”

Fearful that he might know the truth, Fanchon questioned him. “What do you believe?”

“I think *he* got carried away, not you.”

“Don't you think I could have fought him off? And if I couldn't have, don't you think I would have screamed?”

“You probably couldn't. The way I see it, he either had you in a compromising position, or he threatened you with one of his guns. I know he was smitten with you, Fanchon, and he seemed like he could charm any woman he wanted.”

Fanchon bowed her head to stare at the narrow band under her cameo. How wrong Byron was! Not only had she not been threatened, she'd *wanted* intimacy with Gabe.

"I wish there weren't, but there's only one way to ask this. Are you going to have his baby? Is that why you've been so sick lately?" Both her expression and her mind went blank. Her shock was too deep for any reaction. Again, he drew his own conclusions. "If you are, I'll be glad to marry you and give the child a name."

*Marry her?* Fanchon thought. This conversation couldn't be taking place. It had to be some awful dream from which she would awaken in a few seconds. But standing there with Byron was all too real. She had to think of a way out of this without divulging her secret.

"That's very gallant, Byron," she said, not sure what words would follow, "but I'm sick because I've been working so hard. As for your inference that I was attacked by the major, you're wrong. I cleaned and dressed his wounds that morning. He did *not* do anything he shouldn't have."

"I didn't say you were attacked. If anything, you were seduced by a very charming man."

"I've said the last I'm going to about Major Freeman," Fanchon declared, unable and unwilling to continue their discussion. "Now if you'll excuse me, I want to be alone for a while."

Fanchon didn't even turn around as Byron left. Gabe had been wrong. Byron wasn't a mere admirer. He loved her; he never would have offered to marry her if he didn't. In eighteen years, not one man had expressed more than a passing interest in her. Now, in only twenty days, two men had suggested marriage. And it was ironic that a man she loathed had introduced her to love—even if it was indirectly.

Then she heard his voice behind her. No, it couldn't be. She only *thought* she heard Trevor because she'd been thinking about him. But when he said her name a second time, she knew she wasn't alone. Without speaking, she rose and started to leave. As she passed, Trevor grabbed her arm and spun her to face him.

"So, you like to come here with men," he said. "Although Byron's no man—not the kind *I* am, anyway. I'll show you."

"Have you forgotten that you're Astrid's escort?" she asked, her rage at Trevor growing by the moment.

"She's too busy dancing with the other men. All of them but three that is—Ben, Wood, and some lieutenant who can't keep his eyes off you. Besides, *you* haven't danced with me, either."

Before she could react, Trevor crushed her against him, moving in time with the music. Revolted by his embrace, she fought against him. She didn't even want him to touch her. When he stopped swaying to the tune drifting from inside, she realized that her battle hadn't roused only his desire. It had roused his ire, as well. But she stopped short at the sound of a man's angry voice.

"Prepare to defend yourself!"

Trevor released her. While Fanchon scrambled out of the way, metal scraped against metal. To her horror, Lt. Gibson had drawn his saber in preparation for a duel.

“Wait a minute,” Trevor said, raising his hands to shoulder height. “I’m not even armed.”

Tossing his sword aside, the officer drew his fists up before his face. “Neither am I. Fisticuffs will be equally suitable to defend the lady’s honor.”

Unable to believe he was prodding Trevor into battle, Fanchon stared at Lt. Gibson in shock. To her amazement, Trevor tried to avoid a confrontation. For the first time, he was backing down from a fight.

“I wouldn’t want to make a horrid mess out of that pretty-boy face,” Trevor insisted as he took two steps backward.

“I’d happily get a black eye or worse to protect Miss Sten.”

“Look, pretty boy,” Trevor said, “this is a party. Why don’t we forget what happened? I’ll go back in and pretend that I was never out here with Fanchon.”

“Miss Sten?” Lt. Gibson asked her. When she nodded twice to indicate her agreement, he returned his irritated gaze to Trevor. “Don’t let it happen again. Next time I won’t hesitate to use my saber—whether you’re armed or not.”

As Trevor hurried back inside, Fanchon stepped closer to the soldier. “Thank you, lieutenant. I don’t know how I’ll ever repay you.”

“The only repayment I need is for you to call me Jesse,” he said with a smile.

“All right. Thank you, Jesse.”

“You’re welcome. Tell me if he bothers you again,” Jesse offered, “and I’ll handle him. I’ll see that he’s armed and have it out with him once and for all.”

“I doubt that will be necessary.”

Retrieving his abandoned sword, he slid it back into its sheath. “Would you like to go back inside?”

“Please. Then I’ll go home.”

“I’ll escort you, Miss Sten—or may I call you Fanchon?”

“Please do.” As she grasped his extended elbow, they strolled back toward the house. “Thank you for offering, but my parents would prefer that someone they know take me home.”

After kissing his cheek, Fanchon scurried into the Deere house.

## TEN

Fanchon paced her bedroom for well over two hours. If Astrid liked her plan, Fanchon might be able to hide her pregnancy from her mother longer. Her idea was sound, but she still had to convince her more skeptical twin it was possible. And that could be more difficult than hiding her marriage and pregnancy, because Astrid could be as stubborn as she was.

As soon as she heard the carriage, Fanchon raced to her bedroom window. Below her mother and two younger sisters started into the house. When she could no longer see them, she waited in her doorway while Astrid and Elsa mounted the stairs.

"How was the rest of the party?" she asked.

"Wonderful!" Astrid crooned as she did a pirouette in the middle of the hall. "I danced so much I think my feet will fall off. Some of your soldier friends are very nice."

"Did you have fun, too, Elsa?"

"Yes, but I'm tired. I'm going to bed. Good night."

"Good night," the twins chorused. Elsa disappeared into her bedroom before Fanchon returned her gaze to Astrid. "Why don't you come in so we can talk?"

"Gladly." While Fanchon sat cross-legged on her bed, Astrid made herself comfortable in the desk chair. Studying Fanchon, she said, "I heard a rumor about you tonight."

"A rumor?" Fanchon repeated. "What kind of rumor?"

"About you and a soldier. Somebody said he attacked you. Why did you lie to me?"

"I didn't," Fanchon denied. "Who told you such a thing?"

"I overheard Patience telling Connie Belwood. I imagine Patience heard it from Fred."

Fanchon sighed. "That's the trouble with rumors. Everybody hears it from somebody else, but no one seems to know where it started. Did you hear anything else?"

"When people heard you didn't feel well, they said you're pregnant, too."

Fanchon gasped, unable to contain her shock. "You can't be serious!"

"You've been acting odd for about three weeks, so the rumors make sense. And you've been sick for what? Five days now? Is it true, Fanchon? *Are you pregnant?*"

"You don't *believe* that gossip, do you?" she asked to avoid answering her sister. Now she regretted not announcing her marriage. Obviously, people thought Gabe was capable of assaulting her. They probably wouldn't even listen if she confessed now. People who knew her would never believe she'd eloped then hidden her marriage.

"I don't know *what* to believe anymore," Astrid admitted. "I used to think I knew you better than anybody else, but I'm not so sure now. I'm not going to say that I believe the rumors, because I'm not sure I do. I saw you with that soldier by the barn, Fanchon, and that was more than a friendly kiss. You'd *never* sleep with a man unless you were married to him, so he must have seduced you then jilted you. I haven't even seen him around town since that next morning. Now you're sick. Even you have to admit that it's all very suspicious."

Fanchon rose and wandered to her window. Staring at the barn door where she'd met Gabe to elope, she replied, "I can't believe we're having this conversation. Don't you have more faith in me than that?"

"Of course, I do. It's that soldier I don't trust."

Fanchon returned to her bed and sank down on the edge. "Let's change the subject. I have an idea that could be very profitable for both of us."

As Fanchon had hoped, Astrid's interest piqued enough to change the topic without complaint or suspicion. "Profitable? What is it?"

"Were you serious about opening a dressmaker's shop?"

"Of course!" she admitted. "I've wanted to do it for years."

"Then I have a proposition for you. I have some money in the bank, but I have a better idea for it. I want to invest it so it will make even more money for me. With your skills, a shop could work. Ladies are always commenting on how good your seamstress skills are. If you can get a loan of two hundred dollars, I'll loan you three hundred at a lower interest rate."

"But that's only five hundred dollars," Astrid said downheartedly. "Dad said we need at least a thousand."

"The other five hundred will be my half of the business. I'd loan you the other two hundred, but I don't have that much."

"You have eight hundred dollars?" Astrid asked, stunned.

"And more to come."

"Where did you get it?"

"I can't tell you yet. Now do you want to go into business with me or not? It would give us a chance to be real twins."

"I'd like to, Fanchon," Astrid admitted, "but I don't know how to run a business."

"All you need to know is how to design and sew clothes. You save all the receipts, and I'll do the bookkeeping. I'll even teach you as we go along in case you want to buy my share someday." Fanchon's enthusiasm over the proposed project increased as she spoke. "Can't you see the possibilities, Astrid? We could start right here, and as soon as I get enough money, we can move into a two-story house downtown. We'll live upstairs, and downstairs we'll have the shop with a fitting room and a sewing room. You can do custom-made dresses and have several copies of your own designs in different sizes that women can come in and buy. We could make a lot of money if we don't overcharge our customers."

"You're awfully excited about this," Astrid observed. "But is it possible?"

“Possible!” Fanchon exclaimed. “Astrid, it’s entirely likely. Wouldn’t you like to earn some money to call your own?”

“Of course, but you’re forgetting something. You’re going into this without a debt. I’m going in with a loan to pay back—two of them counting yours.”

“I haven’t forgotten. Pay back the other loan first, then worry about mine. It’ll wait. What do you say? Will you do this with me?”

Astrid sighed. It was a tempting proposition, a dream come true. And her twin was good at planning things. She’d probably already put a lot of thought into it. Still, she had reservations, and it would be best if she told Fanchon. “It sounds too good to be true. What will happen if we lose money instead of make it? What if we fail?”

“We won’t. In fact, we can’t help but succeed!”

“Then let’s do it!” Astrid agreed. “With you as my partner, I probably won’t have any problem getting a loan. Everybody knows how smart you are.”

“You’re intelligent, too, Astrid. You’re just want men think they’re smarter than you. As everybody already knows, I don’t care *what* men think. Now are you positive about our venture? You can’t have any reservations.”

“You already relieved the only reservation I had. I can’t wait to get started.”

“Terrific! We’ll start tomorrow. First, we’ll get our plans down on paper, so you have something to show the banker. Right now, though, we should get some sleep.”

“You mean *try* to get some sleep. Good night, Fanchon.” Astrid gave her twin a rare hug. “And thank you for doing this with me, Fanchon. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate it.”

Fanchon and Astrid began their work early. After breakfast, they went to Fanchon’s room to outline a reasonable plan for a successful business venture. Although Fanchon still felt ill, she kept so busy that she could ignore her churning stomach. The excitement of their venture was too great for her to succumb to sickness. One day she would be free of it, then her mind could center on her nursing career and her half-ownership of a seamstress shop. Until that day, she would suffer in silence.

By noon, the twins had listed everything they wanted to accomplish with the business, their expected expenditures, and their possible income. Building on the belief that Astrid would get a loan, they listed steps that would lead to their goal. As soon as Astrid got the money, she would go to Chicago and purchase the most modern sewing machine possible, as well as plenty of material to begin their enterprise.

By dinner, Fanchon had devised a plan of advertisement so people would know about their shop before they opened. Using some of her designs, Astrid sketched some posters for Fanchon to tack up around town while Astrid was in Chicago.

\*\*\*

“What were you and Astrid doing up in your room all day yesterday?” Jane asked as Fanchon ate toast and tea for breakfast.

“Making plans for the future,” Fanchon replied.

“Since when do you and Astrid plan things together? What’s happening to you, anyway? First, you started acting strange after that soldier supposedly rescued ...”

Fanchon bristled. “There’s no supposedly to it. Gabe *did* rescue me from an attacker. He’s a good man, Mom. He would never hurt a woman. And I’m tired of hearing all the accusations against him.”

Staring at her daughter in amazement, Jane continued. “I understand why you want to support him *if* he saved you, but there’s a rumor circulating that I suspect is true.”

“Astrid told me.” Having taken enough of the verbal attacks against her husband, Fanchon admitted the truth with an angry onslaught of words. “I wasn’t raped—not by Gabe and not by anybody else. I was loved by a man who tried to do the right thing, even though he was unconscious part of the time and didn’t know exactly what happened during my attack. Yes, I’m sick—sick and tired of hearing that Gabe is such a horrible man. He’s not, Mom. He loves me, and I love him.” All of the lies over the past few weeks had come so easily that Fanchon had wondered if they were all true—even the one that he loved her, despite his words to the contrary. “And I never want to hear those insults again. When we first decided to get married, ...”

“You’re married?” Jane asked in shock. “To a man you hardly know? Why aren’t you living with him? Why did you have to hide it?”

Relieved that her secret was exposed, Fanchon suggested they go her room where they could discuss it privately. Upstairs, Fanchon broke into tears. She missed Gabe and didn’t know if she would ever be able to convince her mother of her love for him. Retrieving the tintypes from under her mattress, she handed them to her mother. “This is our wedding picture, Mom. And this is a picture of Gabe.”

“He’s very attractive,” Jane complimented. And Fanchon knew exactly what her mother was thinking: How could her own daughter get married without consulting her? “I can see why you’re infatuated by him, but ...”

“I’m not infatuated,” Fanchon insisted. “I love him.”

“How much do you know about him? Why haven’t we met him?”

“I know a lot more about him than he knows about me. He writes me often, and he tells me something new about himself in every letter.”

“He writes to you? That means he doesn’t even live here. You married a man who isn’t around to take care of you?”

“He’s in Washington right now, Mom,” Fanchon explained. “He’ll leave for the front as soon as his troops arrive.”

“Then all this about you and a soldier attacking you is true.”

"No!" Fanchon denied. Then she lowered her voice, determined to keep the conversation rational even though her mother seemed intent on starting an argument. "Gabe didn't attack me, Mom. I *gave* myself to him—after we were married. He wants me as a wife, and he wants a child—because he's afraid that he won't come back from the war. *That's* why he asked me to marry him. He knows my personality is what he wants in a wife, because I told him how I feel about my independence. He wants a wife who can take care of herself whether he comes home from the war or not."

"I can't believe I'm hearing this," Jane said. "I thought you were a reasonable, young lady. Now you're telling me that you married a man just because he wants a child. I'm ashamed of you, Fanchon, and very embarrassed. Of all my children, you were always the most sensible, but you're being the *least* sensible in marriage. Well, I won't recognize it. I won't be happy for you, and I *won't* accept it."

No longer able to control her temper, Fanchon shouted, "I *knew* you wouldn't understand! You could *never* understand the kind of love I have for him. Why else do you think I didn't tell you for three weeks? And now I'm sorry that I did. If you can't accept Gabe, I'm moving out of the house as soon as I can."

"What about the other the rumor? You don't deny being with child."

"And I won't. I'm carrying my husband's child, and I'm carrying it proudly. If you don't like it, that's too bad. Bianca and Ben are the only ones who know we're married, and right now, I'd like to keep it that way. Don't tell Dad *or* the rest of the family. I won't have anybody else telling me that what I did was wrong—especially when I know better than that. I'll tell everybody when I think the time's right. Now, if you don't mind, I have to send Gabe a telegram before he goes to war. He wants to know if I'm pregnant."

\*\*\*

*Yes, Daddy. Told Mom, went badly. Investing money. Loving you always, Mrs. Freeman.*

"Hallelujah!" Gabe leapt off the floor in his excitement. He glanced around and saw several men and women in the telegraph office gazing at him. "I'm going to be a father! This calls for a celebration. Any man here wanting a drink meet me at the saloon around the corner. I'm buying. As for you, sergeant, that's an order."

The tall, blond sergeant with a long scar down the left side of his face and a black patch over his left eye watched without a word as Gabe raced from the building. With a slow shake of his head, he turned his attention to the telegrapher. "I'd like to send a telegram to Moline, Illinois."

"Yes, sir," the telegrapher agreed, "but don't you think you should follow orders."

"First, I want my family to know when I'll be home."

The sergeant conducted his business and paid the telegrapher before following the officer to the saloon. He'd heard of men being happy about becoming a father, but this man was overreacting. How important could fatherhood be when it meant another person depending



on a man? The day *he* had somebody dependent upon him would be the day that he lost his freedom. And he wasn't about to do that.

By the time the sergeant arrived, the major sat alone at a table for four. Glancing over his superior's shoulder, the sergeant's remaining eye widened in disbelief. Rage flooded through him, and he slammed his hand on the Ambrotype lying on the table.

Gabe scrambled from his chair to confront him. "What the hell do you think you're doing, sergeant? Where's your respect for your superiors?"

"This is personal, pal. Forget your rank and tell me what the hell you're doing with my sister's photograph."

Gabe stared at the enlisted man, studying him for several seconds. This soldier was Fanchon's brother! The wide scar and eye patch distorted his features on one side, but the resemblance between his wife and the soldier was uncanny.

"I asked you a question, major," the sergeant said, his mouth set in anger. "Where did you get my sister's picture? And don't try to tell me that's not Fan, because even with one eye, I would know her anywhere."

*Fan*, Gabe thought. That was the name of the little girl he'd stopped from fighting that day. Surely, this couldn't be true. He looked closer at the sergeant's features, but they were marred by the scar and eye patch. Could he be the same teenage boy from all those years ago? It would fit with all the other signs of destiny if he was.

"Start talking," the sergeant demanded, "or I'll beat the hell out of you. I don't even care if I lose my honorable discharge status."

"Fanchon's my wife."

The announcement stunned the sergeant into silence. Several seconds later, he replied, "I don't believe you."

"My name's Gabriel Freeman."

With a suspicious gleam in his one blue eye, the sergeant examined for several seconds, then a flicker of recognition crossed his face.

"Do you go by Gabe?" the sergeant asked.

"As a matter of fact, I do," Gabe said. "I get the impression that I look familiar to you."

"Were you ever in Moline before you met Fanchon?"

"A long time ago I passed through there. My family spent a few days with my aunt."

"I *knew* it. We spent some time together back then—wandered the streets one night, went fishing the next day. Remember?"

Gabe searched his memory and found the incidents, but he couldn't recall the sergeant's name. Finally, he admitted, "Vaguely." He picked up the Ambrotype under Fanchon's and passed it to Nels. "This proves that I married your sister. If you look closely, you'll see the wedding band on her finger."

"I'll be damned." Returning the picture, he snapped to attention then saluted his new-found brother-in-law. "Nels Sten, sir—since you obviously don't remember my name. I apologize for my out-burst, but I never *dreamed* Fanchon would get married. I thought she'd be the only one of us other than me who didn't. All my life I thought we'd grow old together."

Instead of responding with a salute, Gabe playfully knocked Nels' arm down then motioned to a chair. Nels was a name he remembered now. They *had* spent some time together, but they'd never discussed his little sister who'd been fighting with the red-haired boy after the incident. As the men sat down, Gabe signaled the saloon girl and ordered a bottle of Scotch and two glasses. "Scotch is all right with you, isn't it, Nels?"

"Yes, sir," Nels responded.

"Good. We have a lot to talk about, starting with the fact that brothers-in-law don't call each other sir."

"All right—Gabe," Nels said. "You must be mighty special to have captured the heart of the most free-spirited girl on the continent. Fanchon always said marriage was only for people who couldn't get along on their own. And that's *not* my sister."

"And I wouldn't have had her any other way. Being in the Army, I spend a lot of time away from home. I always wanted a wife I didn't have to worry about. Fanchon's already proving that I made the right decision, too."

"How?"

"I gave her eight hundred dollars," Gabe explained as he gazed at the Ambrotype on the table before him, "and sent me a telegram telling me that she's investing it."

"Knowing her," Nels boasted, "she'll make a fortune. I don't suppose she said what the investment will be."

"No."

Nels shrugged. "It doesn't matter. She must have done a lot of research before making her decision." The saloon girl set the bottle and glasses on the table, and Gabe thanked her. "I still can't believe this. I'm sitting here sharing a bottle of scotch with a brother-in-law I didn't even know existed. Well, I obviously knew you existed—just not as an in-law. How long have you known Fanchon?"

After splashing some liquor into each of the glasses, Gabe slid one across the table to Nels. Picking up the other one, he raised it slightly, toasting, "To Fanchon and our child."

"That's right. You said you're going to be a father," Nels said as their glasses clinked together. After a brief pause to sip his drink, he continued in amazement. "Woah! That means Fanchon's going to be a mother! Good Lord! I never thought she'd marry, and she's having a baby. Things are certainly happening fast."

Gabe laughed. "You ain't heard nothin' yet. I met Fanchon one night—for the second time now that I've pieced everything together. If you'll recall, you and I met because I'd broken up a fight between her and a redheaded boy. You saw me talking to her, and you didn't like it anymore then than you liked me having her picture a few minutes ago."

“And that’s the only time I’ve ever seen her interested in a boy. Do you think she recognized you?”

Gabe shook his head. “If she did, she didn’t mention it, or even *show* it.”

“That surprises me, because Fanchon remembers *everything*.”

“I see.” Gabe took a sip of his Scotch then said, “Anyway, we met one night, and I married her the next.”

“My parents must have been furious. Ma’s always been one to promote more than one love interest in a person’s life before settling down. She always said it gave a person more information to go on where love is concerned.”

The smile slipped from Gabe’s lips, and he grimaced at the thought of what he was about to admit. It didn’t sound like Nels was going to be very receptive to his admission. “I don’t know. They weren’t at the wedding, so I’ve never even seen them. Bianca and Ben are the only ones who know about our marriage, because they were our witnesses. On second thought, your mother does know now, but Fanchon said things didn’t go well.”

“Why didn’t you tell her beforehand?”

“I wanted to, but Fanchon wouldn’t hear of it. She wanted to adjust to our marriage and said something about your parents not understanding. Apparently, she was right. But I think it was more than that. Fanchon’s probably still worried that our marriage won’t last. I don’t blame her, either—under the circumstances.”

“What circumstances?”

“She was attacked by some guy named Riley.”

“The same one you had to pull off her way back when,” Nels interrupted. “When I get home, I’m going to take care of that bastard once and for all. I’ve had enough of him bothering my sisters.”

“Fanchon’s not the only one?” Gabe asked, startled.

“Hell no. He can’t keep his damned hands off of Astrid, either. But it’s Fanchon he seems to have some sort of vendetta against. He’s been bothering her since she was seven years old, and I’ve had enough of it! I’m going to see that he doesn’t bother either one of them again.”

“I wish I could help.” Again, Gabe grinned at the thought of Fanchon expecting his child. The baby was their child of destiny, destiny’s desire, who might never have been created if it hadn’t been for the redhead. On second thought, maybe he should thank the man. “Let me rephrase that. There’s *almost* nothing I’d like better. More than anything, I want to see my wife and child. I’d even like to see the baby born. I hope this war is over before that happens.”

“You love Fanchon a lot more than I thought,” Nels observed.

Gabe shifted in his chair. How could he word this without alienating Nels? “I wish I could say yes, but I can’t lie about this. Like I told my wife, love isn’t an emotion that I’ll ever experience. I vowed *that* when my mother died. I could never go through the pain that my father did. No, our marriage is purely logical. She’s everything I want in a wife, and I’m committed to making our marriage last a lifetime.”

“And Fanchon *knows* this?”

“Yes. I explained everything before the wedding, so she married me knowing how I feel.”

As Nels studied Gabe, anger seethed deep within him. More than anything else, he wanted to beat this major to within an inch of his life. But he couldn't, because Fanchon would be devastated and would probably never speak to him again.

“I know what you're thinking,” Gabe said. “I'd probably think the same thing if I had a sister some man had done this to. But no man will *ever* be as loyal and committed to a woman as I am to Fanchon. I swear to God, I'll never hurt her.”

Nels examined him. Gabe sounded sincere. No, not sincere—determined. If Gabe didn't love Fanchon, as he insisted, it was as close as he would come to loving any woman. And Fanchon would never have married Gabe if she didn't love him. So, what else could he do but accept the marriage for what it was—a close, personal relationship.

Gabe smiled. “I'll worry about her while I'm gone, Nels. I'll also worry about the baby, and how their doing, and if Riley's bothering her, and if the investment she's making is a wise one, and ...”

Nels laughed. “And on, and on. Tell you what. *I'll* worry about Riley. You take care of all the other worrying—except for the investment, of course. She's the most intelligent girl I know. She won't do anything without being positive that it's sound. She's very cunning. If anything, she'll put it together so it *can't* fail.”

“Before we put away this entire bottle in celebration,” Gabe warned with a grin, “there's something you should know. When I get drunk, I tend get a little overly supportive of my relatives, without much concern about who gets hurt—including my wife's brother. And tonight, I plan to get rip-roaring drunk. So, remember one thing. Fanchon Freeman is no girl; she's a woman who did me a great honor by letting me marry her.”

Nels splashed more scotch into each glass then raised it toward Gabe. “I'll tell you something, Gabe. For a brother-in-law, you're not bad. I doubt my parents—especially Ma—will give your marriage their blessing, but as far as I'm concerned, you and Fanchon have my approval. Down it, brother. Tonight we celebrate.”

The men put their vessels to their mouths and drank the shot glasses of liquid in one swallow. While he poured more, Gabe said, “I've never been called brother before.”

“Don't get too used to it because you'll never hear it from Peter. His viewpoint is too much like our parents'. He'll agree with them when it comes to Fanchon. But Fanchon and I are two of a kind. Maybe that's why I'll call you brother. I see why she fell in love with you—the rest probably won't. But I'll do what I can to get our folks' blessing for you.”

“God, I would appreciate that. I'm glad I ran into you at the telegraph office, too. It's destiny, you know. Everything that's happened to Fanchon and me is destiny. I call it destiny's desire. And one of these days we'll be together forever.”

Although he said the words, Gabe was filled with a sense of dread. Would he really be reunited with Fanchon? Or would something happen to divert their destiny, just as Fanchon had suggested in their parting moments?

## ELEVEN

"I still can't believe I ran into you here, Nels," Gabe said as he ate breakfast with his brother-in-law. "Thanks to you, I know my wife better. It means the world to me that you took so much time to tell me about her."

"I'm convinced that you won't hurt her," Nels explained. "And I doubt anybody—other than Astrid, of course—knows her better than I do. Once you've had a chance to spend a few months with her, I'm sure you'll know her as well as we do. She always speaks her mind."

Nagging doubts of that ever happening made Gabe frown. "Do you really think so?"

"I sue do. Some of the things you said in the past couple of days prove it."

"Most of what I said was speculation—what I *dream* her to be."

"Your dreams come awfully close reality. Fanchon's the most complicated person I know, but you have about a seventy-five percent accuracy rate when you describe her. If you ask me, you two are made for each other."

"I'm glad somebody thinks so."

"Meaning our folks?" Gabe nodded, and Nels grinned. "Don't give them another thought. By the time you come back, they'll at least have accepted the marriage. I'll do everything I can to convince them that you're right for my sister."

Gabe shook his head. "You should discuss that with Fanchon. She was dead set against telling them. If your mother didn't take the news well, I doubt Fanchon would want you dragging the subject up again."

"There, you see? You did it again."

"What?"

"You predicted how Fanchon would feel, and you were right. She wouldn't like me bringing the subject up—not without her consent, anyway. She has a fierce pride, Gabe. She hates people fighting her battles for her. I can't tell you the number of scraps she had with Riley when they were in school. She always came out on top, too. I guess he didn't know how to fight against somebody who bites and kicks. No *boy* ever beat him in a fist fight—not even Fanchon's big, protective brother."

"I hope she lets somebody else do her fighting now." His sorrow was as strong at that moment as it had been when he left Fanchon—maybe stronger. Even though he longed to keep the conversation going so he wouldn't have to think, he couldn't. The words he wanted to say were stuck—until they burst forth in a rush. "You will take care of her, won't you? I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to my wife or child."

"You know I will."

Taking out the cheap pocket watch he'd bought in Moline, Gabe checked the time. "I'm late to meet my incoming troops. I wrote Fanchon last night. Would you deliver the letter for me?"

Nels accepted the thick, sealed envelope. "Do you want me to deliver any other messages?"

"Tell her that I sent a telegram to Pa and told him to send her as much money as she needs. Whatever I have is hers, because I trust her judgment completely."

"All right."

As Gabe started away, his heart grew heavy. He'd felt so close to Fanchon while he was with Nels that it seemed as though he was leaving his wife. Stopping short, Gabe turned back toward the table. "And Nels? Tell her that her memory will bring me through this hellish war in one piece. Tell her that I promise we'll be together again someday."

"She'll get the message as soon as I can find some time alone with her. You take care of yourself so you can keep your promise."

"I'll do my best. Have a safe trip home." With those words, Gabe raced out of the building, no longer able to bear the pain of parting with someone so close to the woman he loved.

\*\*\*

"You got another letter today, Fanchon," Bianca announced when they met on the street during Fanchon's dinner break. "I would have brought it to you, but it isn't from Gabe. Do you want to come by and get it?"

"I suppose," Fanchon answered as she strolled down the boardwalk with her oldest sister.

"Something's bothering you, isn't it."

Unable to hide her distress, Fanchon replied, "I told Mom. She won't believe that Gabe didn't assault me, and she won't recognize our marriage."

"I'm sorry, Fanchon."

After walking a good distance in silence, Fanchon changed the subject. "We got a telegram from Nels yesterday. He should be home Saturday afternoon."

"That's a relief. Maybe *he* can talk some sense into Mom."

"What do you mean?"

"You and Gabe, of course."

"How do you expect him to talk some sense into Mom when he doesn't even know about the wedding?"

"Of all of us, Nels would accept your marriage without a question, Fanchon. You *have* to

tell him.”

“I plan to. You don’t know what it’s like to love a man, but at the same time be afraid to tell your family. I’ve never been afraid to say anything in my life, and I’ve never cared about others people’s opinions—until now. All of a sudden they’re *very* important to me. I truly care what everybody thinks of the man I love.”

“That’s because you want everybody to like Gabe. But that won’t happen until they meet him.”

“Do you think it *ever* will?” Fanchon asked in concern.

“Of course, I do. I know how you feel, too. You’re scared that Gabe won’t come back alive, but you have to think positively.”

“I try, Bianca, but I can’t force the thought of impending doom from my mind. And it’s so firmly embedded in my spirit that I *always* feel like something’s going to happen. This was supposed to be the happiest time of my life, but I’m almost always miserable.” As she entered Bianca’s kitchen door, Fanchon asked, “Where’s the letter? I’ll get it myself.”

“Upstairs in the drawer of the hallway table. That’s where I always keep them until I can get them to you. Should I set an extra place at the dinner table?”

“No, thank you. Aunt Em is expecting me. Uncle Hal went to Springfield for a few days, so I’m staying there to keep her company—for what it’s worth with things so hectic at the hospital lately. I’ll get my letter and leave.”

Her curiosity was finally roused when she saw her name and address on the envelope. She quickly broke the seal and withdrew the enclosed piece of paper. Realizing something was folded into it, she carefully opened the letter. A check fell out, made out in her maiden name, in the amount of twenty-five hundred dollars. Her shock ran so deep that she instinctively shouted for Bianca, who appeared within seconds.

“What happened?”

“Nothing. I mean, everything.” Fanchon fanned the check before her face. “Look! This check is for two thousand five hundred dollars!”

“Who’s it from? What’s it for?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t read the letter yet. Give me a couple minutes.” Quickly scanning the single-page letter, Fanchon grinned at her sister. “It’s from Gabe’s father. He welcomed me to the family—what there is of it. He said that it’s been just him and Gabe for eight years, and he’s glad to finally have the daughter he always wanted. Two thousand dollars is a wedding gift, so I can set up housekeeping if I want to. The rest is what Gabe asked him to send. And he said that he’s planning to come for a short visit sometime this winter so we can meet.”

“This winter!” Bianca repeated in surprise. “Why in the winter? Why not now before the weather gets bad?”

“He only needs a small outfit to watch the cattle in the winter. Otherwise, he has to stay there. I’m not exactly sure what an outfit is, but I assume it has something to do with his ranch crew.”



"He owns a *ranch*?"

"He co-owns a ranch, with Gabe. I knew that before Gabe left. But I had no idea he had enough money to send two thousand dollars as a wedding present."

"You need to put that in the bank right away."

"Maybe tomorrow. First, I have to discuss it with Astrid."

"Since when do you discuss money with Astrid?" Bianca asked.

"Since Saturday night. We decided to go into business together. She wants to get a loan at the First National, but she won't need it now. I was going to loan her three hundred, so I'll finance *all* of her share instead. And I'll have a house built in the best location possible. I wish I had time to discuss the finer points of our venture with you, but I don't. I have to get over to Aunt Em's. I'll try to come tomorrow and explain."

Fanchon slipped the letter and check into the envelope then into her pocket. Twenty-five hundred dollars! It was inconceivable. That it should arrive now was nothing short of destiny.

As Fanchon raced through the back door of the Osterberg house, Em set a bowl of stew on the table. "I'm sorry I'm late, Aunt Em. I had to stop at Bianca's house."

"That's all right, dear," Em said. "I'm a little late myself. Sit down and eat. You have to get back to the hospital."

Fanchon ladled some stew into a soup bowl while Em sliced some bread to go with it. "Did Uncle Hal's train leave on time?"

"For a change. There are times when I wish your cousin hadn't gone off to college to become a lawyer."

"You know you're proud of Cal."

Em chuckled as she scooped some stew into her bowl then sat across from Fanchon. "Doesn't everybody? But I get lonely when Hal's gone. If Calvin were here, he could keep me company."

"Is something wrong with your charming niece?"

"Not under normal circumstances," Em returned with a fond smile. Fanchon knew that Calvin wasn't the only member of the family who held Em's pride. She adored Fanchon almost as much as she had her daughter Cynthia, who had died several years earlier, despite Fanchon's diligent care. It had been hard for Fanchon, because Cynthia had been her first loss in the medical profession. But Em had made things better for her and had grown closer in the process. Em continued as Fanchon returned to the present. "Unfortunately, my favorite niece hasn't exactly been a happy young lady lately. I'm not sure I want a crank visiting me. May I ask what's bothering you?"

"I've been working too hard."

"I think it's more than that. I have a feeling a certain major tried to make things easier after your assault."

Stunned that her aunt had come so close to the truth, Fanchon stared at Em for several seconds before she responded. "Why do you say that?"

"I know you don't like people meddling in your life but humor an old aunt. Ever since that night he brought you here, you've acted strangely. Hal thinks *Gabriel* assaulted you then felt guilty about it. but I disagree."

"You do?" Fanchon interrupted in amazement. "Why?"

"There was something between you and Gabriel that no man would ever notice. If you were—I hate to use this word, but there's no sense denying it—raped, Gabriel didn't do it. I think he wanted to marry you so your possible child wouldn't be illegitimate." Unable to hide her shock, Fanchon dropped her spoon into her bowl, and Em smiled. "That's what happened, isn't it."

"No, but we did to the Rock so he could teach me to defend myself, and later he told me what he interrupted when he regained consciousness. He didn't think anything happened, though."

"I'm sorry about what happened, Fanchon. I thought you'd see a lot of him. I didn't think he'd leave you."

"He didn't have a choice, Aunt Em," Fanchon admitted. "He was only traveling through town on his way to the war."

"Now it makes sense. I suspect he asked you to marry him."

Fanchon's vision clouded with tears. Someone finally realized that Gabe was a good man and not a monster. "Yes, and I miss him. I never believed in love at first sight—until it happened to me. Does love always hurt this much?"

"Of course not. But when people in love are separated soon after meeting, it can be as traumatic as if you've been together for years." Em paused then said, "Fanchon, I heard rumors Saturday ..."

"Astrid told me, and so did Mom. She knows the truth now, so you may as well, too. At least, you won't tell me how ashamed you are of me. Yes, I'm pregnant from when we consummated our marriage."

"Then you did marry him."

Excitement coursed through Fanchon. "Of course, I did. I love him, and I knew it even then. When he proposed, I couldn't say no. But I don't understand why Mom won't recognize our marriage, and that hurts worse than her not trusting me to make the decision."

"Surely, she sees Gabriel as the decent man that he is."

Bowing her head, Fanchon's face heated in embarrassment. "If she'd met Gabe, she might. Only Bianca and Ben know about him. We hadn't known each other very long and didn't want anybody else to know about our wedding." She paused, knowing that she had to be honest. "That's not exactly true. I was so scared by how fast things happened that I didn't want anybody else to know. I'm still scared, Aunt Em. I'm afraid Gabe will change his mind while we're separated. I don't want to lose him, but I don't know how I can keep him, either."

“He’s a decent man, Fanchon. He’ll do the right thing. He’ll come back and make a rational decision with you—if he changes his mind. But I don’t think that will happen, so quit worrying. Now eat. If you’re going to have Gabriel’s baby, you have to keep up your strength.”

“You won’t tell anybody, will you?”

“Of course not, but don’t wait too long to make your announcement. Your pregnancy is going to show sooner than you realize. The longer you wait, the less likely people will believe you.”

\*\*\*

Excited about starting their business sooner than she and Astrid had anticipated, Fanchon stopped at the train depot on her way back to the hospital. There she purchased two round-trip tickets to Chicago so Astrid and Elsa could leave late the next morning. To thrive in their endeavor, they needed to open before the Christmas season. That way the more prominent women would come to them for specially made gowns. And Astrid had to start sewing dresses with which to stock the shop as soon as it was ready.

After seeing her sisters off at the depot, Fanchon went to the Rock Island bank. Using Gabe’s allotment as her income, she secured a loan under her married name. The inconvenience of the Rock Island bank was the only thing that bothered Fanchon, but it was better than answering a barrage of questions from her friends at the First National Bank. Hopefully, their business would be more successful if they doubled their initial investment. With Astrid borrowing one thousand dollars from Fanchon for their business, Fanchon took out a loan for the building.

Fanchon spent work breaks searching for a lot. The location she decided on was only two blocks from the business district. It wasn’t too far out of the way for potential customers, yet it was isolated enough for raising a family. If Gabe wanted to live in Moline, she wanted to have their home ready for him. But it wasn’t what she wanted. She wanted to move west and live on the ranch with Gabe. Hopefully, he would, too.

Saturday morning Fanchon met them at the depot, thrilled that ground had already been broken on the house. Her excitement increased when she learned that her sisters brought back several bolts of material, as well as the latest model Singer sewing machine. After hiring a buckboard, they enlisted Trevor, Byron, and two other male friends to transport everything to the farm.

That afternoon the Sten family went to the depot where Nels was due in on the two o’clock Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific Railroad. While the family watched the disembarking passengers, Fanchon’s mind wandered to the future. One day she would wait for her husband’s return, too. Then a man with a black eye patch stepped onto the loading platform with a happy grin and a wide sweep of his arm.

Stunned, Fanchon blinked to erase the image of her brother. When she looked again, Nels was hurrying through the crowd toward the family. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her father’s quick movement. She turned her head as he caught Jane, who fainted at the sight of

her handsome son's severely scarred face. Instantly, Fanchon stepped to Carl's side, ordering him to lay Jane on the ground. By the time Nels joined them with his carpetbag, she already tended to her mother.

"Put your bag under her feet, Nels," Fanchon ordered.

Following his sister's directions, Nels knelt beside Jane as she regained consciousness. "Are you all right, Ma?"

"Nels?" Jane asked, reaching up to caress his right cheek. "Oh, my baby. What happened to you? Who did it?"

"I don't know, but I've accepted my disfigurement."

"What happened?"

"A Reb got me with his saber. I lost my eye, but I'm alive and glad of it." Turning his gaze to Fanchon, he said, "I have to talk to you as soon as possible. It's important."

"Mom will be fine if she rests for a while," Fanchon replied.

"It isn't about Ma. At the farm. We'll walk like we used to."

"All right." Returning her attention to Jane, Fanchon said, "I know this is embarrassing, but you should lie still a few minutes to get your strength back."

Jane ignored Fanchon to speak with Nels in a voice filled with concern. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine, Ma," Nels replied with a grin, "but *you* don't look very well. Do what your beautiful daughter says."

Shooting a spiteful glance toward Fanchon, Jane mumbled under her breath. "What daughter?"

Stunned, Nels gazed over at Fanchon. Her face was set in anger. Fanchon's telegram to Gabe about Jane taking the news badly was an understatement. The marriage had widened the already existing rift between mother and daughter. He needed to think of a plan to convince Jane that Gabe was the perfect mate for Fanchon.

Nels attempted to relieve the tension on the carriage ride back to the farm, but everyone else remained silent. Was there something even greater behind the mother-daughter dissension? After putting his possessions in the room once occupied by Bianca and Ilka, Nels went downstairs to rejoin the rest of the family. In the kitchen, Jane and his sisters prepared dinner.

"May I talk to you alone, Fanchon?" he asked.

"Fine," Jane interrupted, her voice filled with bitterness. "Talk to her and ignore your mother. Everybody in the family knows that I don't have any feelings."

Nels stared at her, aghast. But nobody else in the room paid attention to her hostile attitude. "What's wrong with you?"

"You're being disrespectful," Jane countered. "After all, *I'm* the one who raised you."

"I'm not being disrespectful, Ma. I'd love to talk to you. Why don't we go sit down and chat right now?"

"If I do, you won't have the wonderful homecoming meal I'm making for you. We're going to have all your favorites cooked just the way you like them—the way *I* cook them." Jane shot another irate glance at Fanchon, who ignored her.

"For God's sake," Nels demanded, "what the hell's happening around here? This is the worst damned homecoming a man could have. I hope you do a hell of a lot better when Pete comes home."

"That's no way to talk to me," Jane fumed. "I demand an apology."

At that moment, Carl entered the house through the kitchen door. The sorrowful look in his eyes alerted Nels to drop the subject.

"Oh, hell," he said irritably. "I'm sorry, Ma. I just expected a lot more happiness and harmony when I got home. I didn't expect to walk out of one war zone into another. I'll wait until everybody else has gone to bed before I talk with Fanchon."

By the time of the homecoming festivities, from which Bianca and Ben were missing, the situation had deteriorated. Nels was just about to speak in Fanchon's behalf when Em arrived, studied the scene, then drew her niece outside.

"I didn't realize things were so bad, Fanchon," Em said.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," Fanchon admitted. "I knew Mom would be upset, but this is ridiculous. I don't understand why she's so angry. I've tried to talk with her, but she won't discuss it. I'm sick about that *and* the reason we discussed the other night. Mom's furious with Bianca because she let us get married in her house, and that upsets me. Mom and Dad have been arguing again—worse than ever. To top it off, two days ago I got a telegram from Gabe. He left for the front with his troops, so I'm worried about *him*. I still have my nursing duties, and Astrid and I are starting the business. Sometimes I feel like I'm falling apart, Aunt Em—just like this family is."

"How's your health?"

"Normal for my condition. I get tired and weak, but it's bearable."

"You look terrible," Em declared in a whisper, "and I think it's because you're under too much stress. Why don't you move in with us for a while? At least, until things between you and your mother settle down."

"I couldn't impose like that, Aunt Em. Besides, running away from a problem won't solve it."

"Women under a lot less stress than you miscarry, Fanchon. You haven't had any of those symptoms, have you?"

When she recalled the abdominal pains she'd been having since that afternoon, Fanchon stared at her aunt in shock. A symptom of miscarriage, and she'd been so upset that she'd

missed it. She should have gone to bed right away!

“Dear Lord,” Em exclaimed, “you have! You’re a nurse, Fanchon. You should know better than to ignore them. If you don’t get out of this house, you’re going to lose Gabriel’s baby. Is that what you want?”

“No,” Fanchon admitted, fighting back her tears.

“Then move in with us. Work things out with your mother from a distance. Maybe it will be easier on both of you.”

Fanchon sighed at length. It would be nice not to feel like she was constantly under pressure. “All right. I’ll pack my things tonight and ask Nels to help me take them to town in the morning.”

Nels’ heart went out to his sister as it never had before. It was bad enough that she had to be without her husband, but their mother was torturing her. Fanchon had never appeared as defeated as she did that night, probably because she wanted to keep things pleasant for him. To hell with his own feelings! He was going to add some brightness to her evening.

“So, Fanchon,” he began, determined to ignore his mother, “how do you like nursing at the prisoner hospital?”

“Nels,” Jane said the same moment she heard her daughter’s name, “did Astrid show you her new sewing machine?”

He continued as if she hadn’t spoken. “Is it interesting?”

“You didn’t answer my question, Nels.”

“I wasn’t in a prison hospital, but I imagine they’re run like the one I was treated at.”

“Astrid’s very proud of the machine.”

“I wouldn’t even have it if it weren’t for Fanchon,” Astrid inserted in her twin’s defense.

Jane’s conversation shifted to a different daughter at the sound of the older twin’s name. “And Elsa was thrilled to get to see Chicago, even though I didn’t think she and her sister should go.”

“Not one nurse in my hospital,” Nels said, “was as beautiful as my sister. I’ll bet the prisoners get sick just so you’ll tend to their every need.”

A half-smile played at Fanchon’s lips. Nels was sweet to insist on including her in the conversation, but Jane would never allow it. She would only grow even angrier, this time at Nels. As badly as she wanted to warn him, Fanchon decided it would be better if she kept her mouth shut.

With a quick glance at her mother, Fanchon saw Jane’s icy glare at Nels. Too late—their mother was already furious. Oh, well, she had enough to worry about if she wanted to keep Gabe’s child alive. She couldn’t let another person’s problems add to hers—not even Nels’.

“Nels Sten,” Jane worded, “I’m talking to you.”

“And *I’m* talking to Fanchon,” he returned. “I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t interrupt.”

Fanchon stared at her brother in disbelief, until she heard her mother’s vicious words.

“And *I’d* appreciate it if nobody uses that name in my house again!”

## TWELVE

Fanchon gasped. Why was her mother tormenting her in front of nearly the entire family? They should be celebrating Nels' return. Unable to bear the humiliation of being rejected by her own mother, Fanchon scrambled to her feet then raced out the front door.

"Damn it, Ma! Stop torturing her!" Nels exclaimed. "She's suffering enough without you making matters worse."

"I'm suffering, too!" Jane proclaimed. "She thinks she's smart because she was good in school. She doesn't think she needs a mother. She's ungrateful and inconsiderate. Does any of you care if *I'm* suffering? No! But I am—a lot."

"I know. But you're putting her through hell."

"You don't know ..."

"I know a hell of a lot more than *you* do," Nels shouted. "I'm going after her, Ma. And I won't be back until you've apologized to *both* of us."

"Come back here, young man," Jane demanded as Nels strode to the door. "I'm your mother ..."

With his hand on the door handle, Nels spun to face her. "Not as long as you treat my sister like that. You obviously disowned her, so you can disown me, too."

The door slammed, and Astrid scrambled from her chair while Jane glared at her and asked, "Where do you think *you're* going?"

"To my room. I was blind for eighteen years, but I'm not now. I saw it all through Nels' one eye. You've always resented Fanchon for being smart and independent. You always thought she should need you, but she didn't. Ever since she learned that my dream is owning a dressmaker's shop, she's been helping me get it. For the first time we're working together, and I can see her for the person she is. Now good night. I won't be down again." With those words, Astrid lifted her skirts and ran up the steps while Em rose to follow.

"Excuse me please," Em said. "I'll go pack Fanchon's clothes. She's already agreed to move in with us for a while, and I think it would be best if she goes with us tonight."

"Good idea," Jane snapped. "But don't expect Carl and me to visit you again."

"Leave me out of this, Jane," Carl inserted. "Your disagreement with Fanchon doesn't involve me. I'll agree to let her leave home—for *her* good. But she's still my daughter. I won't let you force her away from me. I won't let you force *any* of my children away from me."

"Fanchon?" Nels asked from behind her. "Are you all right?"



"I haven't been feeling well lately," Fanchon admitted. "I couldn't suffer silently at Mom's vengeance anymore, so I thought it was best that I leave."

"I don't blame you." Sitting down beside her in the hayloft, where she had always hidden as a child, he stroked her hair. "Do you mind if I talk to you?"

"I'd rather talk to you. A lot happened while you were gone."

"You can explain it all in a few minutes. First, I have an important message for you. Your husband says that your memory will bring him home in one piece." She turned her startled gaze to his face while tears of joy filled her eyes. "And he promises to come back as soon as he can."

"You met Gabe," she said.

Nels' grin produced one in Fanchon as well, her first true sign of happiness in weeks. "For the second time in my life. I don't know if you remember your first fight with Trevor, but Gabe broke it up. You were infatuated with him from that very second."

Fanchon smiled fondly. "I remember the incident, but I wasn't sure it was Gabe. I only suspected it."

"He felt the same way until I told him my name. It's hard to believe that you two got together after all these years."

"We call it destiny."

"I know. He told me." Nels paused a moment then added, "I've never met a man more excited about being a father by the way, even though I think he's insane to *want* a person dependent upon him. But I suppose he has a right to be happy when his wife is the only perfect woman in the world."

"How can you say that after the scene I created?"

"*You* didn't create the scene, Fanchon. Ma did. In fact, you showed remarkable restraint. I told Ma how I felt, too. I even heard Astrid side with you."

"Astrid?" Fanchon asked in surprise.

"Your twin, remember?" he said with a mischievous grin. "She didn't like the way Ma treated you any more than I did. So, little sister, how does it feel to be wealthy?"

"What do you mean?"

"Your husband's rich, Fanchon. Didn't you even suspect it when he told you that his father would send you five hundred dollars a month?"

"I assumed it was his military pay plus what he makes on the ranch."

"I didn't think you were that naive. The man has money coming out his ears. Five hundred is only *part* of his monthly income from the ranch."

Envisioning cash actually coming from Gabe's ears, Fanchon giggled. "What an amusing mental picture! If I can depend on anything, Nels, it's that you'll cheer me up when I'm upset."

“Don’t get too happy yet. I just succeeded in getting the two of us locked out of the house. I told Ma that I wouldn’t be back until she apologizes to *both* of us. I also told her that, if she disowned you, she could do the same for me.”

“Oh, Nels,” she said in distress. “How could you *do* that?”

“She deserved it.”

“But she deserved it from *me*. Mom was thrilled to have you home. You have to go back in there.”

“Not until she apologizes to both of us. If she comes to me without going to you first, I still won’t go back.”

“Where will you live?”

He patted her hand in silent support. “Hell, I’ve been living on the ground for a long time. I can do it again if I have to. You’re the one who’s having a baby. Where will *you* live?”

“With Aunt Em and Uncle Hal,” she explained. “I’ve already been invited.”

“Do you think they’ll take me in, too?”

Fanchon smiled. “I can’t see them turning away a homeless waif just back from a war, especially when he’s their nephew.”

“How would you like to take that walk with me? I’d like to see my big sister and her family. Nobody’s even mentioned them since I’ve been home.”

“I’d love to. On the way, I’ll explain why Bianca’s another taboo subject with Mom.”

\*\*\*

*“I love you, Fanchon,” Gabe said as he comforted her in his strong arms on the north bank of the Rock River. “If your mother insists on making you miserable, I’ll take you out of her house. We’ll be happy on the ranch with our baby. And there won’t be arguments or stress—only love. Do you trust me to make you happy, my dear? Do you love me as much as I love you?”*

*She sobbed against his chest, her tears stemming from joy rather than sorrow. “Oh, yes, Gabe. Yes to both questions. When can we leave for the ranch? Every night I dream of what it must be like.”*

A knock startled Fanchon from her dream, and she bolted up sit on the bed as she asked who it was. At the sound of her father’s voice, she hurried to admit him and Nels. Returning to the bed, she slid her legs back under the covers while they sat on the edge.

“For the first time in twenty-seven years, I couldn’t sleep with your mother.” Carl placed a package wrapped in a sheet on Fanchon’s bed. “I didn’t know what had gotten into her, not until I had such a hard time sleeping in your lumpy bed. Obviously, Em didn’t know you were hiding such important possessions there.”

"You know?" Fanchon asked.

"Yes. I've already spoken with your brother about it, too. I thought I was telling him some deep, hidden secret."

After glancing at Nels, Fanchon returned her startled gaze to her father. "Thank you for bringing them to me, Dad. I didn't know how I'd get them back without encountering Mom."

"Why didn't you tell me, Kitten One? Why did I have to hear it this way?"

Fanchon cringed at the thought of her folly. "I was afraid to say anything. You were so hostile when you thought that I'd been raped."

"Nels says that you love Gabe very much. They spent a lot of time together in Washington. I'm very sorry I overreacted, but you've never given me any real reason to worry before. I honestly believed that something bad had happened, so I didn't even consider that it could be something good."

"I should have invited you to our wedding, but Gabe and I had only known each other for a few hours. He doesn't love me like I do him, Daddy. He did it because I'm the kind of woman he wants for a wife. How could I admit that I'd fallen in love with a man who's incapable of returning that love?"

"From what Nels tells me, you don't have anything to worry about. Is it Gabe's money that's financing the shop for Astrid?"

Fanchon glanced at her brother. What could he know after talking to Gabe? Had Gabe told Nels that he loved her? Oh, what she would do to have her disrupted dream come true! With a sigh, she returned her gaze to Carl and answered his question. "It's a joint venture. I'm loaning her a thousand dollars, and she's renting space in my new house. Has she told you that she'll be moving into town when it's done?"

"Not yet. But after last night, I'm not surprised. She wasn't very happy with your mother. After Nels left, Jane sent everybody away who didn't live in the house. She told them that anybody who agreed with Nels was welcome to leave and never come back. I don't know what's going to happen next. I suppose I'll try to talk some sense into her and see if I can get my family back together."

"Don't expect miracles, Dad," Fanchon said, wandering to her dresser and picking up her necklace. "She doesn't even want to know Gabe's name."

Carl strode over to stand behind his daughter. Caressing her upper arms, he spoke in the soft, melodic voice. "No matter what happens between you and your mother, Kitten One, nothing will change between you and me. Nothing will change my love for you."

"I know." She turned in his arms to hug him. "But I still needed to hear it. I love you, too. I don't want to lose you any more than I want to lose Gabe, any more than I want to lose his child. That's why I came to live with Aunt Em. She understands and wants me to have as much peace as I can."

"I didn't know you were going to have a baby."

"Our baby was destined to be conceived, just as we were is destined to marry. It's how we both feel."

Carl smiled fondly at his daughter and patted her hand tenderly. "In that case, I couldn't be happier for you. I'll be back as often as I can. And Nels?"

"Yes, Pa?" Nels asked, speaking for the first time since entering the room.

"You can work on the farm until you find something you'd rather do. I know you don't like farming, but I'll pay you decent wages."

"Thanks, Pa. I'll be there after I eat."

"Good. I'd better go back home now. I don't want your mother to wonder where I was. There's already a wall between us that's going to take some time to break down." Carl kissed Fanchon on the forehead. "You take care of that grandchild of mine."

"I will, Dad. And thanks again for telling me you love me. It helps a lot."

\*\*\*

Fanchon's life calmed after that. In her room at the Osterbergs' home, she displayed Gabe's tintype, even though she still felt too ill at ease to show their wedding photograph. At least, she could talk about the man she loved without hesitation or argument. And she did so often with Em, Carl, Bianca, and especially Nels.

Fanchon's happiness increased as her home and business establishment grew into a tangible building. Her pregnancy symptoms also subsided with the peace in her life. The hour or two of nausea each morning became a mere nuisance. The support of Em, Hal, Nels, and Carl brought Fanchon the sense of relaxation that she needed. But her closest confidant was still Bianca, because she understood better than Nels.

By early November, Fanchon's home was completed enough so the twins could move in before the heavy snows came. They spent several days preparing the house before transporting the sewing machine to their Mississippi River valley home. It was the last item to be put in place, the final one needed before they could open for business.

Their grand opening was more successful than they'd imagined. Bianca and Ilka assisted the customers who bought the ready-made dresses. Astrid took orders and measured women who wanted specially designed dresses for up-coming Christmas celebrations. Fanchon managed all of the monetary transactions and kept the books for the first day's work. By the end of the first week, the twins had realized a small profit; at the end of the month, their net income exceeded their goals.

"I can't believe how well we've done," Astrid enthused.

"Don't get too excited," Fanchon reminded her. "We opened at a very good time. Christmas and New Year's are both coming within a month. Women won't need our services as much after that. Which reminds me, I have an idea about expansion."

"Already?" Astrid asked, stunned.

"Of course. We can't let our profits go to waste. We have to reinvest it if we want to succeed. You need a line of maternity clothes, something fashionable yet comfortable for parties

this winter. And I heard a couple of girls mention their impending weddings. You could design wedding dresses, too. These are only ideas, mind you, but they deserve your consideration.”

Constantly aware of her changing body, Fanchon had mentioned the maternity clothes so she would have something to wear. Before long she wouldn't be able to hide her pregnancy anymore. Two months earlier she had started wearing her shirts outside her trousers, and the added weight was beginning to show.

As she prepared dinner with Astrid that night, Fanchon jerked erect, startled by a bump in her side. “Ow!” She was almost overwhelmed with excitement. Her child had finally given its first real kick! When Fanchon glanced up, Astrid studied her from across the room.

“Maternity clothes, Fanchon? Do you plan to wear them?” With a shocked gasp, Fanchon faced her. “You can't expect me to live with you for a full month and not notice. Is that why you moved away from home?”

“It was one reason,” Fanchon admitted. “The other reason was that Mom and I weren't getting along anymore. You know that.”

“Is the father that soldier you met at the barn?”

“Yes,” Fanchon admitted, “and I'd appreciate it if you'd keep quiet about this. Your love of gossip could make things worse for me.”

“I will. Where is he?”

“Fighting the Confederates somewhere in the South.”

“He's why Mom's so mad at everybody, isn't he.”

Fanchon nodded. This conversation was going well, but she was still concerned that her twin would inadvertently mention her condition to the wrong person. To conceal her true worries, she asked, “Have you made up with her yet?”

“No, but Dad thinks he's making progress. And he can't convince her to make up with you.”

“I'm not surprised. Go to her, Astrid. Tell her that you love her and don't want to feud with her. It would make her very happy—you, too, probably. Explain that you're only living here because of the business, that we have very little to do with each other except professionally.”

“But that would be a lie. We're getting along better than we ever did.”

“Mom doesn't have to know that, and a little lie would be worth it if you could reunite with her.”

“If you don't mind, I will. I miss the closeness we had.”

\*\*\*

The chilly rain produced mud so thick that Gabe's horse slogged through it. But he had to get to his men lying wounded in the harvested cotton field. Keeping low over his mount, he trudged forward. Gunshots came from all around him. Some of his troops battled back from their positions, using dead horses for protection. He didn't know why his steed hadn't been hit, but he was grateful it was still moving.

An excruciating pain shot through his lower back, and he couldn't maintain his leg hold on his horse. Gabe fell to the ground a moment before his chestnut gelding crashed down atop his legs. But he had no pain, despite being crushed under the dead weight of the horse. The realization hit him like the bullet. A solitary, desolate scream pierced his ears before he gave into the blessed blackness enveloping him.

"Fanchon!"

Glancing toward the other side of the room, Fanchon noticed the surgeon examining a patient with a broken arm. "What do you want, Dr. Watson?"

His eyes filled with surprise, he stared at her. "What makes you think I want something?"

"You called for me."

"I didn't say anything. Nobody did."

"But I heard my name so clearly."

"You must have been daydreaming. It was as quiet as a church in here until you asked what I wanted."

Without a word, Fanchon returned to folding boiled bandages on the table in the corner. Was it possible that no one had said her name? Possible, yes, but not likely. She had heard a man call out for her; it hadn't been her imagination!

\*\*\*

Bianca rushed to answer the door when she heard the knock. Carl had told her that Jane would come by for a reconciliation that day, and Bianca was anxious for the reunion. She'd spent many happy times in private talks with her mother, and she missed them. Jane had been her mentor and guide, her source of advice, and her close friend—until Jane had learned that Fanchon had been married in her home.

At the door, Bianca stopped short. What if her mother wanted her to apologize? She couldn't do it, because Jane was wrong to treat Fanchon as she had. With Christmas in two weeks, Bianca wanted her family around, but if that meant going against her beliefs to pacify her mother, she'd do without. At least, she would have Nels and Fanchon.

The person knocked again, and she smiled to conceal her nervousness. When she opened the door a tall, attractive Union soldier stood before her. In that instant, dreams of the black-haired man kissing her flashed across her mind. It had been a long time since she'd been intimate with a man—before Ben went to war. Now the memories of how good it could feel

came back to plague her. She would have to see if Ben would respond to her attempts at seduction that night.

“Captain James Wilkerson, ma’am,” he said as he tipped his kepi hat. “Are you Mrs. Gabriel Freeman?”

Her fantasy disappeared along with her smile. He didn’t want to see her; he wanted to talk to *Mrs. Gabriel Freeman*. And that could mean only one thing. To conceal the horror coursing through her, she replied in a deceptively confident tone. “I’m her sister. Did something happen to Gabe?”

“I’m not at liberty to discuss it with anyone other than Mrs. Freeman. May I please speak with her?”

“She’s working at the prisoner barracks hospital.”

“She is?” he asked in amazement. “I need to go back over to the island then.”

“Wait!” Bianca grabbed his arm as he started to leave. “If this is about Gabe, I want to go.”

The captain stepped into the house and closed the door to keep out the cold, snowy weather. “This is highly irregular, ma’am. I shouldn’t allow it.”

She reached into the entry closet and withdrew her heavy coat. “But you’re going to, right, Captain Wilkerson?”

“Jim,” he offered, holding her wrap. “Yes, ma’am. I’ll let you go. You seem awfully concerned about your sister. May I ask why?”

Turning around, she gazed up at the attractive soldier. At last, she could look up to someone other than her relatives. She’d been pushing her husband around in his wheelchair for so long that she’d forgotten how nice it felt to look up to a man. At that very moment, she tired of being Ben’s servant.

“I’m Bianca Morgan. My sister’s pregnant, and I don’t think she can handle any information about Gabe. If you’re here, it has to be serious.”

“It could be worse, but it still isn’t something she would want to hear without your support. Are you ready to leave?”

“Yes,” she said as she picked up her reticule, “but first I need to stop next door. My neighbor will watch for my children to come home from school.”

As Jim reached for the handle to open the door, someone knocked. He glanced down at Bianca in question but didn’t pull it back until she nodded once.

“Mom!” Bianca exclaimed when she saw Jane. “Daphne and the boys should be home soon. Would you wait for them? And could we borrow your sleigh? We’re going to the island. It’s an emergency. Something happened to Gabe.”

Before Jane could protest, Bianca rushed out of the house with Jim right behind her. Fanchon needed her. Their mother would just have to wait for a reconciliation.

## THIRTEEN

After lifting Bianca into her mother's covered sleigh, Jim unhitched the horse from the fence post, then climbed into the rig beside her and urged the horse into a trot. Once they were on the way, he asked, "What was that about? You acted like you couldn't wait to get away from your mother."

"I couldn't," she admitted. "Things in our family haven't been very pleasant since my sister married Gabe."

"Your mother must hate the man."

"Mom hasn't even met him. She didn't even know about the *wedding* for three weeks. That marriage has to be the best kept secret in Moline, Rock Island city, and Rock Island all combined. Only eight people know, nine including my sister."

"I understand. Since I can't discuss my business with Mrs. Freeman, why don't you tell me about your children? How old are they?"

"Daphne's almost eight, Benjy's six, and Curt's five."

"You don't look old enough to have children those ages. You must have married very young."

Bianca smiled at the man. In her mind, he spun her around a large room in time to a festive dance song. How long had it been since she'd danced with a man other than Carl or Hal? Long before Ben went to war, because he didn't like to dance. A sudden desire to be flirtatious raged through her, and she gazed at him demurely. "That's sweet! Thank you."

"You're welcome. Are you and your husband going to the community Christmas dance next weekend? Or would it be my good fortune that he's at war?"

His frankness about his interest startled Bianca. Her heart tightened with excitement. If this was why Fanchon had fallen in love with Gabe only hours after they'd met, Bianca understood now. It was exciting to have a man talk to her like that. Although she tried to stifle her reaction, her voice carried an uncontrollable note of longing.

"He's already been to war, and he came back with only a half a leg," she explained. "There is no more dancing."

"You sound disappointed."

"I love to dance. I went to my sisters' birthday dance and sat the entire time—except when my father or uncle asked me."

"Your life isn't nearly as happy as it once was, is it."



Stunned that he saw her hidden pain, she asked, "Could we please change the subject, Captain Wilkerson?"

"Jim, remember? What do you want to talk about?"

"I don't care. Anything but me."

For the rest of the trip, Jim chatted about his family in New York. At the hospital, Jim tied the horse to the hitching post. After lifting Bianca to the ground, he hurried her through the rapidly deepening snow. In the building, he removed his hat and slapped it against his leg to knock off the snow. Beside him, Bianca cleared snow from her coat.

When she glanced up, her eyes met his and remained fixed. Why was she so attracted to a stranger? Was it because Ben would have nothing to do with her in bed? The smile playing at Jim's lips sent an unexpected shock of shyness through her. She bit her lower lip gently as he reached out toward her. Unable to avert her eyes, she started as his fingertip slid across her eyebrows—first one then the other.

"Snowflakes," he whispered. Then he asked aloud, "Where do you think we'll find Mrs. Freeman?"

"I don't know. I suppose we have to look for her."

Jim slid his arm around her waist, and Bianca started. He was treating her like a desirable woman! She hadn't realized how much she missed it until that moment. And he was steering her gently, farther into the building. They had moved only a few feet when Fanchon came out of a ward ahead and to their right.

"Jim," she greeted. "Bianca. What are you two doing here? And together at that."

Jim stared at Fanchon with his mouth gaping. His gaze shot to Bianca then moved slowly back to Fanchon. "I don't believe it, Fanchon. *You're* Mrs. Gabriel Freeman?"

Fanchon's mouth dropped open in horror. Tears spilled from her eyes. Her bottom lip trembled as she struggled to regain control of her emotions. A powerful ache took over her heart, and her lungs drained of oxygen. She felt as though she would die on the spot from the sorrow that overwhelmed her. If Jim knew her husband's name, it could only mean one thing. Her pained screams pierced the still silence of the hospital as she broke into a frantic run toward the door.

"No! Gabe! No! No!"

Jim caught her only a few steps later, drew her against him, and tried to calm her. Dr. Watson raced out of a ward as Jim spoke to her in a soothing tone.

"Relax, Fanchon. Please. It's not what you think."

"If you're here, he has to be dead," she wailed. "Oh, God, no. Not Gabe."

"As far as we know, he's alive."

"Don't lie to me!"

"I'm not. The telegram said he was injured trying to help his wounded troops."

"Then he's *going* to die, or you wouldn't be here."

"The Army doesn't *know* his condition, Fanchon," he explained. "He disappeared. There were Union and Rebel soldiers everywhere. Most of his unit died, but they can't find Major Freeman. He's missing in action. We can only assume he was taken prisoner."

"Prisoner?" she repeated.

"That's right. He could still be alive."

"Dr. Watson," Fanchon said as she faced him. "I have to see how the prisoners here are treated."

Dr. Watson shook his head. "I'm sorry, Fanchon, but you can't."

"I have to. They have my husband. I have to know what it's like for him." Her desperation increased as she pleaded with the surgeon. "Get me permission, or I'll break down a stockade gate."

"You need some rest."

"I *need* my husband."

Breaking away from Jim, Fanchon raced toward the door again. Before she took four steps, a sharp pain shot through her abdomen. With a cry of agony, she dropped to her knees and doubled over, clutching her stomach with both arms.

"Oh, my God!" Bianca exclaimed. "The baby. Doctor, don't let her lose her baby!"

"Damn," Dr. Watson said, striding to her side. "Why did you lie when I asked if you were pregnant? I would have made you quit."

"That's why," Fanchon answered. "I want to go home. Gabe's picture is there. I want to be with him."

"You should rest first."

"I can rest at home," she insisted. "Please. I want to go home."

"All right," Dr. Watson agreed. "I'll get your coat."

As the doctor left, Bianca knelt beside her sister and laid her arm across Fanchon's back. "At least, you know he's alive, Fanchon. That's the important part. Hold on to your baby—for Gabe."

"I will." Fanchon turned her sorrowful gaze toward Bianca. "But how *long* will he live? Will they treat his wounds properly? If they do and he recovers, how will the guards treat him? Will he be tortured? I have to know these things. I have to see the stockade. Somehow, I have to get behind those gates. Oh, Bianca! I can't bear not knowing how Gabe is being treated."

"Don't do this to yourself—or your baby. How do you feel?"

"I hurt, but I can't let a little pain stop me. I *love* Gabe. I have to find him so I can treat him. I have to help him escape."

"You can't go anywhere but to bed," Bianca said. "You *have* to save your baby."

“Help her into this,” Dr. Watson ordered as he handed Fanchon’s coat to Bianca. “Captain, come with me.”

“Yes, sir,” Jim agreed, following the doctor a short distance down the hall.

Curious, Fanchon watched them as she slipped into her coat. Dr. Watson took a small container from his pocket and passed it to Jim. Even though Dr. Watson led Jim away, she could still hear them.

“Put her to bed as soon as you get her home. And see that she takes one of these.”

“What are they?” Jim asked.

“Sedatives. I have a feeling she’s going to need them. Knowing Fanchon, she won’t rest unless I keep her sedated. I’ll check on her as soon as I can, but that might not be until later this evening. And don’t leave her alone.”

“All right. Is there anything else?”

“Two people should stay with her. If she goes into labor, somebody can come for me while the other person stays. Do you know how far along she is?”

“I didn’t even know she was pregnant,” Jim replied. “I’ve been trying to court her since September.”

“It doesn’t matter. She’s obviously not far enough along to let that baby come. If she does go into labor, get somebody to me quick. We might be able to stop the birth.”

\*\*\*

Once Fanchon was in bed, Bianca returned to the sitting room where Jim awaited her. When he saw her, he scrambled to his feet. “How is she?”

Bianca released a long, heavy sigh. “I don’t know. She still wants to visit the stockade. I have to stay here because Astrid’s in Chicago, and Dr. Watson said we can’t leave Fanchon alone. I have to watch her, so she doesn’t lose her baby.”

“Why don’t you make dinner?” he suggested, grasping her shoulders. “I’ll take your mother’s sleigh back then come keep you company. Doc did say two people.”

“I would appreciate that.”

“Good, because if she goes into labor, I could make a lot better time on horseback than you could in a sleigh.”

When he returned, Jim let himself back into the house per Bianca’s instructions. “I’m sorry I took so long, Bianca. Whatever you’re cooking smells wonderful.”

“Thank you.” With a smile, she glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. It had been years since she’d indulged in subtle flirtations and doing it with Jim was exhilarating.

“Your husband was home from work.” Did she detect a note of disappointment in his

voice, or was it only her imagination? “He asked me to take your mother home because the weather’s so bad. I couldn’t think of an excuse not to, so I did it.”

She *had* heard disappointment in his voice! That must mean he wanted to be with her as much as she wanted to be with him. It had been a long time since Ben left for the war, but the ten months since his return seemed even longer. He refused to satisfy her womanly needs.

“Why don’t you hang your coat in the mud room?” she suggested. She and Ben hadn’t even had a reasonable conversation in several months. Life with him had become unbearable, and she was tired of hiding her feelings. With Jim, she could be open. “Is the weather bad?”

“It’s a blizzard out there now. I hope Dr. Watson can get here.”

“I hope Fanchon doesn’t go into labor.”

“Have you checked her lately?”

“About five minutes ago. She was sleeping. This is very difficult for her, Jim. She could handle knowing if he’d been killed, but not knowing is devastating.”

“Fanchon’s strong. She’s been through hell with some of the Rebs at the prison hospital, and she always handles everything very professionally.”

“She isn’t emotionally involved with those men. She loves Gabe so much that this could destroy her.”

Jim sat down at the kitchen table while Bianca handed him a cup of coffee. “I could never understand why Fanchon refused my invitations to parties.”

“Fanchon never courted anybody but Gabe. He was her first and only love.”

“He must be thrilled to have conquered the unconquerable.”

“That’s not how Gabe sees it. He found the woman of his dreams and married her.”

“You sound envious,” he observed, setting down his coffee to join her at the stove.

Again, her voice had told this man things she hadn’t expressed to anyone. How could he possibly understand her when she was still trying to understand herself and her attraction to him. In three hours, she’d been transformed from a woman with no feelings to one who could scarcely breathe because she wanted him so badly. This must have been how Fanchon felt when she met Gabe.

“You don’t have much of a marriage, do you,” he observed. Stunned, she shot her startled stare to his face. “I’m sorry, Bianca. It’s none of my affair. I shouldn’t even be thinking about it, but I can’t stop myself.”

“Sit down and warm up with your coffee,” she replied in a husky voice filled with desire. “I’ll finish dinner.”

Jim’s hand trailed over her head to the chignon in the back of her hair. “I’d rather warm up by the hot stove—and you.”

His words touched her nerves. She moved away to stir the stew in the large pot. Again, his voice showed that he wanted her. But she was married. She had to remember that. But

she was also a woman with desires that had been stifled for a long time. Now that they were active again, her nervousness far outweighed her longing.

“I didn’t need this much food,” she admitted. “I mean, it’s just the two of us—and maybe Fanchon. But I’m used to cooking a lot. I suppose that’s why I did it.”

“Bianca.” He was standing so close that she had to tilt her head back to stare up at him. “That’s a beautiful name. It rolls right off your tongue. Bianca. Fanchon. Do all the girls in your family have unusual names?”

“Yes, but I never liked my name. People can’t remember it. I’d rather have a name like my mother’s—Jane. It’s nice and simple, and nobody ever forgets it.”

“I’ll never forget your name. It’s as beautiful as the woman it belongs to.”

Bowing her head in embarrassment, Bianca tried to remember the last time a man had told her that she was beautiful. Although her looks hadn’t failed her in her nearly nine years of marriage, no man took the time to tell her. Ben hadn’t even said it after their wedding. Looking back on it, her appearance was probably the only reason he’d married her. And why had *she* married *him*? She couldn’t even remember anymore!

“Is that stew about done, Bianca?” Jim asked, drawing her from her thoughts. “We should eat before ...”

“Before what?” she quizzed curiously.

“Before I forget that you’re married instead of your name.”

Dr. Watson arrived to examine Fanchon about eight o’clock. Her concern increased when he ordered complete bed rest for a week, even though her pains weren’t as strong as they had been. When she insisted she had too many commitments, he explained that he was putting her on herbal medication to help prolong her pregnancy. Any extra exertion could counteract the medicine. Disappointed, she watched him leave her room.

Now what was she going to do? She needed to see what it was like for prisoners. If she had some idea of what Gabe was experiencing, she would know how to react. The only reaction she had now was fear—fear that he was being mistreated, fear that he wasn’t being treated at all, fear that she would lose him forever.

No! She couldn’t think that way. Destiny wanted them together. Besides, she hadn’t had time to make him fall in love with her yet. He had to come back to her—he *had* to. Or she had to find him and bring him home. Either way, she had to reunite with him. It was as simple as that.

“How is she, Dr. Watson?” Bianca asked when he joined her and Jim in the sitting room.

“It doesn’t look good right now. She’s been working too hard lately—between the hospital and the business. I told her that, but she refused to slow down. And when I asked her if she was pregnant, she lied to me. Now the stress of learning about her husband has made matters worse.”

"That's not all the stress she's been under lately, doctor," Bianca explained. "Our mother's been making things hard for her, too. It's like she *wants* Fanchon to be miserable."

"I agree," Jim inserted as he sat with his arm on the back of the couch behind Bianca. "When I took Mrs. Sten home, she said that maybe now Fanchon would see how stupid she'd been."

Bianca shook her head. "I'm not surprised."

"I need to get back to the hospital," Dr. Watson said. "I don't care if you have to disguise those sedatives, give Fanchon one every four hours. Put them in a drink or some food if you have to but give them to her. I told her I was putting her on some herbal medication, but doctors and nurses are notoriously bad patients. Tricking her might be the only way we can keep her in bed."

"All right, doctor. I will."

"And don't bother to walk me out. You have to stay healthy so you can take care of your sister. Good night."

While Jim and Bianca watched, Dr. Watson left the room. Neither spoke until they heard the front door close. Then Jim pulled her close and kissed her hair. Again, Bianca was shocked by her reaction to the gesture. Ben hadn't even done that much since his return from the war, despite her desperate attempts to regain his interest. With Jim she wasn't trying, and she seemed to be doing everything right.

"It sounds like you've been made a nurse," he said softly. "It also sounds like you're going to be in this big house with a bedridden sister for a while."

Again, her voice gave away her inner desires. "I know."

Turning her head by caressing her chin, he tilted it toward him. "Does he get out in weather like this?"

"No," she replied, knowing to whom Jim was referring.

"Will he come here to check on you?"

"No. He thinks we did the wrong thing by witnessing Fanchon's wedding, so he refuses to come here." Sensing what was destined to happen that night, Bianca excused herself. "I want to check on Fanchon and see how she's doing."

"I'll be waiting." Before letting her leave, he kissed her tenderly on the lips. "Please don't take all night."

Bianca escaped upstairs where she found Fanchon asleep. Racing into Astrid's bedroom, she stripped out of her dress and underclothes then slipped on Astrid's deep green, satin robe. Tying it around her waist, she examined herself in the full-length mirror and brushed out her long hair. If Ben wasn't interested in keeping her happy, Jim certainly was. And she was going to get whatever she could from the handsome man. So what if the butterflies in her stomach made her want to dress again? Who cared if Ben learned of it? She was going back downstairs to Jim and what he was offering her that night.

By the time she returned, Jim had already dimmed the kerosene lamps and was staring

out the window. As she approached him from behind, he spoke without turning around. "It's pretty bad out there. Maybe I should leave before it gets worse."

She slid her arms around him and pressed against his back. "And maybe you should get snowed in."

"This is lunacy." Turning in her arms, he embraced her and gave her a peck on the lips. "I'm a fool for being here alone with you."

"I'm even more foolish. I'm married."

"I'm not, but I'm as guilty as you if this goes any further."

"Ever since he got back, Ben's been punishing me for convincing him to go to war." Unbuttoning his uniform shirt, she slid her hands over the coarse, woolly long johns. "He won't be intimate with me, Jim. He won't even kiss me anymore. At least, he's not home much now that he has a job. If he won't give me what I want, I'll get it from somebody who will."

"I don't know why I feel this way, Bianca." Reaching inside her robe, his cool hand massaged her warm breast. "Anything lasting between us is hopeless. But I want to make you happier than any other man has."

"Astrid's bed will probably get very cold tonight, and Fanchon's sound asleep from the sedative." Bianca draped her arms over Jim's shoulders and entwined her fingers behind his neck. "Keep me warm, Jim."

"It will be my pleasure," he agreed.

His lips met hers hungrily, and his arms engulfed her. Feelings that Bianca had believed she would never again experience spread through her like a wildfire. She pressed herself against him, molding her body to his until she could feel his swollen desire against her stomach. She parted her lips, and his tongue passed into her mouth.

The sinfulness of their embrace increased her ardor. His tongue clashed with hers, driving her closer to being his conquest. Nobody had ever kissed her like this before, and she never wanted it to end.

But at the same moment she thought the words, he broke the kiss, stared into her eyes, and whispered, "God, Bianca, I need you—*now!*"

"I need you, too," she returned in a low, breathy tone.

"Let's go upstairs."

"Later," she replied, collapsing against him.

He took her gesture as it was intended and gently lowered her to the floor while he sank to his knees. Without a word, he untied her sash and slowly pushed the soft material out of his way. When she lay before him, her pale body exposed to his view for the first time, he inhaled sharply.

Even after three children, Bianca had a slender figure of which she was proud. Her breasts weren't as big as the twins', but they were still firm. Someday that would probably change, but she didn't care. Their moderate size would be a benefit then.

While she watched in a trance, Jim quickly shed his clothes. His muscular arms, his smooth strong chest, his flat, rippled stomach gave way to his dancing desire. Unable to resist, she reached out to grasp it tenderly. He inhaled sharply at her touch and stopped disrobing.

His mouth reclaimed hers as she spread her legs. She pulled him to her, positioned him for their union. To her surprise, he broke the kiss to plant a small peck on her chin. The tip of his tongue slid down her throat and across her chest to her nipple. He circled the bud until it hardened then kissed it before slithering his tongue through her cleavage to her other breast. Suckling the nipple gently, he taunted the other one with his thumb.

“Oh, Jim,” she sighed. “You make me tingle all over.”

“There’s more,” he whispered.

He kissed his way lower to her navel and beyond. His lips caressed her, his tongue devoured her, until she could no longer bear the excruciating heat of desire, and her body convulsed in release.

Only when she lay panting before him did he enter her, filling her and bringing her to a second fulfillment only moments before he gave himself over to complete release.

After several minutes of rest, Jim finished removing his clothes and slid her arms from her robe. Then he lifted her and carried her to Astrid’s bed.

She lay there quietly while he retrieved their clothes. No man had ever made her feel like that before—and she didn’t even feel guilty. Since her husband didn’t want her in his bed, she would take Jim as her lover for as long as he wanted her. She didn’t even care if it destroyed her marriage. That was already dead, anyway. And if somehow her mother learned of her lover, she didn’t care about that, either. She was tired of living for other people; it was time to live for herself.



## FOURTEEN

"Is he ever going to regain consciousness, Daddy? It's been over a week."

The heavy Southern drawl confused Gabe. Fanchon didn't have a Southern accent. His first thought was to open his eyes and see if his wife was truly at his side. He had to assure himself that he wasn't dreaming, but the extreme pain in his head forbade any movement. Then a man's thick drawl drifted through the dense fog in his mind.

"Maybe never according to Charles. A fractured skull is a critical injury, Dolly. It can kill a man."

A fractured skull? No wonder the pain was so severe. Were they talking about him? He considered lapsing back into unconsciousness, where he'd be free of the excruciating agony, but he wanted to hear what else these people would say.

His mind was so muddled that the people's conversation was too difficult to follow at first. What had happened to him, anyway? The last thing he remembered was regaining consciousness in the mud and seeing his horse lying on his legs. He'd tried to get out from under it, and there was more. But what? Why couldn't he remember?

"I need to put another log on the fire," the man said. "He'll never survive if he catches pneumonia."

"How long do you think we can hide him, Daddy? I heard rumors in town. Billy's searching for a Union major, and he's furious that he disappeared. Rance thinks it's the same man. They both say he fought more like an Indian than a soldier—whooping and hollering and charging like a maniac, until he was forced to keep low. That's why Rance killed Chester—to keep him from clubbing Gabriel to death. It *has* to be Gabriel that Billy's looking for."

They *were* talking about him.

The man sighed. "I wish you'd stop calling him that, dear. Don't act like you have with other wounded soldiers we've taken in. You've been hurt too many times."

"Gabriel's different, Daddy. I know he is."

"Yes, he is. Major Freeman loves his wife very much. You could see it in the photograph. A lot of men carry pictures of their wives or fiancées, but it's rare for a man to carry one of both himself and his wife. Don't get involved, Dolly. You'll only get hurt again."

Now Gabe knew that woman wasn't Fanchon—and she wasn't a dream. Where was Fanchon? For that matter, where was *he*? If only the pain in his head would let him open his eyes. But the agony was too excruciating. The only relief possible was to give himself over to the exhaustion raging through him.

If Fanchon were there to nurse him back to health, he wouldn't go back to sleep. He would stay awake and satisfy her like he never had before. She apparently wasn't with him, though, and he was tired. If he wanted to see his wife, he needed to recover. To do that, he needed a lot of rest. Drifting back to sleep, Gabe's mind slipped into a wonderful dream of loving his wife.

\*\*\*

Fanchon studied Lt. Jesse Gibson while she sipped on a cup of hot cinnamon tea in the warm kitchen. Was it advisable to go through with her plan? Despite her desperate attempts to get into the stockade, she hadn't been able to. Bianca did all she could to dissuade her, and Jim adamantly refused to help. Accepting Jesse's invitation to the Christmas Eve ball had been a ploy in the hope that she could get his assistance in return. Now, while they relaxed after the social, was the perfect time to try.

"What are the barracks like?" she asked.

Jesse studied her, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Why do you want to know that?"

"I'm curious. I work in the hospital, but I don't know anything about the barracks. Are the prisoners forced to do harder labor? What if they don't work when they're supposed to? How are they punished?"

"In the first place, the prisoners work on a volunteer basis. They earn five or ten cents a day, depending on the work they do. But we do have a couple officers who ... *forget* the regulations."

"What regulations?"

"The prisoners have their own system of punishment. If a crime is committed, they try and punish each other—most of the time. A couple officers have been known to take matters into their own hands, especially if they've lost at poker."

Fanchon furrowed her brow in concern. "Do they injure the prisoners?"

"You'd be one of the first to know if they did." Jesse's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Why are you suddenly so interested in the prisoners? Is one of them attracted to you?"

"What nonsense!"

"Why? There's not one prisoner who doesn't recognize you by name, and the ones who've met you describe you to the rest. If you walked through the center of camp tomorrow, every man would know who you are."

"I wish I could."

"You can't be serious!" he exclaimed. "They'd attack you in a second."

"I don't believe men from the South are so crude. I'm sure they're as much gentlemen as you and the men in my family."

"I wouldn't take you through. Some of those men haven't laid eyes on a woman for a year

or more. If they saw a pretty lady like you, they'd forget their good breeding."

Fanchon shook her head. "I disagree. Besides, if *you* took me through, I know nothing would happen. You've already defended me once."

"Even if I could get permission, I wouldn't do it."

Noticing that his cup was empty, she went to the stove for the teapot. "May I get you more tea?"

"No, thank you. I have to be on duty early in the morning. I should leave now." Together they wandered to the mudroom off the kitchen. Taking his uniform overcoat from a peg in the wall, Jesse slipped into it and buttoned it. "Thank you for letting me escort you to the social. I appreciated it."

"Thank you for inviting me. I'm surprised that Captain Wilkerson wasn't there. Did he have to work?"

"When he heard I got the lady he wanted," Jesse said with a wink, "he settled for second best. Actually, he was invited to a private dance in Davenport. He took another lady to that one so he wouldn't meet us. I suppose he felt awkward going where a lieutenant was escorting the lady he'd bragged about escorting."

"You're probably right," she returned with a smile. "My sister was invited to a party in Davenport, too, but her husband wouldn't go. I hope she and Jim were at the same one."

Tilting his head, Jesse kissed her cheek. "Thank you again, Fanchon. You were the prettiest lady there tonight, even prettier than your twin sister. The little weight gained since your birthday party does you good. You work so hard you'd lost a little there."

Fanchon blushed. Apparently, the dress Astrid had designed to conceal her condition had failed. If Jesse had noticed, how many others had?

"Don't worry, my dear," he said, gently laying his hands on her waist. "If I hadn't danced with you last time, I never would have known. The feel of your waist was forever burned into my hand during our first dance."

Suddenly, the baby gave a solid kick against Jesse's hand then began moving within Fanchon's womb. With a small gasp of surprise, Jesse shifted his shocked stare to her stomach. When he returned his gaze to her face, fury shone in his eyes.

"It's not what you think, Jesse," she started.

"Not what I think!" he raged. "I thought you were decent. I even wanted to take you home to my parents. Now I find that you're with child. You're not even as good as Astrid. At least, she's honest about the kind of woman she is."

Before she could deny his statement, he raced through the door, slamming it behind him. With a disappointed groan, Fanchon leaned back against the kitchen door. Now what was she going to do? Not only had she failed in convincing Jesse to take her into the stockaded camp, she'd alienated him. He wouldn't even listen to reason. All he wanted to do was run.

"Big help you were, little Freeman," she said as she patted her slightly rounded abdomen. "Your timing is atrocious. I hope you do better than that when your daddy gets home. Neither

one of us will appreciate you squalling when we're ready for bed. Let's have some more tea."

As she sat at the table with her cup, Fanchon stared at it. Now how would she get through the prison gates? Jesse had been her last chance, and she would probably never even see him again.

A quiet rap on the mud room door startled her back to the present. Warily pushing herself off the chair, she opened it to see Byron standing outside.

"I came to see how you're doing," he explained as he stepped into the mudroom. "I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not. Take off your coat and have a cup of cinnamon tea."

"Thanks." Slipping out of his coat, he hung it on a peg then sank onto a kitchen chair. "I heard what happened a few minutes ago."

"How?" she asked in surprise, setting his cup before him. Emptying her cold tea, she poured herself more. "When Jesse left, he was headed back to the barracks. At least, I thought he was."

"I passed him going home. He couldn't wait to tell me what a terrible woman my friend is."

"I'm not surprised," she admitted as she sat down across from Byron. "He was furious."

"I told him that if he said anything, I'd beat him to within an inch of his life," Byron proclaimed. "But I doubt my threat affected him."

"You shouldn't have done that, Byron. He's supposed to be very good with both his saber and his fists."

"I did, though, and I *meant* it. If I hear one rumor, I'm going straight to Gibson."

"I appreciate you trying to protect me, but it isn't necessary."

"I told you at your birthday dance that I'll marry you if you're pregnant. I haven't changed my mind."

"That's very kind, but impossible. Her father's coming back." The words stunned Fanchon. She hadn't considered the baby's gender before and, in fact, wanted a son. But she knew it was true. The baby was a girl. Across from her, Byron questioned her impatiently.

"Is it, Fanchon? Is the major you treated the father?"

"Yes."

"But he was only passing through town. How do you know he'll come back?"

"He promised he would."

"I hope you're right."

Fanchon wandered to the sink. "Do we have to talk about this, Byron?"

"No. I just wanted you to know that I'm still willing to be a father to your baby. It hasn't changed since August."

"I honestly appreciate it, but it's not necessary. He'll come back."

Byron also stood. "Maybe I should leave."

"You don't have to," she offered, following him to the door.

"You need your sleep, little mother," Byron said while he donned his coat. "I'll be waiting if you change your mind. I'll wait for the rest of my life if I have to."

He hurried out into the cold December weather, leaving Fanchon alone with her thoughts. Taking her tea upstairs, she removed her dress and underclothes then stood naked before her full-length mirror. For a woman almost five months pregnant, she didn't show much. But that would change very soon. If only Gabe could be there to see her stomach grow with their child! Fanchon slid her nightgown over her head then went to his photograph which she had framed and mounted on the wall. Within her their child stretched and moved as it did each night at bedtime.

"Our baby and I miss you so much, Gabe," she told the tintype as a tear slid down her cheek. "Oh, darling! Where *are* you?"

\*\*\*

*His head descended until his lips captured hers in a hungry kiss. His hand sought out her bare breast to gently squeeze it while he teased her nipple with his thumb. Then he slid his hand lower to her slightly distended stomach. Within her the baby moved as though stretching for more room. He rubbed her stomach in a slow, circular motion to lull the child until it was still again.*

*Releasing her mouth, he nibbled at her ear and drew a reflexive shudder from her. After tenderly pushing her light blonde hair out of his way, he nuzzled his way downward, centering his attention on her breasts. When he kissed his way to her stomach, he delighted in the sound of the heartbeat that came loudly to his ear. At first, he thought it was Fanchon's, but a moment later he realized that it was much too rapid. How could he hear the child's heartbeat so clearly when it should be muffled?*

*Covering her with his body, he gazed down into her baby blue eyes. "Fanchon, you've made me the happiest man in the world."*

*But when he tried to take her, his body wouldn't respond. The festive music playing somewhere in the distance didn't even help arouse him. His desire was strong, but his body was weak. Somehow, he had to prove that he needed her, or she would only stay with him to nurse a half-man. He couldn't let that happen! She was born to be free, even if he was a prisoner of his own body.*

Until then, the dream had been pleasant. Now it was a nightmare. He couldn't bear going through the tears they shed over his impotence each time the dream recurred. To pull himself out of his deep slumber, he concentrated on the voices around him.

"Is he waking up, Charles?" asked a man with a thick Southern accent.

"His moaning could indicate that, Rance," Charles replied in a similar drawl.

The moaning was his? Gabe thought someone else was making all the noise. Who were those people? Why wasn't the music in his dream fading away?

"We're taking a big chance by coming up here during the Christmas Eve ball," Rance said. "Billy could have followed us. He knows we're up to something."

"He's also occupied," Charles returned. "Dolly will keep him busy. I know she'd rather be here, but she knows the danger. Billy's enamored with her, and she'll do her duty by pretending interest in him. Don't worry about Billy, Rance—not tonight, anyway."

The names sounded familiar, but Gabe didn't know why. What kind of duty was Dolly doing? Why would she rather be with Charles and Rance? Why was Dolly's occupying Billy so important? And where was he? The only way to get answers was to come out of his semi-conscious state. When he opened his eyes to the brightly lit room, blinding pain shot through his head. He shut them again.

"Dim the lamps," Charles ordered. Gabe heard some movement then, "All right, major. You can open your eyes now."

Doing as instructed, Gabe noticed the room was considerably darker. Then he saw the shadowy figures of two men beside his bed. In the back of the room near the fireplace, he noticed the silhouette of a woman and extended his arm toward her, whispering, "Fanchon."

"No, Major Freeman. That's not her name."

Distressed, Gabe stared at the dark-haired man. Where was she? If she was there, she would be at his side. What had they done to Fanchon? "My wife. Is she safe? Where is she?"

"Your wife is safe," Rance replied in a quiet voice. "She's probably home waiting for your return."

"She's a nurse. I want her with me."

"It's dangerous enough for you to be here. We can't let her come."

"Where am I?"

"On a plantation in Georgia. We'll hide you here until it's safe to transport you back to your wife."

"When will that be?" Gabe asked.

"Probably quite a while. Both of your legs are badly broken, and you have a fractured skull. Traveling is out of the question for at least three months."

"That's impossible," he denied. "There's no pain. I've had a broken leg before, and it hurt. But it doesn't now. Not my legs—just my head."

"You mustn't overexert yourself, major," instructed the other man at his side. "Don't talk so much."

"Does Fanchon know where I am?" Gabe asked, ignoring Charles.

"I doubt it. You were taken from the battlefield when the fighting was too heavy for your troops to notice."

"Then I'm a prisoner."

"No, sir," Rance said. "You're a free man. You're not being held here against your will. You'll be treated then sent home to your wife via the Underground Railroad we operate. At the moment, though, you can't make the trip."

Panic flooded through Gabe. "Tell Fanchon I've been injured. She'll worry if she doesn't know where I am. She might lose our baby. Please. Tell my wife where I am. Tell her about my injuries. She's a nurse. She'll understand."

"Relax, major," Charles ordered, his voice filled with calm. "Concentrate on getting well."

"Promise you'll notify my wife that I'm safe—unless I'm not. Unless you're lying to me about being free."

"You're free, Major Freeman," Rance said, "but you're not safe. Confederate sympathizers are determined to find you. If we contact your wife, she might want to join you, and that's not advisable."

"Lie to her. Just tell her where I am. Contact her through her sister—Bianca Morgan—in Moline, Illinois. Tell her you're hiding me from the enemy until it's safe for me to leave. I don't care what you say as long as she thinks I'm well."

After glancing at Charles, Rance returned his gaze to Gabe. "I'll have my sister send a telegram."

"Thank you," Gabe said.

A moment later he returned to his slumber, exhausted by his desperate pleas.

\*\*\*

"Are you positive, sis?" Nels asked, grasping Fanchon's hands. "I hate seeing you alone on Christmas."

"I won't be alone. The soldiers are coming for dinner. Now make Mom happy. Go to the family dinner."

"I meant it when I told her that I won't go home unless she apologizes to you. I don't care if she has apologized to me. I won't back down on my decision."

"Dinner's at Aunt Em's, so you won't be going home. Don't disappoint the family."

"You're doing it."

"I'm keeping it a happy occasion. Nobody will miss me when they're having so much fun opening their presents."

"I've been thinking about that feud, sis. You're both too damned stubborn to admit you're wrong. You were wrong for not introducing Gabe to the folks before you married him. You

were wrong not to tell them about it, and you're wrong not to announce it to your friends and relatives. You haven't done anything to be ashamed of."

"Thank you so much for your support," she said sarcastically.

"You know damned well I support you. If I didn't, I would have had Uncle Hal publish the news in the *Argus*. For the first time in your life, Fanchon Sten—I mean, Freeman—you're being stupid. And believe me, stupidity and stubbornness don't mix. You irritate the hell out of me by the way you're acting, but Ma infuriates me. Because of her, you're ostracized from family occasions. Christmas this year won't be easy for you, especially since you haven't heard anything about Gabe." Then his tirade weakened. "Wouldn't you rather be with your loved ones at a time like this?"

"Astrid was here, and Bianca will be coming by for a while. Besides, Dad stopped by for a few minutes to give me a present and get his and Mom's from me. Mom probably won't open it, but I got her one, anyway—so she knows I'm willing to reconcile. And you're here now." She smiled to relieve some of the tension. "What more could I want? There's only one real present I want for Christmas, anyway, to have Gabe tell me that he's alive, well, safe—and free. But that's too much to expect. I only hope somebody's doing for him what I'm doing for some of the soldiers at Rock Island. I hope they're offering him a home-cooked meal."

"So *that's* why you wanted to invite prisoners. You wanted to do for those soldiers what you want others to do for Gabe."

"Exactly," she admitted. "Now go over to Aunt Em's, or our nephews and nieces will eat all the food before you get there."

"All right, sis, but I'll be back later."

Nels had been gone only a few minutes when the first knock came at the business entrance door. Thinking it was one of the soldiers, Fanchon hurried to answer it. Instead, Trevor burst into the building, locking the door behind him. His enraged expression caused her to back away from him.

"I have a Christmas present for you, Fanchon," he said, his gray eyes scanning her body. "One you'll like."

"Astrid!" she shouted.

"Don't be stupid. Astrid's helping Em. I saw her through the window."

"Leave me alone," Fanchon demanded as she raced into the shop to escape him, "or I'll tell Gabe what you're doing."

"Gabe? Are you saying that you have some man who'll come to your defense like the one in the storeroom that night? It didn't work then, and it won't work now."

When he darted toward her, she knocked over a rack of dresses to block his path. Spinning around, she fled into the kitchen and grabbed a carving knife from a drawer. But as soon as she picked it up, he wrenched it from her hand and drove it point-down into the counter. Fanchon jerked her arm from his and sped to the back stairs. If she could get to her room, she could lock the door and be safe until her guests arrived. Better yet, she could get her derringer from the bureau.



Trevor caught her halfway up the steps. Crushing her against him, his lips ground against hers. She opened her mouth to bite him, and his tongue slid in. A moment later her teeth sank into it. At the same instant, she forced her fingernails downward across his eyes. Howling in pain, he grabbed her arm in a viselike grip then doubled his fist to retaliate.

Fanchon saw his imminent blow and tried to duck. But his fist connected hard with her eye. The force of the assault threw her off balance, hurling her against the wall then propelling her forward again.

Trevor hands tried to catch her but missed. Her scream of terror pierced the air as she tumbled over the banister. A loud, sickening thud echoed through the room as she landed face-down on the small table below and bounced to the floor. Then deathly silence filled the building. Fanchon coughed once. Blood spurted from her mouth. Finally, the blackness engulfed her.

\*\*\*

He felt the pain in his lower abdomen as surely as if it had been his own. How could that be? The doctor had told him there could be no more pain below his waist. But the dream was so real. Gabe bolted upright in his bed with a distressed cry, bracing himself up on his hands.

“God, no! Fanchon! Our baby!”

## FIFTEEN

On his left, a petite brunette with a gentle Southern drawl helped him to lie down. On his right, a tall black woman did the same. He'd heard that voice somewhere before, but where?

"Lie down, Gabriel," the brunette coaxed when he resisted. "Don't ever make a sudden move like that again. Charles thinks there's a bullet in your back. Near your spine. He said it could sever your spinal cord, then your paralysis would be permanent. So don't move."

Unable to disguise his distress, he said, "My wife. She needs me. I have to get to her."

"It was only a bad dream. Lie back down."

Doing as instructed, he examined the brunette. Her nose was a little large for her narrow face, but she was still quite pretty. Her shoulder-length hair was styled into tight ringlets that framed her shoulders and neck. "Who are you?"

"Dolly Clairmont. Our servant is Genevieve."

"Slave, you mean," he spat out as he glanced at the other woman.

"Ah ain't no slave, mister," Genevieve explained. "Ah gits paid fer workin'."

Gabe's apology even sounded half-hearted to him. "My mistake." Returning his gaze to Dolly, he asked, "Is it Miss or Mrs. Clairmont?"

"Miss, but call me Dolly."

"I have to go home, Miss Clairmont," he said. "My wife needs me. She's going to lose our child."

"That's worry talking, Gabriel. I'm sure she's fine. Besides, you can't go anywhere as long as there's a bullet in your back."

Gabe closed his eyes in distress. He may not be a prisoner wherever he was, but he was a prisoner of his body. Oh, how he longed to be free again! How he longed to be with his wife! But that would never happen again. His body denied him the simple pleasure of satisfying the woman he so desperately needed. And how he longed to see her beautiful face again!

"May I have my Ambrotypes?"

"Your Ambrotypes?" Dolly asked with a blank expression. "I don't understand."

"My photographs. One of my wife; one of both of us. I had them in my pocket." When she appeared confused by his request, he grasped her wrist. "Didn't you see them? My wife is a beautiful blonde with pale blue eyes. You *had* to have seen them. Get them for me. I want my wife's picture where I can see it."

"You must have imagined them, Gabriel," Dolly said. "Or maybe you dreamed it. There

were no photographs in your pockets.”

It couldn't be possible. He'd had them the morning of the battle; he'd looked at them every chance he got. He *knew* they were there. But Dolly said they weren't. He repeated her words in a distraught voice. “No photographs?”

“I'm afraid not.”

“Let me see my clothes,” he demanded.

“They had to be burned. A Union officer's uniform is too obvious to keep lying around.”

“My wife's photograph was *burned*? Who did it? I'll beat the hell out of him.”

“I burned your clothes myself, and there were no photographs in the pockets. I took out all your personal effects. Show him his pocket watch and wallet, Genevieve.”

Sure enough, Genevieve withdrew the watch and wallet from a dresser drawer but no Ambrotypes. Where were they? Why were they missing? Who would want to steal a wedding picture? He could understand why a man at war might want Fanchon's photograph. But the Ambrotype of them together? The theft of his wedding picture was incomprehensible. Could it be an omen of things to come?

A vague memory of Southerners talking about his wife and her beauty came back to him. Had that happened? Or was it a dream like the one he'd had of Fanchon, her pain, and the loss of their child?

“I have to have those pictures,” he pleaded. “You have to find them. Something happened to my wife, and our child is dead. I need my pictures, or our destiny's as dead as our baby.”

\*\*\*

The first voice Fanchon heard as she regained consciousness was Bianca's. As badly as she wanted to feel her sore stomach to see if her baby was still alive, she couldn't. Fear and pain prevented it. She would ask Bianca as soon as she stopped talking.

“Thank you for sending that sergeant to get me, Jim,” Bianca said in a near whisper. “I'd much rather be here than at that miserable family dinner. Everybody pretended to have fun for the children's sake, but even they knew how upset Fanchon must be. We all tried to talk to Mom, but it didn't do any good. Now this. I wish there was some way to spare her the truth.”

“She'll know as soon as she wakes up, honey.” Jim released a long, sorrowful sigh. “God, I feel guilty. Because of me, we were almost a half an hour late. Maybe I could have helped her.”

“This isn't your fault, darling.”

The shock in Jim's voice told Fanchon that he'd found her even before he said the words. “I've never seen such a mess in my life. At least, nothing as horrible as seeing a dead baby I could hold in one hand. And she was perfect. She had fingers and toes—even ears. I've seen

men lose legs and arms in battle, but seeing that tiny little girl made me sick to my stomach. All I could think of was cleaning up the mess before Fanchon saw it.”

“You did the right thing. But don’t tell her it was a girl. That’s what Gabe wanted and knowing might make it harder on her.”

“I’ll try.” Jim blew his nose, then his voice became more controlled, more determined. “I’m going to find out who killed their daughter and see that he pays. I found her, so it’s my responsibility.”

No longer able to remain silent, Fanchon spoke up in a weak voice. “No, Jim.”

“Fanchon!” Bianca exclaimed, rushing to sit in the chair at her bedside. Jim followed her silently, grasping Bianca’s shoulders as though he drew strength from the touch. “How do you feel?”

“It’s *our* fight,” Fanchon insisted when Bianca took her hand. “We’ll handle it our way, in our time.”

“But Jim can take care of matters right now.”

“We’ll handle it,” she repeated in a voice sparked with determination.

“At least, tell us who was here,” Jim prompted. “The doctor Bianca brought said it looked like you put up quite a fight. Who did this to you?”

“I won’t say. Gabe deserves the pleasure of destroying the man who destroyed our daughter.”

Bianca glanced over her shoulder at Jim. Fanchon followed her gaze to see his face masked with grief as he said, “Gabe may never come back.”

“Then I’ll handle it myself. I know who did it, and I know he won’t go anywhere. When I’m strong enough, I’ll take care of things myself if I have to. But I don’t believe it will be necessary, because Gabe will come back and punish him. Now I’m still tired. If you two will leave, I can rest.”

When the door closed, Fanchon burst into hysterical sobs. Her hatred of Trevor Riley equaled her passionate love for Gabe. One day that vile man would pay—and it wouldn’t be the law who collected the debt. It would be her husband!

\*\*\*

Someone knocked on the door several times, but he didn’t answer until he heard Astrid’s voice. “It’s me, Trevor. I brought you a present.”

“I can’t open the door,” he called back. “I ‘m sick.”

“I’ll take care of you if you want.”

“Doc said no visitors. I might be contagious. I can’t see anybody for at least a week.”

“Can I do anything for you?”

“Would you put up a sign at my store saying I’m sick?”

“And I’ll bring some soup by later. I’ll knock and leave it on your doorstep.”

When he heard her hurry down the steps of his late parents’ home, he returned to the mirror where he shaved. Blood still seeped from the seven scratches over and under his eyes. If those scratches scarred, he would have a hard time explaining them. Astrid’s offer to bring him soup was perfect, too. He probably wouldn’t be able to eat much until his tongue healed.

The scene at the twins’ house flashed across his mind again. He hadn’t wanted to hurt Fanchon; he *never* did. But every time he approached her, she fought like a wildcat, and he lost his temper. Trevor shuddered at the memory of Fanchon flying over the banister. Self-hatred and guilt engulfed him.

He squeezed his eyes shut. The emotional pain of what he’d done that morning struck him with a savageness he never expected. Everything had happened so fast that he hadn’t had time to react. All he could do was watch helplessly while her stomach and chest smashed onto the table before she toppled to the floor.

She hadn’t moved except to cough. Although she was seriously injured, he knew he had to leave. At least, he’d done what he could by rolling her onto her side so she wouldn’t drown in her own blood. Then he’d run away, locking the door and taking the key to make her injuries look like an accident. The only way anyone could have gotten into the house was to break down the door.

\*\*\*

Gabe was despondent over his inability to move for fear of dislodging the bullet. Still, his most earnest prayers were for Fanchon. In the beginning, he prayed for their child, too; but as time passed, he stopped. Deep down he knew that their baby was dead, and no amount of praying would bring it back.

When Dr. Charles McGuinness announced that his broken bones were completely healed, Gabe had a ray of hope. The doctor could now try to remove the bullet without damaging the spinal cord. After three hours of consultation, Gabe agreed that the surgery could be scheduled for the next week.

The longer he was separated from Fanchon, the more he missed her. Although he wrote her every day, he received no replies. As badly as he wanted to, Gabe never broached the subject of their child. Fanchon had enough grief; she didn’t need him adding to it when he couldn’t be there to support her. They could discuss their child when they were together again, when they could weep together in each other’s arms. But in his heart, he grieved for their destiny child who had not survived.

Dolly had yet to find the Ambrotypes that could give him comfort, but she did her best to support him. Still, not an hour passed that Gabe didn’t think of his wife, didn’t dream of his beautiful Fanchon.

The day of his surgery dawned, bright and fresh as only spring can be, and he woke to

the sound of Genevieve's cheerful voice.

"Good morning, Genevieve," he replied, unable to feel an ounce of happiness for his possible cure.

"You ain't so happy fer a man who's gonna walk soon."

"There are no promises that I'll walk. It's tricky surgery, you know. The doctor's knife could slip, and I would never walk again. I'd never be able to satisfy my wife again or give her the child that we both want."

"You love her a lot, doncha, Major Freeman?"

"I'd give my life for her," Gabe said. He couldn't love Fanchon, and he never wanted to say that he did. That would only lead to even more pain in his life. "That's why I agreed to the surgery. I need to take the chance. I couldn't stay married to her as half of a man. If something happens and I don't come out of this whole today, I'll get a divorce before I go back to her. My wife is very young. She could have a happy life without me being a burden on her."

"What if she don't want a divorce?"

"Just pray that I can walk back into her life. Hell, I want to *dance* back into her life."

"Them pitchers Miz Dolly's lookin' fer? Want me to look, too? Mebbe Ah cin find 'em."

"If you could, I'd be eternally grateful."

"Ah'll try. Ah gotta go now. Doc McGuinness'll be here soon. Ah'll be prayin' fer ya, Major Freeman."

"Thanks, Genevieve. I need all the prayers I can get."

\*\*\*

Fanchon woke with a start. Why did she have a sudden sharp pain in her back? She wasn't in labor—not that she couldn't have been if the baby hadn't died. Ah, the pang disappeared. It must have been a muscle spasm. Gabe had nothing to do with it, even though his image had been in her dream just before she awoke.

If only she knew where he was! She was frantic with worry most of the time, so she spent many more hours working than necessary. It helped relieve her anxiety and was her best defense against the terrible emptiness. Her loneliness would at least be bearable if she had their child to talk to, but that was impossible now. Gabe not knowing their daughter had been murdered was almost too much for her to endure, but somehow she did.

"Dear God," she prayed as she stared at Gabe's tintype, "please keep him safe and bring him back to me. If he's ill, please touch him with Your hand and heal him."

Another stabbing pain shot through her back, and she cried out. Now what? Why was she getting these muscle spasms when she'd never had them before? Maybe she'd been lifting more patients than she usually did.

Her bedroom door flew open, and Astrid burst into the room. “Are you all right, Fanchon?”

“I’m fine. It was a muscle spasm.”

“It sounded more like you were hurt.”

“It did hurt.” Pulling herself up in bed, Fanchon hugged her knees under the covers. “Something strange is happening to me, Astrid. I’ve never had pains in my lower back before, and I don’t understand why I do now. From the way you’re acting, *you’re* not having pains, and that’s the only time I’ve ever had unexplained pains before—when I got them because you did.” After rubbing her back for a moment, she embraced her knees again. “My muscles don’t feel tight.”

“Maybe I should get the doctor.”

“Don’t bother. The pain that woke me up felt like someone stabbed me, but now it’s more of a throbbing pain. I hope it goes away so I can go to work. I like to keep busy.”

“You keep *too* busy. Even Dr. Watson thinks so. I know it’s hard to lose a baby, but you’re going to make yourself sick.”

“Hard work won’t hurt me. It keeps me going when I feel like I’ll fall apart.”

“While I’m thinking of it, Trevor’s coming for dinner tonight.”

“What time should I come home?” Fanchon didn’t approve of Astrid’s lifestyle, but she wouldn’t intrude on her twin’s right to privacy. Besides, if Astrid and Trevor wanted to be alone, that was fine. She didn’t want to be around the man who had murdered her daughter, anyway. “Or should I spend the night at Aunt Em’s?”

“You can come home. I can’t do anything tonight, anyway. I sure wouldn’t want to get pregnant. Damn. I’m sorry, Fanchon. I know it still hurts, but sometimes I forget what you went through.”

“It’s all right. You don’t need to be careful around me. I can control my tears for Gabrielle now.”

“I know, but it’s getting so close to the time you should have delivered. It can’t be easy.”

“I have other things on my mind lately, like the end of this war and the return of Gabrielle’s father.”

“That’s something I never understood. Why did you name the baby when she was born dead?”

“She deserved a name.” Straightening abruptly, Fanchon grabbed her lower back. “Ow!”

“Another one?” When Fanchon nodded, Astrid added, “I’m going for the doctor.”

“Don’t bother,” Fanchon replied, confused. “It’s gone now. In fact, I feel a sense of relief. It’s like there was a pressure in my back that’s not there anymore. I didn’t even know that I felt the pressure before. This morning is starting on confusing note—and I have a feeling it isn’t over yet.”

Fanchon's prediction was more accurate than she'd imagined possible. The *Argus* announced that General Robert E. Lee surrendered to General Ulysses S. Grant at the Appomattox Court House in Virginia. The war was over. Gabe should return home soon. Then he would learn that she had lost their daughter by the hand of the same man who had contributed to their marriage.

At the Osterbergs' house, Em questioned Fanchon about her feelings concerning the end of the war. But Fanchon insisted that she was in control of her emotions. What she wanted to do was visit Bianca to see how she had reacted when she learned that Ben was coming home. To Fanchon's surprise, Bianca was in tears when she arrived and led her sister to her bedroom.

"I don't know what to do," Bianca confided as they sat on the bed. "I'm scared silly. You never would have gotten yourself into a situation like this, but *I* did. And I don't know how to get out of it."

"What happened?" Fanchon prompted in concern.

"Jim's being transferred to the frontier. He isn't positive where yet, but he thinks it'll be Fort Bridger. Isn't that where Gabe came from?"

"Are you talking about Jim Wilkerson?"

"Yes. He wants me to go with him, but I don't know how I can. Ben won't divorce me. He blames me for causing his war injuries, and he's making me suffer for convincing him to go. I hate him for putting me through such hell since he's been back. We were never actually happy, you know."

"Then why did you marry him?"

"I've thought about that a lot since I met Jim, and I finally understand the reason. I married Ben because he was the first man to propose. I'm not like you, Fanchon. I needed a *reason* to get out of the house. I wanted some freedom from Mom. I love her, and we always got along, but she was confining and stubborn. You know that better than anybody else. You know she doesn't like to have us go against her wishes. I never understood why you needed to be free until I met Jim."

Although reluctant to know the answer, Fanchon asked "Are you and Jim in love?"

"Yes. All the parties I've been going to alone since Christmas Eve? Jim and I meet at them. He almost always escorts another woman, so I don't get to dance with him much. But it's enough to make us happy. We also meet at a hotel in Davenport once a week. We *want* to get married, but we'll still live together if we can't.

Fanchon couldn't believe what she was hearing. She'd known Bianca and Jim were in love, but she hadn't realized things had gone so far. "What about your children?"

"We'd love to take them with, but I doubt Ben would let me. What's Fort Bridger like, Fanchon?"

"I don't know. How can you go with Jim? You have to be married to live at the fort."

"We'll build a little shack outside where we can be together."



“Does Ben know about Jim?”

“Yes. I told him because I thought he’d go to a lawyer the second he heard. But all he did was laugh.”

“That’s an odd response.”

Bianca explained everything in a flurry of words that told Fanchon how relieved she was that she could finally confide in someone. “Ben hasn’t been intimate with me since before he went to war. He hasn’t even kissed me. I was starved for affection when I met Jim. I tried to convince myself that I didn’t need intimacy, but I couldn’t. The night Jim told you about Gabe is the same night he told me that he thought he loved me, but I didn’t say it to him until last month, because I had to be sure of my feelings. I know you think I’m terrible for loving a man other than my husband, Fanchon, but you can’t understand. You love your husband with all your heart, and that’s how I love Jim. We want to be together, and you have to help us find a way.”

Fanchon stared at her sister in shock. “How can I do *that*? I don’t know anything about divorce, and, quite frankly, I never want to. I love Gabe. I want to be with him forever when he gets home.”

“That’s how I feel about Jim,” Bianca said beseechingly. “I didn’t expect this to happen, Fanchon. *You* should understand that better than anybody else in our family. You hadn’t expected to meet and fall in love with Gabe. It’s the same with Jim and me, but I had to be more careful about my feelings. What am I supposed to do?”

“I don’t know. Follow your instincts?”

“If I’d been thinking clearly, I would have known that you’d say that,” Bianca admitted as she dried her tears on a handkerchief. “Now why are you here?”

“My questions aren’t important now that I know about you and Jim. Trevor’s at the house, but I’m exhausted. I’m not sure why, either. I didn’t work that hard today. I probably should have expected it, though. Lots of strange things are happening to me today.”

“What kind of strange things?”

Explaining about the pains in her back and the sensation of a sudden relief from pressure, Fanchon concluded, “It was almost as though I was having sympathy pains like I do with Astrid. But Astrid wasn’t in pain of *any* kind, let alone back pain. Sometimes men have morning sickness with their wives or even labor pains. At first, I thought I was imagining it.”

“What do you think it is?”

“I don’t know. I was dreaming about Gabe and suddenly had a pain. Until it happened a second time, I thought it was a muscle spasm, but there was no tightness in my back when I examined myself. Dr. Watson couldn’t feel any tightness, either. We’re both baffled by it.”

“Do you think it had something to do with Gabe?”

“I don’t see how. Anyway, I’ve been exhausted all day. It’s almost like I took a sedative. I’m going to bed whether Trevor’s with Astrid or not, and I think I’ll use a hot water bottle on my back. It still aches.”

“But you did have Dr. Watson look at it, right?”

“The hot water bottle was his suggestion, and for once in my life, I plan to follow the doctor’s advice. I’d better leave now. Be sure to tell me what you and Jim decide. And talk to a lawyer to find out what rights you have. There might be something since Ben won’t be a true husband to you—especially when you both know he can.”

## SIXTEEN

"I want that divorce, Rance," Gabe insisted. "I don't care what you have to do to get it for me."

"Have you gone mad?" Rance protested. "You love your wife. Why do you want a divorce?"

"I never said that I love her," Gabe proclaimed. "Everybody assumes it. I can't satisfy her, and I can't take her to balls and dance with her. All I can do is sit in a damned wheelchair. If I go back as her husband, she'll feel obligated to stay with me because nursing is her life. Do you know what Fanchon means? Free. Her father gave her the name because she had no use for people—except for things she couldn't do. That's why I wanted to marry her, because she doesn't need to depend on me."

"You should still give her a chance."

"A chance to what? Take pity on me? She's only eighteen, Rance. She has a long life ahead of her. She could have children, but not with me. I want her to be happy, not saddled with a half-man."

"But you could still recover. Give yourself time."

"I have. It's been a month since the surgery, and nothing. McGuinness doesn't know if I'll ever recover. He sees no physical reason why I can't, but he can't promise any changes, either. I won't put her through that." Gabe gazed at his friend in the hope of showing his desperation. "Our meeting was destiny. We were together two days and she got pregnant, so we felt that the baby was part of our destiny. But it's gone. I feel it in my heart. And it's all because I lost our destiny in the battlefield."

"What does that mean?"

"My Ambrotypes. I had one of Fanchon and one of both of us."

"I know," Rance interrupted. "I saw them. You have a beautiful wife, and you shouldn't lose her to your stubbornness. Her expression in that picture shows how much she loves you."

Unable to believe what he'd heard, Gabe stared at Rance. Dolly had told him that there were no photographs, but Rance claimed there were. "You saw them?"

"I found them in your jacket when I was looking for your identification."

"Miss Clairmont told me that they weren't here. And Genevieve showed me the possessions I had left."

Rance's nearly black eyes narrowed in anger. "I'll bet she hid them. She's had designs on

you since we brought you here. It's possible she already destroyed them, but I doubt it, because that would alienate you completely. No, if Dolly took them, she hid them so well that nobody else can find them. She doesn't want to lose you."

"She can't lose something she never had. I'm not interested in her, and I've never pretended that I am."

"That doesn't stop her from hoping."

"That's *all* she can do. The sooner I can get my divorce and go back to my wife so I can court her properly, the happier I'll be."

"Now you want to *court* her?" Rance asked, startled.

"Of course. I don't want her to feel obligated to me, and that way she has a choice. Will you get me the divorce, Rance?"

"All right," Rance reluctantly agreed, "but you can't leave yet. Billy's still fighting the war where you're concerned. He saw you kill his brother, and he wants your blood. If it weren't for Dolly, you would have been dead a long time ago."

\*\*\*

Each morning Fanchon went to the depot to make a list of all westbound incoming trains and their expected times of arrival. Then she planned her day around the schedule so she could meet each train in case Gabe was on it. With each arrival, her hopes soared as she watched for him. Each time, her hopes drained when he didn't disembark.

There was still hope, though, still every reason to dream of his return. Most of the Confederate prisoners had been released, but many remained in the stockade. And the belief that Gabe was also being held past the end of the war kept her optimistic.

When Fanchon got home that May evening, Jim and Bianca were waiting in the kitchen. If they were together, it meant only one thing. Bianca had decided to leave Ben and the children.

"Hi," Fanchon greeted. "I assume you're here to tell me your decision."

Jim's concerned expression, however, alerted Fanchon that she was wrong. She glanced at Bianca and knew that the reason for their visit was Gabe.

"I made a couple of enemies trying to find out the truth, Fanchon," Jim explained when she returned her gaze to him. "I pestered enlisted men *and* officers wanting their information checked and rechecked—and rechecked again. The answers always came back the same."

"Don't tell me. There's no record that Gabe has been or will be released from a prisoner of war camp."

"There isn't even a record that he was ever captured. Because of his past military service, his status has been changed to missing and presumed dead."

Staring at him, she considered his words. The Army listed Gabe as a casualty of the war,

but she knew it was a mistake. There was no reason for her hope—only something in her heart that said he was alive and his request that she not believe Army officials until she saw his body. Her mind said to listen to Jim, but her heart screamed that he was wrong. When she spoke again, it was with a note of curiosity. “You don’t believe that, do you?”

“I examined Gabe’s service records from Fort Bridger. He had outstanding ratings. He was even given several field promotions, because he risked his life time and again to save his troops and ranking officers. One of two things could have happened. Gabe deserted, or he died in action and is listed as an unknown soldier. That’s no record of a deserter, Fanchon. It’s the record of a man who died valiantly, trying to save his men.”

“You’re saying that I should be proud of my husband.”

“You should be.”

“I am, but not because he died valiantly. I heard you, Jim. More importantly, I listened. But until the Army has physical proof that my husband is dead, I’ll never believe it. My heart tells me that Gabe is still alive, and I have to follow my heart.”

“I have to follow my heart,” Bianca repeated. Startled, Jim and Fanchon looked at her. “I’ve made my decision, Jim—thanks to Fanchon. I’m leaving with you the day after tomorrow. If Fanchon can follow her heart, so can I.”

But Jim questioned her warily. “What about your children? I want you with me, but I don’t want you to give them up that easily.”

“I might have a solution. I’ll talk to them before Ben comes home from work today. I’ll explain that I love you and want to move away with you. I’ll even explain that Ben and I don’t have a happy marriage. If they want to come with me, I’ll be thrilled; but if they want to stay with their father, I won’t stop them. Everybody should be free, Jim—even my children.”

“Are you positive about this, Bianca? That’s an awfully hard decision for children that age to make.”

“I know, but they’ll know that I’m not leaving them behind. They need to know that I love them and want them with me—if they want to be.”

Rising, Jim pulled Bianca up to embrace her. “You just made me the happiest man in the world. I promise you’ll never regret this. I love you, and I’ll take care of you for the rest of our lives. But I hate that we can’t do it legally.”

“I do, too, darling.”

From her seat at the kitchen table, Fanchon watched as Jim kissed Bianca. Saying good-bye to her sister would come with mixed feelings. She was glad that Bianca had found the type of love she had for Gabe, but Fanchon felt sorry for her. Leaving a husband and children was an unreasonable price to pay for that love. She couldn’t even imagine doing such a thing to Gabe.

“I have to leave,” Bianca said, pushing away from Jim. “I have a lot to do. Can you get train reservations for night, so we won’t be noticed? I’m going to try to keep this from Ben, or he’ll start trouble.”

"I'll meet you at our usual place at nine tonight so you can tell me how many tickets we'll need."

After giving him quick kiss on the lips, she raced out the mud room door, promising, "I'll be there."

"I can't put my blessing on what you're doing," Fanchon warned when Jim turned toward her.

"We don't expect your blessing, but you must understand how we feel. Bianca doesn't like what she's doing, and neither do I. But Ben refuses to divorce her."

"You're going about it wrong. There must be some legal way you could be together. Why doesn't Bianca get the divorce?"

"Ben hasn't done anything to merit it, at least not according to the lawyer Bianca talked to. Now, about Gabe."

"I don't care what the Army says. He's alive somewhere in the South, and I'll find him. I don't know how, but I'll find my husband as surely as you've found a way to be with Bianca."

Fanchon's fury grew as she watched Jim leave. How dare he say Gabe was dead! How dare the Army list him as a casualty just because they couldn't find him! Somewhere in the South Gabe was alive. Why he hadn't written to her and why he hadn't informed the Army were mysteries she intended to solve.

Instead of beginning dinner, she hurried to the Osterbergs' house to talk with Em. While they chatted, Nels came home from his job at John Deere and Company.

"Well, if it isn't my gorgeous sister," he greeted. "I haven't seen you in a couple of days."

"She received word that Gabriel died," Em said sadly so Fanchon wouldn't have to voice the words again.

"I did not, Aunt Em," Fanchon countered. "He's only *presumed* dead. That doesn't mean he is. Like I said, I don't believe it for a second."

"Did you finally get a letter or telegram from him?" Nels asked.

"No, but that doesn't mean anything. I know Gabe's alive, and as soon as I think of a way, I'm going to prove it."

"The Army doesn't indiscriminately say a man is dead. They have reasons behind their opinions. You only have hopes. And, as much as I'd like to agree with you, hopes aren't enough. You'll be better off if you accept Gabe's death."

"I won't accept something that isn't fact. I don't care if it takes me the rest of my life. I'm going to find Gabe. He's alive. I know it in my heart."

"You seem so sure."

"I'm *more* than sure. I feel his presence around me; I feel him comforting and embracing me from wherever he is. It's like the bond Astrid and I share. There has to be a good reason he hasn't contacted me yet. Maybe he has amnesia, or some kind-hearted Confederates took him into their home."

“You don’t know that’s what happened,” Em said.

“And I don’t know it’s *not* what happened,” Fanchon insisted.

“Where’s all your logic, Fanchon?”

“There was never anything logical about our marriage, Aunt Em. It’s destiny’s desire. That’s why I’m not surprised that I know he’s alive when nobody else believes it. He *will* contact me—someday. I only hope I’m here instead of on a trip to see if I can find him.”

“You’re determined to do this, aren’t you, sis,” Nels observed.

“I won’t give up on something as important as my husband.”

“Then I have a suggestion. If you’ll finance me, I’ll look for him. You shouldn’t be running all over the country, anyway. Besides, I could make better time. You stay here and wait for your letter while I search.”

“You’d do that for me?” she asked. “Even though you don’t believe me?”

“I understand your bond with Astrid, and I believe in it. Who knows? Maybe you do have the same kind of bond with Gabe. It will probably take a lot of time and money, and it can’t be done all at once. But I can start making trips within a week if you want.”

Fanchon hugged her brother. “Oh, Nels! You’re wonderful. You won’t be sorry, either. You’ll find him, and he’ll prove that whatever happened to keep us apart was beyond his control.”

\*\*\*

When Bianca left with Jim and Daphne, a startling emptiness overwhelmed Fanchon. Bianca had become her best friend and confidant after the wedding. They shared all their thoughts and feelings as they never had before. Now that Bianca had been gone for two days Fanchon felt like she’d never again have that closeness she’d come to cherish. Even Astrid couldn’t give her the same sisterly friendship that Bianca had.

Fanchon washed the lunch dishes and left for the depot to get there before the afternoon train arrived. The ticket agent looked like he thought she was insane for constantly monitoring the incoming trains, but Fanchon didn’t care. If Gabe was on one, she was going to be there to meet him.

As she watched the passengers disembark, she thought that she saw Gabe, but a second, closer look proved her wrong. The man was a little too short, and when he removed his Stetson to wipe the perspiration from his brow, he was much too gray. Disappointment tugged at her heart; she suddenly doubted Gabe’s return. But her apprehension was short-lived, the bond she believed in too strong to deny. Gabe was alive somewhere in the United States, and they would eventually be together again. With renewed determination to find him, she hurried home to review Astrid’s accounts.

A loud knock at the front entrance brought curious looks from the twins around eight o’clock that evening. Neither was expecting a guest, nor were they expecting a late customer.

Whoever was at the door was uninvited and probably not a close friend. They all used the private entrance in the kitchen at night. With Astrid busy sewing a hem in a dress, Fanchon went to answer the door.

When she opened it, she stared in astonishment at the man on the doorstep. He was the same man from the train depot—and he looked even more like Gabe up close!

“Are you Fanchon Freeman?” he asked.

“Yes, sir.” Her stunned gaze didn’t leave his brown eyes. They were the exact color of Gabe’s eyes. “May I help you?”

“My name is Jacob Freeman. Gabe was my son.”

Fanchon’s mouth dropped open; her eyes widened in disbelief. No wonder he reminded her of her husband! Why was her father-in-law there when spring and summer were his busiest seasons? As his deep voice drifted to her ears, she stared at him. His voice even sounded like her memory of Gabe’s.

“Fanchon? Are you all right? I know I shoulda telegraphed ahead, but I didn’t know when I’d git here.”

“I’m fine—but *very* surprised to see you. Please come in.” Leading him to the parlor, she introduced the amazed man to Astrid. “Mr. Freeman, this is my twin sister Astrid. Astrid Sten, Mr. Jacob Freeman.”

Jacob stared at Astrid with his mouth gaping in shock. Then with a smile, he acknowledged her with a tip of his hat and a quick, “Ma’am.”

“I suppose you want me to leave,” Astrid said with a sigh.

“If you don’t mind,” Fanchon replied.

“Should I make some tea or coffee?”

“Mr. Freeman?” she asked him.

“No, thanks. I jest had a big meal at the Moline House. I couldn’t git another thing in my stomach.”

“I don’t want any, either, Astrid.” As Astrid left with her work, Fanchon held her arm out toward the most comfortable chair. “Please be seated, Mr. Freeman.”

His grin was as cheerful as she remembered Gabe’s. There was another tug at her heart, and she battled to control her emotions while he spoke. “Not until you agree to call me Dad or Pa—or Jacob.”

“All right, but I prefer Jacob.” Once they were seated, Fanchon questioned him. “Why are you here?”

“You did get the news, didn’t you? You were visited by a soldier who told you about my son?”

“Are you referring to their assumption that he died? Yes, I heard, but I don’t believe it’s true.”



"You don't?" he asked, startled. "Did you hear from him?"

"No, but my heart tells me that he's alive. Don't you believe it, too?"

"I believe what the Army said, because I know Gabe. He woulda let us know he was alive by now."

"Not necessarily. If he has amnesia, he couldn't contact us. Gabe *is* alive, Jacob. You have to believe that if you ever want to see him again."

Jacob changed the subject. "Where's my grandchild, Fanchon? It's my first, you know."

The memory of the funeral she'd insisted upon flashed across her mind. It still hurt that she hadn't been able to attend. She'd been bedridden with broken ribs and internal injuries, but Bianca had told her that all of the adults in the family had attended—except Jane. That still hurt. Gabrielle had been innocent, and Jane would have been the first person at the cemetery for any of her other grandchildren.

After collecting herself, she explained, "Your granddaughter was murdered before she was formed enough to survive her birth. A man assaulted me, and I lost her."

"It was a girl?" Jacob responded. Then his voice turned angry. "Who was he? The one Gabe saved you from? If it was, I'll tear ..."

"Gabrielle was murdered by the same man," Fanchon interrupted, "but Gabe will avenge her death—not you. She was his daughter, and he deserves the honor."

"You named her Gabrielle? After my son?"

"Yes. When he comes home, I'll tell him what happened. *He'll* take care of matters—without your help."

"But he's not coming back. Why won't you accept that?"

"Because it isn't true."

"I'm not sure I want to tell you why I came anymore, but I don't have much choice." Pulling some papers from his vest pocket, he passed them to her. "That's Gabe's will. He left all of his holdin's in the ranch to you—all of his cash, too. I brought fifteen thousand dollars of it with me. There's some papers you hafta sign, too. I can't do nothin' important with the ranch 'til you do."

"I can't sign anything," she protested, "and I can't accept the money."

"Why not?" he exclaimed in astonishment.

"If I do, I'll be accepting his death. I can't sign or accept anything that was given to me in Gabe's will. Besides, he's still alive, so the will's invalid."

"Damn it, Fanchon," he said. "You cain't do this. You're tyin' my hands. Gabe and I *both* own the ranch. No, *you* and I both own it. I cain't do a damned thing 'til you give me yer okay to run the spread. We'll lose ever'thin' if you don't sign those papers."

Fanchon studied the papers for several minutes. Although she saw no sense in signing them, Jacob had a valid point. Then again, signing them didn't mean she was giving up hope; it merely signified her entrance into another business. The worst thing one could do in a

partnership was to tie one partner's hands, as Jacob had put it.

"All right," she agreed, "but I want to make a few minor changes. Let me get a pen and ink."

Sitting at the roll-top desk in the corner, Fanchon made several changes then scribbled her name on the indicated line at the bottom of the last page. When she returned the papers to him, Jacob admitted, "I was afraid you'd be stubborn 'bout this. Gabe tol' me you don't like people tellin' you what to do."

"You didn't tell me anything, Jacob. I signed the papers so the three of us won't lose the ranch—not because I believe Gabe died. It's another business venture. Now, about the changes I made. All you need to do is read and initial them. I haven't done anything but give you total control, so you don't have to consult me. I also put in that I won't dispute your choice of a successor if you want to leave your portion of the partnership to someone else."

As he examined her changes, Jacob initialed each segment then signed on the line below Fanchon's signature. After blowing the ink dry, he returned the papers to his pocket. "You got good business sense, Fanchon. I'm impressed, but I don't know why. Gabe said you invested in somethin' and tol' me to send you whatever you wanted for it, but you never asked for nothing. What happened?"

"Nothing. Astrid and I are doing very well. I've even paid off the loan on the house, thanks to my five-hundred dollar allowance from Gabe. And Astrid is paying me back on my loan to her. We expanded a little, so I put quite a bit of my income from the business back into it. We're making this into a very prestigious establishment."

"I see. That reminds me. Gabe didn't tell me that you had a twin sister."

"He doesn't know," Fanchon explained with a soft smile. "Will you be in town long?"

"Jest a coupla days."

"Why don't you check out of the Moline House and stay here? That way we can spend some time together."

Jacob grinned. "Long as you take the money I brought."

"All right. My brother's leaving this weekend to look for Gabe. He'll need as much cash as he can safely carry."

"There's a lot more in the bank at Fort Bridger."

"Would you mind having it transferred to Rock Island where I do my banking?" When he nodded his agreement, she added, "Good. After I get the train schedule for tomorrow, we can plan when to go over there and do the paperwork. None of this is for me personally, you understand. All of it will go to finding Gabe and bringing him home. Then I'll put everything back in his name."

Having Jacob in the house built for her and Gabe filled Fanchon with a curious mixture of security, peace, and sorrow. Deep in her heart, she longed for her husband's presence to share in the visit. The first night they chatted about Gabe until about three in the morning

before Jacob insisted that they get some sleep. But Fanchon was too upset to sleep.

Since the morning Gabe left, she'd wanted him to share her bed. Since that day, she'd spent many early morning hours in wakefulness, secretly depressed by his absence. This night was different. Jacob's presence compounded her loneliness. Despite her certainty that she would have no trouble sleeping, she paced her room. Carrying Gabe's picture, she spoke to it in a whisper so as not to disturb Jacob's rest in the next room.

Again, she expressed her conviction that he was still alive. Again, she expressed her sorrow at failing to produce the heir they so desperately wanted. Vowing that she always carried the derringer he had given her, Fanchon wiped a tear from her cheek with her thumb.

What hurt the most was that there was no Freeman to follow Gabe. Apparently, Jacob had been thrilled to have a grandchild. With Gabrielle deceased, his dream that the ranch would stay in the family another generation was gone.

Fanchon felt an acute sense of failure that had been hidden deep within her heart. She hadn't been able to save their daughter. As hard as she had tried, she'd still lost their darling Gabrielle—the baby she'd never even seen. Jacob may have been upset by the loss of his grandchild, but Gabe would be furious. The grief Fanchon had buried with her daughter came back in full bloom; the devastation in her heart was almost too much to bear.

When dawn broke, Fanchon slipped into her thin robe and padded downstairs to start breakfast. As she finished lighting the stove, Jacob entered the room, greeting her cheerfully.

"Mornin', Fanchon. Looks like it's gonna be a beautiful day."

Stunned, Fanchon spun to face him, aware of her state of dress. She hated anyone see her in the short, translucent dressing robe Astrid had given her the previous Christmas. Fanchon appreciated the present but was embarrassed by the way the peach silk fabric clung alluringly to her figure. Had she known that Jacob was awake, she would have dressed before starting the fire. Now it was too late! He had seen her and, judging from his expression, liked what he saw.

## SEVENTEEN

Jacob examined her before he spoke again, breaking the uneasy silence. “No wonder my son wanted you for his wife.”

Fanchon mumbled a thank you then brushed past him to escape upstairs and change her clothes. Closing her bedroom door, she collapsed back against it. Now that Jacob had seen her in her robe, she had to be extra careful. He looked so much like Gabe that his appreciative scrutiny excited her beyond decency. Jacob Freeman was her father-in-law not her long-lost husband. Any liaison between them would be adultery, even if the Army had declared her a widow. She still believed Gabe was alive, so she couldn’t bed another man—not even Jacob.

After going to the depot and the bank, Fanchon and Jacob went to the cemetery. That had been the worst part of the day. Visiting Gabrielle’s grave was always difficult, but Jacob’s gentle questions about the miscarriage and what had been done to punish the man made it worse. Fanchon explained, focusing her attention on her words to remain calm.

“The lawyer I talked to said there was nothing we could do about Gabrielle’s death. She wasn’t out of the womb before it happened, so the law doesn’t recognize her as a person. Since I survived the attack, the most I could have done was file assault charges, but that wasn’t enough for me. He *murdered* our daughter. I want to see him in prison forever—or hanging from the end of a rope. Burying Gabrielle was my way of saying that she was a person when no one else wanted to. And Gabe would have wanted the same thing.”

“You know my son real good for somebody who jest spent a few hours with him,” Jacob said as he slid his arm around her waist. “Maybe it’d he’p you to remember that Gabe and Gabrielle are with my Grace now.”

Furious, Fanchon jerked away and glared at him. “Don’t you *ever* say that again. I know better than anyone if my husband is dead or not. I *know* he’s alive, Jacob—and desperate to return to me. I won’t let you or anyone else put him in his grave before he’s gone. Is that clear?”

Dropping the subject, Jacob escorted Fanchon away from Gabrielle’s grave with his arm around her shoulders. She didn’t want him to touch her, yet at the same time, she welcomed the security of his embrace. Her mind screamed for her to break contact, to maintain both physical and emotional distance. But she couldn’t. He was too much like Gabe, and she needed his support. She let him guide her to their buggy.

Again, at bedtime, Fanchon couldn’t sleep. The stressful day had eaten away at her until she broke into unrestrained tears. She tried to be quiet so Jacob could sleep, but the harder she fought to control her distress, the louder her sobs became. Then a knock at her bedroom door invaded upon her grief.

"Fanchon?" she heard Jacob ask through the door. "You all right?"

Her only thought was to tell him that she was fine, that he should go back to bed. But the words that escaped in a desolate voice betrayed her. "No. I miss Gabe. I miss our daughter. I wish this hell was over so I could be free again."

The door opened slowly as Fanchon turned toward it with Gabe's tintype in one hand and their wedding photograph in the other. When she saw the expression on Jacob's face, she knew she had made a serious mistake by admitting the truth.

Judging from the look in his eyes, he liked the short, pastel green nightgown that seductively hugged her figure. The sleeveless, light-weight gown was extremely low-cut. The buttons ran from a point at the bottom of her breasts to the hem, which ended high, on her firm, white thighs.

Tears streamed uncontrollably down her cheeks, and he approached her, reaching out to embrace her in a fatherly manner. Accepting his caress was stupid, Fanchon told herself, because she knew he was attracted to her. His eyes had the same look in them as Gabe's had had. But she felt too comfortable in Jacob's arms to break away. Without thinking of the possible ramifications, she set the tintypes on the nightstand then slid her arms around him. Suddenly, she realized she'd wanted to be there all day. The feel of his body hair against her cheek drew Gabe's image to her mind.

Her husband had held her like this. He had stroked her long, soft hair in the same leisurely fashion. He had become aroused in her arms, just like now. Her tears slowed with Gabe's vision in her memory, and Fanchon tightened her hold.

"I'm sorry I failed you," she apologized. "If I'd been more careful, I could have borne the heir you want so badly. Gabrielle was my life for months. I lived for her. I coddled to her every whim by drinking gallons of cinnamon tea and eating potatoes baked with cheese. I'm a failure."

"That ain't true," he whispered as his hands moved over her back and buttocks. "You couldn't he'p it."

"I should have carried my derringer, but I didn't. I was at home. I didn't think he'd try anything here."

"Don't do this, Fanchon. You ain't to blame."

"I wanted to give you an heir. I wanted to give you a healthy child who would bear the Freeman name. It meant everything to me."

"You still could," he said, "if you wanna."

"More than life itself," she breathed.

Fanchon was swept away with desire the moment his lips met hers. Her distant feelings of excitement turned into more than a happy memory. They were real again, and very tangible. When his hand moved to her covered breast, her nipple tightened almost instantly. Oh, how she loved him to caress her like that. How she loved to have him lower her to the bed as he did at that moment.

His lips ground against hers while he opened each button on her gown then pushed the

material aside. The coolness of his hands on her heated breasts drove her closer toward the satisfaction she could only dream of. She accepted his tongue into her mouth.

Her heart burst with joy. Gabe was with her again. She could feel him touching her, hear his voice before he kissed her. At that first shocking contact of his tongue with hers, she trailed her hands up his arms to his shoulders. Time had changed his hardness, but she didn't mind. Then he released her mouth to kiss his way down her neck and chest to her nipples.

"My God, honey," he whispered hotly as he discarded his trousers, the only clothes he wore. "You're so beautiful. I've missed this sorely."

"Me, too," she admitted in a voice so low he could scarcely hear her. "I love you, Gabe."

Then his movements stopped.

"Look at me, sweetheart."

"I don't need to, darling."

"Please, Fanchon. Look at me."

Granting his request, she gazed up at him for several seconds. Her eyes widened in horror at what had nearly happened. As she frantically pulled her nightgown together, his pained expression registered only in the recesses of her mind.

"Damn! I thought so." Sliding back into his trousers, he buttoned them then sat on the edge of the bed while she finished closing her nightgown. "I'm sorry, Fanchon. I didn't know you was dreamin' 'bout my son. But I'm sorry that we can't finish, too. He ain't the only man in our family who thinks you're beautiful. When you said you wanted an heir to the Freeman name, I thought you'd be willin' with me. I didn't know you was thinkin' I was Gabe. I swear it."

"At least, you had the decency to put an end to this adulterous mistake."

"It ain't adulterous," Jacob reminded her. "My son's dead. You're a widow now."

"How can you believe that?" she shouted. "Don't you know your own son? He's a survivor. He's proven it often enough. He survived Sioux arrows, and he survived Rebel bullets. If you can't have enough faith that Gabe will hold on to every minute of life that he can, our meeting has been a waste of time."

"You really believe he's alive, doncha?"

"Don't I sound like I do?"

"I jest don' know why yer hangin' on to the notion. Even I grieved when my wife died. It wasn't easy, but I knew I had to—fer Gabe. It ain't good fer you not to accept his death, Fanchon."

"I can't accept something that isn't a fact. And before you say anything, no, I don't have any evidence that he's still alive. I only have my feelings. Gabe's and my relationship is destiny, and that has no connection with logic."

"There ain't no changin' yer mind, right?"

"Right. Nels is going find Gabe, and they'll come back to Moline. Only then will I produce

a child to bear the Freeman name.”

“I won’t come near you like that agin,” Jacob vowed. “I jest hope it won’t keep you from comin’ to the ranch.”

“I don’t know. We’ll see.”

“Good night, Fanchon. I hope you ain’t too mad at me.”

“Not at all. I’m as responsible for my lack of restraint as you are yours. Good night.”

\*\*\*

Gabe sat on the plantation house porch watching the spring drizzle from his wheelchair. What a miserable day! Even so, he would welcome it if he could be with Fanchon. If only they could walk in the rain and enjoy the fresh smell it emitted as it bathed the rejuvenating grass and perennial flowers. The more time that passed without movement in his lower body, the more distressed he became, and the more deeply he believed he was permanently disabled. How could he return to the woman he loved if he couldn’t even walk with her?

His thoughts were interrupted when Genevieve raced from the house, shouting, “Major Gabe! Major Gabe, Ah found ‘em.”

Instantly, the despair lifted. “You’d better be talking about my photographs.”

“Yep,” she said as she handed him the worn pictures. “These’re them, ain’t they?”

“Oh, God, thank you!” he exclaimed when he saw the wedding photograph on top. Pulling the black woman onto his lap, he kissed her firmly on the mouth. “You are the second most wonderful woman in the world, Genevieve.”

“Major Gabe,” she scolded as she scrambled to her feet. “You ain’t s’posed to be doin’ that.”

“It’s better than me doing it to your husband,” he said with a grin. “Where did you find them?”

“In the secret room behind Miss Dolly’s. That’s where you was when they first brung ya here. Ah cain’t figger why Ah didn’t think of it bafore.”

“Our destiny’s secure now that I have these back. We can reunite. Something’s going to happen that will bring us back together. I can feel it.”

“You ain’t gonna tell Miss Dolly ‘bout ‘em, are ya, Major Gabe? She ain’t gonna like it if she hears tell that Ah gib ‘em to ya.”

“I don’t give a damned what she likes,” Gabe proclaimed. “Miss Clairmont has strangled me too long. Now that I have my Ambrotypes, I’m going to tell her exactly what I think of her. I may be a prisoner of my body, but I’m still a free man. There’s only one woman who will ever tie me down, and you can damned well be sure it isn’t Dolly Clairmont. It’s Fanchon Freeman. But she’s not *asking* for my freedom—I’m giving it to her.”

"You love her a lot, doncha."

"I've vowed never to fall in love, Genevieve. But if I did, it would be with Fanchon."

"Then why you gittin' a divorce?"

Staring at her in shock, Gabe gasped. "Oh, my God. The divorce! Rance hasn't been by for several days. I hope to hell he hasn't taken my request to the judge yet. You've got to go into town and stop him."

"Ah ain't s'posed to go if Miss Dolly ain't here."

"I'll take care of Miss Clairmont. You stop Rance from getting my divorce. I'd do it myself if I could. Please, Genevieve. I'm desperate. I don't have anybody else to turn to. I'll take responsibility if you get in trouble."

"All right, Major Gabe, but only cuz yer so set on it."

Gabe waited on the porch for Genevieve's return. If he could have gotten up and paced, he was sure he would have. Shortly after lunch, she came home and announced that Rance was busy and would come by as soon as possible. Although relieved by the news, Gabe remained on the porch despite Dolly's attempt to wheel him into the house.

Holding up his photographs, he glared at her. "Why did you hide these?"

"Hide them?" she repeated. "I didn't even know you *had* them."

"The hell you didn't!" he raged. "You deliberately kept them from me. You thought I'd get a divorce if you kept my spirits down, but it didn't work. Rance is coming to discuss it with me, and I'm telling him to tear up the papers."

"Why are you blaming me for this, Gabriel?"

"Rance *saw* these, and he accused *you* of hiding them. The only problem I have now is getting away from you. Doc McGuinness doesn't think I should leave yet. I'm going to walk again, too. I'm more determined than ever to go home to my wife a whole man."

"If you go home to a wife," she mumbled as she left him alone on the porch.

What did she mean by that? Of course, he would go home to a wife. Fanchon had promised her love was too strong to ever divorce him. Not only that but she'd carried his child, and she wasn't a woman who would forget a man simply because the baby's life had been cut short. Of course, she would be waiting when he returned. Still, the nagging thought that his letters and telegrams had gone unanswered remained in his mind.

Maybe that was what Dolly meant. Fanchon hadn't written him nor had she returned his desperate telegrams asking if she was well. According to everything Nels had told him, that wasn't like Fanchon. She would have answered, even if she had changed her mind about their marriage. Then again, it was very likely that she'd decided she didn't want a husband who couldn't return her love.

Late in the afternoon, Gabe finally released a long-awaited sigh of relief. Rance, his horse splashing mud with its hooves, sped down the long road leading to the house. Dismounting quickly, Rance raced up the steps to greet Gabe.



"You picked a hell of a day to want your information. You're a free man, Freeman." He laughed at his joke. "I've waited a long time to say that—ever since the judge signed the papers last Friday."

Unable to speak, Gabe stared at his friend in shock. There had to be a mistake. Rance had said it would take a month before the judge made a decision, but it had taken less than two weeks. His stupidity had caused him to lose the only woman he had ever wanted to marry; his stubbornness had cost him more dearly than he dreamed possible. Fanchon was no longer his wife.

"Something tells me," Gabe heard Rance say, "that you wanted me here because you changed your mind."

"Genevieve found my Ambrotypes," Gabe announced, changing the subject. "The second I saw them I lost all thoughts of divorce. It was supposed to take a month, and you stalled for two weeks before you drew up the papers. What happened?"

"The judge was paralyzed from the waist down in a carriage accident about eight years ago. He wonders if the only reason his wife stays is out of a sense of duty. He signed the papers almost the second he read them."

"Tell him I changed my mind. Have him tear them up."

"He can't do that. I'm sorry, but you're divorced now. There's nothing you can do to change it except remarry the woman. I thought Dolly would tell you. She was at my office when Genevieve got there. I asked her not to say anything, but I still thought she would."

"I gave her a piece of my mind out this afternoon. I think she tried to tell me, but I didn't realize it."

"I have to get back to town now," Rance said.

"Would you mail a letter for me? I want Fanchon to know my pictures were found."

"Of course." Accepting the sealed letter Gabe withdrew from his shirt pocket, Rance put it inside his slicker to keep it dry. "I have to go now. Remember, if you two want to be together badly enough, *nothing* will stand in the way of your reunion."

\*\*\*

Alone in his room, Gabe poured some scotch into a glass. After three days, the pain and guilt of his folly hadn't diminished. Hopefully, they would with an increased level of alcohol in his system. He had no right to blame Dolly for his own stupidity. No matter how down-trodden he was, he never should have considered a divorce without first discussing it with Fanchon. He alone had destroyed their destiny.

The realization hit him hard. What a fool he'd been to think Fanchon that would stay with him out of pity. She was independent. She wouldn't let anybody tie her down—not even a husband who couldn't walk. Downing the amber liquid in his glass, he set it on the nightstand. He put the bottle to his lips, tossed his head back, and guzzled several swallows.

He'd been positive that nothing could change his mind about marrying Fanchon, but he'd proven himself wrong. Or had he?

He was no longer her husband, but that didn't mean he preferred his single status. In fact, he hated it! Ever since Rance announced the divorce, Gabe had been consumed with unfathomable guilt. He'd broken his promise never to end their marriage. If it took him the rest of his life, he would regain Fanchon's acceptance and convince her to take him back. Someday he would prove that nothing meant more to him than being her husband, until *death* finally separated them.

Placing the bottle beside the glass, he threw back the sheet covering his legs. He had to force them into action. Staring at his useless appendages, he willed them to move but nothing happened. He leaned forward and grasped his left leg just above the knee. Lifting it off the bed, he laid it down and repeated the process several times. After ten repetitions, he did likewise with his right leg.

"All right, you two," he said aloud, "no more self-pity. If you aren't ready to walk out of this house in a month, you may never have the pleasure of dancing with Fanchon Freeman. You may never feel her strong, sensational-looking legs wrapped around you again. So, what's it going to be? Are you going to do what you're there for? Or do I have to force the issue? There's a beautiful woman back in Moline, and I want to be part of her life. I have to know it was my charm and good looks that got me there, not her nurse's sympathy. So, I expect you guys to start working hard first thing in the morning."

By the time Gabe lay down to sleep, he had downed nearly two-thirds of the scotch; but he felt as though he'd only had three or four shots, light-headed yet in control. He needed a full night's sleep to begin the long process of relearning to walk, but a solid slumber eluded him that night.

Instead he was plagued by dreams of Fanchon, most of them the same. He saw her across a crowded ballroom and approached her while she spoke to a faceless man. The first words he said were the same ones he'd spoken when they'd been pronounced man and wife: *You're the most beautiful woman I've ever met, Mrs. Freeman*. Then, when she turned to face him with a loving smile, he asked her to dance. That night was the first of many during which what became his favorite dream recurred.

Another dream, however, gave him a ray of hope. After awaking for the third time, he'd just drifted back into slumber when he heard a faint click. Behind his closed eyelids, he saw Fanchon approach the bed. He heard the distinct rustle of her skirts, saw the dress she wore for their wedding. He smelled the fresh aroma of her clean tresses—the same freshness he had come to love in their short time together.

More material rustled before Gabe saw Fanchon's camisole slide down her arms to lie at her feet. Her firm breasts beckoned to him, but she pushed his hand away when he reached for her. Pulling the string tie of her pantaloons, she pushed them over her round hips, past her silky thighs, until she stepped out of them. Only then did she move the sheets from his half-clothed body.

Her fingers worked the buttons on his trousers. Instantly his once stubbornly resistant manhood began to respond. Using slow, enticing motions, she removed his pants so he lay

nude on the bed. Then she touched his member, causing it to grow fully in her hand before her lips caressed the tip. He inhaled at the sensation. She had shown him that he was still a whole man.

A gentle whisper into his ear as she lay down beside him jolted him to reality. That wasn't his wife's voice!

## EIGHTEEN

"See, Gabriel? You are a man. Satisfy me."

Pushing her away, Gabe glared at Dolly in rage. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Proving your manliness. Now that you're not married, you can satisfy me. I've known for weeks that you would recover. I check you every night to see you get excited in your dreams. Now that I've proven it to you, you can please me."

"Never!" he denied. "I should have known I wasn't dreaming, but I wanted to think Fanchon was with me. She's my wife in my heart—even if the legal system doesn't agree. I'd feel like an adulterer if I bedded you. But that will never happen. Now get out of here! I never want to see you in this room again. I can't control the rest of the house because it's your home, but from now on, I'll lock my door."

"How can you be so ungrateful after what I've done for you?"

"What you've *done* for me?" he repeated in amazement. "Hiding my wife's picture is *doing* something for me? How else have you been helpful since I've been here?"

"I helped you keep in touch with your wife. If it weren't for me, who would have taken your letters to town?"

"Rance mailed one for me the other day." Seeing her expression of shock in the light of the full moon, he realized what had happened. "You didn't mail them. Damn you to hell for interfering in my life. No wonder Fanchon never answered my letters and telegrams. You never *sent* them. What else is there?" When she didn't respond, he shouted, "Tell me, damn it! If you ever want me to speak to you again, tell me everything."

The door rattled as someone tried to enter. On the other side her father spoke frantically. "What's happening in there?"

"Nothing your daughter wants to!" Gabe shouted. "Leave us alone so I can get some answers."

"Dolly?" he asked.

"It's all right, Daddy. I won't be long." When his bedroom door closed, Dolly spoke in a low, husky voice. "Doesn't it excite you to see me standing here naked?"

"All your nudity does is repel me. Get dressed while you talk. It will save time."

Defeated, Dolly stepped into her pantaloons. "I thought if she was out of your mind, you'd

turn to me. I tried to get you interested by consoling you when you thought your pictures were missing, but that didn't work. And I tried to get your trust by keeping Billy away from you. He thinks he loves me, so I was the most valuable person in hiding you. But that didn't help, either."

"You were only doing your duty for the North. I know all about the underground railroad. Rance and I discussed it when we were considering my escape. Now what else was there?"

"The telegrams and letters. I thought you'd get tired of writing to someone who never wrote back, but you don't give up."

"Not where my wife is concerned."

"She's not your wife anymore. I was glad to hear you'd filed for divorce. I thought you were responding to me, but you didn't stop writing. You just kept sending those stupid letters."

"How could you be so cruel to someone you say you care about?" Gabe asked. "Don't you know how much you hurt me?"

"I thought you'd come to me for support. I didn't think you'd be so distant once you got your divorce, but now that you've got it, you don't want it."

"That's because I made a stupid mistake—one that I might have to live with for the rest of my life. Is there anything else?"

Studying him, she buttoned her dress with shaking fingers. When she was finished, she gazed at him unfalteringly. "I didn't contact the Army after the war like I said I would."

Stunned, Gabe stared at her. His mind reeled with the consequences of her admission. If the Army didn't know where he was, he could be listed as a deserter. Fanchon would be devastated if she thought he was the kind of man who would desert the Army. She might think he was the kind of man who would desert his wife, too. But there was a more grievous consequence. He could have been listed as missing and presumed dead.

How would she react if she thought he'd been taken prisoner? Surely, the Army would give that option before declaring him a casualty. What had happened to their destiny? Why had it been so savagely ripped from them? How could he rectify it?

His heart breaking, he asked, "Have I lost all hope of returning to our destiny? My wife must think I'm dead. If I've lost her, I've lost everything."

"Gabriel?" Dolly asked tentatively.

"Leave me alone. And keep away from me until I find someplace else to stay."

"You don't have to leave, Gabriel. I'll stay away you, but you should stay here until you recover. Nobody can keep you safe from Billy like I can. He couldn't fight in the war because he lost an arm, but he'll hunt you down and murder you for killing his brother. He was there that day. He saw you do it. Stay alive, Gabriel. Stay on Clairmont Manor."

\*\*\*

When the train pulled into the station, Fanchon and Nels stood on the platform to meet it.

"Here it comes, sis," he said. "Are you positive that you want me to do this?"

"I've never been more positive of anything in my life," she declared. "Gabe's alive, and I have a feeling he's been injured. We have to find him so I can nurse him back to health."

"Then that's what I'll do."

"Will three thousand dollars be enough?" she asked in concern.

"If it's not, I'll be back for more."

"Let me know the second you get any information."

"I will. Take care of yourself while I'm gone, sis. I won't be here to fight your battles for you."

"Don't worry. I *always* carry my derringer. I also have Byron. He wants to marry me, so he'll protect me, too. We became very close after Gabrielle died; he gave me emotional support. He'll be here if I need him."

Nels kissed his sister on the cheek. "First stop Washington. I'll telegram you as soon as I learn anything. Maybe you can meet me at the city closest to his last battle."

"Oh, Nels!" she exclaimed, hugging him. "Would you really let me join you? I'd give anything if I could."

"If I think it's safe, I'll send for you."

As the train pulled out in an easterly direction, her mind grew increasingly relieved. At least, she and Nels were doing something to prove the Army wrong. It would probably be a week before Nels had any information, so she may as well relax. In the meantime, she'd sign the business over to Astrid so she could leave as soon as Nels contacted her.

Although Astrid was leery of taking control, Fanchon convinced her to close the shop and handle the necessary paperwork at the bank. There Astrid got a loan to purchase Fanchon's half of the business. Fanchon made arrangements for the bank to place her allotment payments from Jacob in her account.

As they prepared dinner together that night, Astrid asked, "Why didn't you tell me you got married?"

"I don't know," Fanchon replied with a shrug. "At first, it was to protect myself from embarrassment, because it happened so quickly. Then I'd waited so long and caused so much trouble that I didn't know how to bring it up. When Gabrielle was murdered, I didn't want to talk about it. After that, there didn't seem to be any reason."

"So, your last name is Freeman. That man who visited you last week. Was he ..."

"My father-in-law," Fanchon finished. "I'd never met him before, and we wanted to get to know each other."

"Then the picture of the man in your bedroom is your husband."

"Yes."

"That explains why Mom was so furious. He jilted you, didn't he."

"He went to war. For a while, I thought he was a prisoner, but Jim Wilkerson told me that Gabe's status had been changed to missing and presumed dead. I can't accept that, though—not until I have physical proof. I'm using my inheritance to finance Nels' search for him."

"Nels knows about him?" Astrid asked in surprise.

"They met in Washington and became friends. Actually, it was their second meeting. Remember when we were about seven and we had a big argument because I wanted to go see a boy with Nels?"

"Yeah. That was the first boy you ever wanted anything to do with."

"That was Gabe—only I didn't know his name."

"Oh, it was not," Astrid said.

"It was. Gabe and Nels figured it out for sure when they ran into each other in Washington. I guess the farther away you go, the smaller the world gets. Anyway, Nels planned the search for Gabe because he agrees with me. Bianca met Gabe, too. She and Ben were the witnesses to our wedding."

"Bianca, too? But you didn't tell your own twin sister? Wait! Was he the soldier you went off with that night?"

"Yes. The night we got married. The night before that Gabe rescued me from a man who was attacking me. When I told Gabe that Nels and Pete were at war, he insisted on teaching me to defend myself, so we went to the Rock. That's why my hanky was there. Gabe told me what happened the night of the attack, because I'd been unconscious. He was, too, but not for as long. He told me that I might have been raped."

The memory of that night still haunted Fanchon, and she struggled to control her tears.

"You don't have to tell me this," Astrid interrupted.

"But I *want* to. Oh, Astrid, you were right. It did happen in Trevor's storeroom—only Gabe didn't attack me. I never saw the other man's face," she said to avoid telling Astrid it was Trevor, "because everything happened so fast. I fought back, and the other man knocked me out. Anyway, back to the river. Remember the bullets? You were right. They were mine. Gabe gave me a derringer and taught me to use it. Gabrielle was conceived when we consummated our marriage."

"So that's where you got her name—for Gabriel. That explains a lot. Since you're so close to Bianca now, where did she disappear to?"

"I promised not to tell anybody."

"A lot of strange things started happening in our family when you and Gabe eloped. Will they ever end?"

"Maybe when Gabe is finally home. At least, that's what I'm praying for."

Astrid dropped the knife she was using onto the counter. "Oh, no! I have to take a dress to Mrs. Peterson. I promised I'd deliver it this afternoon. Do you mind finishing dinner yourself?"

"Heavens no. You have to keep your professional standing. When Gabe comes back, the Army will send us away—or we'll move to his ranch. The business is yours now."

It felt good to confide in Astrid, a lot better than she expected. Maybe it was because they'd grown so close since they began their partnership—or maybe they'd simply grown up. Whatever the reason, Fanchon regretted not talking to her twin sooner. Astrid could have supported all these months if she'd only given her the chance.

Astrid had only been gone a few minutes when someone knocked at the back door. Opening it, Fanchon saw Trevor standing before her. "What do you want?"

"Astrid and I are having dinner together," Trevor announced, striding past her without being invited in.

"She's not here." The second the words escaped from her mouth, she regretted it.

"She's not?" he asked as he approached her. "Maybe we could renew an old friendship."

"You have a lot of nerve to suggest such a thing after you murdered my daughter."

"That was an accident. I tried to catch you and missed."

"You still caused it."

"I've suffered for it, too. I never wanted to hurt you, Fanchon, but you never gave me a chance to be a gentleman. You started fighting me when you were seven and haven't stopped yet. I've always been attracted to you—because of your temper. It's the only difference between you and Astrid that I can find."

Although Trevor stood directly before her, he hadn't touched her. He sounded so sincere, so honest, that it confused her. And he acted like he honestly did like her temper. Is that why he'd always picked fights with her in school? So she would lose her temper?

When he reached out for her, she moved away, but too slowly. He gently grasped her shoulders. Again, she was taken aback by his behavior, so alien to her that she couldn't even think.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Fanchon," he said. "I'll never hurt you again. I only want to prove that I want you like no other woman—not even Astrid."

Before she could protest, he drew her against him in a tender caress that she could easily have broken. His lips sought out hers without the roughness he'd used on other occasions. Her muddled brain was too stunned to respond, or even to close her eyes. When she saw the knife on the counter, the painful memory of the day Gabrielle died flooded her mind.

It came to her in a flash—a way to get revenge. All she had to do was convince Trevor that she was disappointed that they hadn't been friends throughout their childhood. Breaking the kiss, she laid her head on his shoulder and slid her arms around his back.

"I wish I'd known you felt that way," she said. "We wasted years being enemies when we could have been friends."



"I know," he replied as he stroked her hair. "I swear, I didn't mean to hurt your baby. I didn't even know you were pregnant. And the only reason I ran was because I was scared."

"I understand it was an accident."

"Could I court you?"

"There's nothing I'd like more than to be alone with you. Let's make arrangements to meet next Friday night, at the Rock where I've seen you meet Astrid. Better yet, we could run away together. I've wanted you for a long time, Trevor, but I thought you hated me."

"Honest?"

"Absolutely, but if you want to live with me, I need my freedom. The only way you can prove that I'll get it is by letting me move in with Byron until it's time to leave. Don't tell anybody where I am. If we disappear at the same time, everybody will know we're together. People will think you kidnapped me after all the trouble we've had."

"I suppose they would. All right, I'll do it."

"Don't worry when I disappear, and whatever you do, don't contact me at Byron's. The fewer people who know about this the better."

"I understand. This certainly explains a lot. I always thought it was strange that you never reported my attacks. Now I know that you loved me too much."

"I'm glad you believe that." She gave him a quick kiss. "You'd better come back when Astrid's here."

"Good idea. I'll see you Friday, my dear," he said as he rushed out the door.

Fanchon smiled to herself. After dinner she would visit Byron and make arrangements to leave town with him. She would convince him that she wanted to run away and marry him, then move into his house. Trevor was too self-centered to wonder about her sincerity, but Byron loved her too much to deny her. If she knew either man, her plan couldn't fail.

And it didn't. Byron was thrilled when Fanchon asked to move into his spare bedroom until they could run away together the next Friday. Well aware of the problems in the Sten family, he didn't even question her explanation that she'd grown to love him. If she wanted to disappear like Bianca had, he would. While Astrid slept that night, Fanchon moved her clothes and personal possessions to Byron's house.

\*\*\*

The days passed slowly, and Fanchon's mind centered on her duty. She was driven as she had never been before, driven to avenge her daughter's death, to avenge her assault—in the only way to insure Trevor would never bother her again. After dark on Friday night, she borrowed Byron's horse and made her way to the Rock River. If she could control the guilt growing in her, maybe she could get her life back in order.

When she arrived, Trevor awaited her. With him, he had saddlebags and a carpetbag.

Seeing them, Fanchon knew that her scheme had succeeded. There was only one thing left to do.

"Where are your things?" he asked.

"Still at Byron's. I'll get them later. I wanted to be with you before we leave. I'm not a virgin, so why wait? Let's do it now."

"Here?" he asked in surprise.

"Of course." Approaching him, she kept both hands in her jacket pockets. "Hold me, Trevor. Show me how much you like my temper."

As he embraced her, Fanchon pulled her left arm from her pocket and slid it around his waist. The moment had arrived, and nothing had happened to thwart or delay her plot. Trevor's mouth descended to hers while Fanchon moved her right hand, sweating from the fear rising within her. What if this didn't work? What if she failed to get the results she wanted? Then what would she do?

Her finger moved, and the derringer exploded like a cannon. Trevor collapsed to the ground with his hand on his stomach. Blood flowed through his fingers as they stared at one another in shock.

Fanchon hadn't planned to pull the trigger yet; her hand had been so wet with her perspiration that her finger had slipped. Now she couldn't turn back. She had to finish what she started so Trevor couldn't follow her. With renewed courage, she withdrew her weapon and pointed it at Trevor.

"My God," he said. "I was right all along. That damned soldier taught you to use a gun."

Her sober gaze remained fixed on him. "You murdered Gabrielle, and now I'm returning the favor."

"No!" he pleaded. "Fanchon, don't do this. Please. I won't bother you again. I promise."

"I know you won't, Trevor. You won't be around—and neither will I. Byron and I are leaving Moline tonight."

Her mind now centered on survival rather than murder. The first shot had been accidental, but she would never live to see the morning if he was alive to follow her. She had to shoot again, and her aim went to his head. A bullet in the brain would end it quickly. But a split second before she pulled the trigger, her hand dropped. A hole ripped into the left side of his chest, propelling him backward with his knees bent under him.

She stared at him in horror. What had she done? She'd just destroyed a bright future with her husband to avenge Gabrielle's death. They could have had more children if she hadn't been mad with rage. As surely as Trevor had killed her daughter, she had killed her destiny with Gabe. Now she would never know if he was alive. She couldn't stay in Illinois without suffering the consequences of what she'd done. She had to live the rest of her life in hiding.

\*\*\*

Fanchon stood beside Byron at the church. He'd insisted upon a commitment before they entered the new state of Nebraska, where they would make their home. Council Bluffs, Iowa, was the last city before the border. But now that they faced the minister, the words were trapped in her throat. She couldn't repeat the vows! Nothing came out when she opened her mouth.

Instead of saying "I do," she gazed at Byron as an unrestrainable tear slid down her cheek. "I can't. I'm sorry, but I don't believe he's dead."

Byron, the minister, his wife and two children stared at her, obviously stunned by her announcement. After a moment, Byron asked, "What are you talking about?"

Sliding the cameo off her right hand where she'd put it for the ceremony, she revealed the wedding band beneath it. "I married Gabrielle's father before I went to his room. Jim Wilkerson said Gabe died, but the Army doesn't have a record of his death and they can't find him. I'm sorry, Byron. In my own way, I love you, but I can't help feeling that my husband is still alive. If I marry you, I'd feel like a bigamist."

"Excuse us a few minutes, please." As he spoke to the others, Byron directed Fanchon to a distant corner of the room. "Why didn't you tell me about this before?"

"I tried. I thought I could marry you once we decided where, but I can't do it. I feel like a fool."

"Don't." Smiling, he grasped both of her hands. "If you can't accept his death yet, we'll wait until you can. I know how much you loved him, because I love you that much. We'll wait until you're ready before we get married."

"Do you love me enough to wait forever if it comes to that?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. We'll go on to Nebraska and set up housekeeping as Mr. and Mrs. Byron Wood. You have a wedding band, so no one will suspect a thing. After a year, I'll ask you again."

"I can't sleep in the same bed with you—or even the same room. I'd feel like an adulteress."

"As long as I can share your life, I'll be happy."

"If you think that's enough, we'll try it, but please don't take any steps to change those arrangements."

"I won't, Fanchon," he vowed.

"And I'm going to keep my nursing and midwifery careers. I'm also going to get involved in the suffragist movement now that the war is behind us. I'll probably do a lot of traveling for speaking engagements."

"It's your decision. Besides, it'll help me keep my end of the bargain. I'll go pay the preacher."

When he started to lead her back to the others, she stopped him short with her confession. "There's something else you should know. I had a reason for staying with you before

we left, a reason I didn't want anyone to know I was with you. I think I committed murder."

Byron stared at her in shock. "You *what?*"

"I think I killed Trevor. He attacked me the night before Gabe and I got married. He also murdered Gabrielle. The night I asked you to elope he came to me. He was very sweet that evening—even *sincere* in his apology. But something in my mind broke. All of a sudden, I was determined to get revenge. No lawyer would help me, so I decided to punish him myself. Those entire six days were devoted to my scheme, and I almost carried it out to the letter."

"Almost?"

"Yes. I met him at the Rock and was going to kill him, but at the last second, I changed my mind. I even had a derringer in my pocket." Squeezing her eyes shut in an attempt to block out the dreadful memory, Fanchon paused then sobbed in a near-whisper. "God forgive me! That first shot was an accident. My finger slipped on the trigger because I was sweating so badly."

"Then it wasn't premeditated."

"Don't try to make it acceptable. I don't think I did much damage with that bullet. I knew he would come after me, and I was afraid that he would kill me. Then I would never be with Gabe again. I had to protect myself. That's when I shot him in the chest. He was unconscious and bleeding profusely when I left. I didn't examine him to see if he had or would die. It wasn't until after I shot him the second time that I realized I can't go back to Moline—ever. If I do, I'll be prosecuted for murder. And I killed all hope of reuniting with my husband. Now can you understand why I wanted to elope? I trust you to protect me. We both know Trevor won't stop until he finds me—if he's still alive."

"Of course, I'll protect you. Don't worry about Trevor *or* being prosecuted. If you use my name, the law will never find you. You were smart to hide out at my house before this happened. That way no one suspects you were in Moline at the time. No matter what happens from now on, honey, I'll protect you from everything."

"Oh, Byron," she sighed as she hugged him. "I'm glad that I confided in you. You're so understanding. I hope I'll either find Gabe alive or get undeniable proof that he's gone. Either way you won't be forced to live in a state of limbo."

Byron smiled, lifting her spirits a bit. "And I thought I was going to be living in the state of Nebraska. I'm going to pay the preacher, but when I get back, I want to know exactly when limbo was admitted to the Union."

While Byron was gone, Fanchon slid her wedding band onto the proper finger and put her cameo on her right hand. As she gazed at the plain, narrow band through tear-filled eyes, joy swept through her. After nearly a year, she could display her most prized possession. Despite her disappointment that she wouldn't be called Mrs. Gabriel Freeman, she knew in her heart that she was. And nothing else mattered.

## NINETEEN

Furious with himself, Nels sipped a cup of coffee in a Georgian restaurant. If he'd been smart, he would have made the entire trip on horseback. Instead he'd wasted days waiting for train connections until he'd reached Atlanta. While there, he'd viewed the destruction, but what he'd seen was only a vague memory.

He needed a good horse and riding tack, and he didn't stop looking until he found the best mount possible. Still, he stayed in Atlanta, waiting a week for Fanchon to arrive. But he'd gotten no telegram announcing her expected date of arrival, and he was worried.

Something was wrong. Fanchon had been excited about joining him, but she'd neither met nor contacted him. That wasn't like her. Despite his suspicions of a problem for Fanchon, he had to keep his promise. On the eighth day, he left in search of his brother-in-law.

He'd arrived in the small town the day before and had asked every person he'd encountered if they'd seen the man in the tintype. To his discouragement, none had. As soon as he finished his coffee, he would visit some of the nearby plantations and farms to make inquiries. Every plantation resident he visited in the following few days vehemently insisted that they would shoot any Union soldier they found in the vicinity.

On the fourth day, he made his way to a distant plantation he'd heard about. The far reaches of Clairmont Manor had apparently been the site of a skirmish in early December. But Clairmont Manor was so far from town that it took him most of the morning to make the trip. Upon his arrival, a tall black woman answered the door and asked him to wait on the porch while she got the lady of the house.

The lovely brunette with a ready smile who answered the door caught his fancy immediately. Apparently, she wasn't the least frightened by his scarred face, because she examined his body with dark, appreciative eyes while she languidly ran the tip of her tongue over her lips.

"I don't know what you want," she said in a husky voice, "but I'll help you any way I can."

"My name is Nels Sten, ma'am," he started to explain.

"I'm Dolly Clairmont, and I'm very pleased to meet you, Nels. I may call you Nels, may I not?"

"By all means," Nels agreed as he showed her Gabe's picture. "I'm looking for my brother-in-law, and I wondered if you've seen him between now and last December."

Her expression didn't change as she stared at the tintype of the man, while Nels examined her. She didn't seem upset that he was inquiring about a Union soldier. A moment later she returned her gaze to his face and said, "I'm not sure, Nels. It's hard to concentrate on a

picture when one is as hungry as I am.”

Dolly was clearly indicating that she wanted to spend some time with him, and he wouldn't mind that at all. She was the first woman since his injury who hadn't recoiled at his appearance. Not only was she attractive, she was probably the woman to satisfy the needs he'd been having for months. Without a doubt, she could accept his disfigurement, so he decided to see where this conversation went.

“I'd be honored if you'd join me for a meal and conversation in the nearest town,” he said, “but I hope it's closer than the one I came from this morning.”

Biting her bottom lip, she returned her gaze to his face, then she stroked her lower lip with her left index finger. “I have a better idea. Why don't we go on a picnic?”

An unexpected vision of how she would look with wet clothes clinging to her body flashed across his mind. “It looks like rain, Miss Clairmont.”

“I know a very dry, very warm place where we can go. And, please, call me Dolly.”

“In that case, Dolly, I'd love to go on a picnic.”

“Wonderful. Would you mind waiting for me at the end of the road? My father wouldn't like it if he saw that we have no chaperon.”

“Whatever you think is best,” Nels agreed.

As he mounted his mare, he pondered the advisability of what he was doing. He'd promised Fanchon that he would find Gabe, but he didn't want to rebuff Dolly. Besides, he'd waited for his sister, and she'd never arrived. He was entitled to some relaxation with a lovely woman.

About twenty minutes later Dolly came down the road, riding her mount side-saddle and carrying a basket. As her horse cantered toward him, he watched her breasts bounce above her low-cut dress. His trousers grew tight as his manhood responded to her provocative movements. If he was charming enough, maybe he could get some relief from the arousal he suffered whenever a woman came near him.

“That's an awfully big basket for two people,” he observed as she joined him. “You must be hungrier than I expected.”

A mischievous glint came to her dark eyes, and she replied in a smoky voice. “I brought more than enough food for two meals—in case we lose track of time.”

“Oh, God,” he moaned under his breath. When Dolly didn't stop, Nels spurred his horse into a trot beside hers. He had a feeling that this was going to be a day he would never forget.

Neither spoke again until they stopped before a one-room cabin in the woods. Immediately, Nels dismounted and tied his horse to a nearby hitching post. He turned, took the basket from Dolly, and set it on the ground. Finally, he reached up and grasped her around the ribs to lift her off her gelding.

She stumbled when her feet touched the ground and fell against him. Nels held her close to stabilize her while his maleness throbbed in his trousers. Dolly wasn't the most beautiful woman he'd ever met by any means, but she possessed a quality that he found irresistible.

Staring down at her, he slipped his hands down to her narrow waist and pressed himself to her body. She moved against him just enough to give him the hint that she didn't mind his caress.

A thunderclap brought him to his senses, and he jerked away from her. But when he was no longer touching her, he felt empty. Picking up the basket, he took her hand in his and led her into the cabin.

To his amazement, there was a Franklin stove and two rocking chairs, a table with two chairs at it, and a bed big enough for two. Other than that, there were no furnishings—not even kerosene lamps or lanterns for light.

Nels pushed the door closed with his foot and set the basket on the table, still not releasing Dolly's hand.

"Are you still hungry?" she asked in a seductive tone.

He faced her again and studied her. He didn't want to misread her actions and make a blunder that would leave him wanting for more. A stray strand of her dark hair caught his eye, so he brushed it off her cheek with his free hand. A smile came to his lips when she leaned into his caress. "I never said I was. You're the one who complained of being hungry."

Dolly turned from him and began to rummage in the basket. To his surprise, she pulled nothing from it. When she faced him again a couple of minutes later, his mouth dropped open in awe. Two of the buttons on her dress had come unfastened, and he could clearly see that she wore no camisole. He could even see a hint of a dark nipple.

Inhaling sharply, he stepped toward her. This woman wanted only one thing from him, and he was going to give it to her before she ate. But she turned her back on him again and started away.

Nels grabbed her hips and jerked her back against him, pinning her buttocks against his pelvis so she could feel his hardness, and whispered into her ear. "You don't want to eat, either, do you. You want this." He laid one hand on her crotch and began to rub while he caressed her covered breast with his other hand.

"Oh, Nels!" she breathed. "Yes. This is exactly what I want."

With a sweep of his arm, he knocked the basket to the floor, spilling the contents. Desperate with desire, he spun Dolly around and laid her back on the table. He spread her legs and stepped between them until their bodies met. Working quickly, he unbuttoned her dress to caress her naked breasts. Then he kissed each nipple before covering her lips with his.

He devoured her mouth with his tongue, darting and clashing and demanding. With his free hand he released his swollen desire then tugged at her dress until the skirt was around her waist. It was then that he realized she wore absolutely no underclothing.

Knowing this was what she had wanted all along, he dove into her hot, wet passage. She grabbed at his shirt over and over, like she was desperate to find a good hold while he thrust into her body. She moved beneath him—animal-like in her mating—until she ripped her head from his and screamed in release. The moment he felt her convulse around him, he gave himself over to the throes of his own satisfaction.

When they stopped panting, Nels finished undressing then disrobed Dolly. At last, he carried her to the bed and lay down with her.

“That was the most incredible experience of my life, Dolly,” he said. “I’m glad that I stopped at your house.”

Dolly snuggled against his hard body. “Then you aren’t disappointed because I’m not a virgin?”

“Not in the least. But I need to rest, eat, and leave. I have to find my brother-in-law.”

She slid her fingertips across his chest and kissed his shoulder. “Surely, you could take one day to enjoy my company.”

“I shouldn’t,” he denied, shaking his head. “My sister’s desperate to find him.”

Rising on one elbow, she kissed him on the lips then asked, “Please, Nels? I truly love what you do to me.”

Against his mind’s advice, Nels spent the better part of five days in the cabin. Dolly was a willing and capable lover who catered to his every desire. She did things for him that no woman before her had even tried, and he knew he could spend the rest of his life in her accommodating arms. But what he felt for her wasn’t love, only a physical attraction that set his head reeling each time she came within ten feet.

Now playtime was over, his break from reality at an end. He had to return to the freedom of the search instead of remaining in the wonderful captivity of Dolly’s body. But he had to leave while she was gone, or he could never walk away from her. Writing her a note, he left for town while she was out.

As he sipped a beer at a local saloon, Nels started conversations with as many men as possible in a renewed attempt to locate Gabe. But he accomplished nothing until an average-height, dark-haired man approached his table.

“I understand that you’re looking for a missing soldier and you have a photograph. If you don’t mind, I’d like to see it.” Stunned by this turn of events, Nels passed the tintype to the man. He nodded twice then returned it. “That’s what I thought. Come with me.”

“You know where he is?” Nels asked in astonishment.

“I can’t discuss it here.”

Abandoning his unfinished beer, Nels followed the man out of the saloon. Despite Nels’ attempts to get information, the man insisted that the safest place for them to talk would be at his family home. The longer they were on the road, the more familiar the terrain became and the more anxious Nels grew. It was becoming more and more obvious that their destination was Clairmont Manor, and Nels feared that he was being taken to marry Dolly.

How had this man learned of their brief affair? How could he avoid marrying the woman! Panic set in. He would bolt as soon as he was sure Clairmont Manor was their destination. Then they stopped at the plantation gate. This was it. He was leaving—now! But as he started to turn his horse around, the man’s words stopped him.



“When we get to the house, you’ll find him upstairs.”

Shocked, Nels reined up his horse. “Him? Gabe’s *here*?”

“Why else would I have brought you to my family estate?” While they conversed, the man started down the dirt road. Nels followed in a daze. “He’s been here since he was injured.”

“I don’t understand.” Nels removed his hat to run his hand through his fine hair. “I was here to ask about him several days ago, but Dolly told me that she’d never seen him.”

“I’m not surprised. My sister’s had designs on him since the day we brought him in. He squelched her plans after he got the divorce and learned that she’d deceived him.”

“Divorce!”

“Talk to Gabe. He’ll explain everything.” The man paused then added, “By the way, my name’s Rance Clairmont. And yours?”

“Nels Sten.” Stopping at the bottom of the porch steps, the men shook hands and dismounted. “Lead me to my friend.”

Rance led Nels to the bottom of the long staircase. “There are a few things you should know first. He spends most of his time in his room—to avoid my sister, I assume. Should I announce you, or do you want to surprise him?”

“I’ll surprise him. Which room is his?”

Gabe looked up from his book when he heard the knock on his door. He didn’t like people interrupting him, especially when he’d said he wanted to be alone. If that was Dolly or her father to make another attempt to convince him to forgive her, he didn’t want to hear it. Repeating the habit he began after learning of Dolly’s dishonesty, he asked who it was. When there was no response, he got up and laboriously made his way to the door without his crutches, demanding, “Who the hell is it?”

Still there was no response. “Damn it, Dolly. I hate your ...” Throwing open the door, he stared in shock while his brother-in-law grinned at him. “Nels! God, it’s good to see you. Come in. How’s Fanchon? What’s she doing? She lost the baby, didn’t she? You have to tell me everything, starting with why you’re here and how the hell you found me. Are you going to start talking or not?”

Nels laughed as Gabe shut the door behind him. “I’ll start when you stop.”

“Sorry.” Thrilled to see his friend, Gabe embraced Nels and thumped on his back with a masculine hug. “I can’t believe my eyes. There’s only one thing that could make me happier than seeing you, and that’s seeing my wife. Where is she? Did you bring her? Is she going to meet you here? What’s happening? My prayers are finally coming true! How stupid of me. Have a seat.”

“What happened to you?” Nels asked as Gabe made his way to the bed.

“I cheated the Grim Reaper again. Right now I’m fighting back from paralysis.”

“That explains the divorce Clairmont mentioned. I couldn’t understand then, but now I

do. You got it because you didn't want Fanchon to feel like she had to stay with you. You didn't want such a free woman saddled with an invalid. I probably would have done the same thing if I'd been in your place. And you won't go back until you're a whole man again, right?"

"Exactly, but enough about me. Tell me everything about Fanchon. Even *I* can't believe how much I miss her. I've written every day, but my letters and telegrams weren't sent until I stopped trusting Dolly. That's Rance's sister."

"I know," Nels said. "I've tasted her deceit."

"Sounds serious. We'll discuss it later. Let's start with my wife, a much more pleasant topic from my point of view."

"Mine, too," Nels agreed.

Gabe and Nels spent the entire night talking and making plans for their separate returns to Moline. Nels would leave first. Gabe would follow a week later and report his survival to the proper military authorities in Washington before reuniting with his wife. Since his enlistment was over shortly after the war had ended, Gabe dreamed of taking Fanchon to the ranch. As an after-thought, he offered Nels a job as a wrangler, which Nels accepted without hesitation.

Nels cornered an embarrassed Dolly after breakfast to tell her that she would never see him again. After what she'd done, he was moving as far from her as possible—to the frontier with Gabe and Fanchon. Before she could protest or explain her actions, he stalked out of the house.

\*\*\*

"Fanchon!" Drawing her near, Gabe kissed her then hugged her against him. "Only God knows how much I missed you. Nels told me where to find you so I wouldn't have to look all over town. I didn't even have to stop and see him first."

Astrid couldn't believe what was happening. This was her twin's dead husband, and he was very much alive. So alive, in fact, that he aroused her to greater heights than Trevor *ever* had. Trevor! He was still too sick to accommodate her, because her sister had left him to die. Well, she would show Fanchon—wherever Fanchon was. She would pretend to be her sister and force her husband into adultery. What more appropriate revenge.

"I missed you, too, Gabe," Astrid said, hoping she sounded sincere. "Kiss me again. Show me how much you missed me."

"First, you have to tell me where our bedroom is. I've never been in our home before."

"Upstairs, the second door on the left," Astrid directed. Being with Fanchon's husband in Fanchon's bed would be a pleasure, as well as sweet revenge. "Carry me?"

"Whatever you want, Mrs. Freeman."

Gabe swept Astrid into his arms. He wanted to talk, to explain everything, but Fanchon wanted to go upstairs. Far be it for him to reject her! If she wanted to go to bed before they talked, he was more than willing.

In the dim light of the room, he noticed the small, dark box beside the kerosene lamp on the nightstand. Nothing would please him more than making love to his wife as they had the first time. She'd wanted the lamp lit on their only night together, and he wanted her to know that he remembered. But when he struck the match, she blew it out.

"We don't need that," Astrid said. "It's more romantic in soft light."

Returning to the bed, he sat down beside her. "Do you remember when we first did this? In room seventeen at the Moline House? That's when we declared our destiny."

As he spoke, he slid his hands across her back, drawing a moan of excitement from her. When his hand slid to unbutton the front of her dress, though, she broke away from him. As much as it distressed him, he remained silent while she stood before to disrobe him, but he stopped her. He grasped her wrists and returned her hands to her sides. The backs of his fingers brushed against her silky skin as he calmly released her buttons. She inhaled with a gasp.

Once she was naked, Gabe helped her lie down then stripped out of his clothes. It was hard to believe that she let him take charge, since she'd been the aggressor their last two times together. *She* had led him down the splendid path to their unions, but that night she seemed to want him to show the way.

As excited as he was to have his wife in his arms, he wanted to prolong the time. He'd dreamed of this moment since the first time he struggled to awaken, had longed for Fanchon's passion-filled kisses. Yet her actions seemed different. She seemed more wanton, but at the same time more eager for him to take control. That didn't sound like the woman he'd married.

His thoughts stopped abruptly as she screamed in ecstasy, tightening around him until he couldn't restrain himself a moment longer. At last, he drove into her with a groan of fulfillment, then he rolled over to pull her close.

Kissing her deeply, he trailed his finger down her right breast where he expected to feel her scar.

The movement was indelibly burned into Astrid's skin as she shuddered at the caress. Suddenly, he sat up and lit the bedside lamp then returned his gaze to her chest.

"You have remarkable healing powers, nurse-lady," he complimented. "In more ways than one."

Astrid studied the named man beside her. He was the most perfect man she'd ever set eyes on. "What do you mean?"

"Not only can you cure any human with your nursing skills, you don't even have a scar."

"A scar?" How could she extricate herself from this blunder? "You didn't expect a little scratch to leave one, did you?"

Gabe chuckled. "A little scratch, no. A large gash that nearly required stitches, yes."

Astrid gasped, stunned to learn that her twin had hidden a wound like that so well. "A large gash? You can't be serious."

Shock overwhelmed Gabe in that instant. "Oh, my God!" Scrambling from the bed, he stepped into his trousers. He'd been deceived, and he was furious. "Who the hell are you? Why are you masquerading as my wife?"

"I'm Astrid Sten, and ..."

*For over a hundred years, our family has had at least one set of twins in every generation.* Fanchon's words echoed savagely through his mind. Why hadn't she told him then? Because they'd had more important things on their minds, of course. But why Nels hadn't told him was still a mystery. He groaned in dismay. "No wonder it seemed different. You're not Fanchon. Thank God, Rance got me that divorce. It would have been adultery—with my wife's twin sister! I can't believe you would do such a thing."

"If you got a divorce, Fanchon's not your wife anymore," Astrid reasoned.

"She is in my mind. How could you do it?"

"She tried to kill my lover. I wanted revenge. Although, I don't know what good it did. She disappeared weeks ago. I thought she followed Nels to see if they could find you. Luckily, I found Trevor in time to keep him from bleeding to death."

Gabe stared at her, unable to believe her words. "Riley's your lover? You two deserve each other. Now what's this about Fanchon disappearing? When did that happen?"

"About a week before Trevor was shot. He's the one who told me she did it, too, so don't question my accusation. It's the truth."

"And you have no idea where she went?"

"Nobody does. She disappeared the day after I bought her partnership in the shop. She took everything important to her and left in the middle of the night."

"I have to get out of this whorehouse and find her. As for you, I hope I *never* see you again."

Grabbing the rest of his clothes, Gabe stormed from the room to finish dressing downstairs. What had Fanchon said about their destiny before they parted? *We will find each other again.* Her prediction had partially come true. Destiny had brought them together, it had taken them apart, and it had given them a child. But the rest hadn't come true—not yet, anyway. Destiny had *not* brought them back together.

# **DESTINY FULFILLED**

**Territory of Wyoming, 1869**

# **DESTINY FULFILLED**

**Territory of Wyoming, 1869**

## TWENTY

With Nels acting as trail boss for the small herd of cattle purchased in New Mexico Territory, Gabe made a side-trip to Fort Bridger. An old Army buddy had notified him that he was stationed there, and Gabe decided to visit him. Because Nels had been his right-hand man since Jacob's death three years earlier, he could easily run the ranch in his absence.

Gabe needed a vacation from years of hard work and searching for Fanchon. That had been his sole purpose for teaching Nels the business.

All he'd learned from his father was that Fanchon had visited her bank three and a half years earlier to have them transfer her earnings from the ranch to a bank in the west, one they could not disclose without her consent. With his father deceased, Gabe continued sending money to her Rock Island account. Twice a year he hand-carried the allotment to see if she'd visited or contacted them, but each trip had been a waste of time and money.

Inside the fort Gabe saw little change from when he'd been stationed there. In addition to the headquarters building were officer and enlisted bachelor quarters, married officers' quarters, a commissary, and a small bank. Within the fort confines, soldiers still diligently performed their duties.

As Gabe tied his horse to a hitching post outside headquarters, he noticed a pale blonde exit the commissary. A little girl no older than three with the same light blonde hair tagged along behind her. He halted abruptly. Any young woman with platinum hair drew his attention, but the woman with the child crossing the courtyard in his direction stopped him cold in his tracks. She looked awfully familiar. In fact, she looked enough like Fanchon to be her ... That was it!

"Bianca!" Gabe shouted.

She stopped short, staring at him blankly for several moments as he raced toward them. Who was this man? How did he know her name? When he was close enough to make out his features, she gasped in stunned recognition. This was impossible! He'd been gone for four years. Unable to speak, her gaze remained fixed on his face until he stood before her.

"Come on, Bianca," he said. "Since when have you been left speechless? Or maybe you don't remember me."

"I remember you, Gabe," she admitted with a small smile, "but I'm not used to running into my sister's dead husband, either. I can't believe it's true."

"Maybe this will help." Embracing her, he kissed her on the cheek then held her at arms' length. "Convinced?"

"Who's he, Mommy?" the little girl asked as she tugged on Bianca's skirt.

"Your uncle Gabe," she replied. "Where did you come from, Gabe? What are you doing here?"

"I came to visit an old friend. What are you doing here?"

"I fell in love with the man who told Fanchon that you'd disappeared. I left Ben to be with Jim." Pausing to examine him, she added, "You look terrific for a ghost."

His joyous grin brightened his entire face as he squatted down to the child's level. "You're a sight for sore eyes, too. So tell me, Bianca, what's my gorgeous niece's name?"

"Charity," the child answered.

"Did you know you would have had a cousin named Gabrielle just a little bit older than you if things had worked out?" When Charity nodded mutely, Gabe stared at her in amazement. "You do? How did you know that?"

"Fanchon told her about the baby a couple of weeks ago," Bianca explained.

Gabe scrambled to his feet. "You've seen my wife as recently as that?"

"Fanchon's busy with speaking engagements for the suffragist movement, but she makes time to visit for two weeks every June and two weeks at Christmas." Again Bianca paused to examine Gabe. He looked so healthy, so robust that it was hard to believe the Army had pronounced him dead. "She's been from one coast to the other several times looking for you. Whenever she lectures in another part of the country, she takes time to ask about you at every train change. And now that the transcontinental railroad is done, she would have been even busier."

"Would have been?"

"I convinced her to take a rest then slow down a little. The women of the movement in Cheyenne asked if she'd be their spokeswoman to Governor Campbell. He's a bachelor, and Fanchon's a beautiful, intelligent woman. They thought she'd be the best person for the job."

"Fanchon's in Cheyenne?" he asked. "Talking about the movement with John? I make a lot of trips there every year, but I've never seen her. And John's a friend of mine."

"She's usually not there. She doesn't even own a house because she travels so much. As for Fanchon and the governor, she probably won't meet him until the middle of next week. At least, that's what she said. She wanted to prepare her case first."

"This is too good to be true!" he exclaimed. "My wife is finally within my grasp. Have you two kept in touch all these years?"

"We're the only family we have. Both of us ran away from Moline. I left because of a man I love, and she left because of a man she loaths. She lived in Lincoln, Nebraska, with Byron Wood—as brother and sister, by the way—until Trevor killed him while she was out of town. All their friends thought they were married, but Fanchon couldn't do it. She only used Byron's name to avoid a scandal. She *still* uses it."

"Why?" Gabe asked in a wounded voice.

"She's afraid Trevor will try to find you if she uses Freeman. Jim and I told her it was impossible for Trevor to kill a dead man, but she wouldn't listen. She never believed you'd



died, Gabe. Obviously, Trevor doesn't, either, because he left Fanchon note threatening to kill you. He gave her only enough information so she knew who it was from."

"I know why he believes it, too," Gabe said. "I went to Moline after the war, straight to the address Nels gave me. And there she was—looking more beautiful than her picture. She wanted to renew our marriage immediately. I wanted to talk, but making her happy was more important. It was night and the lamps were out, so I had no idea until it was too late."

"That witch!" Bianca exclaimed, knowing what had transpired. "I'd use a stronger word, but I don't want Charity to hear. Astrid's always loved to pretend she's Fanchon. I was going to stop and see Jim, but I can talk to him later. Why don't you come to the house so we can talk?"

"I'd love to, Bianca," he said, "but I want to go to Cheyenne and get my wife back. It's been a long time."

"She's not going anywhere, so one more day won't hurt." Grabbing Gabe's arm to lead him away, Bianca glanced down at her daughter. "Come along, Charity."

"I have a better idea," he said as he scooped up the child. "How about a ride, cutey? You won't be scared if I put you on my shoulders, will you? It's awfully high up here."

"The higher she is," Bianca said with a giggle, "the happier she is."

While Gabe lifted Charity onto his shoulders so her legs straddled his neck, she removed his Stetson and planted it on her own head. Then she grasped his forehead with her tiny hands. Although he laughed, his heart tore. It was a simple joy, but one he would never share with Gabrielle. When he glanced down at Bianca as they strolled toward the gate, he saw her staring at him curiously.

"I'm surprised you're so happy to meet Charity after what happened to Gabrielle. She missed having a terrific father. You obviously like children a lot, and Charity likes *you*. She's usually afraid of strangers."

"Why should she be afraid of an old uncle?" Gabe asked. "I have mixed feelings about meeting Charity, of course, but with Cully around the house all the time, it's made the emptiness bearable. He doesn't replace our daughter, but he fills the void in my spirit."

"Cully?" she asked slowly. "But I thought ..."

"That's right. You don't know about that, either. Cully's Nels' son."

Bianca gasped in shock. "*Nels'* son? Nels lives with you?"

Grinning down at her, he nodded. "I couldn't keep looking for my wife without him. He takes over the ranch while I make side trips on trail drives."

"I can't believe Nels got married. I thought he'd be a free spirit for life."

His grin turned into a scowl when he thought about what he needed to say. Still, he had to tell Bianca the truth. "It wasn't exactly a marriage that he wanted. A conniving woman who tried the same thing with me trapped him into it. I don't like having her on the ranch, but I need Nels. I don't know how I'll explain her to Fanchon, either. Dolly will start trouble sooner

or later.”

“Did he get her pregnant?”

“Unfortunately. As soon as I reunite with Fanchon, we’ll have a family reunion. The ranch is only three days away.”

“I’d love that! I’ve missed everybody, and being with Nels again will be wonderful.”

“Then you’ve got a real treat coming. Not only does Nels live with me, I established a town closer to the ranch than Cheyenne. I stocked it with several of your other relatives. Em and Hal run the *Freeborn Gazette*—our newspaper. Cal is the town attorney, and apparently Elsa’s major contribution is to turn all the young men into mush when they see her. With a ratio of about four to one, I’m going to have my hands full trying to court Fanchon and win her back.”

Bianca stopped short to gaze up at him. “Court her? Win her back? What are you saying?”

“I don’t know if it was a mistake or a blessing anymore, Bianca, but I was paralyzed for a while. I got a divorce so Fanchon wouldn’t feel obligated to me. That’s another long story we can discuss later. The point is that we’re only married in our hearts, not in the eyes of the law.”

“What did you mean by not knowing if it was a mistake or a blessing?” she asked as they resumed their stroll.

“Astrid, of course. Nobody told me that my wife had an identical twin—not even Fanchon. I thought I was pleasing *her* that night. I should have known better when I went to light the lamp, and she wanted it dark. Fanchon had wanted it light the night we were together, but I was so desperate to please my wife that I didn’t question her. When we were done, I lit the lamp. That’s when I saw that she didn’t have a scar on her right breast. Did she tell you about that?”

“Yes, but what about Astrid? How did you discover that she wasn’t Fanchon?”

Gabe shuddered at the memory. “I teased her about her remarkable power of healing, but she didn’t know what I was talking about. At first she almost had me fooled—but it didn’t take long to realize what I’d done. Astrid said she was getting revenge for Fanchon almost killing Riley. I understand he and Astrid were lovers. Legally, there wasn’t any adultery, but it still hurt. I suffered for a long time because of what I did. I *still* feel like I committed adultery, and I don’t think I’ll stop until Fanchon forgives me.”

“Let me give you a piece of advice. She’s been completely faithful to a husband everybody believed was dead. She won’t blame you for what happened, but she’ll probably think you married her for her looks if you confused her with Astrid. Don’t tell her what happened if you want her back.”

“Maybe you’re right. With our marriage happening so quickly then me getting a divorce, I understand how she could have doubts.”

“Uh, Gabe,” Bianca stammered, “there’s something else you should keep secret for a while. Jim and I aren’t married, and Fanchon thinks that’s terrible. But she loves us, so she doesn’t say anything. I don’t think she’ll sleep in your bed if you tell her about the divorce—

no matter how much she loves you. You need to think about that if you want marital relations again.”

“I can’t keep something like that from her. I want ours to be an honest relationship. If she won’t be intimate with me, that’s all right. A divorce is too important to hide.”

“Have it your way,” she said with a sigh. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Gabe spent an enjoyable night with Bianca and her family. He told them how he’d been injured, why he hadn’t notified the Army of his survival, and what he’d been doing since the end of the war. They also discussed Nels and his family. But their main topic was Fanchon and what she’d been doing in the past five years. Gabe wanted to know everything possible before he reunited with her.

While they conversed, a plan formulated in his mind. It would be a terrific reunion, under the happiest of circumstances. As desperately as he wanted to be with her again, he wanted to make the moment as perfect as possible. And he knew exactly how to do it.

\*\*\*

Fanchon was nervous about being the voice of the women of Wyoming. She’d never even seen a governor, let alone spoken to one. And John Campbell was a bachelor. Her widowhood was one reason she’d been chosen to discuss a bill recognizing women’s rights with him. Another was her appearance. Sometimes she hated her beauty. Too often, people only wanted her to do things for them because of her good looks, and she regularly denied their requests to help in various causes.

But the National Woman Suffrage Association was different. Fanchon believed in the movement with all of her being and would do anything she needed to help the cause. She was a nurse; she’d been a successful businesswoman; and she knew she could also run a large ranch. That was why she’d stayed with Jacob Freeman for so long, to learn the details of running an outfit that size. If Jacob died before she found Gabe, she could do the job.

Would she be able, though, to convince the governor that the women of Wyoming Territory should have equal rights with men? Would she be able to convey what she sincerely believed? She could do the same jobs men could, and other women could do equally well. Women, married and single, had every right to equal pay—as the schoolteachers wanted—and separate property from their husbands. Of all the places in the United States and its territories, the frontier was the most logical place to demonstrate the equalities of women. They’d worked at their husbands’ sides to build farms, ranches, even empires from the previously little-used land.

Although this was only an introductory meeting, Fanchon had prepared her information for Governor Campbell. She wanted to conduct an intelligent discussion if he decided to have an in-depth interview. The only thing that bothered her more during the past five days was her growing sense of being watched. Every instinct told her that Trevor had found her, and she again took to carrying her derringer. Yet every time she turned around to see if she was being followed, no one appeared to be.

With a sigh, she entered the governor's office. This was no time to worry about a man she hadn't even seen from a distance in the past four years. She had more important items on her agenda that day. And the first was a brief meeting with John Campbell to state her objectives in women's suffrage. Rising from behind his desk to greet her was the man she'd heard so much about in the last month.

"Good morning, Mrs. Wood," Governor Campbell said in a friendly tone. "I've heard rumors about you, and I must say that you live up to each of them so far."

"I hope they were good rumors, sir," she replied, offering her right hand to him.

"Very good. Please be seated." The governor waited until Fanchon settled onto a straight chair on the opposite side of his desk then dropped into his chair. "I hope you don't mind me doing a little research on you."

"No, sir. It's your privilege."

"I'm glad you feel that way. You have quite a list of accomplishments, don't you—a nurse at Rock Island Prison Barracks, a partnership in a dressmaking business with your sister, even a partnership in a ranch right here in Wyoming Territory."

"I inherited the ranch partnership, but I could certainly run the outfit if I had to."

"I believe you could. Shall we move on to business now that we've dispensed with the informalities?"

After outlining the suffragist movement objectives, Fanchon requested a formal conference at his convenience. To her relief, he agreed. But throughout their meeting, an odd expression of delight covered his face. Unable to contain her curiosity, she questioned him at the end of their formal discussion.

"May I ask why you seem so pleased about our meeting, Governor Campbell?"

In an instant, his expression changed, and he straightened himself in the chair in an obvious attempt to mask his discomfort. "I find you a lovely, delightful, young lady."

"Thank you, but it distracted me. I hope that the next time you'll try to remember that I'm here in an official capacity—not social."

"I'll do my best." After a brief pause, he said, "Since you mentioned the idea, Mrs. Wood, I'd like to invite you to a ball in my home on July twenty-fifth."

"Thank you, but I can't come. I have a previous commitment."

"Are you being escorted to another function?"

"No, sir. I spend every July twenty-fifth alone. It's my wedding anniversary."

"I understood that you're a widow of about two years."

"I still like to spend the time alone. I owe it to my husband to keep his memory alive."

"Please change your mind. It's one of the bigger events I'll have this year, and there'll be many powerful men present with whom you can discuss the movement."

Fanchon considered his suggestion for several moments. Maybe a social was exactly

what she needed to begin her campaign. She could show those men that a woman didn't have to be boring to want equality. "All right, Governor. I accept your invitation."

"I don't think there's another woman in Wyoming Territory that I'd rather have attend."

Smiling at the thought of going to her first ball in several years, Fanchon rose. "Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today, Governor Campbell, but I should leave now. I have several other appointments."

"I'm already looking forward to our next meeting," he said as he escorted her to the door. "By the way, Mrs. Wood, do you own an appropriate dress for the ball?"

"Of course. Why do you ask?"

"I was told that you always wear trousers."

"They've saved me on more than one occasion, sir. I started wearing them when I worked in the hospital, and I was ... assaulted a couple of times. By the end of the war, I was used to them. They're really quite comfortable. But I still like to wear pretty dresses, especially to balls."

"I hope so, although you may take the breath away from every man there."

Fanchon blushed. Nothing about a conversation like this would ever change. Compliments concerning her beauty still embarrassed her more than she cared to admit. "Thank you. I need to leave now, sir. I'll bring by some documents on the movement before the end of the week. Good day, Governor Campbell."

As she hurried out the door, she heard a scuffling sound behind her and spun to see what it was. Out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw a movement, but nothing appeared out of the ordinary when she went to the doorway to see if someone was there. With a shrug, she chided herself for her overreaction.

Trevor *couldn't* be after her. She'd left no forwarding address and her family had no idea where she was. Bianca knew, but she would never tell Trevor if he found her. She was probably nervous because she felt like she was being watched. Forcing her thoughts back to the upcoming ball, Fanchon hurried out of the building.

Gabe opened the door and checked the hallway to see if she was gone. That had been close. If that room hadn't had a closet, Fanchon would have found him, and he was determined to avoid her, even if he did spend almost all of his time following her everywhere she went. Only the prospective joy of their reunion as he dreamed it kept him at a distance. Besides, he wouldn't have to wait that much longer.

With a happy grin, he tapped on the governor's office door. Waiting for permission to enter, he swung it open. "How did it go, John?"

"Looks like we're going to have a ball on the twenty-fifth, but for a while I didn't think I could convince her to come."

"Why not?"

"She had an appointment with a memory that she wasn't fond of giving up. She was going

to celebrate your anniversary—alone. Apparently, she does it every year.”

“I do, too,” Gabe admitted, smiling softly at the thought, “but this anniversary’s going to be different. This year we’ll celebrate together. How did you get her to agree?”

“I appealed to her business sense. I told her a lot of influential men that she could discuss the movement with would be there. By the way, thanks for telling me about her past. I think she was impressed. But when she left, I was the one who was impressed. She’s not only a lovely lady, she’s very intelligent.”

“Intelligent enough to finish school four years early,” Gabe boasted. “But don’t get any ideas. She’s already spoken for.”

“I didn’t work my way to brigadier general during the war by being stupid, my friend,” he said with a grin. “I didn’t get to be the governor of the Territory of Wyoming by the age of thirty-three by being stupid, either. And only stupid men try to steal the wife away from a man your size. Stupid men and fools, that is. As you know, I’m neither.”

Gabe laughed heartily. “Remember that when you see her turn from a lovely lady into a beautiful woman simply by putting on a dress. And that’s exactly what will happen. I’ll let you go back to work now. The only reason I came in was because I couldn’t wait to hear if she was going to the ball I talked you into giving for us. I’ll see you tonight for dinner. Bye.”

## TWENTY-ONE

The wardrobe contained four party dresses, three business dresses, a heavy winter coat, a lightweight cloak for warmer weather, several men's jackets, and a couple dozen men's shirts. Choosing the appropriate outfit for a formal social shouldn't be difficult. So why was it? Granted, that night was special. She'd never been to a ball at a governor's mansion before, but her nerves were too active for such a simple explanation. She was nearly a wreck, probably the reason her selection of four suitable dresses seemed like a hundred.

The first dress she pulled out was the blue one she'd worn to marry Gabe. Holding it against her, she studied herself in the half-length mirror on the back of the wardrobe door. A tear slid down her cheek at the memory of the early morning hours exactly five years earlier. The adoration in Gabe's voice had been obvious as he pledged his love, even if it was the only time she would ever hear those words from him.

Where was he at that moment? Was he thinking of her? Was he thinking of the gift of their destiny that had been so cruelly robbed from them? How would she ever find the right words to tell him that the daughter he wanted so much had been murdered?

Fanchon hung the dress back in the closet. She couldn't wear it—not without spending what was supposed to be a happy occasion reliving painful memories. Then her gaze fell on the peach dress Astrid had made for their eighteenth birthday dance. It hadn't fit her for the party, but she'd tried it on a few days ago and learned that it fit perfectly now. It also exposed most of the wide pink scar on her breast. Why hadn't she had the cut stitched so it wouldn't have been so noticeable? The real shame was that she would never be able to wear the lovely dress.

Staring at the other two dresses, one a forest green taffeta and the other a slightly darker peach brocade, she wrinkled her nose in distaste. She didn't particularly want to wear either, but both completely covered her scar. As she gazed at the gowns, Fanchon envisioned Gabe spinning her around an empty room in time to the music of a string quartet.

She'd spent the past four years desperately searching for the truth about her husband, but she'd never accepted his death, despite all the evidence pointing to it. Throughout her search, she'd met many men, both socially and professionally, whom she found interesting. And not one had the dramatic emotional impact on her that Gabriel Freeman had when she first saw him. And even at seven years old, she'd felt drawn to him. Then years later, the connection had been even stronger.

"If Gabe walked back into my life tonight," she asked herself, "which dress would he like best? I know he'd like the blue one I wore at our wedding, but he wouldn't be able to resist me in the light peach."

As she took the dress from the wardrobe to examine it at arms' length, she pondered her words. She always thought more strongly about Gabe on their anniversary, but that night everything centered on him. With her unfaltering gaze on the gown, she could see Gabe clearly, waltzing her around a room. To rid herself of the fantasy, she shook her head furiously.

In all likelihood, she would never dance with Gabe, so what difference did it make which dress she wore? She would show those influential men and John Campbell that a woman could be both intelligent and feminine. The peach frock demonstrated that more clearly than any other gown she owned. Besides, dreaming that she was in Gabe's arms while she danced with another man was almost as good as being there.

While she dressed, Fanchon couldn't help wondering if Gabe had been looking for her. She'd never thought about that before, and why she did that night roused her curiosity.

Once she finished dressing, she brushed her long hair and was about to pin it up when she caught a glimpse of it in the mirror. Gabe had once written that he loved the feel of her silky hair. Since she was in the mood to indulge her fantasies that night, she decided to leave it loose. If he liked it long, he would love it now. She hadn't had it cut since she'd last seen him. Now it ended just below her waist, with natural waves that gave the impression she worked for hours to create the effect. Clasp the heart-shaped locket around her neck, she examined herself in the mirror then turned her attention to their wedding photograph.

"I may not know where you are yet, darling, but I feel closer to you tonight than I have in a long time. I hope this means our separation is almost over. Tonight, while I'm dancing with other men, my heart and mind will be with you. I still love you, Gabe. I always will, so please let me find you someday."

\*\*\*

Gabe paced the bedroom where he had dressed. Tonight, he would see how Fanchon felt about him. Bianca had told him that Fanchon would be thrilled to see him again, and he prayed that she was right. Then a knock startled him from his thoughts.

"How are you doing?" John Campbell asked as he entered the room without an invitation.

"I'm more nervous about tonight than I was about marrying Fanchon—and believe me, I was *very* nervous that night. Everything had happened so fast. In my mind, I wasn't convinced that we were doing the right thing. But I desperately wanted to be her husband, and that's *still* what I want. In my heart, I know I did the right thing five years ago, and I'm doing the right thing tonight."

"Then why are you so nervous?"

"Fanchon might not feel the same way."

"From what you told me and what I learned when I talked to her, you don't have anything to worry about. My guests started arriving about five minutes ago. How long are you going to wait before you come downstairs?"



"I don't know. Hopefully, until I hear the music, but I might run down the steps the second I see her arrive." Strolling to the window that overlooked the front entrance, he gazed down at the empty street. "Did I thank you for letting us have this room tonight? And for telling your cook that we'd be eating breakfast here in the morning?"

"Several times. By the way, use the room for as long as you want. I know you'll want to be alone for a while so I made arrangements to stay at the Karns House over on O'Niel Street for a couple of days—starting tomorrow morning."

"You didn't have to do that, John."

"I wanted to. After five years, you two have a lot of catching up to do."

"I'll tell you if things don't turn out well. We might leave before that."

"I've never known you to be pessimistic," John said, "and *now* is the worst time to start. Things are going to turn out fine. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if you sent a servant asking me to lengthen my stay at the Karns. I should get downstairs now. I'll keep Mrs. Freeman's back to the door as long as I can, but don't take too long or other men are going to want to dance with her."

"John," Gabe said frantically, "you *have* to remember to call her Mrs. Wood. If you don't, you'll spoil my surprise."

"It was hard enough to call her that the other day. Knowing what I do about tonight will only make it harder."

"Then maybe you should call her by her first name. I don't want any mistakes." A carriage pulled up in front of the house. As Gabe watched the driver help Fanchon down, his heart beat faster; excitement raged through his body. "Oh, God. She's here. And she's beautiful!"

Gabe rushed toward the door, but John grabbed his arm. "Where are you going?"

"Downstairs. To be with my wife."

"What happened to that dream you told me about, my friend? The one where you tell her she's so beautiful when she doesn't even know you're there? Wait for the music, Gabe. I think I can detain her until then."

\*\*\*

When the male Chinese servant opened the door, Fanchon stepped inside the large house. The entry was decorated with assorted fresh flowers and plenty of candles that would be lit once the sun set. The man at the door offered to take her shawl, and she surrendered it with her back to him. As she faced him again, she noticed his eyes riveted on her bosom.

"Sir?" she asked to divert his attention. "Where will my shawl be if I decide to leave early?"

"Tell me, ma'am," he replied without altering his gaze. "I get for you."

"That's very kind of you, but ..."

A male voice above and to the right of her interrupted them. "Put Mrs. Wood's wrap in the far bedroom at the front of the house, Ling Chu."

Glancing up the stairway, she saw the governor descending them slowly, his eyes not leaving her. Beside her Ling Chu spoke to his employer. "But ..."

"Don't argue. I set that room aside for the young lady in case she can't find a suitable gentleman to escort her back to the hotel." He stopped beside her and added, "Although I sincerely doubt you'll have any difficulty finding one. You'll probably have to draw straws to be fair."

Fanchon blushed and dipped her head to avoid seeing his scrutiny. "Thank you, Governor Campbell."

"This is a social occasion, Mrs. Wood. Do you mind if we dispense with the formalities and use first names?"

"Not at all. In fact, I prefer informality."

John gazed at her with a mischievous glint in his eyes. "What are you waiting for, Ling Chu? I told you to take her shawl to the bedroom."

"Yes, sir," the servant mumbled as he started up the stairs.

"He's usually very good at following orders, Fanchon." The governor chuckled as he linked their elbows to escort her into the dance hall, "but he's confused. I already have a houseguest, and he didn't know I'd decided to offer you a room. Don't feel obligated to use it, but I hope you will."

"I appreciate your offer, John. If I'd come prepared to spend the night, I would accept it."

"Maybe you'll change your mind by the end of the evening. Which reminds me, are you going to save the first dance for me?"

"It's the least I can do for such a charming host."

John led Fanchon to the large room serving as the dance hall. He introduced her to two couples and several single gentlemen before requesting that she act as his hostess. Although reluctant, she agreed. What better way to become acquainted with the most influential men?

Before long, he announced that the string quartet would begin playing. She was stunned that there was a quartet—like in her fantasy. What surprised her more, though, was John suggesting they have a glass of punch before they danced. Curious, she let him escort her to the back of the room. They both faced the refreshments table until the band started the song. At that time, John stepped in front of her.

He seemed to be looking for someone while they chatted, but when she glanced over her shoulder, she saw no one. Returning her gaze to the man with her, she noticed the wide grin on his face.

"Are you expecting a special lady to join you, John?" she asked in concern. "If you are, I understand if you'd rather dance with her. Several other men have already asked me. I doubt they'd mind taking their turns early."

His grin disappeared. "No, no, no. Don't get another partner. It won't be much longer."

"I don't understand. *What* won't be much longer?"

"It won't be much longer before I quench my thirst," he said as the grin returned to his lips. "In fact, I expect to be satisfied in only a moment."

"I see you were able to keep your part of the plan, John," a man said from behind her. Fanchon froze, her gaze glued to John's face. That voice sounded familiar—*too* familiar. Could it be possible? No, the man only sounded familiar because of all her fantasies of Gabe that day. Then she heard the voice again. "You're the most beautiful woman I've ever met, Mrs. Freeman."

The empty crystal punch cup she held crashed to the floor, but she couldn't turn around. If she did, her shock would be too apparent to this man who knew her real name; but if she didn't, she wouldn't know if her mind was playing tricks on her.

John's image blurred as tears sprang to her eyes. Her heart pounded in anticipation of a reunion with the man she believed to be behind her. When he spoke again, she squeezed her eyes shut. Tears of joy spilled over and flowed freely down her cheeks.

"I've missed you desperately, nurse-lady," Gabe said in a voice cracking with emotion.

Still afraid that her mind was deceiving her, she turned around slowly. Behind her, Gabe smiled. "Gabe! My God, it *is* you! I knew you were alive. I *knew* it! I never believed you were dead—not even for a second. My God, it's you. It's really you. I can't believe it."

The moment he spread his arms she flew into them, hugging him tightly, afraid to let go in case it was a dream. But this was no fantasy. After all the years of sorrow, joy was at last in her arms. Happiness was holding her against him, showering her hair with soft kisses.

Caressing her wet cheeks, Gabe lifted her head to direct her gaze upward. "God, I've missed you. I've been looking all over the west for you—everywhere I thought you might be."

"I've been all over the *country* trying to find you," she said. "I sent Nels, but I had to leave Moline before I heard from him. And now I can never go back."

"I know all about Nels; he lives on our ranch. And I know why you left Moline from talking with Bianca. She's how I found you." Again, he embraced her. "I thought I'd *never* do that. When I met up with Bianca at Fort Bridger, I couldn't believe my luck. I was there to see an old Army buddy, but I didn't. I spent the night talking with Bianca and Jim—mostly about you. As soon as I left there, I came here and watched the hotel until you came out. Then I followed you for hours on end. I wanted to let you know I was here, but I wanted this reunion on our wedding anniversary even more. I'm glad John's a friend. Otherwise, I couldn't have made such elaborate plans for our reunion. He's even given us ..."

Laying her hand on his mouth to still his nervous, excited words, she scolded him in a teasing tone. "Gabriel Freeman, you talk too much. I love you."

Grasping her wrist, he kissed her palm. "And I never stopped wanting you back. I had this whole reunion planned to the letter, but now all I want to do is hold you. Why don't we dance while I do?"

"Why don't you kiss me while you do?"

Slowly, almost tentatively, he lowered his head toward hers. "I'd love, too, but I can't promise we'd dance."

As she slid her arms around his neck, she whispered, "Who said that I *want* to?"

Their lips met, their passion restrained in a room filled with strangers. But the lost years usurped their actions. Gabe ran his hands across her back then sent them lower to push her against him in an intimate caress. When she felt his desire through her thin layers of clothing, she moved against him.

Oh, how she had longed for this moment! Her mouth opened slightly at the hungry touch of his tongue against her lips. Their passion mounted as their lips ground together until Fanchon heard distant mumbling around them. To her surprise, the quartet no longer played. How could that be? The musicians had barely begun the song when she first heard her husband behind her. Their kiss seemed like only a moment.

Pulling his head back, Gabe glanced around the room without releasing her. "It seems that we're creating a scene."

"There's something else I'd rather create," she whispered, "but the timing isn't quite right. We could practice our technique, though. John invited me to spend the night in ... Wait. You're his other houseguest, aren't you?"

"That I am," he admitted with sparkling brown eyes. "Having a friend in high places has its advantages."

"I can see that."

"Excuse me, Fanchon," John interrupted, "but my friend used up the dance you promised me. Do you plan on giving me another dance?"

Glancing at John without releasing Gabe, she glimpsed his merry grin then returned her adoring gaze to Gabe's face. "Not tonight. You need to find another lady if you want to dance. My card is filled, and I won't even be dancing if I have my way."

"That's what I thought. If you two want to retire for the night, please feel free."

Gabe chuckled. "Be sure to spread the news, John. I don't want people thinking my wife is a loose woman. Do you want to dance once before we go to our room, nurse-lady?"

"I only want to be with you," she replied. "I want you to hold me forever to make up for the past five years of emptiness. I want to be your wife again—in every sense of the word."

"In that case," he said as he draped his arm around her shoulders, "why don't we dance in the privacy of our room?"

"I'd like that." Before they left, she faced John with a pleasant smile. "I know you were part of my husband's scheme for this reunion, and I thank you from the depths of my soul. Good night, John."

"Good night, Fanchon," he returned with a wink at Gabe. "Night, my friend."

The music resumed as Gabe escorted Fanchon out of the ballroom. Hurrying her up the stairs, he locked the door behind them then swept her into his arm. His lips captured hers while he embraced her, swaying in time with the music.

When she pushed away from him at the end of the song, he stared at her without a word. She was more beautiful than she had been five years earlier. Now she carried herself with more confidence; she'd acquired a less young-lady more mature-woman appearance. The dress she so proudly wore showed off her pale complexion and ample bosom, as well as the scar that marked their second meeting. He traced the pink blemish, drawing a shudder from her. Then he noticed the locket and grasped it to rub it with his thumb.

"You're absolutely beautiful, Mrs. Freeman," he said. "I think I want you more now than I did while we were separated. Tell me how to prove my sincerity lies in my heart and not in the lust I feel right now. I need to convince you that I want the woman you are, not the package that you come in. Please, tell me what I should do."

"By asking my advice," she explained as she unbuttoned his suit jacket and slipped it off his broad shoulders. "Your desire to make me understand says more than your actions or words. I know how much you want me, Gabe, and I want you just as much. I want to give myself to you so we can both be satisfied before we talk."

Again, Gabe ran his index finger down her scar, stopping briefly at the material of her dress. He traced the neckline through her cleavage and across her left breast to her shoulder. Sliding both hands under her hair, he quickly released the buttons in the back while she stood motionless. Small, uncontrollable tremors escaped her when he touched sensitive spots. Despite his desperate longing, his motions slowed as he languorously removed all her clothing. His eyes never left his fingers while he exposed her supple body until she stood proudly naked before him.

When he embraced her again, she pushed away to disrobe him as he had her. She paused occasionally to squeeze his work-hardened muscles, to slide her fingernails through his body hair, to offer him light, spontaneous kisses anywhere the mood struck her—from his shoulders to his stomach and lower. Once they were both nude, she stepped against him, lifting her head to accept his coming kiss. He waltzed her around the room to the music until they fell upon the bed.

His hands moved over her body, massaging her breasts, rubbing her stomach, stroking her firm thighs. His mouth reunited with her nipples to suckle until she was in a frenzy. Then he moved his hand to caress her heated passion, massaging her until she exploded in joy.

Fanchon expected him to satisfy himself next. Instead, he kissed his way lower to the junction of her legs. Despite the wonderful sensations, she longed to take him into her body.

"Gabe, please," she whispered. "I want you."

He accommodated her without hesitation, sliding easily into her silky cavern with a groan of pleasure. His lips sought out her nipples first. He kissed each excited pink tip before his lips caressed hers. Their tongues dueled as she met his thrusts in a time-stopping expression of their destiny that was culminated by a dual cry of release only a few minutes later.

Rolling onto his back, Gabe laid her head in the crook of his shoulder and wrapped a long arm around her. While she toyed with the hair on his chest, he ran his fingers through her

soft, tangled locks.

"I missed you desperately, darling," she said.

"I know exactly how you felt, too," he admitted before kissing the top of her head. "I was beginning to wonder if I'd *ever* find you."

"So was I." She paused a moment. "Gabe, there's something very important you have to know. It's about our child."

"It's all right, Fanchon. I know all about Gabrielle."

"But you don't know the whole story," she insisted. "Nobody does. Trevor visited me, and I overreacted—out of fear. He attacked me again, and I fell over a stairway banister. He murdered our daughter, and the law wouldn't even recognize her as a person. I was going to let you handle matters when you came home, but something in my mind snapped after Nels left to find you. I plotted to murder him. It wasn't impulsive. I planned it, and I did it. Then Byron took me away from Moline. We were going to get married, but I couldn't do it because I didn't believe that you were dead."

"Don't torment yourself like this," he said as he brushed tears from her cheek.

"Don't interrupt. You need to know the truth. Byron and I lived together for almost two years. We didn't share the same bedroom, but it didn't matter. Between my nursing and the suffragist movement, I was hardly home. I spent thousands of dollars searching for you while I traveled. One day I came home to find Byron dead. There was a note on his body—from Trevor. He said that Byron's death was only the first of three. You were next, then me. I knew I should quit my search, but I was driven to find you. Now we're *both* in danger."

"Do you know how he found you?" he asked.

"No. I only told Bianca where we were, and Byron wasn't supposed to tell anybody. Maybe he went against my wishes and told his parents. But that's only a guess."

"Well, we're together again, and you don't have to worry about a thing. Now *I* have to explain something. Bianca didn't think I should, and I wasn't going to. But my conscience is already bothering me. I was injured in the war, a bullet in the lower back. Then my horse was shot. He landed on my legs. I heard one thing as I passed out—your name. I assume that I cried out for you. When I regained consciousness, some Reb had me by my hair and a knife at my head. He said something about if I fought like an Indian I should die like one. I reached into my pocket, pulled out a derringer, and shot him in the head. He went down, and I lost consciousness again."

Fanchon kissed him on his lips. "It must have been a terrible experience."

"It wasn't even *close* to the hell I went through when I woke up and discovered that somebody had stolen my Ambrotypes. I was devastated. I saw it as a sign that our destiny had died. When they told me that the bullet was causing my paralysis, I was torn apart. I didn't know what to do. The last thing I wanted was to burden you with a half-husband, but they said there was hope. As soon as both of my legs healed, the doctor operated to remove the bullet, hopefully without damaging my spinal cord."

After all her years of doubts and confusion, she finally knew the truth. Gabe hadn't said

the words, and might *never* say them, but he loved her. If he didn't, he never would have gone through the emotional pain he had when he lost the Ambrotypes.

Her heart swelled with joy as she questioned him. "When did you have the surgery?"

"The day Lee surrendered. Why?"

Fanchon snuggled closer, delighting in the feel of him. "I woke up that morning with a sharp pain in my lower back, like someone was cutting me with a knife. It happened three times then there was a curious sense of relieved pressure. I even told Astrid that it reminded me of the sympathy pains I have when she gets hurt. Obviously, the surgery was a success."

"Yes, but it took quite a while to recover. I didn't think it was *ever* going to happen, Fanchon. I swear I didn't. I didn't want you to feel obligated to me. I didn't want to take away your freedom. Then a servant found my pictures, and I was ecstatic! All I could think of was our destiny being fulfilled—until she reminded me of what a damned fool I'd been. I sent her straight to Rance. I didn't even hesitate. But it was too late. She didn't get there in time to stop him."

"Stop him?" she asked. "I don't understand."

Gabe tightened his embrace. "I didn't want to be the man to steal your freedom, and I hated myself when I heard that I was too late. Fanchon, if you had it to do all over again, would you marry me?"

"Of course, I would. I didn't spend four years and thousands of dollars searching for you because I don't love you."

"I hope you really feel that way, because the only way you can be my wife is to marry me again. Please understand, Fanchon. I was very upset when I got that divorce."

## TWENTY-TWO

Shocked by his admission, she raised herself to gaze down at him. She studied his expression, trying to read his thoughts, but the mixture of pain and desperation on his face left her speechless. He hadn't wanted to divorce her; he just hadn't wanted to confine her in a marriage with a man unable to satisfy her physical needs. She would have done the same thing for him. But in her heart, she was still Gabe's wife. Their intimacy a few minutes earlier hadn't been sinful. It was the natural conclusion to a love that had lasted through five years of separation.

"Fanchon?" he asked. "Please say something."

"I wish you had ..."

"I wanted to tell you," he interrupted. "I didn't want to deceive you, and I told Bianca that the second she suggested it. But she told me to give it more thought because of how you feel about her relationship with Jim. Please don't be angry, Fanchon. I knew I should tell you before I brought you to bed, but I couldn't do it."

"Don't you ever shut up, Gabriel Freeman? If you would, I could finish what I want to say."

"I'm sorry. I'm nervous about your reaction. Go on."

"I was going to say, my darling husband, that a piece of paper doesn't change what I feel in my heart. But we should have reunited sooner, so we could remarry on our anniversary."

"We still can. I'll ask John if he invited a judge or a preacher to the party. Or we could do the next best thing and wait a couple of weeks until your birthday so we can be married in our own home."

"I would love that. Would you mind if I invite Bianca, Jim, Daphne and Charity? I want them with us. Bianca and Jim were with me through the worst parts of our marriage. They've been very supportive. Jim even blamed himself because Gabrielle died. He was a half an hour late to my Christmas dinner and found me unconscious on the kitchen floor. It was *his* idea to hold Gabrielle's body. The doctor wanted to throw her away and be done with it, but Jim wouldn't let him. Thanks to Jim, our daughter had a proper burial."

By the time she finished speaking they were both in tears. For the first time, they could weep and console each other as they should have four and a half years earlier. How many hours had she spent dreaming of this moment? How long had she held back her grief until she could share it with Gabe? And the grief had definitely surfaced in full this time. Her heart felt like it was breaking despite her joy of being in her husband's arms.

Many minutes later their tears dissipated, and Fanchon believed that their grief was



complete. Now they could continue their life together.

"I'm glad you wanted to bury Gabrielle, Fanchon," Gabe said as he stroked some hair from her face. "I'm even more glad that we could finally grieve together. I knew that Christmas that our child was gone. I *felt* it—like you felt my surgery. One of the first questions I asked Nels when I saw him again was if our child had died. I hadn't even given him the opportunity to answer my other questions. But it's all right now. We have to go on."

"Yes, I know. And our wedding will be doing exactly that."

"There are a few other people I'd like to invite if you don't mind."

"I don't care who comes as long as I'm your wife again."

"I want my right-hand man there. Like I said, Nels lives with me, along with his wife and son. And I established a town that I named after you—Freeborn, because you were born to be free. You know the owners of the *Freeborn Gazette*. I recruited Em and Hal for that. Your cousin Cal is our lawyer. Even Elsa came to Freeborn when she had a falling out with your mother."

"All of my relatives are there?" she asked, stunned.

"Only the important ones," he replied with a grin. "I wanted you to have lots of support when we were finally reunited."

"And speaking of reuniting ..."

Fanchon kissed him, letting her tongue explore his mouth as her hands explored his hard body. He felt as wonderful as ever. He even tasted and smelled like she remembered. All she wanted to do was feel him and taste him and smell him forever. But when she caressed his swollen manhood, he pushed her away.

"What's wrong?" she asked with a pout. "Don't you want me?"

"Not until I'm your husband again. I want to do this right from now on."

Without a word, she scrambled from the bed. While he watched in silence, she collected their clothes, tossing his onto the bed and beginning to dress in hers.

"What are you doing?" he asked in amazement.

"Dressing. You'd better do it, too. I won't let my groom stand naked in front of all those women downstairs. They'd want you as much as I do, and I refuse to share my handsome husband."

"What are you talking about?"

"If you're going to deprive me, I'll get my derringer and *force* you to marry me if I have to. There are only a few hours of our wedding anniversary left. Let's get married."

"Not so fast." Getting out of bed, he took her dress and tossed it over a chair. "I thought you wanted to wait until your birthday."

Dressed in her pantaloons and petticoats, Fanchon stepped forward so only her nipples touched him. His body hair tickled, causing them to harden. Grasping his wrist, she covered her firm breast with his hand. When he kneaded her, she knew she could convince him.

"I love you, Gabe," she said, looking up at him with the most desirous gaze she could muster. "I want to give myself to you. If you won't accept my love outside of marriage, we're going to renew our vows right now."

"Are you sure?"

"I don't want to possess you, Gabe. You're a free man. That's why I don't want you to be *my* husband. But I do want to be possessed *by* you. I'm positive, darling. I want to be your wife; I want you to possess me."

"Oh, Fanchon," he said, wrapping his arms around her, "that's exactly how I feel. I want to be your husband, but I don't want you to be *my* anything. I want you to keep your freedom. But there's only one way I can be your husband, and that's to take you as my wife."

"Then do it. Tonight."

"If I could love any woman, Fanchon," he breathed, "it would definitely be you."

His lips caught hers with passion as he lifted her and laid her on the bed. Without breaking the kiss, he worked her clothes slowly from her body, inching both her petticoat and her pantaloons over her hips and down her thighs. His hands caressed her soft skin, kneaded her flesh, as he maneuvered her clothes past her knees and feet until she lay naked. Disregarding his clothes, he lay down beside her and rolled onto his back so she was atop him.

Acting on instinct, Fanchon straddled him so her pelvis lay against his. She squirmed on him until, seconds later, she felt his hardness at her heated entrance. Despite her still-desperate desire, she moved slowly, feeling for the first time unrushed by appointments, partings, or reunions.

Then their bodies joined, easily, as lovers destined to be together. Their moans of pleasure chorused through the room. Unable to resist, Fanchon sat up. His maleness filled her so completely that she moaned again. This felt *so* good. She never wanted it to end!

Gabe's hands slipped from her knees to her hips. They left a path of heat from her hips to her waist, then across her ribs to her breasts. He cupped her firm mounds, massaging, stroking, taunting the hardened tips, while she moved upon him.

Deep inside, something new sparked her into a frenzy. She had to move—fast. She had to quench the lust in her loins before she exploded.

"My God, Fanchon!" Gabe exclaimed. "You're incredible."

His words put her over the edge of the chasm of desire, and waves of relief swept her into exhaustion that she'd never known as Gabe's deep growl of fulfillment echoed through her mind.

Fanchon collapsed on him, panting from the exertion. Then she waited until their bodies separated naturally before rolling off him and cuddling against him with a contented sigh.

"I don't know about you, nurse-lady," he said, "but I'm tired. I'm an old man now. I need to rest after such a wonderful experience."

"Five years ago, you told me that if I were twenty-two and he were thirty our ages

wouldn't matter. I'm twenty-two now, my darling husband, and you're thirty. Are you changing your mind?"

"I don't usually take a woman twice in one night. Hell, since I met you, I haven't even taken a woman *once* in one night. As for you calling me your darling husband, I love the sound of it. After I rest, I'll take you downstairs so we can repair that minor discrepancy in our relationship."

"M-m," Fanchon sighed. "Sounds marvelous."

\*\*\*

A knock at the door startled Fanchon, and her eyes popped open. The room looked different; music no longer played in the distance. Under her ear she heard Gabe's beating heart, felt her head rise and fall in time with his gentle breaths. Moving to gaze down at him, she saw a ray of sunlight across his nose. Her eyes followed it to the gap in the curtain.

When the person knocked again, Fanchon got out of bed and slipped into Gabe's shirt, buttoning it on the way to the door. In the hall, Ling Chu smiled.

"Good morning, Mrs. Freeman," he greeted.

"Good morning, Ling Chu," she replied in a whisper. "Would you please keep your voice down? My husband is still sleeping."

The short man with the long queue down the middle of his back lowered his voice. "You and Mr. Freeman be wanting breakfast, ma'am?"

"I don't know. What time is it?"

"Nine."

"Oh, no!" she whispered in surprise. "I have a nine-thirty appointment. I'll never get there in time."

"Ink, paper, and pen in desk. I deliver a note."

"Terrific. I'll bring it to you when my husband and I come for breakfast."

"No. I must bring breakfast to you."

"How sweet. I'll have a note ready when you get back."

"I come back about nine-thirty. Note *will* be late, but it gets there."

"Thank you," she said. "I'll wake up my husband."

Turning around, Fanchon saw that Gabe was still asleep even though he had moved. As she bent over to kiss him on the lips, he caught her in a bear hug. He flipped her over him onto the bed while she squealed in surprise. With his arms still around her, Gabe smiled, his eyes blazing with desire.

"Are you going to make meeting men at the door in my shirt a habit, Mrs. Freeman?"

“Only when you’re too lazy to get up,” she retaliated.

“I’ll remember that. It seems as though we slept through our wedding.”

“It seems that way, but I don’t care, because you’re still my husband.”

“I hope you never stop calling me that,” he said as he worked at the buttons on his shirt to expose her body. “You do wonders for my shirt.”

“Then why, may I ask, are you taking it off me?”

“Because it’s in my way, of course,” he replied, pushing the material away to caress her breasts.

Fanchon giggled, but her merriment was cut off by Gabe’s kiss. Sliding her hands up his arms, she delighted in the hardness of his biceps. He was so strong, so well proportioned, so handsome, and she knew that he was in love with her. She didn’t need him to tell her if he showed her like this often enough.

Her hands moved across his shoulders, gently massaging them. His muscles twitched under her touch while she slid them down his well-toned back to his narrow hips. She lingered there before gripping his buttocks. After several minutes, her hands were on another trip, to grasp his manhood and guide him into her body. All her feelings centered between her legs while she ground against him slowly, seductively, caressing his buttocks firmly.

The more she moved against him, the more excited she became. This was probably the best part of marriage—the joy she felt whenever she was in his arms—the passion she experienced whenever he was near her—the excitement he could instill in her whenever they had intimacy. With all of her being, she hoped that this would never end.

Her arousal increased as she moved against him, digging her fingernails into his buttocks so he wouldn’t move, and she could please him yet again. This time she would go slow—like she had last night when she’d bedded him the second time. But before she could stop herself, she constricted around him while he ground into her. His groan of fulfillment sounded so sweet in her ear.

Instead of rolling off her, he kissed her and ground against her. What was he *doing*? They’d already finished, but he wasn’t stopping. And he was already drawing her close to the brink again! How could that be when she’d already been satisfied? How could ... Fanchon jerked her head away to cry out in a second joyful conclusion.

A moment later, the Chinese servant knocked again. Fanchon scrambled from the bed as she buttoned the shirt. “Oh, no. You made me forget to write a message. Wait a minute, Ling Chu!”

“Don’t dare touch that door handle!” Gabe ordered, practically flying out of the bed. “I don’t like other men seeing you in my shirt.”

“I wasn’t going to answer the door,” she said. “You do it while I write my message.”

While they ate, they discussed the day ahead. Although Gabe had nothing planned, Fanchon had a busy schedule. Her first appointment was at eleven to check the progress of a

little girl with the mumps. She eagerly agreed to let him accompany her on her errands, but she denied him entrance to the little girl's home when she learned that he'd never had the disease.

"Why can't I go in with you?" he asked in a wounded tone.

"If you want more children, you *don't* want the mumps. It could make you sterile, and that means no babies. I'm the nurse in this family, and I know what I'm talking about. You absolutely do *not* want the mumps at your age."

"I'll find something else to do then—like get the pack horse we need to get your things back to the ranch."

She smiled up at him. "Smart man. I also have to make an appointment to meet with John. I have an official statement to make, and I can't do it properly unless I go to his office."

"What official statement is that?"

"I'm quitting my work for the suffragist movement. I need to tell the president of the Cheyenne committee, too. I believe in the cause or I never would have become involved in it, but my purpose for lecturing is over. I only began so I could search for you while I traveled. The National Woman Suffrage Association paid my traveling expenses, and the places where I lectured paid my hotel expenses plus a small fee for my services. Any stops I made along the way, I paid myself. Now that we're together again, I don't want to lecture. I want to be with you."

"I'm glad to hear you say that. I was afraid you'd want to keep doing it, but I didn't want to ask you to stay home."

Sliding her arms around him, Fanchon gazed up into his face. "What did I ever do without you, Gabriel Freeman?"

"I don't know, but I hope you never find an answer."

"When should we start back to the ranch? It's been a long time since I've seen your father and my big brother."

"Pa died a few years back, Fanchon. You won't be seeing him."

Fanchon broke away to stare up at him in astonishment. "He *died*? I don't understand. My bank should have notified me."

"I thought they would, too, but apparently they didn't. I kept sending your money, and I took the first payment there myself to let them know the change. From what I understand, the way you wanted the contract worded included any partner that Pa saw fit to run the ranch was fine with you. In case you've forgotten, you didn't want to be notified as long as you received your interest. Each time I went to the bank, they told me that they'd send a note in their next transfer to the western bank. Obviously, they didn't. And I practically insisted that you get one. Nels' wife even suggested that you were ignoring me."

"Why?"

"That's a long story—and not a very pleasant one. I think I'll keep it to myself a while longer. Maybe we *should* get married now. She might try to cause trouble if we don't."

“But I want to get married with my family there.”

“Then we should pretend that we are. If she learns that we aren’t, she might cause trouble. The only reason Nels married her is because she was carrying his son.”

“Speaking of my nephew,” she asked, “what’s his name?”

“Carl Nels Sten, but we all call him Cully—except Nels’ wife.”

“And what’s her name?”

Gabe spat out his answer. “Dolly Clairmont Sten.”

Fanchon studied him. Something was wrong between Dolly and Gabe. But what could it be? And why didn’t he want to discuss it with her? Well, she’d always had an open mind. Maybe she could mend the rift and restore harmony to an obviously stressed relationship.

“So, you want to keep our nonmarriage a secret,” she said to change the topic, “after *I* wanted to keep our marriage a secret. Ironic, isn’t it? How are we supposed to make wedding plans?”

He released a long sigh. “I don’t know. A surprise wedding maybe? Pretend it’s a get-together for your birthday?”

Her face lit with excitement. “What a wonderful idea! Let’s not even tell everybody in Freeborn that I’m in the area. Let’s surprise them when I appear to legally become your wife.”

“You *like* such a stupid suggestion?” he asked in disbelief.

“Can’t you see their faces? I’ve been missing for four years and all of a sudden—out of nowhere—I appear.”

Gabe laughed. “Do you want to give them all heart failure? Everybody but Nels still thinks we’re married. Not only that, if we got married to surprise them, they’d never believe we were married when you were pregnant.”

“So what? I’ve never cared what other people think. Why should I start now? Besides, I told Aunt Em—or she guessed, and I loved you so much I couldn’t hide my shock. What do you say, Gabe? Can we have a surprise wedding?”

“Oh, all right, but you need to be prepared to answer a *lot* of questions.”

\*\*\*

Gabe and Fanchon spent the next two days preparing for their departure. Their trip took two more days. When they arrived, Gabe took her to the area a ranch hand told them Nels was working. In the distance, they saw several men around a small herd of cattle. Gabe whistled and waved his arm at his crew. Immediately, a man mounted his horse, urging it into a gallop toward them.

This was it! She was going to reunite with her brother next. It was one of the happiest moments of her life. The excitement raging through her was almost too much to control as

she beamed happily at the approaching man.

“Gabe!” Nels shouted, drawing up his horse. “Where the hell have you been for so long? I was beginning to worry.”

“Weren’t you worried about *me*?” Fanchon asked merrily.

Nels’ expression turned to shock. Without a word, he stared at his sister as he dismounted and made his way to the left side of her horse. His eyes didn’t leave her face, partially hidden by her cowboy hat. When Gabe reached over and took the hat from her head, Nels’ mouth dropped open. He reached up to grasp Fanchon’s waist then dragged her off her horse. Even when she stood before him, with his hands on her waist, he didn’t speak. Instead he studied her for so long that the passing time seemed like eternities to Fanchon.

Finally, he asked, “You’re not Astrid playing some sort of dirty trick on me, are you?”

“Do I look *that* much like Astrid?” Fanchon teased.

“Fanchon!” He hugged her while her arms encircled him. “I don’t believe it. Where did you come from? What are you doing here? How did you find Gabe? How *are* you?”

“I’m fine,” she said, answering his questions in reverse order. “I didn’t find Gabe; he found me. I came here to live with my husband. And if you have a son, I think you should *know* where I came from.”

Nels laughed. “You’re still incorrigible. But God, it’s good to hold you again.” Glancing at Gabe, Nels winked. “Although, I have a feeling I’m not the first man who’s told you that recently. Now what do you mean Gabe’s your husband?”

“We didn’t want the divorce, so we did the only thing we could to change it. We got married.”

“I should have known. What did you think of Cully? Pretty cute boy, isn’t he? Looks exactly like a Sten—although I don’t know how.”

“I haven’t seen Cully yet. I want *you* to introduce me to your son, not to mention your wife.”

“Good idea,” Gabe mumbled. “Let’s *not* mention her.”

While Fanchon examined Gabe for a hint of meaning in his expression, Nels said, “Don’t mind him, sis. You’ll get used to it. What do you say, boss? Do I get some time off work? Or do I have to pull some strings with your partner to get it?”

“Put my wife back on her horse, Sten. You’ve hugged her long enough. She wants to meet your family, and I want her to have everything she wants. Let’s go.”

## TWENTY-THREE

"Genevieve!" Gabe shouted as he opened the front door for Fanchon. "I've found my wife! We're home! Come meet the lady of the house! *Genevieve!*"

Fanchon had been looking forward to meeting Genevieve since Gabe told her the black woman had found his Ambrotypes. He clearly adored her, and Fanchon knew she would, too. Instead of Genevieve descending the stairs, however, a petite brunette Fanchon found vaguely familiar glided down them. She wore a yellow dress with lace accents that belonged far from the western frontier. As she examined the other woman, Nels spoke beside her.

"This is my wife Dolly, Fanchon," he said, not in the cheerful tone of a man who loved his wife. "Dolly, my little sister, Fanchon Freeman."

Although suspicious of the smaller woman, Fanchon greeted her pleasantly. Something *was* wrong. Gabe hadn't even acknowledged Dolly's presence with a smile. Whatever the problem, it concerned Gabe and Dolly directly, and possibly Nels indirectly. This was a something she had to correct if the four of them were to live in the same house.

"Where's my son, Dolly?" Nels asked.

"The last I saw him he was outside playing."

"Where are Genevieve and Moses?"

"They went into Freeborn. They won't be back until midafternoon tomorrow."

"Wonderful," Gabe grumbled. Draping his arm around Fanchon's shoulders, he led her toward a door on her left.

When she'd lived in the house four years earlier, the room had been the formal parlor. During her stay, there had been three bedrooms upstairs, the parlor, a sitting room, a dining room and a kitchen on the first floor. But a two-story addition had been put on the back and a one-story addition to the right-hand side of the house. At the moment, she didn't know where he was taking her.

If only she'd had the courage to come back sooner. A question that she'd been unable to ask in the five days since their reunion nagged at the back of her mind. If he'd wanted her back as badly as he claimed, why hadn't he responded to her monthly telegrams asking if he'd returned?

"I have a surprise for you, Fanchon," Gabe said as he opened the door. "I've been dying to show you this since I had it done. Close your eyes."

Following his instructions, Fanchon let him lead her into the room by the hand. When he moved behind her to caress her shoulders, he told her to open her eyes. Above the fireplace



before them was a large portrait painted from their wedding photograph. Even though her hair and eye color were perfect, her dress was a slightly darker blue than it should have been. Still, she was amazed at the accuracy of his memory.

“Oh, Gabe,” she worded, “it’s beautiful. But how did you do it when I had our clothes? The colors are almost perfect.”

Gabe grinned down at her. “Don’t tell me. Your dress isn’t right.”

“But everything else is perfect, even your uniform.”

“I borrowed a buddy’s from Fort Laramie when I was up there one time. That’s where I had this painted. I took Nels with so the artist would have your hair color. But your blue eyes? I personally supervised the mixing of his paints for that. I could never forget the color.”

Sliding her arms around his neck, she gazed up at him. “It’s no wonder I love you so much.”

He lowered his head, and his lips caressed hers in a tender kiss. Even that small gesture caused an instantaneous response. After five long years, she cherished every moment of their time together, especially these spontaneous moments when he simply wanted to show her that he cared. Maybe it wouldn’t take as much effort as she’d anticipated to make him fall in love with her. All she had to do was ask Nels the best way to approach it.

“Unca Gabe?” a small voice said from behind them.

Startled, they turned toward the door without releasing each other. Fanchon’s heart melted at the sight of the little Sten in the doorway. Cully was Nels’ son. The only trait he’d inherited from Dolly was her dark complexion. Otherwise, he looked exactly like his father. After her initial happiness, a frown crossed her lips. Something didn’t look right about the child.

Gabe knelt on the floor and spread his arms wide. Cully raced into them. As they exchanged hugs and kisses, Gabe picked up the little boy, asking, “Did you miss your old uncle?”

“Yep,” Cully replied.

“Did your pa tell you who’s here?”

“Nope.”

“I found Aunt Fanchon. Aren’t you going to say hello and give her a big kiss and hug?”

“Aw right.”

As Cully reached for her, Fanchon took him into her arms to hold him. But her joy at meeting the son of her favorite sibling was marred by concern. The child’s body temperature was higher than it should be.

“I’m glad to meet you, Cully,” Fanchon said. “Uncle Gabe told me a lot about you, but I need to ask you something very important. Are you sick to your stomach?”

“Yep,” he admitted, “but Mama said I just think I’m sick. She said I prob’ly ate too much.”

“Do you hurt anywhere?”

“My throat—and my ears hurt. A lot.”

“How would you like me to be your nurse?”

“Aw right.”

“Would you take me to his room?” she asked, glancing up at Gabe. “Then get my medical supplies from the pack horse?”

“What’s wrong with him?” Gabe asked in concern.

“I won’t know until I’ve examined him.”

While Fanchon put Cully to bed, Gabe hurried outside for her medical bag. Now Fanchon knew why Dolly looked familiar. She’d seen Nels’ wife before, on her first visit to the house where the little girl had the mumps. Cully must have been there, too. His salivary glands were swollen and tender to her gentle touch, indicating that he’d contracted the disease. And so could Gabe! When he opened the bedroom door, she raced to him and pushed him out of the room.

“Stay away from him, Gabe. And get out of the house. Ask Dolly why she didn’t have him in bed then send Nels to give me the answer. At least, he’s immune. You can wait for me outside. I’ll explain as soon as I can.”

“Is it something that serious?”

“It could be for us,” she admitted. “Cully has the mumps.”

Gabe gasped as he passed her the large black bag. “Oh, my God! I’ll wait on the porch.”

As soon as Gabe closed the door, Fanchon returned to the bed. A few seconds later she heard his irate voice not far away. “What the hell’s wrong with you? Do you hate her that *much*?”

But there was no answer as Gabe ran away from whomever he’d addressed. Soon there was a tap at the door, and Fanchon invited the person in while she continued tending to Cully. Sitting on the edge of the bed opposite Fanchon, Nels took his son’s small hand in his before he spoke.

“How’s my big boy?” he asked the child.

“I don’t feel good, Pa,” Cully admitted.

“Why didn’t you tell Mama?”

“I did. She said little boys get tummy aches all the time.”

“Aunt Fanchon will make you better. What is it, sis? Anything we should be concerned about?”

“No. He has the mumps. It’s a perfectly normal childhood illness—nothing serious for a young man his age,” she explained with a bright smile and a wink at Cully. “Unfortunately, it could be very serious for a man Gabe’s age. If he contracts this, it could leave him sterile.”

“What’s that mean?”

“We might not be able to have children of our own.”

“No wonder he was so angry,” Nels said with a grimace. “I’m sorry, Fanchon. Dolly’s not the best mother, but I didn’t think she was this bad. Thank God, we have Genevieve. She dotes on Cully. I wish they’d been here the last couple of days, then this never would have happened. I saw Gabe kiss Cully. That’s bad, isn’t it.”

“Very. Would you have Dolly get me a bowl of warm water and a small towel? That should help ease the pain in his glands.”

Without another word, Nels left, returning several minutes later to sit beside his son. “Is there anything else I can do?”

“Keep him in bed,” Fanchon explained. “It’s unlikely at his age, but he could have the same fate as Gabe—if he contracts the mumps. You wouldn’t want Cully to become sterile, and neither would I. That’s why keeping him bedridden for a week to ten days is important. Is there a doctor in town?”

Nels nodded, his brow furrowed in concern. “Do you want me to fetch him?”

“That won’t be necessary. He can’t do anything that I can’t. Maybe Gabe and I should take our honeymoon now instead of later like we’d planned. I want to keep him away from Cully, and I’m afraid he’ll want to visit if we stay. The doctor should check Cully at least twice while we’re gone to be on the safe side.”

“Am I gonna get better, Aunt Fan?” Cully asked.

“Of course, you are. There’s nothing to worry about as long as you stay in bed until you’re well. I’ll leave instructions with your dad so everybody here can take care of you, all right?”

“Aw right,” he agreed skeptically. “Are you goin’ away?”

“Yes, she is,” Nels said firmly so Fanchon wouldn’t have second thoughts, “but she wouldn’t if she thought you won’t get well. I’m going to walk her downstairs, then I’ll be back with your mother.”

On the way to meet Gabe, Fanchon gave Nels his instructions on the best care for Cully then left the house. As he had said, Gabe waited on the porch, pacing from one end to the other. When he saw her, he hurried to grasp her hand.

“What do you think?” he asked. “What are my chances of getting the mumps?”

“Quite high, I’m afraid. Let’s take a walk.” They strolled hand in hand toward the north pasture. Fanchon didn’t know how to broach the subject, given their marital status, or rather the lack thereof. But she needed to say something to bring up the topic of their honeymoon. At the same time, she didn’t want him to know exactly how concerned she was about his health. Maybe the best way to start the conversation was to be professional about it—like she would with any other patient. Taking a deep breath, she said, “You don’t have to worry for the next twelve to twenty-six days. That’s the approximate incubation period.”

“What’s *that* mean?” he asked.

“It takes that long for the symptoms to appear. Given your age, old man, we should know within two weeks, but we won’t be *positive* until a month passes.”

“Two weeks?” he repeated. “We’ll be on our honeymoon then, and I’m anxious to visit

Gabrielle's grave."

Fanchon shrugged. "Then we'll have to take our honeymoon *before* the wedding. I need to cancel my business at the Rock Island bank, anyway. I know it's dangerous to go, but it's necessary. Do you *want* to go before we get remarried?"

"I don't have a choice," he complained. "I can't travel with the mumps."

This was something she hated to tell him worse than anything else. Since they were reunited, she'd dreamed of renewing their wedding vows, but it certainly wasn't advisable now.

"There's one more thing, darling," she said. "I think we should postpone the wedding. If you contract the mumps, I'll have to leave your bed. I wouldn't want to if we were married."

"Why would you have to do that?"

Stopping short, Fanchon stepped in front of him and seductively trailed her fingertips across his shirt. "Because I know you, Gabe. You wouldn't be able to control your passion for me any better than I could control mine for you. While you have mumps is no time for us to be intimate."

Gabe stared down at her sadly. He wanted her right this second, but he couldn't have her because any of the wranglers could wander by at any time. With a soft sigh, he fought off his desire and asked, "What if I don't get them? Then we've postponed the wedding for nothing."

"Would you rather become sterile?" Pausing, she gazed up at him. "That reminds me. I think I know where Cully was exposed."

"Where?" he prompted when she didn't continue.

"At the same house I wouldn't let you go into. You told me that you were an acquaintance of the family because of Nels and Dolly, remember? That's why you wanted to go with me in the first place. When I met Dolly, she seemed vaguely familiar, but I didn't place her until I realized that Cully had the mumps. I saw her at the Colliers' house, Gabe."

Gabe's eyes narrowed in anger. "Do you think she saw you?"

"I know she did. I found it odd at the time, but she left the house almost the second I entered. She didn't even wait to be introduced. Now that I've seen the portrait in the parlor, I understand why. She knew who I was. But I don't understand why she didn't want to be introduced."

Instantly, he tensed. "That's part of my long story, and I have no intention of burdening you with it." Draping his arm around her shoulders, he changed the subject. "If we're not getting married, let's take a trip into Freeborn and do a some more reuniting. I want to send Genevieve home, anyway, because somebody has to take care of my precious nephew."

"That's a *wonderful* idea! I've missed everybody so much that I hated the thought of waiting."

"Then let's unpack the horses and go to town. We'll leave everything on the porch, and Moses—that's Genevieve's husband—can take them to our room. We'll come back for clean clothes before we go to Cheyenne. If I can't live in my own house for a while, you're not going

to, either.”

Fanchon giggled. “As if I’d want to!”

“Fanchon! Good Lord, Fanchon!”

Turning toward the female voice, Fanchon saw Elsa for the first time in four years. Gabe was right. The youngest Sten sibling had become a beautiful young woman! Fanchon’s heart burst with happiness and pride as she raced to hug Elsa.

“Elsa!” she sobbed. “I thought I’d never see you again.”

“I can’t believe it. Where did you find her, Gabe?” she asked him when he joined the ecstatic sisters.

“In Cheyenne,” he explained with a wide grin, “right after I found Bianca in Fort Bridger.”

“Bianca’s at Bridger?” she asked Fanchon in shock. “I don’t believe it.”

Nearby Fanchon heard her aunt’s voice. Glancing around, she saw Em standing under a sign that said *Freeborn Gazette*. “Hal, come here! I was right. Fanchon! Where have you been all these years? Do you know how frantic we were? Especially that husband of yours?”

Fanchon embraced Em. This was the third happiest day of her life. The first was the day she got married; the second, the day she reunited with Gabe; and the third, this day when she could again be with her relatives. She’d always known that she missed them, but she had no idea how much until that very moment. Seeing Nels again was only the beginning of the wonderful feelings that accompany familial love. And her relatives in Freeborn all loved her unconditionally—not like her mother who had loved her with reservation all her life, who expected complete devotion and total dependence from her children.

Only one thing was missing—her beloved twin. Granted, she and Astrid had seldom gotten along, but they were part of one another, which was something she hadn’t learned until she ran away. Next to Gabe, she’d missed Astrid the most. And despite the miles separating them, she still felt Astrid’s pains, or she believed she did whenever she had an unexplained pain. The first time had it had happened shortly after she left Moline, when her healed breast suddenly stung like it had just been cut.

Hal’s hands weighted down on her shoulders a second before he embraced her. Moments later Gabe dragged her from her uncle’s arms to hug her as well.

Gazing up at him, startled but thrilled with her life, she asked, “What are you doing?”

“Now that you’re back, I can’t let other people hug you and not expect one for me, can I?”

“You’re impossible. You’re also right. Feel free to hug me as often as you want.”

“I see nothing’s changed between the two of you,” Hal teased. “You were in each other’s arms when I first set eyes on Gabe, and you’re still in each other’s arms. That’s true love.”

“It certainly is,” Fanchon agreed, gazing up at her husband with adoration. “And it always will be.”

“Close the paper for a while, Hal,” Em ordered. “I want to know what Fanchon’s been

doing since we last saw her.”

After two hours, Gabe announced that he and Fanchon had to run a few errands before going to the house then returning to Cheyenne. Although Em was disappointed that they couldn't stay for dinner, she was thrilled to learn that they were going to Moline to try and reconcile with Jane Sten.

Then Gabe and Fanchon went to Calvin Osterberg's law office where she reunited with the last member of her family in Freeborn. She hadn't seen her tall, dark-haired cousin in seven years and enjoyed their brief visit. When it came time to leave, she found it more difficult than she had anticipated. She and Cal had been close ever since his sister had died, and she'd always enjoyed his company. That day was no different. Only Gabe's reminder that they should leave pried her from the office. As they headed toward the hotel, they met Genevieve and her husband.

“Mr. Freeman,” Genevieve said, “you found yer wife. When did that happen?”

“About three weeks ago, but we were only reunited on our anniversary. I waited on purpose. Fanchon,” Gabe introduced, “this is Genevieve Reynolds and her husband Moses. Genevieve and Moses, my wife, Mrs. Fanchon Freeman.”

“We're glad to meet you, Mrs. Freeman. But is it real?”

“Is what real?” Fanchon asked.

“Are you married?”

“Oh, that. Yes, Mrs. Reynolds, we're married,” she lied, sliding her arms around Gabe's waist. “We need your help with something. Cully has the mumps, and my husband can't go back into the house until he's well again. All of our belongings are on the porch, and we wondered if you would pack us about a week's worth of clean clothes. We'll be leaving for Cheyenne again tomorrow morning.”

“Yes, ma'am. Is there anything else?”

“Only that you take very good care of Cully. He has to stay in bed until the doctor says he can get up. Gabe and I will tell him about Cully pretty soon.”

“Yes, Mrs. Freeman. We'll leave town now so's we can get home right away.”

Grimacing at her incorrect grammar, Fanchon chose to skim over it this time. When she returned from her trip with Gabe would be soon enough to educate the woman.

“That's *so* we can get home,” Fanchon explained following a momentary pause. “And I would appreciate it.”

Gabe slid his arm around Fanchon's shoulders and escorted her to the doctor's office. After introductions, Fanchon offered her assistance whenever she was available. Finally, they mounted their horses and went back to the ranch.

\*\*\*

Astrid slowly unbuttoned her dress. Stepping out of it, she exposed her nearly naked body under the cover of darkness. Throughout more than seven years, she and Trevor had continued their affair even though neither wanted to marry the other. And in those seven years, Astrid had found only one other man capable of satisfying her. Until she was back in Gabriel Freeman's arms, she wouldn't be completely satiated. That plan had been put into action three and a half years earlier, when her business failed.

Trevor stripped away her remaining clothes suckled on her nipples. He tossed her on the bed then covered her with his body. Long before she was ready, he entered her. In only minutes, he satisfied himself then rolled off her.

"Damn it, Trevor," Astrid complained, "why the hell couldn't you have waited for me? Sometimes you make me so angry."

"You won't be angry when you hear what I learned in Wyoming. My yearly trip finally paid off. We're going to have the people we want as soon as I can sell my house and store."

"What did you find out?"

"The lovebirds are together again."

"All this time," Astrid said. "All the waiting and wondering is finally going to end."

"That's not all that's going to end."

"What do you mean?"

"Our plans. They're going to end, too. I'll have Fanchon, and you'll have Freeman."

"Do you think they remarried?"

"The preacher didn't perform a ceremony, and neither did the judge. That means we have a little time to get there and make arrangements without them knowing about it."

"I hope you're right. I've been waiting to get even with Fanchon ever since she sold me a business that failed practically the second she left. I don't like failing any more than she does, Trevor, and I *don't* want to fail this time. Everything had better go right in Wyoming."

"Don't worry. Everything will go perfectly, and everything will be done."

Astrid studied him. What was he talking about? Everything will be done sounded too final for her liking. She wanted Gabe again, but she didn't want anybody to get hurt—not physically, anyway. Fanchon was bound to be hurt emotionally if she discovered that she'd been replaced in Gabe's bed, but that wasn't lasting. Fanchon *always* bounced back. Still, there was something in Trevor's voice that bothered her, and she was suddenly reluctant to accept his help.

## TWENTY-FOUR

In silent dedication to their child, they stood in the dark. Each had an arm wrapped around the other's back; each had a heart tearing with grief. Gabe knew this was the first and probably only time the entire family would be together—three souls joined by a destiny unbroken through the years.

"How did we do it, Gabe?" Fanchon asked as they stared at Gabrielle's headstone.

"How did we do what?"

"We spent a little over a day together before we were separated for five years. But in the past few days, I learned that I love you even more than I thought. I met a lot of men during our separation, and not one equaled you."

"I learned that no woman could compare to you, either," he admitted. "Our relationship defies the logic that Bianca said is so important to you."

"It's destiny, pure and simple. I never took off my wedding band, and I always wore my locket. There were times when I felt I'd lose faith in your survival, but I'd open it and read the inscription. *Destiny's Desire*. That necklace brought me through many lonely days."

"Your picture did the same for me. That's one reason I couldn't mail our wedding picture to Pa like I said I would. When I thought my Ambrotypes had been stolen, I *did* lose my faith. I was positive that our destiny had died with Gabrielle—of course, that was long before I actually knew she was gone. I did know it, though, as surely as you knew that I was alive."

He wiped away some of her tears as she laid her head on his chest. While he stroked her long, soft hair, he hoped the security she always said she felt in his arms warmed her soul.

"It's all my fault, Gabe. I didn't protect our child."

"Fanchon—my dear ..." He said the words tentatively, afraid she would think that he loved her and break her heart even worse. But she needed his support, and he had to do his best to give it to her, despite his anxiety.

To his relief, however, Fanchon interrupted in a soft voice, cracking with emotion. "It's true, Gabe. I should have told you, but I was too ashamed. Because of me, our daughter is dead. Because of my stubborn defiance and my desperate desire to prove that you couldn't tell me what to do, I refused to carry the derringer you gave me. That's how Gabrielle died, Gabe. Trevor came to me, and I wasn't prepared. Please, Gabe. Please forgive me."

His heart ached for her misery, and he held her close to comfort her. He kissed her head in an effort to relieve her distress. But how could he when he was also upset? Still, he had to do something. She was his wife—at least, in his heart—so he couldn't let her go through her sorrow alone. He had to make her understand how he felt.



“Don’t do this to yourself, my dear,” he whispered into her hair. The words came easier this time, so he continued in a stronger voice. “There’s nothing to forgive, and you can’t blame yourself. If anyone’s to blame, it’s me. I knew you could get pregnant. If I hadn’t been weak where my lust was concerned, Gabrielle would never have been conceived. But I needed you too much to deny you a part of me. I thought a child would bind you to me.”

Even though she knew that the endearment had been difficult to voice, Fanchon said nothing about it. He probably already felt awkward, and she didn’t want to add to his discomfort. Besides, they were discussing something much more serious than an uneasy endearment. They were discussing their daughter’s existence and her own inability to deliver a healthy child for him.

After a ragged breath to still her sobs, she said, “You couldn’t help yourself, darling, and neither could I. What I did by not carrying a weapon ...”

“Damn it, Fanchon,” Gabe declared in frustration. “Stop that. It is *not* your fault. You didn’t know you needed a gun in your home, and I certainly didn’t expect you to carry it there. Only one person can be blamed for murdering our daughter—Trevor Riley. And someday he’ll pay as dearly as Gabrielle did.”

With a gasp, she pushed away from him. “You’re not going to get revenge while we’re here, are you?”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’m not going to do anything here. I said *someday*, and that’s exactly what I meant. And *I’ll* be the one to collect the debt. But when I do, I’ll do it legally.”

“How?”

“I have an idea, but before I can do anything, I need to force his hand. He *must* make the first move, hopefully on ground I’m familiar with. Somehow I have to get him to start trouble in Wyoming Territory. Since you saved that note he left on Wood, we’ll have proof that he’s been plotting it for a long time.”

“How will you get him to Wyoming?”

“That’s the easy part—I hope. Tomorrow we’ll go to Moline. We’ll visit Astrid’s business then a few of your friends and relatives. We’ll tell them about our marriage and where we live, but we won’t stay in town any longer than a couple of hours. I don’t want an altercation here, because I’m not familiar with the terrain. That’s how I got hurt so badly in the war. I need to confront Riley on familiar ground, and that’s around home.”

Fanchon shook her head. “I still don’t understand. How will visiting people get Trevor to Wyoming?”

“With any luck, he’ll hear that we’re in Moline. If he wants to know where we are, he can ask anybody close to you. I have a feeling he meant what he said in that note, and I think you’re the last on his list so you can watch me die. The man’s loco, Fanchon. At least, that’s the assumption I’m holding so I can fight him effectively.”

Horror engulfed her. For years she’d dreamed of Gabe getting revenge for Gabrielle’s death, but now that they were together again, she couldn’t bear the thought of possibly losing

him again—this time forever. Determined to keep him with her, she stared up at him unflinchingly and declared, “No. I won’t let you fight somebody insane.”

Smiling, Gabe grasped her shoulders in a tender hold. “I’m not saying that he’s insane, sweetheart, but if he thinks he can beat me after what he did to you and our child, something’s wrong with him. Think about it. With so many of your relatives in Freeborn, he’s had to know where I live for a long time now. He’s probably been waiting for our reunion. Besides, if he still wants to kill us after all this time, the man’s *got* to be loco.”

“That’s precisely why I don’t want you asking for trouble.”

“How else can we live in peace? He’s not going to leave us alone until it’s over—not if he follows us to Wyoming. If he doesn’t, he probably never will. I know what I’m doing, Fanchon. I’ve fought against Sioux, remember? Thank God, I also gained the respect of a few of them. I ran across them after the treaties were signed, and they told me.”

Stunned by his announcement, she gazed up at him. “Aren’t they restricted to reservations now?”

Again, Gabe smiled. “A few in our area escaped being caught. They want to be free, and I understand that. We get along fine. In fact, most of them are my friends. But that has nothing to do with my plan unless I ask them to help throw a scare into Riley. That may not be a bad idea, either.” Gabe paused and gazed down at Fanchon lovingly. “We’ve discussed my plan enough for one night. Let’s pay that surprise visit on your parents before they go to bed.”

\*\*\*

The moment Fanchon had been dreading for five years was nearly upon her. Long before Gabe had been declared dead, she’d known that her parents must eventually meet him. She was concerned about her mother’s reaction, but Gabe seemed casual about the introductions. Then Fanchon recalled how casual he’d seemed about getting married, while deep inside he’d been concerned about their future. Maybe he was hiding his anxiety again.

After Gabe lifted her into their rented carriage, she watched him unhitch the horse from the post then climb up beside her. When he saw her nervousness, he draped his arm around her shoulders and drew her across the seat until their hips touched. Without speaking, he smiled at her. With a click of his tongue, he turned the horse away from the hitching post.

The man she had married could always calm her fears, no matter how important or inconsequential they were. He had a knack for making the serious seem minor, and he’d proven it on the train trip from Cheyenne to Moline more than once. To keep her mind occupied, Fanchon reflected on the journey from Wyoming.

When they’d climbed into their sleeping cubicle each night, the quarters were cramped. Fanchon was nearly as tall as the average man while Gabe towered over her, and neither had fit well in the small bed. The narrow width had heightened their desire for one another, and they’d discovered increased excitement in surreptitious intimacy while other travelers slept. The movement of the train had driven her to satisfaction beyond her most lustful dreams.

Grabbing the reins from Gabe, Fanchon pulled up the horse, then reached across him to engage the carriage brake at the border of her parents' property. When he stared at her in astonishment, she dropped the reins to grasp his knee. She trailed her hand up his thigh to caress his manhood. While she rubbed it gently through his trousers, he offered a weak, use-less protest.

"Have you gone crazy, Fanchon?"

Instead of replying, she brought his head to hers and kissed him. Nothing would show her desire more clearly than the passion in her embrace; nothing else would convince him not to deny her.

Without further complaint, he unbuttoned her shirt to massage her naked breasts. Her nipples hardened almost on contact. His tongue darted around her mouth, delving as deep as possible while his thumbs taunted her hard buds. Suddenly, he broke the kiss to trace her soft lips with the tip of his tongue.

Fanchon moaned and leaned back until her head rested against the carriage top. Gabe's tongue slithered over her chin and down her throat. It left a hot trail of desire across her chest as it slipped lower, over her breast, to her already excited nipple. He circled it several times, then he kissed the tip tenderly and turned his attention to the other breast. Her breaths came in deep, drawn-out pants of excitement.

Oh, how she loved the way he could make her feel. He was such an accomplished lover—always seeing that she was satisfied before he allowed himself release. And the way he toyed with her breasts was never the same two times in a row. Sometimes he barely touched them, while other times he kissed them over and over. Then there were the times when he would suckle gently on her nipples.

Then there was tonight. Oh, tonight! His passion was so strong that he sucked on them like a baby, back and forth, increasing her already strong desire for him. But he was moving too slow for her.

Sliding her fingers into his thick hair, she breathed, "Oh, Gabe."

He said nothing as he slid his hands across her ribs to her waist. A gasp of expectation escaped when she felt his nimble fingers working her trouser buttons. Kissing each hard tip of her breasts, he watched what he was doing as Fanchon lifted her hips to let him slide her trousers down her long, slender legs.

Releasing his own trousers, he slid them over his hips. Then he repositioned himself at her exposed womanhood, knelt on the carriage floor and situated her buttocks at the edge of the seat. Fanchon could hardly wait. Her fingers encircled his forearms as he leaned against the back of the padded seat for support.

But he couldn't gain entrance to her body. Changing his angle, he drove into her as she sighed. She watched him thrust into her for several minutes, working her hips the best she could under the circumstances. This was the most incredible experience of her life. Seeing Gabe burrow into her in the dim moonlight made her want him all the more, made her want to bear his child again. Made her want ...

No longer able to restrain her excitement, she exploded in climactic fulfillment. A few

moments later, he burrowed into her with a lusty growl. Moving her legs out of the way, Gabe pulled up his trousers then sat back on the seat.

“God, Mrs. Freeman,” he asked, “why do you do that to me when I least expect it?”

“Is that a complaint, my darling husband?” she teased as she also dressed.

“Hardly, but I do wonder when this spontaneity is going to end. I’ll sure as hell miss it.”

“Let’s hope it never ends. I wish *you’d* develop a little spontaneity, though.”

Gabe laughed. “When the hell have I had the chance to act first? You’re going to wear me out, Fanchon. The wranglers don’t call me the old man for nothing.”

“I know,” she retaliated. “They call you that because you own the ranch—just like they call me the old woman because I’m your wife.”

A frown crossed his lips. “I wish that were true, Fanchon. I don’t like not being married to you.”

“Neither do I, but I can’t agree until I know if you’ll get the mumps. In the meantime, everybody *thinks* we’re married. And we’re married in our hearts, as well as in God’s eyes. After all, neither of us had committed adultery, had we?”

As soon as she spoke the words, Fanchon regretted it. Now she had to explain what she meant. To her amazement, however, Gabe didn’t seem to notice her wording. Instead, she picked up the reins and urged the horse toward the farmhouse. Why hadn’t he questioned her like she’d expected? When she glanced at him, she saw the concern on his face. Had he been with other women in the five years they were separated? Is that why he was so upset? Whatever the reason, he couldn’t meet her parents in such a state. They would wonder what was wrong. Sliding across the seat, she draped his arm around her shoulders then lay her head against him.

“I’m sorry, darling,” she said. “I didn’t mean to upset you. Let’s forget I said anything. I wanted to swallow my words the second they were out of my mouth, anyway.”

With a brief hug, he gazed into her eyes. “You don’t have anything to be sorry for. You were right. Neither of us had committed adultery, so neither of us should worry about it. Right?”

“Right,” she agreed flatly.

Neither spoke again until Gabe had tied the horse to the hitching post off the porch and lifted Fanchon to the ground. But when he started to reassure her, she laid her hand on his mouth and whispered, “Just hold my hand.”

Kissing her palm, he grasped her hand and led her to the door. Although no light brightened a first-floor window, one came from the window in her parents’ bedroom. At least, they were still awake, even if they weren’t downstairs. When Gabe knocked solidly on the door, he smiled, offering her nonverbal support. Fanchon appreciated his silence. She was too anxious to think clearly, let alone converse intelligently.

As she returned his smile, she thought of Gabe’s initial resistance to visiting. He’d hated the thought of Fanchon being so close to the man who had attacked her, but she’d insisted

that she wanted to visit Gabrielle's grave with him so she could feel like they were a family. It had happened, too—the moment they prayed together over the grave. At last, she felt that their destiny was fulfilled, except for the final detail of the wedding.

What was taking her parents so long to come downstairs? Maybe her mother had seen them and decided to ignore them to show that she didn't want a reconciliation. That was all right. If Jane still held a grudge, fine. She didn't need a repeat of the life she'd lived in Moline.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Gabe's fist raise to knock again. Before he could rap on the door, she grabbed his hand. When he glanced down, he saw a tear seep from her eye.

In a second, he embraced her, whispering, "I'm right here, sweetheart. Don't be afraid."

His lips captured hers as one hand clutched the back of her head and the other held hers. Beside them the door opened. When the couple turned their heads, Carl stood in the doorway, staring at them in astonishment. The single tear on Fanchon's face was joined by others as she examined the gray-haired man. Her father had aged a lot in the four years since she'd last seen him. When he moved his gaze from Gabe, Carl's baby blue eyes locked with his daughter's.

"Daddy?" Fanchon said, "I've missed you."

"Fanchon!" he exclaimed as she flew into his spreading arms. "Oh, baby! Where have you been for so long?"

"Looking for my husband," she explained. "I couldn't come back until we were together."

"Come in. I want to meet the only man in the world who could put up with someone as free-spirited you." While he spoke, they wandered to the living room. "Your mother will be glad to see you, too. I promise. Right now, she's upstairs getting dressed. We were already in bed. That's why it took so long for me to answer the door. We thought you were Astrid."

"But your light was on," Fanchon said. "We thought you were still up, or we never would have bothered you at this hour."

"I *said* we were in bed," Carl replied with a spark of mischief in his eyes. "I didn't say we were sleeping. Your mother and I were ... *busy*."

"Like mother like daughter," Gabe whispered into her ear.

Fanchon giggled, ignoring Gabe as best she could. "Oh, Daddy, you'll never change. Should I wait for Mom? Or do you want to meet your son-in-law right now?"

"Immediately, of course."

"This is my husband, Dad, Gabriel Freeman. Gabe, Carl Sten."

The men shook hands and exchanged pleasantries before Carl motioned for Gabe and Fanchon to sit on the couch, while he sank into a wing chair across from them. They were already chatting casually when Jane came downstairs. Hearing Jane's loud gasp behind her, Fanchon turned in her seat. Excitement coursed through her. Jane looked happy to see her, and she was thrilled to see her mother. Scrambling to her feet, Fanchon raced to Jane and embraced her.

“Mom! I love you, Mom. I’ve missed you.”

After a quick squeeze, Jane pushed her away then stunned Fanchon with pain-filled words. “Not enough to come home before this.”

“I wanted to,” Fanchon responded with a pout.

“Not badly enough, young lady,” Jane shot back. “Four of my seven children left home because of you—five if you count Astrid. Thank the Lord, she had sense to come back.”

“Stop it, Jane,” Carl warned.

“No. My family would still be together if Fanchon hadn’t split it apart.”

Fanchon’s heart ached with shocked sorrow. Somehow, she had to explain to her mother without telling her the whole truth yet. “You don’t understand, Mom. I *couldn’t* come back.”

“Did you hear, Carl? She won’t even call it home.”

“What’s wrong with you, Jane?” Carl asked, joining the women at the bottom of the stairs. “You were so happy when you saw her. You were always worried about her, and you missed her desperately. Now you’re acting like she’s committed a crime by not calling our house her home. It’s not a crime, and this isn’t her home—not anymore. She’s a married woman, Jane. You have to accept that.”

“How can I when she married a man I didn’t even know?”

“Then take the time to get to know him. Fanchon brought him to meet us, so come say hello to our son-in-law.”

Despite her angry protests, Carl drew Jane toward Gabe and introduced the two. With his normal cheer, Gabe acted as though the scene hadn’t occurred. His attitude obviously startled Jane, and she stared at him, accepting his hand. Instead of pumping her arm, he bent over her hand to touch his lips against the back. Clearly not knowing how to react to the charming stranger, she glanced first to Carl then to Fanchon. Fanchon approached the trio with a smile, glad to see how easily Gabe had charmed Jane.

Leave it to Gabe to win over her mother when no one else could. Wrapping her arms around Gabe’s waist, Fanchon rose on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. No wonder she was devoted to him; no wonder her heart filled with pride whenever she looked at him. He was understanding and caring enough to do everything he could to ease the tension in her family. And all it took was a little smile and gallantry!

“What do you think of my husband, Mom?” Fanchon asked. “Does he pass inspection?”

“I ...” Jane stammered. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You could start with an apology that’s only five years too late, dear,” Carl reminded her.

“Oh, yes,” she agreed. “I am sorry, Fanchon. I never should have let my love interfere with your life. I was worried because you’d acted impulsively. I was afraid you were going to get hurt, and I couldn’t bear to see that happen.”

Fanchon smiled at her mother. “You were right about my getting hurt, Mom. Gabe and I

were only reunited recently. After five years, this is the first time we could come here together.”

“Let’s sit down and get reacquainted,” Jane insisted. “Tell me everything that’s happened in the last few years. Oh, and Nels. Hal said that Nels lives in your house, Gabe. What’s his wife like? How are he and his family?”

“Cully has the mumps,” Gabe answered as he sank onto the sofa beside Fanchon and draped his arm around her shoulders, “and your beautiful daughter doesn’t want me to be around him.”

Jane smiled. “Yes, my daughter the nurse. I’m surprised she isn’t sitting at his bedside.”

He grinned, hugging Fanchon against him. “She has priorities now—me.”

Fanchon grimaced, certain Gabe had made a fatal mistake; but to her surprise, Jane laughed. “She always has gotten what she wants. You probably didn’t even know what hit you when you met her.”

“She stole my heart.” He gazed at Fanchon with love in his eyes. “And your stubborn daughter refuses to give it back.” He winked at Jane. “Not that I want it, of course.”

Confused, Fanchon listened to the others chat, rarely offering her own contribution to the conversation. She was too stunned by Gabe’s admission that she’d stolen his heart. It was the first time he’d even suggested that he loved her. She was also surprised that he’d won her mother’s trust in such a short time. Jane obviously adored him. Even Peter, who like Astrid always disagreed with her, liked Gabe when they were introduced.

But to Fanchon’s astonishment, Gabe met Astrid distantly, in an obvious attempt to conceal his irritation from her parents. It appeared that his anger was eating at him like a flea on a dog, and like the dog, he itched to be free of the annoying insect. Sensing his discomfort, Fanchon rose. As desperately as she wanted to stay and be alone with Astrid, talk to her, hug her, and tell her how much she’d missed her, Fanchon knew that Gabe couldn’t bear to be in her presence. Maybe when he finally got used to seeing the twins in the same room, he would get over his obvious anxiety. But in the meantime, it was better that they leave.

“We should go now, Mom,” she said. “I don’t know about Gabe, but I’m exhausted. We had a long trip on a train that has short beds. I’d like to sleep in a real one tonight.”

“Your room is still empty,” Jane offered.

“Thank you,” she replied, “but we already have a room at a Rock Island hotel. And, as much as I’d like to stay longer, we’re leaving tomorrow afternoon. We have to go right back to Wyoming.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. It’s been so long since we’ve had a decent conversation, and you hardly said anything tonight.”

“When did you, Dad and Gabe give me a chance?” she asked merrily. “You and Dad can visit us any time you want.”

## TWENTY-FIVE

In their hotel room, Fanchon questioned Gabe about his reaction to Astrid, but he avoided her gentle queries by kissing her then making love to her. When she returned to the subject later, he feigned sleep so he wouldn't have to answer. He didn't relax until he heard Fanchon's slow, even breathing of a deep slumber.

He wanted to tell her the truth—desperately. But he couldn't after Bianca's strong warning. The guilt of his mistake still consumed him. He hated himself for having been with Astrid. He'd thought he could handle seeing the younger twin, but he'd been wrong. His burden tore at his heart.

How could he tell Fanchon that he felt like an adulterer after what she'd said at Gabrielle's grave? Worse yet, how could he possibly take breakfast at the Sten house without everybody suspecting his feelings? He liked almost everyone he met and made friends easily. Pretending camaraderie with Fanchon's twin would be difficult—if not impossible.

Cuddling closer, Gabe draped his arm over Fanchon's ribs to mold his body against hers. Within moments, he drifted into a troubled sleep, riddled with dreams of viewing the sisters in identical peach dresses and not knowing which was his wife. When asked by Nels to decide between the two, he chose Astrid, who laughed mockingly while Fanchon wept. Each time when he looked for the telltale scar, both twins had one. Each time he made the wrong choice, Fanchon slipped a little farther away.

When Nels demanded a decision, Gabe insisted that Fanchon would still love him no matter how many times he confused the twins. Then he dropped to his knees and begged her forgiveness as she glided to him, her feet not touching the ground. Removing her dress, she revealed her trousers and shirt then took his hand to help him up. Finally, she kissed him, and they walked away from Astrid hand in hand.

At last he was free—of guilt *and* of Astrid's devious, powerful hold on his mind. He was free to sleep peacefully in Fanchon's arms for the rest of the night.

Fanchon frowned, wondering why Gabe had spent such a restless night. Normally, he hardly moved, but that night had been different. He'd tossed and moaned like something was bothering him. As much as she wanted to question him, she had faith he would tell her sooner or later. She had to be patient, supporting him until he was ready to talk.

Her instincts told her that Astrid played a part in Gabe's distress, and she was determined to get one of them to admit it. Rising at dawn, Fanchon dressed and left for the farm after putting a note on her pillow to tell him where she was. Although stunned that she was alone, her family accepted her explanation that Gabe wasn't feeling well that morning. To her



amazement, no one questioned her honesty.

"Can we talk privately?" Astrid asked when the dishes were clean and put away.

"Of course," Fanchon agreed. "I want to hear how you did with the business."

"Let's go to my room."

Upstairs, Fanchon and Astrid sat on the bed as Fanchon began the conversation. "Well? How long did you keep the shop? Did you make a good profit? Mom told me that you didn't have it now, but she didn't go into detail. She said you should be the one to explain."

"I *didn't* make a profit," Astrid said. "I lost everything because *you* abandoned the business."

Fanchon stared at her in shock. How could Astrid claim that she'd abandoned the business? She'd sold her share to Astrid because Astrid deserved it. And how could she have lost everything? "I don't understand, Astrid. You could have done very well. The only paperwork I did for months before I sold to you was entering the receipts. I didn't tell you because I knew how nervous you get when it comes to finances. But *you'd* done the hard work. How did the business fail?"

Astrid's eyes widened in disbelief. "You're serious, aren't you. I did the books myself. I thought you checked them while I was working. You said you did, and I believed you."

"That's *all* I did," Fanchon admitted. "I should have told you that you were doing a good job. Maybe if I had, you would have been more confident taking over the business. I'm sorry, Astrid. I honestly thought you could make it profitable."

"You're sorry?" she repeated in shock. "You weren't even here. Why should *you* be sorry?"

"I should have told you how much you were doing. Maybe things would have been different if I'd been able to stay longer after the sale."

"Why *did* you leave, anyway?" Astrid asked.

"I had to find Gabe. It took four years, but we're finally back together. And we're very happy. I love him even more, too. It's amazing how close two people can grow when there's nothing to do but talk like we did on the trip here. We've discussed all kinds of things about our future together and our pasts separately." Fanchon sighed then crooned, "All of our dreams are coming true."

"I can't imagine you being married. Do you honestly love him?"

"I wish *you* could feel the wonderful sensations of being in the arms of a man you love more than yourself. And before you say anything, I don't mean that in a derogatory sense. I was referring to how I feel about Gabe."

"You love him that *much*?"

"That's right," Fanchon said. "Now tell me about yourself. Is Trevor still courting you?"

"Yes."

"Is there a wedding in the offing?"

"I doubt it. I see other men, too. Last night I was with Fred Blankenship. Do you remember him?"

"Byron's friend. But isn't he married?"

"Patience died a couple of years back. Fred waited a full year before he began courting again, and he called on me first. He calls on a few other women in Moline and Rock Island, too, but he always comes back to me. I think he likes me more than he wants to admit."

"Do you think there's a future with him?"

"There might be."

"Thank goodness. I never did like you spending so much time with Trevor. He's a vile man who will stop at nothing to get what he wants from a woman. But I can't live your life for you. That's the only reason I didn't say anything. If you love him ..."

"Love him!" Astrid exclaimed. "I could *never* love Trevor."

"But I thought you two were having sexual relations. How could you do that if you don't love him?"

"Because I like sex, and Trevor was always willing."

Rising from the bed, Fanchon wandered to the window, her mind centered on her opinion of him. The very thought of anyone being intimate with Trevor Riley was distasteful but knowing that her twin sister did was revolting. "I'd rather you bed Fred."

"He hasn't wanted to yet," Astrid offered without hesitation. "I don't think he's the kind of man who'll have sex with a woman before he marries her."

Turning around, Fanchon leaned against the windowsill and crossed her arms under her breasts. "What do you think of Fred?"

"He's a real gentleman. I like him a lot. I always have—ever since we were in school."

As Fanchon opened her mouth to respond, Jane knocked on the door and announced Gabe's arrival. Excitement flooded through Fanchon. He'd come to the farm on his own accord! Racing down the stairs, she ran straight into his waiting arms. After a brief hug, she greeted him with a passionate kiss, letting her tongue explore his mouth. Then her mother interrupted, offering to make him some breakfast.

"Thanks, Mom," Fanchon said as she gazed up at Gabe, her gaze locked onto his loving stare, "but I would adore cooking for my husband. I haven't had the chance since we found each other. Do you mind?"

"Me? Mind not cooking?" she asked with a laugh. "The kitchen's all yours. I have washing to do, anyway. Don't forget to say good-bye before you leave."

After Gabe ate, the couple went to close her account at the Rock Island bank. With that task complete, Fanchon and Gabe went to visit several of her friends at the Rock Island Arsenal, then went to Ilka's house where Fanchon introduced Gabe to the rest of her family, including Bianca's two sons who were also there. After noon meal with Carl and Jane at the Moline House restaurant, the young couple left town with her parents promising to visit Wyoming as soon as possible.

\*\*\*

"I can't go through with it," Astrid said as she paced Trevor's storeroom. "She's in love with him. Their marriage isn't something she's taking lightly."

"You can't change your mind now," Trevor raged.

"You didn't see how excited Fanchon was when Gabe came to the house. I don't think it's worth a week in his bed anymore."

"Unless you want your folks to hear how many times you've been pregnant, you'll think it's worth it. Or will they understand you killing three babies in the last seven years?"

"You *wouldn't* tell them," she said. "You're only threatening me."

"Turn your back on me now, my dear," he said malevolently as he strode toward the door leading to his store, "and you'll see how much of a threat it is."

\*\*\*

Fanchon's birthday came and went, while Gabe slept in the bunkhouse with the ranch hands. Although Cully no longer showed visible signs of the mumps, he still complained of a sore throat and earache, so Fanchon insisted that Gabe continue the sleeping arrangements for a while longer. About a week after their return, a loud rapping on the front door awakened Fanchon.

As soon as she opened it, Gabe grabbed her around the knees and draped her over his shoulder. Startled, she squealed in surprise then demanded that he put her down. But he wouldn't even speak as he carried her to the barn. Finally, he tossed her into a mound of hay.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"You're the one who complains that I'm never spontaneous."

His lips covered hers in a hungry kiss as he lay down beside her. His hands moved quickly over her nightgown. Her excitement erupted almost instantly; her hands reached for the only clothing he wore—his trousers. Before she could touch him, he grasped her wrists and gently pressed them into the hay beside her head.

Fanchon sighed when he released her wrists the buttons on her flimsy nightgown. Beneath it, she wore. While his tongue clashed with hers, he caressed her naked breasts. His warm hands sent sparks through her body.

He slithered the tip of his tongue down the side of her neck and across her chest to her pink tips. After circling each hard nipple with his tongue, he trailed it down her flat stomach and lower. Instinctively, her fingers entwined in his hair. Again, he removed them, this time sliding her hands under her back. Unbuttoning his trousers, Gabe stood to remove them. His arousal danced in anticipation as he spoke in a husky voice filled with desire.

“You do so much to please me, Fanchon. Tonight, I want to please you.”

“You do, darling. Always.”

“But I want tonight to be different.”

Before she could respond, he kissed her again, kneeling beside her then lifting her far enough to remove her gown. Despite her compulsion to help, Fanchon let him handle the chore. If he wanted to please her that badly, she would let him—even though she’d always hated the idea of being possessed. But that night was different. Gabe’s possession was done with a heated passion that would lead to her ultimate fulfillment. If he wanted to hold her captive, she would let him—this time.

Four times Gabe brought her near satisfaction then suddenly ceased all movement until she calmed somewhat. The fifth time Fanchon could no longer restrain her desire and exploded in a lustful cry of joy. Propping himself up, he thrust into her for several more minutes until she reached the ultimate fulfillment again. Then he drove into her one time.

To Fanchon’s astonishment, Gabe retrieved a multi-colored Indian blanket from a nearby stall. After covering her and blowing out the lantern he’d lit earlier, he crawled under it. Snuggling closer to him, she laid her head on his chest.

“Is this your idea of spontaneity?” she teased.

“Did you find something wrong with it?”

“Oh, no. I had a marvelous time. But I do wonder who taught you that a spontaneous liaison included a lantern that had already been lit and a conveniently located blanket for afterward.”

Gabe chuckled. “You’re too smart for me. I *did* plan it, but it was spontaneous for you, wasn’t it?”

“I can’t deny that. If you keep this up, though, you’ll have a hard time getting rid of me if you contract the mumps.”

“I can hardly wait. Unfortunately, we both know that will never happen. If I get sick, you won’t do anything more than sit on the edge of my bed.”

“You’re right. You’ll only sleep with me in your dreams. And speaking of dreams, why don’t we do some of that right now? You woke me up, and now I’m more tired than I was when I went to bed. So, shut up and go to sleep.”

The couple took little time falling into a restful slumber, but a noise woke Fanchon later. Listening carefully, she heard shuffling nearby. They weren’t alone! Whoever was in the building was coming closer. Who could be using the barn at that time of night? And why? Laying her hand over Gabe’s mouth, she shook his shoulder. When he opened his eyes, she mouthed that they weren’t alone. While they listened, the other people stopped—in the empty stall beside theirs.

“Do you have the money?” came the distinctive Southern drawl.

“Yep,” the wrangler replied. “I been lookin’ forward to this since the last time. I don’t

cotton to waitin' my turn, Mrs. Sten. I'd rather be here every night."

"If I became involved with the cowhands, I'd *never* get out of this God-forsaken country. Only a few more nights, and I'll have enough money to take Cully, Genevieve and Moses away with me. No more living in the middle of nowhere. No more pretending that I like that pushy sister-in-law of mine."

"Mrs. Freeman's one of the nicest ladies I ever met— smart, too. Sometimes she even helps with the work, but Mr. Freeman don't particularly like it. He worries that she'll get hurt."

"I don't give a damn about her. Now shut up and give me what my husband won't."

Gasping in shock, Fanchon covered her mouth. Dolly was prostituting herself to take Nels' son away from him. She couldn't let that happen without trying to stop her sister-in-law. But when she started to rise, Gabe pulled her close and whispered into her ear.

"Let her do it."

"But ..."

He covered her mouth with his hand. "I'll explain later."

Except for rustling noises and lewd moaning, silence reigned in the barn. After a while, Gabe made his way to the stall, where he peered through the cracks between the boards. It had taken years, but now he had Dolly exactly where he wanted her. Turning to Fanchon, he beckoned her to join him with his finger.

She stared at him in disbelief. He *couldn't* want what she thought he did. Shaking his head, he grasped her wrist and drew her to his side. To her dismay, he directed her to look into the neighboring stall. He *did* want what she thought! Reluctantly, she gazed through the crack. In the moonlight shining through a window, Dolly and the hand named Bill were having intercourse. Grimacing in distaste, she sat back on her knees and leaned against Gabe to await their departure.

It hurt to think that Dolly would do such a thing to her brother, but more than the pain, Fanchon felt rage. If Gabe weren't holding her, she would bolt over the stall and tear Dolly apart. Nobody could cuckold her brother like that and get away with it while she was around. If it took the rest of her life, she would get revenge for what Dolly was doing to Nels.

After warning him about what she would do if he said anything about their liaison, Dolly fled from the building. A few moments later Bill left as well.

Filled with anger, Fanchon asked, "How could you make me watch that? Now I'm disgusted and furious."

"Furious enough to get revenge, I hope," Gabe returned, "because that's exactly what the hell I want."

"Yes," she declared. "I'm definitely ready for revenge."

Leaning back against the wall, he pulled her to him while he covered them with the blanket. "Nels loves a woman in Freeborn, and he's been trying to find a way to get out of his marriage for about eighteen months, but he was afraid to try anything, because he thought

Dolly might take Cully away from him—and she would. He'd be devastated if he lost Cully. That's why he had to be so careful. His lady knows how he feels, of course, and so do I. Hopefully, nobody else even has an inkling. With this evidence against Dolly, I can throw her off my land like I wanted to from the second she got here. It'll give me a hell of a lot of pleasure to get her out of my life."

"Why would that give *you* pleasure? Nels is the one she cuckolded."

"I never wanted her here, Fanchon." There was no better time to explain the past to her than now—after she'd been an eyewitness to Dolly's deceit. He inhaled then blew the air from his mouth in a loud gush. "I may as well tell you everything, Fanchon. I can't hide it anymore." He paused but continued before she had time to prod him on. "Dolly Clairmont Sten was the sole force that kept us apart for five years. I was injured in the war, and her family were Union sympathizers. They took me in and kept me alive. She wanted *me*, sweetheart, not Nels. She stole my Ambrotypes and hid them, then she burned the letters and telegrams that I wrote to you while I lived with her family. She even tried to seduce me, but she failed. That was about a month before Nels came looking for me, so she seduced him instead. They spent the better part of five days in a cabin, and she got pregnant. Then she followed us here. Most of the rest you already know, except I overheard her tell Genevieve that she got pregnant on purpose. She knew Nels and I were close because he'd told her. That's why him. She wanted to spend the rest of her life in my house. Nels hasn't touched her since I told him what I overheard."

"No wonder I never got a reply to the monthly telegrams I sent asking if you were back."

"You *what*?" he asked, enraged. "You've been trying to get information about me for all these years? From *Pa*?"

Fanchon giggled and snuggled against him. "You know I've been looking for you, silly. Do you honestly think I would overlook the most obvious place for you to appear—next to Moline, that is. Anyway, I suspect that she burned those telegrams, too."

"That bitch!" he spat out. "You're probably right, Fanchon. She probably *did* burn them." He paused a moment then continued. "Did you honestly wire Pa that often?"

"Of course. You know I was desperate to find you, but I couldn't bear coming back unless you were here. It was hard for me the short time I lived here. That's why I left without telling your father. I didn't want him to follow me. He reminded me too much of you."

"Our love is special, isn't it, Fanchon."

"Very special. Now what are we going to do about Dolly?"

"Get her out of our house."

"How?"

"Listen carefully, Mrs. Freeman, because you're going to have to be a hell of an actress for this."

His scheme was devious, but it would undoubtedly get Dolly out of their house without Cully. After unfolding his in-depth plan, Gabe put on his trousers and left the barn while Fanchon slipped into her nightgown.

Dragging Bill from his bunk, Gabe forced him out of the building then explained what he was doing. Eager to save his job, Bill agreed to help and hurried to the house where Fanchon awaited him in the parlor. As much as Gabe wanted to be present for the scene, he knew he couldn't chance being seen. Dolly would be suspicious from the start.

\*\*\*

"Don't lie to me!" Fanchon shrieked. "I *saw* you with her! How could you do that when you claim to love *me*?"

"You forced me to," Bill returned in an accusatory tone. "*You* wouldn't satisfy me, so I had to find somebody who would!"

"I hate you!" she shouted. "I never want to see you again. If you really loved me, you never would have bedded my sister-in-law! And don't try to deny it because I *saw* you."

Nels stormed down the stairs, demanding, "What the hell's happening?"

"Oh, Nels!" she wailed as she flew into his arms. "He lied to me. He told me that he loved me like Gabe never will, but he took Dolly to the barn tonight. That wouldn't be so bad if he hadn't paid her. I swear it, Nels. He gave her *money* to have sex. How could I have been so naive? How could I have let him convince me that I should chose him over my husband?"

Nels called to Dolly in a voice filled with rage, and she appeared in the parlor in just moments.

"Fanchon says that you're a whore. I want you out of this house and away from my son—*now*. Pack your things and leave. I don't care if you take Genevieve and Moses, but the decision is theirs. As soon as Fanchon is calm enough, I'm going to Cal and have him draw up divorce papers. When that's done, I'm personally taking them to a judge in Cheyenne. With any luck, I'll be free of you within a week. You've caused enough heartache in my family. I won't let you ruin my son's life, too."

"But, Nels," she protested, "that's not what happened. I was raped."

"The hell you were! Fanchon saw everything. Get packed and get out. Now!"

As Dolly fled up the stairs in tears, Nels hugged Fanchon. "Thank you, sis. You just saved my sanity."

"Not to mention Rachel's," she said with an impish smile. "Gabe tells me that you love a woman in Freeborn. I couldn't let you suffer like Gabe and I did. If you'll excuse me, I need to get back to my husband. He's waiting in the barn for me to tell him what happened."

## TWENTY-SIX

When Gabe learned that Nels had sent Dolly away, he embraced Fanchon and kissed her with great passion. One obstacle blocking the way to their destiny had been removed, but they still had to contend with Trevor. Cautiously joyful, Gabe admitted the truth of his marital status to Fanchon's stunned brother. Nels took the news much better than the couple had expected, which pleased her.

The day after Nels left, Fanchon decided Gabe could return to the house. Thrilled that they could sleep together in the master bedroom, she cleaned it thoroughly. In excited anticipation, she filled the room with fresh flowers and candles. But at dinner Gabe announced that a problem on the north range would keep him away all night. Determined to spend the night with him, Fanchon insisted upon helping.

In fact, Fanchon welcomed the reprieve. Despite her enthusiasm, she dreaded going to bed with Gabe in that room. So far, she'd been lucky. When they'd gotten home, Cully had had the mumps. Then they'd left town. Now that they were back and Cully was well, Gabe had to ride the range. How much longer could her luck hold out?

Sleeping on the hard ground wasn't her idea of fun, but she found the idea exciting. Maybe they'd be more desperate for each other's caresses when they finally slept together again. Maybe that desperation would help her forget her anxiety. Maybe ...

"Fanchon?" Gabe whispered. "Are you awake?"

Sitting up in her bedroll, she gazed over at him. "Yes. Is something bothering you?"

"I'm cold. I thought you might be, too." He grinned down at her. "Wanna cuddle?"

"In front of the ranch hands?"

"In front of the world if I have to."

"I'm not cold, but all right." When he lay down beside her, he seemed warm even through his clothes. Laying her hand on his forehead then on his bristly cheek, she released a long sigh. Her luck was holding after all! "Tell me the truth, Gabe. Are you feeling all right?"

"It's nothing. I'm just cold."

"What other symptoms do you have?"

"I *can't* have the mumps," he said. "Cully just recovered. I don't have a sore throat or an earache. All I have is a headache."

"That's one of the symptoms. I'm taking you home."

"I can't go. I have a job to do."



“Need I remind you of the seriousness of this disease?”

“No,” he acquiesced with a disappointed mumble. “I’ll saddle the horses.”

“You’ll lie still,” she insisted. “I’m perfectly capable of saddling a couple of horses. Who do you want to take charge?”

“I don’t know. Bill, I suppose. He was loyal when it came to Dolly, and he’s a good cow-hand. I’ll give him a chance.”

“You rest, and I’ll take care of everything.”

\*\*\*

The next morning Fanchon rode into Freeborn. While in town, she invited Elsa to live on the ranch, since Em and Hal had such cramped living quarters above the office. Even though she claimed that she was glad Fanchon had offered, Elsa opted to remain in Freeborn. Disappointed, Fanchon continued her schedule.

She’d thought Elsa would *want* to live with her. Under normal circumstances, she would be glad Elsa was independent, but these weren’t normal circumstances. Not only was she now playing mother to a three-year-old boy, she wanted to nurse Gabe. He most likely wouldn’t die, but their dreams of a family could, and she was determined to keep that from happening. She also had to handle all the ranch paperwork, as well as supervise the cowboys. She needed Elsa’s help, but she couldn’t bring herself to ask for it.

There was another reason for wanting Elsa to live with them, but what could it be? All she knew was that Elsa’s presence had something to do with the reason. So did the fact that Elsa knew her very well. Fanchon sensed that someday Elsa’s knowledge would be critical. Why? The only possible trouble was from Trevor, and Elsa couldn’t help with him.

Fanchon released a long sigh. If Elsa wouldn’t help her, maybe somebody else would. Opening the door to Dr. Robert Samuels’ office, she entered and greeted him.

“Ah, Mrs. Freeman,” the tall, middle-aged man returned as he looked up from his medicinal inventory. “I’m glad to see you. Are you busy today? I’m up to my ears in a shipment of medicine. I could use your help.”

“I afraid I am,” Fanchon said. “I think my husband has the mumps, and I’d like your professional opinion. That’s why I’m here.”

Rob chuckled. “From what I hear, you know as much about medicine as I do. You could trust your own opinion.”

“I do, but Gabe’s my husband. I want to be positive I made the right diagnosis, because he doesn’t want to stay in bed if he doesn’t have to. Besides, it isn’t wise for a doctor to diagnose his loved ones. All I want is a second opinion.”

“All right, Mrs. Freeman,” he agreed. “I’ll come on one condition—that we dispense with the formalities if we’re going to work together. I go by Rob.”

\*\*\*

Throughout Gabe's illness, Fanchon insisted that Rob examine him daily, despite Gabe's verbose protests. He didn't like the constant treatment, but since he wanted to please her, he tolerated it. What he hated most was the doctor's tone of voice whenever Fanchon's name was mentioned. Obviously, Riley wasn't the only man he had to watch. If word got around that he and Fanchon weren't married, he would have to contend with Rob, too. He needed to convince her to repeat their vows soon so he wouldn't have to worry about other men stealing her. But whenever he broached the subject, Fanchon refused to discuss it, even when he accused her of not loving him enough.

That time she'd kissed him on the cheek and said, "That's not true, and you know it. I only want the time to be perfect. I want our second wedding night to be even more special than the first."

\*\*\*

"Freeman's cowhand said he has to stay in bed," Trevor explained as he sat across from Astrid at the dinner table. "Now's the time to act. He'll be in bed for several more days, so we have plenty of time to get to the ranch."

Astrid hated having this conversation, but she also knew there was no way to avoid it. Then a more pressing question came to her mind. "Why is it so important for you to get even with Fanchon? You didn't die, and Fanchon doesn't even live near here anymore. Why not leave her alone?"

"Revenge," Trevor said. "Pure and simple."

An unexpected sensation of pain—but not pain—gripped her abdomen, and she struggled to remain calm. Questions she hadn't previously considered burst to the front of her mind. All of a sudden, she knew there was more behind Trevor's proclamation of revenge, and she was determined to learn what it was. "There are some things I don't understand, Trevor. Why did she shoot you? Fanchon was never a violent person—unless she was provoked. And why would you meet her at the Rock in the first place? You always told me that you weren't interested in her."

"I was curious. She said something about wanting to try what *we* did at night." During his faltering reply, Astrid studied him, her forehead creased in suspicion. "Let's get back on the subject. Be ready to leave tomorrow morning."

Trevor was hiding something that he had no intention of confiding to her. And that something had something to do with Fanchon and Gabe. Well, she wouldn't agree to this. She refused to be party to anything that might harm them.

"I've changed my mind," she said. "I don't want to go anymore."

“Oh? I wonder what your parents—not to mention Fred Blankenship—will think about you killing your babies.”

Stunned, Astrid stared at him with her mouth gaping. She’d been extra careful to hide her friendship with Fred from Trevor, but he’d discovered the truth on his own. Now what would she do? Trevor could ruin her chances with the only man she’d ever truly been interested in.

Before she could speak, Trevor offered her a menacing grin. “You didn’t think you could see him without me hearing of it, did you? I know how close you are, too.”

“You wouldn’t actually tell him, would you?” she asked in disbelief.

“Try me. Maybe I will, anyway—after we get back from Wyoming. It will all depend on how cooperative you are. You haven’t been that exciting in bed lately, either. Has your mind been on Blankenship instead of me?”

Astrid knocked over her chair as she scrambled to her feet. How dare he say something like that! Trevor was the worst lover she’d ever had, even if he was the most willing. Infuriated, she propped herself up on the table with both hands and glared at him, declaring, “If it had been, you damned, conceited idiot, I would have been *better*.”

Returning her glare, Trevor rose, his movements slow and intentional. “The train leaves at seven in the morning. Be there. If you’re not, I’ll cancel our reservations and tell Blankenship everything. It should be interesting to see his reaction.”

This was the last straw! She refused to let Trevor ruin her life when there was still a chance to salvage it. Granted, she didn’t know how she would do it yet, but she would. Spinning away from him, Astrid rushed out of the house, slamming the door behind her.

Fanchon was right. Trevor was a vile man. He may have threatened to tell Fred about their affair, but that didn’t necessarily mean it would matter. If she got there first, she could strike before Trevor had a chance.

Deep in thought, she continued down the street at a slower pace. Making her way up the steep hill, she turned onto the road at the top. From there she walked to the Blankenship residence overlooking the Mississippi River. With a deep breath, she knocked on the door. Before she could decide if she should take Trevor seriously, she had to see what Fred thought of their relationship.

When the door opened, she smiled down at the dark-haired ten-year-old boy. “Good evening, Tad. How are you tonight?”

“Fine,” he replied with a blush. “Dad! Miss Sten is here!”

Fred’s footsteps grew louder as he hurried across the hardwood floor of the sitting room. When she saw the average-height man with black hair and deep blue eyes, all the feelings she’d experienced in his presence swept over her. Every time they were together since he moved to Moline when she was ten, she felt the same exhilaration. If this was how Fanchon felt about Gabe, she understood why her twin had spent so many years searching for him. She would do the same thing if Fred ever disappeared. That was why she needed to find out if she had a future with him.

“Come in, Astrid.” Moving his son aside by grasping his upper arm, he said, “Your brothers and sisters are ready for bed, Tad. Would you please read them their book tonight so I can spend some time alone with Miss Sten?”

“Would you mind if I do it?” she asked as she entered the house.

“You *want* to?” he asked in astonishment.

Astrid smiled. “Of course. I always read to my nephews and nieces when I’m with them at bedtime. I enjoy it.”

“Patience hated it. She always made me do it when they wanted a book. But I’m used to it now. I do it almost every night.”

“Tonight, *I’ll* do it. You go relax. I’ll be with you in a few minutes. Come along, Tad,” she said, draping her arm around his shoulders. “You can tell me what I’m supposed to do. I’m used to my nephews’ and nieces’ bedtime schedules, but I don’t know what happens around here.”

Even when Fanchon was pregnant, Astrid couldn’t envision the type of mother she would make. Fanchon had always been subdued around the children. She, on the other hand, eagerly gave them her love. Maybe Fanchon would be a reserved mother, but she herself would be active in all aspects of her off-springs’ lives.

Having been forced to murder her own babies long before they were born had been the most horrifying experiences of her life. And she prayed that she never had to do it again. Fred’s five children compensated for her losses, but they would never replace her babies.

With the three boys and two girls tucked into bed, Astrid returned to the sitting room where Fred had lit a log in the fireplace. Smiling, she strolled up behind him. “You have darling children, Fred. I enjoy them.”

He turned toward her and gazed into her eyes. “Do you honestly, Astrid? Or are you just saying it to be nice?”

“Fanchon and I are alike in one way, Fred. We both say what we mean. Can’t you tell that I like them?”

“Of course, I can. I was just afraid to believe it.” Escorting her to the sofa with his hand on the small of her back, they sat down together before he continued. “I heard a rumor at work today, Astrid. Rumors are always flying around John Deere, but they’ve never concerned you before. I need to know if it’s true. The men told me that I shouldn’t defend you—because of my children. They told me to think twice before ...”

Studying him, she tried to read his mind. Was he going to tell her something more than a friendship existed between them? Oh, how she hoped so, even if it wasn’t advisable right now. To avoid her thoughts, she questioned him hesitantly. “What was the rumor?”

“They say that you’ve been ... that you’ve been ... that you’ve *known* several men in Moline and Rock Island. Physically I mean, like in the Bible. They say that I’m a fool to court you. They say you’re not the kind of woman who should be around my children.”

As difficult as it was, Astrid knew that she had to meet his desolate gaze. What his coworkers at John Deere Plow Works had said hurt him more than she’d imagined it could.

For the first time in her life, she regretted her immature actions. “Before I answer you, I need to know something. Would it make a difference if the rumors are true?”

“I don’t know, Astrid,” he answered. “It would be hard to believe that you care for me as much as I do you. You’ve never shown me that you’d like a physical relationship with me.”

“I didn’t know that *you* wanted one,” she replied. “You’ve never even kissed me.”

“It isn’t because I didn’t want to. It’s been a long time since I courted anyone, Astrid, so I don’t know what to do. And you frighten me. You’re so sure of yourself—just like Fanchon. But *she’s* sure of herself in everything. You have a vulnerability that’s absolutely enchanting. I’ve thought that since the first day I noticed you—about eight years ago.”

“Then before I answer your question, would you kiss me?”

Fred embraced her, letting his lips capture hers in a sweet kiss like none Trevor had ever given her. This was it! She’d finally found true love. Her heart constricted, and her breathing became heavy in an instant. This had to be how Fanchon felt with Gabe. As much as she hated to leave Fred, she *had* to go with Trevor—to divert trouble.

Reluctantly pushing away from him, she spoke in a near whisper. “I’m sorry, Fred, but the rumors are true. I was like that for years.”

“I don’t care. Astrid, your past won’t interfere with our relationship if it stays there. Do you think you can be faithful to one man?”

Astrid hated herself for doing this to Fred, but she didn’t have a choice. She had to be as honest as she could without revealing details if she wanted a future with him. Tenderly grasping his hand, she replied, “I can’t answer that right now, Fred. First, I have to visit Fanchon. I leave in the morning.”

“How long will you be gone?” he asked in concern.

“Anywhere from two weeks to a month. I’ll contact you if it takes longer.”

“Before you go, there’s something I have to say.” Kneeling on the floor in front of her, he proclaimed, “I love you, Astrid. When you come back, will you marry me?”

Her heart tore at the thought of what she had to announce. She wanted to scream yes, but that would be foolhardy. The best she could do was answer truthfully and hope that he would understand. “I can’t answer that, either, Fred. I love you, too, but I can’t say yes until I’ve done what I have to. Let me leave knowing that we’re in love. When I come back, I’ll explain why I went. If what I tell you doesn’t change your mind, you can ask me again—and I’ll accept your proposal in an instant.”

\*\*\*

Entering the master bedroom now that Gabe was well again was the most painful thing Fanchon had ever done. She wanted everything to be all right, but it hadn’t been. He’d bedded her as she’d wanted, and as always, he’d more than satisfied her. But the ache in her heart was still there. For more than two hours, she struggled to fall asleep. At least, Gabe had

quickly gone to his dreams. Dreams! That was why she was afraid to sleep, until exhaustion finally won out over fear.

*The scotch burned as it slid down her throat. Why had she agreed to toast their anniversary? The vile-tasting liquor was hard enough to swallow without his words of what would have been under different circumstances. How could Jacob talk about Gabe like he was dead? He was alive, and she was determined to prove it. But first she had to finish the terrible liquid in the glass she held.*

*Watching Jacob tilt back his head and swallow everything in his glass, she followed suit. What better way to get rid of it than quickly? To her surprise, he gazed at her in amazement while he refilled her glass. Instead of drinking it, she set it down on a nearby table. As they chatted, she picked up the scotch and took a couple swallows. That time it went down easier. Holding it, she sipped on it while they continued their conversation. Sometime during the evening, he poured more of the amber liquid into her glass.*

*Eventually, Jacob suggested that they go to bed, and she agreed. Blowing out the lamps in the parlor, Jacob extended his hand to help her up. Instead, she rose on her own and discovered that she couldn't stand without wobbling. Thank goodness, Jacob was strong enough to carry her upstairs. She never would have made it on her own. When he set her on her feet, she noticed that the room seemed different. Why? A moment later she felt his fingers working the buttons on her shirt.*

*"What're you doin', Jacob?" she asked drunkenly.*

*"He'pin' you undress, sweetheart. You cain't do it yerse'f."*

*"Sure, I can. Watch." But when she tried to unbutton her shirt, she found she couldn't. "I s'pose I can't."*

*In minutes he disrobed her and helped her into bed. Funny, it seemed awfully big. Then Jacob took off his clothes and got into bed. Why was he kissing her like that? Who cared? He looked like Gabe; he sounded like Gabe; he even kissed like Gabe. The instant Jacob's hands began to examine her nude body, she sobered.*

*She wasn't in her own room. She was in Jacob's! She had to get out of his bed and out of his house. What had she done? How could she have let this happen? But when she frantically tried to break his kiss, he became more demanding. Finally, the worst happened—he entered her against her will.*

*Breaking the kiss, she cried out. "No! Stop! I don't want this. I want my husband, not you. Leave me alone!"*

*"Fanchon," she heard. "Wake up, Fanchon. It's all right. I'm here. Nobody's going to hurt you."*

*Opening her eyes, she saw Gabe bending over her and threw her arms around his neck. She hugged him tightly while he slid his arms under her. Tears sprang to her eyes as she sobbed through the events of four years earlier on their anniversary.*

"It wasn't your fault, sweetheart," he comforted. "You didn't know what you were doing if you were that drunk, and you certainly didn't know that I'd gotten the divorce. You didn't commit adultery, Fanchon. Try to see it that way."

"I can't because I love you."

Despite his fury at his deceased father, Gabe remained calm. He had to if he wanted to ease Fanchon's unnecessary guilty conscience. "He *had* to do it then, Fanchon. He knew I'd be home within a week. I'd telegraphed him through Fort Bridger, and he *had* to have gotten the message by then. I wanted him to know that I was staying in Moline until our anniversary in case you came back. I *knew* something was bothering him when I got here. He was drinking more than he ever had. Now I understand why. He must have felt guilty about what he'd done. It also explains why you never came back to see if I was here. You were afraid to be alone with him, weren't you?"

"Yes," she admitted.

"As long as you bared your soul, it's time for me to tell you something. I know you're still curious about why I couldn't stand to be around Astrid."

"Oh, my God," Fanchon gasped, horrified. "No wonder you understand. You were with my twin."

"I'm just as sorry as you are, too. I've suffered for years because of what I did. I did it willingly, though, because I didn't know you had a twin sister. You never told me, and it never came up in conversation with Nels. I thought she was you, but it's a mistake that will never happen again. I swear it."

After all her past experiences with her twin, Fanchon could sympathize with him. "It doesn't matter, darling. It's all in the past. Can we forgive and forget? I forgive you, because I know how deceitful Astrid can be. She loves to imitate me, and she's quite good at it. But the question here is can you forgive *me*?"

"Definitely. It's my father I'll have trouble forgiving. I need you too much, Fanchon. You'll never do anything so bad that I won't be able to forgive you."

She snuggled against him with a soft smile. That was the first time he'd ever said that he needed her. And if he needed her as much as he claimed, maybe the words she longed to hear more than any others would eventually follow.

## TWENTY-SEVEN

“What’s Rachel’s last name?” Fanchon asked at breakfast the next morning. “I thought I’d visit her while I’m in town. She’d probably like to know where Nels went and why.”

“Her last name is Crandall,” he replied with a sheepish grin. “And I have no doubt that Nels already told her about his plans. Now tell me the *real* reason you want to visit her.”

Fanchon shook her head as a slow grin crossed her lips. “You understand me too well, Mr. Freeman. I want to see her and find out what she’s like. There’s nothing wrong with that, is there?”

“Of course not, but I can *tell* you what she looks like. She has blonde hair—a cross between yours and mine—and dark blue eyes. She’s tall, and she’s very pretty.”

“And since when do you notice a pretty woman?” she asked.

“I may have committed my life to you, my dear,” he retaliated, “but I’m *not* blind.”

“You’re full of spun this morning, aren’t you? What brought on your good mood?” She paused a moment then asked, “Or need I ask?”

“You needn’t. I had no trouble getting used to waking up with you in my arms. In fact, I was used to it the morning after our wedding. That was the hardest part of going to war.”

With a blush, she bent over her food. This playful conversation had taken a dramatic turn to the serious, and she didn’t want to hear his words. For some reason, it hurt her deeply that he still didn’t love her, despite all of the things he said that insinuated he did. To steer their conversation into yet another direction, she asked, “What about Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds? Things have been so hectic I haven’t had time to ask when they want to take the weekend off that they missed while you were sick. Do you know?”

“They’re planning on *this* weekend,” Gabe said as she rounded the table to stand beside him. “Is that all right with you?”

“Fine. Why don’t we give them two weeks? They were so helpful while you were sick that they deserve it.”

Grasping her wrist, he pulled her into his lap. “Whatever you want, my dear.”

“Thank you.” After a quick kiss, she added, “I love you, darling. And I know you’re worried about me working with Rob Samuels, but I’m not interested in him.”

Sighing, he gave her waist a tender squeeze. “Rob’s certainly attracted to you, Fanchon. I can see it in his eyes.”

“So can I, but there’s only one man I want to spend my life with—you. Now, I have to go.”



“Until you’re my wife again, I can’t help but worry about other men. Let’s set a wedding date.”

Giggling, she wrapped her arms around his neck. “Would you *please* stop fretting? You’re the only man I want, and we’ll be husband and wife again by Christmas. I promise.” After a quick peck to his temple, she dashed to the door then stopped to gaze at him over her shoulder. “Be careful today. If you feel weak, rest for a while. I’ll see you tonight.”

Hurrying from the house, Fanchon raced to the barn. She saddled and bridled the horse Gabe had given her, the entire time battling an unexplained sensation of uneasiness. At first, she shrugged off the feeling, but it returned with greater intensity when Astrid’s image flashed across her mind. Something was wrong. She could *feel* it. Before she left the ranch, she needed her derringer. Returning to the bedroom, she took her weapon from her dresser then went to the study for the bullets in the gun cabinet. Now she was protected.

On the way into town, she stopped to test her gun and do some target practice. It had been a long time since she’d fired the tiny pistol. Now that she and Gabe were back together she refused to let their future go without a fight. Satisfied she could at least do damage with the derringer, she slid it into her boot and continued into town.

Fanchon dismissed meeting Rachel and went to the doctor’s office. They spent most of the morning organizing the medicines and locking the potentially dangerous or addictive drugs in a cabinet. They were so involved in their work that neither realized it was almost two until Fanchon’s stomach began to growl.

“Down girl,” Rob teased as he patted her stomach. “I’ll put some food in you in a couple minutes.”

Fanchon wanted to lash out at him, but she restrained herself. She hated men other than Gabe touching her, and Rob doing so made her very uneasy. If she was going to work with the doctor, she needed to deal with this situation. First, she would try ignoring his physical act, in case he was using levity to relieve his exhaustion from their work. Laughing, Fanchon said, “I don’t usually get so involved in my work that I forget to eat. It’s one of the greatest joys in my life.”

“Then let’s feed you,” he replied. “I can’t have my favorite nurse starving to death on the premises.”

While making some sandwiches, Rob and Fanchon joked and teased one another, creating an atmosphere of relaxation. The mood continued throughout their lunch but changed almost the minute Fanchon began washing their dishes in the large, metal pan on the counter.

Leaning against the counter, Rob examined her overtly. “You’re a very beautiful young woman, Fanchon.”

Her guard rose in an instant. She had to put a stop to his obvious attempt at seduction. “My husband likes to think so.”

“Your husband?” he asked. “That’s not what I heard on one of my visits to the ranch. You two were discussing your wedding—in the future.”

Astounded, Fanchon stared at him. No wonder Gabe was worried about Rob coming between them. Rob had overheard them and thought he could take her away from Gabe if he tried hard enough. She would have to change *that* attitude. "That was a mistake caused by the war. Gabe thought he was paralyzed for life, and he didn't want me feeling obligated to him."

"Still, you aren't married," he said as he laid his hand on her shoulder.

How would she extricate herself from this without causing hard feelings? She hated to give up her nursing and midwifery careers, but she would if it meant saving her relationship with Gabe. Ignoring his touch, Fanchon continued. "Gabe and I are very happy. We're going to repeat our vows."

"When?" Rob braved more intimate contact to caress her neck. His thumb taunted the skin just below her ear.

"Before Christmas." With a downward movement of her head, Fanchon stepped sideways to break contact.

"In other words, you don't have a definite wedding date. He isn't the only man on the frontier, Fanchon. There are others who would like a chance to win your hand."

"Namely you."

"For one. But there are others in town who've expressed a longing for the woman Freeborn was named after."

"Longing is not love. Gabe loves me, Rob." As soon as she uttered the words, she knew it was true. Gabe had to love her if he was so worried about other men taking her away from him. Now all she had to do was get him to say the words. To her surprise, that meant a lot to her now, when it never had before. "And I love Gabe. No man will ever come between us."

"You don't sound very sure of yourself." Embracing her from behind, he nuzzled the side of her neck. "It sounds like you're trying to convince yourself. Let me show you that another man could please you as easily as Freeman."

As much as she hated to do it, now was the time to get the derringer out of her boot. But how could she when he held her? Without thinking, she lifted her foot and scratched her leg just above her boot. When his lips caressed her cheek, she scratched her leg again, complaining that she couldn't reach the itch. Then she slipped her hand inside her boot and grasped the weapon. Pulling it out, she turned in his arms and pressed it into his stomach. His shocked expression brought a menacing grin to her lips.

"Do you want to see if I'll use it?" she asked.

"No."

"Then let go of me—right now." His arms dropped to his sides. "Don't *ever* do that again, or next time I'll use it. I nearly killed a man who wanted the same thing you do. Now, I'm going to continue my career without worrying about your unwanted advances. Either you get used to me being here or I'll open my own nursing and midwifery service. That would take away some of your patients, because I won't charge nearly as much for my services. And I'll take a trade of goods instead of only money like you. I firmly believe that I could lower

your income without damaging my reputation or yours.”

“I don’t see why we can’t work together,” Rob agreed. “I won’t try anything again.”

“Good. You finish the dishes. I’m leaving for the day. I have a husband waiting.”

With those words, Fanchon dropped the derringer back in her boot and hurried away. No wonder she’d felt uneasy that morning. Her instinct had been telling her that Rob wanted more than a professional relationship. Now that the incident was behind them, she should relax. But she didn’t. Why did she still sense danger? Should she discuss it with Gabe or dismiss it as a reaction to what had happened?

She couldn’t tell Gabe that Rob had tried to seduce her. He would be furious and insist that she quit work. Then she would get mad because he wanted to tell her how to live her life. The incident would surely turn into their first real argument. She had to keep the afternoon’s events secret—at least until they were married again.

Besides, Rob would probably prove that he wouldn’t repeat the act, which was all she needed to still her sense of danger. Proof would give her more comfort than Gabe could concerning her working conditions. To be Rob’s nurse, she had to trust him. The only way she could do that was to give him a second chance.

\*\*\*

Days passed, and Genevieve and Moses went to see Dolly in Georgia. Fanchon still carried her derringer, her instinct as strong as ever. Astrid was on her mind almost constantly now, although she couldn’t understand why. In all the years they’d been separated, she’d rarely thought of her more than in passing, except on their birthday when she always felt a deep loss and spent a good portion of the day crying after she told the air “Happy birthday, Astrid—wherever you are. Sometimes, I can’t believe how much I miss you.”

But in the last three days she couldn’t even force her mind to other matters. Nels was due home that afternoon, and she could discuss her feelings with him instead of burdening Gabe. She had no doubt that Nels would understand. After all, he’d grown up with the twins and knew all about their special bond, despite their usual differing opinions.

To her dismay, however, he didn’t appear for dinner. Something was wrong for him, too. She knew it as surely as she’d known that Rob would try to seduce her.

“Gabe,” she said as they did dishes after dinner, “something’s been bothering me for several days now. Could we talk about it?”

“You can discuss anything with me, Fanchon. What is it?”

“I’m worried about Astrid. I’ve been thinking about her almost constantly for three days, and I have this unshakable sense of danger. I *know* it has something to do with her.”

“Do you have any reason to believe something happened to her?” he asked, accepting a dish to dry.

“No. It’s a *feeling*. We’ve always known when the other needed help—before either of us

said anything. It's an instinct that some twins have. We were never close, but we do love each other. And there's a bond we could never break. That bond's telling me that she's in danger."

"Do you want to go back to Moline? I have no objections, but I can't go with you. I've already spent too much time away from the ranch lately."

"I'd love to ease my mind," Fanchon admitted, "but Astrid's not in Moline."

"How do you know that?" he asked.

"Our bond." Fanchon dropped her rag into the soapy water to embrace him. "Thank you for offering to let me go. Now I know that you'll never hold me back from something that I want. I feel the same way toward you."

"You'd better, Mrs. Freeman," he said as he returned her hold. "There are going to be plenty of times that I'll have to leave you here while I head out on a trail drive."

"Guess what, my darling husband," she whispered. He stared at her curiously, obviously stunned by her reaction. "I'm hungry."

"How *could* you be? You only finished eating everything in sight a few minutes ago."

Laying her hand on his manhood, she grinned. "Not everything."

Gabe laughed. "You're insatiable."

"And you love it," she returned in a seductive voice. "How would you like to do something spontaneous? With Cully at Aunt Em's until Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds come home, we have the house to ourselves."

"When are you going to start calling them Genevieve and Moses?" Inhaling several times while Fanchon massaged him, he grew under her tender touch. "Besides, Nels could walk in that door any second. What would he think?"

Gabe's words about the butler at the governor's mansion flashed through her mind before she said, "He'd think you're in the arms of the most beautiful woman in the world, then he'd go out and find his own woman. He'd be jealous of us because we have a destiny that transcends logic—and because we can't get enough of each other. Are you going to reject me, my darling husband? Or have you already gotten enough of me?"

"*That*, my dear ..." He crushed her body against his and lowered his head. "... is impossible."

His lips caught hers heatedly, and Fanchon let her knees buckle. The act forced Gabe to tighten his hold her and lower her to the floor. As soon as she was lying down, she grabbed his shirt lapels and yanked them apart. Material ripped; several buttons clattered across the floor.

Gabe tore his mouth from hers and stared down at her in shock. Again, she'd taken him by surprise. She laid her hand on his crotch and began to massage him as he moaned, "Oh, God, Fanchon."

Without stopping her movements, he quickly unbuttoned her shirt. His hands cupped her breasts at the same moment his lips reclaimed hers. His tongue thrust into her mouth, dueling with hers. Then her anxious fingers fumbled with the buttons on his trousers, and he

groaned into her mouth.

She touched his hardness, caressed him, massaged him. That night she'd worn a dress for dinner, for this precise reason. And now Gabe understood the reason. She could tell, because he tugged at the skirt until it was around her hips.

Spreading her legs, she led him into her body. Their union was as satisfying as ever, yet something was different, something that gave their intimacy a new dimension.

When they were both spent, Gabe rolled off her and lay back on the floor. Fanchon laid her head on his chest and toyed with the hair covering it. He kissed her soft tresses and caressed her shoulder.

"Fanchon Freeman," he praised, "you are the most precious gift I've ever received. But I have a feeling that you're going to wear me out before we have a chance to say our vows again."

Her heart swelled with happiness. She was his most precious gift. That *had* to mean that he loved her. And one of these days—hopefully soon—she was going to get him to say the words. In the meantime, though, he was getting closer, and that would suffice for now. Knowing that, she decided to keep their conversation light, and taunted, "It's all *your* fault, my darling husband. You're by far the most attractive, most desirable, most *attractive* man I've ever laid eyes on."

"I'm serious, sweetheart. I don't know what I would do if something ever happened to you. I don't think I could keep on living. I *need* you, Fanchon, and I never want to lose you."

"You won't lose me, Gabe." She gave his chest a lingering kiss. "I'm indestructible."

"No, you're not. I know you're teasing me right now, but I'm completely serious. Don't ever fool yourself by believing that you're indestructible. And there's something you need to know right now while I'm mentioning the seriousness of my feelings for you. If I have to, I'll give my *life* to keep you from leaving me."

Fanchon wanted to say something, but she didn't know what. He was being too serious for her liking, but he still wasn't saying the words she wanted to hear. One of these days, though ... Dear, God, she wanted to hear those words!

\*\*\*

A shot rang out, and the man by the campfire crumpled to the ground. A woman's scream of horror pierced the air. "Nels!"

Astrid ran to her brother's side and knelt over him. If she'd known Trevor would harm her family, she never would have agreed to help him. Four years ago, all she could think of was getting even with Fanchon by spending a week in Gabe's bed without him suspecting. Now none of that mattered; now she wanted to spend a lifetime in Fred's bed. Everything had changed in less than a month—everything but her commitment to help Trevor.

"Get up," Trevor ordered.

"You shot Nels," she declared as tears streamed down her cheeks. "How *could* you?"

"He's in our way." Grabbing her upper arm in a vise-like grip, he dragged her to her feet. "Get on your damned horse. We have a schedule, and we're already behind."

"No. Nels needs me."

"He *needs* an undertaker. Now get the hell on your horse."

"No!" she denied. "I won't do anything for you ever again. You'll have to kill me, or I'll tell Fanchon and Gabe what you're planning."

Seething with anger, Trevor hit her across her right cheek with the back of his right hand. Pain shot through her face. Her head snapped to the left by the force of his blow; her fearful cry echoed in the still night. When she returned her frightened gaze to him, he poised to strike again. Instead, he pushed her to the sandy ground. Propping herself up on her elbows, she stared at him with wide eyes as he dropped to his knees, straddling her.

Astrid froze with fear. He viciously tore at her clothes, tossing her pants and shirt into the nearby campfire. Within seconds, she lay naked beneath him. She wanted to scream, but nothing would come out. If only Nels would open his eye and see what was happening! But that wouldn't happen. For the first time in her life, she had to fight on her own. Drawing up her courage as well as her strength, she pushed Trevor away and scrambled to her feet. She'd taken only two steps when she heard his threatening voice.

"One more move, and I shoot." Astrid halted instantly. "And I thought Fanchon was the smart twin. Lay down again."

Knowing it was best not to defy Trevor, Astrid did as he instructed. As she lay on the ground, his gun constantly pointed at her temple, she centered her mind on how she could warn her twin. Somehow, she had to escape from Trevor, but that seemed impossible.

Then it dawned on her. She could die at any moment. She might never see Fred again. She'd finally found love, but she might never even sleep in the arms of the man of her affections. Her tear-filled gaze fell upon Nels, only a couple of feet from her. How could she think of herself and Fanchon when Nels was the one who needed help?

At last, Trevor released her and ordered her to dress in the clothes he'd stolen from the wash hanging outside the ranch house.

\*\*\*

Rolling over in his sleep, Gabe hit Fanchon squarely in the cheek with his elbow, and she cried out in pain. Startled, he bolted to sit up in bed. "What's the matter?"

"You elbowed me," she explained with a smile. "I didn't realize that sleeping with you could be so dangerous."

"I'm sorry, my dear." He lay down again and took her into his arms as she snuggled against him. "Are you all right?"

"It's probably nothing more serious than a bruise. At least, you didn't wake me up."

"Haven't you gone to sleep yet?" he asked in concern. "You're more worried about Astrid and Nels than I thought."

"There's nothing I can do to help Astrid," Fanchon replied, "because I don't know where she is. But I do wish you'd believe that there's a reason why I'm concern about Nels."

Rubbing her shoulder, he asked, "Would you like me to go look for him?"

"Would you? It would mean an awful lot to me."

"When I bring Nels home safe, you can *show* me how much." After lighting the lamp, Fanchon got out of bed and began to rummage through her wardrobe while Gabe watched curiously as he dressed. "What are you looking for?"

"My blue and gray plaid shirt. I have two of them, and I can't find either one."

"You wore one yesterday, but I don't understand. Why not wear something else? Why is it so important to wear that one?"

"Because I want to." Glancing over her shoulder, she winked at him. "You don't understand female fashion sense at all."

"I don't even understand why you want to get dressed. Why don't you go back to bed and get some sleep?"

"I want to be up in case Nels comes home. I want to find out why he's two days late. That's logical, isn't it?"

"Will you at least try to sleep on the sofa in the parlor?" Gabe asked in concern for her wellbeing. "If you light a lamp, he'll come in to see who's up. Then you can talk to him."

"All right—as soon as I find my shirt. Oh, what the heck! I'll wear the one I had on yesterday."

After pulling on his boots, Gabe strode to embrace her. "I suppose every woman defies logic at one time or another, even my beautiful bride-again-to-be."

## TWENTY-EIGHT

According to the clock on the fireplace mantle, Gabe had been gone nearly two hours, but Fanchon was still awake. If only she knew how Nels and Astrid were! Maybe then she could rest. Even though her concern for Nels lessened when Gabe left, the strong, almost telepathic calling from Astrid increased.

After wandering from window to window, upstairs and down, several times, Fanchon lay down on the sofa. Why wouldn't her mind rest about Astrid? The bond between them had never been as strong as it had been those last few days, and Fanchon was growing more worried as time passed.

A hand clamped over her mouth, and her eyes popped open. The only light in the room came from the lamp on the table by the door. Still, she recognized the shadowy face glaring down at her. Trevor had walked into Gabe's trap—but Gabe had walked out of it! Fear coursed through her as she stared up at her assailant.

In a desperate attempt to save herself, she grabbed Trevor's arm and jerked it with all her strength. He flew over the divan onto the floor beside her. As he landed on his back, Fanchon rose, jabbing her foot into his stomach. A raspy grunt of air gushed from his lungs.

"Fanchon!" Astrid screamed. "Run!"

Stunned, Fanchon froze. Astrid was clad in clothing identical to her own, right down to the belts they wore. Now she understood why she was so desperate to find that shirt! Astrid had the other one. But why was she wearing it? How did she *get* it? Astrid grabbed her hand and dragged her away from Trevor. As they sped to the door, they heard his angry voice

"Stop, or I'll shoot you both."

In unison they halted; in unison they turned in the doorway. Before them, Trevor's eyes widened in astonishment. The twins glanced at each other, and Fanchon realized why he was shocked. Not only were they dressed alike, she and Astrid had a bruise in almost the identical place on their cheeks. If he was traveling with her twin, Fanchon surmised, he knew about Astrid's bruise. Now they stood, side by side, both sporting a bruise on the right cheek. He must have thought he could tell them apart by that mark and their clothing.

"You seem awfully confused, Trevor," Astrid said.

Understanding her twin's thoughts, Fanchon spoke without hesitation. "Is it too hard to tell your mistress from your enemy?"

"How did you do it?" he demanded. "How did you make plans to trick me?"



"We didn't make plans."

"No. Twins have a bond that single-birth people don't understand."

"That's right. We can communicate mentally."

"I know how to tell the difference," he said, raising his Colt .45 to point it at the twins. "Open your shirts." When neither twin moved, he cocked the hammer with his thumb. "I said open them! One of you should have a scar."

Realizing that she had been discovered, Fanchon unbuttoned her shirt to save Astrid. Trevor didn't want her twin, anyway, so why make matters worse. Beside Fanchon, Astrid moved in unison, releasing each button at the same time her sister did. Their bond was so strong that night, even their actions were identical.

With their breasts exposed, Fanchon raised her head to see Trevor's shocked expression. Letting her gaze follow Trevor's, Fanchon saw the nearly identical scar on her sister. When she looked at her twin in amazement, she could have been looking into a mirror. Astrid was as astounded as she was.

"Damn it, you two!" Trevor shouted. "No more games. Which one of you is Fanchon?"

"I am," they chorused.

What was Astrid doing? They were in serious trouble. How could she play games at such an inopportune time? Didn't she realize that she was going to make Trevor furious? Then he might harm them both. Suddenly, Fanchon realized that she must protect not only herself but her sister as well.

"Don't listen to her, Trevor. I'm Fanchon."

"What are you *doing*, Astrid?"

"Stop it!" he raged. "I'll decide who's who myself. We're all going to the bedroom you share with your lover, Fanchon. Now move."

The twins turned simultaneously, and they ascended the stairs. Beside Fanchon, Astrid matched her movements step for step, as if she knew exactly where to go. That was impossible. She'd never been in the house. Astrid had become a very good actress, and she was playing the part of Fanchon Freeman perfectly. Maybe the scene wasn't real; maybe she was dreaming. When they arrived at the room, Astrid reached out and opened the door, entering the room before the others.

Trevor studied the twins individually before pointing his weapon at one. "You. On the bed. I'm going to have you where your fake husband has you."

"You don't want him to come back and find you raping his wife, do you?" she replied. "You wouldn't like to taste his rage again."

"Your husband's not coming back for a long time, and you know it," Trevor said. "He's out looking for Nels."

Fanchon stifled a shocked gasp. If Trevor knew that, he had to have been watching the house for quite a while. Could she and Astrid extricate themselves from the trap Gabe had set? Why had she asked him to search for Nels? If she hadn't been so selfish, she and Astrid

wouldn't be in such danger.

The moment Trevor released the hammer of his pistol, the standing twin rushed him, knocking him onto the bed while the weapon flew from his hand. Thinking quickly, she grabbed the gun and threw it out the open window, while the twin on the bed pushed Trevor off her.

Scrambling to his feet, Trevor attacked the woman charging toward him. Which twin was it? He couldn't concentrate as both battled against him. One of them fell to the floor when he hit her, but the other attacked with even greater vengeance. Enraged beyond control, he tossed her onto the bed, tearing away her clothes and tying her to the four posts with the remnants of material. When the one on the floor began to rise as she regained consciousness, he swung a chair over her head and watched her collapse again. Now he could get what he came for! The twin on the bed put up the more vicious fight, so she had to be Fanchon. Stripping off his trousers, he forced himself into her.

At last he had Fanchon where he wanted her. After he had been nice to make up for killing her baby, she'd tried to kill him. She would have been better off doing it. He would have her, then he would kidnap her and leave Astrid with a message for Gabe. When he found a good place to hide, he would have her again and again—until Freeman found them. Then he would have complete revenge; he would kill Gabriel Freeman while Fanchon watched. After that he would take her away forever. When everything was done, *he* would be the victor!

The woman under him laughed as he pounded into her. Hitting her across the mouth several times to silence her, he drew louder laughter along with blood. Finally, he covered her mouth with his in an angry, vicious kiss to shut her up. The action increased his arousal so much that he sated himself only moments later. When he stood up, she was still laughing.

"Shut up, bitch!" he demanded as he rebuttoned his pants. "Or I'll shut you up permanently."

"You wouldn't do that to the best lover you've ever had," she replied. "God, that was fun. In all the years I've pretended to be Fanchon, it was never as great as tonight."

Staring at her in wide-eyed amazement, he questioned her. "Astrid?"

"I thought you'd know the second you started raping me."

"How did you do it? How did you let her know about your bruise? How did you get a scar like hers? You were supposed to be my accomplice. I thought you wanted to replace her in this bed."

"That was before Fred proposed to me. And it isn't the first time Fanchon and I have had identical injuries."

"What about the scar? I knew I could tell by that."

"When Gabe and I were together, he traced where it should have been. That's how he discovered that I wasn't Fanchon. When I went bankrupt, I cut myself there. I'm surprised you didn't suspect when my necklines went higher, and I wouldn't let you see me naked in the light anymore. I wanted revenge as much as you did."

“What changed in the last month?”

“I told you. Fred asked me to marry him, but I wouldn’t give him an answer. I didn’t know how things would go here.”

“They didn’t go well for you, Astrid.” Picking up a strip of material, he gagged her so she couldn’t make noise. “You won’t marry anybody now—unless I decide to come back for you. After all, you’re as beautiful as Fanchon. Maybe I’ll marry you myself. It certainly wouldn’t surprise anybody. But while I make up my mind, you’re going to suffer for turning against me.”

\*\*\*

The pain in her head was excruciating, worse than she’d ever known. When she tried to massage the spot where it hurt the worst, her hands were tied behind her back. What was happening to her? As cognizance returned, Fanchon realized she was draped over a horse, moving upward over sandy, yet rocky terrain. How did she get there? Why didn’t she feel as though she would fall from the horse? Ropes. Yes, that was it. Ropes were keeping her on. Unable to bear the bright sunlight, Fanchon moaned and closed her eyes again.

“Gabe,” she groaned before she slipped back into unconsciousness. “Help me.”

\*\*\*

With Nels draped over his shoulder, Gabe hurried to Nels’ bedroom, shouting loudly for Fanchon. After laying the unconscious man on the bed, he raced out of the house to the corral nearest the barn.

“Bill!” he shouted as he sprinted across the courtyard. “Where’s my wife?”

“I don’t know, boss. Her horse ain’t here, so I s’pose she went into town.”

“Damn. Drop what you’re doing and get upstairs with Nels. He’s been shot. I’m going to find Fanchon. His room is the last one on the right down the main hall. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Gabe’s first stop was the doctor’s office, but Rob hadn’t seen Fanchon that day. After announcing that Nels needed immediate attention, Gabe hurried to the *Freeborn Gazette* to ask if she’d been there. Again, he got a negative response. Where had she disappeared to? It wasn’t like her to go away when she was so worried about Nels and Astrid. Frustrated, Gabe returned to the ranch to await her return.

When he arrived at Nels’ bedroom, he questioned the doctor about Nels’ condition. “How is he, Doc?”

“Not good,” Rob replied. “I’ll do what I can, but I don’t think he’ll make it.”

“That’s what I was afraid of.” After an anxious pause, Gabe changed the subject. “Are you

positive that you haven't seen my wife?"

"Couldn't you find her?"

"She's not with me, is she? And while we're alone, I have something to say to you. Keep your filthy hands off my wife. I see how you look at her, and I won't let you seduce her like you did a couple other women in Freeborn."

"Fanchon and I already discussed that. She and her derringer made it very clear that my advances aren't welcomed."

"I imagine they did," Gabe said with a broad smile. "But remember that you'll deal with me if it ever happens again."

"I'd rather deal with you than your wife, but I won't bother her. Go see if your cowhand is getting my boiling water. I want to try to get the bullet out while Sten's unconscious."

Without another word, Gabe left. So Fanchon still had the sense to carry her derringer. If she was roaming the countryside alone, having her weapon was one of the smartest things she could do. As he descended the steps on his way to the kitchen, somebody knocked on the front door. Opening it, he saw one of his ranch hands on the porch.

"Bill asked me to run an errand, boss," the man explained. "On the way back, I found this on the other side of the house."

Gabe gazed at the pistol in his employee's hand. It wasn't one of his. And if the man was bringing it to him, he must have seen to it that it didn't belong to any of the other hired hands. Taking it from him, Gabe examined the Colt .45. It wasn't Nels' weapon, either.

"Are you positive this doesn't belong to one of you men?" Gabe asked.

"I already asked. Besides, why would any of us leave it in the flower garden?"

"The flower garden? I don't understand. That's under our bedroom window. Why would a gun be ..." Gabe's eyes widened in horror. "Oh, my God. Fanchon."

Turning his back on the man, Gabe raced up the stairs two at a time and went to his room. Throwing open the door, he found the battered woman, bound and gagged with the shirt she'd been wearing the previous night, lying naked on the bed. In an instant, he was at her side.

"Fanchon! Dear Lord, what happened? Who did this?" He laid his fingertips on her neck. Her pulse was weak, but she was still alive. "Doc! Come here! *Now!*"

Gabe worked to release the unconscious woman. As he removed the gag, Rob rushed in the door. "What's wrong?"

Gabe's voice cracked as he choked back unmasculine tears of distress. "My wife. Somebody got to her while I was gone. You've got to help her, Doc. Please."

"Get out of the way, and I will."

Pacing the room, Gabe watched while Rob examined her numerous injuries. No matter what happened, he wouldn't leave her side until she could tell him who had attacked her. The answer hit him with all the power of a bolting mustang—Trevor Riley had arrived! If his

instincts were right, Riley had shot Nels, leaving him for dead. And the Colt on the nightstand could belong to Riley.

The first chance he could, he would track down that man. Until then, he would stay with his wife so she would know that he loved her. The thought startled him, but now was no time to analyze it. Fanchon was more important than unexpected thoughts, and his presence would reassure her more than anything else. When the doctor stood, Gabe pushed him out of the way and sank onto the edge of the bed to grasp his wife's hand.

"Well?" Gabe demanded.

"She'll probably be fine in a few days."

"Probably?" Gabe asked. "What the hell kind of doctor are you if you can't give me a positive diagnosis?"

"Relax. She's going to be fine. She has a concussion, so I don't know how long it will be before she regains consciousness. It could be within an hour, or it could be tomorrow. She's going to have a hell of a headache when she comes around, and she's going to be plenty sore. But she's going to make it through this without any long-term effects."

"But she'll be all right?"

"Fanchon's a strong woman, Gabe, a lot stronger than Nels at the moment. *He* needs my attention right now. Can you spare a cowhand? I want you to stay with Fanchon, in case she wakes up."

"I wouldn't leave her for anything. Bill let you in when you got here. Have him help with Nels—and use him as long as you have to. I'll be leaving as soon as Fanchon comes to and tells me who did this to her."

"I'll send someone into town to bring Elsa out here. She can help with my patients."

"You work on Nels, and I'll send the message. I want Elsa here before I leave, anyway."

\*\*\*

Fanchon was still groggy, unable to concentrate on her surroundings and unable to stay awake more than a few minutes at a time. What time was it, anyway? How long had they traveled? Why was she still bound even though she was lying on the ground? Glancing around, she noticed a man hunched over a campfire.

"Gabe?" she asked, her headache as painful as when she'd first regained consciousness.

When the man turned around, she saw Trevor Riley. No wonder she was tied up! Where were they? And how had they gotten there?

"I see you came to again, and you're finally able to talk."

"Where are we?"

"In the mountains, far enough from the ranch so your lover can't find you for at least a

couple of days. It'll probably take him that long to realize you're missing."

"He'll know right away."

"I doubt it. I left Astrid tied to your bed—and I beat her enough to keep her quiet. Freeman won't even know she's the woman he's fretting over until she comes to."

"You beat Astrid?" she asked in amazement. "Why?"

"She was supposed to help *me*—not you. I even raped her because I thought she was you. You two confused me. I couldn't tell who was who. When Astrid fought like a wildcat, I thought she was you. I had to knock you out before I could take her."

"Did you hurt her badly?"

"She won't die if that's what you mean."

"What are you going to do to me now?"

"Nothing until your lover finds us. You're in no shape for anything, anyway. I'm not even going to move you again for a while. I didn't mean to hit you so hard. How do you feel?"

"I think I have a concussion. I'm seeing double, and I'm dizzy. I also have a terrible headache."

"What can I do to help? I don't want anything to happen to you—not before Freeman gets here, anyway. I have plans."

"Untie me. I don't have enough energy to escape even if I wanted to."

Rolling her onto her side, Trevor released the rope binding her hands behind her. "You'd better not go anywhere, Fanchon. I don't want to hurt you."

"How can you say that? You killed Byron and left a note threatening not only me but my husband."

"What good are you to me if I accidentally kill you?"

"None, I guess." Pausing, she studied him. "Do you have anything to eat?"

"You're hungry? Of course, I have something. I'll get it."

Fanchon waited until Trevor's back was turned before she pushed herself to her feet and ducked into the trees. Her best defense was to keep moving until she found suitable cover. Hopefully, that would be before she lost consciousness again. She hurried away while Trevor's irate voice rang in her ears.

"Damn you, Fanchon! You're going to make me kill you before Freeman can find you!"

Fear coursed through her, but she didn't slow down. She kept moving through the forest, turning her head only once to see if he was getting closer. She bumped against a tree. A hand clamped around her upper arm. Her scream of terror pierced the stillness. In another part of the forest, Trevor cried out as well. Looking at her assailant, she noticed a bare-chested man with long black hair and a band around his forehead. She stared up at him for several moments, unable to even consider screaming again.

The Indian was speaking to her in broken English, telling her something about being all

right. But his words didn't register in her befuddled mind. Nothing registered except that he was an Indian capable of hurting her if he wanted to. Oh, well, let him do whatever he wanted. She couldn't stay on her feet a second longer. She couldn't even remain conscious.

When she woke, she was lying beside the campfire. Hovering over her was the Indian. He offered her a friendly smile as he covered her with a blanket. In the background, Trevor stared at two other Indians, their rifles trained on him while two others bound him in an upright position with his arms extended between two trees. Good! He deserved to be bound like that after what he did to Astrid. The Indian beside her spoke, and she returned her gaze to him.

"You are Free Man's Woman, yes?" he asked.

Confused, she stared at him until what he'd asked made sense. "Freeman. Yes. I'm his wife. Are you a friend?"

"Good friend. My brave brings Free Man for war."

"War?" Fanchon repeated in astonishment. "You're going to fight with my husband? You can't. He's your friend."

"I am White Eagle. Free Man is friend. Man with Hair of Fire is enemy, yes? He takes you from Free Man?"

Hope sprang within Fanchon. The Indians were keeping Trevor captive until Gabe could come. "Yes. Oh, yes! He took me from Freeman."

"Free Man will come. Stalking Lion goes to his lodge now."

"Wait," she said, grabbing his wrist when he rose to leave. "How do you know who I am?"

"Free Man talks about his woman with white hair. We meet many nights. He talks about you, wants me to watch for you in mountains where we live."

"Then he did ask you to help. I'd hoped so. You speak English well."

"Free Man teaches me," White Eagle smiled. "We talk much. I teach him Arapaho; he teach me English. Free Man's Woman must sleep. He will come and wake you."

"One more thing. Did you say your name is White Eagle?" When he nodded, she said, "Thank you for rescuing me, White Eagle. Gabe and I appreciate it. And thank you for not hurting Trevor. Gabe wants him alive."

"Free Man wants him. Free Man wishes to make war with the man who killed the baby."

White Eagle and Gabe were closer than she'd thought if Gabe had confided in the Indian about Trevor murdering Gabrielle. If Gabe trusted the Indians enough to tell them why he wanted Trevor alive, he also trusted them enough to take care of her until he could come. And she trusted them, too.

## TWENTY-NINE

Stroking the bruise on her right cheek with his thumb, Gabe gazed down at her, his heart filled with sorrow. It was the only injury that he had caused. How could Riley have done this to her? Why would any man be so desperate for revenge that he would beat a woman? He was desperate, too, but it was different. He wanted the man who had attacked his wife several times and murdered their daughter.

When her eyes fluttered open, he smiled to reassure her, even though she appeared disoriented. "When you take a nap, my dear, you don't fool around. How do you feel?"

"No," she said, her voice barely audible. "I'm Astrid."

Gabe's brows furrowed. "You're confused. Doc said that might happen. You're not Astrid, sweetheart. You're my wife—Fanchon. Don't you remember me?"

"No. I'm Astrid. I am."

"It's all right. You'll remember soon."

"You're Gabe, and I'm Astrid," she insisted. "He took my sister like he planned, but I stopped him."

Gabe stared down at her in shock. He tried to determine which twin she was, but it was impossible. She was so badly beaten that he could find no special marks that might identify her as Fanchon—except for the scar on her breast. Thank God, Rob had noticed that earlier and asked him about it, so he must be talking to Fanchon.

To humor her, he asked, "What are you talking about, Fanchon? Who took your sister? And how did you stop him?"

"Trevor brought me here. He wanted to have Fanchon in your bed, but we confused him. He raped me instead. That's why he beat me. He was furious because he didn't get what he wanted."

He sat back, breaking contact with the woman in his bed. He didn't want to hear this. "You're in shock. Something happened to your mind, and you think you're Astrid."

"No. I'm honestly ..." Astrid stopped short when a woman screamed downstairs.

His gaze shot to the door. "Oh, my God! Elsa! I'll be right back." As the youngest sister cried out a second time, Gabe raced from the room. "I'm coming, Elsa!"

Rushing to her side at the open front door, he slid his arm around her shoulders. When he saw the Aparaho brave on the porch, Gabe sighed in relief. "It's all right, Elsa. He's my friend, Stalking Lion. He won't hurt you. Run along and keep Fanchon company. She's probably worried about you. And don't be surprised if she claims to be Astrid. She's disoriented."



As Elsa hurried up the steps, Gabe turned his attention to the man in his doorway. "What can I do for you, Stalking Lion?"

"We now have Free Man's Woman."

Stunned, he stared at the Arapaho for several seconds. The woman in his bed *was* Astrid, and she'd been beaten so severely even Elsa hadn't noticed the difference. "You have Fanchon? Where?"

"In mountains. Man with Hair of Fire keeps her."

Intense fury exploded in Gabe, and he fought to control it. "Riley! Damn him to hell! I should have listened to my instincts. I *knew* she was in trouble while I was out looking for her brother. How is she?"

"She sleeps. She runs from Man with Hair of Fire. White Eagle stops her. He takes care of her now for Free Man."

"What about Riley—the man? Do you have him, too?"

"He cannot go."

"Good. I have to take care of a few things before we leave. Do you want to wait in the house?"

Stalking Lion's dark eyes brightened in excitement. After leading the Indian to the parlor, Gabe excused himself to go upstairs. No matter how badly he wanted to hurry to Fanchon, he had to speak with Astrid. He owed the younger twin an apology for having carried a grudge against her for so many years. In his room, he sat on the edge of the bed and took Astrid's hand in his.

"My friend Stalking Lion is downstairs, Astrid," he said. "He and the braves with him have Fanchon. Apparently, she's fine, but I won't know for sure until I see for myself."

"What about Trevor?"

"That was my question—almost exactly. Apparently, White Eagle took him captive. I'm leaving in a few minutes to take care of him, but first I have to apologize to you—in case I don't come back. I couldn't forget what happened four years ago. I'm sorry I avoided you in Moline."

"I understood. I'd planned to replace her for a week ever since she ran away, but a man I love asked me to marry him and I changed my mind. I only came with Trevor to stop him. I'm sorry it didn't work."

"You did what you could, Astrid. I owe you my life. After all, you took the rape and beating for Fanchon."

"Gabe," she said, "we know you two aren't remarried yet. That's why we planned this. I don't think even Trevor would have gone this far if he thought Fanchon was married. I think he loves her. That's why he can't forget her, why he wanted to have her so badly. But even when we were children, she wouldn't have anything to do with him. I suppose he felt like he had to force her. He wanted to get her pregnant, so she would *have* to marry him. At least, that's what he told me on the way here."

"I can't believe he could do such a thing."

"He was desperate. He hated himself when he heard that he'd killed Fanchon's baby, and he wanted to make it up to her. For a long time, he avoided her—like she avoided him—until they were thrown together by accident. He told her that he was sorry about Gabrielle, and he thought she accepted his apology. He was thrilled when she suggested that they run away together. You probably know about that, though. He almost died because of the bullets Fanchon put in him. We *both* wanted revenge after that. He was my lover."

"You shouldn't be talking so much, Astrid, and I should leave so you can rest. If you don't mind, I'll have Doc take you to a different room."

"That's all right. You don't want a bitch like me in your bed, and I don't blame you."

Kissing her cheek, he caressed her neck and said, "No bitch would be as honest as you were. Don't put yourself through hell because you think you're not worthy of our acceptance. You've more than earned it after what you did for Fanchon last night. We'll both be eternally grateful to you."

"I'm glad you understand. I would have felt terrible if you didn't. I don't think I could have married Fred without your forgiveness. When he asked me, I wouldn't answer him. I knew I could never go back if I couldn't help here."

"Now you can go back with a clean conscience. Fanchon and I will never forget what you did. Elsa will help you to another bedroom. Or should I get Doc?"

"Elsa's fine." Astrid grasped Gabe's hand to stop him from rising. "Before you go, I need to know three things. How's Nels?"

"Not very good. The doctor doesn't think he'll make it, so he's been with him almost constantly."

"What will happen to Trevor?"

"I'll throw a scare into him that he'll *never* forget. He won't bother any of us again when I'm done with him. I'll fight him to the death if necessary, but not unless he forces me to. I could never cold-bloodedly kill a man—only in war. Now, what's your last question?"

"Will you forgive me for everything bad I've ever done? I need to know in case you don't come back. Trevor could kill you. He's determined to make Fanchon suffer for nearly killing him, and he's determined to make her watch you die."

"Before he kills her?" Gabe asked, remembering the note Trevor had left when he murdered Byron Wood.

"I don't think he'll do that. He talks a lot, but I don't believe he could kill Fanchon. He loves her too much. He might force her into a marriage she doesn't want, but he could never kill her. Do you forgive me?"

"The second I realized what you'd done for Fanchon I forgave you. And to prove it, you can stay in our house as long as you want." Again, he kissed her cheek. "I have to go now. I don't know when I'll be back, so send Elsa into town. She can telegram your intended for him to join you."

"I doubt he could. He has five children."

"Tell him to bring them along. I'll pay for their train tickets if he can't. I want you to get well and having the man you love at your side will speed your recovery. Now, enough talk. I'll bring Fanchon to you as soon as I can."

Returning to the first floor, Gabe was stunned to see Elsa and Stalking Lion on the sofa, chatting as though they'd known each other for years. At twenty-one, Elsa was old enough to know her own mind, but he doubted that she knew what she was doing. He'd come to think of her as his little sister, and he worried about her becoming involved with the Arapaho man. The expression in her green eyes, however, showed him that she already was.

"You are pretty woman," Stalking Lion said. "You are a friend?"

"I want to be, Stalking Lion," she replied.

"Free Man is good friend. You be good friend like Free Man?"

"Better, I hope." Blushing, she bowed her head as he grasped a lock of her hair to study it. "Do you like my hair?"

"Elsa," Gabe said in a fatherly tone as he entered the room, "Astrid wants you upstairs. And she *is* Astrid. Would you tend to her?"

With a pout, Elsa rose and joined him near the door. "You don't have to be so angry. I was only being friendly."

"*Too* friendly. Now go upstairs."

"Good night, Stalking Lion," Elsa said politely with a shy smile of flirtation. "I hope to see you again sometime."

The Arapaho watched Elsa leave with a disappointed expression. Something had sparked between the two that Gabe hadn't noticed earlier. Studying the Indian, he tried to determine if he should wait to see what came of the unexpected meeting. His decision to wait came quickly. He had more pressing matters at hand; he had to find Fanchon.

While Stalking Lion waited nearby, Gabe saddled his horse. Only minutes later they rode off toward the foothills. On the way, Gabe devised a scheme that would force Trevor's hand. If it worked, he could trap Trevor into making the first move.

\*\*\*

At dawn Fanchon awoke to the sound of a horse approaching the camp. Looking around, she noticed that Trevor was now on the ground with his arms bound around a maple tree behind him. Glad that he was at the mercy of these men, Fanchon smiled. Now he might understand what he had put her through when he tied her up.

The man speaking with White Eagle must be the one he'd sent for Gabe. But her husband was nowhere around. Why didn't he come into camp? Had he decided not to confront Trevor? As White Eagle approached her, an expression of anger on his face, Fanchon scooted

away from him. When he lengthened his steps, she froze in place. Her gaze didn't leave his face as he knelt beside her and withdrew a leather thong from the waist of his colorful, fringed leggings.

"No!" she shrieked. "No, don't do this. Freeman will be angry. Please, don't do this. I'm your friend, like Freeman. He will be your enemy if you hurt me."

"Do not move!" White Eagle warned as he bound her wrists behind her back with the leather thong. Then he whispered in her ear. "Free Man comes to you soon."

Tears of relief overflowed her eyes. Gabe had told her that he wanted to force Trevor's hand. This must be his way of doing it. She wasn't the actress Astrid was, but she had to put on her best performance, depending on what happened next.

When she was tied, the Arapaho strode to the tree where Trevor was bound and released him. Rubbing his wrists, Trevor clenched and relaxed his hands to promote circulation to them. "What's happening?"

"Free Man will not come. Stalking Lion says Free Man's Woman is at his lodging. He does not want this one."

Confused, Trevor stared up at him. "Not his woman? But Astrid told me that I attacked the wrong one. Unless ..."

"You are free," White Eagle pronounced. "We go now."

Trevor waited quite a while after the Indians left before he approached Fanchon. Despite knowing Gabe wouldn't let anything happen to her, she backed away from Trevor in fear. This incident could mean the difference between life and death for the man she loved. Even though Trevor had threatened her, she didn't think he would kill her. Something told her that he wanted her too badly to carry out his threat.

"So, Freeman doesn't believe I left Astrid in his bed," Trevor said as he knelt beside Fanchon. "That's too bad—for both of you. Until she convinces him, you're mine."

"I'll *never* be yours," she declared. "No matter *what* you do to my husband."

"We'll see."

When Trevor tore her shirt down the front, true fear engulfed her like a flash flood, the memory of Trevor's other assaults vivid in her mind. Screaming, she tried to roll away from him. But he threw his body over hers, kissing her passionately as he caressed one of her breasts. It was a casual stroke—as though he had a long time to get what he wanted.

While Fanchon struggled to free herself, Gabe raced from the trees with a war whoop equivalent to a band of a hundred Arapaho. Trevor scrambled to his feet as the irate man flew through the air at him. Before Trevor could rise, Gabe knocked him to the ground and pulled his right arm behind his back. Trevor's wrist was nearly at the nape of his neck. From her vantagepoint, Fanchon saw that Gabe was bare-chested, just as the Arapaho had been.

"You killed my daughter, you bastard, and you've assaulted my wife for the last time. You'll be lucky to live through the day!" Gabe roared as he dragged the smaller man to his feet. "I'm going to fight you to the death. If you want my wife, there's only one way you'll get

her.”

“Gabe!” Fanchon screamed in shock. “No!”

A strong arm encircled her at the same moment Gabe drove a fist into Trevor’s stomach. When the redhead doubled over, Gabe knocked him to the ground with a blow to his jaw. Grabbing Gabe’s left leg, Trevor pulled it out from under him to bring the larger man down. Tears stung Fanchon’s eyes as the men grappled on the ground. She buried her face in the chest of the man holding her.

A man was holding her? Fanchon stared up at him, stunned. Offering her a quick smile, White Eagle untied her wrists and pulled off her shirt then helped her into Gabe’s. Thanking him absently, she returned her gaze to the battling men while she buttoned the shirt.

Gabe went down and didn’t move. Fanchon grabbed White Eagle’s arm, pleading frantically, “Help him, White Eagle. Gabe’s your friend. Don’t let Trevor kill him.”

“Free Man wishes his war,” White Eagle explained. “I cannot stop it.”

“Then *I* will.”

Rushing at Trevor, she toppled to the earth with him under her. Arms encircled her waist and pulled her off him. On her feet, she looked up to see Gabe’s angry face.

“Damn it, Fanchon. Stay out of this before you get killed. White Eagle! Tie her to a tree if you have to but keep her out of my way.”

As Gabe pushed her toward the Indian, White Eagle hurried to drag her from the scene. Tears of frustration streamed down her face. Gabe was determined to fight Trevor alone, and there was nothing she could do to help. Standing by, she watched the battle. If she interfered again, she would distract Gabe. Then he could get hurt—or worse.

Most of the time Gabe was in control, but occasionally Trevor sent him to the ground. After many minutes, Fanchon noticed that the men were getting dangerously close to the mountainside. Unless they moved away, one of them would fall over the steep, sloping cliff. She could only pray that it wasn’t Gabe.

In the next minute, Trevor had Gabe precariously close to the edge. With a single swift movement, one or both would tumble to their deaths. She wanted to scream for Gabe to be careful, but that it would be foolhardy. He would be more concerned for her welfare than his own and lose his concentration. If only this fight were over! All she wanted was to be back in Gabe’s arms and tell him how much she loved him.

Then it happened. Both men were on the lip of the steep embankment. Gabe was bent backward over it with Trevor’s hands encircling his neck, thumbs thrust into his throat. Gabe struggled not only for air but to free himself of his perilous position. Sliding his arms between Trevor’s, he kicked the smaller man in the stomach. Gabe lifted upward and knocked Trevor’s hands away the moment he loosened his hold. Both men disappeared over the mountainside. Trevor flew through the air, while Gabe tumbled backwards. Fanchon called out Gabe’s name, her cry echoing through the forest in unison with a masculine scream. Breaking away from White Eagle, she raced to the edge. There was Trevor, bouncing down the mountain like a rag doll. But where was Gabe?

“Gabe!” she shouted. “Gabe, where are you! My God! Gabe! I love you! God, don’t let him die. Not after all we’ve been through. Don’t destroy our destiny.”

“Free Man’s Woman,” White Eagle said, pointing to his right. “There.”

“Where?” she asked, letting her gaze follow in the direction the Arapaho pointed. “I don’t see him. Take me to him—please. Maybe he’s still alive.”

Slipping over the side, White Eagle made his way through the rocks and trees. When he reached up to help her, she declined his efforts. She could do much better if he let her follow the path he took. Within minutes they reached Gabe as he clung to a rock. White Eagle grasped Gabe’s arm near his elbow and dragged him to ground.

As Gabe knelt beside Fanchon, they embraced. Death had come too close. They could only hug each other for several minutes. Finally, she pushed away to examine him and assure herself that he was all right.

“I’m fine, my love.” Tears of joy sprang to her eyes, and she stopped her examination to gaze into his dark eyes. He’d called her *my love*, the first time he’d ever used that word in a positive context, but he apparently didn’t notice, because he didn’t even hesitate before he continued. “I’m tired and sore, but I’ll heal in a couple of days.”

“You could have a concussion,” she insisted in a voice cracking with emotion. “You didn’t move several times.”

“It was a diversion to draw him closer, give him a little confidence, force him into moves that gave me an advantage.”

“I was afraid for you, darling. I love you, and I didn’t want you to get hurt.”

“Where is Riley, anyway?” Gabe asked. “I was so stunned I didn’t know what I was doing. Part of that fight was survival instinct.”

Again, tears seeped from Fanchon’s eyes. Gabe didn’t want to hurt anybody despite what he’d told Trevor. Telling him that he had killed another man would be hard for both of them. “He fell down the mountain, Gabe. I don’t see how he could have survived.”

“I killed him?” Gabe asked. “God forgive me! I really didn’t want to.”

“Don’t torture yourself, darling. You had to or Trevor would have killed you, and he certainly wouldn’t be asking God for forgiveness. Praise the Lord, *you* survived. I love you. I couldn’t bear to live if you had died instead of Trevor. I would have done everything I could to be the next to die by his hand.”

Her tears flowed freely, and Gabe held her, comforting her until her sobs faded and she was in control of her emotions. Only then did the trio make their way back up the mountain. When they were again on relatively level ground, Gabe asked his friend for more help.

“Would you and your braves bring Riley up the mountain? The least I can do is give him a decent burial.”

“We take him to your lodging, yes?” White Eagle asked as he walked with Gabe and Fanchon to their horses.

Gabe considered the suggestion for several moments. Most of his men didn't like the Indians, and he didn't want to cause trouble for White Eagle and his band, not after all the help they'd given him. Still, he trusted White Eagle. What better way to show that than to invite the Arapaho to the ranch?

"Yes, White Eagle," Gabe agreed. "You and your braves come to my lodging. We will eat together. My woman makes good food. That is, we'll eat together if Fanchon feels like cooking."

"I'd be honored to," she announced with a bright smile. "Will you eat with us, White Eagle?"

"We eat," White Eagle said. "We bring Man with Hair of Fire. We eat in Free Man's lodging."

"Wonderful!" Gabe exclaimed. "We'll see you at the ranch. Come along, my love. Your nursing skills are needed at home. Astrid and Nels need you. Riley attacked them both."

"Oh, no," she said. "How seriously are they injured?"

To put her at ease, Gabe grinned. "Astrid will heal without you, but she needs your emotional support. Nels needs your loving touch. Now are you going to waste time talking, or are you going to be a good nurse and get to your patients?"

"I'll be a good nurse. Let's saddle my horse and go home. I'll even show you how much I love you—if you help me so I can finish more quickly."

## THIRTY

Elsa met the returning couple on the stairs as they entered their home. "Fanchon!" Racing down the rest of the steps, Elsa embraced her sister. "Astrid told me what happened, and we've been worried sick about you. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Fanchon replied as she returned Elsa's hug. "How are Astrid and Nels?"

"Nels is improved, but not much. And Doc Samuels had to give Astrid something to calm her down. She got hysterical when Gabe left to find you. She kept saying that Trevor would kill him, and she'd never see you again. Doc Samuels said that she was in a lot of pain, too, so he gave her a shot and she went to sleep."

"Is she still sleeping?"

"Yeah. She woke up a couple hours ago and asked to see Gabe. I told her that he wasn't home, and she started all over again. Doc Samuels gave her some more medicine, and she's been out ever since."

"Did she seem more worried about Gabe or me?"

"Gabe. She blamed herself because she couldn't stop Trevor from killing him."

Fanchon gazed up at Gabe. "Why don't you go sit with her? That way she'll see that you're alive as soon as she wakes up. I'll go see if I can help Rob with Nels. Elsa, I need a favor. Go kill four chickens and pluck them. We're having company for dinner."

"All right, but what about Trevor?"

"Riley's dead," Gabe offered with a note of anguish in his voice. Heading toward the steps, he added, "Excuse me."

A frown crossed Fanchon's lips as she watched him begin his ascent to the second floor. Trevor's death had triggered something in Gabe that went much deeper than guilt. Beside her, Elsa remained silent until Gabe was nearly to the top of the staircase.

"What happened, Gabe?"

Fanchon laid her hand on her sister's shoulder. "Don't question him about it now, Elsa. It's going to be a while before he can discuss it, maybe quite a while. Just kill and pluck the chickens, then get some vegetables from the garden." Starting up the stairs, Fanchon stopped on the third step to gaze down at Elsa. "By the way, several Indians will bring Trevor's body here as soon as they recover it. They're friendly, so don't be afraid of them. And relay a message to the ranch hands. Tell them about the Indians."

Elsa's eyes brightened with excitement. "I know they're friendly, Fanchon. I already met Stalking Lion and is he ever nice!"



Smiling down at her sister, Fanchon shook her head. "It looks like we're about to have our first sisterly talk soon. Since Bianca's not here to do the honors and Astrid's sick, it's up to me."

"That reminds me," Elsa added. "I sent a telegram to Bianca. I thought she might want to see Nels in case he doesn't make it."

"She should be arriving within a couple of days then."

"Yeah, so you don't have to give me that advice after all."

Again, Fanchon smiled at her sister. "This time you'd *prefer* my input. I'm more open-minded toward the Indians. But that discussion has to wait. Nels needs me."

With mixed feelings about her sister's new love interest, Fanchon finished ascending the stairs in two long strides. In Nels' room, Rob rose to greet her. "Are you all right, Fanchon?"

"Fine," she replied as she grasped her brother's hand. "The important question now is Nels."

"It's still too early to tell if he'll make it," Rob admitted. "We're lucky in one respect. He's stabilized. It's safe to operate now. He'll have a better chance once we get that bullet out of his lung. It's collapsed and is pressing against his heart. The sooner we get that remedied the greater his chance of survival. Elsa already sterilized my instruments. If you'll get them, we'll relieve the pressure on his heart."

On her way through the house, Fanchon stopped to talk to Elsa. "I need one more favor. Don't let Gabe leave the house before I talk to him. I'm afraid he might do something irrational while I'm in surgery. We have to remove the bullet in Nels' chest to increase his chance of survival. Now, will you keep Gabe here?"

"Of course."

Fanchon and Rob labored over Nels for three hours before he told her to clean up his instruments while he checked on Astrid. Gathering his surgical supplies into a bloody towel, she raced to the kitchen. There Elsa cleaned the chickens while an Arapaho brave sat nearby.

"Fanchon!" Elsa exclaimed. "Are you done already?"

"Already?" Fanchon repeated with a chuckle. "Rob and I worked on Nels for three hours. Where's Gabe?"

"Gone."

Fanchon gasped in shock. "You let him *leave*? I trusted you to keep him here."

"I tried, Fanchon," Elsa said. "I even told him that you wanted to talk to him. All he said was that he had to take Trevor's body to town. He wouldn't even let Bill go with, and *you* know how much he depends on Bill now."

"How long ago did he leave?"

"About an hour."

With a heavy sigh, Fanchon collapsed onto a kitchen chair. "I suppose it's too late to stop him from making a terrible mistake."

“What kind of mistake? All he’s doing is taking Trevor to the undertaker.”

“I don’t think so. I can’t explain why, but I *know* he’s going to do something he could regret for the rest of his life.”

“That reminds me. Astrid’s awake again. I sat with her for a while after Gabe left and let her know that he’s all right. She wants to see you as soon as she can.”

“Will this day *never* end?” Fanchon asked, wearily pushing herself up from the table. Glancing at the Indian in the chair beside hers, she smiled and offered him her right hand in friendship. “I’m sorry I was rude. I’m Fanchon Freeman. What’s your name?”

“That’s Stalking Lion,” Elsa answered while the two shook hands. “He’s the one I was telling you about earlier.”

“I’m pleased to meet you, Stalking Lion. I wish I didn’t have so much to do, because I’d like to get to know you. Thank you for helping my husband rescue me. We can talk later, at the dinner table.”

“Yes, Free Man’s Woman,” he said. “We will talk. And Elsa.”

Fanchon’s smile widened. The Indian was as taken with her sister as Elsa was with him. But was a union between a white woman and an Arapaho man advisable? Accepting a man who had helped rescue her would be easy, but her lack of prejudice toward Negroes or Indians was rare. If Elsa married an Arapaho, she would suffer the same fate as an Indian in white society. She would be ostracized by her peers, and her children would be ridiculed.

Still, Fanchon could never tell Elsa not to marry a man she loved. Her sole purpose in discussing Elsa’s interest was to warn her of what could happen and see that Elsa knew what she faced by associating with a renegade. Not only would he be looked down upon, he would be verbally and physically abused by the white community.

Tapping on the door of Astrid’s room, Fanchon pushed her thoughts from Elsa to her twin. All their lives she and Astrid had had differences of opinion. But the last time she saw her twin they were of like mind. Both had wanted to win the battle against Trevor, and both had failed.

When she opened the door, she gasped in shock at the damage Trevor had done. Unable to speak, she shut the door then wandered to the bed. Sitting on the edge, she grasped her twin’s hand.

“Are you all right?” Astrid asked.

“I should be asking *you* that question,” Fanchon replied, trying to smile but failing. “What happened?”

“Didn’t you hear? He raped me, then he beat me when I told him who I was. He *thought* I was you. Elsa said Gabe killed him.”

“It was almost the other way around.” The tears in Fanchon’s eyes flooded her cheeks in a torrent. Astrid was suffering for what she herself had started four years earlier by trying to murder Trevor Riley, and there was nothing she could do or say to alleviate her twin’s pain. When she was able to speak again, her voice cracked under the strain of knowing how many people had been hurt because of her. First it was Trevor, then Byron, followed by Nels, Astrid,

and Gabe. Thank God, no one else would suffer. “What possessed you to let him do that when you knew he wanted me?”

“It all started when I let Gabe think I was you,” Astrid explained. “That’s why he was so distant back in Moline.”

“I know all about it. Gabe told me everything.”

“Let me finish. I wanted Gabe from that time on—even more after Trevor told me that you tried to kill him. At first, I couldn’t believe it, but when I remembered Gabrielle, I decided it must be true. Then my business went bankrupt. I blamed you, of course, even if it *was* my own fault. That’s when I decided to get revenge. I started right away, too. Gabe had run his finger across my breast where you got cut, so I cut myself in the same spot.”

Fanchon shuddered at the thought, the memory of her own pain still clear in her mind. “Oh, Astrid. It’s mentally *sick* to disfigure yourself.”

“I think I was at the time. I wanted revenge for losing my business as much as you wanted revenge for Trevor killing Gabrielle. I wanted to replace you in Gabe’s bed, and Trevor wanted *you*. That’s when we decided to work together. Only I changed over the years, especially when you told me that I could have run my business without your help. I told Trevor I couldn’t go through with it.”

“You changed your mind because of what I told you?”

“No.” Astrid paused then explained. “I don’t know. Maybe that *was* part of it. Mainly, I realized that you and Gabe are truly in love. I couldn’t believe it at first, because you’d never been in love before.” During her second pause, her tears flowed. “Who am I trying to fool? Nobody but myself. I did it because of what Fred told me.”

“Fred Blankenship?” Fanchon asked when Astrid hesitated.

“He said that some of the men he works with told him that I wasn’t the kind of woman he should court. They told him that I’d been intimate with a lot of different men.”

“Why would they spread rumors like that?” Fanchon asked, horrified by the thought.

“They weren’t rumors.” When Fanchon gasped in shock, Astrid grimaced. “I thought you knew it wasn’t only Trevor. Anyway, I couldn’t answer Fred—not until I knew if it made a difference or not. He told me that my past didn’t matter as long as it stayed there, then he asked me to marry him. We love each other, but I couldn’t risk a future with him until I saved you from Trevor. Please tell me that he didn’t rape you.”

“He didn’t,” Fanchon said. “Gabe’s Indian friends captured him before he could. They held him for my husband.”

“Why do you call Gabe your husband? You’re divorced.”

“In our hearts, we’re still as committed to spending our lives together as if that piece of paper didn’t exist.”

“I hope Fred still wants to marry me when I tell him what happened. Elsa said she sent him a telegram to tell him that I’d been hurt.” Her eyes lit at the prospect as she grabbed Fanchon’s wrist, asking excitedly, “Do you think he’ll come?”

"If he loves you even *half* as much as I love Gabe." Smoothing Astrid's hair from her bruised and cut face, Fanchon continued in concern. "You should get some more sleep now. You want to be as beautiful as possible when he gets here, don't you?"

"I couldn't be beautiful after what Trevor did." With a wide grin, she dried her tears on the sheet. "We certainly had him confused, didn't we?"

Fanchon giggled as she dried her own tears on her handkerchief. "You had *me* confused, too. I couldn't understand why you were being so loyal when you never were before."

"I tried hard to transmit my thoughts to you. I kept thinking, *Fanchon, be careful*. I thought it over and over until I wondered if I was going insane. I didn't even know if you would get the message. Then when it was time to come to the house, I kept thinking about the clothes I was wearing. But I honestly didn't think you could wear the same thing, because Trevor stole your clothes. Didn't you even notice?"

"Of course. I got your mental messages, too. I didn't realize what it was at the time, but Gabe thought I was the one going loco. I *insisted* on wearing my gray and blue plaid shirt in the middle of the night. He couldn't understand why I didn't stay in bed. I've even been carrying my derringer for the past several days because I sensed danger—not to myself but you and Nels."

"I'm glad all that thinking worked. I don't know what I would have done if we hadn't been dressed alike."

"It was the first time in our lives that I was glad you impersonated me so well." Suddenly Fanchon burst into laughter. "I didn't know it then, but I had an awful lot of fun confusing him. After everything he'd put me through, after living in fear that he'd find Gabe or me and kill us, I was actually having fun. It was Trevor who attacked me in his storeroom five years ago. Gabe stopped him, but it was only today that Gabe gave me any direct indication that he loves me. He called me *my love*, Astrid. I don't think he realized what he said, but by the end of the night, I'll hear the words. I *know* I will."

"You married him, and he didn't love you?" Astrid asked. "That's not like you."

"I know, but I loved him. I didn't care whether he loved me or not. He wanted an heir in case he didn't come home from the war, and I wanted to give him one."

"It doesn't sound real. But why should it? You've never done anything that sounded real."

"Bianca called it destiny. Gabe and I were destined to love each other. And we do."

As Fanchon spoke, Elsa burst into the room, announcing that Sheriff Crandall's daughter Rachel had arrived to sit with Nels and said that Gabe was in jail. Fanchon's eyes widened in astonishment. Her instincts were right! Gabe had done something that could destroy their destiny—again! Racing past Elsa, she ran to Nels' room. The woman sitting in a chair beside the bed stared at Fanchon in amazement.

"I'm Fanchon Freeman. Where's my husband?"

"Ah, Fanchon." The blonde woman holding Nels' hand smiled up at her. "Nels thinks the world of you. He talks about you all the time."

"I think the world of him, too," Fanchon returned, "not to mention my husband. I'm sorry to be so abrupt, but Gabe's future is in jeopardy if what you told Elsa is true."

"About Gabe being in jail? It is. He told Father that he murdered the man he brought to town. He insisted on being put in jail. But don't worry. I was in the office, and Father didn't believe Gabe cold-bloodedly killed the man."

"Then why did he put Gabe in jail?"

"Because Gabe was as stubborn as he always is. He wouldn't leave the office. He practically locked *himself* up. Father decided to give him some time to think behind bars."

"I'll give that stubborn man something to think about," Fanchon vowed irately as her concern turned to anger. "I went through hell trying to find him, and I'll be damned if I'll let him destroy our destiny now."

Fanchon raced from the house to the stable where she bridled and mounted her horse without bothering to saddle it. Only one thing would get through to a man determined to torture himself for something beyond his control. If he was going to forget about their devotion to one another, she was going to remind him. She understood his guilt feelings, understood that he needed to purge himself of it, but she wouldn't tolerate him jeopardizing their destiny.

She was as stubborn as Gabriel Freeman—and determined to show him what he was doing to their future. If he had resolved to spend the rest of his life in jail, she would teach him a lesson he would never forget. All she had to do was convince Sheriff Crandall that her plan would work.

\*\*\*

After several minutes' discussion, Sheriff Crandall led Fanchon to the cell. Gabe sat on the cot, staring at the pair in stunned disbelief. When the sheriff unlocked the door, Gabe questioned him, seething with rage.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Crandall?"

"I learned that your wife is a conspirator in the murder. I'm letting her spend some time in your cell before you both go to the gallows."

"You can't do this!" Gabe cried out as Sheriff Crandall released Fanchon then closed and locked the cell door behind her. Gabe slid his arm around her in a gesture of support. "She's a free woman. You *can't* lock her up. She didn't *do* anything."

"She tried to murder Riley in Illinois. I can only assume she was behind his successful murder."

"This is ludicrous. Fanchon would never murder anyone. Let her out of here—now!"

"I can't do that, Gabe. She's been charged with conspiring to murder Trevor Riley."

"But she *didn't* conspire," Gabe declared. "It was *my* idea. Please. Let her out. I don't want

my wife to hang for something she couldn't control! Be reasonable, Crandall. Let her be free." When the door to the office closed behind the sheriff, Gabe embraced Fanchon. "Oh, God, Fanchon. I didn't think *you'd* be arrested for this. You couldn't kill him four years ago, and you couldn't have done it now. How am I ever going to get you out of this mess? I love you too much to let you hang for something you couldn't control. You didn't know how it was going to turn out when you shot him, and you didn't know how it was going to turn out today. It's ludicrous that Crandall arrested you. How am I ever going to convince him of your innocence? How am I ever going to convince him that he's destroying our destiny?"

Fanchon hoped he would convince himself of his folly. But when he made the declaration that the sheriff was destroying their destiny, she couldn't hold her tongue. "If you hang, we *have* no destiny."

"But Crandall doesn't even believe me. Fanchon, my beloved wife, he's *convinced* you were behind Trevor's death."

"I'm not your wife, Gabe. Remember? And I never will be now that our destiny's been destroyed."

"Oh, my God," he groaned as he sank onto the cot and buried his head in his hands. "What have I done?"

"I don't know, darling" she said, sitting down beside him to stroke his hair. "What *have* you done?"

"I've confessed to a murder that I had no control over. It was him or me, and I won. Now that I've confessed, I killed everything we could have had together."

When Gabe gazed at her, his tears of sorrow touched her heart. She smiled. "You haven't killed our future yet, darling. All you have to do is tell Sheriff Crandall what you admitted to me."

"What's that?" he asked. "I'll tell him anything if we can still be married."

"A few minutes ago, you said that you had no control over killing Trevor. You admitted it was him or you, but you need to admit one more thing before we can go on."

"What?"

"Admit that he provoked the fight. You only rescued me from a man more than capable of destroying our destiny."

"You did this on purpose, didn't you, Mrs. Freeman," he accused lightly while drying his tears on his bandanna. "You weren't charged with anything. You put me through hell thinking that you were going to hang—to teach me a lesson!"

"And I succeeded," she admitted with a grin.

"You taught me, all right."

Moving on the cot so he could face her, he caressed her chin. His lips descended to hers, locking upon them in a deep kiss. The fires of desire raged through him; his arms encircled her in a frantic hug. God, how he loved this woman! And now he knew that he always had. All

the times he'd lied about her having stolen his heart weren't lies after all—they were the Gospel truth. No wonder people were so eager to believe him. As desperate as he was to show her how he felt, he couldn't do it in a jail cell. First, he needed to take her home, where they could unite in privacy.

Reluctantly breaking the embrace, he gazed down at her and added, "You taught me never to cross you when it comes to our destiny. Crandall!"

"He's not here, darling," Fanchon said as she lay back on the cot and slowly unbuttoned her trousers. "He went home to have something to eat with his wife. Come to think of it, I'm hungry, too."

Gabe chuckled. "Not again."

"Again," she replied, sliding her trousers over her hips while Gabe removed her boots then pulled off her pants. "And again—and again—and again. I'll never stop wanting you, Gabe. I don't care where we are, or what we're doing. If I want you, I'll find a way to have you."

"But in a jail cell, Mrs. Freeman?" he asked as he removed his boots and trousers.

"Do I hear you complaining about my spontaneity again?"

"Absolutely *never* again." Covering her with his body, he moved against her. "But before we go any further, I want a date."

"A date for what?"

"For our wedding."

"I haven't heard a proposal recently."

"You're determined to make me say what's in my heart. All right. I love you, Fanchon, with all my being. And I'm beginning to think I loved you from the very first time I saw you when you were seven years old. You sparked something in my heart back then that I just couldn't get rid of. Will you marry me if I promise to tell you that I love you every day?"

"Yes, because I love you, too. From the first time you saved me from having to beat up Trevor." Grasping his buttocks, she raised her hips to reunite them as man and woman with a deep, heated sigh. Then she whispered, "Thanksgiving Day, with as many of our friends and relatives as possible there to share our happiness. I don't want anything small this time. I want the *world* to know we're husband and wife."

## THIRTY-ONE

As Elsa and Fanchon anticipated, Bianca arrived two days later. Astrid, determined to keep her good standing and become a woman of principles, revealed a family secret. Three years earlier Ben Morgan had committed suicide. Jane had been so ashamed of Bianca deserting her sons and contributing to such a tragedy that she'd made everyone keep the secret. Not wasting a minute, Fanchon and Bianca went to telegraph Jim and have him and the girls join them. Bianca wanted to be married as soon as possible, since she was due to have another child in about four months.

Three days after Bianca arrived, Fred Blankenship sent a telegram from Cheyenne to Freeborn announcing that he would be at the ranch as soon as he could find it. The receipt of that telegram had Calvin Osterberg at the ranch within an hour. Fanchon and Gabe had Calvin send a return telegram telling him to wait at the hotel until they arrived.

By the time they returned to the ranch, both Astrid and Nels were vastly improved. And Nels, who had spent most of the time in Rachel's care, was thrilled to learn that he was reunited with more of his siblings. The only ones missing were Peter and Ilka.

After Jim and Bianca said their vows, telegrams were sent to Moline announcing it and inviting relatives to Nels' wedding in November. No sooner had the Wilkersons left town than Astrid began work on Rachel's wedding gown, dreaming of the day she would design her own. While she labored over a sketching, Fred approached her in the dining room.

"Astrid?" he asked.

"Yep," she replied. "Wasn't it a wonderful day? Seeing Bianca so happy got me excited about Rachel's gown."

"I have a better idea," Fred said as he sat down in the chair beside hers. "Why don't you put your talents to work on one for yourself?"

Astrid was stunned by his words. In Moline he'd asked her to marry her, but he hadn't said anything since she'd explained everything to him. If he was proposing again, she was almost afraid to accept. They hadn't even discussed her part in Trevor's scheme. "What do you mean?"

"I still want to marry you. I've given it a lot of thought, too. You didn't do anything but try to save your sister—and you did in the long run. I'd be proud to have a courageous woman like you as my wife. Will you marry me?"

"Oh, Fred, yes!" Dropping her pencil, she threw her arms around his neck. "I'd love to marry you. I love you as much as Fanchon loves Gabe. I want to be your wife more than anything else in the world. Could we get married and live here? In Freeborn—near Fanchon? I never thought I'd say this, but I've missed her desperately. Every day I felt like part of me



was gone, but I didn't know why until Fanchon and I were reunited."

With a skeptical expression, Fred gazed over at her. "I don't know, honey. How would I earn a living?"

"You could probably think of something if you talk to Gabe, and I could convince Fanchon to invest in a seamstress shop again. We could both earn an income, and we could both raise a family. We could do everything together—like Gabe and Fanchon do. I envy her for having a job and running a household, too."

"Fanchon has help, Astrid. I know you're as smart as she is—even if you do want others to think you're not. But Fanchon has Genevieve and Moses."

"We'll do whatever you want, but promise to discuss it with Gabe. This is a ranching and farming community, Fred. There must be something you know from working at John Deere Plow Works that you can build a business on in Freeborn. And I know the seamstress business—despite my failure because I was too scared to run it alone."

"Working and raising a family isn't easy, honey," Fred warned her. "I've done it."

"You did it alone. We'll have each other, and we'll do fine with me working, because we'll be doing it together."

"I didn't know building a business meant so much to you."

"Neither did I," she admitted, moving to sit on his lap, "until I saw how happy Fanchon is. There's nothing but my stubbornness stopping me from being as independent as she is. We're a lot more alike than I thought. I could have gone through school as fast as Fanchon, but I'm more social than she is. I was more interested in being popular and having a lot of friends; she was more interested in learning everything she could. She had a lot of friends, too, you know, but they were in books instead of people." In her excitement, she paused when she saw his concerned expression. "Don't you want me to be independent?"

"Of course, but there must be some middle ground we could take."

"I don't want to be *totally* independent. I want to depend on your loyalty and love for the rest of my life."

Fred's arms slid around her waist; his hands wandered up her back. "You can, Astrid. I promise."

"And I promise you the same thing. All you have to do is *talk* to Gabe. You don't have to decide to live here. If you don't think you'd like it, we'll go back to Moline and get the children back from your mother before we're married."

"If it means that much to you, honey," Fred agreed, grasping her head in both hands, "I'll see if I can find something to do in Freeborn. But you'll have to talk to Fanchon about your seamstress business. I only ask that you wait and see what Gabe says."

\*\*\*

Later that night, while Gabe and Fanchon relaxed in bed, he opened a conversation that stunned Fanchon. “Apparently, my love, we’re going to have few more houseguests than we thought when we extended invitations to Nels’ wedding.”

“I didn’t realize you’d sent more telegrams,” she replied.

“I didn’t. Fred’s bringing his family here—or his and Astrid’s family. They’re going to get married and live in Freeborn.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you,” she said in shock. “I knew they talked about marriage, but not living here. Did Fred say why?”

“Astrid wants to. I’m glad I know how to tell you two apart just by looking. I’d hate to spend the rest of my life wondering which woman let me be her husband.”

“You figured out a difference?” she asked. “And what might that be?”

“Astrid has a scar on the back of her right hand that you don’t.”

Grinning, she snuggled closer and rested her head on his chest to toy with the hair. “Oh? And you found this scar all by yourself?”

“Well,” he confessed, hugging her, “I *might* have had a little help from my best friend and brother-in-law.”

“I imagine you *might* have,” she returned with a giggle. “He’s been giving that hint to anyone who asked for years.”

“I also told Fred. If he’s going to be living in the area, he’s going to need the inside tips as much as I do.” Pausing, Gabe rubbed Fanchon’s shoulder. “You don’t mind if I offered to help finance his blacksmith business, do you? We need one in Freeborn, and he has the skills from working at the Plow Works.”

“I don’t mind. I enjoy making investments when I feel they’ll be profitable—like I did with Astrid in Moline.”

“And Freeborn. She wants to open another business. Fred said she wants to be a working woman like her twin.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. She was never as happy as she was when she had A & F Designs. Now she can have everything just like I do—only she’ll have even more for a while.”

“What do you mean?”

“She has a ready-made family. We have to wait a while before we have any.”

“*If* we have any,” he mumbled

In the dark, Fanchon smiled. Sliding her hand from his chest down his stomach and lower, she caressed him until he became aroused and rolled her onto her back. While they joined together a second time that night, Fanchon’s mind returned to their union in the jail cell. That day she’d again felt destiny working its way with her body.

\*\*\*

"Today's perfect for a wedding," Astrid crooned with a tear seeping from her eye, "even if it is snowing. It's blanketed in white wherever you look. Isn't it beautiful!"

"Not as beautiful as *we* are," Fanchon said. "For the first time in my life, I want to look exactly like you. Not many people will be able to tell us apart—other than our grooms, thanks to Nels. I'm glad he and Rachel agreed to postpone their honeymoon until after we got married. I wouldn't have felt like the family was complete without him here."

"Me, either. And you wanting a double wedding, when all these years I thought my dream would never come true, is a miracle."

"How could I *not* want a double wedding?" Fanchon asked with a laugh. "You saved my husband's life—or my ex-husband—or my groom—or whoever he is until we say our vows again in a few minutes. But remember what you told me at our eighteenth birthday dance—age before beauty. I get married first, sister, no matter how much you love Fred."

"Where are you going on your honeymoon?" Astrid asked. "Or can you even take one? We've been so caught up in the wedding that we haven't even discussed it."

"We leave for Cheyenne tomorrow morning to catch the train to San Francisco." When Astrid gasped, Fanchon giggled. "Don't tell me. You two are leaving for Cheyenne tomorrow morning to catch the train to San Francisco. And the location for the honeymoon was totally your decision."

"How did you know?" Astrid returned with a smile.

"Our bond, of course. The decision was totally mine, too. Since you're going to San Francisco, there was no other explanation. Apparently, we're not only having a double wedding but a double honeymoon, too. At least, Genevieve and Moses won't have much trouble finding us if something goes wrong with any of the six children you and Nels are leaving in their care."

At that moment, a knock on the door interrupted them.

"Are my two kittens ready to march down the steps on my arms?" their father asked. "Thanksgiving dinner will burn if you don't get these weddings over with pretty soon."

As the trio entered the formal parlor, Fanchon saw the preacher standing before the fireplace facing the door with Gabe on his left and Fred on his right. Approaching the men slowly, Fanchon on her father's right and Astrid on his left, Fanchon marveled at how easily announcing her marital status had gone when she and Gabe told her parents the previous night. Neither had wanted to reveal the truth until the last minute to avoid a possible argument, yet there was none. Quite a while into the discussion, they learned that Nels had told her parents before his own wedding. Carl and Jane agreed that what mattered the most was that Gabe and Fanchon were happy and would eventually be husband and wife again.

Tears flowed throughout the service, not only from the brides but Gabe, as well. They were finally getting married, and he was the happiest man alive. During the second ceremony he spoke his vows with as much conviction as the first time, again reciting them from

memory. Fanchon, who had studied diligently the previous night while she lay awake in a separate bedroom, did likewise. At the end of Astrid's vows, the preacher said a short prayer then spoke to the newlyweds.

"I now pronounce you husbands and wives," he said soberly. "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, Amen. Gentlemen, you may kiss ..."

Again Gabe swept Fanchon into his arms before the minister could finish his words. And again he released her to gaze deeply into her eyes. "You're the most beautiful woman I've ever met, Mrs. Freeman." This time he added, "Including that beautiful twin of yours, because you're letting me be your husband."

Hugging him, Fanchon wept against his suit jacket. "I love you, Gabriel Freeman, more than any man I've ever known. Now let's get our relatives, cowhands, and friends—both white and Arapaho—into the dining room. Dad said he's starving."

\*\*\*

As they sat before the fire in the parlor that night, Fanchon sighed, more than content with her life. When she snuggled against him, Gabe clasped his hands together to hold her loosely in his arms. "You sound happy, my love."

"Totally and wonderfully happy. Are you?"

"Happier than I've *ever* been. It was great of your family to go into Freeborn tonight."

"It was, wasn't it. It gives us a chance to be alone like Astrid and Fred before we all go to San Francisco."

"Don't tell me she chose the place for a honeymoon, too."

"All right, I won't." After a brief pause, she asked, "Did you see Elsa and Stalking Lion today? They seemed to envy us."

"I noticed. That's why I left you for a while. I wanted to talk to Stalking Lion alone so I could see if he knew what his interest could do to Elsa. Apparently, they've already discussed it. Elsa insisted that she doesn't care what people think of her as long as she's happy."

"That's a result of good advice from her older sister. We had a long talk shortly after she met Stalking Lion. I wanted to assure myself that she knew the possible ramifications of her involvement with a renegade Arapaho. At the time, she hadn't considered everything. So I gave her a week to think about it, then we continued our discussion. That's when she told me that she loves him."

"He loves her, too. I understand that they meet as often as they can, but he's reluctant to take her into his way of life. He knows what he faces if he's found roaming the mountains."

Fanchon released a long, deep sigh, this one filled with concern. "I want them to be as happy as we are, but I can't advise Elsa to give up all of her comforts to live with Stalking Lion. I love her too much to see her suffer in that lifestyle."

After kissing her hair, he said, "You may not have to. I offered Stalking Lion a job on the ranch if he wants it. I warned him that there could be trouble from the other hands if he accepts it, and I told him that he might change his mind after a while. I extended the offer because he's a good man. I know he'd never do anything to hurt Elsa. She's become my little sister, too, Fanchon, and I don't want to see her suffer any more than you do."

"What did Stalking Lion say? Is he going to take it?"

"I don't know yet. I told him that I don't even want an answer until after we get back from our honeymoon. I want him to give it a lot of thought before he makes a decision. I want him to discuss it with Elsa."

"It's a miracle, isn't it, darling?"

"What is?"

"That so many people in my family found true love despite all the problems that seem to plague us. And it all began with our destiny marriage that was a trial in itself."

"I suppose you're right. Thank God, our destiny's fulfilled now."

Shifting in his arms, Fanchon gazed into his eyes, her own sparkling. "Not quite. That won't happen for another six months."

"Are you saying what I think you are?" he asked excitedly, his brown eyes brightening at the thought. "Are you telling me that in only six months we'll have a brother or sister for our Gabrielle?"

When she nodded, he tightened his hold on her and kissed her soundly in his excitement. "Oh, my love, I can't tell you how happy I am. I missed your first pregnancy, but I'm going to be with you all the way through the birth of this child. Nobody will *ever* come between us again—nobody will challenge our destiny. In fact, if we have another little girl, that's what I want to name her. Destiny."

"Destiny," she repeated as he laid her down on the couch. She smiled up at him. This was a spontaneous act on Gabe's part, and she was willing to accommodate him. As he pushed her nightgown out of his way, she whispered, "I like it. It will always remind us that our love is destiny's desire."