

**A  
GOLD RUSH  
ROMANCE**

**BOOK ONE**

**Restless Hearts**

by

**Mona Ingram**

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For Max

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## Chapter One

*Boston Harbor. May, 1849*

Sarah stood at the ship's rail and tried unsuccessfully to make out the buildings clustered along the shore. The foghorn bleated its mournful warning and she peered into the shifting white mist, trying to pinpoint the familiar landmark. Odd that the sound should startle her now; the foghorn had been part of her life for as long as she could remember. On a normal day it barely registered.

But there was nothing normal about today. In a few hours she would be leaving her familiar life behind. It was exciting and terrifying at the same time, but she'd made her decision. In her mind, there'd been no other option. She couldn't imagine living the rest of her life in Boston, where nothing in the foreseeable future was likely to change. Staring into the fog, she offered up a silent prayer, hoping that her instincts were right, that leaping off this precipice into the unknown would fulfil her in a way that life in proper Boston never could.

The captain had assured her that the fog would lift and that they would depart as scheduled on the afternoon tide. She was inclined to believe him. Captain Samuel Johnson radiated confidence. He wasn't much taller than Sarah, but her first impression when she'd boarded the ship a few hours ago was of a man who was an extension of his ship. As solidly built as *WindSprite*, he'd greeted her with a firm handshake, his feet spread apart as though they were already on the high seas. She was lucky to have found this passage, and she knew it.

Built as a cargo ship, *WindSprite* hadn't originally been intended to carry passengers, but these days with more and more people clamoring for transportation to San Francisco, the ship's owners had made some slight modifications, carving out space for what she now knew would be four other passengers. At least she'd have some company on the long voyage, although she had her doubts that Anna Taylor would provide much in the way of companionship. The woman had embarked with her daughter shortly after Sarah, and the moment she'd stepped on board, her gaze had cast about wildly, as though she was going to be ill. Not surprisingly, the little girl had stayed on deck, wide-eyed and excited as her mother went below to get settled.

The familiar sound of oars clanking in oarlocks drew her attention and once again she peered out into the fog. The ship's dory came into view, rowed by one of the crew members, but it was the man standing in the bow that drew her attention. He stood easily, one foot braced on a thwart as he surveyed the ship with interest. Sarah looked down at him as the dory drew closer, fascinated by the air of casual confidence that swirled around him. Dark, curly hair and long, stylish sideburns framed a face that could only be described as handsome. Her breath caught in her chest as he looked up at her and nodded, a faint smile on his lips.

Sarah glanced down at the ring on her left hand, and for the first time since she'd hatched this crazy plan, she regretted her decision to pose as a married woman.

A fanciful thought, to be sure. A man who looked like that would be married. She studied him surreptitiously; curious as to why she didn't know him. She didn't know everyone in

Boston, but society had its limitations, and a man like this would surely be discussed among the unmarried women of the town. The married ones too, for that matter.

“Hello, what’s your name?” The young girl appeared at Sarah’s side. “My name’s Melissa, but my friends call me Missy.” Bright eyes studied her for a moment. “You can call me Missy.”

“Why thank you, Missy. My name is Sarah.”

The child’s attention switched to the dory, which bumped gently against the ship and was made fast by a crew member.

It was only then that Sarah noticed the other passenger in the dory. A woman had been sitting in the back and she rose unsteadily, a voluminous bag clutched in her hands. This must be Lucy Davis, Sarah’s cabin companion. Her trunk had arrived earlier, and had been delivered to the small cabin, her name prominently displayed. A woman in her mid forties, her figure could best be described as generously proportioned. Fully loaded, the ship was sitting low in the water. As with her own arrival, the climb for the new passengers would be manageable.

The man extended a hand, and murmured something to the woman. She nodded, and passed him the bag. She didn’t seem daunted by the fact that she had to scramble up the ladder. As a matter of fact, her eyes sparkled with the challenge, and she was soon standing on deck, smoothing down her skirts and taking in her surroundings.

“So,” she said, striding toward Sarah with a hand extended. “The adventure begins. I’m Lucy Davis. Please call me Lucy.”

Sarah returned the other woman’s smile. “Sarah Howard. Delighted to meet you.”

Missy had watched Lucy’s ascent, and studied her openly.

“Your daughter?” Lucy’s eyebrows rose slightly.

The question caught Sarah by surprise, and she glanced quickly at the man before responding. “What? Heavens, no. This is Miss Melissa Taylor. She gestured toward the companionway. “Her mother is below, getting settled.”

Lucy touched young Melissa on the head and the child smiled brightly at the unexpected attention. “I suppose I should do the same thing.” She bent over and spoke quietly to Missy, who was partially hidden behind Sarah’s skirts. “I’ll see you later, Miss Melissa.”

The child said nothing, but she released her hold on Sarah’s skirt and stepped forward. There was something about Lucy Davis that engendered trust, and Sarah gave silent thanks that the woman would be her cabin mate. It had been too much to hope that she would get a cabin to herself; she was keenly aware that an unpleasant traveling companion would make the long voyage even more tedious. Her luck was holding, and she gave a sigh of relief. The show over, the child drifted away to explore the myriad nooks and crannies on the deck. She’d heard the captain inform Mrs. Taylor that the girl would be confined to a limited area once the ship was under way. The child was taking advantage of the opportunity to explore now.

Sarah turned to introduce herself to the man, but he wasn’t there. She scanned the deck and spotted him near the main hatch, speaking to one of the crew. Whatever they were discussing, he looked comfortable, and as she observed, he threw back his head and laughed, white teeth flashing in contrast with his tanned face. This man was a study in contrasts. He was urbane and well dressed. Elegant, even, and yet he talked comfortably with the crew member. Judging by his comfort in the dory and his tanned appearance, he spent a fair amount of time outdoors.

He glanced over as she studied him, and for the first time she could remember, she didn’t look away when a man looked at her directly. That was the old Sarah, and although the new Sarah was – as far as the world knew – a married woman, she was also independent and forward

thinking. The notion was liberating, and she found herself standing a bit taller as he strode toward her, moving across the deck as though he owned it.

“Mrs. Howard?” He offered his hand and she took it, not surprised by the jolt of energy that passed between them. “I’m Jamie Thompson.” Eyes that were somewhere between grey and blue studied her, and she found herself wondering what color they’d be on a sunny day. His gaze shifted briefly to her left hand, then returned to her face. “Pardon me for being so bold, but since we’ll be traveling in rather close company for the next little while...” He shrugged amiably.

He looked beyond her, and indicated with a tilt of his chin that she should turn. “The fog is lifting, just as the captain predicted. We should get underway right on schedule.”

Sarah twisted the ring around her finger, but he appeared not to notice. “So,” he continued, glancing into the rigging. “It’s a beautiful little ship, wouldn’t you say?”

Sarah found her voice. “I don’t know a lot about ships, but it seems sturdy, and was recommended.”

Jamie nodded. “Thankfully. As you must know, this isn’t the best time of year to round the Cape, but I for one didn’t want to wait until the fall.”

“It’s a difficult concept to grasp,” she mused, almost to herself. “The fact that it’s winter down there while we enjoy summer up here.” She looked to him for reassurance. “We’ll be at our most southerly point in the middle of their winter, right?”

“Yes.” He sauntered over to the mainmast and looked up into the rigging again. “But I have every faith in Captain Johnson.”

He turned back and spoke casually. “Your husband is already in California, I take it?”

Sarah nodded. “Yes, he’s...” She paused. How could she not have made up an occupation for this fictional husband? “He’s a doctor.” At least she could speak with some confidence about the medical profession, as her father was a respected Boston doctor.

His face lit up with an almost boyish enthusiasm. “Have you heard from him? How is everything out there?” He ducked his head in what she assumed was an apology. “Sorry to pester you with questions, but so little news has filtered back.”

“So true,” Sarah murmured to herself.

“Sorry, what did you say?” He moved closer.

She raised her eyes. Lord, but he was a good looking man. Thank goodness she was a married woman. The thought almost made her laugh.

“He’s only been there a few months. He was getting ready to leave when President Polk made his speech about the discovery of gold.” She was getting warmed up now. “Unfortunately, he didn’t give me very much news, just asked me to get the first available ship. It was the only letter I’ve received, but I understand that mail service is rather sporadic.”

Jamie’s gaze swept over her and a knowing smile hitched up the corner of his mouth. “I can understand why your husband would want you to join him.”

He’d said nothing wrong, and yet there’d been a flash of something in his eyes. She’d love to explore it further, to find out what he’d been thinking, but she reminded herself of her marital status.

Jamie’s generous lips narrowed. “I’ve heard similar reports about the mail service. It seems that everyone is so busy making their pile that they don’t have time to waste on the simple services that we take for granted.” He didn’t seem at all upset by the notion of irregular mail service. “So much to organize,” he said, almost to himself.

“What do you do, if I might ask?” Sarah couldn’t quite picture him mining, although his shoulders were broad enough, and he exuded strength.

“Up until now, I’ve worked in my family’s merchant bank.” He gestured vaguely toward the hold. “I’ve brought a large safe, and a minting machine with me.” He anticipated her next question. “I’m from New York. I had the safe shipped up here from New York and then I followed, and purchased the minting machine here in Boston.”

“I see.”

He grinned at her response. “I know, banking is boring, but this is the perfect opportunity to go out there and see it all for myself. I told the Board of Directors of the bank that I’d go and set things up, but that I don’t want to be tied down for the rest of my life. The bank has sent some men from the Chicago area by the overland route, so I’m not obliged to stay.” He gave her an odd look. “Why am I telling you all this?”

Sarah lifted her shoulders. “I don’t know, but I understand your enthusiasm.” She walked to the rail and looked out to the open ocean. Only a few tendrils of fog remained. “I’m anxious to get there myself and see what it’s all about.” She turned and gave him a sideways glance. “What will you do if you don’t work in the bank? Do you intend to join the rush to the gold fields?”

“No.” He shook his head decisively. “For some reason, that doesn’t interest me.” His face took on a faraway look. “My grandfather left me some property.” He turned to her and re-focused. “They call them ranchos, and the one I inherited is outside of San Francisco, on the Sacramento River.”

“A farm?” She wasn’t sure if she could picture him as a farmer.

“I don’t really know. The truth is, I didn’t know my grandfather all that well, and I was as surprised as anyone when he left it to me. I only met him once, when I was about ten years old. He visited us in New York, and I remember spending quite a bit of time with him. I recall pestering him with questions about the rancho; it seemed very exotic and far away.” He smiled at the memory. “He and my grandmother had two daughters, both of whom are married now and living back on the East Coast, so evidently he thought if I inherited, the ranch would stay in the family.” He paused for a moment. “To answer your question, I would imagine there is some general farming on the property, but I believe it’s mostly cattle.”

“So.” She stepped back and appraised him openly. “You’re a land baron.”

He laughed good-naturedly. “Hardly. But I hope you and your husband will come to visit one day when you’re settled in. You might be ready for some time away from the city.” He glanced back toward the open hatch. “I think I’ll check on the safe once more before we get underway. Make sure they have it tied down properly.”

“Right.” Sarah nodded, but her mind wasn’t on his words. She was regretting her decision to pose as a married woman, and not just because Jamie Thompson was a very appealing man. She hadn’t realized that lying about a fictional husband would make her so uncomfortable, but there was no getting around it. She couldn’t possibly travel such a great distance on her own as a single woman. Her thoughts drifted back to the day she’d made the decision to leave Boston.

## Chapter Two

*Three months earlier*

“Thank you for the dance.” Sarah’s dance partner returned her to the group of young women who’d gathered well away from the orchestra. She smiled graciously, unable to remember his name. She’d only agreed to dance with him to get away from the incessant gossip from the cluster of unattached women. Lewis hadn’t partnered her for about half an hour, even though he’d brought her to the dance. She’d reluctantly agreed to attend the St. Valentine’s dance after her mother had overheard Lewis asking her for the second time, and urged her to attend.

She sighed as she scanned the dance floor for a sign of her fiancé. Becoming engaged to Lewis had been a mistake, but she’d accepted his proposal out of desperation, devastated by her father’s refusal to endorse her application to medical school. She and Lewis were good friends, but there was no romantic spark between them, even when he kissed her, his lips dry and cool.

“We haven’t seen much of you recently.” Lydia Carmichael eyed her over her fan. Sarah thought the fan was ridiculous; it was February and not the least bit hot.

“I’ve been busy,” she said, wondering why Lydia had singled her out. “Helping my father with his practise.”

“Euuw.” The expression on Lydia’s face made her distaste clear. “Cleaning up after sick people!”

Sarah wanted to crack her over her head with the ridiculous fan. “No,” she said evenly. “Not exactly. I assist him with many of his small surgeries.”

“Oh, that’s right.” Lydia rolled her eyes dramatically, more for the benefit of the other women than for Sarah. “I forgot about your determination to break into the medical profession.” She tapped the folded fan against her chin and narrowed her gaze. “It won’t work, you know. Women will never be accepted.”

Up until recently, Sarah would have agreed. But things were changing. Slowly, to be true, but they *were* changing. The trouble was, the changes were unlikely to help her anytime soon.

“Oh, haven’t you heard?” Sarah tried to keep the triumph out of her voice. “Elizabeth Blackwell was graduated from medical school just last month.”

Lydia’s eyes widened, but she recovered quickly. “One woman! Oh yes, I read about that. Wasn’t that a mistake?”

Sarah acknowledged the comment with a tip of her head. “Perhaps her initial acceptance was a mistake of sorts, but she graduated at the top of her class.”

“Really.” Sarcasm dripped from Lydia’s lips and she looked to her friends for support. “Commendable, I’m sure, but one woman graduating from medical school is hardly a trend.”

Sarah’s temper was reaching the boiling point, but she bit her tongue. “True, but attitudes are changing. Especially since the New England Female Medical College opened in Boston last year. I consider that to be real progress.”

“And are you enrolled?”

The spiteful question almost brought tears to Sarah's eyes, but she refused to show weakness. "Regrettably not. My father wouldn't approve. And now if you'll excuse me, I think I'll go outside for some fresh air." She turned on her heel and walked away, head held high. Let them talk about her. She didn't care what they said, but attitudes like Lydia's didn't help bring about the important changes that were needed before women could find liberation.

Once outside, she pulled her shawl around her shoulders and stepped into the shadows behind a rose trellis. It was too cold to stay out here for long, but the change in temperature would cool her down in more ways than one. She took several deep breaths and was about to go back inside when she heard a soft moan. Was someone in pain? Did they need help?

She was about to step out of the shadows when she heard a man's voice. "Oh, Lewis. I can't live like this, knowing you're going to marry Sarah. I thought you loved me."

And then the familiar voice of her fiancé. "I do love you, Stephen. You know that."

Uncomfortable spying, and yet mesmerized by the conversation, Sarah looked around the corner of the trellis. Lewis was tenderly holding Stephen's face, and as she watched, he kissed the other man fully on the mouth, deepening the kiss until the other man moaned with need. The sight was oddly arousing, and disturbing at the same time. Lewis had never kissed her that way, and now she knew why.

"When can we be together again?" The man called Stephen was touching Lewis intimately, and Sarah looked away. "It's been too long."

"I don't know, but please be patient. I'll talk to Sarah soon. I promise."

Sarah didn't realize she'd been holding her breath until the patio doors opened and a laughing couple stepped outside, music spilling out behind them. She slipped through the open door and stood quietly for a moment, composing herself. She'd heard about men who preferred other men, but she hadn't known any. At least she didn't think she had... until now.

Her initial shock was soon replaced by relief. She didn't want to marry Lewis, or anyone else at this point in her life. They'd met over ten years ago, and grown up together, but she blamed herself for the situation they were in now. She should never have gone along with their family's expectations that they would one day get married.

The engagement ring felt tight on her finger and she looked at it sadly. She'd accepted his proposal during the Christmas season, knowing even then that it was a mistake. At the time it had seemed like the only way out. Her father had refused to endorse her for the medical college and here she was, twenty two years old and would soon be considered too old for marriage. Especially now, with the pool of available men shrinking, as many headed west to find gold and excitement in California.

Lewis's family owned a cartage business, and they had been talking about expanding. The idea of moving away from Boston appealed to her, and she'd told herself that by accepting his proposal she could make a new life. She would come to love him eventually, she told herself. At least they were friends.

But now everything had changed. She managed to avoid the other guests and sought out a quiet corner where she could think. It wasn't a question of *what* she should do now. That much was clear. The question was, when should she confront Lewis?

"There you are." Startled, she looked up to see him standing in front of her. "Are you all right, Sarah?" He'd known her long enough to discern that something was wrong. She wished the best for him in his difficult life ahead, but she would have preferred that he wasn't so perceptive.

“I’m fine.” It was an automatic answer, and she retracted it almost instantly. “No, I’m not, Lewis. I’ve developed a bit of a headache. Do you mind taking me home?”

“Not at all. I’ll have the carriage brought around, and we can leave immediately.”

\* \* \*

Lewis looked over at her several times on the way home. He appeared to be getting up his nerve to speak, while Sarah looked straight ahead, gathering herself for what was to come.

When they pulled up in front of her father’s residence, he fidgeted, making no move to get out.

“Lewis.” She turned to him. “I’m sorry, but I can’t marry you.”

The look on his face was almost comical. His first reaction had been joy, then a puzzled expression took over.

“Why, Sarah?”

Light flickered from the lamp at the gatepost, and she looked into his eyes. “I saw you with Stephen tonight. I overheard what you said.”

The blood drained from his face and he seemed to shrink back into the depths of the carriage.

“It’s all right, Lewis. I understand.” She gave his hand a squeeze. “We never should have become engaged in the first place.”

He looked up, and for a moment she thought he might cry. “Do you hate me?”

“Of course not. We’ve been friends too long for that.”

Hope flared in his eyes. “Then you won’t tell anyone?”

“No. I’ll tell my family that we won’t be marrying, but that we want to remain friends.” She removed the ring from her finger and handed it to him. “Here, take this.”

He reached for the ring and she held on, reluctant to sever the connection they’d shared for so many years. “You really need to be more careful when you and Stephen are in public together.” She released her hold on the ring. “What will you do?”

He gave her a hopeful grin. “This is all very sudden, but maybe Stephen and I could move together to Philadelphia when we expand the business. No one knows us there.”

Sarah nodded. “That could work.” She raised a hand to his cheek. “Be careful, Lewis, but be happy.”

He nodded wordlessly, eyes gleaming with unshed tears. Sarah got out of the carriage and walked to the front door. She didn’t look back.

\* \* \*

“You’re home early.” Sarah’s mother looked up as Sarah removed her shawl and stood at the entrance to the living room.

“Yes.” Sarah pressed fingers to her temple. “I developed a bit of a headache.” She glanced toward her father’s chair by the fire. “Has father been called out?”

Bridget Howard sighed. “No, he turned in early. He was up most of last night trying to save that young child who was run over by a carriage.” She raised her eyes. “The child died this morning.”

Sarah squeezed her eyes shut and said a quick prayer. A dedicated physician, her father was still saddened every time he wasn’t able to save a patient. She liked that about him; the fact that he didn’t adopt an aloof air, the way some other physicians did when dealing with death. His

compassion was one of the reasons she'd been taken completely by surprise when he'd refused to support her application to medical school. Another reason was that she'd been helping him treat patients in his office for as long as she could remember. She'd thought he understood where her interests lay.

Her mother's voice brought her out of her reverie. "Shall I make you some warm milk, my dear? It might help you to fall asleep."

Sarah smiled at her mother. Bridget Howard was the core of this family. Sarah's father may be the breadwinner and the titular head of the household, but nothing worked in this family without her mother.

"No thanks, but I would like to talk to you for a moment. Devon is out, I take it?"

Bridget nodded. "Yes, your brother is out with his friends. I do wish he'd settle down, but..." Her voice trailed off.

Sarah sat down on the footstool by her mother's chair and plucked at the folds of her skirt. Her mother was going to be disappointed, but it would serve no purpose to delay.

"Mother, Lewis and I aren't getting married. We decided tonight."

Her mother's gaze went to her left hand.

"I returned the ring."

"But surely..." Her mother frowned. "This is rather sudden. Surely you can patch things up."

Sarah held her mother's gaze and made a decision. "Mother, Lewis is in love with someone else."

Bridget put down her embroidery. "Why that's preposterous."

Sarah felt her lips twitch in a wry smile. Her mother was right; it *was* preposterous. "Mother, Lewis is in love with another man. I found out tonight."

Her mother's mouth opened, but no sound came out. Sarah watched as she looked around the room, her gaze finally coming to rest on a set of crystal candlesticks on the mantelpiece. When she finally spoke, her voice seemed to come from a long distance. "Your father is going to be so angry when he hears about this."

"No he isn't." Sarah reached out and took both of her mother's hands. "Because we're not going to tell him the details. As far as he's concerned, I changed my mind." Sarah watched as her mother considered her statement.

"I promised Lewis I wouldn't tell anyone, and now I'm asking you to help me keep my word." She smiled. "Please understand, mother. Lewis and I are friends. I genuinely like him, but quite frankly, I'm relieved not to be marrying him." She felt like she'd been deprived of oxygen for a long time, and had finally been given permission to breathe. She gave her mother's fingers a gentle squeeze. "I want something more than that in my life. I thought I'd be in medical college by now. That wasn't to be, but I refuse to accept that my life is over. I don't want to marry someone just to be married. I want to have a life that means something. I want to have some adventures."

Bridget Howard's face softened and for a moment she was somewhere else as she gazed into the fire. "I can understand that," she said quietly. "When I was young, I had the chance to go to England for a year, but my mother wasn't well and I chose to stay home and take care of her. I've never said this to anyone, but I always regretted that I missed that opportunity. That was before I met your father, of course." She looked at her daughter and exhaled slowly. "I know you're deeply disappointed with him right now, Sarah, but he's a good man." She picked up her embroidery and stared at it, as though wondering who had created the intricate pattern. "And while I'm being frank, I might as well tell you: there were harsh words between us about your

medical training, but your father was adamant.” She shook her head. “There was only so much I could do.”

Sarah rarely heard her mother speak so candidly and it took a few moments for the words to sink in. “I didn’t know that. Thank you for sticking up for me. That means a lot.”

Bridget’s fingers caressed the embroidery she’d just completed while she studied her daughter. “I’m going to lose you, aren’t I?” A tear ran down her cheek, but she was smiling. “What are you going to do?”

Sarah sat up a little straighter. “I have no idea how I’m going to accomplish this, but I’d like to go to San Francisco.” Excitement fluttered in her stomach as she spoke. “I’m going to need your help, though.” For the first time in months, she looked forward to the future. “What do you say?”

“You’re not afraid?”

Sarah laughed. “I’m terrified.”

Her mother smiled and shook her head. “Good, but we have to agree to something here and now. Your father must never know I helped you plan this. You’re going to leave a letter when you leave and I’m going to be completely taken aback when I find it.”

“Thank you.” Sarah hugged her mother in a rare display of affection. “That’s one promise I can keep.”

### Chapter Three

Had that really been only two months ago? Sarah came out of her reverie and looked around the deck. Excitement gripped her as she realized that her dream was about to come true. She was really here, on board *WindSprite*, soon to depart for San Francisco.

As though in tune with her thoughts, the anchor chain clattered loudly as it was winched up from the bottom. Crew members, eager to get started, clambered up to the yards and prepared to release the sails.

Lured by the sound, Lucy Davis popped her head out of the companionway, spotted Sarah and joined her at the railing.

“Are you excited? How long has it been since your husband left?” A light breeze had sprung up and Lucy swatted impatiently at a few loose hairs.

“Not too long.” The ship started to respond as wind filled the sails.

“What does your husband do? Is he chasing the golden dream, or is he in business?”

Sarah laughed. “Neither, really. He’s a doctor. I stayed behind to tidy up our affairs.” A weak story, but it was the best she could do.

“I understand. I have a friend who’s married to a doctor in New York. She’s told me many times that she has to make all the practical decisions.” The ship heeled slightly, and Lucy clutched the railing. “My Charles has always been in business. I told him I expect a proper home by the time I arrive. The last letter I received assured me that he’s having a house built on a hill away from the center of town. I have no idea what that means, but I’ve brought enough household goods to set up housekeeping once I get there.”

“We thought we’d buy a place after I arrive,” said Sarah. “Devon says he’s leaving that up to me.”

Lucy gave her an odd look. “I may be wrong, but I don’t think there are many places available for purchase. I got the impression that it’s every man for himself when it comes to housing.” She shrugged. “Although maybe that’s among the single miners.” She gave Sarah an appreciative once-over. “You’re young and strong. You’ll figure it out. Now I think I’ll have a quick turn around the deck before it gets rough.”

“Yes,” Sarah murmured to Lucy’s retreating back. “I’ll figure it out.”

\* \* \*

The shoreline receded rapidly as the ship put out to sea. Off the bow of the ship, streaks of grey stretched across the sky, and in the west, the sun’s descent illuminated the clouds with a pale golden glow. Not the colorful, romantic sunsets Sarah had imagined, but she was confident she’d see many of those in the days to come. Today she was embarking on more than a sea voyage... she was embarking on a new phase of her life. This time she wouldn’t allow herself to slide into situations or relationships that weren’t to her liking. The notion was empowering, and she smiled to herself as she braced against a sudden swell.

“Finding your sea legs?” Jamie Thompson appeared at her side.

“They weren’t lost.” The words popped out before she could stop them, and she glanced sideways to see him grinning.

“Touché,” he said, with a tilt of his head. “But seriously, those shoes aren’t suited to walking on the deck.” He looked out to sea. “Especially when we get into heavy waters.”

Sarah looked down at her ankle-high, square-toed boots. “I’m learning that, but all the same, it’s exhilarating.”

“Looking for a bit of an adventure, are you?” He raised an eyebrow.

Sarah’s heart raced when he looked at her like that. She was enjoying his company far too much. “Not if it means being swept overboard, no. Thankfully, my mother is a practical woman, and she insisted that I bring several pairs of buskins along for that very purpose.”

He nodded. “Buskins. You’re referring to low-heeled shoes, right?” His tone held a definite challenge. “Aren’t those usually worn by – how can I say this delicately – the lower classes?”

She raised her head and met his gaze. “As I said, my mother is a practical woman.” She made a broad gesture that encompassed the sea and the diminishing land mass at their stern.

“Something tells me that the old rules don’t mean much where we’re headed.” She paused for a moment. “Well... some of the old rules will still apply, of course, but I intend to keep an open mind when I get there.”

“And your husband? Does he share your passion for fresh starts?” He spoke casually, but watched her intently as she pondered his question. She’d have to be careful around this man; he saw more than he let on.

“Surprisingly, yes.”

He turned to her. “Why is that surprising?”

She kept her gaze on the distant horizon. “Because most men in the medical profession are fairly set in their ways. I grew up with a father who is a doctor, so I know all about that.” It was difficult to keep the bitterness out of her voice. It was time to change the subject before she gave too much away. “What about you? What prompted you to take the leap?”

A fleeting smile crossed his lips. “I like the way you say ‘take the leap’. It suggests something wild and unknown.”

*If only he knew.* She maintained her silence, and he continued.

“As I mentioned before, my grandfather left me some property, but if I’m really honest with myself, that was just an excuse. I’ve been restless for some time now, and learning about my inheritance was the catalyst I needed.” He shuddered. “I can’t see myself being a banker for the rest of my life.”

Sarah was about to respond when Melissa Taylor came running out onto the deck.

“Mommy’s sick,” she said breathlessly.

Sarah looked at Jamie. “Perhaps the steward...”

Missy tugged at Sarah’s hand and she lowered herself to the child’s height. “Mommy has a baby in her tummy,” she confided. “That’s why we didn’t go in the wagons with Daddy.”

Sarah imagined that the sea voyage would have seemed the simpler choice, but there was no point in wondering now... the die was cast. She rose and caught Lucy’s attention as the older woman strode around the deck for the third time. “Could you watch Missy for a few moments while I check on her mother?” Hopefully Anna Taylor’s sickness was an adjustment to the motion of the ship. If the woman’s condition was going to be an ongoing problem, she’d have to speak to the steward and determine how much help he could offer.

“Of course,” Lucy agreed cheerfully. “Come along, then. We’ll have a story.”

“Mrs. Taylor?” Sarah knocked and entered the cabin.

A soft moan greeted her, followed moments later by the smell of vomit. Sarah had smelled and taken care of worse. She cranked the porthole until it was open a few inches, then went to Anna Taylor’s bedside.

“Your daughter tells me you’re pregnant.” She placed a hand on the woman’s brow.

Anna nodded and struggled to get up. “I’m so sorry,” she said, looking down at her soiled dress and the floor.

“Think nothing of it.” A small towel and washcloth sat on a stand near the bed; preparations for the inevitable sickness. She dipped the cloth in cool water, cleaned off Anna’s mouth and chin, then gently wiped the woman’s brow. A few fine hairs lay flat against her sweaty temples.

Sarah gave the woman an encouraging smile. “I’m going to find a bucket to leave beside your bed, and bring you a glass with some drinking water to rinse out your mouth. This sickness will go away. You’ll be on your feet in no time.”

The woman’s stomach heaved, but nothing came up. “I’m a poor sailor,” she murmured, collapsing back onto the thin pillow. “Always have been.”

“All right.” Sarah summoned her most confident voice. “A few days, then. Two or three at the most, but you can’t spend the entire voyage here.”

“No, you’re right.” She didn’t sound convinced. “What is your name?” The other woman reached out a hand.

“I’m Sarah Howard. Please call me Sarah.”

“Anna.” A faint smile transformed her face. “My daughter. Is she safe?”

“Oh yes. She’s on deck with my cabin-mate, Lucy Davis.” Sarah pictured the stout, no-nonsense woman. “Don’t worry about her.”

Sarah tidied the room and went in search of a bucket and some water. As she popped her head out of the companionway, she saw Jamie pacing back and forth. It pleased her that he seemed to be waiting for her to appear.

He turned eagerly when he heard her. “Everything all right?” The ship lurched and he reached out to steady her. She was reluctant to admit it, but it felt good to have a man look out for her.

“Yes, she’s just seasick.” A fine mist covered everything, and she looked around for the child. Lucy was seated on a coil of rope, Missy sitting at her feet, oblivious to the worsening conditions. Sarah smiled and returned her attention to Jamie.

“It was a bit...” she wrinkled her nose, “...smelly in there, so I opened the porthole. Do you think that’s all right? I don’t know much about a ship’s movement.”

Jamie scanned the horizon. “It should be all right for now, but make sure to close it later, in case the seas come up tonight.”

“Okay.” She gave him a quick smile. “I’m off to find a bucket to keep beside her bed.”

\* \* \*

Jamie watched her go, wondering if he was the only one who’d felt the sizzle of attraction that raced through his body when he touched her. Had she felt it as well? She hadn’t made any outward sign, and yet for a split second, something had flared in her eyes.

No, he told himself. What he’d felt was wishful thinking. What was that new term he’d read last week... projecting? Yes, that was it. He’d been projecting his own desires onto Sarah, even though he knew better. Sarah Howard was a married woman, and he was too much of a

gentleman to pursue her. Besides, look what had happened to his friend Aidan, who had been foolish enough to dally with a sea captain's wife while the man was away at sea. It didn't matter that the woman had been more than willing. When her husband found out he'd been cuckolded, he'd challenged Aidan to a duel. A rare event these days, but Aidan had accepted the challenge. His foolish friend was still sporting a sling on the arm struck by the bullet.

And yet there was something about Sarah Howard. Something that didn't quite ring true. By her own admission, she craved the adventure, the excitement of traveling to California. Not that there was anything wrong with that. Sometimes it was all he could do to tamp down his own enthusiasm. But everything about her spoke of a need for independence. Someone who was prepared to strike out on her own, as opposed to a dutiful wife in a supporting role.

He dismissed the idea with a small snort. Now he was reading things into her words and actions that weren't there, and that was dangerous; he had some experience in that department.

\* \* \*

Jamie had known Letitia Wilkerson most of her adult life. Her family owned one of the largest merchant banks in New York, and their families were co-invested in several major businesses. During her coming out season, she'd effortlessly dominated the social scene. Her family's wealth ensured that she was invited to every event, where she shined as the most beautiful debutante of the year. It had seemed only natural that she and Jamie would gravitate to one another, Lettie with her pale blonde hair and cool grey eyes, Jamie with his broad shoulders and dark, good looks.

He couldn't quite pinpoint the time when he realized that Letitia was a shallow, self-centered woman. By then, it was expected that he would marry her, but life with a woman like Letitia would be one-sided. Already she was trying to manipulate him... something he detested... and he saw nothing but years of unhappiness stretching into the future.

Sarah reappeared, and he watched her go below. He couldn't imagine Letitia taking care of someone who had just been sick. The idea was laughable, and yet it served to underscore the fact that he could never marry her. Fortunately, they had never been formally engaged, but when he'd told her that he was considering staying in San Francisco, she lashed out at him in a most unladylike manner. He hadn't realized that she'd even heard the words that spewed out of her mouth, let alone use them, and he smiled now at the memory. He'd wanted to applaud her use of the vernacular, but that would have enraged her further. That day, it occurred to him now, was the first time he'd come close to liking her in over a year, and all because she'd shown genuine emotion when she swore like a sailor. The timing of his departure couldn't have been better.

Prior to leaving, Jamie and his friend had met for one last drink together. Never one to hold back on his opinions, Aidan had suggested that he was taking the easy way out. "You're running away," he'd said, coming perilously close to the truth. "Although I can't say I blame you. Lettie would eat you up and spit you out."

Jamie had bristled at the comment. "Hold on there." he'd said, prepared to defend himself.

"Don't get me wrong." Aidan signaled for another drink and lounged back in his chair. "What I meant to infer is that your damnable sense of honor would eventually prevail and you would end up marrying her simply because you've kept her from meeting anyone else." He made a half-hearted grab for the barmaid as she placed their drinks on the table, and consoled himself with a deep draught. "And that would be a pity."

“Yes, it would.” Jamie toyed with his glass. “Lettie will make someone a splendid wife.” He lifted the glass and took a small drink. “Just not me.”

“So you say.” Aidan had looked at him with knowing eyes. “But remember, this is Letitia Wilkerson we’re talking about. “She always gets what she wants.”

Jamie and Aidan had been friends for many years. They’d grown up together, and discovered women together, and sometimes Aidan knew him a little too well. His friend had the innate ability to get to the heart of the matter with a few well-chosen words. A useful skill in many instances, but there were times when Jamie would just as soon have avoided the truth... like the truth about Letitia.

His friend took another drink and stared into his glass as though wondering where the brandy had gone. Every once in a while, when Jamie least expected it, Aidan’s vulnerability showed, and he was reminded of what his friend had lost, and the emotional scars he carried to this day. No one else was ever witness to the pain in Aidan’s eyes and Jamie glanced away, hiding the sympathy he felt for his friend.

“Not this time she won’t.” Jamie stood. “Are you sure you won’t come with me? The ship leaves from Boston four days from today.”

A flash of something resembling interest crossed Aidan’s face, and then the old, devil-may-care facade slipped back into place.

“Some other time, my friend, but thank you for the invitation.” Aidan tried to bow while seated and almost fell from his chair.

Standing here now as the weather started to close in, Jamie smiled at the memory. Aidan could be boorish and annoying at times, but he was a loyal friend, and he would miss his company... one of the few things he would miss about New York.

## Chapter Four

Sarah was relieved when Anna Taylor recovered from her sickness and appeared on deck a few days later. Within a week, passengers and crew had settled into a comfortable routine, and almost every day Sarah gave silent thanks that she'd been lucky enough to find passage on *WindSprite*.

Living in Boston, stories about ships captains abounded. Perhaps only the worst stories were repeated, but there were too many reports of mistreatment of crew members to be ignored. Here on *WindSprite*, Captain Johnson demanded high standards from his sailors, and yet their respect for him was evidenced by their actions, plus their cheerful dispositions. With little to do, she spent an hour or two with Melissa every day, allowing her mother time to rest. Anna had thought to bring some children's story books, but after several weeks, Sarah knew the stories by heart, and she feared that her reading lacked her former enthusiasm.

A couple of pages before the end, Melissa would start to fidget. "Read it again, Sarah. Please." Sometimes she wondered if the youngster even heard the stories. She looked up to find Jamie smiling at her. When the weather was favorable, which was most of the time, they had fallen into the habit of spending the few hours after supper on deck, judging the quality of the sunsets. She'd confided in him that the storytelling was becoming tedious, and that she was casting about for other ways to amuse the young girl.

Melissa tugged at her arm and she reluctantly tore her gaze away from Jamie. Sunset was several hours away, and she was already looking forward to that magical time of day.

"I'm sorry, Melissa. I promised the cook I'd help him this afternoon."

"Mr. Reed?" The child smiled brightly. Levi Reed had not only fed the passengers well, he'd completely charmed the young girl with his fanciful stories of sea monsters.

"Yes. I'm going to help him bake some pies." She re-tied Melissa's hair ribbon. "Do you like apple pie?"

The child nodded.

"All right then. Go to your mother while I go below and help Mr. Reed."

\* \* \*

"Do you believe what they say?" Levi peeled and cored apples while Sarah rolled out pastry. "My mother used to say that people with cold hands produce the best pastry."

Sarah didn't look up, but she nodded. "Mine says the same thing." She transferred the sheet of pastry to the baking dish. "When I was small, I'd watch her bake pies. She was admired for all of her baking, but her pies were in demand for every social event. When I close my eyes, I can see her hands." She paused for a moment, lost in thought. "By the way, thank you for allowing me in your kitchen. I'm accustomed to being active, and I'm finding the pace of life on board positively glacial."

“Soon you might find it too hot to do much of anything. We’re reaching the southern latitudes.” He filled the baking dish with apples and passed it back to her for the top crust. “It’s a rare voyage when we aren’t becalmed once or twice.” He brightened. “Although that’s often followed by a storm. Cools us down a treat, and we collect all the fresh water we can.”

Sarah stepped back and admired the remaining pies. Three pies were already in the oven, sending mouth-watering smells drifting throughout the ship. “How many days do you think it will take for us to get there? I’ve heard so many different estimates.”

The ship went into a long, slow roll and Levi rolled with it. Sarah braced herself against the edge of the table.

“Hard to say,” he said. “Four months is good time, although we’ve done it in less. We don’t have the speed of the new clippers.”

“I’ve heard some of the new ones are setting records.”

Levi shrugged. “Yes, but *WindSprite* isn’t far behind, and the captain knows how to handle her. It all depends on the weather.” He grinned at her. “But you, being from Boston, would know that.”

She acknowledged his comment with a nod. “It’s difficult to live in Boston and not absorb a certain amount of knowledge about the sea. But my main interest has always been medicine.”

“Medicine?” He frowned.

“Yes,” she continued. My father’s medical practise was in our home, and he allowed me to help him.” She waited for the usual expression of dismay, but saw none.

“I would imagine you were quite a help to him. You have competent hands.”

Sarah found herself blushing, something she rarely did. “Thank you.” She decided not to bore him with the tale of her failure to attend medical school. “It’s a fascinating subject.”

“And your husband is a doctor. You’ll be able to assist him, as well.”

For a moment she didn’t grasp what he was talking about, then she recovered. “Yes. Devon and I make a good pair.” Now that she was getting to know her shipmates better, she was finding it increasingly difficult to perpetuate the lie. But she had no other choice.

“Thanks again for allowing me to help. I enjoyed it.”

“I did as well.” Levi grabbed a handful of his apron and prepared to remove the first pies from the oven. “I’ll see you at supper.”

\* \* \*

“The pie was good.” Sarah and Jamie strolled on the deck after supper.

Sarah acknowledged his compliment with a small smile. “It felt good to be doing something. I enjoy making bread as well, but I don’t want to impose myself. It was generous of Levi to allow me to trespass in his kitchen. And what did you do today?”

“I spent some time with the captain, but other than that it was the usual routine.”

Sarah studied the colorful sky as the sun dove toward the horizon. “A nice sunset, but not the best we’ve seen.”

“Hmmm.” He sounded distracted and she looked up to find him studying her. His gaze lingered on her face, then he broke away to study the sunset. Instead of bothering her, she found his interest exciting. What would it be like to be with a man like Jamie? Someone whose masculinity was palpable. It was becoming more difficult to spend time with him, especially in these quiet evening hours, when they were usually alone. She was beginning to fantasize about touching his face; she wanted to feel the coarse stubble on his chin.

“So what do you think?”

“I beg your pardon?” She snapped out of her reverie.

His eyes sparkled as though he’d read her thoughts. “The sunset. Shall we rate it an eight?”

She tore her gaze away from his lips. “I give it a seven tonight. Let’s save the big numbers for something truly spectacular.”

Jamie frowned, as though trying to determine if there was a double meaning behind her words. “Agreed,” he murmured. “It can only get better from here.”

\* \* \*

In spite of the difference in their ages, a solid friendship developed between Sarah and Lucy. Sarah cherished the older woman’s wisdom, and knew that such closeness would have been unlikely back in Boston. As the ship sailed into the southern hemisphere, Lucy passed her time working on an endless supply of embroidery projects, and tried to teach Sarah, but her efforts lacked consistency and Sarah eventually threw up her hands in despair. “I’m wasting your precious embroidery thread,” she said as Lucy cast a critical eye at her work. “I doubt that embroidery thread is something that will be available in the stores when we get there.”

“You make a good point.” Lucy took back the proffered thread and the needle and tucked them away carefully. “Although I daresay you can stitch up a sliced finger as neat as you please.”

“That I can do.” Sarah glanced toward the ship’s rail, where Jamie was supervising Melissa as she attempted to fish. The weather had grown colder the past couple of weeks and Sarah knew that their days outside were numbered.

“He’s a handsome man,” observed Lucy, but her attention remained on Sarah.

Sarah watched as Jamie leaned over the child, showing her how to hold the fishing pole. “Yes,” she sighed, and in that moment, she decided to tell Lucy the truth. She turned to confess her deception, but from the look in Lucy’s eyes she could tell that the other woman had already guessed the truth.

“You’ve figured it out.” Sarah held the other woman’s gaze.

Lucy nodded. “But I’d like to hear it from you.”

Sarah glanced around to make sure she couldn’t be overheard. “It feels so good to finally tell you this, Lucy. I’m not married, and I’m sorry I pretended otherwise.” She shifted her position so she could look directly at the other woman. “I didn’t see how I could possibly make the trip as a single woman.”

Lucy raised her eyebrows, but remained silent.

“You see...” Sarah plucked a piece of embroidery thread from her skirt. “...everything changed for me on Valentine’s Day, when my fiancé and I decided that we didn’t love each other enough to go through with marriage.”

“A wise decision.”

Sarah looked up, startled. “Do you think so?”

“I wouldn’t say so, otherwise.” Lucy’s tone was matter-of-fact.

“No, of course you wouldn’t.” Sarah continued her explanation. “Fortunately for me, my mother understood when I told her I wanted to get away. She helped me plan everything right up to my escape.”

Lucy set down her embroidery. “Your escape?”

Sarah frowned. "I've made it sound more dramatic than it really was. But mother and I both knew that I couldn't leave when my father was around, so we managed to book passage on this ship which was scheduled to depart while father was in New York at a medical conference."

Lucy picked up her embroidery again. "That's right. You told me your father was a doctor. Is his name Devon?"

"No, that's my brother's name."

"Another doctor?"

Sarah laughed. "Not a chance. My father was greatly disappointed when Devon told him he wasn't interested. No, Dev still hasn't decided what he wants to do, although he's working now at a ship's chandlery." She paused to think. "He could probably be very good at it if he tried."

A squeal of delight came from the ship's rail. Melissa had hooked a fish. Lucy's face softened as she watched Jamie with her. "He's attracted to you. You must be aware of that."

Jamie hauled in a small fish which flopped on the deck. "Yes," she said. "But I'm hoping you'll keep my secret."

Lucy considered her request for a few moments. "For the time being. But when we get to California, you might find it helpful to have a male friend. I hear it's a rough place, and that's putting it mildly." She tilted her head. "Not to be indelicate, but do you have enough money?"

"I hope so. My grandmother left me some money, and my mother went to New York and sold some valuable jewellery that she'd inherited." She thought of the money tucked away in her trunk. "I'm not afraid to work, and in the meantime I'm sure I have enough to get established."

"We shall see." Lucy shoved her work into a carpet bag as Melissa came running over with her fish.

"Yes," murmured Sarah. "We shall see."

\* \* \*

After supper that night, the captain turned serious as he looked at each of his passengers in turn. "You saw me exchange signals this morning with that frigate."

"What was that about, Captain Johnson?" Sarah had been curious all day.

"We exchanged latitude and longitude. Passing ships do that from time to time as it's an excellent way to confirm our position. He doubled the Cape three weeks ago."

It was difficult not to shudder. Doubling the Cape was the most dangerous part of the voyage.

"He's sailed this route most of his life, and he informed me that the weather is particularly foul this winter. So I've decided to follow his example and double the Cape instead of chancing the Straits of Magellan." He looked around at the adults. "I'll give you a day's warning, and you'll need to put away any loose items in your quarters. The seas can become violent, as we're here in the middle of their winter."

Anna Taylor let out a small whimper.

"Mrs. Taylor, perhaps you and your daughter should stay in your cabin as much as possible. The steward will bring your meals."

"How long?" she asked, eyes wide.

"It's hard to predict. Somewhere between a week and two weeks." He paused. "I did it in eight days the last time, but the weather was far nicer than what we'll have this time."

"I'll help with Missy." Sarah wondered if she'd regret the spontaneous offer.

"As will I." Jamie spoke kindly. "Don't worry, Mrs. Taylor. After this, it's clear sailing all the way to California."

The captain frowned at him, but said nothing. Jamie shot a grateful look in the captain's direction, and the discussion was over.

"Did you mean that?" Sarah asked the next morning as they caught a breath of fresh air on the deck. "About clear sailing all the way to California?"

Jamie looked guilty. "I have no idea. I shouldn't have said that, but the poor woman needed something to hang on to."

Sarah nodded her agreement. "You did the right thing." She looked at the darkening sky. "I think we're all going to need support."

## Chapter Five

*WindSprite* sailed into the storm in the middle of the night. Sarah thought she'd prepared herself for rough seas, but nothing she'd imagined came close to the reality of what the ship endured during that first night. Lucy lay in her bunk, calm but wide-eyed as Sarah checked to ensure that the porthole was tightly closed. She'd checked it before going to bed, but she needed to feel in control of her own destiny.

She pulled her night shift around her shoulders. "I'll go next door and check on Anna and Missy."

Lucy remained in bed, the bed covers clutched up under her chin.

The ship's motion tossed Sarah from one side of the narrow hallway to the other. Her arms would no doubt be bruised, but that was a small price to pay. The ship's movement caused the timbers to groan, and she was glad she'd ventured out. Anna Taylor would be terrified.

"Sarah!" Anna's skin had acquired a healthy glow from days spent in the sun, but it was pale now. Melissa, uncharacteristically quiet, had climbed onto the bunk with her mother. Only frightened eyes showed above the bed clothes. "Is everything all right?"

The ship rolled sickeningly and Sarah sat down abruptly on the opposite bunk. From there she could see that the porthole was firmly closed, and she forced a confident smile. "Everything's fine. I just wanted to check on you."

"Thank you. Missy and I are just fine." Anna squeezed the child, who nodded, but remained mute. Sarah admired the show she was putting on for her daughter.

"Good." Sarah managed to stand. "I'll get back to my cabin and keep Lucy company."

As she made her way back to her cabin, a loud metallic crash reached her ears. It had come from the direction of the galley, and she wondered if some of the cooking utensils had come loose. She listened carefully, and hearing nothing further, she entered her cabin and collapsed on her bunk.

As Sarah opened her mouth to communicate her concern to Lucy, the other woman emitted a loud snore. Sara couldn't help but smile as she crawled back into her bunk. Sleep was elusive as she puzzled about the loud sound from forward in the ship, but it was pointless to worry about it until the morning. They'd been averaging slightly less than eight hours of precious daylight each day, and she knew she'd rise long before the pale dawn showed through her porthole.

\* \* \*

The motion of the ship was still unsettling as she made her way forward a few hours later. For the time being, they had sailed through the worst of the storm, and were fighting their way west against the fearful winds that blow offshore, threatening to push passing ships into extreme southern latitudes.

Entering the galley, she saw a group of several crew members clustered around the table. They turned toward her, their faces ashen.

Alarmed, she rushed forward. “What is it?”

They parted to reveal Levi Reed, the ship’s cook, laid out on the table.

Sarah took in his appearance at a glance. His face was pale and contorted with pain.

“Levi,” she said softly, placing a hand on his brow. His skin was cool and damp with sweat. He trembled, and she recognized that he was going into shock.

“I heard him moaning from the sick bay this morning,” said the steward, motioning to the area forward of the galley. “When I asked him what had happened, he said he’d come up to the galley during the night to check on his equipment. He wasn’t making much sense, but from what I could make out, one of his large pots was being flung about and while he was trying to secure it, it dropped onto his arm.” A white cloth had been wrapped around Levi’s arm and he pulled it back. Sarah could already see that the arm was bent at an unnatural angle, but she hadn’t expected to see bone poking through the skin. At first glance, it appeared that only the ulna had been fractured, but she couldn’t be sure. She’d need to palpate the area to check for further injuries. Below the break, his arm and hand were starting to swell and turn purple.

She turned to the steward. “Where is Captain Johnson?”

He gave her an odd look “He’s on deck,” he replied. “He’s been up all night. I didn’t think I should bother him.”

Sarah frowned. “No, I suppose you’re right. Who usually handles your medical emergencies?”

All eyes turned toward Levi.

She nodded. “I see. And who assists?”

“I try to help,” said the steward. “But I have no medical knowledge. I usually fetch and carry and hold them down if necessary.” He gave a nervous laugh.

“Okay...” She paused. “What’s your name?”

“Matthew Farmer, ma’am.”

“All right then, Matthew. I’m not a doctor, but I do have some medical training. Does Levi have any laudanum in with his medical supplies?”

Matthew glanced toward a locked cupboard. “Yes, ma’am.” A flush rose in his cheeks. “I think I’d recognize the bottle, but I can’t read.” He looked anxiously at Levi. “Will you be able to help him?”

“Yes, but we have to move quickly.” She turned to the men. “One of you please inform the captain what’s happening.” She glanced toward the cupboard. “And I’ll need the keys to that cupboard.” She smiled at the remaining men. “I’d appreciate a few more lights in here, and then if you men don’t mind, I can concentrate better without an audience.” She smiled to soften her words.

“Is there anything I can do?” She looked up at the sound of Jamie’s familiar voice. His broad shoulders blotted out the light from one of the hanging lanterns, but his presence was welcome.

“You can find out where he keeps the keys to that cupboard.” She lifted Levi’s arm and he moaned in pain.

“They’re around his neck,” said Matthew, removing the keys and handing them to Jamie.

“Check for laudanum, would you Jamie?” Sarah looked around for a bucket of water, but everything had been stowed away before last night’s storm. “Matthew, I need some water to wash my hands, and if there is any way to heat some water, I’d appreciate that as well.”

Jamie turned. “Here it is.” He held up a brown bottle and removed the stopper. “How much shall I give him?”

Sarah thought for a moment. "Two or three ounces. We don't want to administer too much, but this is going to be painful."

Jamie lifted Levi's head and placed the bottle against his lips. Only a few drops dribbled down his chin and Jamie held up the bottle, checking to see how much Levi had taken. "I think that's about right." As he spoke, Levi's body started to relax.

Matthew returned with the water, and Sarah started to wash her hands. "Did you see any rum in there?" she asked Jamie.

"Yes," he said. "In the lower cupboard."

"Bring it to me," she said, "along with whatever bandages you can find."

He watched as she splashed rum on her hands, and then poured a liberal amount on the wound around the shattered bone.

"I read something about this," he murmured. "Something about a nurse in England who's a stickler for cleanliness."

Sarah looked up sharply. "Florence Nightingale."

"That's the name. Does it work?"

Sarah gave him a wry smile. "It doesn't hurt. My father has adopted the practice, and his patients rarely become infected."

"Good to know. Now what can I do?"

Sarah removed the ring from her left hand, looked around, and shoved it at Jamie. "Hold this, will you please? And then I need you to put that wooden spoon in his mouth and hold him by the shoulders. As I said, this is going to hurt."

He complied, and she splashed more rum on her hands.

She palpated the arm, trying to ignore Levi's moans of pain. She frowned. "I don't know how he managed it, but only one bone seems to be broken." She stood back and took a deep breath. "I'm going to try to re-align the ulna. If I'm lucky, I'll be able to tell when the two ends are back in place." She looked up. "Ready?"

He nodded, and gripped Levi firmly by the shoulders.

Sarah exerted slow, steady pressure. Levi's teeth clenched around the spoon and beads of sweat broke out on his brow, but the color in his hand returned to normal almost immediately.

"That's amazing," said Jamie as Sarah wrapped the arm. "What about the swelling?"

"That will take longer to subside, but at least the circulation has been restored." She spoke into the cook's ear. "Levi, can you move your fingers?"

The cook wiggled his fingers and Sarah and Jamie exchanged smiles, unaware of anyone else in the room.

"You did it!" Matthew came forward. A smile lit his face. "Will he be all right?"

"Yes, but it will take several months to heal completely. I'll keep an eye on his dressing until the skin heals, and I'll show you how to make a sling for his arm." She became aware of the other men who had faded back into the shadows, but came forward now. "And if you men are wondering who's going to cook for you, Matthew and I will figure something out. Right now, I'm ready for my morning cup of coffee, and I'll bet the captain could use some, too."

"Yes, ma'am, I'll see what I can do." Matthew gave her an informal salute. The rest of the men laughed with relief and scattered.

"You were amazing." Jamie hovered as she watched over her patient. "You're really skilled."

Sarah shook her head. "Why does no one believe that a woman can do the same as a man when it comes to medicine?" She pushed back a stray curl. "Let's not talk about this right now, okay?" She gave him a weak smile. "How's the weather out there?"

“Huge snowflakes and still high seas, but better than last night.”

“That’s something, anyway.” Her attention was drawn back to Levi as he started to stir. “As soon as Levi can stand, would you see that he gets to the bunk in sick bay?” She glanced toward Matthew. “Between Matthew and me, we should be able to arrange something for breakfast.” She shrugged. “As to the other meals, we’ll figure it out as we go along.”

“I’m sure you will.”

Levi tried to sit up and they turned to him. He swung his legs over the side of the table and held his arm close to his body. “What happened?”

Sarah laid a hand on his brow. “You were wandering around in that storm last night and broke your arm.” She attempted a fierce scowl. “You should have woken someone up, Levi. You must have been in terrible pain.”

He didn’t respond, but looked around with a frown. “How am I going to feed the men?”

“You’re not.” Sarah’s tone was crisp. “And you’re not to worry about it, either. Matthew and I are going to take care of breakfast, and I’ll ask Lucy to help with some of the other meals.” She looked over his shoulder toward Jamie. “Jamie will make sure you get back to sick bay since you can’t manage the ladders with that arm. We’ll bring you some coffee when it’s ready. Now run along.”

He grinned. “I knew you wanted to take over my kitchen.”

“You’re jesting, of course.” She looked at Matthew. “He must be feeling better.” She held Levi’s good arm as he slid off the table and found his sea legs. “I’ll check on you later, my friend.”

Sarah watched Jamie and Levi disappear, then turned and accepted the mug of coffee that Matthew held out. Steam curled enticingly from the surface of the hot liquid and she took an appreciative sip.

“Okay,” she said briskly. “I can tell by the way the captain runs this ship that he likes to stick to a routine, so I’ll do whatever I can to help you restore order.” She paused. “Did someone take a mug of coffee up to him?”

Matthew nodded.

“Good.” She washed her hands again. “Let’s make some breakfast.”

## Chapter Six

It took *WindSprite* ten days to double the Cape, but Sarah scarcely noticed the howling winds and rough seas. With Levi's guidance, Matthew, Lucy and two other crew members helped Sarah establish a routine that suited the captain.

Some three weeks after Levi's accident, the captain appeared in the galley shortly after Sarah had taken several loaves of bread from the oven. It wasn't the first time he'd 'happened by' when the smells became too tempting to ignore. She sliced him a thick piece from the warm loaf.

"You really don't have to do this," he said, closing his eyes in bliss as he bit through the crisp crust. "But I won't deny the fact that I'm glad you're helping."

Sarah thanked him, even though he'd made similar comments before. The truth was, she was enjoying herself. As she and Levi directed the efforts of Matthew and the kitchen crew, it occurred to her that thus far in her life, she'd never been solely in charge of anything. While the ship forged ahead through turbulent seas, she had collected many bruises from frequent contact with the walls and pieces of furniture, but a few discolorations on her body weren't enough to lessen her sense of accomplishment at the end of each day.

She met the captain's appreciative smile with one of her own. "Thank you for saying that, but I've enjoyed myself."

The captain warmed his hands on the coffee mug. "Then I can only say that I'm glad you decided to sail with us." He tilted his head. "Thank you."

He didn't seem in a hurry to leave, and his gaze lingered on the loaf of bread. Sarah cut him another slice and handed it to him.

"Levi said you often stop at Valparaiso," she said. "What's it like?"

He considered her question for a moment while he chewed. "It's not like any other place I've been."

She stopped wiping down the table. "In what way?"

He gazed into the distance. "It's wild and yet beautiful. The people are friendly once you get to know them, and yet they can be very stand-offish. Some people are immensely wealthy, and yet most are poor." He frowned to himself. "It's a place of contrasts, really." He raised his eyes and looked at her. "I'll be interested to hear your opinion."

"How much longer?" She couldn't keep the excitement out of her voice.

"Another week or ten days." He set down the coffee mug. "Speaking of which, I'd better get topside and make sure we're still pointed in the right direction."

Levi appeared moments after the captain left. "It's good to see the captain relax a bit." He'd been spending all of his time alongside Sarah this past week; it was evident that he wanted to be in charge of his kitchen again.

Sarah nodded. "He says we'll be at Valparaiso soon." She turned to him eagerly. "I'm looking forward to it."

The lack of sound was the first thing Sarah noticed when she woke up. She'd become accustomed to the shouts of the crew, the creaks and groans emanating from deep within the vessel, and the sound of water rushing past the hull. She had wanted to be on deck when the ship sailed into Valparaiso harbor, but evidently that wasn't to be. She lay still for a moment, enjoying the gentle rolling motion, then leaped from her bunk to dress for the day ashore.

Her reflection in the mirror confirmed what she already knew; she was excited to visit their only port of call. She'd stopped wearing voluminous underskirts and corsets well over a month ago, the tropics had simply been too hot. Jamie had sent a few curious looks in her direction, but nothing that indicated disapproval. As a matter of fact, his gaze tended to linger on her even more now that she could move about unimpeded.

She stepped out onto the deck and gasped.

The ship couldn't have arrived on a more perfect day, and Sarah decided that after the harrowing trip around the Cape, they deserved the brilliantly clear skies that greeted them.

*WindSprite* was harbored in the semi-circular bay on which Valparaiso was situated. The town clung to the foreshore, and on further inspection she noted buildings creeping up the numerous valleys that stretched into the forested mountains beyond. Snow-crowned hills rose majestically in the distance and she stood for a moment, taking in the grandeur spread out before her.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Jamie materialized beside her. "What's your first impression?"

"I don't know," she said. "There's so much to take in." She remained silent for a few moments, her gaze sweeping the graceful curve of the harbor. "For one thing, I didn't expect to see so many other ships anchored."

"I suspect most of them are headed to California as well."

"No doubt." She spotted a small rowboat heading in their direction. A man in a formal black suit sat stiffly in the stern. "Who do you suppose that is?"

"I would imagine it's the harbormaster." He paused. "Or whatever they call him here." They watched as the small vessel bumped against the hull and the man climbed the rope ladder. "We should be cleared to go ashore fairly soon. I spoke with Captain Johnson the other day and he said that the inspection is more of a formality than anything else."

Sarah glanced around the deck. "Have you seen Lucy this morning? She had already left the cabin when I woke, which is unusual. We were going to explore the town together."

"She was in the galley having her breakfast a while ago, and anxious to get going."

"Melissa will be disappointed." Sarah leaned over the rail. "I can't imagine that Anna will try to climb down that ladder. Not in her condition." She didn't think it necessary to speak delicately about the other woman. Over the past couple of months, Anna's pregnancy had become obvious.

"No," he said, "I suspect you're right about that."

She looked up to see him smiling at her.

"What?"

"Nothing." He sucked in a quick breath. "No, that's not true. I was wondering if it ever occurs to you that you don't have to take care of everyone."

His words set her back on her heels. "Is that what I do?"

The look in his eyes was all the answer he gave.

She gazed into the distance, turning his words over in her mind. "I suppose I do, in a way. The truth is, I enjoy it." She nodded to herself. "It's something I just discovered on this voyage."

“And you do it very well.” His gaze held hers for a moment, then he looked over her shoulder. “Here comes Lucy,” he said, and pushed away from the rail.

“Good morning.” Lucy’s bright eyes shifted from Jamie to Sarah. “Did you see those beautiful mountains? Of course you did.” She lowered her voice. “The little government man is with the captain. We should be able to go ashore soon. I don’t mind saying, it will feel good to step on solid ground for a change.” She pulled out a man’s pocket watch and flicked it open. “I want to make the most of our time there, since we only have one day.”

The captain appeared on deck with the Chilean official. They bowed slightly toward one another, then the man disappeared down the rope ladder.

“The ship’s dory will take you across any time you’re ready,” he said, as the small rowboat carrying the Chilean headed for shore. “And Seaman Lang will give you instructions about the return trip.”

“Ladies.” Jamie made a sweeping bow. “I yield to you. I’m going to have coffee, and I’ll no doubt see you in town some time during the day.”

Sarah felt a pang of disappointment, which was ridiculous. Jamie would have his own agenda, and it didn’t include trailing along while she explored the shops.

“Shall we go?” Lucy bustled over to the area the captain had indicated. “Valparaiso, here we come.”

\* \* \*

Lucy’s enthusiasm was contagious, but exhausting.

“Where did you learn all this?” Sarah asked, gazing up at the exquisite carvings adorning a church a few blocks away from the commercial area.

“Captain Johnson owns an excellent guidebook.” Lucy stepped back as two elderly women entered the church, clutching black lace shawls over their heads. She watched them disappear behind massive doors and then turned to Sarah. “They don’t smile much, do they?”

“I was just thinking the same thing. Those men we saw in the square looked right through us.” She lifted her shoulders. “I suppose we *are* invading their city.”

Lucy gave an un-ladylike snort. “Doesn’t mean they can’t be polite.” She turned back to the main road that hugged the shore. “Had enough?”

Swept along in Lucy’s wake, Sarah had seen several small shops she’d like to explore. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to look in a few little stores. I’ll be fine if you want to go back without me. I promise not to stray from the main area.”

“Oh, my dear I was hoping you’d say that. I’ve quite worn myself out.” Looking anything but tired, Lucy struck out ahead. Sarah followed, suppressing a smile.

\* \* \*

Dark haired shopkeepers with black eyes in solemn faces showed very little emotion as she examined their wares. A French *modiste* was marginally more helpful, but Sarah hesitated to buy dresses, not having any idea what she’d need in San Francisco. The woman soon lost interest when it became obvious that Sarah wasn’t going to buy.

She exited the store to find Jamie loitering in the narrow street. “There you are,” he said. “I thought I saw you go in there, but I wasn’t sure.”

Sarah glanced up and down the street. "I was hoping to find some small gift to take back for Melissa, but I'm not having much luck."

"There you go again," he said with a gentle smile. "Looking out for others."

"She's just a child," she said, "and no doubt she's disappointed at not being able to come ashore."

"I'm sure she is." He guided her back toward the center of town. "And to be honest, I've been looking for something for her as well. I saw some little animals made of raffia. I think they were supposed to be donkeys. What do you think?"

"That sounds perfect."

"And I also found some oranges. Why don't you get the raffia donkey and I'll get the oranges. That should please her."

"All right." Her stomach growled as she spoke and she placed a hand on it.

He frowned down at her, concerned. "Did you have any breakfast?"

She shook her head. "Afraid not."

"I saw a restaurant up there." He pointed ahead. "Let's go in and sit down." He guided her down the narrow street, one hand at her waist as they dodged people coming the other way. A man on a donkey rode placidly in the middle of the street, his brightly colored poncho draped over the rear of the animal. Sarah tried not to stare.

"It's not Boston, is it?"

She laughed. "I was just thinking that." She followed him into the restaurant.

"Monsieur, Madame." A woman greeted them in heavily accented English. "Some café, perhaps? And we 'ave for you today some delicious meat pies."

Jamie looked at Sarah, who nodded her agreement.

"Thank you Madame, that sounds wonderful. Could we take our time with the coffee first?"

"Bien sur." The woman beamed and scurried off.

Sarah examined the adobe walls of the one-storey structure. "It doesn't look very permanent, does it?"

Jamie nodded. "They're constantly rebuilding due to the number of earthquakes." He pointed to the ceiling. "That's why it's only one storey."

"Makes sense. I'm surprised Lucy didn't tell me that. She was like a walking, talking guidebook." She looked up as the woman brought their coffee.

"You've become friends with Lucy," he observed.

"Yes." Sarah stirred coarse sugar into her coffee and took a sip.

"It will be good for you to have a friend in San Francisco," he said, watching her closely.

There was something about the way he spoke, but she couldn't place her finger on it. She set down her cup and looked across the table into his eyes.

He reached into an inside pocket and pulled out something small, holding it hidden in his hand.

"Hold out your hand," he said.

Sarah hesitated, then extended her hand, palm up.

He dropped her ring into it.

Sarah's eyes widened. "My mother's ring!"

The moment the words were out, she realized what she'd said. She closed her fingers around the ring and lowered her eyes. She should have known that she couldn't keep up the deception forever.

He ducked his head, trying to get her to look at him. "You're not married, are you?"

She shook her head, and the strain of keeping her secret caught up with her. A tear ran down her cheek and plopped on the table. She brushed it away. “How did you know?” Her words were little more than a whisper.

“I’ve known from the day you helped Levi,” he said. “The moment you took off the ring, I could see from your finger that you hadn’t been wearing it very long.”

She nodded, and forced herself to look at him. “I’m sorry,” she said, “but I didn’t see how I could travel that far as a single woman.”

“I understand.”

His acceptance surprised her, but she could tell he had more to say. He toyed with his coffee cup, gathering his thoughts. “What do you intend to do when you get there, and there’s no husband to meet you?”

His words brought into focus the enormity of what lay ahead, but they also strengthened her resolve, and her belief that she’d done the right thing.

“I’m not sure,” she said, determination shining through her tears. “But at least I won’t be stuck back in Boston, going nowhere.” She slipped the ring back on her finger. “I want to do something with my life, Jamie. I came close to marrying the wrong man, and it made me realize how easily we can be steered into something we don’t really want.” Her gaze drifted around the inside of the restaurant, but her thoughts were far away. “He was a friend, and it would have been so easy to give up on my dreams and marry him.”

“What happened?”

“It turned out that he was in love with someone else.” She met his eyes unflinchingly. “Another man.”

His only reaction was a slight raise of the eyebrows. “Just as well, then.”

A great weight seemed to lift from her shoulders, and she was suddenly hungry. The delectable aroma of beef pies wafted through the small restaurant and the beaming owner fussed over them as she presented the savoury concoctions, rich gravy bubbling through small holes in the browned pastry crust. If she noticed traces of tears in Sarah’s eyes, she didn’t let on.

“More café?” she inquired.

Sarah drained her cup and examined the pie. “I’d love some, and this looks delicious.”

The woman scurried off, and Sarah looked across the table at Jamie. “Since we’re being personal, what about you? Is there a woman in your life?”

He hesitated for a fraction of a second, and Sarah’s heart plummeted. *Of course there’s a woman*, she scolded herself.

“No, not officially,” he said, opening up his pie to let the steam escape. He put down his utensils and leaned forward, forearms propped on the table.

“You said a moment ago that you came close to marrying the wrong man. The same thing almost happened to me.”

“You almost married a man?”

He gave a soft chuckle. “Feeling better, are we?”

“A little,” she said, tasting the pie.

“I escaped too, although my friend Aidan accused me of running away from the situation when I told him I was coming out to San Francisco.”

“And were you?” This time she was serious. “Escaping?”

He hesitated for a moment. “Possibly. But at the time, it seemed like the only way to break free of Lettie.” He gave a little shudder. “She’s a very determined woman. A lot like you, I suppose.”

“I’m not sure I’m flattered.”

“That didn’t come out right,” he said with a wry grin. “Actually, except for her determination, she’s nothing like you. I was thinking about that back on the ship when you were taking care of Anna... that first time she was sick and you cleaned her up. I think Letitia would rather stick pins in her eyes than do something like that.”

Sarah considered his words for a moment. “Then I would guess she’s very beautiful. There must be some reason you were together.”

“Very beautiful, if you like that sort of thing.” His gaze held hers. “But there’s more than one kind of beauty.”

She held her breath, waiting for him to say more, but he was suddenly interested in his pie. “So,” he said, “how is it?” He took a forkful and a low, appreciative growl escaped his throat. “My Lord, this is good,” he said after a moment, and continued to eat. “I guess I was hungry, too.”

Sarah liked the way he attacked the food, but then she liked everything about this man, and it was time she admitted it, even if only to herself. She poked around inside the pastry shell, examining the contents.

“Full already?” Jamie wore a frown as he watched her.

“What?” She looked up, startled. “No, I was checking the ingredients and thinking that I’d like to duplicate this. I wonder if Levi would give me access to the kitchen again.”

“Probably. After what you did for him, you’re quite the heroine with the entire crew, you know. And if you made some of your bread to go along with it, the captain would be at your mercy.”

“You noticed that, did you?” Sarah grinned. “He’s definitely partial to bread, and I can’t blame him. I believe there’s something about the smell of freshly baked bread that makes a man think of home.” She nodded to herself. “I like making bread, but there’s something about pastry, too. It’s simple and basic.”

“Have you heard about the Cornish pasty?”

“You mean ‘pastry’?”

He ducked his head. “No, it’s called the Cornish pasty. There’s some difference of opinion as to how the word should be spelled. We Americans have adopted it and spell it pastie, but the original spelling is pasty. I know an English chap who opened a pub in New York, and his customers love them.”

Sarah put down her fork and looked up, interested.

“Apparently the Cornish mine workers would take them down into the mines because they were a compact and nutritious snack.” Jamie warmed to his subject. “They’re a piece of pastry, filled much the same as these pies, although Garran says that nowadays a wide variety of fillings are used. Some shops even make them with fruit filling. Anyway, the classic Cornish pasty is flat on the bottom so it could be warmed up, and they have a distinctive crimped edge. In the mines, the crimped part acted as a handle, and the miners would discard it, because they often had arsenic on their hands, but I’ve noticed that most people in Garran’s bar eat the entire crust.”

Sarah edged forward, her meal forgotten. “Sounds interesting. So the miners used it as a portable meal.”

“Exactly.” Jamie wiped up the last of his gravy and popped the bread in his mouth. “I don’t know why I thought of that.” He pointed to her plate. “Eat up.”

She pushed the plate away. "I've had enough. I suppose we should look for those items for Melissa and get back to the boat." She stood reluctantly. "This has been a wonderful break, but I confess I'm ready to continue the voyage. How much longer do you think we'll be?"

"A couple of months, more or less."

Sarah nodded. "That's what I thought." Jamie insisted on paying for their meals and she reluctantly accepted his offer.

"Tell you what," he said, sensing her hesitation. "Allow me to sample the first pastie you make, and we're even."

"Fair enough," she said, as they started back toward the pier. "Although it might take some experimentation."

## Chapter Seven

*WindSprite* left Valparaiso shortly before sunset, pushed swiftly out to sea by the late day offshore breezes that funneled down through the valleys. The captain didn't plan to stop again, and Sarah experienced a tightening in her stomach, which she recognized as nerves. Prior to rounding the Cape, San Francisco had been more of a far-off dream than a reality. Focused on the extreme weather and sea conditions, she had deferred thinking about practicalities until the dangerous part of the voyage had passed, but she couldn't put it off any longer.

Lucy's warnings about the difficulty of finding somewhere to live worried her more than she let on. She and her mother had tried to plan for every possibility, but it had never occurred to them that there would be no rooms available for rent. At least, no rooms that would be suitable for a woman by herself.

She followed the progress of the sun as it slipped below the horizon, painting the cloud layers in brilliant shades of orange, apricot and plum... a fruit salad of color. What would she do if she arrived and there was nowhere for her to stay? She let out a nervous laugh. There was nothing she could do about it now, out here in the Pacific Ocean.

"Is everything all right?" Jamie appeared, and took his usual place at her side on the rail.

"Sure. Everything's fine." Her voice sounded shrill, even to her own ears.

He watched her carefully, but said nothing. That was another thing she liked about him; he didn't feel the need to talk constantly, and he didn't demand answers.

"Sorry I'm late," he said, lighting one of the thin cigars he allowed himself. He had run out just before the Cape, but he'd replenished his supply in Valparaiso. "How was tonight's sunset?"

"It was lovely," she said absent-mindedly. Only faint streaks of color remained in the western sky.

A thin stream of smoke escaped his lips and she lifted her head as it blew in her direction. She'd become accustomed to the sweet scent of the tobacco, and knew she would miss it when she reached San Francisco. Not for the first time, she was reminded that every hour they sailed brought her closer to the moment when Jamie would go his own way.

She glanced at his profile and swallowed a sigh. Why couldn't she have met someone like him back on the east coast? A silly question, but one she couldn't help but ask. Of course if she'd met a man like him, she wouldn't be here now.

"What is it, Sarah?" He kept looking out to sea, as though to look at her might stop her from speaking.

"You're getting to know me too well," she murmured.

The skin at the corners of his eyes crinkled as he smiled. "Perhaps."

Sarah sucked in a deep breath. "I'm concerned about finding a place to live when we get there."

The tip of his cigarillo glowed in the dusk and she focused on it as she continued to speak. "Oddly enough, I've never worried about taking care of myself. I'm not afraid of hard work, but this is a problem I hadn't considered."

“Understandable, but you have the advantage of having friends there.” He turned toward her. “Lucy, and myself. We both have homes, so it’s not as if you need to go without a roof over your head.”

She stared at him. “I couldn’t do that.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Why not? Lucy is your friend, and I have an entire ranch at my disposal.” He glanced at the ring on her finger. “I get the impression that people in California... at least those who’ve come out for the gold... aren’t spending a lot of time worrying about social niceties. I suspect that they wouldn’t pay too much attention to a widow who visits the friend of her late husband.” He grinned. “That would be me.”

“But...” Sarah stopped, recognizing that what she said now could set the tone for the future of their friendship. She needed to word her reply carefully.

“I hadn’t thought of posing as a widow.” The water rushed past the hull, keeping time with her racing thoughts. “And thank you for the offer. It’s good to know there’s somewhere I can go if I get desperate, but...”

“...but you want to assert your independence.” It was almost dark now, but there was something in his eyes when he looked down at her. “I appreciate that,” he said, glancing away and then back, “but I’ll be there, if you ever need me.”

She laid a hand on his arm. It was an instinctual gesture, and she almost wished she hadn’t touched him, hadn’t rekindled the attraction that pulsed between them. And now... now that he knew she wasn’t married... there was nothing to prevent them from acting on that attraction. Nothing other than her need to be independent. Thankfully, it was a need he seemed to understand.

She lowered her eyes, suddenly shy. “I’ve never had a man friend before.”

He tossed his precious cigar away and she followed the glow until it fell into the ocean. Then he tipped up her chin, and her heart began to race. “Is that what we are?” he murmured, lowering his head until his mouth hovered just over hers. “Friends?”

She gazed up at him, sensing more than seeing the intensity in his eyes. Then she closed the distance between them, and settled her lips on his.

He responded with a low growl, and one arm slid around her, pulling her firmly against his broad chest. The other hand cupped her face, tilting it slightly to give him better access. His lips were soft yet hard, gentle yet demanding. Sarah’s senses spiraled giddily, and she returned the kiss with a passion she didn’t know she possessed. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she scolded herself for all those years of missing out on such a delightful experience.

He pulled back slowly, breathlessly. “I shouldn’t have done that,” he said, trying to see into her eyes. “But I couldn’t resist.”

“I’m glad you did,” she said, unable to hide her smile. “I thought it was rather wonderful.”

The wind had come up, and an escaped lock of hair blew across her eyes. Jamie reached out to tuck it behind her ear, and his fingers lingered along the column of her neck, sending shivers of anticipation throughout her body.

He gave a soft, intimate chuckle. “Sarah Howard, you’re like no other woman I’ve ever met.” He looked ahead, where the bow cut cleanly through the water, rushing them toward their destination. “You’re going to do just fine when we get there. I’m convinced of it.”

She tried to read the expression on his face, but it was too dark. Did he regret kissing her? She couldn’t imagine why, when they’d been leading up to it ever since the first moment they’d met. A sudden thought chilled her, and she backed up a step. Jamie’s sense of adventure had brought him to California, but unlike her, he didn’t need to prove himself. He would have no

interest in being saddled with a woman when he had a business to establish, and a rancho to run. Besides, he was correct: her goal in striking out for California was to prove that she could be an independent woman, and she wasn't prepared to give up her dream. At least not yet.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," she said, boldly touching him on the cheek. Then she turned and walked toward the soft glow of light coming from the companionway, her lips still tingling from the unexpected kiss. She had a lot to think about tonight.

\* \* \*

Jamie made no move to follow her, even though his body ached with the need to touch her again. He wanted to slowly remove the pins from her hair and run his fingers through the silken strands.

He gave a strangled laugh. Who was he kidding? He wanted to make love to her. He was right when he'd said that he shouldn't have kissed her, but not for the reasons she might think. A shudder rippled through his body as he took in a deep, calming breath. He didn't know why he wanted her so badly. He'd known women more beautiful, more socially adept, but he'd never known anyone with the fire and independent spirit shown by Sarah. Not to mention the fact that she cared about others. That in itself was enough to make him fall in love with her.

But he had to let her go. She was obviously inexperienced when it came to men, and he sensed that her underlying sensuality could burst into the flames of passion very easily.

*'Flames of passion'?* When had he started thinking like the dialogue in those penny dreadfuls, the new rage in fiction from England? He reached inside his jacket, patted the slim pack of cigars in his vest pocket, and debated lighting one. Caught up in the need to draw Sarah into his arms, he'd tossed a perfectly good cigarillo into the ocean earlier. If that wasn't proof that he was in too deep and needed to step back, then nothing was. No, he told himself. He'd save the cigar for when he really needed it. He braced his feet apart as the ship crested a long, rolling wave and slid down the other side. High one moment, and low the next: much like his life at the present. He turned and went below.

\* \* \*

"The pastry's too short." Levi looked pointedly at the pastry flakes that littered the table. "You need to cut back on the lard. You know... make the pastry tougher."

Sarah looked to Lucy, then to Jamie. They both nodded.

"I'm not sure if I can," she said with a frown.

"Nonsense. Of course you can. You just don't want to." Lucy eyed her knowingly. "You're proud of your flaky pastry, and rightly so, but it just doesn't work with these." She took another bite. "They're delicious. I'll bet you could sell as many of these as you can make." She absently picked up the flakes and ate them. "You said you could fill them with fruit as well?"

Sarah looked to Jamie. "Apparently that has been done, with equal success."

Lucy placed her hands on her ample hips. "You could make a living with these." Her eyes flashed as she warmed to her subject. "I've heard about women who sell food to the miners. Some of them are making more than their husbands. But they're limited by the number of plates, and spoons, and seats. With these, the men don't need to sit down. Just think how many more you could sell that way."

Sarah shouldn't have been surprised that Lucy had read her thoughts. They'd spent a lot of time together this past month, and what had started as a friendship on a sea voyage had turned into something more permanent. Lucy would never take the place of Sarah's mother, but she'd found herself turning to the older woman to discuss her feelings for Jamie, and her nervousness at striking out on her own.

Jamie watched the two women. Part of him wished that Sarah was more reliant on him, but he knew that a successful business would be good for her. He'd originally thought that she might try to make a living utilizing her medical skills, but baking was something she excelled at. Knowing her, she'd be treating her customers for less serious injuries while she fed them. He wanted to help her, but he hadn't thought of a way. At least not yet. Things would no doubt change when they sailed through the Golden Gate.

\* \* \*

"*That's* the Golden Gate?" Sarah couldn't keep the disappointment out of her voice. They had stood off for two days due to heavy fog, but this morning's breeze blew the fog away, revealing the shoreline basking in the warm September sun. The pilot had boarded, and then guided them between the high cliff and some unremarkable, rocky islands. "I thought it would be something majestic."

Lucy and Jamie said nothing. They were too busy trying to take it all in.

Once inside the bay, Sarah's disappointment turned to awe. Rolling hills rose up from the sheltered bay, dotted with structures of various types and sizes. But it was the ships in the harbor that drew and held her attention. She turned as Levi came out on deck, and she made space for him in their small group.

"So many ships," she said, gazing out over the forest of masts. "I had no idea. Is this normal?"

Levi shrugged. "Captain says most of 'em are deserted. The crews go ashore, get the fever, and run off to the gold fields. Captains can't find anyone to sail them back."

"And so they just sit here. It must be a real problem."

Levi shook his head. "It will probably get worse in the months to come."

Sarah looked up into the rigging, where many of the crew had climbed to get a better view. "Will Captain Johnson have that problem?"

"I don't know, but he has a good reputation. A few of the crew are bound to run off, but he'll be able to replace them, I'm quite sure."

"I hope so." Sarah turned to Jamie and Lucy. "What happens next? How do we get to shore?"

"Charlie is sending a boat for us." Lucy glanced toward the forward deck, where several large crates already sat waiting. "Those crates contain my household supplies. I hope he remembers that I don't travel light, and sends a large enough boat." She turned to Jamie. "What about your minting machine? You'll need a special winch for that, I suspect."

He appeared surprised at her knowledge. "Yes. I'm going to go ashore first and make sure there's a spot prepared for it. Once it's set in place, I'd rather not move it."

"Then by all means, come ashore with us." She lowered her voice and spoke to Sarah. "What about Anna and Melissa? Has she made arrangements?"

"She seems to think that her husband will be here waiting for her." She smiled, recalling Anna's growing excitement as they neared their destination, and her disappointment at being delayed by the fog.

Lucy spoke forcefully. "He'd better hurry up. It looks to me as though she could have that baby any day now." She turned to Sarah. "Wouldn't you say?"

"She looks ready to me, but she seems to think it will be another few weeks."

"I suppose time will tell. You said her husband's a miner?"

Sarah nodded. "That's what she said."

Lucy gave a soft little snort of derision. "These young people," she said. "Blinded by dreams of riches, and yet I'd wager most of them are barely scraping by. Oh, look. Her face lit up and she suddenly looked ten years younger. "There's my Charlie, in that boat." She waved gaily.

The man in the boat was as tall and lean as Lucy was short and round. He looked up at his wife, and even at a distance, Sarah could see the adoration in his eyes. She liked him on sight.

Lucy had come up with a practical solution to Sarah's housing dilemma. Sarah would spend the first night at Lucy's home, and Charlie would fill them in on what was available for rent. The plan had made sense at the time, but seeing the obvious affection between the couple, she worried about spoiling their reunion.

"Isn't he handsome?" Lucy was almost giddy as the lighter bumped against the hull of the ship, and her husband started to climb the rope ladder. "And he's a good man, too."

Lucy ran to greet her husband and Sarah backed up a few steps, bumping into Jamie's solid body. His hands braced her shoulders and lingered longer than necessary. He bent his head and whispered in her ear. "It's nice to see a couple express their affection so openly."

His hands slipped from her shoulders and she wanted to lean into him again... to feel his solid strength and support. It was just as well they'd arrived; there was no room in her plans for conflicted emotions... was there?

## *Chapter Eight*

“Pioneer Merchant Bank, you said?” Charlie Davis shot a quick glance at Jamie and nodded vigorously. “Yes, I know them. Two fellows showed up, oh, a month or so ago and purchased a building on Montgomery, near Sacramento.”

Jamie leaned forward eagerly. “That’s excellent news. Is it a good location?”

“It had better be,” said Charlie with a twinkle in his eye. “I sold it to them.”

Jamie laughed. “Then you would know.”

The businessman turned serious. “What I also know is that if you’re smart, you buy what’s available as soon as you hear about it, assuming that it suits your purpose. If you wait... even as much as half a day... it will be gone.” He grinned, and for a moment he looked like a tall, gangly pirate. “Or you could wait until tomorrow, and pay twice the price. That’s the way things go around here.” He motioned for the driver to stop and pointed out a two-storey building. “That’s the place right there. Good luck, young man.” He held out his hand, and they shook. “Come and see me any time. My office is two blocks in the other direction.”

“Will do.” Jamie nodded to Lucy. “Goodbye, ma’am. It was a pleasure sailing with you.”

Lucy huffed. “It’s not as if we’re never going to see each other again. Now say goodbye to Sarah, and we’ll be on our way.”

“Goodbye, Jamie.” Sarah’s throat was suddenly tight. “Good luck.”

“Thank you, Sarah Howard.” A soft, intimate smile flitted across his face. “But this isn’t goodbye.” He held her gaze for one last, lingering moment, then walked away.

\* \* \*

“Charlie, it’s perfect!” Lucy reached up and patted her husband on the cheek. “I love my new home.”

The two-storey structure overlooked the city from a hillside near Telegraph Hill. On the drive from the waterfront, Charlie had explained proudly how he had purchased two of the first shipment of pre-fabricated wooden houses imported from China, and had re-worked the plans to turn it into a two-storey dwelling.

“I’m glad you approve.” He stood in the kitchen, where he’d just opened the crate marked kitchen supplies. “And now, if you don’t mind, my love, I need to get back to the office.”

“Of course not. Sarah and I will unpack and tonight we’ll have our first family meal.”

Sarah couldn’t remember ever witnessing any signs of affection between her mother and father. Seeing Lucy and Charlie together made her feel like a voyeur, but in a good way. Would she ever feel that kind of happiness? Her thoughts drifted to Jamie, and she was overcome with a longing so intense it took her breath away. Maybe one day, when she was established and could meet him as an equal. The idea gave her strength, and she set about unpacking the crate with a faint smile on her face.

Lucy lingered at the door, saying goodbye to Charlie, then came into the kitchen and watched for a moment. "You're smiling. I suppose you're thinking about that young man of yours."

"He's not my young man."

"Nonsense."

Sarah gave in. "I suppose I *was* thinking about Jamie." She unpacked a teapot and fished around in the excelsior for the lid. "I couldn't help but notice how well you and Charlie get along, and I was hoping that I experience something similar one day."

"You mean with Jamie, of course."

Sarah nodded. "I got to know him fairly well during the past four months."

Lucy wrapped an apron around her ample waist. Sarah had no idea where it had come from, but she'd stopped being surprised by Lucy a long time ago. "What's holding you back?" the older woman asked, her tone mild.

"I don't know." Sarah kept her head lowered. Lucy was far too intuitive.

"Nonsense." There was that word again. "Of course you know. Your father trampled on your dreams of becoming a doctor and you're determined not to let a man take control of your life again."

Sarah acknowledged her friend's words with a wry smile. "I hadn't thought about it quite like that, but you could be right."

Lucy remained quiet.

Sarah continued. "Yes, I think perhaps you *are* right. It's something I have to do." She paused and ran her fingers over the pattern on a large serving dish.

Lucy watched her, one hand braced on the edge of the packing crate. "It's not an either or proposition, you know."

"What do you mean?"

"Being independent and loving a man." Lucy nodded to herself. "Find the right man, and you can do both. Not every man wants to control his woman." She ducked her head. "All right, most of them do, but not all. I can't offer any guarantees, but I think Jamie is one of those men who admire independence in a woman." She paused for a moment. "And you think so too, or you wouldn't care for him. It's something most women know instinctively. Mind you, some gravitate toward the wrong man every time, but you're not one of them, in the same way that Jamie isn't one of those men."

"Wow. You've really thought this out."

Lucy softened her tone. "I've had a few more years of experience than you, Sarah. I've come to realize that we women spend too much of our lives, and expend too much energy pleasing other people. We need to learn to please ourselves somewhere in the mix, or we become empty shells."

Sarah gave a nervous little laugh. "I didn't know you were a philosopher."

Lucy accepted the comment with her usual good humor. "Not a philosopher, my dear. A woman who's a keen observer of human nature."

Sarah stopped working, and looked affectionately at the other woman. "I'm glad you're my friend, Lucy Davis. I wish you could meet my mother. You'd like her."

"I'm sure I would." Lucy dabbed at her eye with a corner of her apron. "Something in my eye," she said, her voice suddenly husky. "Come on, let's get this crate unpacked and then we'll see what we can round up for supper."

As items were unpacked, Sarah became aware of the immense amount of planning Lucy must have put into her packing. Everything that was necessary to start a household was carefully

tucked into the crate. As though to confirm Sarah's opinion, the last item in the crate was a broom. Sarah chuckled.

"Why are you laughing?" Lucy was re-arranging her spice cans.

"I'm laughing at your organizational skills." She glanced at the kitchen floor. "You knew that by the time you finished unpacking, the floor would be littered. I'm impressed."

Lucy blushed. "Thank you, my dear. I put a lot of thought into it."

"Well, it's paid off." The room had been transformed into a functioning kitchen that contained everything necessary to produce a meal.

Lucy examined the scant foodstuffs Charlie had purchased in anticipation of his wife's arrival. "Hmmm," she said. "There seems to be plenty of canned beef, and a few carrots and onions, but not much else is fresh." She produced a loaf of bread from her carpetbag. "Levi sent me off with this loaf from the ship. Why don't we make a stew with whatever we can find, and use the bread?" She walked into the living area and looked out over the city. "One of my first priorities will be to learn where to buy fresh food." She turned to Sarah. "But I'm ready for the challenge. What about you?"

Nervous laughter bubbled up into Sarah's throat. "I don't have much choice." She gave her head a bewildered shake. "You know, I scarcely remember anything about the drive here. Going through town, with all those people. Everybody seemed to be rushing somewhere, and many of them looked like they hadn't washed their clothes in months."

"I've heard that it can be cheaper to buy a new shirt than pay to get one washed. And that some men send their shirts to China to be laundered, because they can't afford the local prices."

Sarah watched for a sign of her friend's quirky sense of humor. "Are you making that up?"

"No, it's true. This is a place of extremes."

"I'm beginning to see that, and I've been here less than a day. I hope Charlie can give me some advice tonight about where to live."

\* \* \*

Charlie Davis patted his stomach and looked from Sarah to his wife. "Thank you, ladies. I'd almost forgotten what a good home-cooked meal tastes like."

Lucy gave one of her small snorts. "I'll cook you a proper meal when I learn where to buy food."

Charlie sighed. "It's nothing like shopping in Boston. You learn to be aware of what comes in on the ships and if it's something you use, buy a good supply. As you could see in the pantry, most things are canned or dried, but people seem to make do."

Lucy frowned. "What about fresh vegetables? I realize that it's late in the year, but surely fresh vegetables are available in season."

Charlie shook his head. "Not a lot, but a few things are brought in from the Sacramento area. Plus, some of our fruits and vegetables are brought up on ships from Chile." He warmed to his subject. "Potatoes, for example. I heard of a man paying half an ounce for a baked potato."

"Half an ounce of gold? That's..." Lucy lifted her hands. "How much?"

"Eight dollars."

Lucy's jaw dropped open. It wasn't often that the woman was nonplussed, and Sarah hid her smile. "That's preposterous! What about the local farmers?"

"My dear, this place was sparsely populated before the gold-seekers arrived. It was Mexican territory until two years ago, and Mexican cuisine doesn't feature a lot of potatoes."

“What about the...” She turned to Sarah and fluttered a hand in the air. “...what did Jamie call it... a rancho? What about the ranchos?”

Charlie shrugged. “They grow for their own use, and they sell to the miners up on the American, but not much gets sent down here.”

Sarah leaned forward. “The American?”

“Yes. The American River.”

She tried to absorb this new information, but it was as though she had stepped into a different time and place, where nothing was familiar. In a way, she supposed she had. She looked into the distance, processing what Charlie had said. “And even if a man *could* make a profit growing potatoes, I would imagine that that the ones who came here to make their fortunes in the goldfields would feel they were admitting failure if they started to farm.”

“Precisely. And that goes for the forty-niners who are still arriving, even though the easy pickings of the early days are a thing of the past.” He lit an after-dinner cigar.

“A few have already given up.” His head was wreathed in cigar smoke. “And once they realize that they aren’t going to get rich, too many of them drink or gamble away any remaining gold they have. Then, of course, they can’t afford to pay for passage back home... that is if they can find a ship.”

“Couldn’t they offer to work as crewmen? I hear that many of the ships can’t leave because there aren’t enough men to sail them.”

Charlie shot her an appreciative look. “That’s true, but they know nothing about sailing, and it can be dangerous. Most captains want experienced hands going around the Cape.”

Lucy shuddered. “I can understand why.” She rose. “I’ll get the teapot. Charlie, why don’t you fill Sarah in on the housing situation.”

“Ah, yes.” A small frown took up residence between his brows as he studied Sarah. “What had you thought you would do to support yourself?” He glanced at her ring. “Or are you recently widowed, and haven’t thought that far ahead?”

Sarah twisted her mother’s ring. “I was never married, Charlie. But posing as a married woman seemed like a good idea, until Lucy pointed out that there was actually no man at the end of the voyage to meet me. So I became a widow.”

“I see.” He grew thoughtful.

Sarah hurried on, lest he get the wrong impression. She edged forward on her chair. “I’m not afraid to work. As a matter of fact, I’ve always wanted to prove myself.” She gave a self-conscious laugh. “Lucy helped me to realize that. I worked alongside my father, who’s a knowledgeable physician, but I’m not a licensed physician. Even so, I know a lot about medicine, and I would feel confident offering my services in non-life threatening situations.”

Charlie looked around, as though afraid someone might hear him, then tapped the ash from his cigar. “Probably do a damned sight better than a lot of the charlatans who hang out a shingle and call themselves doctors. There’s no system in place to check their credentials.” He puffed furiously. “And the hospital! Those who can pay are placed on the top floor, but I’ve heard that even up there it smells like a cesspool. The lower floors, where the indigent people are cared for is a disgrace.” He stopped and caught his breath.

Lucy bustled into the room. “Charlie, you’ll scare the poor girl half to death with talk like that.”

“No, I’m fascinated.”

Lucy brushed aside Sarah’s words. “Be that as it may, we need to discuss finding somewhere for Sarah to live.” She turned her attention to her husband. “What about a boarding house?”

“No. Definitely not.” He sat back in his chair and puffed on his cigar. Sarah found that she was almost breathless as she waited to hear what he would say.

“There are very few women here,” he started. “When you go out, you’ll discover that women here are revered. Even the soiled doves are treated with respect when they venture out during the day.” He let out a discreet cough.

“Charlie!”

Charlie shot a frustrated glance at his wife. “She has to hear this, Lucy, if she’s going to make it on her own.”

Sarah watched the exchange with interest. Charlie turned back to her.

“But it’s also a rough town, Sarah. Especially at night. And on Sundays... a day you’d think might be a day of worship or rest, is anything but. Most of the men take the day off. They get drunk, and gamble, and...” his voice trailed off. “Well, they do what men do.”

“Boarding houses offer no privacy for a single woman. The rooms, if you can call them that, are small. The walls are made of canvas. Very little or no privacy.” His gaze held Sarah’s. “Definitely not a place for you.”

Sarah was aware of Charlie studying her as she absorbed this information. His words were disappointing, but she sensed that he had more to say.

“Pardon me for being indelicate, my dear, but do you have any money?”

Sarah looked to Lucy, who merely shrugged.

“Yes, I have a little over twenty thousand dollars.”

Charlie’s eyebrows shot up. “Twenty thousand. That puts us in an entirely different position.” He glared at his cigar, which had had the audacity to go out.

He re-lit the cigar, and she could almost see the wheels turning in his head. “So,” he said eventually. “You might be in the market for a house of some sort.” He thought for a moment. “Did you think you might start a business? If so, then the location would make a difference.”

Sarah glanced at Lucy. “Tell him,” she urged.

“Well, yes. I thought I might try making Cornish pasties.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a meat pie, for lack of a better description.” She glanced at Lucy again. “They’re delicious, but what’s more important, a man can eat them out of his hand. They’re completely portable.”

A small smile played around Charlie’s lips. “Interesting. I don’t suppose you’d like a partner?” He caught his wife glaring at him. “Not that I think you’ll need one,” he muttered, serious again.

“I have the perfect place for you. The young man purchased it from me two months ago, in anticipation of his wife’s arrival, but she got cholera in one of the outbreaks on a wagon train. Killed her and her unborn child.” His eyes became suddenly bright and he cleared his throat self-consciously. “The young fellow was desperate to leave and go home. He said he’d take whatever I offered him, but I couldn’t bring myself to take advantage of his misfortune, so I paid him what he paid me.” He paused to think for a moment. “Even so, it’s worth twice what I paid him.”

“Charlie Davis!” Lucy’s eyes flashed. “If it’s within Sarah’s budget, you’ll sell it to her for what you paid.”

“I wasn’t suggesting otherwise, my dear.”

Lucy settled down, reminding Sarah of a hen who had been disturbed on her nest.

Sarah turned back to Charlie. “The poor man. Do people often die of cholera on the way out?”

He nodded. "Too often. Even the groups who hire a doctor to travel with them sometimes lose people. It's one of the dangers of the overland route, among others."

"I had no idea." She felt guilty taking advantage of someone else's bad luck, but it sounded like the perfect solution to her housing dilemma. "You said he bought it in anticipation of his wife's arrival. What were her plans?"

"Ah, yes. She was going to take in boarders, and since she was going to be cooking for them, she also planned to sell food. You'll find a few women doing the same. The upstairs of this particular house has been divided into sleeping cubicles, and there's also a small tent on the property where he lived while the house was being built. They planned to use it as an eating house, in addition to the inside dining room."

"You're right. It sounds perfect." Sarah looked toward the window and was surprised to see that darkness had fallen. "When can I see it?"

"First thing tomorrow."

## *Chapter Nine*

Pale sunshine filtered tentatively through the clouds as Charlie drove them straight down Montgomery Street the next morning. "My office is in the next block," he said, turning up Pacific Street, then left on Kearney, headed for the Plaza. "And this is Portsmouth Square."

Sarah didn't know where to look. The muddy plaza was bustling with people who all seemed to be going somewhere in a hurry. She could make out several foreign languages being spoken, and as she stared into the mass of humanity, she became aware of the variety of native dress on the men. The one constant seemed to be mud, and she gave silent thanks that she'd brought her boots.

"It's a busy place," she observed as Charlie guided his wagon carefully around the perimeter of the plaza.

"You'll get used to it," he said, then turned to acknowledge a greeting from two prosperous-looking men. "It's a bit wild yet, but it's much better than when I arrived."

Sarah and Lucy exchanged glances, but said nothing.

Away from the hustle and bustle of the plaza, the streets took on a semblance of order. Wooden buildings, some of dubious quality, sat side-by-side with tents. Based on what Charlie had told them, Sarah accepted that any private accommodation was preferable to the boarding houses.

Sarah recognized what she was already thinking of as her place when they were half a block away. A tent occupied the area close to the street, and a sturdy-looking house sat farther back on the lot.

"This is it," said Charlie.

Sarah looked the property over from the safety of the wagon. Even here, the streets hadn't dried after an overnight rain. "What street is this?" she asked.

"Sacramento Street," he said, and pointed back toward the bay. "Your friend's office is two and a half blocks in that direction."

"My friend?" Sarah felt a blush creep up her neck. "Oh, you mean Jamie."

"Right." Charlie got down and offered his hand to Lucy, who had been surprisingly quiet. "Let's go and I'll show you around the inside."

The house was well equipped. A large kitchen contained two cook stoves opposite a work table. Cooking utensils, plates, mugs, forks... everything she could anticipate that she might need. A large pantry had yet to be stocked, but it contained a surprisingly wide supply of spices and salt.

Sarah trailed her fingers over the spice containers and turned to Charlie. "It's so well equipped. How could he possibly have bought all of this equipment here?"

Charlie shrugged. "I can't say for sure, but I've heard of that many enterprising young people are buying equipment from stranded ships." He sent a quick glance in the direction of the harbor. "Some of them have been torn apart for their lumber, and some have been dragged up onto land where they serve many purposes."

Sarah nodded to herself. "I suppose someone might as well make use of these things."

The upstairs had been divided into decent-sized cubicles; Sarah counted eight. "I'm not sure if I'd feel comfortable taking in boarders, but the house solves both of my problems. Somewhere to live, and a business all in one location. I must say it's perfect." She looked to Lucy for agreement.

"Where will you sleep?" Ever practical, Lucy addressed what Sarah had been wondering.

"Oh." Charlie strode through the kitchen and opened a door. "There's a room here. It's not large, but I think they were going to share it." He rattled the handle. "Plus it locks."

Sarah examined the space. A bed was shoved into a corner, flanked by a wash stand and a wardrobe. "It's all I need," she said, breathless now that the decision was at hand. "I'll buy it."

Charlie gave a brisk nod. "Good decision. Come, we'll go to my office and sign the papers."

\* \* \*

"Congratulations, my dear." Charlie handed her a surprisingly slim file of papers and a key. "You are now the proud owner of a home on Sacramento Street."

Sarah looked at the papers without really seeing them. "I still feel badly about the circumstances, but someone was going to buy it if I didn't, right?"

Charlie leaned back in his chair. "It would have been sold by the end of the day, I assure you."

Sarah tucked the papers in her bag. "Then I've done the right thing."

Charlie nodded. "This whole gold mining business is fraught with danger. Just last week, a young man had a terrible accident up on the American. He'd invested what remained of his money with a company that was building a flume. During construction, he was hit on the head with a timber, fell into the water and drowned." Charlie shook his head. "That in itself isn't so unusual, but this young fellow's wife and daughter are due to arrive at any moment. And the wife is close to having another child."

Apprehension clawed at Sarah's gut. She opened her mouth to speak, but no sound came out. She tried again. "What was his name?"

"I don't know. It really doesn't..." Charlie looked from Sarah to his wife and the blood drained from his face. "You think she might have been on *WindSprite*?"

Sarah nodded. "She's still there waiting for her husband to show up, as far as I know. Is there any way you can find out his name?"

Charlie thought for a moment. "I heard about it from young Angus, a reporter for *Alta California*." He paused at the curious look on Sarah's face. "That's our newspaper." He consulted his pocket watch and then snapped it closed. "He spends a lot of time at Parker House. He takes his meals there, and mingles with newcomers. Gets a lot of stories that way." He pushed himself up from his desk. "I'll walk over there right now, get the chap's last name, and be right back." He seemed eager to get away from the women. "Might as well find out," he murmured to himself as he strode out the door.

He was gone before Sarah could recover. "Does he always move that quickly?" she asked, turning to her friend.

Lucy nodded, and a devilish smile curved her lips. "Looking back, it's how he bowled me over the first time we met." Her eyes lit up. "Speaking of bowling, did you see the sign for the bowling alley back there..." she twisted around, trying to get her bearings. "I forget which street

we were on, but one of the public buildings had a sign advertising a bowling alley. How extraordinary.”

“A bowling alley.” Sarah gave her head a small shake. “A form of entertainment, I suppose, but I never would have imagined it.” She glanced around Charlie’s sparsely furnished office. “I have so much to learn about this place.” Her voice drifted off, and she faced what both of them had been avoiding. “Do you think it’s possible? Do you think it’s Anna’s husband?” She shuddered involuntarily.

“If so, I have no idea what the poor woman will do. Charlie said the young man in question put all his money into a fluming company.”

“What is that, anyway?” Sarah was grateful for the change of subject.

“It’s a process whereby they divert the water from a stream, or an area of a river, and mine the riverbed.” She gave a dismissive shake of her head. “According to what I’ve read in the paper, none of them have been successful so far. But I can understand the men wanting to try anything. Charlie says that some of them are simply gripped by gold fever and refuse to acknowledge that the big strikes are a thing of the past.” She walked around her husband’s desk, tidying piles of papers. “But for some of them, it’s pride. They can’t bring themselves to go home without having made their “pile”, as they refer to it, so they put all their money into these companies in one final act of desperation. It’s sad, really.”

Sarah considered Lucy’s words. “If it is him, I wonder if there’s any chance of getting his money back?”

Lucy shrugged. “Not if the money has been spent. But let’s wait to see what Charlie has to say.”

At that moment, Charlie entered the outer office, muttering to himself.

Lucy stood. “What is it?”

“Damned mud.” Charlie looked down at his boots, which were coated in mud up to the laces. “Sorry, my dear, but when this winter’s over, we really have to do something about the streets.”

Sarah had risen to stand beside Lucy. Charlie couldn’t bring himself to look directly at either of them.

“His name was Walter Taylor, and his wife was on *WindSprite*,” he said at last. “Anna Taylor.”

Sarah’s hand flew to her mouth, and tears spilled down her cheeks.

“You’re sure?” she asked, her voice little more than a whisper.

“Yes. I’m sorry.” He reached into his coat pocket and withdrew a photograph. “He had very few possessions, but this was among them.” He showed the picture to the women.

“That’s Anna and Melissa,” confirmed Lucy with a sad smile. She looked from Sarah to her husband. “Someone has to go out to the ship and tell her.”

Charlie cleared his throat.

Lucy touched him on the arm. “I didn’t mean you, my dear.” She returned her attention to Sarah. “It should be one, or both of us.”

Sarah steadied herself on the edge of Charlie’s desk and then sat back down, her mind whirling. “I’ll do it,” she said after a moment, and looked to Charlie. “I know this is asking a lot, but could you arrange for someone to unload Anna’s trunks from the ship and bring them to my place?”

“Yes, of course.” He scurried from the room.

“Sarah, you can’t take on such a responsibility.” The horrified look on Lucy’s face was soon replaced by grudging acceptance. “Foolish of me to say that; of course you’re going to help her.

Just make sure you call on me when you need another pair of hands.” She rose to follow her husband.

“How about right now?” Sarah tried to lighten her request with a smile. “While I’m getting Anna and Melissa from the ship, I was wondering if you would mind getting something ready for supper. Anna probably won’t feel like eating tonight, but she has Melissa to consider, not to mention her unborn child. Something like a bowl of soup would be good.”

“Of course, and I’ll bring your personal belongings as well, but...” Lucy’s voice trailed off. “Are you sure about delivering the news?”

Sarah nodded, more to convince herself than anything. “Yes, I am.” As though to confirm her words, Charlie came back into the room. “I have someone outside right now, if you’re ready to go.”

“Thank you, Charlie.” Sarah gave Lucy a quick hug. “See you later, my friend.”

\* \* \*

Charlie handed Sarah up onto the seat of the wagon. “Eduardo here will take you down to the docks. He works for a group that specializes in unloading passengers and freight from incoming ships, so they’ll row you out to *WindSprite*, and collect you when you give them the signal.”

“Signal?”

“Probably a piece of colored cloth. You’ll be asked to tie it to the rail when you’re ready to come back.” He gave her an encouraging grin. “They’re quite reliable, so don’t worry.” He backed onto the wooden planks in front of his office building. “Let me know if I can be of further help.”

The driver didn’t speak on the short drive to the dock, but glanced at her several times. Sarah knew that a woman alone was probably an unusual sight, but she was too concerned with what she would say to Anna to think much about it.

“Here,” the man said, stopping abruptly by the pier. Sarah looked out at the jumble of masts in the harbour and wondered how they would ever find Captain Johnson’s ship. But the Chileans who owned and worked for the company seemed to know every vessel that was jammed into the harbor, and within a few minutes a different man was transporting her across the water with long, sure strokes of the oars.

Sarah’s nervousness grew as they drew closer to the ship. She scanned the deck, hoping that Anna wasn’t outside. She had no idea what she was going to say to the other woman, and was worried that the shock might send her into premature labor.

A large lighter was busy unloading cargo near the bow of the ship, so they tied up near the rope ladder toward the stern. The man handed her a bright red piece of cotton and mimed tying it on the railing. Sarah nodded, tucked it in her bag and started to climb.

Breathless but triumphant, she stood on the deck and looked around. The ship was silent, except for the unloading by the forward hatches, and she wondered if she should look for the captain first.

“Sarah!” Melissa ran up the companionway and threw herself at Sarah’s skirts. “You came to visit!” Her bright eyes looked toward the land, barely visible between the moored ships. “We’re waiting for my Daddy. Have you seen him?”

Tears filled Sarah’s eyes and she turned away to see Anna’s head and shoulders as she, too, came on deck. She observed the reunion with a gentle smile, one hand resting on her stomach.

But then, as Sarah watched, the light faded from Anna's eyes, and the contented happiness that had illuminated her face a moment before was replaced by uncertainty, then outright fear.

"Missy, go to the cabin, please."

"Mommy!" The child wailed.

"Melissa." Sarah gave her a gentle pat on the top of the head. "Do as your mother says."

Sensing the tension in the air, the child's lower lip trembled, but she did as she was told.

Anna took a few tentative steps forward. "Sarah?" Even as her gaze met Sarah's she was shaking her head slowly back and forth. "No," she said, continuing to shake her head. "Not my Walter."

Tears ran down Sarah's face unheeded. She hated herself for crying, when it was the other woman receiving the bad news, but she couldn't help it. Anna was about to collapse, but Sarah recovered enough to catch her, and eased her down onto a pile of rope near the mast. Anna clutched at her stomach and her mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out. Haunted eyes searched Sarah's face, hoping for signs that she was wrong, but in the timeless ways of women everywhere, Anna knew.

"Tell me," she said finally. "He's dead, isn't he." It wasn't a question.

Sarah nodded. "I'm sorry, Anna." Her words seemed so vapid, so useless, but she couldn't think of anything else to say.

"What happened?"

Sarah explained how he had been hit on the head and ultimately drowned. She had been with her father several times when he'd lost patients in surgery and had taken it upon herself to inform the loved ones, but this was different. Anna was vulnerable and alone. And if Charlie's information turned out to be true, she was penniless. This was personal, and Sarah had no intention of leaving the woman to fend for herself.

Anna looked down at her protruding stomach and spoke, almost to herself. "What's to become of us? Surprisingly, she hadn't cried yet, but Sarah sensed that tears would come later.

Sarah lowered herself onto a corner of the coiled rope and took Anna's hand. "I bought a house today and you'll stay with me. But before you agree, I have to tell you something."

Anna gave her a blank look.

"I'm not married, Anna. I'm not even a widow."

A tiny smile appeared. "I know that." She looked directly into Sarah's eyes. "Are you sure, Sarah? Because sudden as this is, I see no other option for Melissa and I at the moment. I would be grateful to accept your generosity, and I'll do my best to pay my own way."

Sarah laid a hand on Anna's taut stomach, and at that moment, the child kicked. "I know you will," she said, "but we won't worry about that for the time being."

Tears sprang to Anna's eyes, but she held them back. "Help me up," she said, trying to rise. "I'll go down to our cabin and tell Missy."

They rose, and Anna looked toward the hills beyond the harbour. "What happens next?"

Sarah was glad to be dealing with practicalities. "You pack up your belongings." She paused. "I suppose they're already packed up, aren't they?"

Anna nodded.

"All right, then. Lucy's husband has arranged for someone to transport your belongings from the ship to my new house." She looked around. "Is Captain Johnson still on board?"

"Yes. The last I saw, he was supervising the unloading of Jamie's equipment."

Sarah flushed. "Jamie's here?" In the shock of learning about Anna's husband, she had forgotten about his safe and minting machine.

“He was here earlier.” Anna gestured vaguely toward the bow. “Check with the captain.”

“All right. You take your time with Melissa, and I’ll speak to the captain. I’ll be here on deck when you’re ready.”

The other woman took a deep breath and Sarah pulled her into a fierce hug. “I’m sorry, Anna. I don’t know what else to say.”

Anna closed her eyes, as though steeling herself for the ordeal to come. “You’re doing fine,” she said, and gave herself a little shake. “Now I just have to tell Missy...” She walked resolutely toward the companionway.

## Chapter Ten

A cluster of men stood around the open forward hatch, and as Sarah approached, a large crate rose slowly from the gaping hole, controlled by a winch.

“Sarah!” Captain Johnson appeared and moved her back a few feet. “Just a precaution,” he said, then returned his attention to the crate. It hung suspended a foot or two above the deck, and then moved laterally through a gap where the ship’s rail had been removed. A voice shouted from below, and the winch creaked and moaned as it started to lower the heavy crate onto the waiting lighter below.

A minute or two later, a voice shouted from below. The captain seemed to understand what had been said, because he turned to her. “All clear,” he said, obviously relieved to have the large piece of cargo safely off his ship.

“Now,” he said. “What brings you here?” He grinned. “I’m happy to see you, of course, but…” His words trailed off.

Sarah’s face must have mirrored her emotions as she remembered why she’d come. The captain sobered, and she gave him a quick rundown.

“She must be heartbroken,” he said. “And in spite of her bad luck, she’s one of the fortunate ones, having you to take her in.” He looked toward the winch. “I’ll get the chair rigged up. She can’t possibly climb down the ladder.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

“No, it’s you who deserves the thanks.” He gave her an affectionate look. “As a matter of fact, Levi and I were talking about you last night. You were such a help to all of us on the voyage, and we’d like to do something for you. Now that we know you’re settled, we’ll know where to send the token of our appreciation.”

“Captain, you don’t have to do that.”

“Perhaps not, but we want to. You can expect a delivery either later today or early tomorrow.” He grinned. “And we know you’ll put it to good use.” He strode off to look for the chair.

Sarah peered into the hatch and her pulse ratcheted up at the sight.

Jamie was assisting with securing the second crate, but it wasn’t his actions that took her breath away. He’d stripped off his jacket and cravat and loosened his shirt. Black, snugly fitting trousers hugged his muscled legs and emphasized his trim waist. Broad shoulders were clearly visible under the shirt, and his hair had fallen over one eye, adding to his rakish appearance. One hand grasping a rope, he looked very much like a pirate, and she had the sudden desire to sail away with him into the sunset.

*Silly woman*, she chided herself, and at that moment he looked up at her. Caught in a shaft of sunlight, his eyes flared in recognition, crystal blue shards among the smouldering grey. “Sarah,” he called. Did he sound breathless too, or was it her imagination? “What are you doing here?” He came scrambling up the ladder and stood over her, smiling into her upraised face. “It’s good to see you.”

“Good to see you, too.” She couldn’t keep the smile out of her voice. “And I have a lot to tell you, but the reason I’m here isn’t good.”

He reached out to touch her, as though to reassure himself that she was all right. “What is it?”

She told him about Anna, and his face reflected his dismay. “The poor woman.” He looked beyond her, to ensure that Anna wasn’t within hearing distance. “What is she going to do?”

Before she could respond, he started to shake his head. “Wait. I already know. You’ve found a way to take care of her, haven’t you?” He seemed resigned to the fact... maybe even proud of her.

“Yes, and that’s my other news. I’ve bought a house.”

“Already?” He let out a short laugh. “You don’t waste time.”

“Charlie says you have to move quickly.”

Jamie nodded. “Well he’s right about that. According to the two fellows who came out from Chicago, we were lucky to get our building. They say it’s already worth double what we paid.”

“Where did you sleep last night?”

“Upstairs in the building.” He rolled his eyes. “Apparently it’s common not to have proper walls here, due to the shortage of lumber. Our sleeping compartments are divided by canvas, and I listened to them snore all night.” He gave a casual shrug. “I suppose I’ll get used to it.”

“How long will you stay before you go to your rancho?”

“I don’t really know. A couple of weeks, at least.” He smiled down into her eyes. “Are you missing me already?”

She looked at him steadily, a challenge in her eyes. “And if I am?”

“Then we’ll have to —” He looked over her shoulder, then lowered his voice. “We’ll have to get together for supper one night,” he said hurriedly. “I’ll find you.”

Sarah turned to see Anna, holding the hand of a subdued, red-eyed Melissa. At the same time, Captain Johnson appeared with the chair, and they began the process of lowering Anna to the lighter.

“It’s ready to leave anyway,” said the captain. “You might as well go back to the docks on it.”

Sarah would rather have stayed and talked to Jamie, but the sight of Anna down on the lighter, cradling Melissa to her side brought her back to the task at hand. She looked back to see Jamie standing by the hatch, his hair ruffled by the breeze. A curl of desire started to unfurl somewhere deep inside, sending pulsing, insistent heat to parts of her body she’d forgotten about. She scolded herself for allowing such feelings at a time like this. But the truth was, she hadn’t consciously allowed them; they’d come rushing over her, swamping her normally composed nature with something new and exciting. Something she very much intended to explore when the opportunity arose.

Jamie gave her a long, lazy smile and tilted his head in what was becoming a familiar gesture. She acknowledge him with a small twitch of her lips, then settled into the chair, already missing his presence as she joined Anna and Melissa on the lighter that would take them to the docks.

\* \* \*

Sarah tried to keep the pride out of her voice as she gave the driver directions to her new home. Despite the shock to her system, Anna’s head swiveled every time they passed an unusual sight.

“Look, Mommy!” Melissa pointed to a thin man in a long blue smock and blue trousers. “Is that a Chinaman?”

Anna lowered her daughter’s finger. “We don’t point, Missy, but yes, that man is from China.”

The child’s attention was quickly diverted to a horse and buggy which had become stuck in the mud. If the man’s elegant clothes and highly polished boots were anything to go by, he hadn’t been in San Francisco long. Their wagon driver snorted with derision as he manoeuvred around the stricken buggy. Sarah was reminded that she had a lot to learn.

They pulled up in front of Sarah’s new home and Anna’s mouth formed a perfect circle. “You own this?” she gasped. “How did you ever manage?”

Sarah wasn’t sure if Anna was aware of her own financial situation, and didn’t want to discuss money matters. “Lucy’s husband Charlie knew about it. Otherwise I’m not sure what I would have done.” She offered a hand. “Here, let me help you down. You, too, Missy.”

They walked past the tent in the front yard and looked up to see Lucy at the front door.

“Lucy!” Melissa launched herself into the older woman’s arms. “You’re here.”

“Yes, my pet. I’ve brought you some soup for supper.”

Lucy enveloped Anna in a hug. “I’m so sorry, love.” Lucy was struggling to hold back tears. “We’re your family now.”

“Thank you, Lucy.” Anna gave her a feeble smile, and continued to look around. “It’s amazing,” she said, looking into the room overlooking the street. A sideboard holding two basic but serviceable glass candlesticks dominated the wall backing onto the kitchen, and a round, pot-bellied stove sat proudly in the corner; Sarah had already imagined sitting around it when the weather got colder. The only other furniture was a long dining table, flanked by eight chairs. The room made it evident that the young couple had planned to focus on the boarding house and selling food before creature comforts. Although Sarah admired their single-minded drive, she made a mental note to re-arrange the furniture and buy several comfortable chairs.

Anna wandered into the kitchen and Sarah and Lucy followed. Her eyes widened, and she turned to the two women. “It’s a complete kitchen. How did you manage all this?”

Sarah glanced at Lucy, suddenly uncomfortable. But knowing that Anna would find out sooner or later, she told her the story.

Tears began to fall from Anna’s eyes and she sat down heavily at the small table in the corner of the kitchen. “What’s the matter with me?” she cried. “I can weep for someone else’s misfortune, but I can’t cry for myself.” She lowered her head and contrary to her words, hoarse, rasping sobs were torn from her body.

Lucy went to her side and rubbed her back with comforting strokes. “Cry all you want, my dear. It’s not healthy to keep it bottled up, no matter what you may have heard.”

Melissa’s hand crept into Sarah’s as she watched her mother cry. After a few minutes, Anna’s tears turned into hiccups, and she bent over, clutching her stomach.

Sarah released Melissa’s hand and went to her side. “Anna?”

The pregnant woman looked up.

“It’s started, hasn’t it?”

Anna nodded.

Sarah was surprised that she felt so calm. Her gaze darted around the kitchen, taking in the gently steaming kettle and the tea towels hanging on a rack beside the stove. “Lucy,” she asked, “did you see a linen closet by any chance?”

“There are sheets and towels over there.” Lucy pointed to a narrow door that Sarah hadn’t noticed.

“Let’s get them out, and into the back room.” She wished she’d had more of a chance to take inventory. “What about candles... in case this goes into the night?”

“I’ll check,” said the older woman. “Come on, Missy. Let’s hunt around for candles.”

Anna moaned, and Sarah waited for the contraction to pass. Perspiration dotted her brow, and she brushed it away, then rose and walked slowly to the back bedroom. “I don’t think we need to worry about candles... at least not on my account.” She gave a thin smile. “Melissa was born very quickly, and I think this one is trying to break her record.” In spite of her confident words, her eyes were suddenly very large in her head. “Do you have any experience...” Her question was cut short by another contraction. She sat on the edge of the bed, waiting for the pain to pass, then started to remove her clothes.

“I’ve been present at several births,” said Sarah, “but nothing complicated.”

Anna lay back, and Sarah covered her with a sheet. “This is only my second child, but everything has seemed normal so far.” Her fingers dug into the thin mattress. “Let’s hope it goes quickly.”

\* \* \*

Anna got her wish. Four hours later, Sarah placed a squirming baby boy on Anna’s chest.

“My boy,” said Anna, drinking in the sight of her son through eyes luminous with tears. She touched the fine wisp of hair at the crown of the child’s head and kissed him on the forehead. “We’ll call him Walter, after his father,” she said, looking beyond Sarah to where Lucy and Melissa were standing in the doorway. “That’s fitting, don’t you think?”

Lucy nodded, unable to speak through her tears.

“Walter,” whispered Melissa, offering her finger to the baby, who gripped it and held on tight. “My baby brother.”

\* \* \*

Lucy was still in the kitchen when Sarah wandered back in. Melissa had climbed up on the foot of the bed with her mother, and the family of three were sleeping soundly.

“You didn’t need to stay,” she said, sinking down onto the chair opposite her friend. “But I’m glad you did. Thank you for taking care of Missy. Did you get her to eat anything?”

“A little.” She motioned to the stove. “Help yourself to the soup, and some of Levi’s bread.”

Sarah looked around. “They brought the supplies? I didn’t hear anyone.”

Lucy grinned. “You were rather busy. The captain sent Anna’s trunk; I had them put it outside her door.” Her eyes danced. “They also delivered the captain’s gift for you. Wait until you see what it is.”

Sarah’s exhaustion fell away. “Where is it?”

“I asked them leave it in the dining room.” She led the way, and pointed to a small pile of bags and canned goods. “I think it’s a hint.”

Sarah examined the captain’s gifts with growing delight. “Flour,” she said, touching the bags. “And beans and molasses. Salt, lard, and canned meat.” She opened one of the smaller bags and raised it to her nose. “And some of Levi’s precious seasonings.” She looked at Lucy, her eyes shining. “He couldn’t have sent a better gift.”

Lucy nodded. “And on top of that, I noticed what appeared to be plenty of beef for sale at the market today. And I picked up some bacon and coffee for your breakfast. As for the produce, onions and carrots are fairly plentiful. I decided to inquire about availability, and at this time of year it’s local produce, brought down from Sonoma, and Mission Dolores.” She made a face. “Still no potatoes to speak of, but I suspect that will change with time. Oh, and there seems to be plenty of fruit if you decide to make fruit pies, or fruit pasties. You’re all set.”

Sarah went back over the pile of foodstuffs, touching each container and already planning what she would do with the contents.

## *Chapter Eleven*

“Sarah.”

Sarah opened her eyes, and for a moment she didn't know where she was. Pale light streamed through a small window, and she could just make out Melissa's face.

“Mama's crying,” the child said. Anna must have wakened some time during the night and found the trunk with their belongings; the child stood shivering, dressed only in her night shift.

Sarah forced herself to sit up. After Lucy left last night, she'd closed up the house and surveyed the pile of foodstuffs to be put away. But the day had been too long, the events too emotional, and she'd dragged herself upstairs and claimed the first sleeping cubicle at the top of the stairs.

She pulled the child onto her lap and stroked her hair. “It's normal for your mother to cry, Melissa. She's sad about your father.” She wrapped her arms around the girl and rocked her back and forth. “After a while, she'll stop crying, but she'll never forget him, and neither will you.”

“Mommy says he's gone to heaven, but I can't go to visit him.” She pulled back and looked into Sarah's eyes. “Why not?”

Sarah's heart twisted. “Because that's the way it is. Besides, your mother needs you here to help take care of little Walter.”

Missy leaned her head against Sarah's shoulder and closed her eyes. “Sleepy,” she murmured.

“Would you like to sleep in my bed for a while?” Sarah eased the child off her lap. “I'll be downstairs when you wake up.”

“Okay.” The child was already asleep by the time Sarah pulled up the blankets. She had a lot to do this morning, and it would be better without the youngster underfoot. She pulled on her clothes, ran lightly down the stairs, and stopped to look around. Was this really her house? At the moment, she couldn't remember where she'd put the papers, but yes, it was hers.

She wandered into the dining room and stood at the front window, looking out at the portion of San Francisco that was visible beyond the tent. Wisps of fog danced down the street, but as she watched, the sun gained strength, and she felt a sense of relief that this morning at least, the rain would be held at bay. Then she turned and got to work.

\* \* \*

“You've been busy.” Anna's voice startled Sarah, who was sitting at the dining table in the main room, staring out over the street.

“You startled me.” Sarah rose. “I just finished a cup of coffee. Would you like some? I can offer sugar, if you take it.”

“That would be wonderful.” Cradling Walter in her arms, Anna moved slowly to the table and sat down kitty-corner from where Sarah had been sitting.

“There you go.” Sarah placed a steaming cup, sugar and a spoon in front of Anna. “How are you feeling?”

Anna made an effort to smile. “Fine, actually.”

“And Walter?”

She looked down at her child. “He’s asleep. Where is Melissa?”

“She fell asleep in my bed. I hope you don’t mind, but that seemed to be a good place for her while I unpacked this morning.”

Anna nodded listlessly and stared out the window. “It isn’t what I thought, you know.”

Sarah frowned. “What?”

“San Francisco. I thought it would be more settled somehow. More like Boston, perhaps.”

Sarah looked out at what she could see of the city. “I know what you mean, but it makes up for that in other ways. It’s exciting... it’s alive.” She gave a short laugh. “It’s hard to explain.”

Anna took a sip of coffee, then placed her cup on the table with a trembling hand. “I don’t have any money, Sarah.” She fidgeted with her wedding ring. “I know the last thing you need is a widow and a couple of children, but if you would let me stay here, I can help you any way you like. I can cook, I can bake, I can clean up...” Her eyes filled with tears. “My family was dead set against Walter and I coming out here. They made it clear that if we got into trouble, we weren’t to ask them for help. And Walter has no family left...” Her voice trailed off.

Sarah had heard similar stories back in Boston. There was no in between when it came to people’s opinions on the California Gold Rush. They either thought it to be a great adventure, or they reacted like Anna’s family had.

Sarah opened her mouth to speak, and then closed it.

Anna leaned forward. “What were you going to say?”

“I was going to say it doesn’t matter that you don’t have any money, but of course it does... to you, at least. As far as I’m concerned, you can stay here as long as you like.” Her gaze rested on the sleeping child. “The children will keep things normal, and I just know you’ll be a great help when it comes time to start the food business.”

Anna seemed to relax. She took another sip of coffee and looked around the room. “It’s not very inviting, is it?”

“That’s exactly what I was just thinking.” Sarah rose and lifted the red cotton fabric that was draped over the table. She’d only been in San Francisco for two days, but she didn’t think she’d ever seen so much red calico.

“This is actually two tables shoved together,” she said. “I think we should separate them and make two tables of four. That will make the room appear more inviting, and it will leave some room in the corner by the fireplace for some comfortable chairs. A rocking chair perhaps, where you can sit with the baby. And one or two comfortable plush chairs.” She smiled at Anna. “I have no idea where we’ll find furniture like that, but we might as well set our sights high. Besides, I have a feeling we’ll be working hard, and we need a place to be comfortable in the evenings.”

Anna’s face brightened. “That sounds wonderful. When do you think you’ll start?”

Sarah thought for a moment. “I’ll need to experiment with the stoves for a few days, but I was thinking of starting small in a week or so. Let’s make sure we’re comfortable and settled first.” Walter’s little fists clenched as he stretched in his sleep. “Besides, you need to spend time with this little guy.” She stood, and her stomach growled. “In the meantime, I’m going to fry up some bacon and bread for our breakfast.”

\* \* \*

“Good morning young fellow.” Charlie looked up as Jamie strode into his office. He indicated the other man sitting in the chair facing his desk. “Have you met Angus McKellern? Angus is a reporter for *Alta California*.”

“Angus.” Jamie extended a hand. “Jamie Thompson.”

Angus rose. “From the new merchant bank?”

“That’s right.” Jamie assessed the other man. “Just arrived.”

“So I heard. I was hoping to interview you about the minting machine you brought.”

“I’d be grateful for the exposure. Seems to me that our services will be welcome.” He glanced at Charlie. “Actually, I came here to ask Charlie for the address of a mutual friend. I know it’s on Sacramento Street, but I wanted to be sure.”

Charlie looked through some papers on his desk. “You’re looking for Sarah, right? Are you going there now?”

“Yes, I thought I would.”

“Great. Would you mind taking this photograph?” He showed it briefly to Angus, then handed it to Jamie. “Angus is the one who gave it to me yesterday. Sarah and Lucy identified Anna from it.”

Jamie looked briefly at the happy family in the photograph. “Where did you get this?”

“I was up the American, checking on the various fluming operations, and someone gave it to me. The chap who drowned had it in his jacket. There were a few other things as well. A pocket watch, a knife, some letters. Not much else.”

“I could take those things with me, I suppose, if you don’t mind me stopping by your office first.”

“Certainly not. We’re finished here for the time being.” He shook hands with Angus. “I wasn’t exactly looking forward to doing it, anyway.”

Jamie got Sarah’s address from Charlie, and then followed Angus out the door. Jamie shot a curious glance at the other man. “What can you tell me about these fluming companies?”

“What would you like to know?”

“I was wondering if there’s any chance of Anna getting some of her money back.”

Angus shook his head. “That’s highly unlikely. Those are expensive operations to mount.” He gave his head a quick shake. “As far as I know, not one of them has made a profit, and yet people continue to invest.”

“Why do they do it?”

Angus acknowledged a greeting from a passing businessman, and then continued. “Blind faith. Greed. The fear of returning home a failure. Any number of reasons.” He pointed to a door. “Here’s the office. I’ll just pop in and get those items.”

In the short time Jamie waited, he heard Chinese, Spanish and French spoken, plus the unmistakable speech of the American south. Men greeted each other, but he noticed that none seemed to linger, limiting their exchange to a few quick words. Time was money here in San Francisco. He watched with a faint smile on his face, and wondered if he would ever fit in... or if he wanted to.

“Here you are.” Angus handed him a small package wrapped in a piece of what appeared to be canvas. “I wish there was more.”

“It was good of you to bring it,” said Jamie, accepting the bundle. “I’ll make sure she gets it.”

Angus nodded. “Will it be all right if I call at your place of business for an interview?”

Jamie thought for a moment. "We should have the minting machine up and running by the end of the week. Perhaps it would make for a more interesting story if you see it in operation. Stop by then."

"Excellent." The men shook hands, and Jamie picked his way through the mud, headed toward Sacramento Street.

\* \* \*

"Sarah!" Missy came running into the kitchen. "Someone is at the door."

Sarah took a quick glance in the small mirror she'd discovered on the back of a door. Her hair hung loosely around her shoulders, and her cheeks were flushed from working over the stove, but the woman who looked back at her was more alive than she'd been for years.

"Coming!" she called, and opened the door to see Jamie standing there, grinning in the morning sunlight. He looked more handsome than ever, and she blurted out the first words that came to mind.

"I was just thinking about you." She was too happy to see him to worry about how her words sounded. "I've missed you."

"Same here." He brushed her cheek with his lips and she breathed in the smell of him. He'd become achingly familiar to her over the four months of their voyage.

He picked up a stand of her hair and rubbed it between his fingers. "I wondered what this would feel like," he said, his voice suddenly husky. Realizing what he had done, he abruptly dropped the hair. "You look good."

Sarah took his hand and pulled him inside. "Come in. We were just about to have some bacon sandwiches for breakfast. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"I'd love it," he said as he kneeled down to greet Missy. She had been observing them with the intensity only an eight-year-old can bring. "How are you, Missy? I missed you, too."

She threw herself into his arms. "Did you?" The baby cried somewhere in the back of the house and she turned serious. "We have a new baby. His name is Walter."

Jamie rose and looked at Sarah.

"It's true," she said. "The baby came last night."

"How is Anna?"

"She's fine." She glanced over her shoulder. "She'll be out in a moment."

A shadow passed over his eyes.

"What is it?" she asked.

He pulled the photograph out of his coat. "I told Charlie I was coming to see you and he asked me to bring this."

Sarah looked at the picture and some of the brightness went out of the day.

"Plus, the reporter from *Alta California* asked me to return this." He handed her the small package. "Some of Walter's personal items."

Sarah stared at the package, then took it from him; neither of them noticed that Melissa had disappeared. "I'll take it to Anna now," she said. "I think she'd prefer to be alone when I give her this." She gave him a weak smile. "Will you stay? I'd like to show you the house."

Sarah brought him a coffee and joined him a few minutes later at the table by the window. "What do you think?" she asked.

"It's amazing," he said, looking around. "It's as if it was made for you."

She told him of her plans to re-arrange the dining room, and her anticipated schedule for selling food.

“It sounds like you have it all planned out.” He turned to her. “Is this what you thought you’d be doing?”

She considered his question. “I didn’t have a firm idea of what I’d be doing,” she said finally. “But I’m willing to work at it and see what happens. What about you?”

“I’m the same, I guess. I don’t regret coming, at least not yet.” He looked around again. “I envy you this house.”

“There’s always your rancho. Maybe you’ll feel more positive when you see it.”

He nodded. “Maybe. Right now it’s a big unknown.”

They sat quietly for several moments, watching the parade of people on the street. Jamie slid his hand across the table, and intertwined his fingers with hers. Conflicting emotions raced through her body; sparks of desire battled with a calm sense of contentment. Was this what it would be like to be with a man she cared for? Excitement mixed with the sensation of coming home? If so, she could get used to it.

“Thank you, Jamie.” Neither of them had heard Anna enter the room. “It was good of you to bring Walter’s things.”

Jamie rose and took her hands in his. “Angus from the newspaper deserves the thanks. I’ll pass them on.”

She looked from one to the other. “I’m sorry I disturbed you, but I wanted to say thanks.”

Jamie rose. “That’s all right. I have to be going. I’ll see the rest of the house some other time.”

Anna drifted away and Sarah walked him to the front door. “Thanks for coming by.”

“I came to ask you out for dinner.” He glanced toward the back of the house. “If it’s okay to leave Anna alone, how about tonight? I could stop by around six and we can walk over to the hotel.”

“I’d like that.” She touched him briefly on the arm. “See you then.”

\* \* \*

“Perfect timing,” said Sarah as Jamie appeared at the door that evening.

He raised an eyebrow.

“It’s almost time for sunset.” She hooked her arm through his as they made their way toward Kearney. “Remember all those evenings on the ship?”

“I remember.” The look he gave her snatched her breath away. “I remember everything.”

She wondered if he could see the pulse pounding in her throat, and looked away, trying to regain her equilibrium. “What did you do today?”

He protected her with his body as a wagon rattled past. “I watched them set up the minting machine for a while, and when I realized that our chaps from Chicago had it in hand, I went out to drum up business.”

“Were you successful?”

“Yes. There’s quite a demand for five and ten dollar gold coins. Every merchant I spoke to is glad we’re setting up.” He smiled down at her. “What about you? What did you do?”

“I checked out what’s available in the stores on Montgomery.” She gave her head a quick shake. “The prices are unbelievable, but I suppose you know that.”

“So I’ve heard.” They walked in silence for a few moments. “You look different tonight, Sarah.”

“I do? In what way?”

He paused to gather his thoughts. He didn’t want to frighten her with the truth; that he’d been thinking of her all day.

“You look energized, and there’s a lightness in your step.”

“I’m feeling positive about the future, and Anna is adjusting to her new status surprisingly well. We even baked our first batch of bread today. And tomorrow we’re going to make our first pasties.”

“Speaking of food, would you rather go to Delmonico’s, or to a Chinese restaurant I heard about?”

“I’m feeling adventuresome. Let’s try the Chinese.” She paused across from a large building with a row of dormers. “That’s impressive. What is it?”

“That’s Parker House, the famous hotel. One of the most popular gambling locations in town.” He lowered his voice. “I understand that there are special rooms on the second floor. One is high stakes poker, where the men are said to bet thousands on one hand.”

She shot a speculative look at the building, and then her gaze fell to a Chilean man straining to push a hand cart through the muddy street. “As I said before, it’s a place of extremes.” She leaned into him. “I’ve had enough sightseeing. Let’s go to the restaurant.”

“It’s on a side street just up ahead, but it’s worth going a little out of our way. The food is supposed to be excellent.”

As they rounded a corner, they almost collided with two women. Sarah couldn’t be sure, but they looked like they were from the American south. She smiled, but they ignored her and gave their attention to Jamie, who flushed dark red at something they murmured to him. Then they continued walking, their laughter floating down the street.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and as he spoke, she realized that the women were prostitutes.

“It’s not your fault. You...” Her words were cut short by a cry of alarm. She and Jamie looked at each other, then ran back toward the sound. One of the women was sprawled in the mud, just off the wooden sidewalk, clutching her side. But it was her leg Sarah noticed, positioned at an unnatural angle. A few feet beyond, a man was trying to control his rearing horse, which was harnessed to a broken cart, now mired in the mud. Jamie and Sarah took in the scene in seconds, surmising correctly that a wheel had come off, hitting the woman as the cart passed.

“We have to help,” said Sarah, about to step off the sidewalk to help the moaning woman.

“No.” The second woman held up a hand. “Hiram doesn’t like anyone to interfere.”

Sarah couldn’t believe her ears. “Who?... I just want to help.”

Something softened in the other woman’s eyes, and for a moment Sarah thought she was going to give in, but she held her ground. “No, but thank you,” she said firmly. At that moment, Sarah saw beneath the garish makeup to the person beneath. She may be a prostitute, but she was another woman... and a frightened one, if Sarah didn’t miss her guess.

“Please,” the other woman said. “Leave now.”

Sarah reluctantly allowed Jamie to lead her away. “What will happen to her?” she asked, glancing back one last time.

“She’ll be cared for.” Jamie flushed again. “He makes money from her, so he’ll see she gets to the hospital.”

“He makes...?” She tried to hide her anger. She’d heard of prostitutes and their so-called protectors, but this was her first real-life experience. No matter what the woman did to survive, it angered her that she hadn’t been allowed to help.

They walked along in silence for a few moments until Jamie stopped at a single storey building. Beaded curtains marked it as a Chinese restaurant and he turned to her. “We don’t have to do this tonight, if you’re too upset.”

“I *am* upset, but I’m also hungry, and I’ve been looking forward to this.”

\* \* \*

Sarah ate the last few grains of rice and pushed the bowl away. “I’ve had Chinese food at home, but never anything that tasted quite this good.” She passed her teacup to Jamie, who filled it with fragrant tea.

“That’s because at home, the restaurants are serving what they think we want, whereas this is authentic.” He reached across the table and took her hand in what was becoming a familiar gesture. “Thank you for coming.”

“I enjoyed it.” She studied him in the dim light. Who was this man who was slowly capturing her heart? After the fiasco with Lewis, she’d thought it would be a long time before she even considered becoming involved, and yet here she was, falling for Jamie in a big way.

But he had made his intentions clear. He planned to work here for a few weeks, and then go to his ranch. He’d expressed ambivalence about working in his family’s bank; what if he fell in love with life on the ranch and never came back?

“Sarah,” he said, breaking into her thoughts. “This won’t be happening for a few more weeks, but would you like to accompany me to Sacramento when I go to check on my ranch?” A smile flirted with the corners of his mouth. “I’d like you to be there when I see it for the first time.”

She should say no, but she couldn’t form the words. The idea was too tempting, and she realized that she’d been hoping for just such an invitation all along.

“I...” a dozen questions popped into her head. “How would we get there?”

His eyes gleamed when he realized that she was considering his invitation. “That’s part of the fun. We’d go on the new side-paddle steamship, the *Senator*. It makes the trip up to Sacramento and Stockton three times a week.” A boyish grin lit up his face. “I’ve heard it’s luxurious, and the trip only takes ten hours. We can be up and back in three days.”

She lifted the teacup and drank slowly, trying to marshal her thoughts. “I’d like to come,” she said slowly.

“Excellent!”

She held up a hand. “But I need more time before I can give you a definite answer. Give me one more week, and I’ll have a much better idea of how things are working out.” She spread her hands in a helpless gesture. “I can’t very well leave Anna alone. Not yet.”

He nodded his agreement.

Sarah twirled her cup between her palms. The tea had cooled, but she scarcely noticed. “Thank you for the invitation, Jamie. It means a lot to me.”

He looked up and met her eyes. “It means a lot to me, too.” The server appeared at their table, breaking the sizzling band of tension that stretched between them. “And now I suppose we should leave. It’s almost dark out.”

They walked slowly back to Sarah's house, neither wanting the evening to end. Little traffic remained on the streets, and they were able to stroll side by side, their hands touching and finally clasping.

At the door of her house, he released her hand and she leaned toward him, missing his touch already.

"I'd like to see you again, soon." He cupped the side of her face and brushed his thumb against the softness of her cheek. "I've grown accustomed to seeing you every day, Sarah Howard. I don't want to let you go."

"Me, too," she said, and raised her lips.

A moan of delight rose from somewhere deep inside her as his mouth covered hers. His kiss was familiar and yet new, and she opened to him as his tongue probed between her lips, filling her with a hot thrill of anticipation.

"Sarah," he murmured, sliding his fingers into her hair and pulling her even closer.

"Jamie!" The door flew open, bathing them in soft candlelight. Caught up in their mutual passion, it took a moment for them to realize that Missy stood in the doorway. "You're kissing Sarah!"

Jamie answered the child, but didn't take his eyes from Sarah. "Yes, I am." A slow, intimate smile curved his lips, and then he forced himself to look away and pay attention to Missy. "That's what adults do when they like each other."

"You must *really* like her." She looked from one to the other.

"Missy!" Anna appeared behind her daughter. "You shouldn't be disturbing Sarah and Jamie." She adjusted her hold on Walter and pulled Missy inside. "I'm sorry."

Jamie spoke first. "It's all right." He reached for Sarah's hand and gave it a quick squeeze. "I was just leaving."

Neither of them noticed as Anna faded back into the house. "I'll see you soon," he said, his voice husky. "And thank you for tonight."

Sarah watched him as far as the street, where he turned and gave her a smile that sent delicious heat spreading through her limbs. And then he was gone. She turned with a sigh, still tingling from his kiss... and wanting more.

She locked the door and leaned against it, aware that something had changed tonight. It was becoming increasingly clear that Jamie wanted to deepen their romantic involvement... to make love to her. She closed her eyes and let her head fall back. The truth was, she wanted the same. Her entire body had come alive tonight; it pulsed with need, even now. But if she gave in, would she lose her chance for self-fulfilment... her chance to be independent?

Most women wouldn't think twice; they'd choose a man and security. But she wasn't most women. She'd worked hard once, only to have her dreams shattered, and in the interest of self-preservation, she couldn't allow that to happen again.

A frustrated sigh escaped her lips. Was Lucy right? Was it possible to have both? She didn't know, and the truth was, she wasn't ready to find out. Even now, her heart ached as she considered that she might possibly lose Jamie if she followed her own path. And yet she had to try... didn't she?

She pushed away from the door and wandered into the dining room. Anna had re-arranged the tables while she was out, separating them. The room looked more inviting already. There was no sound from beyond the kitchen, and she realized that Anna must have turned in. She needed to do the same... tomorrow was going to be a busy day.

\* \* \*

“I’m sorry about last night.” Anna and Sarah were making their first batch of pasties while Missy watched Walter in the dining room.

Sarah hesitated for a moment, then continued to roll out the pastry. “It’s okay.” She raised her eyes. “I think Jamie and I have to figure out where this is going.”

Anna raised an eyebrow. “Better now than later.”

Sarah sighed. “That’s what I thought. The thing is, I don’t want to give up my independence.”

“I can understand that.” Anna blinked back tears. “I also know that life is much easier with a good man.”

“I’m sorry, Anna. I shouldn’t complain.”

“No, it’s not that.” She seemed to drift off. “I envy you,” she said finally. “I think it’s wonderful that you want to be independent.” She made a gesture encompassing the kitchen, and the house. “And you have the means to make that happen.”

Sarah remained silent, sensing that Anna had more to add.

“Please don’t think poorly of me, what with Walter so recently gone, but some women just need a man in their lives, and this past couple of days, I’ve discovered that I’m one of them.”

“Of course I don’t think poorly of you.” Sarah studied the other woman openly. “I admire the fact that you know that about yourself. Whereas I…” She raised her hands in a gesture of futility. “I don’t know what I want.” She crimped together the edges on a tray full of pasties and slid them into the oven. “At least we’re in control of our own lives.”

“What do you mean?”

“I saw something last night that’s been bothering me.” She told Anna about the injured woman. “Imagine, being injured, but too afraid to accept help.” She pulled a bowl of apples across the work surface, and started peeling.

Anna took over rolling the pastry. “The hard part,” she said. “Is that those women are stuck here in San Francisco. Even if they wanted to get away, where are they going to go?”

Sarah nibbled on a piece of apple. “I hadn’t thought about it that way.” She started to peel again, her movements brisk. “You know, I think I’m going to go to the hospital and check on her. Charlie spoke about the hospital, and apparently the conditions are terrible.”

Anna’s eyes grew wide. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Sarah put down the paring knife with more force than necessary. “Anyway, unless I miss my guess, this Hiram character isn’t going to be sitting there holding her hand. He’ll never know I was there.”

Anna had seen her new friend in action often enough to know not to argue. “You’ll be careful, won’t you?” She started to fill the remaining pastry with fruit. “While you’re out, see if you can find some more sugar, okay?” She looked around. “And some milk would be wonderful. I know it’s scarce, but I love a drop of milk in my tea.”

Sarah grinned. “Only in San Francisco. Champagne, claret and brandy by the caseload, but no milk.” She pulled a shawl over her shoulders. “I’ll see what I can do.”

## Chapter Twelve

Appalled by the smell that greeted her, Sarah hesitated at an empty desk near the entrance to the hospital. A surly man came by, clutching a tray of bandages. She couldn't help but notice that his hands were filthy. She suppressed a shudder.

"Who are you looking for?" he asked, looking her up and down. She smelled brandy on his breath and tried not to react.

"I don't actually know her name," she said, stepping a bit farther into the building. "She was brought in last night with a broken leg."

His eyes narrowed as he looked at her. "You know her?"

His attitude made her determined to see the woman. "No, I don't know her," she snapped. "But she looked to be badly hurt, and I want to check on her."

The man shrugged and pointed to a long room, lined with pallets on either side. The lighting was poor, but even so she could see the thin, dirty blankets covering the patients, some of whom were lying in their own excrement. "I think the one you're looking for is down there, on the left. Behind the curtain." He disappeared up a set of stairs.

Overwhelmed by the misery on all sides, Sarah moved down the room. It was unbelievable to her that people who had come here so full of hope had been reduced to sleeping on the floor in such dire conditions.

Pale light from a narrow window fell on a pallet and she recognized the woman from last night. Dark eyes challenged her as she paused. The woman was not going to make this easy. "What do you want?" she said at last, her voice surprisingly strong.

"I came to see you," said Sarah, moving closer.

"Don't tell me you're one of those do-good preacher women."

"No, I'll leave that to someone who knows what they're doing." Sarah pointed to the blanket covering the woman's leg. "May I have a look?"

Doubt flickered across the woman's face. "Why?"

Sarah tried not to let her frustration show. "Because I have some medical training." She kneeled down and lowered her voice. "And I've heard that the care in here can be questionable." She lifted the blanket before the woman could respond. "Are you in pain?"

"What do you think?"

Sarah's lips twitched. "You're right. Foolish question."

The expression on the woman's face softened. "It's not as bad as it was."

Sarah looked into her eyes. "Are you on laudanum?"

"No. They offered, but I didn't want to be at anyone's mercy, if you know what I mean. This hospital isn't safe for a woman and that flimsy canvas divider doesn't offer much protection."

Sarah shook her head as she examined the woman's leg. "The dressing looks good, but you should come home with me. I don't know how anyone heals in here."

"What's your name?" The woman offered a tentative smile.

"Sarah."

“I’m Madeleine.” She studied Sarah’s face, as though trying to make up her mind about something. “Thank you for your offer, but my friend said she’d come to get me around noon.” Her gaze moved to the woman in the next bed. “If you want to help someone, you should help her. That’s Adaline.”

Sarah could see nothing of the woman. A frail form under a blanket and some dirty blonde hair was all that was visible.

“Is she a…” She couldn’t bring herself to say the word.

“... a prostitute? Yes.”

“You know her?”

Madeleine looked uncomfortable. “Nobody knows much about her background, but she’s been here about six weeks, working on her own.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

Madeleine looked away, then brought her gaze back to Sarah. “Hiram decided he wanted her in one of his cribs, but she was determined not to fall under his influence. She’d been drinking a lot and when Hiram discovered that, he started providing her with brandy, only she didn’t know it was laced with opium.”

“Laudanum,” murmured Sarah.

“His plan was to make her dependent on him, but when he found out that she’d somehow weaned herself off his brandy, he beat her.” She closed her eyes for a moment. “Someone dropped her off here last night.” She stopped abruptly. “I shouldn’t be telling you this. I could get into serious trouble.”

“I understand.” Sarah touched Madeleine gently near her bound leg. “Make sure you change the dressing, and keep it clean, all right?”

Tears welled up in Madeleine’s eyes and she nodded. “Thank you, Sarah.”

Sarah had already turned to the next pallet. “Adaline?” she said softly. “Can you hear me?”

A soft moan was her only answer. Sarah pulled back the threadbare blanket and revealed a face swollen beyond recognition. The woman’s right eye had turned purple, and a streak of blood was smeared from her nose across her cheek, where she’d made a feeble attempt to wipe it away. Sarah could only imagine what the rest of the woman’s body looked like.

“Adaline,” she said again, and the woman stirred. “I know you’re in pain, but do you think you can stand up?”

Adaline rolled slowly onto her back and lay there for a moment, gasping from the effort. When she’d caught her breath, she looked at Sarah through her functioning eye. “Why?” she croaked, through swollen lips.

“Because I’m going to take you out of here.”

Sarah thought she saw a flare of hope on the woman’s face, but it was hard to tell. “Why?” she asked again, displaying the ingrained caution of a woman who has had to protect herself.

“Because you need help.”

Adaline turned her head toward Madeleine, an unspoken question in her eyes.

“It’s all right,” said Madeleine. “Go.”

Adaline relaxed back onto the pallet and for a moment Sarah thought she’d passed out. “Thank you,” she said, her words barely audible. “I think I can stand up.”

“Good, but wait until I find a cart. I’ll be right back.”

\* \* \*

Spotting a man who had just delivered a load of lumber to the building next door, Sarah offered him money to take them to Sacramento Street. Supporting Adaline, she walked out the front door and into the cart, covering the woman with the hospital's blanket. Despite the odd moan of pain from beneath the blanket as the cart lurched over ruts in the road, few people paid them any attention as they made their way back to Sarah's house.

The driver's head came up as they approached the house. "Something smells good," he said, a hopeful smile on his face.

"We're setting up an eating house," she said, using the local expression. "We just made our first batch of meat pies today. If you'd like to wait, I'll get you one." She smiled at him for the first time. "And if you like it, I hope you tell your friends." She helped Adaline down while the driver held the horses. "I'll be right back."

The door opened before they reached it. Melissa's gaze darted back and forth between the horses and the strange apparition coming toward her. She backed up as Sarah guided Adaline into the house, and the blanket fell away.

"What is it..." Anna's mouth fell open. "Good Lord, Sarah, what's happened to her?"

"I'll explain in a minute, but this is Adaline and she'd going to be staying with us. Let's find somewhere comfortable for her to lie down."

Anna took over. "We'll put her in the back room. Missy and I moved upstairs this morning while you were gone."

"Thank you." Sarah picked up one of the meat pies. "I hope these are good. I promised one to the driver."

"They're great. Missy and I tested one." Anna exuded positive energy. "Give him an apple one as well."

Sarah presented the man with the beef, and he wasted no time. "Amazing," he said, spraying pastry flakes as he spoke through a mouthful. "These are going to be popular." He finished and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"And this one is made with apples." Sarah handed him the other pie. Anna had sprinkled it with sugar, and he made short work of it.

"Is that your little girl?" he asked, motioning to Missy, who was back in the door.

"No, she's the daughter of a friend."

The man's expression softened. "Do you mind if I give you a tip?"

"No, of course not. I've just arrived, and I'm still learning."

His voice was suddenly husky with emotion. "There are a lot of us family men here, and we miss our children." He cleared his throat. "Get the child to help you sell your pies, and you won't be able to make them fast enough."

"Wouldn't that be..." Sarah searched for the right word. "... exploitation?"

"Not really." He waved at Missy, who waved back. "You'd be doing us a favor. We don't get to see very many children. When we do see one, it reminds us of why we're here."

Sarah nodded. "I see what you mean."

"Well, I'd better go. Good luck with your eating house, ma'am."

"My name is Sarah."

"Albert," he called over his shoulder. Sarah walked slowly back to the house, absorbing his words. It *did* seem like exploitation, but if it helped their business, could it hurt? She'd need to find time to talk it over with Anna, but at the moment, Adaline needed her attention.

Anna met her in the hallway. "Sarah, that woman's been beaten within an inch of her life." She gave her head a confused shake. "I thought you said she had a broken leg."

Sarah looked blank for a moment. "Oh, that was Madeleine. She has a friend coming to get her today. This is Adaline."

Anna glanced over her shoulder. "She's a..."

"Yes. Is that a problem for you?"

"Heavens, no." Anna's back stiffened noticeably. "She needs our help. I filled the water reservoir in the stove while we were baking the pies, so we have lots of hot water. Would you like help cleaning her up?"

Sarah thought for a moment. "I think perhaps one person is all she wants seeing her injuries for now. She hasn't uttered a word since we left the hospital."

"I'll make her a cup of tea." Anna looked hopefully at Sarah. "You didn't find milk, by any chance?"

"Sorry, but I did get the sugar. It's in my bag."

"Oh well. Maybe next time."

\* \* \*

Sarah's anger grew as Adaline's injuries were revealed. The other woman sat quietly, staring into the distance as Sarah removed her soiled dress and undergarments. She made no sound as Sarah bathed her bruised body, even though she must have been in pain.

Sarah slipped one of her own night shifts over Adaline's head and lifted a section of dirty hair. "Shall I do your hair? If you could manage to lean over the washtub, I could wash it for you."

Tears rolled silently down Adaline's cheeks.

"I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?"

"No." Adaline looked directly at her for the first time. "It's just that nobody has been kind to me for a long time."

A knock on the door saved Sarah from tears. She opened it to reveal Anna with a cup of tea. Adaline's gaze went immediately to the teacup and she swallowed involuntarily. "Thank you," she said softly, accepting the cup and closing her one good eye as she drank. "That tastes wonderful." She handed the cup back to Anna with a shy smile and turned to Sarah. "I think I feel strong enough for that hair wash now."

\* \* \*

"When was the last time you ate?" asked Sarah once she had finished washing Adaline's hair. Long and luxurious, it was a soft ash blonde color, and Sarah could tell it had once been the other woman's pride and joy.

"I don't remember."

"Anna and I made two types of pies this morning. Meat and apple. We're planning to sell them eventually, and we'd welcome your opinion if you'd like to try them."

"Why are you doing this for me?" Adaline seemed genuinely puzzled.

Sarah lifted her shoulders. "Because you needed help. I have no hidden agenda, if that's what you're thinking." She lifted the bucket of dirty water. "I can bring you some more tea and a couple of pies, or if you prefer, you can join us in the front room. Anna has a new baby, and he should be awake about now."

## Chapter Thirteen

“How is she?” asked Anna when Sarah sat down.

“I think she’s going to be okay. I invited her to come out if she wants more tea, or something to eat.” She paused for a moment. “I was just thinking. Let’s call the pasties pies from now on. It’s so much easier than trying to explain about pasties.”

“The pie that fits in your hand,” said Anna, turning to Melissa. “How does that sound, Missy?”

“I like it.” Melissa turned to Sarah. “How long is that lady going to stay here?”

“I don’t know, Missy.” She exchanged a quick glance with Anna. “But she’s welcome to stay as long as she wants. She needs our help right now.”

Missy nodded. “What’s her name?”

“Adaline.” They all turned to see her standing in the doorway, Sarah’s shawl pulled over her shoulders. “But my friends call me Addie.”

“Then we’ll call you Addie too.” Missy smiled at her. “Would you like to meet Walter?”

Addie fussed over the new baby and declared the meat pie to be excellent. After washing it down with another cup of tea, her fatigue became obvious. “I’m sorry,” she said, fighting to stay awake. “But if you don’t mind, I’ll lie down now.” She gave Sarah a lop-sided smile and walked slowly back to the bedroom, wincing with every step.

The women remained silent for several long minutes after Addie left the room. Finally Anna spoke up. “I like her,” she said with an emphatic nod. “I hope she stays.”

“So do I,” Sarah agreed. “I wonder if she...” She was distracted by a man coming up to the door. Judging by his features and his dress, he was Chilean.

“Now what?” she murmured, opening the door.

“Miss Howard?”

“Yes, I’m Sarah Howard.”

“*Bueno.*” The man smiled, revealing dazzling white teeth. “I have delivery for you.”

“Are you sure? I’m not expecting anything.” She stepped outside and looked toward the street, where another man waited in a cart.

“Is from Mr. Jamie,” the man announced, motioning for the man in the cart to start unloading. They threw back a canvas cover, revealing a high-backed rocking chair and a comfortable-looking padded armchair. “You like, no?”

“Yes, I like.” It occurred to Sarah that she’d been too busy to think about Jamie. She showed the men where to position the items and they turned to leave. “Wait,” she said, looking for her bag. “I’ll pay you for the delivery.”

“No, *senorita.* Mr. Jamie paid.” The man’s gaze fell on the plate of pies.

“Then let me offer you one of these,” she said. “These are meat, and the ones with the sugar are apple. Take one of each.” She held out the plate to the second man. “You, too. Help yourself.”

Anna watched the men lick their fingers and gesture back and forth. "They liked them," she said, stating the obvious. "If we keep this up, pretty soon everyone in San Francisco will know about our pies." Her eyes danced with excitement. "I wonder if Addie knows how to cook."

Sarah turned thoughtful as she watched the men drive away. "We need to offer something besides the pies if we're going to be successful, although they can be our main product." She wandered into the kitchen and assessed their food supplies.

Anna nodded. "I've been thinking about it most of the day while I was working. We need something we can make in large batches. Something we can feed the men who want to sit down. The pies are basically beef stew inside a pastry shell. We can offer the stew with some of your bread, and fruit pies for a sweet. It's not fancy, but it tastes good and it's filling."

Sarah's gaze fell on one of the bags that had been delivered from *WindSprite*. "Have you ever made baked beans? I haven't, but it can't be too difficult. Pork is available. We could offer pork and beans and bread."

"And coffee." Anna's enthusiasm bubbled over. "Let's be known for our excellent coffee. We can even offer tea. It will remind the men of home."

Sarah shot a tentative look at Anna. "Speaking of which, the fellow who drove Addie and I home from the hospital said something interesting." She glanced into the dining area, where Missy was seated in the rocking chair, playing quietly with a doll. "He said that the men rarely get to interact with children, and that Melissa would be a real draw."

When Anna didn't respond, she wondered if she had insulted her friend. "Anna?" she said, moving to where the other woman couldn't avoid looking at her. "What do you think?"

"Sorry." Anna came back from wherever she'd been. "I was thinking about Walter. About what he would say." She looked at Sarah, her eyes surprisingly clear. "But he's not here, and I have to make my own decisions. I think the driver was right." She gave a short laugh, but Sarah could tell she was deadly serious. "This is about making a living; it's about our future, and if seeing Missy reminds the miners of home, and brings them to our door, then why not?" She lifted her chin a few degrees. "We can try it for a day or two, and if it makes us uncomfortable, then we get her to stay in the background while we're serving." She reached for her makeshift apron and tied it around her waist. "I'm going to get started on a batch of pies for tomorrow while you experiment with the baked beans."

\* \* \*

Jamie forced himself to listen to the man on the other side of the desk. The businessman had a highly inflated opinion of his own importance; he represented a lot of business for the minting machine, and he knew it. Having to deal with customers like this made him wish he'd never agreed to spearhead his company's expansion into California. Jamie's own business philosophy had always been simple: deal with companies who provide the best service. If this man couldn't see that his company offered an honest, superior service, then he wasn't sure he wanted his business.

Quite simply, he didn't want to be here. He wanted to be with Sarah... to see if the furniture had been delivered, and if she liked it. He smiled at the thought, and the man across the table misinterpreted his expression.

"Aha. So you agree." He knocked the ash from his cigar and stood up. "Wonderful. I look forward to working with you." Jamie shook the extended hand and left the office. It didn't matter

that he'd momentarily lost his concentration; nothing had changed in the terms of their agreement.

\* \* \*

His assistant David looked up as Jamie entered the office. "There you are," he said, searching among the papers on his desk. "Someone dropped off a letter for you."

Jamie stared uncomprehendingly at the envelope in his hand. San Francisco had been without mail for three months now, due to some sort of a squabble in Panama.

"It was delivered by a chap from New York," David said. "He just arrived today."

Jamie smiled when he recognized Aidan's handwriting. What was his friend up to now? Aidan was the last person he expected to hear from, but it would be good to hear his news. He opened the letter carefully and began to read.

Moments later, he sat down in his chair with a thud. This couldn't be happening. He carefully folded the letter, re-inserted it in the envelope, and stared blindly out the window. Why did this have to happen now, when his life was going along so well?

He fumbled for the letter, took out the single sheet and read it again, but the message had not changed. Aidan had penned the note hastily, just before a mutual acquaintance was due to board one of the new record-holding clippers. He had no doubt that a letter from his father was also en route, but was probably stuck somewhere in Panama with thousands of other pieces of mail.

Feeling trapped, he rose and strode out through the front office. "Where are you going?" asked his employee.

"Out." Jamie's reply was unusually brusque. He went down the shallow flight of steps to the wooden sidewalk and walked toward the bay. He would apologize to David later for his abrupt departure; right now he needed to be outside, away from the confines of his former life.

He was at the water before he realized it and paused to look out over the mass of ships. The number grew every day, bringing more men bent on making a quick fortune. But it wasn't that easy, as he had already discovered. He raked his fingers through his hair and groaned aloud, uncaring if someone heard him.

He took a deep calming breath and tried to make sense of Aidan's letter. According to his friend, Lettie had calmly announced that Jamie had gone ahead to establish a home for the two of them, and that she was to follow as soon as she could organize passage. He opened the letter again and checked, but there was no mention of the fact that she was on her way. A reprieve, but a small one, knowing Lettie.

He should have known that she was capable of something like this. According to Aidan, she'd blithely made the announcement at a society wedding, where both her family and his were in attendance, along with the most prominent businessmen in New York. Eyebrows may have been raised at the unconventional arrangement, but their marriage had been expected; society would forgive.

He laughed, but it was a harsh, mirthless sound. He could imagine her, tossing her head in that imperious manner, her laughter almost genuine as she informed the gathering that he was impatient for her to join him.

"I was there," Aidan's letter informed him. "I heard the speech, and believe me, if I hadn't known better, I would have believed her."

Jamie gritted his teeth. This wasn't what he wanted to hear. Did Letitia's father actually believe her? Would he let her come? The notion was ridiculous and unlikely. That's what made

it so brilliant. Because sadly, he knew that Letitia wasn't above telling her father that he'd compromised her... even though it was the farthest thing from the truth.

He had only himself to blame. Letitia Wilkerson always got what she wanted, and she'd made it clear that she wanted him. He'd been fooling himself to think that he'd escaped by simply telling her he didn't want to marry her.

The multitude of masts in the harbor were a visual representation of the way he felt in his heart. A dark, tangled mess that threatened to choke the life out of him.

He fumbled in his pocket for one of his cheroots and lit it with a trembling hand. The scent blew away on the breeze, and he was transported back to the deck of *WindSprite*, standing there with Sarah as the ship drew closer to California. His heart constricted at the thought of her. The way her gaze softened as she looked into his eyes, the way her hair whipped around her face in the ocean breeze. The way she cared about everyone she met. Even that prostitute last night had almost been the recipient of her caring nature.

He loved her. It was as simple as that. He had no idea when he'd come to that realization. Perhaps it had come about slowly, during that long voyage when he'd seen her every day, and come to know her fiercely independent nature.

Fear gripped his heart with a cold hand. How would Sarah respond if she heard about Letitia's claims? And yet how could she possibly know? In all likelihood, Letitia had only been posturing... putting on a show so that he would come back to refute what she said. He couldn't imagine her subjecting herself to the long, possibly dangerous voyage.

He exhaled slowly, allowing his thoughts to crystallize. Under no conditions would he marry Letitia. She may excel at manipulation, but her powers ended there. He studied the glowing end of his cigarillo and realized that a visit to Sarah wasn't a good idea tonight. She'd become too adept at sensing his emotions and he didn't want to give her any indication of how badly Aidan's letter had upset him.

He almost smiled as he visualized the future. He loved Sarah, and if she would have him, he would marry her... once she was ready.

\* \* \*

"So what do you think?" Sarah tried to read Anna's expression as she tasted the beans.

"I don't know." Anna tried another spoonful. "They lack something, but I don't know what it is."

"That's what I thought." Sarah admired the cooling pies. "At least we've got those right." She nibbled on what they'd started calling pastry bites. Anna had shown her how to cut the leftover pastry into strips, then twist it and sprinkle with cinnamon sugar before baking, making a tasty bite with a cup of tea. "When I think back on that first day we experimented... back on the ship." She stopped speaking. "Wait a minute. I'll bet Lucy has a recipe for baked beans. She can tell us what's missing."

"Of course! And here's another idea. We'll call them Boston baked beans. Our customers will love that."

Sarah chuckled. "Anna Taylor, are you sure you weren't a salesman in your former life?"

"Maybe I was," said Anna thoughtfully. "Maybe I was." She piled the pastry bites on a small plate and motioned toward the teapot warming on the stove. "Let's go into the other room and have a cup of tea."

“I’ll bring Walter,” offered Sarah, picking up the sleeping child. “And you can try out the rocking chair.”

\* \* \*

Anna watched her with knowing eyes. “I thought maybe we’d see Jamie today. It’s been more than twenty-four hours since the furniture was delivered.”

Sarah shrugged. She’d been thinking the same thing. “He must be busy,” she said unconvincingly. “I might stop by his office tomorrow on my way back from Lucy’s.”

“Did you plan to do that in the morning? I thought perhaps Missy and I would go out and see about selling pies around noon.” She looked down at Walter, who was sleeping quietly, lulled by the rocking of the chair. “You could take care of Walter, if you don’t mind. We won’t be gone long.”

“I could take care of him.” Neither of them had noticed Addie. The woman stood in the doorway to the kitchen, a lop-sided smile on her damaged face. “If you don’t mind, that is.”

Both women stared at her; Sarah recovered first. “Do you have any experience with babies?”

Addie crossed the room to stand behind Anna’s chair. “I took care of my younger sister when I was small, and then she had a baby of her own before we left to come out here.” Her voice was wistful as she looked down at the sleeping child. “I love children.” She looked from Sarah to Anna. “I just thought I could help you out.”

“Well, of course,” said Anna, finding her voice. “We’d appreciate that.”

“May I hold him?” The sleeves fell away from her arms as she reached for the child and Anna winced at the sight of the bruises.

“Yes, of course,” she said, transferring the sleeping baby.

“Thank you.” Addie’s eyes softened. She rocked the baby for a few moments and then handed him back. “I’m sure you must be wondering about my story.” She glanced at Missy, who had fallen asleep in the big chair beside Sarah. Her breath hitched in her throat, but she carried on. “And I think I owe you that much.”

Neither Sarah nor Anna spoke as Addie gathered her thoughts along with her resolve.

“I met Marcel in New Orleans when I was seventeen.” A faint smile curved her bruised lips. “He was a handsome, exciting man, and I fell deeply in love with him.” She paused for a moment, lost in thought. “I never did know how much older he was, but I think he was about twenty four when we met. Anyway, we became inseparable, and when he asked me to marry him a couple of years later, I was more than ready.” She slid a sideways glance at Sarah. “We’d been living together since we met, so it was just a formality.”

“He was a gambler on the river boats. A good one, too, or so I thought. But then one night he was caught cheating.” She looked at each woman in turn. “An unforgivable sin for a professional gambler. This sounds almost unbelievable as I tell it, but he jumped overboard. He’d told me several times that if anything ever happened to him, I was to get off at the next stop and wait for him. I did that, and he showed up two days later as if nothing had happened. His reputation was ruined so he couldn’t gamble any more on the river boats, but he made California sound like he’d chosen to come out here.” She spread her hands. “So we arrived late last year, when men were making so much money they couldn’t spend all of it.”

“Marcel heard about the gambling tents up the American, so that’s where we went.” Her eyes took on a faraway look. “By then, I knew he was cheating, but I couldn’t stop him. He got caught, of course, and he was shot.” She lowered her eyes. “It took him half a day to die.”

A cart rattling past on the street was the only sound for several moments. When Addie spoke again, her voice was little more than a whisper.

“I remember the first time.” She swallowed, and for a moment it seemed as though she wouldn’t continue. “The man who brought me back from the gold fields insisted that I pay him for the transport.” She blinked back tears.

“You don’t have to tell us this.” Sarah reached out, but Addie was pacing back and forth, caught up in her story.

Addie stopped, and her focus returned. “Yes, I do,” she said, her throat clogged with emotion. “Because it might help me to understand what happened.”

“After that,” she said, “it got easier.” She paused again. “Well, not easier, but I learned to close my mind to what was happening. And then I discovered that a little brandy helped. But soon one or two drinks of brandy wasn’t enough to numb me to what I’d become. Someone offered me some fortified brandy.” She let out a strangled laugh. “I was desperate enough to think that fortified brandy actually existed. It contained opium and I very nearly became addicted. Perhaps I was, in a small way, but I realized it just in time, and went back to the regular brandy.”

She stopped pacing and stood looking out the window. “Hiram had decided that he wanted me to work in one of his common brothels.”

“Common brothel?” Sarah interrupted. “As compared to what?”

Addie shrugged. “As compared to a High-End brothel, or one of the cribs.” She gave a shudder. “I would have ended up in one of the cribs, eventually. Most of the women working there are alcoholics or drug-dependent. Or both.”

“Anyway, he couldn’t convince me, and you see the results.” She raised a hand to her face. “Do I look terrible?”

Sarah nodded. “It’s pretty bad.”

Addie nodded. “Thank you for being honest.” Once again she looked from one woman to the other. “I know I can’t stay, but even so, thank you for everything you’ve done.”

Anna stopped rocking. “Are you going back to work... as... you know?”

“No, Anna. I’ll never return to that life, but I can’t imagine that you want me around here.”

Anna glanced at Sarah. “It’s Sarah’s house.”

Sarah looked back at her friend. “We’ve already decided that we’d like you to stay.”

Even with her distorted features, the look on Addie’s face was incredulous. “But what about your customers?”

“What about them?” challenged Sarah. “If they don’t like you being here, they can go somewhere else.”

“Are you sure?” Addie looked hopeful for the first time since she’d arrived.

Sarah rose and hugged her. “We’re both sure.” She pulled back and looked at the other woman. “So tell me, can you cook?”

\* \* \*

“You should have come to me straight off.” Lucy settled Sarah in her front room and gave her a cup of tea. “I make the best baked beans in Boston.”

“I believe you,” said Sarah with a laugh. “But are you willing to divulge your secret?”

Lucy listened to Sarah as she described how she had made the beans. “And how much mustard did you use?”

“Mustard?” Sarah frowned.

“Yes. Powdered mustard.” Lucy gave her head a shake. “Everybody knows that.”

“Evidently not.” Sarah was glad to hear that her friend had lost none of her directness. “But now that you mention it, that’s exactly what we’re missing.”

“Of course it is.” Lucy set down her cup and turned serious. “And now tell me about Anna. How is she coping?”

“Surprisingly well. She’s going out today to sell some pies. Addie is going to take care of Walter while she’s out.”

“Addie? Another of your strays?”

“In a way.” Sarah filled the older woman in on Addie’s story. “And when we get busy, we’ll be able to use the extra pair of hands. Everybody wins.”

“I hope so,” said Lucy. “I really hope so.”

\* \* \*

“I’ll take good care of him.” Addie stood in the doorway with Walter as Anna and Missy started out. Missy had insisted on wearing a pink bow in her hair, and held her mother’s hand as they walked the short distance to Portsmouth Square.

Anna recognized the Custom House from Sarah’s description, but the constant movement of people, animals and transport in the square made it difficult to concentrate. Perhaps this wasn’t the best place to sell her pies after all. She shifted the basket to her other hand.

“Hello ma’am.” A bearded man in a blue shirt and muddy boots lifted his hat to greet her. “You might want to walk around the edge of the square, ma’am. It’s a lot safer that way.” A cart rattled past, spitting up mud from its wheels.

“Oh, yes. I see.” Anna thanked him.

“Is this your young one?” The man smiled down at Missy. “I have a daughter at home, not much older than this young lady.”

“I’m eight,” announced Missy. “Would you like to buy a pie?”

“Is that what I smell?”

Anna folded back the linen cover, revealing the pies. “We have meat, and apple.”

“Those look right delicious. How much are they?”

Anna felt a flush creep up her cheeks. “You know, we hadn’t decided.” She looked into his kind eyes. “What would you say is a fair price?”

“Now let’s see.” He pretended to think. “I’d say two for a dollar.”

Anna tried not to gasp. “Isn’t that a lot?”

Several men were starting to move toward them, and he winked. “From two lovely ladies like yourselves, that sounds about right.”

“All right then.” She raised her voice. “Two for a dollar. Take your pick... meat or apple.”

“I’ll take four,” he said, putting a generous pinch of gold in her palm. “Better find a place to stash that, ma’am. I think you’re going to get busy.” He leaned over and put a few flakes in Missy’s pocket. “And some for you, as well.”

“Thank you,” said Missy, standing proudly beside her mother. “I hope you like them.”

They sold out within minutes, turning away several disappointed miners. “We’ll be back tomorrow,” called Anna. “Same time.”

“We’ll be here,” the men said good-naturedly. “Save some for us.”

## Chapter Fourteen

“We sold everything,” Anna reported on their return. Tired but triumphant, she and Missy emptied their pockets of gold.

“How much do you think we made?” asked Anna, poking at the dull gold with her finger.

“It looks like several ounces to me,” said Addie, caught up in their enthusiasm. “You’ll find that the miners are generous when they’re paying for something they want. Each one probably gave you a little more than necessary.” She passed the baby to Anna and rolled up her sleeves. “You’d better tell me what to do if you’re going to go back tomorrow.”

\* \* \*

The setting sun transformed the city as Sarah made her way back down the hill from Lucy’s. She smiled at the sight of simple canvas tents bathed in the pink glow, tucked in beside the town’s more permanent structures. She hadn’t been here that long, but she swore she could see an increase in the number of ships in the harbor. In some ways it felt like she’d been here forever, and yet deep down she doubted that she’d ever truly understand what drove these people to follow the siren call of the gold.

Her steps slowed as she neared Jamie’s office. She’d missed him these past couple of days, even though she hadn’t had much time to dwell on his absence. Standing outside, she debated the wisdom of going in to ask about him; he knew where she lived if he wanted to see her.

Her dilemma was solved when the door opened and he appeared at the top of the steps and grinned widely. “Sarah!” he said, coming down to street level. “I was just thinking about you. They were selling candles in the plaza today and I bought an extra crate for you. I’ll have them dropped off tomorrow.” He took her arm. “Would you like to go somewhere? We could have a quick supper.”

“No thanks. I’ve just come from visiting Lucy. That woman is enough to wear anyone out.” She slipped her arm through his. “But if you’re going my way, I could use a walk home. I have news.”

He listened to her story about Addie with growing concern. “Are you sure she’s safe from Hiram? I’ve heard he can be ruthless when his ‘girls’ get out of hand.”

“She never actually worked for him, so we don’t anticipate any problems.” She gave his arm a squeeze. “And Anna and Missy went out today to sell pies. I’m anxious to hear how they did.”

Candlelight flickered in the dining room as they walked up to the house. Jamie looked at Sarah and she shrugged. “I don’t know,” she said, in answer to his un-asked question.

They stepped inside to see three people seated at one of the tables. “Angus!” said Jamie, recognizing the reporter from *Alta California*. “What are you doing here?”

“Finishing some delicious stew.” Angus tore off a chunk of bread and wiped his plate. “You should try it.” He beamed at Anna. “These two ladies have been telling me about their success

selling pies today.” He pretended to glare at Missy. “But they sold everything, including all the apple pies, more’s the pity.”

“Can I tell him, Mommy?”

Sarah and Jamie looked at each other as Anna laughed. “Go ahead.”

“We made a real pie this afternoon.”

Angus frowned. “You mean the pies you sold were fake?”

“No, silly.” She turned as Addie brought a pie to the table. “Those are pies that fit in your hand. This is a real pie.”

“Now, Missy. Don’t be cheeky.” Her mother chided her gently. She turned to Angus. “Would you like some tea?”

“Yes, please. And a piece of that pie would go down a treat. Join us, Jamie.”

“I’ll get the tea.” Addie cleared the plates and returned to the kitchen with Sarah right behind her.

“What’s going on?” she asked as Addie moved competently around the kitchen. “What’s Angus doing here?”

Addie loaded cups and the teapot on a tray. “He heard about Anna and Missy selling pies at Portsmouth Square today and came to interview them.” She didn’t try to hide her smile. “It’s better than advertising. This place is going to be busy.” She headed back to the dining room.

“I think you’re right,” said Sarah, checking the pot of stew on the stove. She looked up to see Jamie in the doorway, watching her.

“It’s happening,” he said softly, moving toward her.

“What?” she asked breathlessly. “What’s happening?”

“Your business.” He gestured to the pies on the work table, lined up in preparation for sale tomorrow. “Your success.” A fleeting shadow crossed over his eyes. “Your independence.”

She moved closer and laid a hand on his broad chest. His heart pounded under her fingers and she raised them to his cheek. “You almost make that sound like a bad thing.”

He took her hand and brought it to his lips. “That wasn’t my intention,” he said, igniting a fire in her heart as he kissed her fingertips. “Although I’d hate to lose you.”

She stepped into him and his arm tightened around her waist, pulling her even closer. “The only way you’d lose me,” she said, “is if you hold on too tight.”

He loosened his grip and she laughed softly. “Not that way,” she said, searching his eyes. “I need to do this, Jamie, and I’d like to know you’re with me.”

“I can’t think of anywhere I’d rather be.” He lowered his head and paused, his lips not quite meeting hers. She smiled and rose to her toes, closing the distance.

He kissed her as if he’d never touched her before, slow and tentative, deepening as she molded her body to his. A jolt of desire unfurled deep inside as she inhaled his familiar smell and tasted his cigarillo. Her body ached for closer contact, but instead she pulled away and looked into his eyes, aware that something had just changed between them.

“I feel the same way,” she murmured, wondering how long it would be until they could be alone. “But we should probably join the others. Would you like something to eat?”

He nodded, and held the plates while she dished out the stew. She grabbed utensils and the remaining bread and they joined Anna and Angus at the table. Addie and Melissa had moved to the comfortable chairs with the sleeping Walter.

“I forgot to thank you for the furniture,” she said to Jamie. “As you can see, we’re all enjoying it.”

“I know of one more piece. I’ll have it sent tomorrow when I have the candles delivered. They call it a love seat, and it’s large enough for two people.”

Angus grinned. “You bought candles in the plaza today? So did I.”

“So that explains it.” Sarah’s eyes glowed in the flickering light. “Thank you both.”

“That reminds me,” said Anna. “Did you order firewood?”

“No.” Sarah gave her a curious look. “Why?”

“Addie says a fellow came by after we were gone and piled some firewood in the lean-to out back. She offered to pay, but he insisted there was no charge. Said you’d given him some pies when he dropped you off after the hospital.”

Addie looked up. “We can have a small fire in here when it starts to get cool in the evenings.”

Sarah briefly touched her heart. “That was nice of him,” she said, exchanging a quick glance with Jamie. “It sounds like we really are on our way.”

\* \* \*

“It was nice to come home tonight and find people in the dining room.” Sarah and Addie were cleaning up in the kitchen. The men had left together, and Anna and Missy were upstairs, getting ready for bed.

“Yes, it was.” Addie offered a shy smile. “Did you notice how well Angus and Anna were getting along?”

“No, I...” Sarah sighed. “I tend not to notice much when Jamie is around.”

“I can understand why.” Addie lined the cutlery up in the bin. “But seriously. Anna and Angus really seemed taken with each other.”

Sarah looked at the other woman. “Don’t judge her too harshly.”

“Oh, no. I wasn’t suggesting...”

Sarah continued speaking. “There’s no doubt that she loved her husband, but she had been separated from him for something like six months. I think it would be good for her if she and Angus became friends.” She smiled to soften her words. “How did he respond to Missy and the baby?”

“He seemed quite taken with both of them. It’s just that...” she hesitated. “There are so few women here. The men’s emotions... their needs... are right at the surface. They can come on strong sometimes.”

Sarah flushed. “I see what you mean, although my impression of Angus was that he’s a sincere young man. We’ll just have to watch out for her, won’t we?”

“Yes,” said Addie, her relief evident on her face. “We will.”

\* \* \*

Jamie’s predictions came true in the next couple of weeks. The women were having a difficult time keeping up with the demand for the pies, and each day, their eating house gained popularity.

“I hardly ever get to see you anymore.” He brushed a wisp of hair away from Sarah’s forehead and dropped a quick kiss on her lips. “But I’m proud of you.”

“Thank you.” Sarah had hired two more women to help at the beginning of the week, but she was still tired. “Caroline and Lizzie have made a big difference in our work load. As a matter of

fact, I'm going to take a short break and sell pies with Missy in the plaza tomorrow. I like to hear what the customers have to say."

Jamie and Angus had slipped into the habit of having supper with them a few times a week after the tent cleared out. She walked outside with him now and shivered in the cool air.

"Don't catch cold." He wrapped her in his arms and she laid her head against his chest, relaxing for the first time that day. When she didn't respond, he pulled back and looked into her eyes. "What is it?" he asked.

"I think it's time for a visit to your ranch," she said, looking up at him. "I need a real break, and we need some time alone." She gave a short little laugh. "That's certainly not possible around here."

"Anytime you're ready," he said, kissing her with the promise of more to come. "Just let me know."

"When is the next steamer?" she asked, eager to set the date before she lost her nerve.

"Friday," he said, with a smile that curled her toes. "I've been keeping track just for this very moment."

"Then Friday it is." She raised her lips for one last kiss. "I can hardly wait."

\* \* \*

"Aunty Sarah." Missy had started calling her Aunty sometime in the past couple of weeks, and she found she liked it. "We should get a cart like those people." They were in Portsmouth Square, and Missy pointed to a small hand cart. "Then we could bring more pies."

"You're right," she said, handing four pies to a miner and accepting his gold. "Let's look into that."

A grim-faced woman was next in line. "May I help you?" Sarah wondered why the woman would be buying pre-cooked food, then noticed that she was cradling her left arm and hand, which was crudely bandaged.

"Four pies," she said. "All meat."

Sarah ignored the rude tone; the woman was obviously in pain. "Certainly," she said, wrapping the pies in a piece of the newsprint she'd purchased from Alta California. "Please excuse me, but your arm looks sore." She looked up at the line of customers behind the woman. "I'm going to be another five or ten minutes here, but if you'd like to come home with me, I'll look at it for you." She spoke firmly. "It looks like it might be infected."

"Go home with you?" The woman's voice rose as she turned away. "Well, I never."

Sarah looked after her for a moment, puzzled, then continued to serve the next in line.

"Aunty Sarah, why was that woman mad at us?" Missy held her hand as they made their way back home.

"I don't know, Missy. Maybe her arm was hurting." She turned a corner and was surprised to see the woman standing on the side of the street, waiting for them. She bit back a sharp retort, then approached and waited for her to speak.

"I can't afford to pay," she said, her gaze darting from Sarah to Missy, then back to Sarah. "I got burned and I can't work, can I?"

Surprised at the woman's continued belligerence, Sarah struggled to keep an even tone. "No, of course not, but I don't charge anything to help people." She motioned ahead. "That's our house just up ahead. Please come in and let me have a look at that arm."

Missy ran ahead into the house and the woman turned to Sarah. "I must say, you don't look like a soiled dove."

"Oh." The reason for the woman's stropy attitude became clear. "That's because I'm not." She opened the door and led the woman into the house. "Why would you think that?"

She looked around. "Because Hiram's put the word out that you're running a brothel here, and not to buy your food."

Sarah settled the woman at one of the tables, then gave a soft snort of derision. "You can see for yourself that's clearly not the case. Frankly, there's no time for anything else. We have all we can do to keep up with demand for the food." She lifted the woman's arm and started to remove the soiled bandage. "I'll show you the kitchen later, if you like."

She examined the burn. "This is about to turn septic; I'm so glad you decided to let me look at it." She looked into the other woman's eyes. "I need to clean it up, but it's going to hurt. Would you like me to give you some laudanum?"

A flicker of fear shadowed the other woman's eyes and Sarah laid a comforting hand on her good arm. "I understand. No laudanum. I'll try to be as gentle as possible."

The woman was made of stern stuff. Sarah worked on the arm for twenty minutes before she was satisfied. She covered the wound with salve and bandaged it tenderly.

"Thank you," said the woman, closing her eyes for a moment and sitting back. "I'm sorry I listened to the rumors."

Sarah gathered up her medical kit. "Think nothing of it. Can you stay for a cup of tea?"

The woman nodded. "I'd like that."

Sarah brought a tea tray and sank down with a tired sigh. "It's been a long day," she said. "But I'm going to Sacramento tomorrow for a short trip. Will you come back and see me in four days? I'd like to check the burn and change the dressing."

Addie appeared with a plate of pastry bites and the woman narrowed her eyes. "That's the one," she said, turning to Sarah. "Isn't it?"

"Sit down, Addie." Sarah turned to the woman. "I suppose I should know your name."

"Ellie."

"Well, I'm Sarah, and this is Addie." She paused. "Adaline." She waited to see if Ellie would get up and leave. Instead, she reached for a pastry, and Sarah continued. "The reason Hiram started those rumors is that he tried to force Addie to work for him, and when she refused, he beat her." She looked fondly at the woman who had become not only a good friend, but indispensable. "It's taken three weeks just for the bruises to fade."

Addie covered her mouth with long, elegant fingers. "Have there been rumors?" Her expressive gaze moved fearfully to Sarah. "What are people saying?"

Sarah almost wished that the woman hadn't come, but she supposed they would have heard the rumors eventually. "Hiram is putting it about that we're running a brothel."

Ellie reached for another pastry and washed it down with tea. "I wouldn't worry," she said, slanting a sideways look at Addie. "He's been saying these things for about a week now, and nobody seems to pay him much attention."

Addie opened her mouth to speak, but Sarah held up a hand. "No," she said forcefully. "Don't even think about it." She leaned forward. "We're family, remember?"

Addie's eyes shone with tears of gratitude. "Right," she said, pulling out a man's pocket watch which had been left as payment last week. She ran the kitchen with something approaching military precision and she checked it now. "One hour until the men start arriving for

supper.” She directed a faint smile toward Ellie. “Nice to meet you, Ellie.” She returned to the kitchen, her head held high.

Ellie turned thoughtful as she watched her retreat. “You’re a good woman, Sarah. I hope you know that.” She rose. “I have to go. My children will wonder where I am.”

“Just a moment.” Sarah ran into the kitchen and came back with four fruit pies. “Here. My gift to you. Enjoy.”

Ellie looked longingly at the pies, and for a moment Sarah thought she was going to refuse. “I’ll take two,” she said finally. “For the children, you understand.”

“How old are they?” asked Sarah, walking her to the door.

“Eight and ten. A girl and a boy.”

“Bring them with you when you come back. They can have a tea party with Missy.”

“All right. Ellie’s face softened and she smiled for the first time. “We’ll do that. In the meantime, have a good trip.”

## Chapter Fifteen

“I had no idea it would be this luxurious.” Sarah peered through a window into one of the public rooms. “But we’ll have the whole voyage to explore. For now, I’d enjoy standing here on deck as we get underway.”

Jamie smiled at her enthusiasm. He didn’t really care what they did, as long as she was with him. Even on *WindSprite*, they’d never been truly alone, and he intended to enjoy all ten hours with the woman he’d fallen in love with.

“I got us a cabin,” he said tentatively. “We don’t have to use it, but it’s there if you want to freshen up or rest along the way.”

“I just might,” she said, reaching for his arm as the steamship got underway. They paused at the rail as the paddlewheel began to pick up speed, water spilling from the paddles in a silver stream. “I had quite a day yesterday.”

“You can tell me while we walk around the promenade deck.” He pulled her to his side. “What happened?”

She related what Ellie said, and watched the small muscle in his jaw that flexed when he was angry. “I’m surprised you’re not steaming,” he said finally.

“I was,” she admitted, “but that only lasted for a moment. As Ellie pointed out, it hasn’t done us any harm. Sometimes I think there’s no limit to the number of meat pies we could sell, and we’ve been working on offering a wider variety for the evening meal. Beef stew and beans with pork is standard fare. We’re thinking of adding fish chowder since there seems to be a decent supply of fish.” She stopped and looked up at him. “It’s all your fault, you know.”

“Me?” He placed a hand on his chest in mock horror. “Now what?”

“You’re the one who told me about the Cornish pasties.” Her eyes took on a faraway look. “Remember that day? It seems like such a long time ago.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” The steamer shuddered as they rounded a corner. “And now we’re off to see my ranch, and I have no idea what to expect.” He opened a heavy exterior door. “Let’s go inside and have some coffee and a bite to eat. Especially since someone else is doing all the work.”

Sarah relaxed and took in the elegant surroundings. Gas lights flickered in crystal wall sconces, even though the day outside was bright. She ran her fingers lightly over the damask tablecloth and smiled appreciatively as their coffee was served in fine porcelain cups.

“Remind you of home?” Jamie murmured, studying her reaction as he raised his coffee cup to his lips.

“In a way,” she said, her gaze darting around to take in the other passengers. “But it seems decadent, somehow. I suppose when compared to the way we live in San Francisco, it is.”

She tilted her head to one side. “But let’s leave that behind for now. Tell me what you know about your ranch.”

He settled back into his chair and gave it some thought. "I know it's at least fifty years old, and that my grandparents loved living there. They raised two daughters there..." He paused. "I told you that, I think."

She nodded.

"As far as I know, they enjoyed their childhood. My grandfather talked about horses when he came to New York, and I pestered my father for riding lessons until he finally gave in." He gave her a sheepish smile. "I wanted to be ready when I went to visit Grandfather."

"But you never did." It was a statement.

"No." He shrugged. "But it was good of my father to indulge me. As for how the ranch supports itself, I don't know the details. My grandfather had a trusted foreman – Mexican of course – who has stayed on. I expect he'll fill me in." He turned thoughtful. "He'll probably want to know what I intend to do with the place, since his own future is at stake."

"That's quite a decision. The ranch plus this man's livelihood. What's his name?"

Jamie dragged himself back to the present. "Diego. He speaks English well enough, and I understand that his wife's name is Teresa. When I first got to San Francisco, I wrote to tell him that I'd be arriving within the month, and he gave me instructions on how to get there. He says it's about half an hour from the wharf and he told me where to hire a horse and buggy. I've been looking forward to this ever since we sailed into San Francisco harbor."

Sarah laid a hand on his arm. "I'm sorry I asked you to wait."

"Don't be sorry," he said, looking into her eyes. He brushed the backs of his fingers against her cheek, the gesture at once tender and intimate. "Even before we got here, I knew I wanted you with me when I see it for the first time."

Sarah's heart felt like it would leap out of her chest. "Thank you, Jamie. I don't know what else to say."

"You've said it all just by being here." He covered her hand with his, and they sat peacefully for several moments, content with each other's company.

Sarah's head jerked upright as she caught herself nodding off. "I'm sorry," she said, stifling a yawn, "but maybe I'll make use of that cabin and rest for a while. What time will we get there?"

"It'll be late afternoon when we dock. By the time we arrange for the buggy and drive to the ranch, the sun should be almost setting. A beautiful time of day."

"Then I'll want to appreciate it." They rose and he walked her to their cabin. "Where will you be?" she asked. "I hate to leave you."

"Don't worry about me. I'll either be out here or in the grand salon. Rest well."

Sarah scarcely noticed the luxuriously appointed cabin. The moment she put her head down she fell into a much-needed sleep.

The whistle woke her some time later and she lay there, rocked by the movement of the boat. Judging by the light slanting through the window, she had slept for several hours. She relaxed for a moment longer, recapturing the warm glow she'd felt at Jamie's words. He'd made it clear that he wanted her with him, confirming that she'd been right to make the trip. She rose and checked her appearance in the ornate mirror over the dressing table. Satisfied that she looked respectable, she stepped outside.

"Hello there." Jamie stood outside the cabin door on the promenade, lounging casually against a support pillar. He was smoking one of his cigarillos, and the smoke streamed away in a lazy trail as the paddle wheeler cut through the water. He was so handsome her heart ached.

She sauntered up to him, swishing her skirt like a femme fatale. "For a moment there, you looked just like I've always imagined a riverboat gambler would look."

“How is that?” he asked, adjusting to her playful mood.

“Handsome,” she said, her breath catching in her throat. “And decidedly dangerous.”

He looked both ways, but they were alone. “I like the handsome part,” he said, sweeping her into his arms for a brief kiss. “But I’d never want you to look on me as dangerous.”

“Oh, you’re dangerous,” she murmured. “If only you knew how much.”

“In that case...” he kissed her again, and she clung to him like some helpless female. She hated to admit it, but it felt good.

The boat’s whistle blew again and they both winced.

“It’s hard to get away from,” he said, moving her along the promenade. “Let’s go inside. We only have another hour to go.”

“So soon?” she asked. “I’d hoped to see the gambling salon.”

“Why Mrs. Howard,” he said with a devilish grin. “Does that mean the lady wants to try her luck?”

“Oh, no,” she said with a slight shiver. “It’s just that I’ve never been in a gambling salon before, and since this is a day of firsts...” She looked at him. “Indulge me?”

“Why not?” he took one last draw on his cigarillo and tossed it into the river. “Come with me.”

\* \* \*

Several men looked up when they entered the salon, dismissing them as potential players with one glance. At a table set off to the side of the room, a group of men studied each other through a fog of smoke, their eyes red as though they’d been playing for a long time.

“What are they playing?” she whispered, drawing closer to Jamie. The tension in the room was palpable.

“Five card draw,” he said, his breath disturbing the loose hair by her ear. As he spoke, a man threw down his cards and stood up, knocking his chair over backwards.

“Evidently not his best day,” he murmured in her ear.

The dealer shuffled the cards, his hands deft. “Straight draw,” he announced. “Two draws of two.” He spun the cards out to the remaining players.

The hair on the back of Sarah’s neck stood up as she watched the game progress, and she wasn’t sure if it was because Jamie was standing so close, or the excitement of the game.

“Seen enough?” he asked after several hands.

She nodded, aware that nobody noticed them leave as they slipped out the door.

“It’s so intense,” she said, still whispering. “Did you ever play?”

Jamie let out a breath of air. “Once,” he said with a wry grin. “When I was young and foolish. I made the mistake of thinking that I could hold my own with some much older players. I suppose most young bucks do something similar at one time or another, but I was sure I was different.” He looked down at her. “Believe me, I’m not. I was telegraphing my hands so everyone at the table could see.” He chuckled. “I might as well have been holding my cards backwards.”

“What do you mean?”

He took a breath. “It’s a rare poker player who doesn’t exhibit some sort of a sign when he has a good hand... or a bad hand, for that matter. Apparently mine was rolling my cigarillo from one side of my mouth to the other when I had a good hand.”

She laughed. “I think even I would have seen that.”

“Exactly. As did everyone at the table. I haven’t gambled since.”

“Just as well,” she said, slipping her hand through his arm again. “Did I just feel the boat slow down? I think we’ve getting close.”

The paddle wheeler eased up to the dock and was tied fast within minutes. With three trips a week, it was clear the crew had plenty of practice. They were soon down on the dock amid the noisy throng. Men started unloading the steamer right away, and Sarah noted the stacks of goods ready to be shipped in the other direction.

“I didn’t realize it was such a thriving city,” she said after they’d broken through the crowd.

Jamie agreed. “I’d heard it was like this, but it’s impressive to see it. Sam Brannan had his first store here, and he’s a smart man.” He led her away from the wharf and down a side street to a livery stable. He chatted with the owner for a few moments and they were on their way.

Golden light bathed the countryside as they left the city behind. Even the horse seemed to shake off the tumult of the city, and settled into a comfortable gait.

“Another thing I didn’t realize,” she said, trying to take in everything around her. “As we get farther away from the river, it’s dry, but it’s also beautiful.”

Jamie nodded. “Keep in mind it’s October.” He gazed into the distance. “I would imagine those hills are green in the spring. And I understand a small river winds through the ranch. My grandfather knew what he was doing.”

The horse slowed as they crested a rise, and Sarah’s fingers dug into Jamie’s arm as she gasped with pleasure. “It’s beautiful,” she murmured, noting the way the setting sun sent long fingers of shadow across the idyllic landscape. She glanced at Jamie, and the expression on his face mirrored her enthusiasm.

The main house, partly obscured by a large tree in the center of the courtyard, glowed with an inviting warmth that beckoned them closer. Built of adobe, it had been well maintained, and as they started forward again, Sarah made out a large garden beyond the house, and several slightly smaller adobe structures partially hidden among the trees.

Sarah was grateful for the silence that greeted them as they pulled up to the front entrance. It gave her time to take in the carefully tended flower beds on either side of the front entrance, and the chickens scratching industriously in the side yard. Contentment washed over her, and for a moment she felt like she’d arrived home after a long voyage.

“Whoa.” Jamie pulled up under the tree and stepped down. “I’ll see if I can find…”

“*Hola! Señor Thompson.*”

A short, dark man hurried toward them, a broad smile on his face.

“You must be Diego.” Jamie greeted him warmly, his hand extended.

“Si.” A brief frown furrowed Diego’s brow, then he smiled again. “Excuse me, *Señor*, but you look very much like your grandfather.”

“I do?” No-one had ever told Jamie that before. “Thank you, but please call me Jamie.”

“Your grandfather was a good man.” He smiled at Sarah. “Welcome to *Rancho Agua Dulce.*”

“And please call me Sarah,” she said. “Sweetwater. What a lovely name.”

“*Señor Thompson* named it.” Diego shrugged, and Sarah wondered if perhaps the Mexican considered it a fanciful name.

Jamie came around to her side of the buggy and offered his hand. “You know Spanish?”

“Only a few words.” She offered the Mexican an easy smile. “Thank you, Diego. I’m glad to be here.”

The foreman led them into the house and was quick to explain that his wife Teresa had maintained it the same as she had during the last few years of Jamie’s grandfather’s life. Simple

leather chairs clustered around an open fireplace in the living room, and brightly colored throws were tossed over the backs of comfortably padded chairs. A large, well-oiled slab of wood served as a dining table, and Sarah allowed her imagination to run rampant, imagining herself and Jamie surrounded by several children.

She dragged herself back to reality as Diego led them through to the kitchen. “Senora Thompson loved to look out over the vegetable gardens,” Diego was saying, gesturing out to the large cultivated patch of land visible beside one of the outbuildings. “She was a good gardener. She taught Teresa how to grow flowers and Teresa taught her how to dry beans.”

Sarah laughed. “A fair trade.”

He shot her a bewildered look. “That’s what Senora Thompson used to say.”

“Is that corn?” Jamie’s eyes lit up. “I love fresh corn.”

“Si, *senor*. That corn is for eating. The corn for the animals is out in the field.”

“There’s more?” Jamie looked from Diego to Sarah.

“Yes, *senor*. I can show you now, if you like, but Teresa has your meal ready.” He paused. “Chicken and roasted potatoes, the way Mr. Thompson liked them, but she can make some corn as well.”

Sarah intervened. “We’d enjoy that, Diego, but we don’t expect Teresa to cook for us.” She gave him a curious look. “How did she know we were coming?”

The foreman lifted his shoulders. “I don’t know. She just knows these things. She also said you would be tired after travelling all day.” He turned to Jamie. “I can show you the animals tomorrow, if you like.”

The scent of roasted chicken wafted across the compound and Jamie’s mouth started to water. “That will be fine,” he said, clapping the other man on the shoulder. “Now let’s go pick some of that corn.”

Sarah watched Jamie stride across the compound, bending his head to listen to Diego as they headed toward the corn. At this time of year even a late harvest corn would be far beyond its prime, but somehow she didn’t think that mattered to Jamie. She’d noticed a change in him the moment they drove onto the property. In the space of a few moments, he’d relaxed, the tension that had been building since he arrived in San Francisco magically falling away.

He was in his element here, she realized, and a shiver of foreboding tiptoed down her spine. Would she lose him to the ranch? Would he want to stay? He disappeared from view, but she continued to stare out the window, deep in thought. She’d known from the very beginning that he’d inherited this property, but until now it hadn’t seemed real... it hadn’t been imprinted on her mind. Now that she’d seen the beauty of the ranch, and been enveloped by its peaceful atmosphere, she would understand if Jamie wanted to live here. After all, he had a right to his dreams, in the same way she had a right to hers.

And if their dreams took them in separate directions? She shuddered, finding that she didn’t want to think about that. Jamie came into sight again, holding up three ears of corn as though he’d just won first prize at the fall fair. For now, this was the only dream she needed. The rest would sort itself out later.

## Chapter Sixteen

“Is this heaven?” Jamie pushed his plate away. “If not, don’t tell me. I don’t want to break the spell.” He reached for his cigarillos and raised his eyebrows, silently asking for permission.

Sarah smiled her approval. “But let’s go outside,” she said, blowing out the candles on the candelabra, leaving just one flickering flame. “I saw some comfortable looking leather chairs out there.”

Jamie got to his feet and patted his stomach, groaning with pleasure. “Roast chicken, roast potatoes and corn.” He stopped to light his cigarillo. “And a good smoke. Yes, I really am in heaven.”

“I could make you a cup of tea. I put a pot of water on the back of the stove.”

“They have tea?” He sounded surprised.

“No, I brought it with me.” Sarah started to rise, but he restrained her with a hand on her arm. “Not tonight, Sarah.” His fingers trailed down her arm and intertwined with hers. They sat silently for several minutes, watching the fireflies danced across the yard. “What do you think?” he asked finally, giving her hand a gentle squeeze.

“It’s...” she struggled to find the right words. “It’s so much more than I dreamed it would be.” A sigh escaped her lips, but she didn’t care. “It’s perfect, and I haven’t seen it all yet.”

“I’m glad you feel that way.” He released her hand and released a lazy stream of smoke up into the leaves of the tree. He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, he was smiling. “I feel like I’ve come home.”

“Maybe you have.” He didn’t respond, so she carried on. “I don’t mean that in a spiritual sense, but maybe you’ve finally found where you belong.”

He stared, unseeing, out into the darkness. “I think you’re right,” he said finally. “Odd, isn’t it? I’ve only just arrived and I feel as though my entire life is about to change.”

“In a good way?” she asked, her heart in her throat.

“Definitely,” he said, rising and offering his hand. “I’ve never been so sure of anything in my life.”

He pulled her close. “I’m tired of pretending, Sarah. I’ve wanted you from the moment I first saw you, standing there on the deck of *WindSprite*.” Their breaths mingled for a moment before his mouth settled over hers. A soft whimper escaped her lips as she felt the evidence of his desire, rampant and demanding attention.

“I wanted you, too,” she said, gazing up into his eyes. “Every time you touched me. Every time you brushed the hair back from my face. I wanted to be in your arms, in your bed.”

He sucked in a sharp breath.

“Make love to me, Jamie. Let’s not waste another day.”

He picked her up and carried her to the bedroom. “Are you sure, Sarah?” He paused outside the door. “Because once we go through that door, you’re mine.”

“I’m already yours,” she murmured, burying her face in his neck. “Love me, Jamie.”

\* \* \*

Sarah awoke with Jamie's name on her lips. They had made love several times during the night, even though it had been her first time. One started, she couldn't get enough of him, and assured him that she was ready for more.

She tried to stretch and found that she couldn't move; he'd thrown a leg over hers, effectively pinning her to the bed. A large hand cupped her breast, and as she closed her eyes, recalling everything they'd done last night. They'd explored each other's bodies boldly, as though needing to make up for lost time; as though these precious hours might be snatched away.

Relaxing back into the bed, she waited to be engulfed by shame, but it eluded her. She turned and found him watching her, his expression unreadable. Was he disgusted by her eager responses last night? Did he think less of her for rising up to meet him, matching his ardor with a passion of her own? He hadn't at the time, but now, in the clear light of day, would he reject her as used goods?

The truth was, no matter what his reaction this morning, it had been worth it. She'd waited her entire life to be loved the way he'd loved her last night, taking her to the heights of passion, showing her the stars and then calling her name as he joined her in the ultimate pleasure.

Her insecurities must have been writ large on her face, because with one strong arm he pulled her toward him, moulding her to his body. "Sarah, my love" he said, pushing back her hair and planting a series of kisses on her forehead, her nose, and finally her lips, "thank you for last night." His fingertips brushed her cheek, where his beard had abraded her skin. "I'll remember it for the rest of my life."

She snuggled up against him, wishing she could remain there all day. "What time is it, do you think?"

"I don't know, but I heard that damned rooster several hours ago." He stretched lazily, and she admired the way his muscles flexed under taut skin. "I suppose we should get up." He lifted the sheet and looked down at her body, his eyes heavy with desire. "Although something tells me Diego isn't going anywhere."

Sometime later, she joined him in the kitchen, tying back her wet hair. "Did you see that tiled enclosure near the bedroom? It's rigged up as a shower, and the water drains away somewhere."

"Is that what I heard?" He handed her a cup of coffee. "Let me know next time you use it, and I'll join you."

She sipped the coffee appreciatively. "Have you seen Diego yet?"

He ducked his head and looked out the window. "I haven't spoken to him yet, but I've seen him out in the yard."

"He'll wonder what we've been up to." Sarah flushed.

"Oh, I'm sure he knows."

"Jamie!"

He tilted up her chin and looked into her eyes. "It's okay, Sarah. No more wasted time, remember?"

She nodded, not quite convinced. "It's a big adjustment, that's all."

"I understand." He took her hand. "Come on. Let's go and see the ranch."

\* \* \*

Jamie kept a close eye on Sarah as they rode up into the hills. She had taken riding lessons as a youngster and she soon found her seat, freeing him to return his attention to Diego.

“Is this the entire ranch?” asked Jamie, shading his eyes and looking into the distance. Here and there, the sun reflected from the river where it wound through the bottom of the valley. Cattle grazed placidly, and he knew it would take some adjustment to think of them as a commercial venture... as a crop. At the moment, they seemed like part of the scenery.

“Can you see that row of hills in the distance, *senor*?”

Jamie squinted.

Diego pointed. “Do you see those two hills that look like a turtle? That is the edge of your property.”

Jamie didn’t try to hide his surprise. “I didn’t know it was that large. How many head of cattle will it support?”

The foreman shrugged. “My guess would be around three hundred, but *Senor Thompson* was cautious about overgrazing. We average about one hundred forty.”

Jamie nodded, but his instincts as a businessman came to the fore. “How would you feel about expanding the herd?”

Diego’s gaze shifted between Jamie and Sarah. “Everybody has cattle. The miners were happy with beef for a while, but I hear in town that they are getting tired of the same old thing.” It looked as though he wasn’t going to say more, then changed his mind. “If it was me, I would grow more hogs. And chickens.” He warmed to his subject. “And vegetables. The miners will pay anything for vegetables.”

Jamie nodded his agreement, and they started the ride back to the main house. “In San Francisco, potatoes are like gold,” he said. “I can’t begin to tell you how good those roasted potatoes tasted last night.”

“Thank you, *senor*. I’ll tell Teresa. Or you can tell her yourself, if you’d like to join us for dinner tonight. It’s simple food, but we think you’ll like it.”

“That would be wonderful.” Jamie and Sarah spoke at the same time.

“I saw some red wine in the house,” said Jamie. “We’ll bring a bottle.”

\* \* \*

“These tamales are delicious,” said Sarah, unwrapping another savoury bundle.

“Si.” Teresa’s dark eyes showed her pleasure at Sarah’s interest. “Pork tamales. We also make them with chicken, or sometimes with beef, but pork is my favorite.” She passed Sarah a small bowl. “Try the chile sauce with them. We find the green chile sauce goes best with pork.”

Sarah tried a small amount and her face lit up. “It’s amazing.” She turned to Jamie, who had been watching the exchange with a contented smile. “I’d love to learn how to make this.”

“It’s time consuming,” said Teresa, “but Diego always enjoys them.” Her gaze softened as she looked at her husband. “So I’m happy to do it for him. In my family, the women would get together to make them. It makes the work go faster and gave us a chance to gossip.”

“That’s too bad.” Sarah dabbed at her mouth with a napkin.

“Why do you say that?”

“I was thinking of my eating house.”

“Eating house?”

“Yes. I run an eating house in San Francisco.” Her face came alive. “Myself and several other women.” She glanced at Jamie. “I tell Jamie it’s all his fault. He told me about Cornish pasties, and the rest is history.”

Teresa edged forward on her chair, eager to hear the story. The voices of the women provided a comforting backdrop as Jamie and Diego wandered outside for a smoke.

Diego accepted one of Jamie’s cigarillos and puffed on it contentedly. “Your woman is full of ideas,” he said. “She cares about her business.” He slanted a sideways look at Jamie. “I admire her passion.”

“I do, too,” Jamie replied thoughtfully. “I do, too.”

\* \* \*

“I’d be happy to show you how to make the tortillas.” Teresa smiled. “How long are you staying?”

Sarah sighed. “I can’t speak for Jamie, but I have to go back to San Francisco tomorrow.” She drank the remaining wine in her glass. “But I hope to come back soon.”

“I look forward to it.” Teresa rose. “Would you like some coffee?”

Sarah stifled a yawn. “No, thank you. It’s been a long day.” She rose and they wandered outside. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

“Yes, thank you.” Jamie rose to stand by her side. He extended a hand to Diego. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

They walked across the courtyard, Jamie’s arm around her waist as if they’d been together for years.

“That was nice,” said Sarah.

“Hmmm.” Jamie gave her an affectionate squeeze, but she could tell his mind was somewhere else.

“What is it?” she asked finally. They stepped inside the main house and Jamie lit a candle. She couldn’t quite make out his face, but she’d spent enough time with him to know that something was on his mind.

He toyed with the soft wax on the side of the candle, gathering his thoughts. “I’m going to stay here,” he said finally, raising his eyes to meet hers. “I hope you don’t mind.”

Sarah had anticipated this, but her heart skipped a beat anyway. “I’ll miss you,” she blurted out, blinking rapidly to keep back the tears. “I’ll miss seeing you every day.”

She wished he would take her in his arms, but he remained on the other side of the table. “I’ll miss you as well, Sarah, but I need to be here now.” He turned toward the window, even though nothing could be seen in the darkness. “I need to learn everything I can about the ranch, and I can’t do that in San Francisco.”

“I understand.” And in a way, she *did* understand. Much as he had to learn the ranch, she needed to expend more effort to stabilize her business.

“Will you be all right going back by yourself?” For a moment he looked as though he was hoping she would say no. Then he smiled confidently. “Of course you will. You set out to sail halfway around the world by yourself. What’s a little boat trip down the Sacramento?”

“Exactly.” Could he hear the tremor in her voice? She hoped not. “I’ll be fine.”

He walked slowly around the table and stood before her. “Thank you for understanding,” he said, tipping up her chin. “You’ll come back, won’t you? Soon?”

She nodded. “Soon.”

He pulled her into his arms, his kiss making it clear that he wanted to make love to her. With a sigh, she slipped her arms around his neck and returned the kiss with all the passion of a woman recently initiated into the joys of lovemaking.

They came together that night with a fierce, almost desperate need to please each other. After reaching the heights together she collapsed back onto the bed, gasping for air, aftershocks of pleasure rippling through her body. After a few moments, she rolled onto her side so he wouldn't see her tears, wouldn't see that she was already missing him.

\* \* \*

Jamie walked down the pier as the *Senator* pulled into the current, dodging people, stacks of cargo and animals as he tried to keep eye contact with Sarah. Standing on the upper deck, she looked down at him with clear eyes, her chin tilted up the way she did when she was trying to be strong. But he waved as though he hadn't noticed. As though he didn't want to call her back, and beg her to stay with him... forever.

Driving her to the steamer this morning and seeing her safely on board had been one of the most difficult things he'd ever done. And yet it was something he had to do. He'd known it last night when he heard her with Teresa, telling the other woman about her business in San Francisco. The enthusiasm in her voice as she outlined her plans was unmistakable, and there and then he'd decided to tell her that he wanted to stay on at the ranch. Much as he wanted to ask her to stay with him, he knew he had to let her go... that she had to make her own dreams come true before she could become a part of his.

The paddle wheeler rounded the bend and he lifted a hand again, even though she was out of sight. *Please come back to me*, he prayed silently. *So I can tell you how much I love you.*

His mood lifted as he headed back to the ranch where he would be content to spend the rest of his days. The soft rolling hills called to him, and he knew that Sarah was right: he had come home.

## Chapter Seventeen

Sarah found herself passing the doors to the Grand Salon for the third time. She'd scarcely been aware that she'd circled the promenade deck that many times.

It had been a long time since she'd walked to clear her mind. Back home in Boston, it had been her custom to walk the waterfront when confronted with a particularly thorny problem. The fresh sea air usually helped her to see things more clearly, and she'd hoped that a walk around the ship would do the same today.

But this was a different sort of problem. This time, there might not be an answer. Especially since she could see both sides of the problem. She wasn't being logical. She knew that, but the knowledge did little to ease her mind. There was no doubt that she wanted to go back and ensure that her business thrived. And she couldn't do that from *Rancho Agua Dulce* any more than Jamie could manage the ranch from San Francisco. And yet she'd wanted him to ask her to stay.

She stamped her foot on the deck and then looked around guiltily. She was not some flighty woman prone to temper tantrums. Being in love must have addled her brain, at the very least.

She walked to the railing and watched the water rush past, trying to be honest with herself. What was really upsetting her? Was it the fact that Jamie had decided to stay, or that he hadn't asked her to stay with him? If he loved her, he would have asked her. And yet he hadn't said those magic words. Was that what she really wanted?

She wasn't the first woman Jamie had made love to, that much was clear. He was an experienced lover, and desire pooled deep in her belly as she recalled the past two nights. But he hadn't said he loved her, not before, during or after.

She raised her eyes and stared blankly at a small herd of cattle on the bank of the river. What if she was nothing more to him than a challenge to his virility?

"No." She said the word out loud. Jamie cared for her, she knew he did. But did he love her? She could ask herself that question all day long and not know the answer. Her time would be better spent planning the future of her business. At least that was something she could control.

\* \* \*

San Francisco's raw energy surrounded Sarah as she stepped from the steamer. She'd been nervous about hiring a cart to get from the dock to her home, but it was surprisingly easy, and before long the driver was pulling up in front of the familiar dwelling.

Darkness had fallen, and she noticed a flickering light coming from the tent in the front yard. A few men were standing on the street, waiting their turn to eat and she smiled at them as they doffed their hats. Inside the tent, the long tables were full, and along the length of the table, candles had been set in bowls filled with sand. She noticed that some of the men had extinguished their cigars in the sand, which was better than tossing them on the ground, as she had noticed in other eating houses. One of Addie's innovations, no doubt.

She walked past the dining room, where one table was full of four men, and the other one held Angus and a man with his back toward the door. "Hello, everyone." She stepped into the busy kitchen.

"Hi Sarah. Welcome back." Addie was busy spooning beans into a large bowl. "Are there still men waiting out in the street?"

"Just three or four." Sarah felt left out. "What should I do?"

Addie laughed. "Well, you might go back into the dining room. There's someone there who's anxious to see you."

"Really?" Sarah peered around the door. "Who?"

Addie rolled her eyes. "You're a big girl. Go see for yourself."

Sarah checked her appearance in the small mirror. "We really need a better mirror," she muttered, stalling. "Come on, Addie. Give me a hint."

Her friend gave her a gentle shove. "He doesn't bite. Just go."

The man rose as she walked into the room and she almost fainted. "Devon!" she cried, arms wide. "I can't believe it's you!" She stepped into her brother's embrace and started to blubber. "I can't believe you're really here." She pulled back and looked at him. "You look so much older!"

"Not that much," he said, grinning broadly. "It's good to see you too, big sis." He lowered his voice. "You just about gave our father a heart attack when mother showed him your note."

Sarah's heart sank. "He's all right, isn't he?"

"He's fine." He held her at arm's length. "You look different than the last time I saw you." he tilted his head to one side. "You look like a woman who knows who she is... where she's going."

His words were exactly what she needed to hear. "I am, Devon. Coming here has been the best thing that ever happened to me." She turned to Angus. "I see you've met Angus, and I would imagine you've met the others, as well."

"I'm staying here," he said sheepishly. "I hope that's all right. Addie's had me working to pay for my keep."

"Doing what? You can't cook."

"No, but I can't believe how much food they put out from that kitchen every day. For the last two days they've had me running all over the place buying supplies. I think they'd have me washing dishes if I wasn't so clumsy."

"He's been a great help, too." Addie appeared and placed a bowl of savoury broth and fresh bread on the table, indicating that Sarah should sit. "You might as well eat something while you catch up with your brother."

Sarah listened eagerly as Devon brought her up to date on events at home. "Mother seemed shocked when she found your letter," he said, watching her closely as he spoke. "But by the time father came back from that medical convention in New York, she'd accepted the idea. I think father blamed her at first for not keeping a closer watch on you, but after a day or so, he realized that there wasn't much she could have done."

"That's a relief. But what are *you* doing here?" she asked, still puzzled by his sudden appearance.

"Our father isn't quite the unfeeling ogre you think he is..."

"I didn't say that!"

Devon ducked his head. "Perhaps not, but you've thought it once or twice."

"Yes, I suppose you're right."

"Anyway," he said, brightening. "After he got over his shock, he sent me to find you, to make sure you're all right. And here I am!" He turned to Angus. "Perfect timing, too. Angus tells

me that the mail steamer arrived yesterday after a long delay. I'll be able to send a letter informing him that you're fine."

Sarah looked at the reporter. "The miners will be glad of that, won't they?" Angus nodded and she turned back to Devon. "Letters are the only contact they have with their families. The mail has been sorely missed these past few months."

"People stood in line for hours to get their letters," said Angus. He glanced up as Anna passed through to deliver more food to the tent. "Addie didn't miss a beat. She made extra pies, and Anna and Missy sold every one to those standing in line. I hear Missy made almost as much as Anna." His face softened as he spoke of the child. "The miners are so taken with her; many of them give her a pinch of gold."

"That reminds me." Sarah looked around. "Where is she?"

"I believe she's upstairs, with Walter, but she's probably fallen asleep. The poor little thing was tired when she came home." He said it with pride.

"I'll see her later, then." Sarah turned back to Devon. "So what are your plans? Can you stay for a while?"

He turned serious. "Father didn't ask for any promises one way or the other. I think he's hoping that I'll make something of myself, even if it takes staying here to do it."

Sarah looked fondly at her younger brother. "There are plenty of opportunities. You just have to find something that interests you." She turned to Angus. "Isn't that right?"

"Oh, aye." His attention had been on Anna as she walked back to the kitchen.

She leaned toward him. "Angus McKellern, you're not paying attention."

Angus bristled, embarrassed at being caught out. "Yes, I am."

Sarah laughed. "I'm just teasing, my friend, but it's true. Every time your mind wanders you come out with something in that wee brogue of yours."

A flush crept into his face. "Do you think it's too soon, Sarah? It's been less than a month since she learned she's a widow, but I love her."

Her thoughts drifted back to Jamie, standing on the dock in Sacramento, waving goodbye. How could she advise Angus, when she didn't trust her own heart?

"I have no idea," she said, but gave him an encouraging smile. "That's something the two of you will have to work out."

"You're right, of course." He toyed with his coffee cup for a moment, then raised his head, a guilty look on his face. "I forgot to ask. What was the ranch like?"

Sarah shot a quick glance at Devon. "It was beautiful. Much larger than I thought it would be."

Angus' journalistic instincts took over. "How large?"

"I don't know. I'm not good at estimating things like that, but Diego pointed to some distant hills and said they were the boundary of the ranch." For a moment she could almost feel the horse moving beneath her, and smell the sweet tang of the fir trees. "He says they average a hundred and forty head of cattle each year."

"What was he like?"

She thought for a moment. "Jamie is lucky to have had him as a steward. I'm fairly sure he intends to keep him on."

"Does he speak English?"

"What? Oh, yes. Very well. And he isn't afraid to say what he thinks about how the ranch could be more successful. He'd like to see them expand into produce."

"The new gold," murmured Angus.

Sarah had to agree. "Speaking of which, we had potatoes." She closed her eyes. "Roast chicken and potatoes. And Jamie picked some old ears of corn and ate them."

"Sounds like you had a good time."

She focused on her soup, afraid to meet his gaze. "I did."

"Will you be going back?"

Sarah paused a moment before replying. "Yes. I'm not sure when, but I did promise to go back." She forced a smile. "Teresa... that's Diego's wife... is going to teach me how to make tamales."

"That's good." If Angus noticed the change in Sarah, he didn't let on. "You'll like Jamie," he said, speaking to Devon. "But after I got to know him I had a feeling he wouldn't stay around long."

Devon frowned. "He didn't like it here?"

"It's not that. I think he felt constrained by his family's business. Some men just aren't cut out to spend their lives in an office, and Jamie seems to be one of them."

"I know how that feels." He looked at his sister. "I'd like to meet this friend of yours."

Sarah tried to sound nonchalant. "The *Senator* travels both ways. I'll introduce you the next time he comes back."

"I'll look forward to it."

\* \* \*

"Mommy, there's a Chinaman hiding in our yard." Missy had wandered into the kitchen and was wiping the sleep out of her eyes. "I saw him out the window."

"Missy!" Anna was tired, and she wanted to spend some time with Angus. This was the second time today her daughter had come to her with the fanciful story. Missy had become fascinated by the growing number of Chinese in San Francisco, and mentioned them constantly. She knelt down and took her daughter by the shoulders. "You mustn't make up stories, Missy." She looked into the child's eyes, worried that she was working her too hard. "Maybe we should take some time off tomorrow and go for that picnic Angus has been talking about. Would you like that?"

"Yes, Mommy, but..."

Anna cut her off. "Sarah is back. Have you seen her yet? She's in the dining room."

The child's eyes lit up. "Can I see her?"

"Yes, of course. Now run along."

"Sarah!" Missy ran into the dining room. "You're back!"

Sarah stroked the child's hair. "Yes, I am."

"Where is Uncle Jamie?"

Something lodged in Sarah's throat. She'd have to stop reacting every time someone asked her about him. "Uncle Jamie decided to stay at the ranch for now."

"But he's coming back, isn't he?"

"Of course. Now what did you do while I was away?"

"I sold lots and lots of pies."

"That's what I hear. What else?"

Missy's gaze cut over to Angus then moved away. "I saw a Chinaman in the yard."

Angus interrupted. "Now, Missy. You know what your mother said."

“Well, I did.” She gripped Sarah’s arm, her eyes pleading. “He’s still there, and he’s getting cold. I saw him shivering.”

Sarah glanced over at Angus, who shook his head in warning. But something in Missy’s voice made her wonder. “Can you show me?” she asked, taking the child’s hand. “I’d like to see.”

Angus and Devon started to rise, but Sarah motioned for them to stay seated. “It’s okay,” she mouthed, and followed Missy out the front door.

“Around here, beside the wood pile.” Missy tugged at her hand.

Sarah peered into the gloom. “I can’t see much of anything. I should have brought a candle.”

“I can go get one.” The child scampered off.

Sarah stood quietly, looking into the night sky. Missy was probably having a hard time getting her mother to give her a candle and matches. She supposed she didn’t blame her but...

Her thoughts were interrupted by an odd sound. She cocked her head. It had sounded like a sneeze. Missy hadn’t been making up stories after all.

“Is someone there?” Surprisingly, she wasn’t afraid. She’d never thought of the Chinese as physically threatening – probably because most of them were slight – and they kept to themselves. But she knew that many of them carried knives, and were adept at using them.

“Please come out,” she urged, willing her eyes to adjust to the dark. “I can help you if you need medical attention.”

A dark form materialized out of the darkness. A face was barely discernible beneath a layer of dirt, and one of those ubiquitous Chinese hats. The tunic and pants were probably dark blue, but that was just a guess.

“Hello,” she said, bending at the waist. She felt ridiculous bowing to someone she didn’t know, but she wanted to appear friendly. “Can I help you?”

“Please.” The apparition uttered the one word and then collapsed at her feet.

Missy appeared, holding a candle, and looked at the bundle of rags at Sarah’s feet. Tears sprang to her eyes, and she lowered the candle. “Is he dead?”

“No, I don’t think so.” Sarah took the candle. “Go in and get Devon, would you sweetheart? Tell him I need him.”

Missy took one more wide-eyed look and then ran back toward the house. Sarah kneeled down, trying to find the man’s carotid artery, and was relieved to discover a faint but regular pulse. Delicate features combined with obvious malnutrition lent him an ethereal appearance and she wondered how long he’d been without food.

“What’s going on?” Devon appeared, closely followed by Angus and Missy. “Good Lord,” he said. “The man looks half starved.”

Sarah looked at Missy. “Is anyone sleeping in the back bedroom now?”

“No. Addie was going to put your things in there, but Mommy said we should wait and see what you wanted.”

Devon had been reaching for the man, but he straightened and turned to his sister. “Sarah, you’re not thinking of taking him into your home! Putting him in your bed!”

Angus laughed, and Devon rounded on him. “What’s so funny?”

“You are, lad. Your sister never turns anyone away. You might as well get used to it.”

Sarah adopted a conciliatory tone. “Please, Devon. Just pick him up, will you? Look at the poor soul. Does he look dangerous? Besides, we have you to protect our honor.” She lifted one of the man’s hands. His skin was so translucent she could almost see the bones beneath.

“All right.” He bent over and lifted the bundle into his arms. “But I hope you know what you’re getting into.”

## *Chapter Eighteen*

A soft moan rose from the scarecrow as Devon straightened. Still angry with Sarah, he strode to the front door and was relieved to see that the remainder of the customers had left.

As he pushed through the front door, he became aware that the flesh he held in his arms may be cold, but it was also soft in all the right places. He looked down to ensure that Sarah's newest rescue was still alive, and began to doubt that it was a man at all.

Looking up at him were the most beautiful eyes he'd ever seen. The creature squirmed in his arms, reconfirming what he'd already suspected: the 'man' was a woman. And she was terrified of him, if the expression on her face was anything to go by. She tried to break free of his grip, and his heart broke as he realized that she was afraid of him.

Exhausted by her struggles, the woman sighed, closed her eyes again, and fell back into his arms. Short, dark lashes fluttered against alabaster cheeks – or cheeks that would be alabaster when clean. The curve of her neck was exquisite, and his gaze trailed lower to where it ended abruptly under the collar of the soiled blue tunic. His arms tightened around her protectively as Angus and Missy came in, having cleared the last of the utensils from the tent. "What is it, lad?" He stepped around the form in Devon's arms. "You look stunned."

"Yes, Devon, what is it?" Sarah appeared.

Devon opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. He tried again. "It's a woman," he said, as though he'd never seen one before. What he didn't say was that he'd fallen completely and irrevocably in love.

Devon sounded strange, but Sarah's focus was on the new arrival. "You're right," she said, showing only a moment's surprise. "Please be careful with her."

Devon laid her on the bed and stood over her. The woman's long hair had come loose and flowed across the pillow like black quicksilver. His fingers tensed at the thought of touching it.

"Thanks, Devon." Sarah gave him an odd look and ushered him out of the room. "I'll take care of her from here."

Anna and Angus and Missy were in the dining room, enjoying the remaining heat from the fireplace. Last night, Devon had checked to make sure that it was properly vented, and had built a fire. Missy had enjoyed it so much he'd decided to make another one tonight. He checked to make sure it was drawing properly, then wandered back into the kitchen and leaned back against one of the cupboards, watching as Addie kneaded bread. Caroline and Lizzie had gone home for the night, but they'd be back tomorrow.

"Don't you ever get tired of working?" he asked idly. "I've only been here a few days, but in that time, I don't think I've seen you sit down."

Addie set aside another tray of loaves to proof. "What's bothering you, Devon? You didn't come in here to admire my baking skills." She grinned to soften her words. "Which aren't bad, by the way." She dusted the table and measured out another batch of dough.

"She's a woman," he said, a sense of wonder in his voice. "A beautiful woman."

Addie lowered her head to hide her smile. "So I heard."

“She’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

Addie’s hands stilled for a moment, then she continued. “Some Chinese women are very beautiful.”

“Do you think she speaks English?” He looked up hopefully.

“I don’t know, little brother. It’s possible.” She’d taken a liking to the young man the moment he entered the house, and he’d seemed pleased when she called him ‘little brother.’

“She’s afraid of me.” His dismay touched Addie’s heart.

“No, she’s not.”

His voice was barely audible when he spoke, almost to himself. “But she is. I saw it in her eyes.”

Addie stopped kneading, her hands resting against the work surface. “Think, Devon. She doesn’t know you, so it isn’t you she’s afraid of.” She hated to shatter any illusions he may be harboring, but it had to be said. “She’s probably been abused by a man, and her fear was nothing more than instinct.”

She couldn’t tell if he’d absorbed her words, but as she watched, he took in a deep breath and straightened his shoulders. She wanted to warn him off, to tell him that it was unlikely he would ever forge a relationship with the young Chinese woman, but she couldn’t. She’d been around men long enough to recognize the signs. Devon was besotted, and nothing she could say would make a difference.

She went back to work with a heavy heart. It was better to say nothing and hope for the best, but that knowledge didn’t make her feel any better.

\* \* \*

Sarah stood quietly for a moment and studied the young woman on the bed. In spite of the dark smudges of exhaustion under her eyes, and dirty skin, her underlying beauty shone through. She suspected that the woman had smeared dirt on her own face as a distraction and she wondered what she could have been running from. Every day in San Francisco brought new revelations and it looked as though today was to be no exception.

The woman’s breathing was shallow but steady. Sarah wanted to examine her for injuries, but was reluctant to invade her privacy. As she considered her options, the woman whimpered, and tossed her head back and forth as though fighting against restraints. Sarah’s instincts told her that this woman’s injuries wouldn’t be revealed by a visual examination, that she had suffered trauma that went much deeper. The best thing for her at this point would be to clean her up and offer to feed her. If in time she wanted to talk, she and her friends would be there. In the meantime, she could offer sanctuary.

“How is she?” Addie looked up. She was cleaning the work surface, having just set the last tray of loaves to proof.

Sarah moved to the stove and lifted the lid on the ever-present pot of rich broth. “I don’t think she’s badly hurt.” She shot Addie a quick look. “At least not outwardly. But she’s exhausted, and dirty. I’ll take a basin of water and some soap into the room in case she wakes up. That and a cup of broth are about all I can do for her tonight.”

“Sarah.”

Sarah paused, ladle in hand. She knew that tone of Addie’s. She tipped the hot water into the basin, put down the ladle and turned.

“You should know.” Addie looked uncomfortable.

“What?”

“Devon thinks he’s in love with her.” She waved a hand in front of her face. “No. He doesn’t just *think* it, he’s completely, head over heels, in love.” Addie’s gaze was unwavering. “I’m worried about him, and this isn’t about her being Chinese, you know that.”

Sarah nodded. “I know.”

“That woman has been damaged. Intentionally or not, she’ll break his heart.”

Sarah closed her eyes and remembered Devon as a small boy. He’d always had a good heart, open and honest. As he grew older, almost every young woman in Boston flirted outrageously with him when he appeared at social functions. He’d never known what it was like to be attracted to someone who didn’t return his feelings. She sighed, knowing that he was about to experience his first heartbreak.

“There’s nothing we can do, is there?” She picked up the ladle with a sad smile.

“No,” said Addie, removing her apron and hanging it up. “Except to be here for him.”

Sarah slipped a bar of scented soap into her pocket, gathered a towel and face towel and carried the basin of heated water into the bedroom.

The woman was sitting on the edge of the bed when she entered. Sarah set down the basin and took the soap from her pocket, placing it on the corner of the bedside stand. The woman’s gaze took it in and for a moment her features softened.

Sarah didn’t know how to begin. “Do you speak English?” she said finally.

“Yes.” There was a hint of pride in the woman’s tone. A good sign, Sarah decided. At least she had some spirit.

“My name is Sarah Howard, and this is my house. I’d like you to know that you’re welcome to stay.”

“I have no money.”

“Oh, no. I didn’t mean it like that. You’re welcome to stay here for free.”

“Why?” The woman was obviously reluctant to trust. “Nothing is free.”

Sarah was getting tired. She’d had a long day and the woman’s attitude was starting to annoy her. She bit back an angry remark and tried again.

“What’s your name?”

“Lily.”

“Well, Lily. I came back from Sacramento today. I’m tired and maybe even a bit cranky, but when I say you can stay here for free, I mean it.”

Sarah caught a glimpse of tears in Lily’s eyes before she lowered them. “I’m sorry,” she said, her words directed toward the floor. “I don’t deserve your kindness.”

Sarah watched her for a moment and decided that Lily was a proud young woman who wasn’t accustomed to accepting favors from people. She could understand that.

“It’s a houseful of women, except for my brother who arrived while I was away. We all help each other here. Anna’s husband died while she was en route via ship. Since then she’s had a second child, and she and her daughter Melissa sell the meat and fruit pies that we make. Addie, who has taken over the kitchen, was beaten by a man when she refused to work for him as a prostitute.”

Lily’s head snapped up. “Hiram!”

Sarah pulled back. “How did you know?”

“He bought me,” she said, eyes flashing. “He threatened to beat me if I didn’t go to work in one of his bordellos.”

“Bought you?” Sarah didn’t doubt her, but it sounded incredulous.

Lily's mouth twisted in a parody of a smile. "It's not all that unusual, believe me, but he has the bill of sale to prove it."

"Oh, I believe you." Her chin came up a few degrees. "Then you really must stay here until we can figure out how to help you." Her thoughts turned to more immediate matters. "You must be hungry, right?"

A faint smile flitted across Lily's face. "I'm starved. I've been hiding for five days."

"Then wash up if you like and I'll get you some broth and bread." She turned to go. "Would you like to come out and eat with the others?"

"No, thank you." She was struggling to keep her eyes open. "Something to eat and a good sleep is what I need more than anything." She looked down at her filthy outfit. "Maybe tomorrow I can wash my clothes."

\* \* \*

Sarah wandered into the dining room after taking food to Lily, and smiled at her friends clustered around the wood stove. Anna, Melissa and little Walter. Angus. Addie. They were more than friends; they were her new family. She looked over at the table in the window where she and Jamie had shared meals, and wondered what he was doing right now. Was he thinking of her? She'd been so busy since coming home that she hadn't had a chance to think about how much she missed him.

She'd thought she could fill the empty hours away from Jamie with building her business. There was always work to be done, and decisions to be made, but those things didn't fill the gaping hole in her life. She wandered back into the kitchen, where her gaze rested on the proofing loaves of bread. As she looked around, she noticed a new chalk board where someone had jotted the menus for the next few days. A list of ingredients occupied the area to the right of the menus, most of them checked off. She allowed herself to smile, and it occurred to her that Anna and Addie had quietly taken over running the food, and that they were doing an excellent job. Maybe she'd been trying to convince herself that she was needed, when clearly they could manage without her. She was too tired to consider the ramifications of that tonight, but it was definitely something to think about.

She joined the others and accepted a cup of tea from Addie. In the short while they'd been together, Addie had learned to read her moods. It was uncanny, but there were times it was good not to have to explain.

"How is she?" asked Anna, giving her daughter an affectionate hug. "I'm sorry I didn't believe Missy earlier, but we were so busy..." Her voice trailed off.

"She's exhausted." Sarah stared into her tea for a moment, then raised her gaze to Angus. "She said Hiram bought her." Addie took in a quick breath, but Sarah continued. "How can this be happening? We're supposed to be a civilized society, but this..." she spread her hands in a hopeless gesture. "This is barbaric."

"You're right," he said slowly, choosing his words with care. "And I believe there's change in the air, but for now, especially here where there's so little effort to keep the peace, there's no effort made to stop people like Hiram."

Weariness overtook Sarah and she struggled to her feet. "I'm going to go to sleep now." She looked around. "Where's Devon?"

"He went out. Said he needed to walk and think." Angus glanced outside. "I'll make sure he's back before I leave."

“Thanks, Angus.” Sarah understood how her brother was feeling. He wasn’t the only confused member of the Howard family. Maybe tomorrow, things would make more sense for both of them.

\* \* \*

“How is she?” Devon was waiting for her when she came out of the back bedroom the next morning.

“She’s fine.” Sarah spoke kindly, but took her brother by the arm and led him to the dining room. “Stay here and I’ll bring some coffee for both of us.” She paused. “Would you like anything else?”

“I could eat a fruit pie if there are any left from yesterday, but I suppose that’s not likely.”

Sarah grinned. He may have lost his heart, but he still had his appetite. “I’ll check.”

She returned a few moments later with coffee and two pies. Devon fell on one of them as though he hadn’t eaten for a week.

“Have you thought of serving breakfast?” he asked, washing down the last of the pie with a large swallow of coffee. “You’ve become famous for your coffee already. I hear people talking about it when I’m out buying supplies.”

“Breakfast would be something to consider if we could get our hands on a reliable supply of eggs. Potatoes, too. If we had eggs and potatoes, we’d be the most popular breakfast spot around.” She watched him carefully. “But you don’t really want to talk about breakfast, do you?”

His cheeks flushed red. “Not really, no.” He ran his finger around the rim of his cup. “When can I see her again, Sarah?”

She didn’t need to ask who he was talking about. “I don’t know, Dev. Probably not today. She’s an exhausted young woman and she needs to rest. By the way, her name is Lily.”

“Lily.” He said her name softly, like a precious thing he held in his mouth. “It suits her.” He looked into the distance, and Sarah found herself wondering if Jamie ever had that look on his face when he thought of her. Her brother was saying something, but she didn’t hear. “I’m sorry,” she said, dragging herself back to the present. “What did you say?”

He gave her an odd look. “I asked if she’s going to be okay.”

“Physically, she seems to be fine. But it’s evident that she’s been through some rough times recently.”

“Where is she from? Do you know?”

Sarah nodded. “That’s one of the few things she told me. She’s from Shanghai.” She kept on talking before she lost her nerve. “She told me she’d been sold.”

“Sold!” Devon jumped up from his chair and started to pace, his face reflecting his horror. “Sold? Is that possible?”

“Apparently it is. She said the man has a bill of sale.” A wry smile flirted with her mouth. “According to Lily, he thought he was buying a mild-mannered Chinese woman, but she managed to elude him on the first day and run away. It was just lucky that she found us. She smelled the food and when she saw Anna and Missy, she decided it was safe.”

Devon sat down again and supported his head in his hands. “I don’t even want to ask why someone would buy a woman.” His face was tortured. “When I picked her up and looked into her eyes...” His voice drifted off.

“Devon.” Sarah struggled to find the right words. “Don’t do this to yourself. Please. I think I know how you feel about her, but Addie and I agree that Lily’s going to have trust issues for a long time. Especially with men.”

“I know,” he said, sitting back down. “Addie told me.”

“I’m sorry.” Sarah squeezed his arm again and then released her grip. “We both love you, you know that, but we don’t want to see you hurt.”

He remained silent for several long moments. “Do you want me to leave? Find somewhere else to live?”

“No,” she said. “I want you to stay here. And I’m not suggesting that you avoid her when she’s ready to come out of her room. Just don’t fall in love with her, that’s all.”

But it was too late, and they both knew it.

## *Chapter Nineteen*

“I need something to do.” Sarah stepped out of the way as Caroline and Lizzie swept past, delivering the last of the food to the outside tent. The eating house was a resounding success and the miners lined up earlier and earlier each day, but with Addie running the kitchen and Anna and Missy selling pies in the plaza, there was very little for Sarah to do. Even Lily had helped the last few days, working silently beside the others. She shrank every time she heard a man’s voice, but they had decided among themselves not to let on that they noticed. Devon was always in the background, alert to any threats to her safety.

“We need to talk business.” Addie pulled out her pocket watch. “It’s almost two, and we’ll start serving again at five, but that’s all organized.” The smells of roasting pork were already wafting through the house. “Let’s take a break and have a cup of coffee.”

“Speaking of coffee,” said Sarah, settling in the dining room. “I had coffee with Lucy this morning. She sends her regards. Says she’s hearing great things about us.”

Addie set down her cup. “That’s sort of what I wanted to talk about. Money. We need to decide what to do with it.” She lifted her shoulders. “We’re making money hand over fist, as my father used to say.”

“Really?” Sarah frowned. “I’m embarrassed to say that I hadn’t even thought about it. How much have we made?”

“I can’t tell precisely, because much of it is in gold, but we’ve been open full time for two weeks now. We’re selling all the pies we can make at two for a dollar, and we’re serving something like eighty meals a day at a dollar apiece. We’ve made a profit of something like fourteen or fifteen hundred dollars, less what we pay Caroline and Lizzie. We’re doing well.”

“Good Lord! I had no idea.” Sarah thought for a moment. “What about you and Anna? Neither of you have taken a wage.”

“We have excellent shelter and our meals. As far as Melissa, she has a nice little pile of her own from what the miners give her.”

“But you and Anna are doing all the work.”

“A lot of it, but we’re content for now. You’ve given us both a chance at a new life.”

Sarah blinked back tears. “Darn you, Addie. You’re making me cry.”

Addie drank, watching her friend over the rim of her cup. “You miss him, don’t you?”

“Yes!” It felt good to admit it. She dabbed at her eyes. “This is one of those times I could use his business sense. He’d know what we should do with the money.” She turned forlorn eyes on Addie. “I thought he’d have come back by now. I thought he’d miss me.”

“Hmmp!”

“What do you mean, Hmmp?”

“Why, bless your heart, Sarah Howard, but haven’t I heard tell that the steamer travels in both directions?”

The sassy southern accent caught Sarah by surprise, and she laughed out loud.

“You’re evil, Adaline Lafontaine.” She paused. “Is that even your real name?”

Addie raised an eyebrow, and they both laughed.

“But seriously, Sarah.” Addie sobered. “I’d bet anything that he misses you, too. He’s probably up there on his ranch counting the days since you left and wondering why you haven’t come back for some more lovin’.”

“Addie!” Sarah paused. “How did you know?”

Addie rolled her eyes. “Lord, woman! You were glowing like a new bride when you came back. A blind man could have seen it.” She leaned her elbows on the table. “And every day since, that glow has faded a little bit more. You belong with him, Sarah. Why don’t you admit it?”

“But...” Sarah looked around. “What about the business?”

“What about it? It’s thriving, or haven’t you been listening?”

“So. You’re trying to get rid of me.” Sarah attempted a laugh but couldn’t quite pull it off. “I know you mean well Addie, but I’m afraid. What if he really doesn’t want me?”

“An unlikely scenario, but if it turns out that way, at least you’ll know.” Addie took a deep breath. “Listen to me, Sarah. You’re a good woman and I admire you. You took a chance with this business and it paid off. You’ve helped I don’t know how many people and never asked a thing from any of them. But now it’s time to do something for yourself. It’s time to take care of Sarah for a change.”

Sarah tried to finish her coffee but her hand was trembling so much she had to put her cup down. “Do you really think so? Should I go back there?”

“Lawdy Miss Sarah, are you deaf?” Addie was at it again, but when she continued, it was in her normal voice. “Yes,” she said. “I think you should go. Lily is safe with Devon around. Take your time and make sure it’s really what you want.” She smiled impishly. “And when you come back, bring us a few potatoes. I’d dearly love a potato.”

Sarah suddenly felt a lot lighter. “Okay,” she said. “I’ll do it. I’ll leave in the morning.”

\* \* \*

“Thank you for looking out for Lily.” Devon had delivered Sarah to the dock. “It’s good to know you’re here.”

Devon took her arm and guided her through the jostling crowd. He’d grown up a lot in the past couple of weeks and she found herself looking at him through fresh eyes.

“Have a good time,” he said, brushing her cheek with his lips. “I hope to meet this man of yours one day.” The ship’s horn sounded and Sarah covered her ears. “You’d better board,” he said, and backed up. “Don’t forget Addie’s potatoes.”

Sarah found a spot by the stern and searched the dock, knowing Devon would stay to see the steamer depart. She was proud of the way he’d handled himself around Lily. The young Chinese woman hadn’t outwardly softened toward him, but neither did she get that frightened look when she heard a male voice. When Devon went out to collect supplies, he quietly ensured that Lily wouldn’t be alone. He seemed content to watch over her for now, and for that Sarah was grateful. She raised a hand and Devon returned the gesture, then disappeared into the crowd.

The trip upriver passed surprisingly quickly. Sarah strolled the promenade deck, expecting at any moment to be overcome by a case of nerves. It wasn’t until the steamer was nearing Sacramento, and she started to recognize familiar landmarks, that she realized she was far from nervous. She was anxious to see Jamie again, to look into his eyes. One glance would tell her

everything she needed to know. Now that she was almost there, her heart started to beat a little faster, but she knew she'd done the right thing in coming.

\* \* \*

“*Rancho Agua Dulce*, ma'am? Yes, I remember you coming through a few weeks back. You and the gentleman.” The man from the livery stable greeted her cautiously. “And you just need a horse until tomorrow?”

“Yes, please. Mr. Thomas will bring it back in the morning.” She hadn't expected to have to explain herself, but she gave him a confident smile.

He scratched his head. “All right then.” He helped her fasten her bag, and assisted her up.

Her heart grew lighter as she came closer to the ranch. What would Jamie be doing when she got there? She tried to visualize him at various spots on the ranch, and found that she couldn't. All she could think of was running into his arms and telling him she loved him.

\* \* \*

Jamie stepped back as he made the final cut through the log. One more and he would have enough to start expanding the pig enclosure. Unaccustomed to physical work, his body protested, but he was enjoying himself. Besides, exhaustion was helping him to sleep. For the first few days after Sarah had left, he'd tossed and turned late into the night, wondering if he'd done the right thing in not telling her how he felt. His body stirred every time he thought about her, making sleep even more difficult. He'd decided that if she didn't show up within the next two or three days, he'd go to San Francisco.

He wiped the sweat from his brow and then splashed some water over his head. It was hot work out here in the late afternoon sun, but he wanted to finish cutting the posts. Following Diego's advice, he'd purchased a pregnant sow two weeks ago and she'd already given birth. He probably spent too much time watching the pudgy little creatures lined up in a row suckling, but he was determined to learn about his livestock. He'd already purchased an additional ten pigs, but he couldn't bring them to the ranch until he finished the pens that would separate them from the mother and her rapidly-growing offspring.

He ripped off his wet shirt and picked up the saw. His shoulders ached, but one more post and he would have enough. He heaved the log onto the supports he'd made and prepared to make the first cut.

“*Senor Jamie.*” Diego rode up after returning from his daily check on the cattle. “Someone's coming.”

Jamie shaded his eyes and looked toward the main house. “Who?”

“I'm not sure, but it looks like a woman. I spotted the dust cloud when I was riding in.”

Suddenly Jamie's shoulders didn't ache any more. “Sarah,” he murmured, running his fingers through his hair in an effort to improve his appearance. He grabbed his shirt and wiped what he hoped was the worst of the dust and grime from his face and chest, and strode toward the front courtyard.

He came around the side of the house just as a buggy pulled up. As the dust cleared, he recognized the passenger and he felt like he'd been slammed in the chest.

“Letitia!” He hoped he didn't sound welcoming.

“Darling!” She stepped down and frowned as dust settled on her boots. “Surprise!” She offered her cheek for a kiss and Jamie brushed his lips against it. Her scent was as he remembered, and for a moment he thought he would gag.

He pulled back. “What are you doing here?”

She ignored his question. “Bring my bags, would you driver?” She gestured airily at a trunk and two large suitcases in the back of the buggy.

The driver gave her a poisonous look and Jamie sprang forward. “No, let me,” he said. As he reached for her trunk he considered leaving it there and sending her back. But he couldn’t do that to her. He dragged her luggage down and thanked the driver.

“Have I come to the right place?” Her eyes narrowed as she looked at the house. “Where is your home?”

If Jamie had ever had any doubts about not marrying Letitia, they were put to rest with that remark. “This is it,” he said, indicating the adobe structure. “This is where I live.”

“Really, Jamie. I’ve been travelling for four months to get here. Don’t joke.”

Jamie was starting to enjoy himself. “It’s no joke, Letitia. This is where I live. I love it here.”

She took in his state of undress, her gaze lingering on his broad shoulders. “I must say you seem to be in excellent condition.” Her pink tongue darted out between her lips and he tried not to laugh.

“I’ve been working hard at building a pig enclosure.”

“Pigs?” She leveled those ice blue eyes on him and then laughed. The sound was almost convincing. “You’re jesting, of course.”

“No, Lettie, I’m not. I have one sow that recently gave birth to a litter of twelve, and I have ten more ready to bring home when I finish the pen. Would you like to see them?”

“Certainly not.”

Her superior manners were beginning to annoy him. “Lettie. Where do you think your bacon comes from?”

She tossed her head. “I don’t eat bacon.”

He glanced toward the road. The buggy was nowhere in sight, or he might have called it back. Unfortunately, he couldn’t leave her standing here.

“You might as well come in,” he said reluctantly. “Teresa is making quesadillas for dinner tonight and I’m sure she can make some more. It’s simple food, but filling.”

“Teresa?” She entered the house and looked around.

“Yes. My foreman’s wife.” It angered him that he felt the need to explain. “And they are also my friends.” He led her into the house. “Which bag has the things you need for overnight?”

“That one,” she said, pointing to the smallest of the suitcases. “Why?”

He sighed. “You can’t stay here, Letitia. You must know that.”

“But I’ve come all this way.” Tears pooled in her eyes as she looked around. For the first time since she’d stepped out of the buggy, he sensed that her emotions were real. Her tears were tears of acceptance.

Jamie pitied her, but he wasn’t about to let her manipulate him. “I know, Letitia. I made the trip too. But I didn’t ask you to come, and just because you’ve made up some story for your friends in New York, that doesn’t mean you can waltz in here and take over my life.” He started to reach out for her, to soften his words, then thought better of it. She would interpret any sign of affection as giving in. The corner of his mouth lifted in a wry grin. “You can tell your family and friends that you couldn’t possibly stay here, that it wasn’t up to your standards. I can live with that.”

“That part is true.” She gave a small laugh that sounded more like a hiccup. “This place is dreadful.”

Jamie shook his head. “You see, that’s where we differ. I love everything about this ranch. I have plans to expand. Diego and I have already picked out sites for a couple of new adobe homes for our future workers and their families. I can’t remember the last time I enjoyed something as much as this.”

Letitia looked at him as though she’d never seen him before. And maybe she hadn’t... at least this version. “I’m happy for you, Jamie. I really am.” She looked away, unable to meet his eyes. “I can’t believe I said that, but it’s true.” Silence stretched out for several long moments. “How can I explain going home so quickly?”

“That’s a fair question, but I don’t really think anyone is keeping track. By the time you find a ship to take you back, and make the voyage, it will be almost a year. People forget.”

She nodded her head. “I suppose so. Now did you say something about food? I haven’t eaten all day.”

Jamie cleaned up and opened a bottle of claret. “Come on, let’s sit outside. It will be a while until Teresa brings the quesadillas.”

They drank claret and talked like old friends, a candle flickering on the table between them. Letitia brought him up to date on his family, and although he was happy to hear her news, he realized that he wasn’t homesick in the least. This was his home now.

“I’ll leave tomorrow,” she said after they’d finished their meal. “I think I saw a sign about another steamer tomorrow.”

“Yes,” he said. “Transport up and down the river is becoming big business.” He lit a cigarillo and leaned back. The scent always reminded him of Sarah, and he found himself hoping that she didn’t find out about Letitia’s visit. “Either myself or Diego can take you to the boat tomorrow. What time will that be?”

“It’s an evening departure.” She hesitated. “I think I’d rather have Diego take me. I want to remember you here.” She touched him lightly on the hand. “Good luck, Jamie.” She stifled a yawn. “If you’ll show me where I can sleep, I’ll say goodnight.”

Letitia’s disinterest in the ranch the next day confirmed what he already knew... that she didn’t belong here. Diego sensed that he needed time to think, and as they worked on the pig enclosure, Jamie realized how lucky he’d been to get rid of her so quickly. It was almost a miracle that she’d been willing to turn around and go back, and yet he had no doubt that she’d come up with an amusing story to explain why she hadn’t stayed. He shouldn’t have to feel guilty about that, but he did, and he pushed himself even harder, willing the hours to pass until her departure.

“I’ll take the lady now.” Jamie had been tamping down the earth around a pole, and Diego startled him. “She’s waiting out front.”

Letitia lingered in the shade of the front entrance, examining the thorns on the bougainvillea. Jamie was struck by her cool beauty as she stepped out into the sun.

“Goodbye, Letitia.” His smile was genuine as he took her arm and led her to the buggy. “I’d say thank you for coming, but somehow that doesn’t sound right, does it?”

“No, I’m afraid not.” They paused beside the buggy and she looked sadly into his eyes. “I hope you find happiness here, Jamie. I really do.”

A soft breath of wind stirred the curls at her temple and he brushed them back. Then she was in his arms, clinging to him, kissing him, and he didn’t have the heart to push her away. She

rested her head on his shoulder for a moment, then backed up with tears in her eyes. “Goodbye, Jamie,” she said, and stepped up into the buggy.

He watched as Diego drove past the row of firs that shaded the driveway. Should he have accompanied her? Good manners said yes, but he knew Letitia too well. No, he told himself. It was better this way. He walked slowly back to the house, wondering what Sarah was doing today.

## *Chapter Twenty*

The horse from the livery stable was slow and plodding, but that suited Sarah just fine. A feeling of calm overtook her as she approached the ranch. The row of fir trees a short distance from the courtyard offered welcome shade and she drew up, eager to see if she could spot any changes.

Movement in the courtyard caught her eye. Jamie was there, and her heart did a little tap dance of joy as she recognized him. But who was he with?

It was a woman. Even from a distance, the woman's beauty was arresting. Tiny prickles of apprehension danced down Sarah's spine, and as she watched, Jamie reached up and brushed back a piece of the woman's hair. Her heart plummeted. How many times had he done that with her? She'd thought it was something special between them, but she hadn't imagined the tender gesture.

Diego was in the back of the buggy, reaching for the woman's luggage. He spotted her, and froze, his hand on one of her suitcases. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, he was still looking at her. He seemed to be trying to convey a message, but her attention was drawn back to Jamie, who had now enfolded the woman in his arms and was kissing her.

A strangled laugh escaped Sarah's lips and for a moment she thought her heart would break. She had only herself to blame for coming here unannounced. Unable to watch any more, she turned slowly around and headed back to town.

"Are you sure, ma'am?" The man at the livery stable gave her an odd look. She didn't remember riding back from the ranch, only that she needed to get away as quickly as possible.

"Yes, I'm sure. Thank you very much." She grabbed her bag and managed to walk to the steamer without stumbling. If only she could get on board, she might survive.

"You're in luck." The man in the ticket office took her money and handed her a ticket. "We only have a few cabins left."

"Luck?" Sarah didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "Right, thank you." She made her way on board, found her cabin and fell onto the bed.

\* \* \*

Jamie raised his face to the water. It felt good to wash away the dirt and grime of the day's work. He must install showers like these in the new buildings he and Diego were planning. He stepped out and towelled himself off, thinking once again how lucky he'd been. Letitia could have ruined everything, but that danger was now out of the way. The possibility that she might show up had been in the back of his mind ever since receiving Aidan's letter. Now that the worst had happened, he could proceed with his life.

"Jamie?" At the sound of Diego's voice he stepped into the living area, a towel wrapped around his waist. "Did you see Sarah?"

"Sarah?" Diego took a tentative step into the room.

“*Si*, she was here.”

“She’s here? That’s great.” He walked into the kitchen and looked outside. “Where is she?”

“No, *Senor* Jamie. She rode up on a horse when you were saying goodbye to Miss Letitia.”

The ground shifted under his feet as he recalled Letitia’s departure. He gripped the work table for support. “Sarah was here? And she saw Letitia kiss me goodbye?”

Diego nodded. “*Si*, and then she left.”

“Good Lord.” Jamie scrubbed a hand over his face, trying to organize his thoughts. “Do I have time to get on the boat?”

“No. I heard the whistle as I was on my way back.”

He lowered his head. It had been too good to be true... to think that Letitia could come and leave not a ripple on the mill pond of his life. He was tempted to laugh, but there was nothing funny about this situation. He spoke his thoughts aloud. “What am I going to do?”

He’d forgotten that Diego was there, standing quietly. “I checked the schedules, and one of the smaller boats leaves at first light.” He held up a ticket. “You will get there by late afternoon.”

“Thank you, my friend.” Jamie accepted the ticket. “I should have done this a long time ago.”

\* \* \*

Sarah woke to pale daylight, and for a moment she didn’t know where she was. Then the sounds of the ship filtered into her consciousness. Before she could gather her thoughts, the incident at Jamie’s ranch slammed into her.

Painful as it was, she played the scene over in her mind. There’d been a definite familiarity between Jamie and the woman; it stood to reason that she was the woman from New York he’d spoken of. He must have lied when he told her that their relationship ended before he left. She had believed him, but his actions yesterday indicated differently.

“What did you expect, Sarah Howard?” She rose and looked at her reflection in the mirror. The woman looking back had dark circles under her eyes. They were the eyes of a woman who should have known better than to fall in love with a man who had never expressed affection toward her. She wouldn’t make that mistake again.

\* \* \*

Sarah paid the driver and stood for a moment outside the house, gathering up her nerve. Even though she knew that Addie and Anna would be supportive, she hated the idea of explaining why she was back so soon, not to mention the sympathy she knew she’d see in their eyes. At least they’d be busy preparing to serve the noon meal. She took a deep breath.

The moment she stepped inside, she knew that something was wrong. Senses on high alert, she made her way to the kitchen, where Anna, Addie, Caroline and Lizzie huddled around the work table. They looked up as she entered, their faces reflecting shock and disbelief.

“Addie? Anna?” Her gaze moved back and forth between her two friends. “What’s going on?”

“It’s Lily.” Sarah could tell she was fighting for composure. “Hiram took her.” Her fingers closed around a knife as though she’d like to bury it in the brothel owner.

Sarah’s personal problems disappeared in an instant. “When did this happen?”

Addie looked to the others for confirmation. “An hour ago?” They nodded, and she turned back to Sarah. “About an hour ago. We were all busy working. He came busting through the front door with two men, walked into the kitchen and grabbed her.”

Tears started to spill down her cheeks and she brushed them away impatiently. “I promised myself I wouldn’t cry, but oh, Sarah. You should have seen the look on her face.” Her gaze turned inward. “She was afraid, I could tell that much, but it was as if she’d expected it... as if she knew it was inevitable.” She pushed around a few pies on a baking tray. “And to make things worse, I did nothing to stop them. I should at least have tried to fight.”

“Addie, no.” Anna gave her a quick hug. “Don’t blame yourself. They were here and gone before any of us had a chance to react.”

A sudden thought struck Sarah. “Where was Devon?”

Addie spread her hands in a gesture of hopelessness. “I’d sent him out to find some apples and carrots. If I had been more organized, this wouldn’t have happened.” She raised her eyes to Sarah. “He came home about fifteen minutes later, and when we told him what had happened, I thought he was going to tear his hair out. He’s out looking for her now.” She started to cry again. “What are we going to do?”

It was Sarah’s turn to be strong. “First of all,” she said, summoning every ounce of confidence she could muster, “you’re going to stop blaming yourself. Devon gets supplies for you almost every day. It wasn’t your fault he had to go out.” She turned to Anna. “Anna, have you seen Angus today? He might have some ideas.”

“Not yet. I usually see him in the plaza around noon when Missy and I sell pies.” She brightened somewhat. “We should go. There are a lot of people milling around every day, especially now that the Post Office is open again. Someone may know something.”

“Good idea.” She turned to Caroline and Lizzie. “And we might as well serve the noon meal. You never know, the men might know something and talk among themselves.”

Sarah had never seen Addie like this. The calm, confident woman had disappeared. She poured her friend a cup of coffee and pressed it into her hands. “Here, drink this.” She tried to smile. “It would be even better if we had some brandy.”

Addie motioned to the top shelf of the spice cupboard. “Up there, in the back.”

Sarah poured, her movements followed by Addie’s dulled eyes. “I really need that, but I’m afraid I’ll become addicted again.” Addie reached for the cup. “Do you think that’s possible?” She didn’t wait for an answer, but drank, her eyes closed.

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and looked at Sarah as if she’d just noticed her. “Why are you back so soon?”

Sarah shrugged. “It didn’t work out.”

Addie took another drink.

“He had a woman there, but I don’t want to talk about it.”

“That doesn’t sound like the Jamie I know.” Addie narrowed her eyes. “I guess that means no potatoes, huh?”

Sarah looked at her blankly for a moment, then burst into laughter, releasing the tension in the room.

Addie poured some more brandy into her cup and handed the bottle to Sarah. “Put this away,” she said. “I’m all right now.” She tossed back the remainder of the brandy and let out a shuddering breath. “Devon is devastated, as you can imagine. He blames himself, of course.”

“Seems like there’s a lot of that going around.”

Addie acknowledged her comment with one raised eyebrow, then turned to check the menu on the chalk board. “We can stand around here all afternoon feeling helpless or we can get started on supper.” She handed the knives to Sarah. “You’d better do the chopping.”

They worked silently for several minutes, each lost in thought. Caroline and Lizzie came and went, serving the hungry miners. “Has anyone said anything?” asked Addie as Lizzie loaded more fruit pies on a plate.

“No.” Lizzie shook her head. “Just the usual talk.”

They worked silently for a few more minutes, then Sarah put her knife down. “I wish we knew more about her. There are so many things about her that don’t add up. For example, she speaks excellent English.” She grabbed a carrot and started chopping again. “How does someone with that level of education get sold? It doesn’t make sense.”

“People fall from grace for various reasons. Trust me, I know.” Addie’s words were bitter with regret. “I just hope we can find her before...”

“Sarah, there’s someone here to see you.” Lizzie stood nervously in the door of the kitchen. “She says it’s important.”

“Oh, Lizzie. I don’t know if I can deal with it today.” The number of women coming to Sarah’s informal clinic was increasing daily.

“She says she knows you.”

“Oh, all right.” Sarah followed Lizzie to the dining room, where a woman stood just inside the door, a bonnet covering most of her face.

“Can I help you?”

The woman looked up. One side of her face was badly bruised. “Hello, Sarah. Remember me?”

Sarah took the woman by the arm and led her into the kitchen, away from the curious eyes of the diners. “Madeleine, is that you?” It was the prostitute she’d been visiting when she spirited Addie out of the hospital.

“Yes.” The woman recognized Addie and gave her a brief smile. “I came about the Chinese girl.”

“You’ve seen her?” “You know where Lily is?” Addie and Sarah spoke at the same time.

“No, but I heard that Hiram took her.” She gestured to her face. “He did this to me last night.” She winced, and took a steadying breath. “I wanted to tell you how he operates when he gets a new girl.” Something defiant flared in her eyes. “When he gets a new girl, he always shows her off. You know, to build up interest.”

Sarah fought back nausea, but motioned for Madeleine to continue.

“He plays poker almost every night at Parker House, and when he has a new girl, he takes her with him.”

Sarah thought for a moment. “Addie says that when he came here this morning, he had a couple of thugs with him. I suppose they’ll be there, too.”

“Oh, yes. He always has someone with him these days.”

Sarah probed further. “I have no idea how this works, but Lily said he owned her. That he had a bill of sale. Is that possible?”

Madeleine exchanged glances with Addie. “Unfortunately, yes. It happens all too frequently.” She looked around nervously. “I’ve been gone too long. I really have to get back.”

“Is there anything I can do for you?” Sarah raised her hands in a helpless gesture. “I can’t offer to let you stay here, because it’s obviously the first place he would look, but I could probably help you get away.”

Madeleine's eyes softened. "No, but thank you. I'll be all right."

Sarah doubted that, but there wasn't much she could do. "Thank you, Madeleine. I know you've put yourself in danger by coming here."

"You were good to me." Madeleine shot another glance at Addie. "Let's say we're even."

\* \* \*

Sarah paced back and forth for several minutes, then came to a stop in front of Addie. "How much money do we have?"

Addie looked up, startled. "Close to two thousand dollars."

"I want it."

Addie frowned. "It's your money, Sarah. In case you've forgotten, this is your business."

Sarah waved the comment away. "I'll be going out tonight, and when I come back, I expect to have Lily with me."

"But how?" Addie shook her head. "He won't sell her to you."

Sarah was a bundle of nerves, but she didn't let it show. "Perhaps not, but if I challenge him to a game of poker, he won't be able to resist."

"But..." Addie scrambled to find the right words. "You don't know how to play poker. What if you lose?"

Sarah tossed her head. "First of all, I do know how to play poker, and secondly, if I lose, it's only money. We'll make more." She grinned. "But I don't intend to lose."

## *Chapter Twenty-One*

“She’s gone where? What does she think she’s doing?” Devon was beside himself.

“I already told you. She said she’s going to play poker against Hiram.” Addie grabbed him by the arm to stop his pacing. “Does she really know how to play poker?”

Devon raked his fingers through his hair. “She does. In my teenage years, I was sick for almost an entire year.” He smiled at the memory. “Sarah spent hours with me every day, mostly playing poker. She’s quite good at it, actually.”

“Why am I not surprised? I haven’t seen her fail yet.” She took a close look at Devon. “Have you eaten anything yet?”

He frowned. “Come to think of it, no. But I need to get over to the Parker House.”

“You’ll do no such thing.”

Anger flared in Devon’s eyes, but Addie continued. “At least not for a while. Give her a chance to get settled in, to get the feel of the game. You’re bound to distract her.” She dished out a plate of stew. “Here, eat.”

\* \* \*

Sarah stepped out of the hired buggy in front of the impressive edifice and looked up at the row of distinctive dormer windows. Undaunted by the pressure of entering the famed gambling establishment, she’d dressed in her most attractive outfit. Knowing that she looked her best, she smiled graciously as the door opened.

Several men turned her way.

“Good evening, gentlemen. I’ll be playing upstairs tonight.”

Suggestive smirks followed her as she walked up the stairs, but she held her head high. A man met her at the top of the stairs and she tried not to show her surprise. His jacket was of the finest broadcloth, and he exuded an air of respectability. “The poker room, please,” she said, meeting his gaze steadily.

Her chin lifted imperceptibly as she surveyed the room; she was reminded of the gambling salon on the river boat, and for a moment she wondered how Jamie would react if he knew what she was doing.

She spotted Hiram immediately and it took all of her self-control not to gasp when she saw Lily. He had her dressed in a scarlet cheongsam, split up the side to mid-thigh. Sarah could not allow herself to make eye contact, in case she faltered.

“Good evening gentlemen.” Every male eye in the room had turned to assess her when she walked in. “Who among you is the best poker player?”

Several of the men stifled a laugh, but many coughed into their hands, unwilling to be caught laughing.

“Surely you must know who’s the best.” She walked slowly from table to table, surveying the amount of gold on each one. Stopping at Hiram’s table, she stared pointedly at his winnings. “It looks as though I’ve found out for myself.”

Sitting slightly behind his left shoulder, Lily stirred, but Sarah ignored her. She rested a hand on an empty chair and smiled sweetly at the other men. “Do you mind, gentlemen?” She tossed down her pouch, which landed with a thud that was heavy enough to attract attention. “I have a mind to play some poker.”

“What are you doing here, bitch?” Hiram’s low growl could be heard in every corner. A low murmur of discontent arose from around the room at his words. Sarah recognized many of the men from her eating establishment, and she tipped her head slightly, acknowledging their support.

“Why Hiram,” she said sweetly, silently thanking Addie for the lesson in southern-speak. “I’m here to beat you at poker.” Her hand lingered on the chair. “Or are you afraid to accept the challenge?”

The men at the table tensed as Hiram’s hand drifted toward the revolver that lay beside his pile of gold. “Sit,” he said, and she complied, a serene smile fixed firmly in place.

“Five Card Draw,” the dealer intoned, and Sarah nodded. She played the first few hands like a rank amateur, and the men at the table relaxed. She hadn’t intended to play poorly, but her heart was beating so rapidly she thought she might faint.

After about an hour, her play began to improve. As she gained confidence, several of the men dropped out, and by some unspoken agreement, their chairs remained empty. At one point she looked up and saw Devon sitting in the shadows, staring intently at her. She forced herself not to acknowledge him, but having him there gave her confidence.

Several hours later, the last of the players at Sarah’s table had called it a night. Smoke hung thickly over the table, burning her eyes, but she refused to blink as Hiram lit yet another cigar.

“Just the two of us,” he said, eyeing her stack of gold, which was now a little less than his. “Time to get serious.”

“Let’s do that,” she said, aware that most of the others in the room had stopped playing and were watching Hiram’s table with ill-disguised interest. She glanced around, looking for Devon, and her heart stopped. Jamie was leaning casually against the far wall, and as she watched, he lit a cigarillo. His lazy smile made her breath catch in her throat and he nodded imperceptibly, his eyes holding hers. Confidence oozed from him, and every negative thought she’d harbored over the past twenty four hours drifted away on a stream of cigar smoke.

Sarah’s luck deserted her shortly after she spotted Jamie. The smoke in the room was almost unbearable, and she wanted to rub her eyes in the worst way, but she refused to show weakness. She looked to Jamie for support, but he had moved. He was now standing beside a wall sconce, and as she watched, he fidgeted with the cigarillo in his mouth. What was he doing? Rolling the cigarillo back and forth in his mouth, he seemed to be trying to attract her attention. What was he playing at? More than ever she needed to concentrate, or she would be in real danger of losing all her money, and more importantly, Lily.

And then she remembered Jamie’s story of how he’d lost at poker by signalling his excitement every time he had a good hand. What had she been thinking? Any hands she’d won up until now had been luck of the draw. It was time to start observing her opponent more closely.

She covertly studied Hiram for several hands and even though he was still enjoying some remarkable luck, she picked up no hints. Her stack was dwindling and she was beginning to worry when she glanced at Lily. As she had throughout the game, she sat perfectly still, but

Sarah noticed her blinking... twice, then twice more. She was sitting directly in line with Hiram's smoke but her blinking was anything but random.

The dealer spun out the cards. Hiram picked up his hand and blinked twice. Sarah folded, and he muttered under his breath as he claimed the small pot. Several more hands like this and she knew she had him. Slowly, she began to increase her bets when he didn't blink, and her stack grew. It was all she could do to contain her excitement when she bluffed him on the last hand and the dealer pushed the remainder of Hiram's gold across the table.

He stood up angrily.

"What's your hurry?" she asked, a bold challenge in her voice.

"What do you want, woman?" He pointed to his mouth. "The gold out of my teeth?"

"No, thank you." She tilted her head toward Lily. "But I'll play you one hand for her." She shoved the pile of gold to the center of the table, removed her mother's ring, and placed it on top. "Who knows?" she taunted. "Your luck just might change."

He faltered for a moment and then sat down.

"I'll want that bill of sale," she said coolly. "Made over to me."

He growled and looked at the dealer. "Deal."

"Five card draw. Two draws of two." The dealer flipped the cards.

Hiram picked up his cards and studied them, unblinking. Sarah looked down at two pair, eights and tens.

"Two cards." Hiram put down his cigar; it had gone out over an hour ago.

Sarah discarded. "One card." She looked down at a full house, tens over eights.

The dealer looked at Hiram. "Sir?"

"Two cards." He looked down and glared across the table, still unblinking.

Sarah tabled her hand.

Hiram slammed his cards on the table. "Take her," he shouted, "but don't let me see you in here again."

Sarah smiled. "That would be my pleasure. Now if you would just sign the bill of sale, indicating that she's free?" The room erupted into applause and she turned to face the men. "Thank you gentlemen. It's been a pleasure."

Hiram scribbled his signature, then tossed the piece of paper across the table. Sarah picked it up, put it in her bag and smiled at Lily. "Let's go home."

\* \* \*

Lily trembled as Sarah led her down the stairs and out the front door of the hotel. She climbed awkwardly but eagerly into the buggy Jamie had waiting, and clung to Sarah's arm all the way back.

"Am I really free?" she'd asked, her voice thick with emotion.

"Yes." Sarah squeezed her hand. "You are free. I'll give you the paper."

"Thank you." Tears pooled in her eyes. "I don't know what else to say."

"You've said it all." She glanced over at Jamie. "It's time to look forward."

Addie, Anna and Angus surrounded Lily as she stepped into the house. Somehow Devon had made it back before Sarah and Jamie, and he stood in the background, smiling as Lily was greeted by her friends. When Lily slipped away to change, he joined the group.

“You should have seen Sarah,” he said, reliving the scene for Addie, Anna and Angus. “She shoved that pile of gold into the center of the table with all the confidence in the world.” He paused and looked at her. “I was proud of you, Sarah, I really was.”

“Thank you Devon.” She gestured toward Lily, who had changed into her tunic and loose pants. “But it was Lily who showed me what to look for.”

Lily remained silent. Her gaze went past Sarah, rested on Jamie for a moment, then returned to Sarah with a faint smile and a nod of her head.

Sarah turned and found him leaning against the wall, waiting patiently. How could she have doubted this man who made her heart leap into her throat every time she looked at him? He pushed off from the wall and extended his hand. “Come,” he said, leading her toward the door. He looked back at their friends. “Please excuse us. What I have to say to Sarah is private.”

She could barely make out his face in the flickering light from the dining room window, but it was enough.

“Sarah,” he said, cupping her face in his hands. “Believe me when I say Lettie means nothing to me. I had no idea she was going to show up. I’ve sent her away.”

“I know,” she said, gazing up into his eyes.

“You do?” He pulled back. “How could you know that?”

Tears streamed down her face, but she didn’t care. “When I saw you tonight... at the poker game... I knew.” She touched his face with her fingertips. “I should have stayed at your ranch and demanded an explanation, but when I saw you brush back her hair, and then kiss her...” She tried to scowl at him. “I was afraid that I was too late to let you know how I feel.”

“And how is that?” He gathered her into his arms, lowered his head and gave her a soul-searing kiss.

“I can’t tell you if you keep kissing me.” She grinned up at him.

“Shall I stop?”

“Never.” She raised her lips for another kiss and sighed when he finally released her. “I love you Jamie.” She made a broad gesture that included the eating tent and the house. “This has been a wonderful challenge, but I don’t think I need to prove myself anymore. I went to Sacramento to tell you that.” She smiled up at him in the darkness. “Plus the part about loving you.”

“I love you too, Sarah. I’d planned to come back to San Francisco if you didn’t show up in a day or two.”

“Oh, and what were you going to say?”

He dropped to one knee. “Sarah Howard, will you marry me?”

She pulled him to his feet. “I can’t think of anything I’d like better than to be your wife.”

Jamie patted his pockets as though a ring might magically appear. “I don’t have a ring, but I’ll get one.”

Sarah dug in the pocket of her dress and pulled out her mother’s ring. “Let’s use this one for now.”

He smiled and slipped it on her finger. “Somehow, I think your mother would approve.”

## *Epilogue*

Sarah and Jamie were married on a warm, lazy day in early summer. Golden sunlight streamed through the trees, illuminating a small trio of Mexicans strumming softly on their guitars as the guests arrived for the ceremony. Lucy, Charlie and Addie had arrived yesterday. Charlie dragged Jamie off for a tour of the ranch and the two men had talked development potential long into the night.

Lucy and Addie willingly took direction from Teresa as they prepared the wedding feast, leaving Sarah with plenty of time to greet the other guests.

Caroline and Lizzie were soon drawn into conversation with the other women, and their husbands drifted out to the patio to join Jamie and Charlie.

Recently married, Anna and Angus took Missy outside to see Uncle Jamie, and to visit the new foal in the stable.

Lily greeted Sarah with a fierce hug, and when she met Devon's gaze over Sarah's shoulder, she didn't look away.

Sarah pulled Lily toward the other women. "My friends," she said simply. "My new family. Thank you for being here."

"Oh, pish." Lucy dabbed at the corner of her eye. "I'm just sorry your mother couldn't be here, but I'll be writing to tell her all about it."

"I am too," said Sarah. "But it was just too far. Never mind, she's here in spirit."

Sarah turned to Addie. "Now that you own the eating place, do you plan to make any changes?"

Addie laughed. "Why tamper with success?" She looked at the other women gathered around the work surface. "I feel blessed to know every one of you." She blinked back tears and looked eagerly outside, where a buggy was pulling up in the courtyard. "And here's your final surprise," she said, removing her apron and fussing with her hair.

"Surprise?" Sarah went to the front door. "Captain Johnson," she exclaimed, "and Levi! When did you get here?"

"A few days ago." The captain gave her a kiss on the cheek. "And just in time. I think the priest is right behind us."

Jamie took her hand and led her to the newly constructed grape arbor. They faced the priest, said their vows, and then they were man and wife. He paused right before he kissed her, their lips inches apart.

"Are you happy, Sarah? Will this be enough for you?"

"You're enough of a challenge for me, Jamie Thompson. I knew it from the first moment I saw you." She closed the distance between them. "Kiss me," she murmured.

The heat in his eyes almost scorched her. "With pleasure, Mrs. Thompson."

\* \* \* \* \*

Thank you for reading *Restless Hearts*.

If you enjoyed this book, I would be grateful if you would leave a review on Amazon.com:  
<http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00LS61SL0>

***Please continue reading for an excerpt from Book Two of the Gold Rush Series, featuring Lily's story.***

About the author:

Mona Ingram is the author of 21 romance novels, including two novellas. Many of her stories take place in British Columbia, where she has lived since the age of twelve. In recent years, she has lived in the Okanagan Valley and on Vancouver Island. In addition to reading and writing, traveling and bird watching are among Mona's favourite pastimes.

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## ***No Such Thing***

### *Chapter One*

*San Francisco Harbor. October 1849*

The razor gleamed in the pale, thin light that seeped in through the windows of the captain's cabin. Lily stopped pacing and picked it up, her delicate fingers tracing the now familiar outline. How many times had she held it, forcing her hands to remain steady as she shaved the captain's pockmarked face?

She flicked it open and ran her thumb along the sharp edge, watching dispassionately as a thin line of blood welled up in the cut. She'd known that the razor was finely honed; after all, she was the one who sharpened it every day before using it. And every time she'd performed the

routine task she'd wondered if this would be the day she would break... if she'd give in to the almost uncontrollable temptation to slit the captain's throat.

It would have been so easy, she thought now, flicking the razor closed with one hand. But her desire to go on living was stronger. The captain was well aware of the direction of her thoughts, and he seemed to enjoy watching her struggle with temptation as she wielded the razor. But while she shaved the vulnerable area below his chin, he'd taken great pleasure in pointing out that the crew would know of his demise within hours, and then what? She'd be at their mercy. Not satisfied to point out her tenuous position, he'd told her in chilling detail what would befall her when the crew began to fight over her. Momentarily defeated, she had closed her mind to the disturbing images, biding her time until the ship reached San Francisco.

Born in the Year of the Tiger, Lily was a fighter. At least that's what her *Baba* had told her. Thank goodness he couldn't see her now, her spirit broken and terrified about what the future might bring. She glanced at the locked cabin door, wondering if she should end it now, or if she could reach deep down and find one last reservoir of courage. Because it would take courage to face what was about to walk through that door. Yes, she told herself. For her father, if for no other reason, she would survive.

A key rattled in the lock. Lily replaced the razor and stood by the table, bracing herself against the edge. She may be strong in spirit, but she was wise enough to be afraid. The captain had bought her in Shanghai, telling her that he intended to sell her when they reached San Francisco. That time had come, and she stood unblinking as he entered the cabin with another man.

"What did I tell you?" The captain's lust-filled gaze raked over her. "A little beauty."

The man's eyes narrowed. "She's small." He approached, and she looked directly at him, determined not to show fear. An ugly scar ran down the side of his face, the scar tissue shiny in the subdued light.

"What's your name, girl?" he demanded.

She remained silent and he turned to the captain. "I thought you said she speaks English."

"She does. Answer him, Lily."

"You'll answer me when I speak to you." The man backhanded her so fast she scarcely saw it coming. Her head snapped around and in that moment, she realized that her situation had gone from bad to worse. The man glaring at her was evil; she'd need all her wits about her if she had any hope of getting away from him.

"My name is Lily," she said, fighting back the tears that stung behind her eyes.

"Take off that... that thing," he said, pointing to her tunic and loose pants.

She glanced at the captain, who nodded. Lily assessed her chances of grabbing the razor and slashing her way out of the cabin. Tempting as it was, logic told her to bide her time until she was on land.

As she removed her clothes, she blocked out reality by willing herself back in time. Back to Shanghai, and the lush tropical gardens where she had worked with her father. Standing naked, she was vaguely aware of the man studying her, his eyes devoid of emotion. She braced herself for his touch, determined not to react, but it didn't come. After a moment, he grunted his approval.

"She'll bring big money," he announced, waving for her to put her clothes back on. "I think I'll place her in my number one bordello. Ruby will know how to get the most out of her."

Lily had heard about bordellos, and her hands trembled as she pulled her clothes back on. For one irrational moment she wondered if she should have killed herself while she had the chance, but once more she saw her father's face and her resolve strengthened.

"Get your things, girl." The man turned his back on her and she gathered up her one change of clothes. Everything she held dear had been taken from her and presumably sold before she left Shanghai. Nothing remained of her former life. Not the jade bracelet handed down from her mother. Not the gold pendant her father had given her on her eighteenth birthday. No tangible evidence of happier times. All she had were the precious memories she guarded in her heart.

She forced her thoughts back to the present, aware that the man was completing his business with the captain. Money and paper changed hands, as well as several blocks of what Lily knew to be opium. She picked up the razor and slid it into her pocket. She had earned it, and it was unlikely that the captain would miss it for several days. She clutched her meagre belongings to her chest and prepared for what was to come.

"Let's go." The man preceded her out the door and she followed onto the deck, blinking in the light of day.

Her first impression was of a forest of masts shrouded in mist. It was impossible to take it all in, but she was aware of boats of various sizes ferrying to and from the moored ships, unloading cargo and people, and depositing them on shore. Men called to each other in strange languages, their voices loud and urgent. Everyone seemed to be in a hurry to get somewhere and she wondered if this was what gold fever sounded like.

The man – she refused to think of him as her owner – motioned for her to climb down the rope ladder. A small boat waited below, two men at the oars. She clambered down the ladder and took a seat in the rear of the boat.

One man cleared his throat and spat overboard. "I see you got her," he said, leering in Lily's direction. "You sure know how to pick 'em, Boss."

The other man waited until everyone was settled and then turned the boat with a flick of the oars. "So, Hiram. Where are you going to put her? I've a mind to try her out myself."

*So that was his name.*

Hiram gave a short laugh, but there was no mirth in it. "She's not for the likes of you, laddie." He studied Lily openly, and nodded to himself. "She may be a Celestial, but there's something about her that will appeal to our richest clientele. When Ruby is finished with her, she'll bring top money." He sat back and lit a cigar. "Ever since Ah Toy came to town, the miners have been demanding variety."

Sitting in the back of the rowboat, Lily studied the shoreline as they approached. Cargo of all kinds was stacked in what seemed like haphazard piles. As soon as a pile was loaded into a cart, another took its place. The waterfront appeared to be complete chaos, and yet the carts continued to load and move out, while more goods arrived.

The boat bumped against a small pier. One of the men got out, and Hiram motioned for her to follow. "Get in," he said, indicating a horse-drawn cart. The two men sat up front, and Hiram sat beside her in the back. The mist had turned to a fine rain. She was cold and wet, but she needed to stay alert, as this was the only time she'd have to take note of her surroundings. The driver called to the horses and the cart lurched forward, freeing the wheels from mud that was almost a foot deep. On the dock, a man cursed the rain, and tossed a sheet of canvas over several large sacks of what appeared to be flour. This waterfront was nothing like the one in Shanghai, where cargo moved in and out of the warehouses in an orderly fashion. She watched it all with interest, noting that what San Francisco lacked in organization, it made up for in vibrancy. Men on the

streets tipped their hats to one another, or exchanged a few quick words, but none lingered. They walked with purpose in their stride; the excitement was contagious, and she longed to be part of it.

The man holding the reins turned. "Are we going to Ruby's, Boss?" He didn't notice the man with a cart rounding the corner in front of him. Head down, the man pulled his cart into their path, and the horse closest to the man reared, tilting the wagon and spilling everyone except the driver into the mud.

Lily watched in horror as Hiram dragged himself to his feet. He'd landed in a pile of horse dung, and swore mightily as he tried to brush the offending material from his trousers and jacket. The other man attempted to stand, but he seemed to have injured his ankle, and could only drag himself out of the way and onto the wooden sidewalk that ran beside the road.

Realizing that she was wasting a precious opportunity, Lily jumped down from the wagon and glanced around. A narrow alleyway ran beside the building to her right. She darted down it and looked around frantically, but cover was scarce.

*What am I thinking?* She asked herself. *I can't hide here; this is the first place they'll look.* She continued to run, scurrying between buildings, getting farther from the main square every moment. Here the buildings weren't so close together, and cover was difficult to come by. She paused and forced herself to think. Fear of discovery coupled with lack of exercise over the long voyage left her weak and trembling. It was now raining steadily; she needed to find somewhere to shelter. Up ahead, two men were loading tools into a cart. Other than the two workmen, the street appeared deserted. A partly-constructed building huddled forlornly on a small lot, new wood gleaming through the mist.

"That's all we can do for now." The taller of the men spoke. "The owner says we can expect another lumber delivery tomorrow morning."

"I hope so," his partner grumbled. "I could have been working out in Happy Valley." They trundled off.

Lily waited until they were out of sight, and then crept into the building. Fearful and cold, she huddled under a stairwell and took stock of her situation. Foolishly, she hadn't eaten for the past three or four days, nervous about her imminent arrival in San Francisco. But at this point, hunger was the least of her problems. She had to find somewhere to hide; somewhere safe. In the meantime, she spotted a piece of dry canvas, pulled it over her head and curled up under the stairs. Just a moment's rest was all she needed...

The sky was the color of old pewter when she woke. Had she really slept through the night? She tentatively moved her limbs. If her aches and pains were anything to go by, she'd slept without moving the entire night. Her stomach rumbled, and she staggered to her feet. With no money, no shelter, and nowhere to turn for help, she hadn't the faintest idea how she would survive. But first things first. The workers had mentioned another shipment of lumber today; she had to get out of here and find somewhere else to stay.

She took a few tentative steps into the street and stopped. A delicious smell reached her on the morning breeze. It was the smell of fresh bread, and her mouth watered as she imagined biting into a warm piece of bread slathered with butter and preserves. It seemed like only yesterday that she'd shared this special treat with her friend Julia after their day's lessons.

*Stop that,* she told herself, taking a few more steps to test her strength. *That was a long time ago, and memories won't fill an empty stomach.* Even so, she followed the smell, and found herself outside another two-storey house. Whoever lived here got up early to bake the bread; she watched shadows form and fade as someone moved past a flickering candle. A white tent

occupied most of the space between the house and the street. One broad tent flap was rolled up, leaving it open to the street, and she looked inside. A table with benches on either side ran the length of the tent, and she surmised that it was some sort of eating place. If she could find somewhere to hide, perhaps there would be left-over food. Unlikely, but at the moment it was her best option, and daylight was fast approaching.

She slipped past the tent and continued to edge her way behind the house. A neatly stacked pile of firewood rested against the side of the house, once again covered by a sheet of canvas. She huddled beside the wood pile, on the opposite side from where the residents had been taking wood, and waited.

\* \* \*

*Lily lifted her face to the sun and sighed with contentment. She and Julia were perched on the edge of the tiled fountain, dabbling their feet in the cool water. They'd just completed their first week of French language instruction.*

*"I still don't know why we have to learn French." Lily wrinkled her nose. "I'll never use it." She glanced sideways at her friend. "Will you?"*

*"Possibly," said Julia. "I might marry an Ambassador or something. It could be helpful."*

*Lily stared at her friend. "Is that how you see the rest of your life?"*

*Julia bristled. "There's nothing wrong with marrying an Ambassador."*

*"No, of course not" Lily shrugged. "It's just that I've never considered anything other than working beside my father." She lifted her feet out of the water and watched the droplets fall. "I was so surprised when he agreed to let me take lessons with you. I'd never have learned English otherwise." She paused for a moment. "He's only letting me learn to please your parents... because you wanted me to keep you company."*

*"Haven't you enjoyed it?" Julia looked confused.*

*"Oh, yes, I've learned a lot." Lily's thoughts turned inward. "But I'm the only family my father has left. It's my duty to help him."*

*"Then I guess it's lucky for you that you enjoy gardening." Julia paused. "You do, don't you?"*

*Lily's expression softened. "Yes. There's something about making things grow that gives me great pleasure."*

*Julia shook her head. "You're funny, Lily."*

*"Why?"*

*She splashed water against Lily's legs, careful not to wet her trousers. "Because you could do anything you want with your life. You're so beautiful... surely you must know that by now."*

*Lily ducked her head. She didn't like people commenting on her looks, even though it was usually a compliment. She would rather be known for her bravery, or her hard work.*

*"What I look like on the outside has nothing to do with who I am on the inside," she said, not for the first time. "But thank you."*

\* \* \*

*"Thank you..."* Lily awoke with the words on her lips, and for a moment she didn't know where she was. Fear and hunger were making her hallucinate; she tried to stand up, but almost fell over. Darkness was falling and if she was going to move, now was the time to do it. She shivered violently and resumed her crouched position. Perhaps just a few more minutes, and she'd try again.

## Chapter Two

“Is someone there?” A woman’s voice filtered into Lily’s consciousness and she struggled to open her eyes. She supposed it had to happen eventually; at least she’d been found by a woman.

“Please come out. I can help you if you need medical attention.”

Clutching at the woodpile for support, Lily attempted to stand.

“Hello,” the woman said, bending at the waist. “Can I help you?”

They were the words Lily had been longing to hear. She couldn’t make out the woman’s face in the dark, but she reached out toward her. “Please,” she whimpered, just as her legs gave out and everything went black.

Angry voices woke her. A man had joined in the conversation and she shrank back. He was arguing with the woman about taking a man into the house and it took her a moment to realize that they were speaking about her. Moments later, she felt herself being picked up. The warmth of the man’s body felt so good against her chilled flesh; she really should thank him, but then she remembered the last time a man had touched her and her eyes flew open. She struggled to get free and found him looking at her in the strangest way. Had the last few days been in vain? Was he planning to take her back to Hiram? The thought was unbearable, but she was too weak to fight any more. With a defeated sigh, she closed her eyes.

\* \* \*

Time had lost its meaning. Lily opened her eyes, not knowing how many minutes had passed. She was alone in a room, lying on a bed. A candle flickered softly on a bedside table, but there was no adornment in the room. She swung her feet over the side of the bed, but she doubted that she had the strength to stand.

The door opened. “Hello.” The woman from before entered; she hadn’t seen her clearly enough to recognize her, but she could tell by her voice. The woman carried a basin of water which she set on the bedside table. A small bar of sweetly scented soap followed and she recognized it as lavender. She almost swooned at the idea of washing her face and hands, but the woman was saying something.

“Do you speak English?”

“Yes.” She silently thanked Julia for the years of friendship.

The woman smiled. “My name is Sarah Howard, and this is my house. I’d like you to know that you’re welcome to stay.”

Lily considered the woman’s words. “I have no money.”

“Oh, no. I didn’t mean it like that. You’re welcome to stay here for free.”

“Why?” She voiced her thoughts. “Nothing is free.”

Sarah sucked in a breath. “What’s your name?”

“Lily.”

“Well, Lily. I’m tired and maybe even a bit cranky, but when I say you can stay here for free, I mean it.”

The woman called Sarah was angry, and she had a right to be. Shame washed over Lily as she realized how her words must have sounded. She lowered her eyes so the other woman wouldn’t see the tears that threatened to fall. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t deserve your kindness.”

Sarah studied her silently for several moments, and then seemed to come to a decision. "Listen," she said. "We're a houseful of women and we've all had problems of one sort or another. Anna's husband died shortly before her son was born, and Addie was beaten by a man when she refused to work for him as a prostitute."

A chill crept down Lily's back. "Hiram!" she said.

Sarah pulled back. "How did you know?"

"Because he bought me. He threatened to beat me if I didn't go to work in one of his bordellos."

Sarah shook her head. Could this possibly be true? She needed to ask Addie. "Let's not talk about this anymore tonight. You must be hungry, right?"

"I'm starving. I haven't eaten for something like five days."

"Then wash up if you like, and I'll get you some broth and bread. You're welcome to come out and eat with the others if you'd like."

"No thank you." Lily eyed the basin of water. "Something to eat and sleep is what I need more than anything."

Sarah returned a few moments later with a large bowl of rich broth and two thick slices of bread. Lily waited until she left the room and then forced herself to eat slowly. Had her luck changed? She desperately wanted to believe it, but hope was a tenuous commodity since her father had died. The woman Sarah seemed almost too good to be true... kind and understanding, with no apparent ulterior motive. She set down the empty bowl and fought against the exhaustion that threatened to overwhelm her. She couldn't possibly lie down on the clean sheets until she'd rid herself of the worst of the dirt.

She picked up the small bar of scented soap and her thoughts drifted back to the first time she'd met Julia. Her life hadn't always been easy, but when compared with the present, those days had been innocent and carefree...

\* \* \*

"Hello. Are you one of the gardeners?" A girl of about fourteen appeared out of nowhere, blocking the afternoon sun. Lily's first impression was of blonde hair peeking out from under a broad-brimmed hat.

Lily scrambled to her feet. She'd been taught to stand when confronted by one of the household members. "Yes, I am," she said, thinking that it was a rather silly question. Why else would she be on her knees, weeding around the lavender? Bees buzzed around the heavily-scented plant.

"What's your name?"

This girl was certainly direct, but Lily had heard that *lo fan* were like that. "I'm Lily," she said, looking the other girl in the eye.

"What's your Chinese name?"

Lily's hand tightened on her gardening tool. "Yang Li," she said, her chin tilting up ever so slightly.

"Yang Li," repeated the girl. "I like Lily better."

Lily said nothing.

"I came out to get some flowers for my bedroom." She eyed the lavender.

Lily's dismay must have shown on her face, because the girl stepped back. "I suppose that would ruin the look of this beautiful plant, though. Do you have any other ideas?"

Using her limited English vocabulary, Lily led the girl to the cutting garden beside the new glass greenhouse. The girl gathered a small bouquet, chattering the entire time. Lily understood

most of what she was saying, but she found herself wishing that she could enter into the conversation. The girl was obviously spoiled by her rich family, but she was bright and cheerful. It was a long time since Lily had had a friend, and she began to relax as the girl talked.

After a while, she seemed to run out of words. "My name's Julia, by the way." She offered Lily an impish grin. "Would you like to be friends?"

Lily frowned. Had this girl read her mind?

"Listen." Julia's tone was conspiratorial. "I know you probably don't understand every word I say, but you understand most of it, don't you?"

Lily nodded, and Julia beamed. "I have an idea. What if I could arrange for you to come to classes with me?" Lily could almost see the gears turning inside her head. "I have a tutor who comes every morning for a few hours. Daddy wants me to learn to speak Mandarin. I can tell him that you're helping me learn Mandarin, and in the meantime, you can learn English. What do you say? I'll have Daddy ask your father."

Lily was surprised by how much she wanted to be friends with this bright creature. She reminded Lily of a butterfly, flitting from one subject to another. And yet, she was sweet, and as far as Lily could tell, she had no ulterior motive in wanting to be friends.

"Okay," she said, hesitant to let her enthusiasm show. But Julia had been sincere, and within a week, they were attending classes together, building the foundation of their friendship.

Julia's father had built an impressive estate in Shanghai's American settlement a few years prior, and Lily's father had been the head gardener since the beginning. Most of the staff lived outside the fortress-like walls of the estate, but Lily's father occupied a position of importance in this rapidly changing society where appearances were everything. An influential trader with his own fleet of ships, Frederick Reed reveled in his position. He frequently showed off his gardens to the members of the International Settlement, and was often heard to brag that his gardener lived on site.

Lily's mother had died in childbirth many years ago, her presence little more than a faint memory. As she'd grown older, Lily wondered if her parents had loved each other, but she didn't dare ask her father. He never spoke of her mother, and, and hadn't shown any interest in remarrying. Father and daughter occupied a small cottage on a corner of the estate, their future secure.

That is until six months ago, when the fabric of Lily's life started to unravel.

\* \* \*

"Guess what?" Julia was almost vibrating with excitement. "Mummy's taking me to Hong Kong. We're going on one of Daddy's ships." She grabbed Lily's hands. "I'll miss you, but think how much fun I'll have looking for something to bring back for you." She frowned. "What would you like?"

Lily laughed. "Nothing, Julia. Just have a good time and bring back your memories. How long will you be gone?"

"About six months. Will you miss me?"

"Of course." It was the truth. After more than four years, the girls had become best of friends, and saw each other every day. "But you'll be home before you know it."

Lily slipped easily back into her work routine with her father. A quiet man, he rarely praised her efforts, but she knew that he was proud to have her at his side as they tended the gardens together. In spite of the fact that the Reed family would be gone for an extended period of time, her father maintained the gardens to his usual exacting standards.

\* \* \*

Lily paused in the act of clearing the dishes after the evening meal. “Father, what’s that on your arm?”

Her father looked listlessly at the freckle-like rash on his arm. “I don’t know,” he said. “It appeared two days ago when I was digging out that nest of voles.” He tried to stand up, then eased himself back down.

She looked at him more closely. His forehead was beaded with perspiration and yet he shivered, as though overcome with a sudden chill.

Fear gripped her. “You don’t look well. I’m going to the big house for Liang Yan. She took care of Julia when she got sick last year.” She rushed from the room over her father’s protests, sensing that there was something seriously wrong.

She was right.

The healer took one look at her father and ordered her from the room. When she came out some time later, her expression was grim. “I’m sorry, Li, but your father has bubonic plague.”

Lily’s stomach plummeted. Very few escaped the plague alive. “How bad?” she asked, dreading the answer.

Yan shook her head. “He already has lumps in his neck and armpits.” She shook her head.

Lily walked toward the door, but Yan held her back. “No,” she said firmly. “This is a highly contagious disease, and we can’t risk spreading it.”

“But *Baba*...” Lily looked toward the little house she’d shared so happily with her father.

“He asked me to keep you away.” Yan’s voice broke. “He asked me to tell you that he loves you, and he doesn’t want to risk infecting you or anyone else. He said it would break his heart if anything happened to you.”

\* \* \*

Lily’s worst fears were realized two days later when her father died. She had been sleeping on a cot in a small alcove off the kitchen and was awakened by the housekeeper. “Come,” she said, her tone brusque. “Your father has gone to be with his ancestors. We must bury him right away in a special section of the cemetery.”

Lily dressed in white – the color of death – and followed the cart to the cemetery, where a quick ceremony was performed. Shocked at the speed of her *Baba*’s death, the words barely registered. The only people in attendance were the housekeeper and her mother’s sister. As a cooling rain fell, she tried to remember anything about the aunt she barely recognized, but nothing came to mind. After her mother’s death, the woman had disappeared from her life. She had no idea why her aunt was here now, especially since the woman scarcely looked at her.

Eyes dulled with pain, Lily followed the housekeeper to the cart, but was surprised when the woman laid a hand on her arm.

“I’m sorry, Lily. You won’t be coming back to the estate.”

Taken off guard, Lily gave her a blank look. “Why not?”

“Because we need to clean out the cottage and prepare it for the new gardener.”

Lily had been too worried about her father to consider what would happen to her; the announcement came as a shock. “But where will I go?”

The housekeeper looked away, and for a moment Lily thought she saw pity in her expression. “Your aunt has offered to take you in,” she said, nodding toward the unsmiling woman. “We have packed up your personal items from the cottage and she has them.”

“But Julia...” Lily was grasping at straws, but she didn’t care; there was something about her aunt that frightened her. She felt helpless, as though she was being swept away by a raging river. “How will she know where to find me?”

The housekeeper's expression softened. "I'm sure you will always be welcome to visit, but Mr. and Mrs. Reed won't be back for another four months. You should be thankful that your aunt has offered to take you. Run along now." She walked away, her back stiff and unyielding.

### *Chapter Three*

Lily's aunt started in on her as soon as the housekeeper was out of earshot.

"Foolish girl! What makes you think the *lo fan* will want to see you when they come back? You are nothing to them."

Lily considered answering back, but the housekeeper was right... she was lucky to have somewhere to stay. She took the surprisingly small package of personal goods from her aunt and lowered her eyes. It wouldn't do to let this unpleasant woman know how she felt... at least not yet.

\* \* \*

Lily unpacked her meagre belongings the next morning and let out a cry of despair. Her jade bracelet, passed down to her from her mother, and her gold necklace were missing, as were all of her good clothes. All that remained were cheap cotton tunics and slacks... the attire of the lowliest servants.

"Where are my things?" she inquired, trying to keep her voice even. "My jewellery and my good clothes?"

Her aunt's eyes narrowed. "Those trinkets?" she hissed. "I sold them. Did you think I was going to feed you and house you for nothing?"

Tears sprang to Lily's eyes. "But those were given to me by my parents. You had no right to take them." She stood her ground, her body trembling with anger.

Her aunt glared at her and for the first time in her life, Lily saw pure evil. "I have every right," she hissed. "You are nothing more to me than another mouth to feed... an inconvenience."

Lily considered running away, but her aunt lived in a part of Shanghai she didn't know. It had never occurred to her that by living with her father on the estate, she was effectively shut off from the rest of the world. Her forays outside the compound had been to nearby markets to purchase food and other necessities; beyond that, she was a stranger in her own town.

Lily's aunt ran a small noodle shop near her home. Lily didn't mind the hard work, but no matter how hard she tried, her aunt found fault. Business was improving daily, with more and more laborers frequenting their stand and trying to engage Lily in conversation. Lily was polite, but she didn't encourage them, aware of her aunt's gaze constantly on her. There was something sinister in the way her aunt watched the men fawning over her. More than once she had noticed the woman whispering with strange men and looking in her direction.

"Come," her aunt said one afternoon, closing the shop early. Lily followed, curious as to what tragedy had befallen her aunt that she needed to close early... an unheard of occurrence.

Her aunt wound her way through a warren of narrow streets, coming out at a section of docks along the Whampoa River. It was an area Lily recognized, having travelled there with Julia to see one of her father's new ships.

"Where are we going?" she asked at last.

Her aunt ignored her, eventually stopping at an ocean-going ship. The gangplank tilted at a steep angle, and she pushed Lily ahead, puffing breathlessly as she followed.

Once on deck, they were greeted by a rough-looking seaman who stared at Lily as though he had never seen a woman before.

“Captain Jeremiah Briggs,” Lily’s aunt demanded, mangling the pronunciation of the last name.

The man continued to ogle at Lily. “I’ll take you to him,” he said, leading them down the companionway and aft to the captain’s cabin. He rapped sharply. “Come,” a voice answered, and he opened the door.

Lily’s heart started to pound as she looked around the cabin. Something didn’t feel right here, and she turned questioning eyes on her aunt.

“So you’ve brought her.” The man studied her openly. “I was told she’s eighteen, but she looks younger.” He stroked a rapidly growing erection through the front of his trousers. “I like them young.”

Lily turned terrified eyes to her aunt, who refused to meet her gaze.

“All right,” he said, tossing a bundle of bills to Lily’s aunt. “I’ll take her. She’ll keep me company on the way to San Francisco, and I can sell her there at a nice profit.”

Lily’s aunt grabbed the money and scurried out the door, leaving Lily stunned and alone with the captain.

A cunning grin caught at the corner of his mouth. “You didn’t know about this, did you?”

Lily shook her head. Maybe it was all a mistake and he would let her go. Somehow she didn’t think so.

“Better that way,” he said, lighting a cigar. “Less time to object.” He rose and circled her. “So you speak English.”

Lily considered not responding, but she’d already indicated she understood him. She nodded.

“Good,” he said, as though they were conducting a business negotiation. “Here’s what’s going to happen. This ship sets sail for San Francisco tonight.” He gave a chuckle that set the fine hairs on the back of her neck on end. “Don’t get too attached to me, because I’ll be selling you when we get there.” He paused and lifted her heavy hair. She could feel his breath on her neck and she was almost overcome with nausea. “You should bring a fine price.”

He continued pacing. “If you behave, I’ll let you out on deck once a week, depending on the weather. The rest of the time, you’ll be in here.” He paused dramatically. “With the door locked.”

Lily looked toward the door.

“Don’t think about trying to get away.” He stopped and pretended to think. “And don’t think about trying to harm me. If you were foolish enough to do that, my men would take turns with you for the rest of the voyage.” He made a tutting noise. “Trust me, that would not be pleasant.”

He adjusted the bulge in the front of his trousers. “Much as I’d like to see what I’ve bought, I have to get this ship underway.” He glanced toward the bunk. “There will be plenty of time for that later.”

\* \* \*

The captain made good on his promise. He took her virginity roughly, seemingly unaware of the tears streaming silently down her cheeks. After that, she learned to turn off her mind each night while he rutted on top of her, then rolled over and snored loudly while she roamed silently around the cabin, wondering if she would ever climb out of the black hole that was now her life.

Her pride would not permit her to beg him to leave her alone. Besides, she knew it would do no good.

Her one foray out onto the deck ended badly. The seamen all stopped what they were doing and stared at her, many making lewd gestures in her direction. Terrified, she ran back to the cabin, thankful for the locked door.

As the days and weeks went by, Lily's heart hardened. The captain had taken more than her virginity... he'd shattered every illusion she'd ever had about tenderness between a man and a woman. Looking back, she recognized the romantic, whispered dreams she'd shared with Julia as nothing more than the fantasies of two silly girls. This was real life. She may be broken, but somehow she was determined to survive.

The only break in her routine came about a third of the way through the voyage, when the captain invited several of his officers into his cabin for a game of cards. At the captain's insistence, she sat quietly behind him, watching the game progress. She did not recognize the game, nor the cards, but to amuse herself, she started observing the reactions of the men when they won, as well as when they lost. When she mentioned to the captain that the first mate tugged at his beard when he had a good hand, he looked at her curiously, but said nothing. The games took place more frequently after that, and he encouraged her to report to him when she saw other telltale signs. Pleased with his winnings, he presented her with a change of clothes. Her new outfit was a simple tunic and pants, but the fabric was finely woven, reminding her of her former life. But she harbored no illusions about what would happen when they arrived in San Francisco.

\* \* \*

"Bollocks!" The captain turned away from the mirror, where he had been shaving. Lily had noticed a slow improvement in his appearance in the past few weeks, including reducing his beard to a strip of hair that rimmed his chin.

He swished the razor in a basin of water. "Have you ever shaved anyone?" he asked, watching her reaction closely.

"No," she said, her gaze fastened on the sharp blade.

He passed her the razor and indicated the nicks on his face. "You can't do worse than this."

Lily turned the blade this way and that, catching the light. He was right; he'd made a mess of his face. She approached cautiously, wondering if this was a test.

Within a few days, she had mastered the art of shaving him. He enjoyed the attention, but she was careful not to look in his eyes, unable to hide the hatred that simmered just below the surface. Just when she thought she couldn't stand him another moment, he'd remind her of her fate if something were to happen to him. As they neared San Francisco, she resigned herself to the fact that she'd do nothing... at least not while she was on board.

\* \* \*

The faint scent of lavender brought Lily back to the present. Her life these past few months had been one long nightmare... and almost as unbelievable. She splashed water on her face and gave a prayer of thanks. Was it possible that she could find peace in this house full of women? She stretched out on the bed with an exhausted sigh. She would certainly try.

\* \* \*

Devon walked aimlessly. He knew that Addie meant well, and he appreciated her concern, but she couldn't possibly understand what had happened to him when he looked into the woman's eyes. His friends had called him a confirmed bachelor for many years now, and in spite of his oft-expressed desire to remain unattached, he was growing tired of the single life. In quiet times alone, he'd frequently found himself wondering if he would ever find a woman to love.

And now that he had, she was beyond his reach. He didn't need Addie to tell him that. He'd seen it for himself in the way she looked at him, breaking his heart even as he gazed into her eyes and fell deeply in love.

He found himself at the waterfront and looked into the darkness. Masts creaked as ships rocked at anchor, and disembodied voices drifted over the water. Here and there, a soft light glowed from a ship's interior, but the harbor was mostly quiet.

The ship she had arrived on was out there somewhere. He wondered if he would ever learn what had terrified her... or if he even wanted to know. If the fear in her eyes was anything to go by, her story might be better off left untold. Would time erase whatever had made her tremble in his arms? He ached to hold her again, to help her forget the terrors of her past. But only time could do that. Time and patience. He would need plenty of both, he thought with a wry smile, then turned and walked back toward the house.

\* \* \* End of Excerpt \* \* \*

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