

Night Full of Stars

- by Lynn Wright

Chapter 1

Chris ducked his head to see Josiah's face, which was shadowed by the broad brim of his hat. "This's all right with you? I'd sooner have you with us, but you're the best one to do this; you're...steady. I don't think you'll be followed, he won't know you're gone for at least twelve hours. But if someone shows up there, I know she's as safe with you as she'd be with anyone."

Josiah smiled a little. "It's all right; I understand your reasons. I'm steady, yeah." But he thought to himself, his smile broadening, Old, you mean. You think because I'm old, I'll leave her alone! Well, you're right, I will. He mounted his horse and reined around to face the road leading west out of town. "Vaya con Dios, Chris. Find him quick!" As he turned he looked back to assure himself that Mary followed, and to check that the pack horse was securely tethered to the back of his saddle. The little group moved out, heading for the mountains, the early morning sun stretching their shadows far down the trail ahead of them.

As Josiah rode he thought about the days ahead. He hoped for Mary's sake that their stay wouldn't be long. Most women were not well suited to camp life. They wore too many clothes, for one thing. And they were afraid, afraid of...he paused, thinking...of the wildness. That was it; it was being so close to the primeval nature of life. It scared most women to death.

Living rough was a pleasure for him, although not as much as it had been when he was younger. Old bones! he thought, the corners of his mouth turning up again. Still, the basic nature of life in camp appealed mightily to his introspective mind. The days were filled with simple tasks that were necessary to maintain life and comfort: gathering wood for fire, hunting for the pot, cooking, making the campsite more comfortable. The routine of camp life was almost monastic. That is, it usually was. Mary's presence served to disturb that image considerably. Well, she was a good woman, sensible and brave; maybe it would work out well, but he hoped their stay wouldn't be long. A week, he thought, wouldn't try either of them too far. They knew each other hardly at all, but hopefully they would find some common ground for friendship. Josiah wasn't very worried. He knew he was easy to get along with, and he suspected she might be also.

The trip was broken by short halts only three times. Josiah called the first one an hour after they entered the foothills. "I gotta circle back to make sure we're not followed. I'll have to leave you alone here for...maybe half an hour. Can you stay alone that long?"

Mary shifted in her saddle. "Sure. I'll be all right, it'll give me a chance to eat something, and to get off this horse for a little while. That'll be a blessing!" She grinned at him, and dismounted. "He and I'll wait right here for you."

“Stay on this side of the bluff; don’t give anyone a chance to spot you from below.” A pause. “Do you understand what I meant by that?”

She stared up at him, her face expressionless. “I have a pretty good understanding. I think I’ve got your meaning.” There was definite tartness in her reply.

His eyes dropped from hers. “Didn’t mean any offense. Gotta make sure we understand each other is all.”

She had regretted her little show of irritation even before he apologized. “I’m sorry, Josiah. I guess the heat’s got to me. I know you’re going way out of your way to do this whole thing, and my bad temper sure doesn’t help.”

“No trouble. None at all.” He turned to his horse, mounted and rode back for a short way, then cut off the trail between two enormous boulders and disappeared.

Twice more during the day she rested while he reconnoitered. After the third trip he reported that there was no one following them. “No sign at all. I think it’s about certain we’re not gonna have any unwelcome company. Come on, it’s not a whole lot farther.”

“Just where are we going, Josiah?”

“It’s a place I’ve been to before. It’s a cave...well not much of one, but it’s shelter, and it’s pretty comfortable; better than sleeping in the open.” And easier to defend you, if I have to, he finished silently.

They arrived at their destination an hour before sundown. “Good. Plenty of time to get settled in,” Josiah observed with a glance at the westering sun.

He insisted that she sit down while he made camp. “You sit right there! I’ll do this; I know how, and it’s just...easier for me.” He busied himself, and in an hour they were seated in the cave entrance, supper finished, drinking the last of the coffee.

Mary was bone tired. She sat staring into the fire, too tired to move to the bedroll that Josiah had laid out for her. They had ridden for ten hours, and I didn’t complain once! she thought to herself, rather proud of her silence about the discomforts of the day. That ought to show him that I won’t be a burden.

Josiah looked up from his coffee cup and spoke as if he’d read her mind. “You did real good today, Mary. It was a long ride, even for a man that’s used to riding. I think we’re gonna get along all right.” He smiled at her---his infrequent, charming smile---and again he picked up her unspoken thought. “Come on, get up---the bed won’t come to you.” He stood and held out his hands to her. She took them and started to rise, but stopped suddenly, with what could only be called a squeak. “Oh my goodness!” She rose the rest of the way slowly and carefully, with a grimace of pain.

“A little stiff, huh?” Josiah stifled a chuckle. “Come on, get some sleep, it’ll be better in the morning. ...Maybe.”

She looked up quickly. “Maybe?”

He laughed aloud; the anxiety in her face was comical. “Just foolin’ with you. Sorry!”

“Golly, thanks a lot! You scared me!” She laughed with him, appreciating the friendliness implicit in his teasing. “I don’t understand it. I ride all the time, and nothing like this happens.”

“You ride once or twice a week, for a mile or two. This was a long, hard jornada; it’s not the same. But it will be better in the morning---not gone, but better.”

She hobbled away from the fire with Josiah’s hand under her elbow, to the back of the shallow cave, where their blankets were spread. As she started to bend, Josiah stopped her. “This could hurt. Wanta let me help?” Without waiting for an answer, he picked her up in his arms, sank to his knees and lowered her to the bedroll.

Mary was astonished. "Josiah, I'm no lightweight, that was quite a feat. But thank you, I'm sure glad you're so strong, I wasn't looking forward to getting down. Getting up was bad enough!"

Josiah answered a little gruffly. "No trouble." He was quiet for a moment, still kneeling beside her. Then he said "...Mary? In the morning we should talk about some things. I know you'll want some privacy, and I'll fix up whatever you need, but just for tonight...we're both tired, can we just sleep in our clothes, where we fall down, and worry about it in the morning?"

She answered immediately. "Of course we can! I'm not fragile, Josiah, and not overly modest, I hope. I know I'm more trouble than a man would be, but I guess...you'll just have to put up with that."

She grinned up at him, but his face remained serious as he looked down at her for a minute more. "No. You're no trouble. Goodnight, Mary." He turned to his own bedroll, and in a few minutes they both slept.

Mary's stiffness was much improved in the morning; she got out of her blankets without Josiah's help. When he returned from his short trip to the bushes for morning necessities, he smelled frying bacon. She looked up as he entered. "Good morning! Eggs? How many? We might as well eat up the eggs, they won't last very long in the heat." Her face was flushed from leaning over the fire, and he was struck suddenly with how beautiful she was. Her long blonde hair was pulled back, and the clean lines of her mouth and jaw drew his admiring attention. He looked away quickly. That kind of thinking did no good; she was not for him, nor was any woman of her virtue and quality.

Breakfast was good. He leaned back against the cave wall, coffee cup in hand. "You're a cook, Mary!" "Do you think so? Then cooking can be one of my chores. What else is there that I can do? I mean that I'm able to do; I'm afraid I haven't many useable skills in this situation. Unless you need some poetry written?"

He smiled, amused. "That would be worth while. The Lord loves a willing worker, in whatever pursuit. And poetry beats gunfighting, hands down. 'The pen is mightier than the sword.' At least that's what they tell me."

She laughed. "That's right, but poetry is not what's needed here. Wanted maybe, but not needed."

Her eyes met his, and he dropped his quickly, lest she see more warmth in them than was seemly. Her gaze was level and honest, her smile was open, she was quick and responsive in conversation, and she was disturbingly beautiful. As he stared down at the tin cup in his hand, it crossed his mind to wonder if he was going to be hurting when this trip was over.

"Now, about the blankets..." A sudden thought struck him. "Maybe you're thinking I should sleep outside, and I'd do that if things were different. But the reason we're here is for me to protect you, and I can't do that unless I'm with you...all the time." He looked up at her. "Sorry, that's the way it is. But I can put up blankets."

"That'll be fine, Let's put them here---" She pointed to the middle of the back wall. "Like stalls in a barn. Then we can both get some air at night."

Josiah looked rueful. "Uh-uh, can't do that either. If I put the blankets there someone could waltz right by me while I slept and...scare you. I gotta be in front, crossways." He gestured with his hand.

"Oh! Of course. Well, then...hmm, I don't want to be shut in back there, but I understand the problem." She hesitated, then looked up at him, and as he watched she blushed brightly. She looked down again, away from his eyes, before she spoke. "If you'll just stare into the fire for a few minutes morning and night, I don't think we need the blankets." Her face was still burning, but she looked up at him then, determined to be frank. "This is...an awkward situation, Josiah, but if we're sensible about it, it should work out."

Josiah also was a little embarrassed by her frankness. "That's fine. We'll do it however you want." He began briskly to fold a blanket, turning away from her.

The day passed quickly while they got settled. In the early afternoon Josiah called to her where she was piling firewood. "Leave that, can you? We need to go for water. I guess you know you'll have to come with; can't leave you alone. Besides, I need your help to carry the water. The horses'll keep us hoppin' for water all the time we're here, if it stays this hot."

He bent to pick up the water buckets, then turned back to await her. "Come on, it's up that way. That is, if you've got nothing else planned." His eyes laughed at her, although his face was straight.

She came at once, chuckling, wiping her forehead with her sleeve. "It happens I'm free at the moment." He chuckled in return, handed her the smallest of the three buckets, and they started up the slope.

They had climbed for two or three minutes in silence when he looked up from the trail to find her smiling again. "Don't you ever get cranky, woman? You just smile all the time." When he had spoken he looked away from her, embarrassed at his impulsive words.

"Sure I get cranky...but who could be cranky here!" She looked around her, throwing out her arms, and turned herself in a circle. The view down the canyon was spectacular, the sun was bright, and there was an eagle high up in the cloudless sky making lazy arcs against the blue. "Josiah, I just love this!" She threw out her arms again. "Look around us; this mountain is heavenly. This is a wonderful place; thanks for bringing me here."

"You can thank me if that poor lunatic comes up here after you and I save your life. The rest of this," he gestured widely at the sky and the mountain, "is of the Lord's providing, not mine. It is something to see, though, isn't it?" He took a deep breath, his chest expanding largely, and turned in a slow circle of his own, just looking for a long minute, then he returned to business. "Come on. We need water, and so do the horses."

They climbed at a leisurely pace up the rock-strewn mountainside. The terrain was rough, but the grade was gentle. Mary had no difficulty despite her stiffness, and Josiah was close behind her, watchful and protective.

The vegetation was sparse; water was rare and precious here. That fact made it the more astonishing when Josiah stopped, took her hand, and led her around a huge tumble of rock, into a world apart. Mary stood staring around her, unbelieving of what she was seeing. She had stepped into a miniature box canyon that held within its twenty-foot walls a little bit of paradise.

A small spring's flow arched out of the rock wall to fall in feathery trailing veils into the pool at the wall's foot. The lower half of the rock wall and the pool's edge were covered in lush green vegetation, ferns and soft-stemmed plants not seen for hundreds of miles around this place. Moss covered the rock floor in the shadow of the wall to the south, and fingers of moss trailed wherever there was a patch of shadow from the desert sun. The pool was in the sun at the moment, but soon the shadows would creep over it, and the sun-warmed water would cool again to the icy temperature of the cascading fall.

Mary was speechless, wonderment on her face.

"Better get your bath now, while the water's warm." Josiah pulled a clean piece of flannel from under his vest, and something else from a pocket. "Here, you can dry with this. Here's soap. I'll be right outside." He dipped his two big buckets into the water, and when they had filled he was gone.

Mary stood bemused for a few seconds, but as she saw that the sun was creeping inexorably past the pool's surface, she began to pull off her clothes. The water was deliciously tepid in the heated air, and the spray from the fall was icy cold. The pool made an almost perfect bathtub, although the bottom was perhaps a little rough for sitting. It was the best bath she'd had since she'd left St Louis; the little tin tubs

in use in town weren't anywhere near as comfortable. She bathed quickly, conscious both of the sun's retreat from the pool and of Josiah waiting outside; then she took a few minutes more to wash her hair in the abundant warm water, a luxury in this arid land.

When she came around the rock wall, carrying her full water bucket and still running her fingers through her damp hair with her free hand, she was dazzled by the desert's heat and light. Josiah was a large shadow in front of her sun-blinded eyes. As her eyes adjusted to the glare his face emerged, smiling down at her. "Good bathtub, huh?"

"Oh, Josiah...you're a magician!" On impulse she stood on her toes and reached up to touch his cheek with her lips.

His reaction was entirely unexpected. His hands came up to grab her shoulders and he pushed her away from him, making her stumble on the uneven ground. Without an apology or any word at all, he turned, grabbed up his buckets, and started down the trail.

She hurried along behind him until they came to the place where they had stopped to admire the view on the way up. There he stopped and turned to her. "I'm sorry. I was rude." His voice was honestly contrite, but as he looked straight down at the ground his face was mostly hidden from her, too much obscured by shadow for her to read his expression.

She hesitated, but thought better of inquiring about his reasons. Instead, she made as little of it as possible, changing the subject immediately. "It's all right. Josiah, where does the water go?" She put down the bucket she was carrying and leaned against a boulder.

He looked up. "The water? Oh, the spring. I don't know. Partly into the air. It keeps everything growing in there, but it must have an outlet at the bottom of the pool somewhere. There isn't much current, not enough to tell where it's going right off. You'd have to study it some."

Mary relaxed in response to his lightened mood. "This place must be famous among the local people. I'm surprised there's not a line for baths on every sunny day!"

She chuckled as she spoke, but he remained serious as he answered her. "I don't think anyone knows about it but me. I've never seen anyone up here, or heard anyone talk about it."

"Then I'm flattered and grateful to share your secret. You've been here before; do you come often?"

He still seemed uncomfortable; she hadn't a notion why. "As often as I can. It's good to be alone." He turned immediately and started down the trail, then stopped and smiled quickly over his shoulder. "Don't forget the water; the horses are waiting for it."

As she followed him, Mary's mind worried at the problem of what had happened. Her kiss was the obvious cause, but why should that upset him? He was a very self-possessed man, and she was willing to bet he'd been kissed before, plenty of times; he was no amateur at dealing with women. Was it religion? Oh! Perhaps so! Maybe he'd taken a vow or something. She didn't know a lot about religion of any kind. Her father, who had raised her, had been a devout atheist. Well, whatever had upset him, he seemed to be over it now.

"Josiah, do you think they've caught him yet?" They were sitting at the cave mouth, comfortably full, sipping coffee.

"Quien sabe? He's pretty slippery. They'll catch him when they catch him. One of these days we'll see Chris riding up the trail and we'll know he's caught."

The man they were discussing had come to town two months before. He had no business, no apparent means of support, but spent his cash freely---freely enough that he was very popular with everyone, but especially with Ezra, who was practically making a living off Hannibal Wilson. After a couple of weeks, the general opinion was that he was a remittance man. His wealthy family in the East must be sending

money, and the reason they were doing so became apparent before long. Hannibal was crazy. He looked perfectly normal, and he acted that way on first acquaintance. Some of the things he said and did were a little odd, perhaps, but eccentric behavior is always tolerated in anyone with a lot of cash to spread around. When he took to shouldering women off the boardwalk, though, he'd crossed the line; the residents wanted their women treated with respect. Women were scarce and valuable.

Things got worse after that. He beat a horse almost to death before he was dragged away from it. He took to making insulting remarks under his breath as he walked by anyone he thought couldn't or wouldn't retaliate. And sometimes there was no one visible at all when he talked.

By the third week of his residence, he had centered his attention on Mary. When his advances were politely refused, he only intensified his courtship. Mary was finally driven to ask Chris for his help. Chris warned Hannibal off, not so politely, and very convincingly.

Chris's warning drove Hannibal underground. He began to harass Mary furtively, accosting her when she was alone in the office, sending letters whose love words didn't quite conceal vague threats--against Chris and against Mary herself. Chris held a conference, and the other six were called in to Mary's defense. After that, Hannibal's letters were intercepted and Mary was never without a watcher somewhere in the background.

Hannibal had one big advantage: money. When he could no longer get to Mary, he hired someone else to act for him. He disappeared from town, but his hired gunmen tried twice to kill Chris, without success. After the second failure, Hannibal's insanity went over the top. His men planted charges to blow up the newspaper office with Mary inside. Only a drunken mumble from one of his hired hands on the preceding evening saved her and the office. The consensus among the Seven then was that they couldn't protect her in the town any longer. Every stranger who walked by her was a potential assassin. So it was decided that Josiah would shepherd her, and he had elected to take her to this favorite spot.

While Mary and Josiah lazed by the campfire, Chris and the other five were scouring the territory for Hannibal Wilson. The would-be bomber was in jail, willing to testify to Hannibal's hiring him to commit murder. When Hannibal was rounded up, he'd go away for a long, long time. In the meantime, Mary's safety was in trust here on the mountainside, in Josiah's capable hands.

They sat in the coolness following the departure of the sun, watching the last of the light disappear over the slopes below, the stillness broken only by the very distant sound of a coyote's wailing cry. Mary spoke softly:

*"The stately tragedy of dusk
Drew to its perfect close,
The virginal white evening star
Sank, and the red moon rose."*

"Who?" he said, almost whispering, after a minute.

A pause, then slowly, "I don't remember."

Pause. "It doesn't matter. It's right."

The coyote continued to call, a lonely sound in the deepening darkness.

They spent the next day making the camp more comfortable. With the aid of a small hatchet and some rope, Josiah made a seat with a back for each of them out of the larger branches of the nameless scrub that covered acres of mountainside, never growing more than waist high. Then he improvised a small table for Mary's use in preparing food, and a rack to hang drying clothes on. When that was done, he turned his attention to the beds.

"What we really need are evergreen branches to sleep on."

Mary laughed. "Well, I'm beginning to believe you can do anything, but if you can pull a pine tree out of your pocket, I'll wonder if you're even human!"

He glanced up at her. "I'm human." He looked away quickly, got up and went to the cave mouth to stand staring out. "Tomorrow we go for evergreens."

"Go? Where? Josiah, where?"

"You'll see tomorrow. Now I'm going to use the last of the water to wash the dust off me, then we'll fill the buckets again."

The next morning, Josiah saddled the horses and they set off after evergreen boughs. As he got ready to help her mount, Mary put her hand on his arm. "Josiah...wait, I want to say something." She looked up at him, her face earnest. "I'm having the best time...you've made this trip into a wonderful adventure. Thank you! Thank you for---for being so kind to me when this can only be a chore for you."

"You're not a chore, Mary. It's a privilege to be with a woman who's...well, anyway, you're not a chore. Come on, I'll give you a leg up."

"Wait a minute! Finish that sentence, Josiah, or I'll expire of curiosity!"

He looked away from her, tightening a saddle strap. "A woman who's..." He turned back, to look at her with that serious level gaze that she was learning to look forward to. "Who's got all the best of woman's qualities: sympathy, understanding, gentleness. Who's quick to laugh, and quick to comprehend...and who's so beautiful..." He turned back quickly to fumble at the saddle straps, flinching slightly when he felt her hand on his shoulder.

"Thank you, Josiah." Her voice was husky with emotion.

The trip for evergreens was an outstanding success. They rode around the mountain from their northwest-facing cave farther to the west, and there they found trees in abundance. "Rainfall's twice what it is on the other side. Clouds drop what they're carryin' here, nothin' left for the other side," Josiah explained in his usual laconic manner.

They came upon three deer as they moved through the wood. The deer looked up, undisturbed by the noise of the horses' approach until the breeze brought human scent their way. Then they bounded away, lost behind the trees in three leaps.

"Josiah, that was worth the whole trip!" Mary's eyes were bright. Seeing any kind of wildlife was a rare experience; it was scarce within ten miles of any human community, sacrificed to the cook pot. "Billy would have loved to see the deer. I hope to bring him here, someday."

On their return the horses were draped with evergreen fronds. With them Josiah made beds, as he said, "fit to sleep on." Mary agreed. "But it was getting them---it was the trip that was so lovely."

Several days went by without incident. They went for water twice every day, and on one particularly hot day, three times. The horses drank thirstily however much they were given. With every day they knew each other better, and the unspoken attraction between them grew stronger. Evenings of conversation by the fire were eagerly anticipated by both of them, though neither said anything about it.

They talked about everything. Mary was amazed at the extent and breadth of his knowledge in every subject they touched on, and amused by the elevation in vocabulary and grammar that accompanied the more intellectual subject matter, and by his easy reversion to an unlettered drawl for more everyday matters. When she called it to his attention, he smiled a little and shrugged. "Well, when in Rome.... I'm not out to impress anybody. The high-class stuff isn't my native speech, the other one is. But sometimes you need words of more than two syllables to say things."

Mary talked about her son, her pride in him, the difficulties of raising him without a father. Josiah surprised her here. He answered with understanding---both of her difficulties, and of Billy's feelings of loss and disappointment that his father was no longer with them. "A widow has a hard way to go alone, raising a child. I think it's hard enough with two parents. Does Billy say much? Will he talk about his father?"

Mary smiled. "Oh, yes. He remembers him much differently than I do, but maybe that's good; his father is wonderful in his memory. He misses him still, very much, but his grandfather has been so good to us. That's made it much easier for both of us. Billy's with him now; I always can count on him, and I know Billy's as safe and happy with him as he is with me."

The conversation turned one evening to Abraham Lincoln, or as Mary called him, reverently, "Mr. Lincoln"; they found themselves in conflict almost immediately. Josiah was speedily driven to justify his position against Mary's indignant defense of her idol.

"No, no! Mary, I wasn't implying anything shabby about him when I said that we don't know much about him. He may have been the paragon you think him, although I think even the archangel Michael couldn't live up to your notion of him!" She looked up to find him grinning at her. "All I meant was that you don't know, and I'll stand by that statement. You run a newspaper, you of all people should know how much is suppressed and distorted in the press. Sometimes it's justified, but many times it happens for less than honest reasons."

"Josiah, journalistic standards in this country are the highest in the world! I don't believe that anything of importance has been suppressed about Mr. Lincoln."

"Do you believe that if he drank, or beat his wife, or went with prostitutes, the press would have reported it?"

She was stubborn. "The people deserve the truth; the press gives it to them!"

Josiah shook his head in frustration. Then he looked up at her, struck by a thought. "Mary, when Tom Sharpe died, did you print the entire story, all you knew? Did you tell the town that Tom died in a whore's bed? I saw that story. You said he died on the way back to town from a business trip."

She looked up, began to say something, stopped; began again, stopped again. Finally her face broke into a wryly amused grin. "Trapped!"

"Well, you did the right thing. No one needed to know the details." He smiled, then chuckled. "I was there that night, when Joe Turner brought Tom's body back to town. He couldn't wait to tell us all about it, and he didn't miss a thing. I'll never forget his face when he turned around and saw you standing there! 'Uh...uh, well ma'am, maybe they wasn't exactly "humping", it was more like they was having a--a conversation!" Josiah's face and voice reproduced exactly the man's embarrassed confusion, and his self-satisfied, beaming smile when he triumphantly spoke the last word. Mary's laughter bubbled up to join his, stopping further talk. The dispute over Mr. Lincoln's character and the honor of the press was forgotten in their amusement, and in their growing joy in each other.

Chapter 2

As Josiah laid awake in the early morning following that evening, he admitted to himself that he was in love with her. How it had happened he didn't know, but in the few days of their isolation he had found his love. He didn't flatter himself that she felt, or ever could feel, the same way. He realized that it would be prudent to prepare himself for the inevitable grief ahead; after the end of this sojourn in the wilderness he saw in the future only darkness.

In the nights that followed, talk ranged over every subject that came to either of them to talk about. Josiah was surprised at the freedom Mary showed in discussing subjects considered taboo for single women, but in the context of their discussions, it seemed that no subject was offensive to either of them. They talked far into the night while the fire burned lower, each reluctant to give up the intimacy that the night and their isolation provided, and neither aware of the other's growing passion.

Josiah put off bathing for some days, washing in the limited water that was available in camp instead; he was reluctant to embarrass Mary. But on one particularly hot afternoon as they made their second water trip to the pool, he did express his desire for a bath. But when he explained the cooperation he must have from her, she reacted with the indignation that he had expected.

"I will not stay in here with you while you bathe. That's final!"

"Guess I'll have to do without a bath, then."

"Josiah, that's not fair!"

"What's fair got to do with it? Mary, be as sensible as I know you are. I need to know that you're safe. I'll be as quick as I can. Please?"

Josiah's pleading face made her smile, then laugh. "Oh, for heaven's sake..., oh, all right! But you'd better be quick; I'm going to stand right here and stare at this rock the whole time!"

"I'm afraid that's not good enough. You'll have to stand over here, and stare at this rock. Then I can stay between you and the entrance." Josiah was smiling now, his eyes dancing.

Mary dissolved in laughter. "All, right, all right, have it your way. This rock!"

While Josiah undressed, splashed in the pool, and dressed again, Mary kept up a steady stream of abuse, in which "Napoleon" and "Attila the Hun" were two of the more flattering descriptions. She was still laughing and talking steadily when Josiah's hands came down on her shoulders from behind.

"You can stop..." His words were cut off in mid-sentence as she whirled around, startled. She clutched at him to retain her balance, and found herself pressed against him for her whole length, while his hands had moved from her shoulders to the middle of her back. They stared at each other, neither able to move for several long seconds, stunned to find themselves embraced. Then Josiah once more roughly pushed her away, his hands flying behind his back, as if to put them as far away from her as possible.

This time his apology was immediate. "Sorry" was all he said, as he turned to gather up the flannel towel and the water buckets, with his face still turned away from her. "Come on, let's go!"

"Josiah?" She was dazed by what she had felt in that embrace, and she needed to look into his face again, to verify the emotion which had broken over them both in a wave of heat.

He spun back to her with a violent movement and snarled, "I said LET'S GO!" He disappeared through the entrance. By the time she got outside he was forty feet down the trail.

He didn't speak again on the way back and he remained taciturn through supper, not angry but speaking only when necessary. Mary was almost glad that he was so silent. She had a great deal of confusion of her own to sort through. Her mind kept replaying those moments when she stood with his arms around her, looking up at that rugged face, whose usual kindness was eclipsed at that moment by raw passion. He wanted her very much; his face had left her in no doubt of that. But what stunned her almost into a stupor, so unexpected was it, was that she wanted him just as much. Even the thought of kissing him made her knees weak. She wondered distractedly if her face had shown it as plainly as his had. The possibility made her blush rosily, and she was very glad of the red-gold firelight which camouflaged her face's telltale stain.

In the dancing light of the flames, Josiah's face might have been made of stone; there was nothing to be learned from its study. He smoked a cheroot slowly, presumably with pleasure, but with no hint of any emotion in his face or bearing. He broke his silence only once, to ask her when she planned to get ready for sleep. She took the hint, and he sat looking out at the night while she changed her clothes. Over her thin summer nightgown, she wrapped herself in a large shawl brought for the purpose and returned to the fire, tucking the ends of the shawl over her bare feet. He showed no consciousness at all that she was there. After a few minutes she got up and went silently to her bed. When the last of the cheroot was thrown on the fire, he moved to his bed as well, with a low, "Goodnight, Mary."

Something woke her sometime after she finally drifted off, and she knew immediately that sleep was not recoverable. She got up as silently as she could, wrapped herself in her shawl, and moved in her bare feet toward the cave entrance.

The fire had burned down to a few softly glowing embers and the night was moonless. When she reached the entrance and looked up, she was struck by the stars. So many, so bright! Her childhood had been spent in a big city, where the stars were a dim shadow of the glory spread before her. She looked and looked, unwearied by the spectacle.

When his voice spoke low behind her, she wasn't startled. It seemed to her then that she had been waiting for him. She didn't turn, but kept gazing up at the stars.

*"On a starred night Prince Lucifer uprose.
Tired of his dark dominion swung the fiend
Above the rolling ball in cloud part screened,
Where sinners hugged their spectre of repose."*

He stopped.

"Go on." Her voice was a whisper of sound.

*"Poor prey to his hot fit of pride were those.
And now upon his western wing he leaned,
Now his huge bulk o'er Afric's sands careened,
Now the black planet shadowed Arctic snows.
Soaring though wider zones that pricked his scars
With memory of the old revolt from Awe,*

*He reached a middle height, and at the stars,
Which are the brain of heaven, he looked, and sank.
Around the ancient track marched, rank on rank,
The army of unalterable law.”*

She took a step back, almost without thinking about it. It seemed so natural, so right to lean against him. Still looking up at the stars, she laid her head against his shoulder. And with quiet sureness his arms came up around her, holding her to him with tender strength. She felt his warm breath on her ear and thought that nothing could ever have felt so good before. In a moment his head came down further to rest his cheek against hers. She felt the soft abrasion of his beard against her skin and moved her head a little, nestling closer to feel it pressing against her. His hard-muscled arms were firmly around her just below her breasts; she wondered if he could feel her heart racing. As she thought about it, his hand came up to press on her ribs, feeling the frantic beating of her heart. Then he turned his hand, and it was against her breast.

He sighed deeply. His hand moved on her, cradling her breast, his thumb rubbing softly over its nipple, but only for a moment. He dropped his hand and stepped slowly away from her, his hands on her shoulders now, steadying her while he moved his body's support away.

“No---don't leave me---no!” Mary turned and reached for him, reticence forgotten in the sudden intensity of her desire for him.

“I must.” His hands came up to intercept hers. He caught her wrists before she touched him and held her hands firmly in his. “I must,” he said again. “This can't happen between us.” He looked down at her with pain filled eyes.

Mary was stunned. Her mind, her body, her whole self cried out against what he had just said. “No! No...” She tried to free her wrists, but Josiah held her gently but firmly imprisoned. As she looked up at him, even in the darkness she could discern something immovable in his face and in his body's tension. Her voice had an edge of shaken anxiety as she spoke. “What are you saying?” She paused, then continued, her voice softer, less frantic. “It already has happened, Josiah. We both know that.” Her body relaxed slightly as the truth of what she had just said sank into her consciousness.

But Josiah's grip on her wrists remained, holding her away from his body. “Mary...” His voice broke on her name; he paused for a moment, then, “Querida....” He paused again, waiting for the lump in his throat to let him continue. “I'm sorry, Mary. I'm sorry that I wasn't strong enough...”, another painful pause, “to spare you this. I never thought it could happen...I never believed we'd be...that this could...” He dropped her wrists and turned his back to her swiftly, his control over himself perilously close to breaking.

Mary stepped close to him and slid her arms around his waist, pulling herself tightly against him in a quick movement, willing him with all her strength to give up, to be unable to resist the feel of her pressed to him. But Josiah's will was shaped over many years of self-denial, in many areas of life. He moved away from her again, freeing himself from her softly clinging hands with gentle strength. When she was no longer touching him he walked away, and kept walking, down the trail toward the little corral he had built. In a few moments she heard him speaking softly to his horse, then the sound of hoofbeats as he rode away. It occurred to her in one of those peripheral thoughts that sometimes come in times of great stress: Does he ride bareback? I guess he does! And a bubble of hysterical mirth escaped her, just before the tears came.

She returned to her bed, chilled with the night air. Her tears stopped after a few minutes and were

replaced by a leaden feeling of hopelessness. She had heard him come back; he hadn't been gone long. His conscience wouldn't let him leave me alone, she thought. He will do whatever he believes is right...at whatever cost...

Josiah's flight was indeed short-lived; anxiety for her had turned him back almost at once. He returned just in time to see her figure, ghostly in the light of the late-rising moon, enter the cave. He didn't follow her inside. She was safe there, and distance between them was what he needed now.

He sat down on the ground cross-legged, his back straight, his eyes closed, his hands placed lightly on his knees, and began a systematic disciplining of his mind, a drill he had used many times over his adult years. Desires of many different kinds had been regulated and finally extinguished by discipline and the exercise of his unbending will.

Mary opened her eyes reluctantly. They were gritty and uncomfortable from the night's tears and from too little sleep. Daylight streamed into the cave brightly; it must be late, she thought. But apparently he hadn't moved around much yet either, he was just making coffee. She watched him sadly. There was something---something wounded about his face this morning. She called out softly to him, her usual morning request to face the front of the cave, then dressed quickly and approached the fire.

"Good morning." He spoke without looking up. "Coffee?" He bent to pick up the pot, and filled a cup. She took it, careful not to touch his hand, and sat down.

"Josiah?"

He looked up then, gazing gravely at her, his eyes steady.

"Can we talk?"

The corners of his mouth turned up for just a moment. She was so forthright; it always surprised him. He sat down on the other side of the fire, looking into it for several minutes. Then he said slowly, "There's nothing much to say. You're a virtuous woman, and I don't have any feelings of love for you. I have...desire for you, plenty of that. But that's all, Mary. I wish I'd been...wiser last night, before I got into this." He looked up at her, his eyes steadfastly gazing into hers. "I'm not going to be serious about anything we start, so for your sake we can't...won't start." He continued to look steadily at her while a blush rose up her neck and covered her face.

"I see." She struggled to keep her voice firm. "Thank you, Josiah. You've been as kind as it was possible to be, and I appreciate your...frankness." She stood up and turned away from him, looking around her rather vaguely; there was no place for a decent retreat, for privacy. Tears were coming, and she had to get away from him before that happened, she had to! She turned again, looking around her rather wildly for a place, any place.

Josiah's seat by the fire was empty. He had gone out while her back was turned. Mary hurried to the back of the cave and sank to the blankets of her bedroll, where she cried many bitter tears of humiliation and grief.

Josiah walked up the trail, moving easily until the trail turned, bringing him out of sight of the cave. He looked back to make sure he was hidden from her. When he had assured himself of that he stood perfectly still for a moment. Then, slowly, his shoulders sagged and his knees bent, and he slid bonelessly to the ground. On his knees, his body hunched over, his arms wrapped around his stomach, Josiah gave way to the crushing pain of what he had done.

The supper hour was subdued, in spite of brave attempts by both of them to act as if everything were the same. Josiah teased her, and she laughed and retaliated in kind, but there were pauses when

the silence grew loud before one of them found something to say. As they finished supper and came to the time when, for the past few nights, they had sat back to drink coffee and delight in each other's company, silence settled over them in earnest.

Josiah spoke, finally. "It'll get easier in a day or two," he said quietly into the stretched silence. "We gotta stay here together. Maybe the best thing to do is just not try to be the same as we were. Won't that be easier?"

"Yes...yes, it will." Her smile was shaky. "But oh, Josiah...I loved the way we were!" In a second tears welled up and began to roll down her cheeks.

"Oh God, don't. Don't!" He was around the fire in an instant, and she collapsed on his shoulder, crying hard.

His arms were around her, his cheek pressed to that blonde head, and he crooned to her in his deepest voice, his love speaking to her in the sound of every word. "Mary, don't cry, oh don't, querida mia, my sweetest lo..." He stopped. When he spoke again his voice was still soft, but the throb of emotion was gone. "Come on, Mary, be a good girl now. Stop crying." His self-control was almost perfect; only for a moment, when he felt her in his arms, had he let the passion inside be heard.

But Mary had heard it. Josiah wiped her face and walked with her to her bedroll, teasing a little to lighten the mood, but as she lay in her bed much later, sleepless, she remembered the sound of love in his voice. She remembered his reaction to her kiss and the violent reaction he'd shown after their unexpected embrace. But most of all, she remembered the night full of stars---his arms around her, his cheek against hers, his fingers moving over her breast with tenderness; with love. And as she thought, slowly the realization dawned.

He'd lied to her.

What she had felt from him in the starry night was true, and what he had said this morning was a lie! But why? Why would he deny how he felt? Maybe he was married? But if he was married, why wouldn't he just tell her? Why...? Suddenly she didn't care why. The conviction was strong in her: he did care for her. What was stopping him from admitting it wasn't important. That he cared, was.

She got out of her bedroll and stood up silently. He was turned away from her, lying on his side, facing the fire. She took the two steps that separated them and sank to her knees beside him.

"Josiah?"

He turned even before she spoke, aware of her behind him. "What's the matter?"

She said nothing, only looked at him.

Her hair was loose, streaming down over her shoulders nearly to her breasts, which were barely hidden in her light hot-weather nightgown. Its low square neck and wide straps revealed the soft curves that continued down under the cloth, to where he saw with instant tingling arousal that her nipples were erect, making sharp shadows in the firelight against the fabric of her gown.

He sat up, the light blanket falling to his waist. He was wearing no shirt. In the light of the fire his body was gilded, the muscles of his powerful torso strongly delineated, his chest covered thickly with graying hair. "What is it, Mary?"

She was entranced by the sight of his bare body; she reached out to those enticing gray curls. As her hand touched him he looked down at it for a second, immobilized by conflicting emotions; then he grasped her wrist, pulling her fingers away from his skin. "Oh God, don't!" he groaned. He tipped his head far back and took a deep shuddering breath. "What the hell d'you think you're doing?" He held her wrist tightly enough to hurt her.

"You lied, Josiah. You lied to me."

Surprised, he searched her face and saw conviction there. She knew he had lied. Her other hand came up, and he imprisoned both wrists as he growled, "Go back to bed, Mary. Go now!"

She didn't move. He dropped her hands. "Go!" Roughly, with anger.

She sat still, staring at him. He looked at her sitting motionless before him, beautiful in the firelight, so bewitching, so desirable. How could he not love her? The anger drained from his face, his shoulders slumped, and he gave up the effort of deception. Wearily, he nodded his head. "Yes. Yes, I lied to you. It seemed...the best thing to do."

He reached for his shirt. "I guess we're not going to sleep, are we?"

"I don't think so. Shall I make coffee?"

"Yes, please."

She reached behind her for her shawl, draped it around her shoulders, and moved to the little table he had built for her. When she turned back to the fire with the coffee pot ready to hang on the tripod, he was sitting in his accustomed place, staring fixedly into the flames. He didn't look up or speak. As he remained silent, she began to be angry.

"Busy trying to think up new reasons why you can't make love to me?" There was asperity in her voice.

Sighing heavily, Josiah finally looked up. "I don't have to make up reasons, Mary. There are so many! Here's one: I'm old enough to be your father."

"How old is that?"

"I'll be fifty in November."

"Which makes you fourteen years older than I. I suppose you could have fathered a child at fourteen, but it's not likely."

Another long silence. While she waited for him to speak the coffee began to boil, and she took it off the fire. Then, "I have no means of making a living except my gun, and gunfighters don't marry. No life expectancy."

She handed him a cup of coffee. "Care to become a newspaper editor? You're certainly educated enough and articulate enough to fill the position."

He looked once more into the fire. After a moment he began again. "I have no..."

She interrupted, impatient with what seemed to her to be trivial objections. "Stop this, Josiah! Tell me the real reason. Why is loving me so...impossible?"

He shook his head, and his hand came up to run through his graying curls. There was a silence: then he spoke without looking up, slowly, his voice deep, husky, his passion for her in every word. "It's not loving you that's impossible; ...it's not loving you that's impossible." When he lifted his eyes to hers they were blue fire, alight with his love and his desire.

A moment's freedom was all he allowed himself. The veil came down over his eyes again, and he spoke with his former serious, quiet manner. "But you're not for me." There was finality in his voice; it hurt her to hear it. His eyes dropped to his hands, and after a moment he spoke again. "Long ago, when I should have loved enough to take care of someone, someone who needed me desperately, I... didn't, and it hasn't been forgotten. That act was not pardonable; I am not forgiven." He shook his head very slightly, still looking at his hands holding his cup. "I'm not worthy of you, Mary. I'm...discarded, cast out. Find a better man, a younger man, one who has hope for the future."

"Josiah, I know what I want. I want you. Not young, not hopeful, not...undamaged, but you're what I want. So much..." Her voice shook a little as her green eyes filled with tears, and the next words were a husky whisper. "Please, Josiah."

He was sitting with his elbows on his knees, leaning forward over his cup held in both hands. He flinched at her plea, shook his head hard and dropped it down farther. His voice was harsh when he spoke. "No! I'm not what you want!" He stopped for a moment. Then, without raising his head to look at her, he continued in a gentler voice. "I believe that this...feeling you have for me isn't real." He shook

his head again. "I don't know what made this happen between us, why it's so—intense, but when we're off this mountain, back in the world that's real, you won't feel the same about me. I know it." He raised his head to look at her, and the corners of his mouth turned up in a small smile. "I'm the only man in Texas who reads poetry. That's the basis of this...infatuation of yours."

She replied soberly. "That's not the way it is, Josiah." She thought for a minute, then she came at the subject sideways, hoping to throw him off balance. "When we're back in this...'real world' of yours, will you feel the same about me? Will you...love me, still?"

His head was down again; she couldn't see his face. His voice was low, almost a whisper, when he replied. "Yes. Always."

"When this...this time of ours is over, you believe you'll lose me. When it's over, would you rather you had made love to me before you lost me? Is it better to have loved and lost, Josiah?"

A pause. "Yes." He saw what was coming, but however painful this became, he wasn't going to lie again.

"Is that true for me also? If I change my mind later, and decide I don't love you after all, is it better that I had this...wonderful feeling once in my life, even if I lose it?"

He still stared stubbornly down at his hands. "You'll...love again. You'll marry and be happy."

"No. I'll probably never marry again. My marriage wasn't...good." There was a silence, then she looked up at him. Her voice changed with her next words, became softer, more hesitant. "Josiah, may I tell you something...something I've never told anyone?"

Now his head came up at last and he looked at her, alert to the importance of what she said. He was aware that there was a difference here; the subject had changed. "Yes, of course. Anything."

She sat down across from him, wrapping the ends of her shawl around her bare feet; it was a small action that always touched his heart in some indefinable way. She reached out to pick up the end of a twig that had fallen out of the fire, and stirred the red embers with it. "I think this might be something you don't want to hear, Josiah. It's something I never thought I could tell anyone." She looked down at what she was doing and he saw with surprise that the stick in her hands was shaking. She was trembling.

She pulled the shawl closer around her shoulders, staring into the fire. "I was nineteen when I was married. Henry was older, past thirty. He was a serious, quiet person, intelligent and nice to look at. I was in love with him when we were married."

Josiah could see tension rising in her. "We stopped in Philipsburg on our wedding night; we were on our way to Texas. I..." She stopped, and was silent for many seconds, staring into the fire. Finally she let out her breath with a little soft sound of distress. "Maybe I can't do this after all!" She shook her head helplessly.

Josiah got up and came around the fire to sit beside her. He put his arm around her and raised his hand to pull her head down onto his shoulder. "Tell me. Don't look at me or think about me. Just talk." His voice was quiet but he spoke firmly.

Both of her arms reached around him; she held on tight and began once more. "I only wanted to love him. I didn't know anything at all about it...I just did what..." Her voice broke. She waited a moment, then went on, "He...he said, 'Lie still! Good women don't pretend to feelings they don't have, and their husbands don't expect them to!'" As she repeated words obviously engraved on her memory, her voice took on the harsh embarrassed tones that she had heard so many years before. Josiah could hear a cold-hearted, narrow-minded man speaking through her vivid memory of the cruel incident.

Mary swallowed hard and doggedly continued, as if bound to get it all out. "I I-laid still after that. I did whatever I was told to do, and I hope I was a dutiful wife, whatever that is, but...I didn't love him any more. Then...when Billy came, Henry was a good father to him, and...it got easier." When she lifted

her head, tears were running down her face. "I'm sorry. I'm being silly. It was a long time ago, nothing to cry about now."

As she looked up at him with her tear-stained face, Josiah's heart was torn for her. Torn for a young girl's pain, and for the gallantry that swallowed that pain and went on, making the best of a bad bargain. In that instant of time, as he felt her pain and loved her courage, his defenses crumbled.

All of his scruples about his worthiness paled in the face of her vulnerability. She would marry someday, loneliness and insecurity would wear her down. He wouldn't, couldn't relinquish her to some unknown man who might be unwilling or too unskilled to show her how rapturous lovemaking could be. The tenderness and passion that she deserved were right here, right now, in him, and he couldn't fight his desire and her need any longer. The decision was made almost instantly; unworthy as he knew himself to be, she was his to love.

Chapter 3

She sat at his right, with his arm close around her. He reached down, slid his other arm under her knees, and pulled her into his lap. He held her quietly, his hands rubbing her back, comforting her. "It's all right, love, cry if you want to. My poor love! My innocent little girl, my lovely Mary, I love you so much..." He murmured softly in her ear as he held her. She wept a little, but soon, soothed by the warmth in his voice and the love words tenderly spoken, she relaxed against him, molding herself to the hard contours of his body. When he felt her resting peacefully against him he said, half-whispering into her ear, "He was wrong; completely, utterly wrong! This lovely body of yours was telling you exactly what you should be doing with a man you love." He held her in silence for a few moments more, then, "Mary, will you let me show you...how it can be? How different I can make it for you? I love you very much, and I want you...more than I thought I could ever want anything again."

He put his hand under her chin and lifted her face to his. She looked up at him, and she had no need to speak; her consent was in her eyes. When his mouth came down on hers, it was softer even than she had dreamed, and so gentle. Her arms came up slowly to embrace him, to bring him closer to her. The kiss was intensely pleasurable to her, bringing her to a warm state of floating sensual relaxation. But when he tilted his head to the side and slowly, expertly opened her mouth under his, a burst of sensation of an entirely new kind soared through her. As his tongue slid gently over the inside of her lips, then moved deeper into her mouth to find her tongue, Mary experienced the stirring of sexual arousal for the first time. Her arms tightened around him, and in a moment her hands began to move over his back as she instinctively reached for more...more closeness, more pleasure...

He lifted his head then, when he felt her response, to reassure her. His lips moved over her face, kissing her eyes, touching softly on her cheeks, her ears, her neck. "Yes, this is right, love...this is the way it really is. Come with me, I can show you...I'll take you with me...to heaven...this is for you, only for you..." His words were whispered between kisses.

Mary's hand came up to lie against his cheek, and he stilled immediately, waiting to see what her wishes were. But she only gazed up at him, with a look so melting, so tenderly desirous that his heart turned over and his arms tightened around her, bringing her against him with new urgency. "Mary! Love, if you look at me like that I'll lose my head! I want you so much...so much."

Mary realized as he spoke what a profound effect their lovemaking was having on this grave, self-contained man whom she loved so unexpectedly and so passionately. With a little smile, a shy mischief peering from her eyes, she curled her hand around the back of his neck, threading her fingers through the gray curls that she had wanted to touch for days. She brought his head down slowly. When his lips were close to hers, she opened her mouth slightly, and her tongue came out between her white teeth

to wet her lips. With a half-conscious but deliberate intent to seduce him further she whispered, "Kiss me like that again, Josiah, with your tongue?"

He groaned as his head came down, his mouth open and hot on hers. Now he let his desire show plainly in his kiss, and she was right there in response, her mouth opening further to let him have everything he wanted, and her hands exploring the planes of his muscular back. As the kiss deepened he began to tremble, and he was afraid for a moment that it would scare her. Then he let the kiss take him and all thought ceased in ecstatic pleasure.

When he raised his head at last, he was breathing fast, his heart was pounding, his pulse racing with the excitement this woman engendered in him. His mouth moved over her cheek, and he bit gently at her earlobe; she shivered, moaning a little.

Her response to his lovemaking was natural and uninhibited so far, but he wanted desperately not to go too fast, to let her come to match his surging heat at her own speed. However, no matter what his mind said, his desire was manifesting itself in physical ways.

He felt his throbbing erection straining at the confinement of his jeans, and he wondered if she felt it under her. God, he certainly felt her body pressing on it, she must feel it! Then he wondered suddenly if she even knew what it was. He'd bet her husband had never made her acquainted with the look and feel of his erection.

Reluctantly, Josiah moved back from nuzzling her neck to look into her face. It was flushed, her eyes were closed; she was becoming very much aroused just from his kisses, and he too was holding himself in check with increasing difficulty. He wanted her with urgency, but it was necessary that she know exactly what to expect, lest he frighten her. His experience with women was large and varied, but it hadn't included a conditional innocence such as hers.

The words he used were direct, but his voice was husky and tender, a gentle half-whisper, and his hands caressed her shoulders and her back while he spoke. "I want to see you, love. I want to see your body, to touch your breasts, to kiss you...everywhere. Do you want that too? Tell me, Mary...tell me that you want me to love you...all the way. I need your words, to hear you say it, love. Tell me."

She smiled a little, shy of saying the things he asked. "I think I can say anything to you..." Her smile widened and she turned her head into his shoulder, "...only not while I'm looking at you!" She paused for a moment, and then with her face still hidden in his shoulder she said everything he wanted to hear. Trust flowed from her with the words, words that were balm to all the sore and aching places of his soul.

"I love you, Josiah...I love your hands, I love to watch the way you use them, the deft manner of them. I want to feel them on me. I can feel yet the way you touched me last night, when we stood so close and I knew that I loved you, that I was yours. Your touch is still there; it's imprinted there, across my breast..." She shivered, and slowly her head came up as her shyness passed, and she turned to look into his eyes. "I want you to touch me...everywhere." She took his hand and guided it to her breast, still looking up at him with tenderness. "I want it all, Josiah, everything...and I want it from you---only from you! Love me...all the way..."

"Mary...", he whispered, as his mouth came down to cover hers. He kissed her tenderly, without passion for a moment, but desire exploded through him again as she found the bottom edge of his shirt, and both hands came up under it to caress the skin of his back.

He lifted his head at last, intoxicated with her kiss and her caresses, longing to see her body, to touch her breasts. His hand went to the light gown that covered her. Slowly, he pushed the gown off one shoulder, then the other. He pulled it down, still very slowly, until he had uncovered her breasts. While he bared her body he glanced up repeatedly, always careful of her feelings; she gazed serenely back at him, smiling a little. Reassured, he let his eyes be drawn downward. He looked and looked, hypnotized by the sight before him, but at last he drew in a deep breath and expelled it in a long sigh, "So beautiful..."

His arm under her shoulders lifted her effortlessly while his head dropped slowly until his lips just touched the tip of one breast. She caught her breath at the thrill that arched through her body. When his mouth covered the nipple and his teeth and tongue worried it gently she arched up, unconsciously rising into his caress. She held her breath for a long moment, as sensations she couldn't believe built and multiplied.

After a few minutes she spoke softly. "Josiah...?"

His mouth separated from her with reluctance, but he looked up, attentive to her wishes. "Love?" "I...I can't believe how you make me feel...I didn't know... Josiah---are there more things?...that I didn't...?"

He smiled. "A lot, love...a lot of beautiful things. I'll show you all of them, Mary, everything." His own words made his heart accelerate, as he thought about those things, and how she might react. He kissed her mouth, then moved down the side of her throat, his teeth closing gently on her skin over the vein in her neck. She moaned his name, and her hands came to the sides of his head, guiding him back to her breasts. "Do that again...please!"

He kissed and caressed her breasts, her shoulders and her neck, and she responded passionately to him. After a few minutes, he slid his arms under her shoulders and her knees, rocked forward and surged to his feet, holding her in his arms. Still kissing her face and her throat, he carried her to his bed and laid her down; as he did so, he pulled her nightgown off, sliding it down over her hips, baring her body to his hungry gaze. He knelt beside her then, looking down at her, beautiful and golden in the light of the fire. "God," he murmured, "I want you so much..."

She answered at once, softly. "I'm right here, Josiah." He started to lie down beside her, but she held up her hand to stop him, "Josiah?"

He knew what she was asking; she wanted him to take off his clothes. He hesitated, then sat down on one hip beside her; facing her, leaning over her on an outstretched arm. "I...don't want to---Mary, a man ready for sex can be...intimidating, if you're not familiar with the way he looks. I'm---well, here; maybe this will..." He took her hand with some hesitation, but after glancing at her unworried face he guided it slowly down onto the erection that was straining at his jeans.

She looked up at him, then down at her hand, with an unreadable expression. Then her hand began to move over him, exploring the size and shape of what was still hidden from her sight. As her inspection continued, his head fell back and his eyes closed; his face was strained with the effort of control.

He whispered, "God, Mary..."

"Do you like that? Does it feel good?" She smiled and spoke softly under her breath, not looking up. The thought came to him that it was as if she were talking to the erection surging and pulsing beneath her fingers.

With a last gentle caress, she raised her eyes and said, "What you were thinking is true; I've never seen a naked man." Then her face broke into a wide, mischievous smile. "But don't worry so, Josiah! I've got theoretical knowledge; it'll be all right!"

That made him chuckle. He got up, stripped his clothes off quickly and knelt beside her again. She looked at his penis in full throbbing erection for a moment; then her hand came out easily, and without timidity or any hesitation she began to stroke it. "This is beautiful." She gazed up at him with eyes overflowing with her emotion. "I love you." Her hand continued to fondle him while she spoke again. "Show me, Josiah. Show me how to please you."

"Please me? Oh, love, you're pleasing me!" His breath was coming in gasps. Long tremors shook him as she continued to stroke him. After a few moments, with a shuddering sigh, he moved away from her hands and laid down beside her, rolling himself over to look down on her. Mary reached up to his curly head with both hands and drew his mouth down to hers. He kissed her with tenderness, moving quickly to passionate intensity as desire rose further. His leg slid between hers, and he groaned as

he felt the wet heat that told him that she wanted him as well. Mary's breathing quickened, her hands moved over him, and then he was thrilled to feel her leg rise to clasp his, bringing him closer, pressing his thigh against her center.

He pulled back from her a little; his surging emotion threatened to overwhelm him.. "Mary...I need to keep some control here...I love what you're doing so much... I'm going to lose it...oh, God..."

"Isn't it all right to lose control? You just feel so good..." She smiled up at him, her hands never stopping their exploration of his body. She moved under him, pressing her belly against his erection.

"God! Oh God!" He threw his head back, his expression almost one of pain.

Her voice was a low purr. "I want you to want me. I love it that you can't stop. Lose control, Josiah!" She continued to press herself against him, moving sinuously under him.

"Oh, love..." He bent to her mouth again, surrendering to her loving coercion. He moved over her body until his penis slid between her legs and immediately they came up, twining tightly around his hips.

"Josiah..., I want you...I want you in me. Please...fill me, fill me, I need you...."

He knew as he looked at her and as he heard the urgency of her plea, that it was true. Against all of his expectations, she was ready for him. He moved to position himself over her, and felt with towering excitement the heat of her. His erection was surging and throbbing continually now, and the world narrowed for him to the feel of her hot wet center. Slowly he began to press himself into her, using just the slightest pressure at first, but her hips came up to meet him, urging him into her, asking with her body for his.

She wanted him with such immediacy that it was no longer possible to hold back. With a great groan of relief, Josiah plunged himself into her with all the passion restrained over the last several days. As he buried himself in her heat, they both cried out with pleasure, Mary's legs raising even further around him to bring him into her all the way. Josiah's heart soared as he felt her hot, wet, strongly muscled interior around him, felt the pleasure that her body brought, felt the love and desire that made her clasp him so close to her.

She was possessed by the extremity of this new pleasure. "Come into me, oh, come into me further, harder, longer, I love you, I love you, take me...Josiah..." She moaned and cried out and writhed under him with passionate feeling, and he responded to her call. Again and again he thrust himself into her to the very farthest end, then slowly drew out until only the head of his throbbing member remained lodged in her sweetness. Then another thrust into her---each time with a rush of joy as delirious as the first time.

As he moved within her, her body quieted. She lay under him more and more relaxed, feeling what was happening inside her, letting him make it happen, letting him move, delve into her, letting it all happen to her. Her body was nearly still, moving only with an involuntary lift of her hips to meet him, but a soft moaning murmur came from her throat. It grew louder as her level of sensitivity raised, as his movement in her brought her to new places, new heights of sensation.

Josiah moved instinctively now, without conscious control, letting his body take them to where he wanted so desperately for them both to be, to that moment of ecstatic release that loomed ahead, at the apex of their mutual excitement. Her soft noises of pleasure were like a fiery hand on his most sensitive surfaces. Their blissful sound raised him to places he'd never been before, to rapture so intense that his face twisted as if in agony.

Mary opened her eyes to see him above her, his eyes closed, lost in the moment, lost in the ecstasy. The look of him fired her pleasure to new heights; this tightly controlled man had lost control because of her, because his delight in her was so profound. As she looked at the face of her beloved, agonized in his extremity of bliss, Mary was brought to the edge and with a wordless cry she went over.

Josiah felt the first contractions deep inside her, felt them caress him, and instantly his climax was upon

him. He moaned and bucked and drove himself into her as the hot spurts of his seed were expelled from his body, on and on, leaving him half-conscious as the convulsions of his orgasm slowed and finally stilled.

As she became aware again of her surroundings, Mary felt with joy the heavy, relaxed body of her lover over her. Together they had experienced such pleasure as she had never dreamed was possible, and the weight of him was evidence of his presence, of his participation in that most loving of acts just completed.

Josiah raised his head and smiled down at her. He looked as though he were just waking from a deep sleep. "My sweetest love, Mary..." His voice was soft, sleepy.

He began to lift his weight from her as he spoke, but quickly she reached with both arms to hold him still deeply inside her. "Don't leave me! I need you here, inside me."

Josiah smiled, awake and aware now, back in the present. "I'm heavy."

She smiled back with tenderness. "Yes, you're heavy. But I love the feel of you on me, inside me. I love you, Josiah."

"My darling girl..." He began to kiss her face, his mouth moving over it softly. She shut her eyes, basking in the loving caresses.

"M-m-m-m! More, more..".

He chuckled. "I didn't expect...I never thought you'd be so...unafraid, so willing,...so wonderful!" He kissed her again, and nuzzled into her neck, his mouth and his tongue moving over her lazily, with tender, devoted intent to show her his love. After a few minutes, his caresses grew more intense as she began to move against him, pressing her hips to his with a circular motion that made him gasp and raise his head to smile down at her. "Mary, sweetheart...are you starting all over?"

"Uh-huh. Please?"

"With the greatest, the utmost pleasure!"

When exhaustion finally overtook them they slept in each other's arms, unwilling to be separate even in sleep. In the relaxed contentment that followed their lovemaking they slept deeply and restfully, doubly worn out from the preceding nights of restless wakefulness and the emotional storm just past.

When Josiah woke, the daylight in the cave entrance told him that the morning was far advanced. He laid still, savoring the feel of Mary in his arms, not wanting to wake her yet, until he had enjoyed to the full this moment of possession---a moment only; for his heart told him that it was temporary, that she was a gift bestowed on him by heaven only while their isolation lasted. Once back in the world she would change her mind, and he would lose her. The pain of that thought was so extreme, so devastating, that he wondered briefly if he would live through it when it happened. But only briefly, for he accepted this greatest loss as he had accepted other lesser losses in the past, as part of his punishment. Punishment by reason of an abandonment and a betrayal for which he must pay all the rest of his life. He would lose her and not be granted the release of death. He would live, to be alone again.

But she was here now! He resolved not to think about the future; she was here in his arms right now, soft and warm and so much loved. The present moment was one to treasure forever; he would not give up another second of it to fruitless speculation on the days ahead.

Instead, he turned his mind back to the previous night, a memory to be treasured above all else. As he thought of her willing, joyful participation in the act of love his arms tightened involuntarily, and she woke.

Her eyes opened slowly and focused on his face, then they half-closed again as a smile touched her lips. “Good morning,” She put her hand up to his cheek, and reached over to kiss him softly. “I love you.”

He pulled her closer, tucking her head under his chin, holding her with fierce intensity. His love for her surged furiously in him and his heart rebelled against the thoughts of a few minutes ago. She would not, could not leave him. She was his love...his life. “You’re mine! You’re my own love...I adore you... you’re everything, all there is...my treasure, my sweetest love...” He turned her face up to his, and began to kiss her with frantic fervor; her eyes, her hair, her cheeks and throat. She felt tears suddenly, as his face brushed across hers.

“Josiah...stop! Stop!” She put both hands up to his face to hold him still, to look into his eyes. “What? What is it?” He closed his eyes, unable to look at her, as he tried desperately to regain some control over his grief-stricken panic. She mustn’t suffer any more than was already unavoidable because of this sudden, wonderful, ecstatic, disastrous love affair.

Self-control returned slowly. Reluctantly and with sorrow he again accepted the truth. She was not for him. “I am...undeserving of you.” His hand came up to cover hers, still laid against his cheek. “I’ll pay for this present happiness; I’ll pay gladly, any price...anything! But one moment’s unhappiness that comes to you because of me is...unbearable.” He shook his head and looked away from her, dropping his hand from hers. “I should have been stronger.” He shook his head again, as if trying to shake off his unwelcome thoughts, and his control slipped once more. In spite of his wish to save her pain, his anger at himself erupted into bitter words.

“I should have been able to stop this before it began! Before you were drawn in! I knew! I knew I loved you almost from the first day; I could have made you dislike me...hate me! God! What the hell good has a lifetime of self-control done me, if I couldn’t control my desire when it was so necessary?” His face twisted in self-hatred. In his agonized mind, he deserved the shattering pain of this disastrous, marvelous love. He pulled himself free of her embrace, threw off the light cover, and got to his feet. He moved quickly to the cave entrance, where he stood looking out at the morning.

She got up and followed him, standing behind him, but not touching him. Somehow she knew that his self-castigation wouldn’t allow for comforting of a physical kind. Better not to touch him now. Reason might reach him, but emotional softness was what he was hating himself for at the moment. “Josiah? Didn’t we talk about loving and losing? Even if there is pain in the future for both of us, didn’t we decide it was better to have had this joy than to have passed it by?”

He turned to her and began to speak, then stopped, enthralled by the sight of her standing nude in the morning light. He stood absolutely still for many seconds, looking at her beautiful slim body, examining it in all of its parts. His anger and self-hate were forgotten, lost in the upwelling of his love for her, body and soul. She stood still also, unembarrassed by his scrutiny, looking back at him.

He raised his eyes to her face at last. “I adore you absolutely, world without end. You are my love until the last beat of my heart---and after that, if such a thing can be. There will be no time in the future when you are not in my thoughts. Anything that I can do to make you happy, or more comfortable, or to save you pain, I will happily die to accomplish.” He began to move toward her. “Now, on this day, what I can do to make you happy is to stop worrying or even thinking about the future. We are here, and you love me; and I love you with all the strength that’s in me.”

Mary saw it; it was visible in his face when he put his anger and his grief away from him. By the time he had closed the little space between them and put his arms around her, his face was serenely happy. And for almost all of the remainder of their time together in the cave, he neither spoke nor, she believed, thought about what might be ahead for them.

The next few days were the happiest Mary had ever experienced. They spent one afternoon hilariously concocting a rabbit stew. Josiah came back from a short hunting expedition with a rabbit, then he amazed her by producing potatoes, carrots and an onion. He refused to tell her where he got them. "I thought you believed I can do anything. Well, I can!" She used every means she could think of to force a confession, but he withstood every blandishment and all coercion, until she began to take off her clothes. Then he said, laughing, "What are you planning? D'you think that's going to make me talk? It's not exactly torture, you know!"

It is. You shan't touch me until I know the truth."

"All right, all right, I give up! There are some things that no one can be expected to hold out against! I had them stashed in my saddlebags for an occasion like this, so I could amaze you with my forethought. Mary? Mary! I've confessed, you can stop now. ...Oh love, you're so beautiful! Come here to me..."

They nearly burnt the stew.

Josiah took to wearing a strange garment which he called a dhoti, just a piece of cloth wrapped around his hips to cover his genitals. He said that he usually wore a dhoti while he spent time here at the cave; it was good in hot weather, was it all right with her? She was pleased to agree that it was fine with her. His body was beautiful: long-legged, broad-shouldered and heavily muscled. She loved to watch him, to see his muscles sliding over each other when he moved, to watch the grace with which he handled himself.

They sat by the cave entrance, enjoying the shade cast by a huge boulder in mid-afternoon. He was stretched out, half-lying on the blanket they had brought here to this shady spot, looking cool and comfortable in his nearly nude state, when he suggested something that had not occurred to her. "You could be wearing a lot fewer clothes, you know. There's no need to cover yourself from me. As a matter of fact, I'd love to see you uncovered all the time."

She looked at him, smiled a little, and began to unbutton the front of her dress. "I never thought of it!" She stripped quickly to her chemise and bloomers, then pulled them off too. "These won't do." She disappeared into the cave, carrying her clothes in her hand. In a moment she came out again, wearing only a petticoat, which she had tied up under her arms instead of around her waist. In its new role as a single garment, it covered her from her underarms to her knees and was loose and cool, while giving her some protection so she could sit comfortably.

Josiah's eyes followed her as she came back to the blanket and sat down. "Love, you are incredibly fetching in that garment. Maybe you'd like to come over here by me, so I can get a closer look?"

Within a couple of minutes they were both out of what little they had been wearing. Josiah leaned over her, kissing her softly; then his mouth moved down her neck and kept moving until he began to kiss her breasts. Her hands came up to cradle his head, pressing him to her while she moaned softly, "Oh, Josiah, I love this, I love it..." His mouth raised from what he was doing only long enough for him to say, "So do I, love, so do I." Then he began again to tease her with his tongue and his teeth, biting down gently, holding her while his tongue made fiery circles around her nipples.

She raised herself up, wanting more, closer contact with his mouth, but Josiah pushed her gently back down. In a moment his mouth moved from her breast and continued on, further down her body. He kissed his way down over her ribs and she gasped as his tongue explored her navel. After a moment, he continued to move lower. He felt her body tense as he did so, and always conscious of her wishes he slowed his descent, moving his mouth to her side, kissing her and rubbing his face against her, while

he murmured to her almost under his breath, telling her of his love, reassuring her that everything was all right.

“Josiah?”

“My sweet love?”

“Am I being silly? I’m not sure what...” Her face showed her confusion and uncertainty.

“No, no, my darling girl, not ever silly. Can you trust me here a little, although you’re not sure?” He smiled up at her. “Remember, I said I’d show you everything? Well, this is a little more of ‘everything’. Trust me?”

“Yes, of course I do. But what...?” She was blushing brightly now. Her dawning realization of his intention was so far beyond her wildest imaginings that she couldn’t even ask the question.

“Just what you’re thinking. One of the greatest pleasures of all.”

“I’m...surprised.”

From the look on her face, he thought ‘stunned’ was a more appropriate word. He laughed softly, amused and captivated by her innocence. “Wait. You’ll be more surprised.” And he began again to kiss her navel.

As he moved further down her body, she tensed again, and he paused where he was, waiting for her to relax. He was aware that this wasn’t easy for her. It wasn’t something that even entered the thoughts or the dreams of “good” women, but he knew her well enough by now to know that she’d come around in a few minutes. She loved him, and she trusted him. And as he waited her tension eased, and in another few seconds she opened her legs, just an inch or two, but it was enough to signal her willingness.

He continued to kiss her smooth skin, moving slowly, giving her plenty of time, but his own excitement was starting to push him now. He wanted very much to do this, but not unless she wanted it too. “Love, if you’d like to wait on this one.... I know this is not something you’ve ever seen yourself doing.” While he spoke to her, he continued to kiss her, coming very close to the triangle of light brown hair at her groin.

He felt the muscular contraction of her laughter through his cheek resting on her belly before he heard it. “That’s surely true. I never thought of anyone ever doing...what I guess you’re proposing to do here.”

“You guess right. One more thing maybe I should say: I want to do it. Very much.” He felt her relax further as he said these words.

But Josiah cared deeply that everything be what was best for her, and his cooler judgment told him that she wasn’t quite ready for this. He wanted it very much now, enough that it was very difficult to stop, but reluctantly he raised his head and with a sigh slid his body back up until they were face to face. “Next time,” he whispered softly, and his mouth began to move over her face and neck.

After a few minutes of his loving caresses, Mary pushed gently at his shoulders. “Josiah? I want to... Well, you always get to be in control. You lie down, and let me be in control.” She laughed at his surprised look. “Come on, get yourself off me. I’ve got a few---well, lie down.”

“Mary, you’re blushing again. Just exactly what did you have in mind?” Josiah looked down at her, amusement in his face. “Whatever it is, I’m at your service!” He rolled over onto his back, chuckling, his arms spread wide. “Do with me as you will!”

She was still blushing; her face was fiery but determined. “I want to know you too, like you know me. I think you’ve kissed every square inch of me! Well, not every one...not yet, anyhow.” She laughed down at him, embarrassed at her own words. She stretched herself out beside him, leaning over him in his characteristic position. “If I kiss you here,” she brought her mouth down to his neck, “do you like it as much as I do?” She moved her open mouth down the side of his neck, her teeth lightly trailing over his skin. He shivered and made a small satisfied sound, then another sound indicating delighted surprise as she bit him, not hard enough to hurt, but with decision.

She moved her mouth down to his shoulder, trailing kisses as she went. Her hands moved to his soft mat of chest hair. "I've wondered about...well, you have nipples too, would you feel it like I do if I did... this?" Her mouth closed over a small flat nipple, and she sucked gently. Josiah's hand came up to cradle the back of her head, holding her where she was. A soft moan came from him as she kept up her attentions. "I feel it, love...oh, I feel it!"

When she raised her head, she was smiling tenderly. "I can make you happy too! I want to do that so much." She began to kiss his body, moving over it with her hands and her mouth. Her right hand moved lower, and slowly she approached his penis, which stood up fully erect. She sat up then, and laid both hands on it, looking back at his face to see the effect of her action. He closed his eyes and tipped his head back, a look almost of pain on his face. "Please, love, oh please..."

She began to stroke it; and her action brought inarticulate sounds of pleasure from his throat. He moaned and began to thrust his throbbing penis into her hands. Mary watched the dramatic results of her ministrations with delight, and as she continued she realized that what she was doing was making her as excited as he was. His pleasure was her pleasure; now she understood more fully why he loved every moment of making love to her.

She looked down at what she was doing, and suddenly she wanted to do something that she wouldn't have believed a few days ago. She looked up at Josiah, and found him looking down at her with passionate intensity. Slowly, with her eyes still on his, she lowered her head. His eyes widened as he began to realize what she was going to do, and he started to breathe in short panting gasps. As her mouth touched his penis, he cried out wordlessly. She kissed the tip of it softly, and then opened her mouth and took the end inside. "Mary---my god---Mary!" He was writhing now, and her excitement was becoming unbearable as she saw the effect she was having on him.

She raised her head then, and slid her body over his. Instinctively, with no experience, but shaking with a driving desire, she knelt over him and guided him into her. As she sank down, forcing his turgid penis far into her, they both groaned with the satisfaction of this ultimate contact. She could feel his erection throbbing, becoming harder inside her, and her body responded by contracting vigorously around him. At that he cried out, and his climax was upon him. When she felt the convulsive surges of his ejaculations, her body followed over the edge into ecstasy.

Chapter 4

When Mary came back to the present, she could feel Josiah chuckling under her. "What are you laughing at? You think I'm funny, don't you!" She raised herself up until she was sitting on him, made a fist and punched him playfully. "Don't you laugh at me, you...!"

He put his hands on her hips, holding her lightly. "No, no, Mary, It's not you I'm laughing at, it's me!" He shook his head, laughing again. "I try to be so careful, not to scare you, or push you too hard, and then you do something like this! You surprise me endlessly!" He laughed again, shaking his head in wonderment at her. Then he sobered and said softly, "I love you so much, Mary...I love that you'd do that for me."

She smiled a little shyly. "It wasn't just for you." As he watched, her face turned pink again. "Josiah, does this happen to you, too? When you do something that...excites me, does it excite you too, just as much?"

He grinned. "Oh yes...oh yes, it does! When you moan, or shiver, or make those charming little noises you make, it goes through me like a tornado! It even makes me shiver to think about it." His grin widened. "So it got you going when you...did what you did, huh?"

She didn't answer right away. She rolled off his body to lie beside him, and when she did speak she

looked away from him, without her usual open attitude. “Josiah? Am I...unnatural? It seems like I have too much...I don’t know, I feel like I’m being... licentious.”

“No! Don’t ever, ever think that! You’ve got the healthiest, most open, most loving responsiveness I’ve ever seen in a woman.” He reached over to kiss her lightly, his hand stroking her hair. “You’re a wonderful lover, Mary. The very best in my experience, and I’ve...” He hesitated, stopped for a second or two, then began again a bit awkwardly. “Well, I’ve been around for a long time.”

She looked up quickly, her curiosity roused by his odd hesitation. “That’s not what you were going to say. What was it that you changed your mind about saying, Josiah?”

After a moment’s silence he answered, looking at her steadily with the serious level gaze that she loved. “I was going to say, ‘I’ve had the best.’”

“What...how does that happen, Josiah? How can someone know if they’ve had the best?”

He shrugged. “Well, in this case, they came with credentials.”

“What!”

He sat up. “I’m not ashamed of this, Mary, but I’m a little bit nervous that you’ll be ashamed for me. I hope not, but if you are, I hope you’ll tell me.”

“I’ll be honest, Josiah. I don’t think I could be anything else, with you.”

He settled down with his back against the boulder, his legs stretched out, ankles crossed. “I left home when I was sixteen. I just walked away, I had no money...nothing. I lived on the streets for a couple of days and slept in a park; in San Francisco at that time there were a lot of people doing the same. I was more fortunate than most of them, though. While I was wandering through Chinatown I met a wonderful woman. Her name was Pearl, and she was more of a parent to me than either of my blood parents ever thought of being. She took me home with her, and I lived in her house until I was twenty-two.

“The house that Pearl took me home to was a whorehouse; Pearl was the owner and operator of the place. In her native China what she did for a living was a valued profession, not perhaps the most respectable, but perfectly legal. Her mother had been a madam before her, and Pearl knew her business. She ran the best operation in the city; it was universally well thought of.

“I was big and strong even at sixteen, and I just naturally evolved into the peace-keeper of the house. What I did was stand around and look capable of throwing people out, most of the time. It was such a high-class place that most of the clientele was pretty well-behaved, but liquor will sometimes make the meekest soul into a lion. When I had to do it, I used violence, but it didn’t happen very often. If there was trouble I looked menacing and loomed over people; that usually calmed things down.

“Most of the girls were Chinese; many of them spoke no English at all when they came to Pearl. She bought them in China, and paid their passage to San Francisco.” He held up his hands as Mary bristled. “I know, I know, I raised hell at first, too. But...a different culture, a different time. Pearl’s girls weren’t girls, they were women. She didn’t buy children; she didn’t buy virgins. When one of Pearl’s girls got off the boat, she had credentials. She was an experienced prostitute, and she knew her business.

“Pearl was one of the kindest people I have ever known, she never mistreated anyone. If a girl couldn’t fit in, wasn’t happy, she had a choice. Pearl would give her five hundred dollars and she was on her own, or find another house to take her, or pay her passage back to China. Those were the only choices open to Pearl, as well as the girl. But it only happened maybe three times while I was there. Most of the girls left to get married.”

“Who...” Mary stopped suddenly.

Josiah grinned. “Who’d marry them? Some of them married very well. They were beautiful, smart, and very skilled at what they did. Good reasons for choosing a wife, don’t you think?” He thought a minute. “I guess you could say men like me married them. I would have, if I’d wanted one of them in

particular, and I'd been older. Always supposing she'd accept me. They turned down more men than they accepted."

"I spoke a little Chinese: my father ran a mission in Chinatown. I could communicate with nearly everyone right off, and the girls liked me. I'm not sure why yet, but I suspect a big strong young body had a lot to do with it. Most of the men who came to Pearl's were old. It was the best whorehouse in the city, so of course it was the most expensive; in most cases only older men could afford it.

"The girls started taking me to bed the first night I was there. In six years, I had a lot of experience. And I learned a lot about women. They weren't shy! They knew exactly what they wanted and they gave clear instructions; some of them never quit talking, all the way to the end." He smiled, remembering. "I don't know if all prostitutes are the same, but Pearl's girls almost all really liked sex. Not with their clients, that was business. I was their recreation. There were usually from seven to nine of them, and I was...it. All there was." He grinned. "It's a good thing I was so young!"

He stopped then and waited for her to tell him what she thought. She didn't disappoint him; she said just what he had hoped. "That's the strangest story I've ever heard, Josiah. What a different life you've had from...from anything I've ever dreamed of. But...Pearl, Josiah! You were so lucky to find Pearl! When she took you in she probably saved your life. I'd like to meet her, to thank her...for you, for saving you."

Josiah reached over and touched her face. "You're wonderful." Then he looked away, frowning. "She's dead. She died---I wasn't there, and a drunken client shot her. If I'd been there, it wouldn't have happened." He looked down at his hands. "I should have been there."

"Where were you? Wait; you don't have to answer that. I don't mean to pry."

"Mary, you can't pry into my past. It's there for you to take or leave, all of it. I have no secrets from you. I don't want to." He looked up at her and continued. "I went to see my sister. At my parents' house. I was only gone that one evening; when I got home Pearl was dead."

Mary put her hands over his. "I'm sorry. And sorry I'll never meet her; I wish I'd known her. She was a wonderful person; that's very clear from what you've said."

"She would have liked you, a lot. You've got spunk. She loved 'spunk'---it was her favorite English word. She said there was no word in Chinese that meant the same thing as 'spunk'." He smiled tenderly, remembering.

"You loved her very much."

"She was my mother." he said simply.

They bathed together, an activity productive of much laughter. On the hottest days they spent hours in the pool, lazing in the hot sun and the cool water. Sunburn was inevitable because Mary was so fair, but her skin was surprisingly resistant. The first day in the pool saw her burned badly enough that they didn't make love at all for twenty four hours. After Mary was incautious enough to apologize for her inability to do so, Josiah complained bitterly for about twenty three of them.

"A real woman would submit, even if it killed her. To think I believed that you really loved me! Look at me, a shadow of my former self, haggard and pale, deprived of all that's necessary to me; I'm probably going to have a convulsion any minute now from backed up glands. A man could die from that you know, and I'm beginning to feel faint already!"

While he complained he tended her sunburn with gentle care, trying everything he knew to make her more comfortable, but his resources were limited. As a last resort, he reluctantly left her alone for half an hour, and came back with a spiky, fleshy desert plant. When she was liberally smeared with its juices, the discomfort of the burn diminished immediately. Then he complained again. "You're all sticky.

You can't expect me to make love to a sticky woman!"

"Josiah? It's been three weeks, and the food is nearly gone. What do you think we should do?"

They were lying on the blanket in the afternoon shade of their boulder. Josiah lay on his side, looking at her. One hand was on her stomach, rubbing it now and then with lazy sensuality.

"Don't be worried. We can stay alive living off the land indefinitely. It won't be exactly tasty, but we'll live. Chris knows that, that we won't starve up here, or be forced to come down. But it won't be much longer. They'll get him. I'm surprised it's been this long, I thought a week when we came up, or maybe even less."

He watched her face for a moment, then brought up something he'd wondered about. "Mary? About Chris...did you have any kind of...understanding? Anything agreed on?"

"No! Chris has never said a word to me that he couldn't have said to anyone at all." She looked pensive. "I've wondered sometimes if you thought about that. When I first knew all of you, I thought maybe Chris...but in a few weeks I knew it wasn't going to be. He's a good man, but he's not right for me, and I'm not right for him. I think he feels that too. Billy was disappointed though, he thinks Chris is wonderful." She smiled at Josiah, and reached out to touch the side of his face. "You're right for me. You're just right."

Mary was wearing the petticoat that was her usual garb since she had discovered the freedom of fewer clothes. Josiah held her eyes with his, while his hand moved from her stomach down to the hem of the petticoat, then up again under it, pulling the cloth up as his hand moved. He slowed to caress the light brown curls at her groin, but continued, his hand touching her lightly, lovingly as it moved up her body. When he reached her waist she sat up and pulled the garment over her head, sitting quietly then while he gazed at her.

"I never get enough of looking at you. You're so beautiful...these..." He touched one breast lightly, stroking its under-surface with the tips of his fingers. Her nipples hardened immediately, and as he looked at them he could see her quickening heart begin to make them tremble with each beat.

Desire surged in him, powerful and compelling. "Lie down, Mary. I'm going to make such love to you..." She laid down quickly, eagerly; and he moved his body until he was directly on top of her, but held his weight off her, leaning on his elbows. His mouth touched hers gently, short soft kisses, teasing a little. Her hands came up to his head as he knew they would, to hold his mouth against hers, affirming her desire for him. He kissed her deeply then. In seconds they were both lost in the kiss, feeling the blissful contact, knowing that it was only the beginning of the pleasure to be had, anticipating the more intimate contact to come, but still loving the present sensual pleasure.

He lifted his head at last, his heart pounding, needing to breathe as she did also. They smiled at each other wordlessly; their intimacy had progressed quickly to communication without the necessity of words. He shivered as he felt her hands begin to move over his back. She reached down, her hands touching his buttocks, sliding into the division between them, down as far as she could reach. He threw his head back and gasped. This was a new caress; she was learning fast. Her hands moved next around the sides of his hips, reaching under him to brush against his erection; he lifted his hips to make further access to his body possible for her. She caressed his genitals, touching them lightly everywhere; stroking his scrotum, her fingers running lightly up the shaft of his penis, just brushing the sensitive tip, soft feather touches that tantalized.

"You'll drive me crazy!" He laughed down at her, seeing her smiling. She knew what she was doing to him. "I hope so," she said softly.

Her mouth called to him irresistibly. He lowered his head to make that connection, his lips and tongue warm on her mouth. She opened to him as she always did, quickly and with generosity; more responsive than any woman he had ever kissed. He lifted his mouth from hers and smiled as he looked down at her. "The impulse to tell you how much I love to kiss you makes me stop kissing you!" She laughed and reminded him, "There's plenty of time for both. Please don't stop either one!"

Before he dropped his head to nuzzle her neck she saw a shadow cross his face. There! she thought. For the first time, he's let himself think about what's going to happen in the future. He's wondering if there is plenty of time. He's wondering if there's any time at all. Oh Josiah, I'm yours forever; don't you believe that yet?

Her arms tightened around him, cradling him fiercely, wanting to protect him from even a thought that could make him unhappy. But she said nothing; his self-doubt was deeper than words could reach. Only time would show him that she was indeed his forever.

In a moment her thoughts blurred and disappeared, as Josiah's mouth moved to her breast. She hadn't yet learned to take for granted the sensations that came to her when he made love to her this way. The stimulation made her gasp as his mouth moved over her nipple, sucking gently, his teeth biting just short of pain, his tongue never stopping, moving on her with hot, slippery motions.

Suddenly, with enormous power, a new thought came to her. If his mouth were...where he had wanted to put it, where she knew he still wanted it...if he were doing there what he was doing to her breast? What had he said? ---One of the greatest pleasures of all!

Without thinking about it further she brought both hands up to his head to clasp it between them. She began to put pressure on him to move downward, firmly pushing. He looked up at her, questioning.

"Please?" she whispered.

"Oh, querida...my dear love," he answered, and he began to kiss her body, moving downward now without her hands' guidance, slowly approaching that most desired part of her, his heart racing in anticipation of this great pleasure for both of them.

When she felt his warm breath on her nether lips, the thrill that shivered through her body with lightning speed was not quite fear, not quite arousal, but an incredibly exciting combination of both. The warmth of his breath on her merged into the warmth of his mouth touching her, without her being aware of the transition; but when she felt his tongue she gasped. In a moment his tongue was making smooth movements up and down, with each reversal reaching a little deeper. She began to breathe with long slow shaky breaths. Anticipation was continually outshone by realization; her body relaxed little by little until she floated limp and helpless, while his mouth gave her pleasures not ever dreamt of.

Josiah had been taught by the best. He slowed as he felt her excitement nearing the point of no return. Gently he moved away to kiss the insides of her thighs, moving back and forth between them, stopping in between only to breathe a warm breath on her. That breath alone was enough to drive her to distraction, she thought hazily, through her fog of almost unbearable excitement. As he moved between her thighs, he spread them farther and farther apart, opening her body more fully to his gaze and to his mouth.

When he felt her breathing settle into a steadier rhythm, he moved back to resume stroking her with his tongue, now dipping inside her with each repetition. His tongue delved into her, then moved up to stroke lightly that small knot of nerves that was the center of sensation for her. Every instance of that light touch caused her to moan and raise her hips to his mouth. Soon he began to concentrate there where the sensitivity was greatest. His own level of arousal was so high now that he knew they must both explode very soon. In a fever of excitement he stroked her, and as her climax drew nearer, she began to move with passionate intensity. She arched her back, pushing herself into him, making the contact deeper, closer...until at last she went over the edge into orgasm, with a long wailing cry, and convulsive thrusts of her hips.

Josiah had not a prayer of stopping himself from following her. His climax was as violent as hers, his body convulsing along with hers; then both of them slowly relaxed to collapse in an entwined heap.

Neither of them moved for many seconds, while heartbeat and breathing slowed to normal. Then Josiah, ever concerned for her well-being, raised his head. When he looked at her, he found her eyes just opening. As awareness returned she smiled sleepily at him. His face glowed with his love for her as he said softly, "Are you all right?"

"I'm...wonderful. Come here, up here to me."

He raised himself up to take her into his embrace, and she snuggled close, sighing as she felt his arms close around her. She looked up at him, raising her face for a kiss, and found him smiling down at her with tender amusement. She smiled back. "I know, I know! You think I'm funny. Well, you were right...one of the greatest pleasures.' I love you. Could we have a little nap?" She snuggled even closer, got the kiss she'd wanted, and closed her eyes.

In moments they both slept, content.

"Mary? Unless we want to be caught in our present state of undress, maybe we'd better start putting some clothes on, at least in the evening." He grinned. "We'll sure embarrass Chris if he rides in here and we're looking like this."

He burst into laughter at the look on her face; she was horrified. "Embarrass Chris! What about me? I'd die right then and there! It hadn't occurred to me at all, Josiah. What have I been thinking of?" He grinned at her knowingly. "All right! Don't you give me that evil grin of yours; I don't think about that all the time!" As he had been willing to bet a large amount she would, she blushed.

That made him laugh harder. "My innocent little love! You blush so beautifully; I'm always trying to think of ways to make you do it."

With mock seriousness she snapped at him. "You don't have to tell me that! You're just...just impossible! I don't know what I see in you at all!"

Those words, so lightly meant, tripped that foreboding of coming sorrow that Josiah was having increasing trouble banishing. As she laughed and shook her head, the shadow that she had learned to dread in the last few hours crossed his face again. Mary's heart sank

"Oh, Josiah, don't! Don't, my dear love. I love you with all my heart! You know that! You know it!" She began to kiss his face almost frantically, pulling herself into his arms, tears in her eyes.

"It's all right, querida mia...don't worry or be afraid. It's all right." His arms went around her and he pulled her head down onto his shoulder, stroking her hair as he said the comforting words to her. But above her head his face was a mask of pain.

He made love to her that night with an intensity that frightened her. His mouth moved over her face and her body continually; he seemed to be trying to stretch himself over all there was of her, striving to kiss and caress and love and satisfy her completely and for all time. She felt his tears along with his kisses. What he was doing came to her finally. He was saying goodbye.

When passion had come to its incandescent end and their bodies relaxed, both of them were exhausted more by emotional intensity than by physical exertion. Josiah lay on his back, staring upward, silent and somber.

The time had come. Mary asked the question at last, the question that had hung between them for

days. There was no easy way; she asked it plainly. "Tell me what happened, Josiah. What did you do that you're not forgiven for?"

Josiah said nothing.

She waited for several minutes; then, "Are you going to tell me?"

Nothing.

"What's happening? Please, Josiah, you're frightening me."

That made him respond. He turned to her, drawing her into his embrace. "My dear love...I'm sorry! I...I don't know how to tell you. I must...but I..." He stopped, shaking his head, then with a deep breath, he began.

"I'm going to tell you all of it, from the beginning." He stopped again; this was very hard for him, she could see, but it had to be told.

"I have a sister. Ruth is her name; she's four years younger than I am. We were close when we were youngsters, in spite of the age and sex difference between us. I think we drew together because of our parents.

"My father was a missionary. He wasn't an unkind man, but he served an unkind God. My father's God was a cruel, vengeful God, hard and unforgiving." The biting harshness in Josiah's voice told Mary of his savage hatred of that God, but when he spoke of his father his voice softened. "But to my father he was God, and whatever he commanded, my father did. It tormented him, but he did it. I hated him for many years for that, but not any more. He only did what he had to do in the light of his conscience." His mouth turned up in a little crooked smile and his voice was as bitter as anything Mary had ever heard when he continued, "I had no right to hate him. He followed his conscience; that's more than I could do!"

He put her gently away from him and got up. "Let's sit by the fire." When they were settled across the fire from each other, he stared into the flames for a few seconds. Then he took another deep breath and started again. "My mother didn't love anyone or anything. At the time I blamed her for that, but now I believe that she was another victim of my father's God. I don't know what exactly, but...something happened between them that made her give up all interest in life. She existed, but there was no joy in her, and no love. My father told me once that she had been 'a happy person' when he married her. He sounded almost wistful when he told me that. I think he had no idea what had happened to her."

He shook his head, not looking at Mary, staring into the fire. "Their unhappiness...and my cowardice!...killed Ruthie. Not physically; she's still alive, but she's not...there any more."

"When I left home, Ruthie was twelve. She was all right then. I didn't go home again for more than two years. When I finally nerved myself to open that front door once more, it was already too late. The battle between Ruth and my father was far advanced, and she was barely fifteen. She asked to come away with me, but all I thought of was how could I bring her to a whorehouse?" He stared into the distance. "I should have taken her then. I should have made a place for her, left Pearl and my nice, comfortable, selfish life. I could have gotten a job on the docks. I could have taken her!" His face darkened again in self hatred. "But...I walked away. I walked away from her pain and her need.

"The last time I went home, the war was...total. She had committed her life to her battle with that old man. She drank, she went with men, she taunted him with her 'evil ways'. And his life was dedicated to subduing her; he locked her up, starved her...beat her. When she begged me to take her away with me, she showed me...bruises, bloody stripes...her back...!" His head went down into his hands. "I promised her! I promised her I'd come back for her the next day. I thought I needed to talk to Pearl first. But I promised I would come back!"

He raised his head then. "When I got home, Pearl was dead."

His face showed the stunned, helpless look that she thought must have been on it when he heard that

news. Mary's heart twisted in pain for the man so tormented by the past, and for the boy just entering manhood who faced too many mortal blows, too quickly. How could his youthful heart have dealt with what had happened? Only Josiah's stern conscience would hold him responsible for whatever impulsive action he took at such a time, when the pain of tragic events was unbearable.

"I walked away. One more time, I walked away!" His face was expressionless, but slow tears were sliding down his cheeks. His eyes returned to their stare at the dying fire. "I walked down to the docks; someone offered me a job. I stacked bales for a while, I guess; I don't remember much. But I remember this: when the man asked me if I wanted to ship out, I said yes. I walked up that gangway, knowing what I was leaving behind. Before daylight the next day we weighed anchor for Hong Kong."

"I left her. And when I came back, she was...not right in her head. She's...not there any more."

"Sometimes...sometimes she knows me. Those times are the hardest...she begs me to...take her away..." His face crumpled, and he gave way to his pain at last. "Oh, Lord God forgive me, forgive me..." His words were nearly unintelligible as he cried out in his agony. He wept then, great difficult sobs erupting from deep inside him.

Mary came to him, and as she embraced him he turned to her, pulling her against him with his powerful arms, heedless of hurting her, needing only to feel her tight against him. She stroked his hair, and kissed him, and spoke soft words of comfort. Comfort only, she didn't try to excuse his actions; nor did she try to make him understand how she felt, that he was not at fault. He'd not hear that now, she knew. Her words were those with which she comforted her child: "It's all right...I love you...it'll be better soon...don't cry, my love, don't cry."

Chapter 5

Chris came the next day, late in the afternoon.

They were sitting once again on the soft sandy ground in the boulder's shade, both fully dressed now. Josiah was sitting with his back against the stone, Mary lying across his lap, his arms around her. Her head was resting against his chest; her eyes closed, her body relaxed. She wasn't asleep; neither of them had slept since the night before. They were sitting now in exhausted quietude, drawing what comfort they could from each other's nearness.

Josiah lifted his head suddenly and put his hand on his revolver, which was always within reach. Mary had sensed nothing, but when they both heard a long whistle whose tone dropped at the end, Josiah relaxed. "It's Chris."

Mary didn't move.

"Come on, Mary, get up." Josiah put hand up to stroke the side of her face. "Chris will be here in a minute."

"Well, we're dressed." She remained where she was.

"But he is not going to find us like this. Get up, Mary!"

"Why not? He'll know soon enough." Her arms were stubbornly holding on to him.

Josiah shook his head impatiently. "This is not the time to argue about this. Get up!" He put her firmly away from him, slid out from under her, and stood up.

She was frowning when she looked up at him, but in a moment her face cleared. "I'm sorry. You're right." She took his outstretched hand and rose.

Chris appeared around the bend in the trail, smiling as much as Chris ever smiled.

“Took you awhile to get'im!” was Josiah’s greeting.

“Funny thing is, he’s been dead for over two weeks. ...Hullo, Mary. Some of his hired hands decided they needed his money more than he did, I guess. They were smarter about hiding his body than they were about splashing the cash around though. Seemed kinda suspicious they were so flush when they hadn’t done nothin’ to earn it that we could see. They hightailed it before we could ask questions, so it took us awhile to find ol’ Hannibal, but we found him. He’s dead all right.”

“Good! Maybe it’s not kind, but I’m glad he’s gone.” Mary looked a little uncomfortable about what she had said. “He wasn’t a happy person.”

Josiah came to her rescue. “When a man’s loony, if he’s not dangerous he should be left loose to do the best he can, in my book. But if he’s gonna hurt anybody, then he’s better off dead. Trouble is, you can’t tell who’s dangerous and who ain’t. Guess that’s why they lock'em up.”

Mary looked up at him with a raised eyebrow. “Well done! A quick reversion to type, Josiah.”

“Huh?” He knew exactly what she meant, but his eyes avoided hers. He turned away. “Well, if we’re gonna get out of here in the mornin’, we’d best get crackin’.” He began to gather up the small items that three weeks of living had spread around the cave mouth.

Chris leaned against the wall, watching Josiah work and looking speculatively back and forth between him and Mary. Josiah kept his eyes on what he was doing, avoiding looking at Mary. He knew Chris pretty well; at least well enough to know that he was very quick. Not much got by him. Josiah was afraid that his feeling for Mary would be apparent if he looked at her.

But Mary felt no such hesitation about making her feelings known. After watching them for five minutes as they worked around the cave mouth, Chris had a clear enough picture of the situation to want to investigate further. He stood up straight from his slouch against the wall and drifted into the cave. As he had suspected, there was only one bed, one big enough for two.

The two men went for water in the late afternoon, leaving Mary to cook the evening meal. When they were out of earshot of the cave, Chris went straight to the point. “You gonna make an honest woman of her?”

“She is an honest woman, Chris. Nothing I could do could change that.”

“Don’t dodge me, Josiah! What the hell went on up here?”

Josiah stopped, put down his buckets, and turned to Chris. “Look. There’s nothing you can say to me that I haven’t said to myself a hundred times. It happened, and I’m in love with her---with everything that’s in me, Chris. I’d marry her in one minute if I thought it was right for her. But she...she’ll change her mind when we’re off this mountain. I know she will. And she deserves better than me.

“I guess I’m hoping you won’t push this. In your place I might think the same way you are right now, but I’m thinking of her, of what’s best for her. She’s not for me, Chris. She’s going to realize that pretty soon now, and if we just let it happen, just keep this between us, no real harm is done, is it? If I were a different man...well, I’m not. Let it go, Chris. Please, for Mary’s sake, let it go.”

Chris stared hard at Josiah, saying nothing, assessing his sincerity. He straightened suddenly, his decision made. “All right. I think you’re tryin’ to do the best thing for Mary. You know the situation better’n me, so...all right, I won’t say nothin’ or do nothin’. You handle it the best way you can for Mary.”

Josiah held out his hand. “The best for Mary is all I want in this world or the next.”

“Done.” The handshake sealed the bargain, and nothing more was said on the subject.

Mary spent the night alone in the cave; the men slept outside the entrance, on the sandy ground under the boulder. Before dawn the next morning they were up, packing the horses, preparing for the long ride home.

They set out just as the sun was coming up. Chris rode beside Mary, Josiah following with the pack horse tied behind his saddle. Chris was his usual laconic self, but after a few minutes he spoke. "Mary, I wired the Judge that you were coming back. If he got it, he and Billy should be there when we get to town."

"Oh, Chris, thank you! I'll be so glad to see him...I bet he's grown just since I left!" She reached over and put her hand on Chris's arm, stretching to reach him riding beside her. "That was a kind thing to do. Thank you so much."

Josiah, riding behind them, watched the little interchange. His eyes darkened, and he looked away quickly, saying nothing.

Billy was waiting, standing on the edge of the walk, leaning far out to look for his mother, but obedient to his grandfather's admonition to stay out of the street. Mary saw him immediately, and urged her tired horse into a trot, anxious to feel small arms around her again.

Josiah watched the reunion of mother and child, his face wooden. When Mary turned back to her escorts, Josiah dismounted and busied himself lifting her saddlebags from her horse and carrying them into the building. He set them down inside the door, then faced Mary, looking at her for the first time. "Been a good trip. I'll stable your horse. 'Bye." His voice was low and very impersonal. When she put her hand on his arm he brushed by it without looking at it. He picked up her horse's rein, remounted, and was gone. Chris watched the exchange with an expressionless face, then he too rode away, lifting a hand to Mary in goodbye.

In the following days, Mary saw Josiah only in passing; she knew that he was avoiding her. She was working long hours in the newspaper office, trying to catch up from three weeks of absence, but her attention turned continually to him. He spent a great deal of time in the saloon, playing cards, and she knew he was drinking heavily. From the newspaper office across the street, she saw him several times leaving the saloon late at night, his steps unsteady as he headed for the church and his bed there.

One night he left the saloon earlier than usual. Mary watched him start down the street toward the church, not very steady on his feet, and her heart ached so for him that some action was imperative. She took off her apron, looked in on her sleeping son, and left the building. She followed his retreating figure, still visible walking slowly toward the church. She caught up with him just as he entered.

"Josiah? Please, I need to talk." As she spoke they were inside. She shut the door behind her and waited. He stood still, his back to her, tension apparent in his body even in the gloom. A half dozen candles on the altar at the other end of the room were the only illumination. When he spoke, he said what she was afraid he would say. "There's nothing to talk about. It's over. We knew it would be over. Go home, Mary."

"No! It's not over, it'll never be over! I never agreed to this; I don't understand why you're doing this to us! I love you, Josiah! Please, please at least help me to understand why you're doing this."

"Mary...leave me! I can't.... Oh God..." His face dropped down into his hands. "Just leave!"

She took a step forward and laid her hand on his shoulder. He flinched when he felt her touch, and after a moment's breath-held stillness he gave in. He whirled and his arms came around her, pulling her to him with violence. He kissed her face, her neck, her hair, her ears. "My sweetest love...querida, I want

you...I've missed you so much...I adore you...." When finally his mouth covered hers, both of them were lost immediately in the heat of the kiss.

After long moments he lifted his head, separating from her mouth reluctantly, driven by the need to breathe. He looked down at her for a moment, then swept her up, carried her into the little room that was his living quarters, and laid her on his bed. He dropped down beside her and his hands went immediately to the buttons on the front of her dress; but between the alcohol's effect and his frenzy of excitement, he fumbled to no avail. "I want to see you...get this off! Get it off!"

She stopped him before he ripped her bodice. "Wait, my love—wait, I'll get it!" Her hands fumbled nearly as badly as his, but she got it unbuttoned, and bared her breasts to him. His mouth came down hot and seeking, and she lifted herself into his touch, wanting it as much as he, needing to feel his mouth on her again. "I've missed you...I've needed you so...." Her hands were on his head, holding him to her, pressing him closer. "I love you! Josiah, come into me, I want you inside me..." She writhed under him, ready for him instantly.

They didn't wait to get all their clothes off. There was more fumbling with fastenings, both of them impatient, unable to get it done fast enough. He entered her with a groan of gratification, the heat of her body so wonderful, so welcome to his starved senses. Mary lifted her hips and began a rhythmic movement in an immediate drive toward satisfaction. He let her make the beginning, accepting her movements, letting his body feel her again, feel her wanting him, feel her showing him how much she loved having him inside her. But as his excitement became almost unbearable, he took command.

Mary relinquished control gladly, lying under him more quietly now, letting her body accept him, feeling his desire for her, absorbing into herself his beloved presence inside her again at last. They came to the moment of climax very quickly and at exactly the same time, both of them crying out in the extremity of sensation, each of them holding on to the other with frantic intensity while ecstasy stormed through them, shaking them to the soul.

They quieted slowly, breathing becoming more regular, heartbeat stabilizing. Josiah rolled over, holding her still against him, not breaking their close contact, until they lay on their sides. He looked into her face with soft eyes, loving her with all of himself, not yet sorry for the lovemaking just past. "I can't regret making love to you," he said softly. "You are the light in my life, Mary. You are everything I want, all I long for."

"I've missed you so, Josiah. I've wanted you every moment. I love you so! Why have you stayed away? How could you leave me alone, to wonder if you didn't mean all the things you said?"

His arms tightened around her. "You didn't wonder. You knew. You will know, forever."

She smiled tenderly. "Yes, you're right. I knew. I never doubted you for one moment." She hesitated a moment, then: "Josiah? Is it all right now? Are you going to be...with me now?"

He dropped his eyes. "Mary, I've been drinking...a lot. Don't ask me important things. Tomorrow, all right? Go to sleep now."

"I wish I could. I wish I could stay here with you, in your arms...I've missed that so much, sleeping in your arms. But Billy's alone. I have to go, right now." She began to disengage herself from him, but his arms tightened, keeping her against him.

"I can't let you go! I can't!" His grip was frantic.

"Yes you can. Until tomorrow, my love, only until tomorrow. Go to sleep. I love you." She pulled herself away from him slowly, breaking their intimate connection regretfully, and got up. His hands followed her, keeping contact as long as he could.

"Go to sleep," she said again, while she straightened her clothing and smoothed her disheveled hair. She bent over him to kiss him and whispered once more, "Go to sleep. I love you. Tomorrow, love."

As she turned away from him and started for the door his face whitened and his eyes closed; he couldn't watch her go. No, not tomorrow...not ever. Not ever again, my love...my love... With a great rush of grief he heard the diminishing rustle of her skirts across the floor, and the soft, final click as the door closed behind her.

In the morning he was gone. He left a letter; she found it pushed under her door.

"No...oh no, Josiah!" Tears had begun to run down her cheeks after the first sentence. "Oh, my dear, my love, don't do this. Oh please!" The tears came faster as she realized that he was gone forever. She knew his iron will. He would never come back.

There at the door where she had opened his letter, Mary crumpled helplessly to the floor and wept brokenhearted, for her lost love. And there Billy found her an hour later, still sitting on the floor by the door. Her tears were past; she sat white faced and unmoving, staring into a bleak future.

"Mama? Watcha doin' on the floor? I'm hungry, mama. Are we gonna have breakfast?"

She looked blankly at him for a moment. "Yes...yes, Billy. We're...going to have breakfast." She rose mechanically, put her arm around her son, and started for the kitchen.

It got easier after the first couple of weeks, but not much. During that time she dreamed about him nearly every night. In every dream he was going away, leaving, not saying goodbye, not listening to her, not caring what she wanted to say, disappearing into darkness, gone...gone. She woke Billy twice, crying out "Wait! Oh wait!"

The dreams stopped after awhile; she was grateful for that, but the pain didn't go away. After a month she was so inured to it that she didn't notice it much when she was busy or talking to someone or reading. Unless she read poetry; she found quickly that she couldn't do that at all.

She tried to help herself. She joined the ladies' sewing circle, although she couldn't sew at all, and had very little interest in learning. The ladies laughed and talked, and she forgot about him for an hour or two. She went riding for exercise, or to deliver a newspaper, medicine or groceries to anyone sick or shut in within five miles of town. Fresh air and exercise seemed to help.

She spent time with Billy. He was the best medicine of all, his face was the only one that drove Josiah's from her mind for any length of time. But Billy could not be the answer to her pain. One sunny afternoon at the end of August, she realized that she was monopolizing too much of his time. He looked up from the puzzle they were working on together and said hesitantly, "Mama? Can I go outside now?" He had important business of his own, and summer's freedom called him to be outside with his peers. When he was gone, she put her head down on the puzzle and cried for a long time.

Chris wasn't surprised when Josiah disappeared. He knew what had happened. He had watched Josiah, seen his pain, and wondered from the beginning how long he was going to be able to stand it. The other five wondered and worried about Josiah, and speculated on where he was. One afternoon during a break in the daily poker session Vin asked Chris what he thought about Josiah's long absence. Glad of the opportunity to settle any further inquiry, Chris answered at more length than usual. "I don't

think he's comin' back. I'm pretty sure I know what happened, and I think he had good reason for leaving. I'd've done the same thing. It's nobody's business but Josiah's and it's not something we can help, so I guess it's just...over." He looked around the table at five concerned faces, and saw nodding heads. Nothing more was said.

When the game broke up, Vin stayed behind. "You worried about Josiah, Chris?"

"Some. He's pretty much on the ropes."

Vin hesitated before he spoke, reluctant to betray a confidence. "I been wonderin' about him too, if he's all right. He was drinkin' pretty hard before he left.

"The thing is, Chris, I don't like to mention this, because I...I told him I wouldn't say nothin'. But...well... he's got someone, a relative, over at Vista City, that he visits. If we set a watch for him I bet we could snag him when he goes to see her."

"I don't know what good we could do him anyway, but...well, now I think about it, I guess I know something that might help at that. Do you know somebody over there who'll watch for him?"

"Yeah."

Chris thought for a minute. "Do it. Have them let us know about it if they see him, but don't let him know." He stopped, then added, "...Tellin' me was right, Vin. This could help him."

Chapter 6

Late in October, Vin came to Chris with information. "They saw him in Vista City three days ago. He visited his...relative, and bought supplies; they figured he must be gonna live rough for quite a while from what he bought. He's gone now. We'll have to wait until the next time he shows; my...help over there didn't get it clear that we needed to know right away." Vin smiled a little. "He knows now, though."

Chris said nothing for a minute, then, "Thanks. I'm gonna pass on the news to someone who...well, thanks." He touched Vin lightly on the shoulder before he turned away.

"Thought you might want to know that Josiah's still around here. He was seen in Vista City three days ago. He bought a lot of food and stuff; looks like he's plannin' to live rough somewhere for quite a while."

Mary stopped breathing for a long moment. Her face was white when she spoke. "He's gone to the cave. I know it. Will you take me there, Chris? Now? Oh, please, right now?" Her voice broke on the last words, and tears made further talk impossible.

"Not now, it's too late today, but be ready at sun-up in the morning. I'll be here." Chris smiled his little crooked smile and reached out awkwardly to pat her shoulder. "Don't cry now, Mary. It's gonna be all right."

Chris refused to leave her until they knew that Josiah was at the cave. "If he's not there, what'll you do?"

"I'm not helpless, Chris. I can take care of myself. I can get back to town alone if I have to. But I won't have to; he's there. I know it."

When they were half a mile away from the cave Chris reined his horse to a stop. "You were right. I smell smoke." He smiled at the look on her face as she turned her head quickly to sniff the air. "I'm

gonna leave you. He's here all right. I thought he was all along. You were so sure, seemed like he just had to be."

"Thank you, Chris. I can't thank you enough for what you've done for me...for us, I hope. Oh, I hope..." She reached out to touch his arm, then turned her horse and rode up the trail, not looking back.

She tied her horse to the rail at the little corral and walked the rest of the way, stumbling once or twice on the dark trail. When the fire came into view she stopped, panting a little from the climb, her breath visible in the late autumn air.

He was sitting by the fire, facing the cave entrance, his profile toward her. He sat cross legged, his hands on his knees, his back straight, his eyes shut. He spoke without opening his eyes. "Buenos noches. You're welcome here. Come up to the fire, it's chilly tonight. There's stew in the pot if you're hungry, friend. Be welcome."

"Josiah?"

He had been sitting still, but when she spoke he stopped breathing; his stillness was absolute.

"Mary?" It was a breath of sound only. His eyes opened, and he turned them slowly toward her.

She tried to smile at him. "I'm right here."

He unfolded his long body, stood up, and took a step toward her, then another, and then she was in his arms. He embraced her lightly at first, but his arms tightened and continued to tighten until he clasped her to his body with all of his strength. His face was buried in the warm space between her neck and her shoulder, and he held her for a long minute without movement or speech, his breathing slow and deep. Then he turned his head until his lips found her neck. She felt his kiss there, and a soft trail of kisses over her neck and chin to her mouth. His kiss was without passion; only tenderness and love were manifested in the touch of his lips.

When he spoke his voice was a whisper. "You came. You came to me..."

He raised his head to look into her face. "Mary...my sweet love...don't cry, love...Mary... amada mia.... don't cry." He kissed her cheeks, kissing away her tears.

Smiling shakily up at him, she whispered, "Don't you cry, love," as she also kissed away tears.

"Come to the fire." With an arm around her, he moved with her to the fireside. She followed, willing to accept his lead, but puzzled by his passionless reception. She remembered so clearly the last time they had come together, also after a separation, one not nearly as long. His mouth had devoured her, they had struggled frantically to bare themselves for each other. But not this time. Uneasiness turned to anxiety as she thought: Is he going to send me away?

She sat down in her accustomed place. The flames leaped up between them as Josiah laid fresh fuel on the fire. The aroma of coffee drifted from the pot set just close enough to the coals to keep it hot. The dancing light gilded his curly head as he moved, tending the blaze. It was all so familiar, so much the same.

The surroundings were well-known and well-loved, but Josiah's demeanor mystified her. Anxiety drove her to ask immediately for reassurance. "I...Josiah, I don't understand...you seem so different..." She needed to see his face for a clue to what he was thinking, but his head was turned away.

She had to know. She blurted, "Are you going to send me away?"

He looked up at her from his task at the fire, and as he gazed at her his eyes told her that he adored her still. When he spoke his voice had that deep soft timbre that she loved, that he used when he uttered love words. "I'm never going to send you away, Mary. Unless you tell me that you were mistaken about loving me and that you don't want me, I'll never let you go again."

She was dumbfounded. “No...no, of course I wasn’t mistaken. I adore you...you know I...Josiah, what’s happened?”

He sat down across from her. He said nothing for a few moments, staring into the fire. Then he raised his eyes to hers with that serious level gaze that she loved. “I’ve been forgiven. The penance is paid. I’m free.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, as a silent prayer of thanksgiving went up from her heart. If you’re there and you heard the prayers of one who isn’t even sure of belief, thank you...oh thank you. For she had prayed. What else was there to do? She had prayed every day for the removal of his burden of guilt. Just let him be free, oh please. Let him not suffer any more.

When she opened her eyes, tears streaked her cheeks. “Tell me, Josiah. What happened?”

“It was you. Because of you. When I walked away from you...when I gave you up...that paid the price. It was my penance.” He dropped his head, looking at the fire. “When I realized that, I laughed. I laughed out loud, for the first time in...a long time. It was funny, you know? In giving up what was the most precious thing in the world to me, I had at last paid the price; but what was funny...was that I’d rather have had you. At any cost---any cost at all.”

He looked up at her, and she saw now in his eyes what she had longed to see; the desire, the fiery hunger for her that thrilled her to her bones. And he saw answering heat in her, saw her passion for him. “Oh, yes ...I see it...you want me too...” he whispered. “Yes, querida mia, my sweetest love...” Time stopped for both of them then while that long look passed between them.

He turned his glance away at last, pulling himself up before they lost themselves in each other’s eyes. There was more to say before they could come together at last. He took a deep breath and leaned back against the wall, looking once more into the fire. “I needed a sign. Maybe it’s superstition, but I needed a sign.” He shrugged. “I got one.

“I went to visit Ruthie...and for the first time ever, she knew me. Me---as I am, not as I was thirty years ago.” He shook his head, wonderment still strong in him over what had happened. “She said, ‘Josiah, your hair is gray. You’re getting old. But you’re my brother, and I love you.’ And she put out her hand and touched my face.” His eyes stared sightlessly ahead, remembering. “She smiled and touched the side of my face, and I knew it was true. I was forgiven.” Then he looked down at his hands and his voice changed, lost its wonderment. “Two minutes later she didn’t know me at all.”

Quick tears came to Mary’s eyes again; tears for his release from his long bondage to guilt, and for Ruthie, lost in her own world of shadows and illusion.

He looked up at her. “All I thought of after I left her was you. I didn’t know how to regain you, or if I ever could. I was forgiven because I left you; I couldn’t go back to you now that I had what you had been the price for. But I thought that if you were to come to me, freely, without my asking---that would be fair play.

“This was the place we knew together; I had to come back here. I hoped you’d come. I was prepared to wait forever.” Surprising her, he grinned suddenly. “I thought it would be longer than three days!”

She returned his smile. “Chris told me last evening that someone had seen you in Vista City, and I knew where you were going. I knew!”

He laughed softly. “You found out---just last night?”

“Do you think I’d wait? I wanted to come then, but Chris wouldn’t!”

That made him laugh harder. “You do love me, don’t you? You do want me...” The laughter disappeared suddenly and his face became rapt, enthralled, as desire delayed too long flooded through him again. “Do you want me, Mary? Do you?” He stood up.

“I want you.” She held out her arms. “Oh, please.”

He was around the fire and pulling her up into his arms before the last word left her lips. He looked at

her for a second, immobilized by the hot rush of desire that her plea called forth in him, and when he lowered his head at last he made a small helpless sound just before his mouth came down on hers. Now there was passion in his kiss, all the passion stored up during three months of starving for her. She felt his heart pounding, and his body began almost immediately to tremble as longing for her seized him.

Mary's body reacted to his kiss with instant heat, instant hunger. Her mouth opened under his gladly; she met his searching tongue with her own, wanting all of him, everywhere, deeper, hotter, reaching into her. She pressed her hips to his, helpless to stop the involuntary movement to bring herself closer to him. She pulled up his shirt and her hands moved over his back, joyously recalling the feel of him, the hard masculine muscle under smooth skin.

He lifted his mouth from hers to tell her of his desires, the love words spilling from his lips. "Querida... my angel, I've got to kiss you, to touch you...my sweet love, I want to feel your body under me..." He kissed her everywhere between passionate words. His hands moved over her, curving around her body, passing over her hips, gently pressing on her belly. "I want my hands on the most secret parts of you. I want to see you open yourself to me...open to my eyes and my hands, and to my mouth..." He whispered constantly to her of his desires and his intentions, as his mouth slid over her throat and into the vee of her blouse to touch the tops of her breasts. "I'm going to kiss you everywhere...here...", his hand moved to her breasts, "and here..." his hand warmed her between her thighs.

She felt the warmth of his hands through her heavy riding skirt, and when they moved up, under her jacket, they felt hot through the thinner fabric of her blouse. He stroked her breasts, and she felt as if she were melting in the heat of her desire for him. She pulled away slightly, beginning to unfasten her blouse. "I want my clothes off." Then she brought her face close to his again, asking for a kiss. Against his mouth she murmured, "I want your hands on my skin...I want to feel your hands all over me. I've missed your hands...and your mouth...so much, oh love...kiss me...."

Josiah picked her up in his arms, and took her to his bed. He laid her down, and kneeling over her, he began to unfasten her clothes. They both worked at it feverishly, and in a few moments she lay before him as he remembered her, golden in the firelight, glorious in his eyes.

Mary reached out to caress his penis, furiously erect under the straining cloth of his jeans. His eyes shut, and for a moment he stopped moving and even breathing, to feel her hands on him again. Then he unbuttoned his shirt, pulled it off, and his hands moved to his belt buckle as he rose to his feet. In seconds he too was naked and he knelt beside her again.

His pulsing manhood drew all of Mary's attention and her hand began to stroke it. He knelt motionless, his head back and his eyes closed, breathing hard, while she caressed him. When her mouth touched his penis, he cried out in surprise and delight. "Oh Mary...love...oh, God!" His hands came to her head, holding her there while he groaned in the extremity of his pleasure. But his excitement was such that he couldn't let it go on long. He moved her away from him gently with a hand on each side of her head.

She made a sound of reluctance just as her mouth parted from him. "---But I want to, Josiah!"

"Let me...let me make love to you now...let me..." He laid down beside her. "I need to touch you all over, Mary. I need it...as I need food or sleep...querida...my most loved darling..." As he spoke to her, he began to kiss her throat, moving down to her breasts, taking a nipple into his mouth deeply, drawing on it until she cried out in pleasure, feeling that mysterious connection between her breasts and the deepest seat of her womanhood.

His hands seemed to be everywhere. She felt his mouth still at her breast making her moan with pleasure, while his hand slid over her, making its way down her body to stroke the curling hair at her groin. His fingers reached into the warm, wet place between her legs, and she made a soft surprised sound as he slid two fingers inside her. She tensed with uncertainty, but the stimulation overwhelmed her and in a moment she was thrusting her pelvis into his hand, making the contact as close, as deep

as it could be. She began to moan softly, and as he moved his fingers inside her, her breathing became ragged and her body began to tense in the preamble to orgasm.

Josiah murmured to her softly, lifting his mouth repeatedly from her breast to speak, while his hand never stopped moving. "That's my love...that's my willing little love...do it for me now, let it all come... my sweet one, let it come now, love..." His thumb moved up to touch that small knot of nerves that was the center of all stimulation for her. Her body swayed against his hand as feeling overwhelmed her.

"Josiah...my lover...oh...touch me there...again..." The words came from her slurred and broken as she climbed the heights of sensation. Josiah was watching her avidly now, his excitement growing along with hers. There was a special joy for him in watching her face while he made her lose all control, made her scale the heights of pleasure simply from the touch of his hand.

Then with a long wail she went over into ecstatic, convulsive orgasm. Josiah watched her with passionate attention, drinking in her rapture, his face lit with love and delight at his ability to make her body give her such thrilling pleasure. His arms held her close to him, cradling her as she came slowly back to the present time and place. She opened her eyes at last, and smiled.

His kiss was gentle at first, but his own body was straining now for release, and in a few moments his desire brought him to a hard-breathing peak of passion, "Now, my love...again."

And she was with him. "Oh please...again!"

Her body shifted in concert with his as he moved himself over her. He held himself poised there, feeling her breasts crushed against him, the slim, lithe beauty of her body, feeling the heat of her, the response of her, the joy of having her here, under him once again. He entered her slowly, holding back, wanting to appreciate to the full every instant of this encounter. He had thought never again to feel her body surrounding him, never to immerse himself in her with consuming, fiery ardor.

Holding back lasted only a short time. She was here, now, his again---his again to be his lifemate, his bedmate forever, world without end. At that thought, and with her beginning to move under him, impatient for his lovemaking, passion erupted almost immediately in an orgasm so fiery, so complete, that he lost consciousness for a few seconds. When he returned to himself, he could feel the lessening contractions of Mary's body from her second climax in just a few minutes. Then together they slowly relaxed as their bodies went limp with exhausted satiation.

Keeping their deep, intimate connection, Josiah turned them just far enough to take his weight off her body and reached down to pull a blanket over them. He kissed her gently, and they looked into each other's eyes---a long, warm, satisfying look of love. Then both pairs of eyes closed, and sleep overtook them almost instantly.

Mary woke first, yawning and opening her eyes to the gray light just before dawn. Josiah slept beside her, lying on his stomach, his face turned toward her. She looked at him in the soft dawn glow, seeing his face looking so young, so...innocent, somehow, in sleep.

She loved him so much, with such tenderness. How different, she thought. How different my life with him will be. Days full of the same tasks and challenges that life has for everyone, but how different for me from the past. How much love flooding over me through all the hours of the day from this man who loves with such a whole heart. And the nights---how different the nights!

Her eyes filled with tears as she looked at his sleeping face, and she vowed to herself that his sorrow-filled days were over forever. She would make his life happy and fulfilling. His past was gone, and the future was only bright ahead.

As she gazed at his face, his eyes opened, and he smiled slowly at her. "It's true. I was afraid to open my eyes. If it had been a dream---" His brows drew together. "Tears? What, love?"

“Happy tears only. I love you very much. Are you going to marry me?”

He erupted with surprised laughter. “Well, I wasn’t going to, but if you insist, I suppose I’ll have to. Damn!”

He turned his body so that he leaned over her, and his voice changed, becoming deep and tender. “I told Chris when he was here that I’d marry you in a minute if I thought it was right. Well, it’s right; I know it’s right now. I adore you with every part of me, all of my body and my soul. I can think of no more complete happiness than to spend the rest of my life with you.” He kissed her then, with tender gentleness, without passion.

She smiled up at him. “That’s what I wanted to hear. I hope I’ll hear it every day, and every night, for the rest of my life.” Her eyes showed mischief then. “Especially at night. I love you always, Josiah, in every way, but at night I love you in special ways.”

She sat up, caught by a sudden thought. “You did it again last night, Josiah. There’s always something new. I can’t believe how many different ways you know to make me...” She stopped, at a loss for words. “Josiah---what is it that happens to me? You know, when we...when I...” And to his delight, the fiery blush he loved rose up her neck and covered her face.

He chuckled, and then laughed. “I’m sorry, I’m not laughing at you...well, yes...I am. You’re just so... such a darling, Mary. I love you so much...” He laughed again. “The scientific word for what happens is ‘orgasm’,” his voice became softer, “but that doesn’t tell you a lot. My explanation of what happens to you is more expressive, I think.” His eyes held hers with all of his love in them.

“I take you to heaven, my sweetest love...and you take me there, too.”

“Hungry, Josiah? Shall I make breakfast?” She was watching him as he restarted the fire.

“Not very, not yet. But sit. I’ll make coffee.” He reached for the pot.

“Don’t bother, unless you want it.”

He stood still for a moment, thinking about it. Then he said, grinning, “Sh-h-h. We always have coffee. It’s traditional.”

When the coffeepot was hanging on the tripod, he sat down beside her. “Come here to me.” He slid his arms under her and lifted her into his lap.

She moved a little, getting comfortable, then sighed contentedly. “It’s just the same. It’s the same as it was before.” She looked up at him, smiling. “It’s traditional.”

He kissed the top of her head. “Just the same. But now it’s forever. It’ll always be the same, querida mia, my sweetest love---forever.”

The End

“Twilight” is by Sara Teasdale, but since she wasn’t even born until 1884, I couldn’t attribute her poem to her in the body of the story. “Lucifer in Starlight” is by George Meredith.