

# SCATTERED PETALS

A NOVEL

TEXAS DREAMS • 2

Amanda Cabot



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“How much longer?”

Priscilla Morton tried to smile at the woman on the opposite side of the stagecoach. Now that Papa was asleep, Mama’s normally quiet voice had turned querulous, sending waves of regret through her daughter as her words reminded Priscilla for what seemed like the thousandth time that this was her fault. She was the one who’d insisted they come.

“Soon.” Priscilla reached across to pat her mother’s hand, her smile wry when she recalled Mama warning her to be careful what she wished for. Priscilla had wished for adventure, never dreaming that the adventure would involve comforting her mother as if Mama were the child.

When they’d received Clay’s letter inviting the family to his wedding, Priscilla had realized this was the opportunity she had sought for so long and had convinced Mama and Papa they should go to Texas. Though she’d relished the

idea of leaving Massachusetts and venturing into parts of the country that her sister had described as wild and foreign, she had been careful in phrasing her arguments. While her parents would not willingly seek adventure, they loved Clay, and so it had taken little persuasion for them to agree that Clay deserved to have family with him at his wedding, even if the family was only his by marriage.

At home in Boston, it had seemed a fine plan. But the journey had been more difficult than Priscilla had expected. Though Mama had been stoic on the train, once they'd left its relative comfort for the bone-jarring stagecoaches, her mood had deteriorated, and the days had turned into litanies of complaints. Dust, mud, insects, the rutted roads, even the scenery, which Priscilla had found beautiful, had bothered Mama, and now that the other passengers had left the coach, she saw no need to mute her laments. This was not the adventure Priscilla had sought.

"We'll reach San Antonio tomorrow." Priscilla gave her mother the same response she'd provided only ten minutes earlier. "Clay will be waiting to take us to Ladreville." The small town, he had told Priscilla, was a half-day's journey northwest of San Antonio, located on what he had described as a particularly beautiful stretch of the Medina River. Mama didn't care about that now. What she needed was reassurance that she would survive the stagecoach's jolting. Priscilla gestured toward her mother's Bible. "Would you like me to read to you?" Most days, the Psalms comforted Mama, although recently she had insisted on Job, claiming she was suffering as much as he had.

Mama shook her head. "Not now. My head hurts." Poor Mama. She was like a hothouse flower, wilting in the Texas

sun. She twisted her rings, a sure sign that she was distraught. “I certainly hope Clay has a hot bath waiting for me when we reach that ranch of his.”

“He will.” In all likelihood it would be Sarah, his bride-to-be, who would provide the amenities Mama expected, but Priscilla knew better than to mention that. At first she had attributed her mother’s complaints to the rigors of travel, but as the journey had progressed, Priscilla had discovered the causes were not simply physical. Mama was deeply disturbed that Clay was remarrying. Though Patience had died more than a year ago, Mama seemed to believe he should spend the rest of his life mourning the loss of his wife, Mama’s firstborn daughter.

“Isn’t the countryside beautiful?” Priscilla pointed to the window. This part of Texas boasted gently rolling hills and valleys dotted with small ponds. Clusters of trees, some of them dripping with what she had learned was Spanish moss, lined the banks of narrow streams. With the greenish gold grass and the vibrantly blue sky, Priscilla found it a scene of pastoral beauty. Though she doubted Mama would agree, this was a safer topic of conversation than her mother’s former son-in-law.

Mama stared outside for a moment. “I suppose some might like it,” she conceded, “but I cannot picture Patience here.”

Neither could Priscilla. Her sister had been a lot like Mama, content with her life in Boston, uncomfortable in Texas. When Patience and Clay had returned to his birthplace, it was supposed to be for only a few months. For Patience, those few months had been the last of her life on Earth, and now, though no one would have expected it, Clay had decided to make the small town of Ladreville his home.

The coach gave a sudden lurch, knocking Papa's head against the side, destroying his hope of sleep. "What was that?" he asked, his voice groggy.

"Just a rut, Papa."

"That's all this road is," Mama grumbled. "One rut after another."

Now fully awake, Papa took her hand between both of his. "I'm proud of you, my dear, coming all this distance to be with Clay on his wedding day. You were the one who recognized how important it was to him."

Priscilla bit back a smile at the way Papa changed history to make Mama happy. Not for the first time, she marveled at how different her parents were, and how well those differences suited them. It wasn't simply their physical differences. Papa was tall and lanky, characteristics he'd bestowed on Priscilla, with graying brown hair and eyes. Though no one would call him handsome, Mama was an undisputed beauty with deep auburn hair, green eyes, and what she described as a pleasingly plump figure. Despite Mama's claims to the contrary, Priscilla knew she'd inherited little more than her mother's green eyes. Even her hair was a pale imitation of Mama's, and she lacked her mother's eye-catching beauty. Mama was as spectacular as an orchid. If her mother was a hothouse flower, Papa was a dandelion, able to thrive anywhere, and just as dandelion greens served as a spring tonic, so did Papa heal others. While it was true he was a renowned physician, in Priscilla's estimation, his greatest feats of healing were reserved for his wife.

Mama's face softened into a smile. "You're right, Daniel. Just think of the stories I'll be able to recount for our friends."

“I assure you, none of them has ever had an adventure like this.” The kiss Papa pressed on Mama’s hand broadened her smile. “You’ll be the talk of the town.”

Leaning back, Priscilla felt her own tension begin to ebb. In less than two days, they’d be in Ladreville, reunited with Clay. He and Papa would talk about patients, Mama would have her bath, and Priscilla would meet Sarah. Though it seemed vaguely disloyal to her sister, Priscilla was looking forward to getting to know the woman Clay loved.

Perhaps she dozed. Afterwards, she was never certain. All she knew was that two gunshots rang out.

“Stop or I’ll shoot!” The voice was harsh and filled with menace.

As Mama gasped, Priscilla leaned forward to peer out the window, blood draining from her face at the sight of three men, their faces partially hidden by bandanas, their shotguns pointed at the coach. Surely she was dreaming. This must be a nightmare. A moment later, as the coach lurched to a stop, one of the bandits slid off his horse and wrenched the door open. When the stench of his unwashed body assailed her, Priscilla knew this was no dream.

A second bandit rode toward the front of the coach while the third remained on horseback, his gun fixed on the open door, as if protecting the man who was glaring at Priscilla’s family.

“Git out!” that man ordered. “Keep your hands up. Don’t try nothin’ tricky.” Though her mouth was dry with fear, Priscilla’s mind registered odd details. The man who threatened them was tall, probably over six feet, with hair so dark it was nearly black and the meanest blue eyes she’d ever seen. Though there was no doubting the strength in those arms

and shoulders, the greatest menace was what his index finger could do if he pulled the trigger.

“What’s happening?” Mama whispered.

Papa slid an arm around her shoulders and drew her closer. “I believe we’re about to be robbed.”

“You got that right.” The dark-haired man reached into the coach and grabbed Mama’s arm, yanking her from the seat. “Git out!” As he looked around, his eyes lit on Priscilla, and the greed she’d seen radiating from them changed to something else, something she did not want to identify. “Hey, Jake,” he yelled to the man who remained behind him. “There’s a right purty gal here.”

“You ain’t got no time for that, Zeke.” The man named Jake kept his gun pointed at Mama as she descended to the ground. His hair and eyes were the same color as Zeke’s, but his voice was firmer, as if he were accustomed to being in charge. “Git the others out, then git their valuables. Chet, you git the payroll.”

“All right, old man. You’re next.” Zeke gestured toward the door.

Priscilla willed her hands to stop trembling. Somehow she had to find a way out of this situation. It was her fault. Thanks to her desire for adventure, her parents had endured weeks of discomfort. Now they were about to be robbed. Priscilla’s lips tightened with resolve when she saw her mother’s reticule. Hoping no one noticed what she was doing, she stuffed it behind the seat. The thieves wouldn’t get everything.

She looked down and saw a flash of gold. They wouldn’t get this, either. The bandits could take her earbobs, but they wouldn’t get the locket with the miniatures of her parents and

Patience. While Zeke's attention was focused on her parents, Priscilla tucked the necklace inside her collar.

"You're next, little gal." Zeke punctuated his words with a laugh that made Priscilla's stomach turn.

Refusing to look at the man whose voice raised such loathing, she kept her head averted as she descended from the coach, and as she did, she saw the third bandit, the one they'd called Chet, gesture toward the stagecoach driver. "Gimme the payroll," Chet demanded.

"You can't take that." Priscilla heard the driver's voice waver.

"Can't I?" As calmly as if he were swatting a fly, Chet shot him.

Priscilla gasped, and her legs threatened to buckle at the bandit's casual disregard for human life.

"Oh, Daniel." Mama buried her head against Papa's chest and began to moan. Though Papa's face was unnaturally pale, he murmured comforting words. Only the bandits were unaffected by the driver's death. Jake and Chet climbed onto the coach, tossed the driver's body onto the ground, then pulled a wooden box from under the seat, while Zeke kept his gun aimed at Priscilla and her parents.

"Looks like we got ourselves some rich ones," Zeke told his partners. There was no answer, for the other men had moved to the back of the coach and were dragging out trunks. Zeke nodded at Mama's left hand, splayed across the front of Papa's coat. The day had been so warm that she'd removed her gloves. "That's a right purty sparklie you got there, ma'am. Give it to me."

"No!" Mama shrieked, as if her refusal would dissuade the bandits. Priscilla knew better. "Daniel, tell him he cannot

have my ring.” Mama was acting as if Papa had any control. Had she forgotten what had happened to the driver when he’d refused?

Papa reached for Mama’s hand. “I’m sorry, my dear, but we need to do as he says.” He slid the diamond ring from her finger.

“Yer man’s right. You ain’t got no choice. Now, hand it over.” Once the ring was deposited in a cloth sack, Zeke turned his attention to Papa. “Gimme your watch.” Papa complied. “Okay, little gal, you’re next. I’ll take those earbobs.”

Thankful she’d hidden her locket, Priscilla unclipped the earrings and dropped them into Zeke’s hand. Maybe now that the bandits had what they’d sought, they’d leave them alone.

Clearly unhappy, Zeke glared at her. “Where’d you hide it?”

“I beg your pardon.”

“You cain’t fool me. I saw gold around yer neck. Give it to me, or I’ll take it.”

“Priscilla, we can’t fight them.” Though soft, Papa’s words were tinged with resignation. “Give him your locket. It’s not worth your life.”

He was right. Priscilla unclasped the chain and flung it at the bandit. She had hoped he would fumble and would have to pick it up off the ground, but Zeke caught the necklace with ease.

“That’s a good gal.” He darted a glance at his partners, who’d unhitched the stagecoach horses and were searching the luggage. “You ready?”

Jake nodded. “There ain’t much here. Chet, you take care of the rest. Zeke, let’s go.”

Zeke tossed the bag that held the Morton family's jewelry from one hand to the other. "I got me one more piece of business," he told his brother. "I'll catch up with you."

"Don't take long."

"Don't worry. I won't."

Jake mounted his horse. "C'mon, Chet. Do what I told you. I ain't got all day."

The man shrugged, then picked up his rifle. Before Priscilla realized what he intended, he'd fired two shots. Mama and Papa slumped to the ground.

"No!" The word echoed in her brain along with the sound of gunfire. And then there was silence. The horse pawed the ground, but she heard nothing. The bandit's mouth flapped, but no sound came out. Priscilla stood, unable to move, unable to hear, unable to do anything but feel. *No! This can't be happening.* Terror ripped through her, squeezing her heart until she thought it would burst. There was blood, so much blood. As the sickening smell reached Priscilla's nostrils, her senses returned, and she heard the men behind her, chuckling as if something had amused them.

"No!" She stared at her parents. It couldn't be true. God wouldn't have let these evil men kill them. Priscilla fell to her knees. "Talk to me, Mama," she pleaded. But her mother's eyes were sightless, her mouth frozen in an expression of shock. Priscilla placed a hand over her father's nose, hoping against hope that she would feel him breathing. She did not.

"They're dead." There was no remorse in Zeke's voice as he grabbed Priscilla's arm and hauled her to her feet. "Chet never misses. Now it's time for you and me to have a little fun."

The chuckle that accompanied his words left no doubt of his intent. Priscilla's eyes moved wildly, looking for a way to escape. As if he sensed her fear, Zeke tightened his grip and turned toward his brother. "You wanna watch?"

Chet shook his head. "Not this time." A second later, he had mounted his horse and headed after Jake, the coach horses trailing behind him. Priscilla was alone with the bandit named Zeke.

He turned her so she was facing him, then pulled her against his body and ran one hand down her back. Priscilla shuddered with fear and revulsion. She couldn't let him do this. Zeke merely laughed as she struggled against him. Pushing aside his bandana, he grabbed her chin with his other hand, his mouth twisting into a leer. "I wanna see if you taste as sweet as you look."

"No!" As the memory of her parents' lifeless bodies flashed before her, Priscilla gathered every ounce of strength she possessed. Twisting abruptly, she broke Zeke's grip and began to run. *Help me, Lord*, she prayed. *Help me!* The grass was thick beneath her feet, the air filled with the scents of horses and recent rain. She could do it. She could escape. She could almost taste freedom. A second later, she lay face first in the grass, a heavy weight on top of her.

"I always did like feisty ones," Zeke said as he wrenched her arms behind her and tied them. "Now, gal, let's see what you taste like."

He rolled her over, grinding his lips against hers as he lifted her skirts.

"No!" Priscilla screamed the word, but no sound emerged. *No!* She twisted. She turned. She tried to kick, but it was to no avail. Zeke was big; he was strong; he was determined.

*Please, Lord, help me!* As the blood pounded in her ears and she cried out in pain, Priscilla heard the sound of hoofbeats and a single shot.



“C’mon, Charcoal.” Zachary Webster stroked his stallion’s mane as they forded the river. Though Charcoal preferred galloping on dry land to swimming the Medina and invariably protested when they headed for Ladreville, Zach always smiled when he crossed into town. Though less than fifteen years old, Ladreville had an air of permanence that he suspected was the result of its settlers’ determination. When Michel Ladre had arrived from Alsace with his band of French- and German-speaking immigrants, he’d insisted there would be no temporary accommodations in the town that bore his name. Everything would be built to last. Everything would be designed with pride. And it was. With its half-timbered buildings, a part of its Alsatian immigrants’ legacy, Ladreville was unlike any place Zach had ever seen. It was true that all of God’s creation had its own beauty—all except Perote. Nothing could make the Mexican castle that had been turned into a prison beautiful. Though the rest of the world he’d seen was appealing, somehow this small Texas town touched Zach’s heart as no other location had. That was one of the reasons he sought excuses to leave the ranch and come to town. Today, however, he needed no excuse. It was payday, and he was on his way to the post office.

“Mornin’.” Steven Dunn, Ladreville’s postmaster, greeted him with a broad smile. “I figured you’d be here today. I told my wife you was regular as clockwork.”

Zach chuckled at the realization that he’d become so

predictable. He doubted anyone who'd known him as a youngster would have expected that. "The next thing I know, you'll be accusing me of being stuck in a rut."

The postmaster checked the boxes behind him, then shook his head. "No mail for you or Clay. As far as that rut, with all that's going on, I don't reckon there's much time to get stuck in anything at the Bar C."

"Don't forget the Lazy B." No doubt about it, it was a challenge, being the foreman of two large ranches, but Zach had never been one to shy from challenges. He enjoyed his work, and the fact that Clay Canfield, who hadn't known him from Adam six months ago, trusted him enough to give him complete control over not just his own Bar C but also the neighboring Lazy B was cause for another smile. Two prosperous ranches and a town that had caught his fancy. It was more than a man deserved.

"Heard tell you got some visitors comin' from the East."

Zach nodded. There were few secrets in a small town, not that there was any reason to hide the arrival of Clay's wedding guests. "Clay's happy as can be that the Mortons are coming. You've probably heard that Doc Morton hired Clay as his assistant back in Boston, and the next thing anyone knew, Clay was marrying the older Morton girl."

"She was a right pretty gal, Patience was, but a mite stand-offish."

It wasn't the first time Zach had heard that complaint. "Maybe it was just that she was from Boston," he suggested. "Folks are more formal back East."

"Mebbe. My wife sure hopes the parents and the other gal are friendlier." The postmaster cleared his throat and held out his hand. "Got your package ready?"

“You bet.” Zach gave him the box. He was certain Steven knew the package contained money, but he’d never asked why Zach sent some each month. That was one of the things that pleased Zach about Ladreville. Though the town loved gossip, its postmaster did not indulge in Ladreville’s favorite pastime, and that suited Zach just fine. The good citizens of Ladreville had no reason to know that he sent a substantial portion of his pay to Charlotte Tallman, a woman who was not related to him. If they knew, they would only speculate.

“Thanks, Steven.” *For so much.*

As Zach turned to leave, the postmaster stopped him. “I reckon the lady’s mighty happy to hear from you so regular like.”

“I owe her a lot. Her husband saved my life.” Zach blinked at the sound of himself pronouncing words he’d never intended to. Only Clay and his father knew what had happened at Perote and how much he owed John Tallman’s widow.

Steven shrugged, as if the revelation were insignificant. “Like I said, she’s a mighty lucky lady you write so regular like.” He emphasized the word *write*. “Mighty lucky. I reckon she thanks the Lord for you.”

Steven was wrong. No woman thanked the Lord for him, not Charlotte and especially not Margaret. “*If you leave me, I’ll . . .*” Zach pushed the memories from his mind as he strode out of the post office and mounted Charcoal. It had been fifteen years, half his life. By now a reasonable man should have been able to put the past behind him. Zach had tried and failed. He knew God had forgiven him. He’d begged for and received forgiveness long ago, but he still didn’t know why Margaret had refused his offer of help unless she had followed through on her threat. Zach fought back the pain

that that thought always brought and nudged Charcoal into the water. Perhaps it was time to accept that he would never understand Margaret's motives. One thing was certain. It was time to learn what God had in store for him next.



“What the . . . ?”

Priscilla cringed at the sight of the blond man sitting on a horse, his pistol pointed at her. Though the man bit off his words, sparing her what was probably a string of profanity, nothing could camouflage his anger.

“What happened?” he demanded.

Fear caused Priscilla's heart to skip a beat, then begin to pound furiously. Though every instinct shrieked that she should flee, she couldn't, for Zeke's body pressed her into the grass. He was big and heavy and immovable. He had been silent and motionless since she'd heard the shot, and the smell of blood told her he'd been wounded. Perhaps more than wounded.

Priscilla's eyes widened as the blond man slid off his horse, covering the few yards between them in three long strides. What was he going to do? Was he like Zeke? Was he going to . . . ? She couldn't complete the thought. What Zeke had done was unthinkable. *Help me, Lord. I can't bear any more.* Priscilla kept her eyes fixed on the stranger, trying to read his thoughts. She saw anger and something else, perhaps pity. A second later he yanked Zeke off her, tossed him aside like a piece of trash, then straightened her skirts.

“Are you all right, ma'am?”

She would never again be all right. She would never again be clean. She would never again be whole. Priscilla shook

her head, then nodded as she managed to sit up. She was as close to right as she was going to be. She was alive, and—as far as she could tell—nothing was broken. No bones, at least. She didn't want to think about the injuries Zeke had inflicted, just as she didn't want to think about the big man standing over her. If she stood, he'd be less threatening, but try though she might, with her hands tied behind her, she could not rise to her feet.

“Who are you?” she asked. He didn't look like Zeke or his brothers. Though he'd worn a bandana, this man had tugged it off as he'd slid from the horse, as if—unlike the bandits—he had no fear of people recognizing his face.

“Lawrence Wood, ma'am. I'm a Texas Ranger.” This time there was no question. His eyes were filled with pity. “Let me untie you.”

Priscilla shuddered at the thought of him, of any man, touching her. “No, please. Don't touch me.” The words came out as little more than a squeak.

He nodded slowly, as if he understood. “I won't hurt you, ma'am. I'd swear that on a Bible if I had one handy. Let me help you.”

She had no choice. As Priscilla nodded, the Ranger knelt beside her and slit the bandana that had tied her hands. Then he rose quickly, distancing himself from her as she rose to her feet. She ought to thank him. Priscilla knew that. But somehow the words would not come out. She closed her eyes, trying to block the sight of the bodies lying on the grass. Perhaps if she kept them closed, she could pretend it hadn't happened. Perhaps she could pretend that Mama and Papa were still alive, that they were on the stagecoach, making their way to San Antonio, and she had not been . . . Priscilla

shuddered again. She wouldn't pronounce the word, not even in her thoughts.

"How many of them were there?"

The Ranger's voice brought her back to reality. No matter how much she wanted to pretend, today had happened. Everything.

"Three."

He turned Zeke's body over and frowned at the sight. "Zeke Dunkler. I knew I'd catch up with him eventually. The others must have been his brothers, Chet and Jake."

Priscilla nodded. Those were the names she'd heard.

"This one won't be hurting you or anyone else ever again." The Ranger looked around, his eyes assessing the scene. "Just like the other times. They took the horses and anything valuable they could find." He walked slowly toward Mama and Papa's bodies. "Did you know the other passengers?"

"They're . . ." A sob caught in her throat. "My parents."

"I'm sorry, ma'am." The Ranger's voice rang with sincerity. "I wish it were different, but there's nothing I can say to make it better." He scowled as he looked at the bandit's body. "Scoundrels like the Dunkler brothers shouldn't be allowed to live. I can't undo what they've done, but I promise you they'll pay for it." The Ranger rummaged through the back of the stagecoach, emerging with a shovel and a soft cloth.

"What are you going to do?"

"Bury your parents and the driver. I ought to let the coyotes and birds take care of Zeke, but I can't do that." He held out the cloth and nodded toward the small stream she'd barely noticed. "You might want to freshen up a bit while I dig the graves." As if he knew that being too close to her frightened her, he laid the cloth on the grass.

As the rhythmic sound of the shovel hitting soft earth continued, Priscilla scrubbed her skin. The cool water washed away the dirt and blood, but nothing could cleanse her memories, nothing could erase what the bandits had done. The sounds, the smells, the sights, and—worst of all—the memory of Zeke’s loathsome touch remained. Priscilla knew those moments would haunt her for the rest of her life. She sank onto the ground and buried her face in her hands. *Oh, Lord, why did you let this happen? It would have been better for me to die. Then I would be with Mama and Papa and Patience. Oh, why didn’t you let me die? Where were you when I needed you?* There was no answer, nothing save the pounding of her heart.

She raised her head and looked at the man who was digging her parents’ graves. Why couldn’t he have come ten minutes earlier? If he had, perhaps Mama and Papa would still be alive. Instead, they would soon be buried in this land Mama had found so foreign. It wasn’t fair! The tears Priscilla had been holding back began to flow, accompanied by great body-racking sobs.

*Now, child, you know tears solve nothing. When you want to cry, find something to do.* As the memory of her father’s words echoed through Priscilla’s mind, she brushed the tears from her cheeks. Papa was right. There were things she needed to do to help prepare her parents’ final resting place. As crude as the grave was, it was all they would have. It was up to Priscilla to do her best. Even though there was no minister in sight, her parents could not be buried without a prayer. She rose and entered the stagecoach, emerging a minute later with her mother’s Bible and the reticule she’d hidden from the bandits.

“You ready, ma’am?” The Ranger stood at the side of a single wide grave. The fresh mounds of dirt a distance away told her he’d already buried the driver and the bandit. Dimly, Priscilla realized that he’d dug a single grave for her parents. She nodded slowly. It felt right. Mama and Papa might be in a strange land, but they were together.

Priscilla walked to the gravesite, then bent down and laid the reticule near Mama’s hand. A lady, Mama had insisted, never went outdoors without her reticule. She straightened Papa’s hat, which the Ranger had placed on his chest. There was nothing else she could do.

“I’m ready,” she said. With hands that were still shaking, Priscilla opened the Bible and began to read the familiar words. “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” When she finished and said a silent prayer, the Ranger reached for his shovel. Unable to watch, Priscilla turned away, trying to block the sound of earth covering her parents.

“Where were you heading, ma’am?” the Ranger asked as he stowed the shovel in the back of the stagecoach.

He was matter-of-fact. She would be too. Papa was right; naught was gained by crying. “My brother-by-marriage was going to meet us in San Antonio and take us to his ranch.” Had it been less than an hour since she’d been eager to reach Ladreville? The thought brought a fresh wave of pain, and Priscilla squeezed her eyes closed to keep the tears from falling.

“Do you recall the name of the ranch?” If the Ranger saw her distress, he ignored it.

She nodded. “The Bar C. It’s just outside a town named Ladreville.”

“I’ve heard of the place. The best thing would be for me

to take you all the way there. If we hurry, we can reach the ranch before your brother-in-law leaves for San Antonio.” The Ranger gestured toward his horse. “Let me help you up.”

Priscilla stared, horrified by his proposition. Didn’t he understand that she couldn’t do what he’d suggested? Getting on the horse would mean letting the Ranger touch her. Even worse, once she was mounted, she would have to hold onto him. Priscilla clasped her hands as memories assaulted her. The bandit’s fetid breath. The roughness of his hands. The . . . She forced herself to take a deep breath as she pushed the thoughts aside. There was only one thing to do, only one way to survive. She would ensure that no man ever again came that close to her. She would not get on that horse.

“Ma’am, we need to leave.”

“I can’t.” The Ranger stared at her as if she had lost her mind. Perhaps she had. All she knew was that some things were impossible. *You’re strong, Priscilla. You can do anything you set your mind to.* Unbidden, Papa’s words filled her head, reminding her of the day he’d pronounced them, the day she’d been afraid to strap on a pair of ice skates, lest she break her arm again. With Papa’s encouragement, she had skated that day and had rediscovered the pleasure gliding across the ice could bring.

“All right.” Priscilla stretched out her hand.



“Isn’t she beautiful?” Clay Canfield’s grin practically split his face.

Zach looked at the man who’d become his closest friend. Though they both stood six feet tall and had blue eyes, the similarities stopped there. Clay’s hair was blond, not almost

black like Zach's, and anyone who looked at them could tell that Clay was unaccustomed to physical labor, while Zach had been raised outdoors. Clay was highly educated; Zach had far less schooling. Clay was a renowned physician; Zach ran ranches. On the surface, they had little in common, but despite—or perhaps because of—their differences, they had become almost as close as brothers.

“Isn't she beautiful?” Clay repeated the question.

This was clearly a time for discretion. As far as Zach was concerned, it looked like every other carriage he'd seen. Furthermore, he saw no way to determine that the object of Clay's admiration was female. But Zach knew that uttering either one of those thoughts would not be prudent, particularly when the man who'd hear them was his boss as well as his friend, and so he said only, “Have you given her a name?”

Clay nodded. “Sarah wants to call her Bessie.”

“And whatever Sarah wants, she gets.” Though he had known Clay for only a few months, Zach had been amazed at how loving Sarah had changed Clay. He was a far happier man since Sarah had agreed to be his wife.

Clay's grin broadened. “Don't look so smug. You'll feel the same way when you fall in love.”

He meant well. Zach knew that. He also knew this was not the time for explanations, and so he said lightly, “That day, my friend, will never come.”

“I've heard that before, and every time the man was wrong. Your time just hasn't come, but who knows? Your bride might be arriving in the next few days.”

“What do you mean?” The words came out seemingly of their own volition. Zach certainly hadn't meant to pronounce them.

“Priscilla.” Clay acted as if the answer should have been apparent. “Sunny Cilla may be just the woman for you. She’s pretty and smart and has a way of making even a rainy day seem bright. That’s why her parents called her Sunny Cilla.” Clay gave Zach an appraising look. “She’d be perfect for you.”

This conversation had lasted long enough. “Is Bessie ready to travel?”

“Indeed she is, and just in time. Tomorrow’s the day we go to San Antonio.” Clay patted Bessie. “You’re ready, aren’t you?”

Zach laughed. What else was he to do? The man was as proud as a new parent, all because he had a carriage.

As a slender brunette emerged from the house, Zach tipped his hat. “I hear you’re responsible for this carriage’s unfortunate name,” he said as Sarah Dobbs, soon to be Sarah Canfield, approached. Though she’d always limp, thanks to a childhood riding accident, Zach was glad to see she had abandoned the cane.

“Am I to infer that you see something odd in giving a carriage a name?” Sarah drew herself up to her full five feet four inches and pretended to glare at Zach as if he were one of her schoolchildren.

“Well, ma’am,” he drawled, feigning ignorance, “I reckon this is the first time I’ve heard of such a thing.”

“Zach Webster, you ought to be ashamed of yourself, mocking a child’s idea.”

“You mean this was Thea’s suggestion?” Zach shot his friend a glance and was mollified when Clay appeared as surprised as he by the notion that Sarah’s young sister had named the carriage. “You let a two-year-old tell you what to do?”

Sarah shrugged. “Why not? She’s very persuasive.”

There was no denying that. The little minx had charmed everyone at the Bar C from Clay’s father to the ranch hands. Zach clapped Clay on the shoulder. “I don’t envy you in another fifteen years. You’ll have your hands full, dealing with Thea’s suitors.”

Clay gave his fiancée a fond glance. “I suspect that’s why Sarah’s marrying me. She wants some help.”

As Zach started to laugh, he heard the sound of an approaching horse. Turning, he saw a palomino with two riders. “You expecting company?” he asked Clay. As far as Zach knew, the visitors were strangers to the area. The man sat tall in the saddle, his gaze vigilant, while an obviously weary woman with reddish blond hair clung to him.

“It can’t be.”

Zach wheeled around at the sound of Clay’s distress. Blood had drained from his friend’s face, leaving him ashen. “Something’s horribly wrong. I don’t know who the man is, but that’s Priscilla with him.”