

A MAN CALLED
OUTLAW

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K.M. WEILAND

Ben For All Sword
SCOTTSBLUFF, NEBRASKA

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K.M. Weiland

Scripture quotations taken from King James Version and New King James Version.

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Dedicated to my beloved Savior. May there always be one man willing to stand for His truth no matter what the cost.

And to my father—who is such a man.

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Thank you all. May the bread you have cast upon my waters be returned to you many times over.

*“Brave men bleed and brave men die, and the coward lives a slave.
But red the blood that dyed the plain—no coward fills the Outlaw’s grave.”*

—from “The Outlaw’s Lullaby”

ONE

1887

THE WEAK FALL AND THE STRONG CONQUER.

That was something the major, Nathaniel Wilcock, had been pounding into Shane's head since the day Shane had first left his mother's house in town to live on the Double Hook Ranch. He had been a spindly twelve years at the time, not old enough to understand that the major's words went any further than the weanling calves outside in the big corral.

But in the sixteen years since then he had come to understand quite a few things. He understood them and maybe even agreed with them—which didn't at all explain why he was loping down the hill to the river with the deliberate intention of interfering with the major's orders. The rebellious feeling in his chest was an unfamiliar one, and in some part of his brain that worried him.

The broncy gelding he was riding bounded down the hill with a stiff stride that more than said he wasn't through bucking for the day. Shane kept a tight rein on him. He wasn't in the mood to deal with any tantrums from his horse: he'd dealt with enough of such from people during the last two months.

Cowhand Baxter Shirley, riding beside him, squinted from beneath a dusty black hat brim. "What're you figuring on doing?"

"They're moving our cattle, aren't they?"

"Seems to me that's probably what the major ordered them to do."

The horses reached the foot of the hill and slowed to a trot. Shane grunted. Two months ago, when he had returned early from Richmond and the law school from which the major had so badly wanted him to graduate, he hadn't

expected his reasons for coming home to be understood. But, as happened so often, the major had surprised him.

Shane had seen the disappointment lurking in the old man's eyes; he had known that Wilcock wasn't happy with the decision. And yet not only had his decision been accepted, but the major had gone so far as to hand over the reins of the Double Hook.

"You're foreman now—it's yours to run."

That's what he had said, and Shane had believed him—until it had become clear that this promotion wasn't a gift. It was a test.

Is it a test I'm failing? His frown deepened.

Ahead, where men from the neighboring Bar M Ranch were pushing Double Hook cattle across the river, Shane could see Jim Morrelay twisting in his saddle to look back at them. Even at that distance the man's scowl was visible. He lifted an arm and shouted something to his men, then galloped out to meet Shane.

Shane reined to a stop and waited. Baxter stopped a few feet behind him.

"What's this?" Jim called before his horse was even to a standstill. "The old man don't trust me to take care of my own business?"

"Is it your business to be shoving our cows onto Anna Cassidy's land?"

Jim leaned back in his saddle and rested a hand on his horse's croup. "According to Nathaniel Wilcock it is. Maybe he doesn't communicate with his foreman as good as he should." Derision lurked in the back of his gaze.

"Maybe." Shane had lived around the Morrelay boys long enough to know that the wisest way to deal with them was to keep his temper to himself. It wasn't Jim's business that the major hadn't seen fit to tell him about using Jim's men to shove Double Hook cows onto Sundally land. The only reason he had discovered them at all was that he and Baxter had just happened to be gathering strays from one of the river meadows.

Jim snorted. "Doesn't matter if you're agreeing with your major on this one or not. Family quarrels ain't much in the way of my interest. I don't care if you like what he's doing to Anna Cassidy or not. All I know is, he said move the cows." He lifted a finger to the brim of his hat. "*Adiós.*"

Shane grabbed the black's rein. "Morrelay, what happens between the Double Hook and the Sundally is none of your concern. Go home and take care of your own ranch."

Behind him, Baxter's spur rowel jingled, but he didn't say anything. Baxter had a habit of keeping his own council on when to speak.

A flash of anger lit up Jim's eyes. "What do you think I'm trying to do?"

You may not know it because you've never been anything but Wilcock's little pet lamb—but if you want to survive in this valley, you've got to make yourself mighty useful."

"That isn't—"

"Yeah? Then how come ranches like Anna Cassidy's are dying? If you're not useful to Nathaniel Wilcock, you don't stay in this valley."

Shane let go of the rein and straightened up. "Get out. I want you to cross that river and keep on riding."

The sharp click of a pistol being cocked punctuated his statement. Baxter's horse walked forward two steps. Jim glanced at Baxter, then back at Shane. "Wilcock wants me to move those cattle. I'm not leaving unless they get moved."

"We'll move them," Shane said.

Jim hesitated, then started to wheel his horse around.

"One thing more—" Shane straightened a little, squaring his shoulders. "If you interfere with the Sundally again, being useful to the major is going to be the least of your problems."

Jim gave him a hard look, then roweled his horse and galloped back to his men, scattering the herd of Double Hook cows as he went.

Baxter shoved his pistol into its holster and glanced at Shane. "This a good time for a question?" he drawled.

Shane's eyes followed the retreating figures of the Bar M men. Sometimes he didn't know what possessed him to do the things he did. The major would not be pleased with him. In fact, he would be downright furious. And worse—he would be disappointed.

"Hey." Baxter leaned both hands against his saddle horn and peered into Shane's face. "You're going to move them cattle where Wilcock wants 'em? I kind of got the idea that the whole point of having this little argument was to keep them *off* the Cassidy range. She's not going to make it till winter if we keep shoving our cattle onto her range like we been doing."

"I know it."

"With just her and the old man left on the place, I can't hardly see them hanging on even through the summer."

Shane shot him an angry glance. He didn't need to be reminded that all the Sundally help had left. It had been by his own instructions, two weeks ago, that he'd carried out the major's order for all the cowboys riding for the Sundally to be dispersed—by whatever means necessary.

He hadn't looked Anna in the eye since.

"Maybe," he said. "But the major wants the cattle moved, so we're gonna move them."

“Onto Cassidy land?”

“Push ‘em across the river.”

Baxter spat a brown stream of tobacco. “That’s Cassidy land.”

“That’s right.” Shane tightened his reins until the bay gelding backed several steps. He looked Baxter in the eye. “Then we push them back across.”

“Say again?”

“I said, push them across the river, then bring them right back. If the major says anything, you tell him they were moved onto the Sundally.” Shane roweled his horse into a lope, but not before he saw Baxter’s crooked grin.

The cattle looked up at him as he rode into them, the cows bawling for their calves. They didn’t hesitate as they strung out, headed for the river crossing. Shane was glad; he wasn’t in the mood for a struggle.

He should have been proud of himself, he supposed. This whole business with Anna Cassidy was wrong, and how could he support it? But neither could he justify what he was doing now.

The major wouldn’t understand. He’d see it as defiance. And if there was anything else that Shane had learned over the years, it was that he would never be able to openly defy the man who had given him everything.

Old Diego Romava was waiting in the barnyard when Shane and Baxter rode into headquarters. He came forward to take Shane’s bridle. “The *señor* he is waiting for you, *muchacho*.”

“What’s he want?”

Diego shook his head.

Baxter swung out of his saddle. “Ever get the feeling that there ain’t much that old man misses?”

“Yeah.” Shane dismounted and tossed Diego the reins. “Tie him at the rail for me. I’ll take care of him in a minute.”

“You gonna tell him?” Baxter asked.

That was a question Shane had been asking himself all the way back home. “Maybe.”

“What’re you talking about?” Diego asked.

Shane squinted at the house and at the long French windows of the major’s office. “We moved some of our cattle off the Sundally.”

“Huh.” Diego shook his head. “I would not tell him, if I were you. That is only courting trouble.”

And didn’t Shane know it. He shrugged and turned to go, crossing the barnyard in long strides. He took the porch steps two at a time. The sprawling

ranch house into which he entered had been his home since the major had adopted him sixteen years ago. For all of those sixteen years, it had been his only refuge. But now, increasingly, it was becoming a place of conflict.

He stopped at the first door on his left and took a deep breath. Could things really have changed so much while he'd been gone? Before he'd left, the major and he had never argued.

But before he'd left, they hadn't been forcing Anna Cassidy off her range either.

He knocked. When the major bid him enter, he pushed through the door and into the room, his footsteps muffled in the thickness of the huge red and gold rug that warmed most of the hardwood floor.

At a desk in front of the windows sat Wilcock, one-time cavalry commander, district judge, and the wealthiest rancher in the Wyoming Territory.

"You wanted me?"

The major made one more mark on his papers, then looked up. He was an old man, almost seventy, but he looked older. His body had once been strong perhaps, but never while Shane had known him. The vibrancy of his personality was visible only in his erect posture and in the flashing smile that had charmed so many people, fools and sages alike.

It was that smile that flashed on his face now as he leaned back in his chair, the leather creaking against his body. "Any problems today?"

"No."

"Come across any of the Bar M men?"

Shane studied him, conscious that his jaw muscles were working. "We ran into them."

The major didn't say anything. He just folded his hands across his midsection and waited.

Shane shifted his weight. He could feel the anger rising in his chest. The major was deliberately pushing him.

"They were chasing Sundally cattle out of the valley early today." The words came in a rush. Maybe it would be better, after all, to have this out in the open.

The major raised one shoulder in a shrug. "I don't think what Jim and Paul Morrelay do is any of our concern. It isn't our job to protect the interests of the Sundally."

"They were moving our cattle too."

"I know." The major's blue eyes were piercing. "Jim was moving a herd onto Sundally land—as a favor to me."

Shane stared back, too riled to care that he was risking the man's anger. He knew better than to lose his temper. He shouldn't have let the major bring this up at all. But he was tired of having his own men stepping over and around him just so the major could play his games of cat and mouse without bothering to listen to moral complaints.

The major removed his spectacles from his face. "Shane, I want you to listen to me, and I want you to understand once and for all—I will do what I want with my ranch and its assets. If I choose to overlook the fact that some of my cattle are wandering onto a neighboring ranch and are grazing that ranch's land instead of my own, I'll do so. It's something that happens all the time."

"There's a difference between cattle simply wandering and being driven someplace." Shane couldn't keep the hard edge from his voice.

The major studied him, then rose and walked around to the front of the desk. "Enough." His voice was calm, serene. It was a tone Shane had long ago learned to respect. "We've been over this quite enough I think. If Anna Cassidy doesn't want to sell the Sundally, that's entirely her problem—because one way or another my cattle are going to graze that land."

Shane's gaze didn't soften. He'd heard this argument more times than he could count. "You know that's wrong."

"Not at all." The major turned and lifted a silver case of cigars from the desktop. He flipped open its lid before glancing back up at Shane. "The law of the open range has always been that cattle may graze where they will." He smiled. "We see Sundally and Bar M cattle on our property quite often, don't we?"

Shane's breath hissed out between his lips. Two years in law school, and he still couldn't convince the major that his opinions were worth listening to, much less acting upon. Defeat welled up where the anger had been. "There's no range law that ever condoned crowding a neighbor's cattle off her own land."

The major shook a match until it was extinguished and blew out a long wisp of smoke. When he smiled again, the skin stretched across the cleft in his chin. "You should have told the Morrelays that."

Shane didn't say anything. The major didn't need to know he'd already done exactly that. He inclined his head stiffly and turned to go.

"Shane."

He glanced back. The major was still leaning against his desk, his cigar held between his thumb and forefinger. "Don't let it bother you. You may have been friends with Anna Cassidy before you left, but you cannot blame

me for wanting to purchase a ranch that she can no longer maintain.”

“All my life you’ve told me never to forget old loyalties. Now what are you saying?”

“Ah, Shane. I brought you up better than that. Old loyalties aren’t to be forgotten—but they never take precedence to those that are older.”

Shane hesitated, wavering. The major was right—and yet he wasn’t. So cryptic; so blatant.

The major blew out another breath of smoke. “We’ll not speak of this again.” The words came out slowly, as though they were an offhand comment, but Shane knew better. He turned to go.

At the foot of the porch steps, he was met by Jocelyn Wilcock, the major’s daughter. Clad in a black and beige riding habit, her dark eyes sparkling, she was lovely, as always. But the laughter died when she saw his expression. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Father again?” She turned around to match strides with him, her arm slipping into his. “You let him get to you too easily.”

“You try it sometime.”

“Oh, I have.”

“And you always lose your temper, so don’t scold me for disagreeing with him.” The words were a growl. He jammed his hands in his trouser pockets. It was a bad day indeed when he felt like snapping off even Jocelyn’s head.

“He always wins, doesn’t he?”

“Yes.” The word came out in a long sigh. He squinted at the barn and at the three horses tethered to the rail—one horse too many, according to his tally: Baxter should have already unsaddled.

Jocelyn followed his gaze. “There’s a man here. Looking for you.”

They were close enough now that he could see the stranger leaning against the rail near a mud-spattered buckskin. As they drew near, the man pushed himself upright and removed his hat.

Shane nodded a greeting. “Howdy.”

“You’re Lassiter?”

“That’s right. Something I can do for you?”

“I’m looking for ranch work. Name’s Micah Russell.”

“Sorry, we’ve got more men than we need right now. Going to have to start letting some go come next month.”

“I see. Anyone else around here in need of a hand?”

Shane opened his mouth to say he doubted it, but something made him

stop and take a longer look at the man. His dress was that of any drifting cowhand, but the look in his eye didn't quite fit. It was too sharp, too wary.

"You worked in this area before, have you?"

"No, Texas mostly. I spent a couple seasons at the Four Sixes."

"What brings you this far north?"

The man's steady gaze flickered; a muscle in his jaw twitched. "I felt like seeing some new country."

Shane's gaze drifted down to the battered gun belt slung low on the drifter's hip. A bowie knife rode behind the holster. The handles of both had long since lost any luster of newness. This man wouldn't have scared if he'd been working for Anna when the Double Hook had run off the rest of her help last month. Shane's lip twisted a little.

He looked back up at the man. "What can you do?"

"Whatever I'm told." Russell straightened. The wary look in his eye had intensified.

Shane grunted. "I doubt that. Look, I can't give you work. . . but I know someone who can."

"I'm obliged."

He nodded and swiveled toward the open barn doors. "Diego!"

"Where are you sending him?" Jocelyn asked.

"The Sundally."

She made a satisfied sound, but he didn't look down at her. He didn't want to see what he knew would be a pleased expression. Jocelyn understood better than anyone how he felt about the Sundally—about Anna. For days now, she had been urging him to ride over Sundally way and at least try to explain why he was doing what he was doing.

But what Jocelyn didn't understand was that Anna would certainly have no wish to hear those reasons. It had been weeks since he had seen her. He could only guess what she thought of him after all that had happened during that time.

"Diego!"

"One moment!" The old man trotted out of the barn, a dusty horsehair brush in one hand.

Shane nodded to where Russell was untying his horse. "I want you to take this cowboy over to the Sundally. Tell Anna he needs a job."

Jocelyn picked at his sleeve. "Maybe *you* should—"

He silenced her with a glance, then looked back at Diego. "Did you hear me?"

“Yes, *muchacho*. But—” He looked over at Russell, then back at Shane. “The *señor*—does he know?”

“No.”

Out of the side of his vision, Shane could tell that Russell was watching him, wondering.

Diego hesitated, his callused fingers playing with the frayed bristles in the brush. “Should I tell the *señorita* anything else?”

Jocelyn laid her hand on Shane’s arm, and he could almost sense that she was holding her breath.

“Tell her—” He paused. Should he tell her that the major was pressing harder—that he would be running her cattle completely off her land before long?

No, that was going too far. Sending her a cowboy was one thing, telling her about Double Hook business was something else entirely.

“No, don’t tell her anything.” He glanced over to where Russell had mounted his horse. “Diego will show you the way. Good luck.”

The man studied him for a second, then tugged at the brim of his hat. “Thanks.”

Diego had tossed his brush away and mounted Shane’s horse. He plow-reined the animal around and trotted him toward the gate, muttering, “*Adiós*.”

Shane watched until they reached the gate, then he turned and trudged over to where Jocelyn’s horse was still tied.

She followed, and he could tell from the sound of her voice that her hands were on her hips. “Why did you do that?”

“Don’t start, Jo.” He threw her stirrup onto the seat and jerked on the latigo hard enough to make the horse grunt.

“All right, fine.” She took her hands from her hips and crossed them in front of her. “But you have to know that she deserves an explanation. How can you expect her to ever understand why you do these things if you don’t even talk to her?”

He didn’t look up at her. The cinch swung free and he looped the excess latigo up through the girth ring.

“Shane, most of the time, *I* don’t even understand.”

He clenched his jaw to still the twitch of his cheek muscle. Her words stung more than he liked to admit—mostly because he had thought them himself so many times.

He pulled the saddle from the horse’s back and headed for the tack room. Jocelyn didn’t follow.

What no one—Jocelyn included—seemed able to understand was that he owed the major too much to oppose him. *Old loyalties should never be forgotten.* And his first priority would always be his loyalty to the man who had stood in the place of the father he'd never had.

Anna Cassidy pulled her horse to a stop in front of the big red barn with the Circle Sun brand painted in white on the door. She swung out of the saddle, her joints creaking. Her right foot touched the ground, shooting pain up her leg to her hip. She had been in the saddle since dawn, with only a brief break at noon and to change horses three times. But it felt twice that long.

“Sorry, old man.” She put her arm over the horse’s black neck and patted his sweat-roughened hide. He didn’t even lay back his ears, a sure sign that he was spent. “Been a rough couple of weeks, hasn’t it?” And things only promised to get rougher.

The gelding stiffened. His head came up, his ears pricking forward. She followed his gaze to where two horsemen were trotting down the road to the old ranch house. Her heart jumped for a moment as she saw the bay gelding in the lead—but it was only old Diego Romava in the saddle.

Her eyebrows came together in a frown. A Double Hook man on her property, even Diego, was always trouble.

“*Buenas noches, señorita!* I trust you are in good health?”

She nodded. Never would she give Wilcock the satisfaction of knowing how weary she truly was. “What are you doing here?”

Diego reined his horse over a step and gestured to the cowboy who had ridden in with him. In the waning light, he appeared shorter than six feet, with a set to his shoulders that spoke of strength. One hand rode on his pistol butt with practiced grace. He looked near thirty-five, but his eyes were older—ancient even. Pale blue gleaming out from between narrowed lids, they were cool, emotionless, and probably didn’t miss much.

“The *muchacho* wishes you to hire him,” Diego said.

She raised an eyebrow at the cowboy. “That true?”

“You’re the person I’m supposed to see about that sort of thing?”

“Unfortunately, yes. What’s your name?”

“Micah Russell.”

“Stow your things in the bunkhouse closest to the barn. We can talk about work over supper.”

“Thanks.”

She turned back to Diego, who was looking on with a satisfied expression.

“Would you like to stay? Èmile has made enough, I’m sure.”

“No, *gracias*, but I must return to the ranch. The *niños* they will be looking for me. You understand.”

“Shane—” She paused for a moment and took a long breath. “Is he—”

Diego shook his head, and his eyes twitched a little in understanding. “I’m sorry he did not come. He said to tell you nothing.”

She glanced away. It was foolish to have expected anything else. So very much had changed since Shane had left for Richmond two years ago.

So much—and yet so little.

Diego bit his lip. “*Adiós, señorita.*”

“Goodbye.” A strange burning sensation clawed at her throat as she watched him wheel the horse around and lope out of the barnyard. Why couldn’t Shane have come himself?

She looked over at Russell; he was still watching her. “I’ll show you where to put your horse.”

“Pretty quiet around here.” He swung out of the saddle.

“Yes.” She led her black gelding several steps toward the corral before working up the courage to glance over her shoulder. “No one else works here any longer.”

“And why’s that?” He stopped his horse next to hers and tossed the reins over a fence post.

“Because—” Her fingers slipped on the throatlatch buckle. If she told him the truth, he wouldn’t stay. No one in his right mind would.

She peered at him over her horse’s neck. “Look, you might as well know—if you work here, sooner or later, you’ll be asked, not so kindly, to leave.”

“Why?”

“The man who owns the next ranch across the river wants to get title to my land.”

“And what if I don’t scare?”

“Then there’ll be consequences.” She didn’t look at him as she tugged the latigo loose.

His left stirrup landed in the seat of the saddle with a thump. “How long’s this been going on?”

“The threats against my men started two weeks ago. But Wilcock’s been after the ranch for much longer—near on thirty years now.”

“Long time.”

She looked at him. Was he laughing at her—because she had so stubbornly refused to give in? *He’s probably already planning his route out of the valley.*

“You’re welcome to a meal and our bunkhouse for the night.” She jerked the saddle off her gelding’s back and swung it onto the top rung of the fence.

“I’m looking for work, miss—not charity.”

She opened the gate. After her horse had slipped through, she shut it and slid the latch into place. Slowly, she turned, looping the reins around her hand. “Look, why don’t you try the Bar M or the Stuart place—they’re both west of here. Neither of them are in the line of fire so much.”

He eased his saddle off the buckskin’s back and rested the gullet on his hip. He didn’t look at her as he hefted her saddle off the fence with his other hand. “Where do these go?”

She gestured to the lean-to on the side of the barn. “You can put them in there. Thank you.”

She followed him to the tack room and hung up her bridle, watching him heft the saddles onto two empty racks.

Then he turned to her, slowly wiping his hands on the front of his shirt. “Miss Cassidy, I appreciate your concerns, but I think I can hang onto the job just fine.

“But there’s no one else here to help you—only me. Two people—one of them a woman, no less—trying to run a ranch this size will kill themselves faster than they’ll get anything done.”

He took a step closer. “I said I’d like the job.”

She blew out softly. “You may not be as anxious this time tomorrow.”

“Maybe.” He almost smiled. “There’s stock to feed, I expect. Where’s there a pitchfork?”

She could have laughed. It had been a long, long time since she had been able to laugh. It felt good, even if it didn’t make it past her chest. “Mr. Russell, I believe you’ll find one up in the loft.”

He walked away, his stride quiet and sure, and her smile faded. If he lasted a week before Wilcock forced him out too, she’d chalk it up as a miracle.

Thirty minutes later, she led Russell into the simple cabin that had been her home since birth. At the sound of the door slamming, Èmile Conseiller, a barrel-chested old man with sparkling eyes and iron-gray hair, turned away from the stove.

“What keeps you, *enfant*? My good dinner grows cold while you dawdle.” His eyes shot past her shoulder to Russell’s face. “Who’s this?”

“This is Mr. Russell. He’s signed on to work with us—for a while.”

Èmile planted a hand on the back of a chair and frowned at Russell. “And

what causes a sane man to work on this ranch, of all places?”

“What causes a Frenchman to come to Hangtree, Wyoming?”

“A very disreputable past, I’m afraid.” Èmile’s eyes twinkled. “Have a seat. I can assure you that you will at least eat well while you are here—if you have energy enough to lift a fork at the end of the day.” He shuffled back over to the stove and jerked a large pot of hash off the burner. “I keep telling her that she will kill herself if she continues as she is—and then who is to stop Wilcock from taking this place, eh?” He set the hash onto the tabletop next to a platter of cornbread and gave her a stern glare. “That is right, is it not, *chéri*?”

She lifted her flat-brimmed hat off her head and tossed it, along with her gloves, into the fourth chair at the table. “What has to be done has to be done. You know that. Will you sit, Mr. Russell?”

She got another place setting from the cupboard and set it down in front of him, before sinking into her own chair. Èmile sat across from her and handed Russell the ladle. “Things were not always like this,” he said. “There was a time when one could not wish for a better place to live than here. It was a time I can still remember—no more than twenty, twenty-five years ago.”

“Right after the outlaw died,” Anna said.

“Outlaw?” Russell spooned a good portion of the hash onto his plate and dropped the ladle back into the pot. “You sound as if you talk of him only in capital letters.”

Èmile laughed. “People in this area—those few who still remember him—look upon him as a sort of savior.”

“He wasn’t really an outlaw.” Anna dished up a generous helping for herself. “It was just he was the only one with sand enough to stand up against Wilcock—he and my father.”

“Wilcock again.” Russell broke his cornbread over his hash.

“A skunk doesn’t change its color.”

Èmile snorted. “Or its stench. What good the outlaw did died with him. And now Wilcock is as strong as he was all those years ago. The second generation does not have the backbone to stand against him.”

“The way things are now, every ranch in the valley is headed for serious trouble,” Anna said.

“And you walked right into the middle of it.” Èmile gave Russell a sage look. “When Wilcock discovers you here, you can be assured that there will be some rather unpleasant confrontations.”

Anna glanced over at Russell in time to see the strange look in his eyes just before he lowered them. It was a look of pain and anger—and sorrow. She

frowned. What scars lurked beneath that impassive exterior? The man was hiding something.

After dinner, she lit a lantern for him to take to the bunkhouse. “Be ready to go by four o’clock, and don’t worry about your horse, we’ll put together a string for you before we leave.”

He stared through the open front door into the blackness of the night.

“Mr. Russell—” She hesitated. What was she doing—dragging someone else into this losing battle of hers? She knew how the cards were going to be dealt out. She knew how it must end—with or without Micah Russell’s help. “Èmile’s right, you know—this isn’t your fight. There’s no reason for you to risk getting hurt.”

In the lamplight, she could see his sardonic smile. “You might be surprised what I find worth fighting for. Sometimes I even surprise myself. If it comes to fighting, I reckon I can take care of my end of things.”

She stared at him, doubting his assurance. “I hope so.” She handed him the lantern, and he stepped out into the darkness.