



The Touch Of Fire

By Linda Howard

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

After four years on the run, outlaw Rafferty (Rafe) McCay's face wears "the remote expression of a man who had seen and caused so much death that it no longer touched him." Annie Parker is the lone doctor in boomtown Silver Mesa, a woman with a "worn, weary look" but with "softness in her brown eyes" and healing magic in her hands. An unlikelier pair could not be found, yet fate and a gunshot wound throw them together in Howard's (*Angel Creek*) new novel, set in Arizona territory in the 1870s. When Rafe forces Annie to come along and tend his gunshot wound, what begins as a kidnapping flowers into passion and love, but Howard's set-up is so obvious that her protagonists' coupling--the only real touch of fire in this book--is never really in doubt. Minimal tension provided by several run-ins with bounty hunters leads to the maximal tension of myriad graphic sexual encounters. Slowed down by redundancy and verbosity, Howard's tale wends its way cross-country towards its rather inevitable happy conclusion, with one truly moving segment wherein Rafe and Annie risk their lives to treat a settlement of seriously ill Apaches.

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About the Author

Linda Howard is an award-winning author whose novels include the recent *New York Times* bestsellers *Shadow Woman*, *Up Close and Dangerous*, and *Drop Dead Gorgeous*, as well as the Pocket Books releases *Kill and Tell*, *Now You See Her*, *All the Queen's Men*, *Mr. Perfect*, and *Open Season*. She lives in Alabama with her husband and two golden retrievers.

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From "Chapter One"

1871, Arizona Territory

Someone had been on his back trail for most of the day. He had seen a telltale flash of light in the distance when he had stopped for grub around noon, just a tiny bright flicker that had lasted only a split second, but that had been enough to alert him. Maybe it had been the sun glinting off a buckle or a shiny spur. Whoever was back there had been just a little careless, and now they had lost the advantage of surprise.

Rafe McCay hadn't panicked; he had continued to ride as if he had nowhere in particular to go and all the time in the world to get there. It would be getting dark soon, and he decided he'd better find out who was tracking him before he made camp for the night. Besides, according to his calculations the tracker should be exposed on that long tree-line trail just about now. McCay got the field glass out of his saddlebag and stepped into the shadow of a big pine, making certain that no reflection could give him away, too. He trained the glass on the trail where he estimated the tracker would be and soon spotted the man: one rider on a dark brown horse with a right front stocking. The man was holding the horse to a walk and leaning over to examine the trail as they went. McCay had come that way himself an hour or so before.

Something about the rider was familiar. McCay kept the glass trained on the distant figure, trying to trigger his memory, but he couldn't get a good look at the man's face. Maybe it was the way he sat in the saddle, or maybe even the horse itself that gave McCay a gnawing sense that somewhere down the line he'd seen or met this particular man, and that he hadn't liked what he'd learned. But he just couldn't bring the man's name to mind. The rig on the horse wasn't unusual, and there was nothing about the man's clothes that was out of the ordinary, except maybe for his flat-crowned black hat trimmed with silver conchas --

Trahern.

McCay's breath hissed through his teeth.

The bounty on his head must have gotten pretty big, to attract someone like Trahern. Trahern's reputation was that he was a good tracker, a damn good shot, and that he never stopped, never gave up.

Four years of being hunted kept McCay from doing anything hasty or foolish. He had both time and surprise on his side, as well as experience. Trahern didn't know it, but the hunted had just become the hunter.

On the chance that Trahern might have a field glass, too, McCay remounted and rode deeper into the trees before circling back to the right, putting a small rise between him and his pursuer. If there was one thing the war had taught him, it was always to know the lay of the land, and he automatically chose courses that gave him, whenever possible, both cover and escape routes. He could cover his tracks and lose the bounty hunter here in the timber, but there was another thing the war had taught him: never leave an enemy on your back trail. If he didn't deal with it now, he'd have to deal with it later, when the circumstances might not be in his favor. Trahern had signed his own death warrant by trying to collect this particular bounty. McCay had long since lost any scruples about killing the men who came after him; it was a matter of his life or theirs, and he was damn tired of running.

When he had doubled back a mile, he left his horse concealed behind a rocky outcropping and made his way on foot to where he could see his original trail. By his calculations, the bounty hunter should be along within half an hour. McCay carried his rifle in a scabbard slung across his back. It was a repeater that he'd had for a couple of years now. It was plenty accurate for the distance, which was about sixty yards. He chose his cover, a big pine with a two-foot-high rock at the base of it, and settled into position to wait.

But the minutes ticked by, and Trahern didn't appear. McCay lay motionless and listened to the sounds around him. Birds were calling, undisturbed, having become accustomed to him since he hadn't moved for so long. Had something made Trahern suspicious? McCay couldn't think of anything he'd done. Maybe Trahern had just stopped to rest, cautiously putting more distance between himself and his quarry until he was ready to make his move. That was Trahern's way: biding his time until things suited him. McCay liked to operate that way himself. A lot of men had gotten themselves killed by taking the fight forward when the odds were against them.

Colonel Mosby had always said that Rafe McCay was the best he'd ever seen in ambush because he had patience and endurance. McCay could withstand discomfort, hunger, pain and boredom, divorcing his mind from it and concentrating instead on the job at hand. The growing darkness, however, opened up other possibilities. Trahern could have stopped and made camp for the night rather than try to follow a trail in the failing light. He might think it would be easier to spot a cook fire and just be lying back there biding his time; but Trahern was smart enough to know that a man on the run made do a lot of times with a cold camp, and only a damn fool slept by a fire anyway. A man stayed alive by building a small fire to cook, then putting it out and moving to another location to bed down.

McCay's own choices now were to stay right where he was and pick Trahern off whenever he *did* come down the trail, backtrack a bit more and try to find Trahern at his own camp, or use the darkness to put even more distance between them.

His horse whickered softly down by the rocks, and McCay swore violently to himself. He heard an answering whinny immediately, and the second call was right behind him. McCay reacted instantly, rolling

and bringing the barrel of the rifle around. Trahern was about twenty yards behind and to his left, and it was a toss-up which of them was the most surprised. Trahern had cleared leather, but he was looking in the wrong direction, down toward McCay's horse. McCay's movement brought him swinging around, and McCay got off the first shot, but Trahern was already dodging to the side and the slug missed. Trahern's shot went wild.

The crest of the ridge was right behind McCay and he simply rolled over it, getting a mouthful of dirt and pine needles in the process, but that was better than taking a bullet. He spat the dirt out and got to his feet, bending low to keep the ridge line between him and Trahern. Silently he moved to his right, working his way back toward his horse.

He wasn't in a good mood. Damn it, what was Trahern doing wandering away from the trail like that? The bounty hunter hadn't been expecting anything, or he wouldn't have been so surprised at finding his prey right under his nose. Well, hell, sometimes even the best traps didn't work, but now Trahern was right on him and he'd lost the advantage of surprise.

He gained the shelter of another big pine and went down on one knee behind it, holding himself still and quiet while he listened. He was in a mess and he knew it. All Trahern had to do was settle down where he could watch McCay's horse, and McCay was trapped, too. His only chance was to spot Trahern before Trahern spotted him, and a lot of men had died trying to do that very thing.

Then a humorless smile lifted the corners of his hard mouth. There were only a few minutes of light left. If Trahern wanted to see who could snake around better in the dark, McCay was happy to oblige him.

He closed his eyes and let his ears catch every sound without the distraction of sight to dilute the message. He noticed a gradual increase in the chirping of insects and tree frogs, as the nighttime denizens went about their business. When he opened his eyes again, about ten minutes later, his sight had already adjusted to the darkness and he could easily make out the outlines of trees and bushes.

McCay slipped pine needles through his spurs to keep them from jingling and replaced the rifle in the scabbard on his back; the long gun would be too awkward to hold while crawling around in the dark. He removed his revolver from the holster, then eased down onto his belly and snake-crawled toward the cover of a clump of bushes.

The iciness of the ground beneath him reminded him that winter hadn't completely released its grip on the land yet. During the comparative warmth of the day he had taken off his coat and tied it to the back of his saddle. Now that the sun had set, the temperature was plunging.

He'd been cold before, and the pungent smell of pine needles reminded him that he'd crawled on his belly more than once, too. Back in '63, he'd completely circled a Yankee patrol on his belly, moving not three feet behind one guard, then returned to Mosby and reported the patrol's strength and the placement of the guards. He'd also snaked through the mud one rainy November night with a bullet in his leg and the Yankees beating the bushes for him. Only the fact that he'd been so thoroughly coated with mud had enabled him to escape capture that time.

It took him half an hour to ease back to the crest of the ridge and slide over it as sinuously as a snake going into a river. There he paused once again, letting his eyes go unfocused while he examined the surrounding trees for a shape that didn't belong, his ears listening for the stamp of a hoof or a horse's snuffle. If Trahern was as smart as he was supposed to be, he'd have moved the horses, but maybe he'd been too wary to show

himself like that.

How long could Trahern stay alert, all his senses straining? The effort exhausted most men if they weren't used to it. McCay was so used to it that he didn't even have to think about it anymore. The past four years hadn't been much different from the war, except that he was alone now, and he wasn't liberating payrolls, arms, or horseflesh from Union soldiers. And if he was caught now, he wouldn't be released in a prisoner exchange; he'd never make it to any sort of lawman alive. The bounty on his head, dead or alive, guaranteed that.

He let well over an hour lapse before, moving one muscle at a time, an inch at a time, he began working his way closer to the rocky outcropping where he'd left his horse, stopping every few feet to listen. It was slow going; it took over half an hour to cover fifty feet, and he estimated he had at least a hundred yards to go. Finally he caught the faint scrape of a horseshoe on rock as an animal shifted its weight, and the deep, sighing sound of a sleeping horse. He couldn't see either his horse or Trahern's, but the direction of the sounds told him that his horse was still where he'd left it. Trahern must have decided not to take the risk of exposing himself long enough to move the animals.

The question now was, where was Trahern? Somewhere with a clear view of McCay's horse. Somewhere that afforded cover for himself. And was he still alert, or had his senses dulled from the strain? Was he getting sleepy?

McCay calculated that it had been about five hours since Trahern had walked up on him, which would make it only about ten o'clock. Trahern was too good to let himself relax his guard this soon. The early morning hours were when the senses dulled and defenses tumbled, when the eyelids were lined with grit and weighed about forty pounds each, when the mind was numb with exhaustion.

But wouldn't Trahern, knowing that McCay would know this, expect him to wait? Wouldn't Trahern feel fairly safe in snatching an hour or so of sleep now, reasoning that any try for the horse would come right before dawn? Or that startling a dozing horse would make enough racket to awaken him?

McCay grinned, feeling the recklessness flood through him. Hell, he might as well stand up and walk right up to the horse. The odds were the same no matter what he did. When it looked as if he was damned if he did and damned if he didn't, he'd learned that the most reckless choice was the one with the best chance of succeeding.

He worked his way closer to the outcropping that sheltered the horse, then waited until the shifting sounds told him that the animal had awakened. He waited a few more minutes, then rose silently to his feet and walked up to the big bay, who caught his scent and affectionately butted him with his head. McCay rubbed the velvety soft nose, then gathered the reins and as quietly as possible swung up into the saddle. His blood was racing through his veins the way it always did at times like this, and he had to clench his teeth to keep from venting his tension in a bloodcurdling yell. The horse quivered under him, sensing his savage enjoyment of the risk he was taking.

It took iron self-control to turn the horse and calmly walk it away, but the ground was too uneven to risk even a trot. Now was the most dangerous time, when Trahern was most likely to be awakened --

He heard the snick of a hammer being thumbed back and instantly bent low over the horse's neck as he reined it sharply to the right and kicked its flanks. He felt the sharp burning in his left side a split second before he heard the shot. The muzzle flash pinpointed Trahern's position, and McCay had drawn and fired

before Trahern could get another shot off. Then the big horse bolted, encouraged by another thud from McCay's bootheel, and the darkness swallowed them. He could hear Trahern's curses even over the thunder of his horse's hooves.

Concern for both their necks made him rein in the horse before they'd gone a quarter of a mile. His side was burning like hell, and wetness was seeping down the side of his pants. His horse at a walk, McCay pulled off his glove with his teeth and felt around, finding two holes in his shirt and corresponding holes in his body where the bullet had entered and exited. He yanked his bandanna from around his neck and wadded it up inside his shirt, using his elbow to keep it pressed to the wounds.

Damn, he was cold! A convulsive shudder started in his boots and rolled all the way up his body, shaking him like a wet dog and nearly making him pass out from the pain. He put his glove back on and untied his coat from the bedroll, then shrugged into the heavy fleece-lined garment. The shivers continued, and the wetness spread down his left leg. The son of a bitch hadn't hit anything vital, but he was losing a lot of blood.

The guessing game started again. Trahern would probably expect him to ride hard and fast, putting as much distance between them as he could manage by sunrise. McCay figured he'd gone about a mile when he walked the horse into a thick stand of pines and dismounted. He gave the animal a handful of feed and some water, patted his neck in appreciation of his steadiness, and untied the bedroll. He had to get the bleeding stopped, and get warm, or Trahern was going to find him lying unconscious on the trail.

Keeping the canteen of water beside him, he wrapped up in the blanket and settled down on the thick layer of pine needles, lying on his left side so his weight would put pressure on the back wound while he pressed the heel of his hand over the exit wound in front. The position made him grunt with pain, but he figured the discomfort was better than bleeding to death. Sleeping was out of the question. Even if the pain would let him, he didn't dare let himself relax.

He hadn't eaten since noon, but he wasn't hungry. He drank a little water every now and then and watched the glimmer of the stars through the heavy tree cover overhead. He listened for any sounds of pursuit, though he didn't really expect Trahern to come after him so soon. The night held only natural sounds.

Gradually he began to warm, and the hot pain in his side subsided to a dull throb. His shirt was stiffening, which meant the flow of fresh blood had stopped. It was harder now to stay awake, but he refused to give in to his growing lethargy. There would be time for sleep later, after he'd killed Trahern.

It wasn't quite dawn when he eased to his feet. A wave of dizziness threatened to topple him and he braced his hand on a tree to support himself. Damn, he must have lost more blood than he'd thought; he hadn't expected to be this weak. When he was steady, he went to the horse with a soothing murmur and got some beef jerky from his saddlebag, knowing that food and water would steady him faster than anything. He forced himself to eat, then quietly led the horse back the way they had come. It hadn't worked the first time, but it should the second. Trahern would be intent on following the blood trail.

He had been in position only a few minutes when he saw Trahern slipping up the hollow, handgun in his fist. McCay cursed silently, for the fact that Trahern was on foot meant that he was wary. The bounty hunter either had a sixth sense for danger or he was the luckiest son of a bitch McCay had ever seen.

He steadied the rifle, but Trahern used his cover well, never exposing all of himself at the same time. Rafe caught only a shoulder, part of a leg, the flat crown of that distinctive hat; he didn't have a clear shot at any time. Well, if a wounding shot was all that was offered, he'd take it. At the very least it would slow Trahern

down, even the odds between them.

The next target that Trahern offered was a sliver of pants leg. A cold smile touched McCay's face as he sighted down the barrel. His hands were rock steady as he gently squeezed the trigger. Trahern's scream of pain was almost simultaneous with the sharp report of the rifle, both sounds muted by the trees.

McCay withdrew and pulled himself into the saddle, the movement more difficult than he had expected. His side began to burn again, and a damp feeling spread. Damn it, he'd opened his wounds. But now Trahern was wounded, too, and it would take him a long time to get back to his own horse, giving McCay a good head start that he couldn't afford to waste. He'd see to the wounds later.

Annis Theodora Parker calmly brewed a mild valerian tea, all the while keeping a weather eye on her patient. Eda Couey looked like a big, competent country girl, the sort you'd expect to give birth as easily as any woman could wish, but she was having trouble and was beginning to panic. Annis, known from childhood as Annie, knew that both Eda and the baby would fare a lot better if Eda was calmer.

She carried the hot tea to the bedside and held Eda's head so she could sip. "It'll help the pain," she quietly assured the girl. Eda was only seventeen, and this was her first. The valerian wouldn't really ease the pain, but it would calm the girl so she could help get her child into the world.

Eda quieted as the sedative began to work, but her face was still paper white and her eyes sunken as the labor pains continued. According to Walter Couey, Eda's husband, the girl had already been in labor for two days before he'd given in to her pleas for help and fetched Annie to their one-room lean-to shack. He'd grumbled that he hadn't been able to get any sleep with all the carryin' on, and Annie had controlled a strong urge to slap him.

The baby was turned breech, and the birth wasn't going to be easy. Annie silently prayed for the infant's survival, for sometimes the cord would get pinched during a breech birth and the baby would die in the birth canal. And she wondered if, even should it survive being born, it would live to see its first birthday. The conditions in the miserable lean-to were appalling, and Walter Couey was a mean, stupid man who would never provide anything better. He was in his forties, and Annie suspected that Eda wasn't really his wife but only an illiterate farm girl sold into virtual slavery to relieve her family of one more mouth to feed. Walter was an unsuccessful miner, even here at Silver Mesa where men were finding the precious metal in thick veins; mining was hard work and Walter wasn't inclined to work hard at anything. She couldn't allow herself to think that it would be a blessing if the baby *did* die, but she felt pity for both mother and child.

Eda moaned as her belly tightened again with a massive contraction. "Push," Annie commanded in a low tone. She could see a smooth moon of flesh crowning: the baby's buttocks. "Push!"

A guttural scream tore from Eda's throat as she bore down with all of her strength, her shoulders lifting off the pallet. Annie put her hands on the hugely swollen belly and added her strength to Eda's.

It was now or never. If Eda couldn't deliver the infant, both mother and child would die. Labor would continue, but Eda would grow progressively weaker.

The tiny buttocks protruded from Eda's body. Quickly, Annie tried to grasp them, but they were too slippery. She worked her fingers inside the stretched opening and caught the baby's legs. "Push!" she said again.

But Eda was falling back, almost paralyzed with pain. Annie waited for the next contraction, which followed

within seconds, then used the natural force of Eda's internal muscles to aid her as she literally pulled the infant's lower body from the mother. It was a boy. She inserted the fingers of one hand again to keep Eda's muscles from clamping down, and with the other hand steadily pulled the baby the rest of the way out. It lay limply between Eda's thighs. Both Eda and the baby were still and quiet.

Annie picked up the little scrap, supporting it facedown on her forearm while she thumped it on the back. The tiny chest heaved, and the baby set up a mewling squall as air flooded its lungs for the first time. "There you go," Annie crooned, and turned the baby over to make certain its mouth and throat were clear. Normally she would have done that first, but getting the child to breathe had seemed more important. The little fellow jerked his legs and arms as he wailed, and a tired smile wreathed Annie's face. He sounded stronger with every squall.

The cord had stopped pulsing, so she tied it off close to his belly and clipped it, then quickly wrapped him in a blanket to protect him from the chill. After placing him next to Eda's warmth, she turned her attention to the girl, who was only half conscious.

"Here's your baby, Eda," Annie said. "It's a boy, and he looks healthy. Just listen to him cry! Both of you came through it fine. In a minute the afterbirth will come, and then I'll get you cleaned up and comfortable."

Eda's pale lips moved in silent acknowledgment, but she was too exhausted to gather the baby to her.

The afterbirth came quickly, and Annie was relieved that there was no unusually heavy bleeding. A hemorrhage now would kill the girl, for she had no reserves of strength. She cleaned Eda and restored the mean little lean-to to rights, then picked up the fretting infant, as his mother was too weak to see to him, and crooned as she rocked him in her arms. He quieted, and his fuzzy little head turned toward her.

She roused Eda and helped the girl cradle her child as she unbuttoned Eda's nightgown and guided the baby's rosebud mouth to his mother's exposed breast. For a moment he didn't seem to know what to do with the nipple brushing his lips, then instinct took over and he eagerly began sucking on it. Eda jumped, and gave a breathless little "oh!"

Annie stood back and watched those first magical moments of discovery as the young mother, exhausted as she was, looked in wonder at her child.

Tiredly she put on her coat and picked up her bag. "I'll be by tomorrow to check on you."

Eda looked up, her white, weary face lit with a glowing smile. "Thankee, Doc. Me and the baby wouldn'a made it without you."

Annie returned the smile, but she could barely wait to get outside into the fresh air, cold as it might be. It was late in the afternoon, with less than an hour of light left, and she had been with Eda all day without a bite to eat. Her back and legs ached, and she was tired. Still, the successful birth gave her an immense feeling of satisfaction.

The Coueys' lean-to was at the opposite end of Silver Mesa from the tiny two-room shack that served Annie as both office and living quarters. She treated patients in the front room, and lived in the back one. As she trudged through the mud of Silver Mesa's one winding "street," miners called out rough greetings to her. This late in the day, they were leaving their claims and crowding into Silver Mesa to fill up on raw whiskey and lose their hard-earned money to gamblers and fancy women. Silver Mesa was a boomtown, without any sort

of law or social amenities, unless you counted the five saloons located in tents. Some enterprising merchants had built rough plank buildings to house their wares, but wooden structures were few and far between. Annie felt lucky to have one of them for her medical practice, and in turn the inhabitants of Silver Mesa felt lucky to have any sort of a doctor at all, even a woman.

She had been here for six -- no, it was eight -- months now, after failing to establish a practice in either her native Philadelphia or Denver. She had learned the bitter fact that, no matter how good a doctor she was, no one was going to come to her if there was a male doctor within a hundred miles. In Silver Mesa, there wasn't. Even so, it had taken a while for people to come to her, though like boomtowns everywhere Silver Mesa was a violent place to live. Men were always getting shot, cut, or beaten, breaking bones or crushing various limbs. The trickle of patients had slowly turned into a steady stream, until now she sometimes didn't have time to sit down from daylight to dark.

It was what she had always wanted, what she had worked years for, but every time someone called her "Doc" or she heard someone say "Doc Parker" she was filled with sadness, for she wanted to look around for her father and he would never again be there. Frederick Parker had been a wonderful man and a wonderful doctor. He had let Annie help him in little ways from the time she had been only a child, and he encouraged her interest in medicine, teaching her what he could and sending her to school when he had nothing left to teach her. He had given her his support during the hard years of earning her medical degree, for it seemed as if no one other than the two of them had wanted a woman to be learning anything at all about medicine. She had not only been shunned by her fellow medical students -- they had actively tried to hinder her. But her father had taught her how to keep her sense of humor and her commitment, and he had been as excited as she when she had left to come west and find a place that needed a doctor even if she was a woman.

She had been in Denver less than a month when a letter arrived from their pastor, regretfully relaying the news that her father had passed away. He had seemed healthy enough, though he had been complaining that he wasn't a young man any longer and was beginning to feel his age. But on a quiet Sunday, just after enjoying a good meal, he had suddenly clutched his chest and died. The pastor didn't believe he had suffered.

Annie had grieved silently and alone, for there was no one to whom she could talk, no one who would understand. When she had ventured bravely out into the world she had still felt his presence in Philadelphia as an anchor to which she could return, but now she had been cast adrift. By letter she had arranged for the house to be sold and the personal possessions she wished to keep stored at an aunt's house.

She wished she could tell him all about Silver Mesa, how rough and dirty and vital it was, with humanity teeming in the mud street and fortunes being made every day. He would envy her the drama of her practice, for Annie saw everything from bullet wounds to colds to birthings.

The late-winter twilight was deepening as she opened her door and reached for the flint that always rested on a table just inside the door, she struck it and lit a thin strip of twisted paper, which she then used to light the lamp. Sighing with weariness, she put her bag on the table and rolled her shoulders to ease the kinks out of them. She had bought a horse when she'd arrived in Silver Mesa, for she frequently had to travel a fair distance to her patients, and she needed to see to the animal before it got any darker. She kept it in a small corral behind the shack, with a ramshackle three-sided shed for its shelter. She decided to go around the shack rather than through it, for she didn't want to track mud through her home.

Just as she turned to go a shadow in the far corner of the room moved, and Annie jumped, pressing her hand to her chest. She peered at the shadow and made out the form of a man. "Yes? May I help you?"

"I came to see the doctor."

She frowned, for if he was from Silver Mesa then he knew he was seeing the doctor. Apparently he was a stranger and was expecting a man. She lifted the lamp, trying to see him better. His voice had been deep and raspy, little more than a whisper, but with a slow, southern rhythm to the words.

"I'm Dr. Parker," she said, moving closer. "How may I help you?"

"You're a woman," the deep voice said.

"Yes, I am." She was close enough now to see fever-bright eyes and smell the particular too-sweet odor of infection. The man was propped in the corner, as if he had feared he wouldn't be able to rise again if he'd sat down in a chair. She placed the lamp on a table and turned it up so the mellow light reached into the far comers of the little room. "Where are you hurt?"

"My left side."

She went to his right side and braced her shoulder under his armpit, sliding her arm around his back to give added support. His heat shocked her, and for a moment she felt almost frightened. "Let's get you to the examining table."

He tensed under her touch. His dark hat shielded his expression but she felt the look he gave her. "I don't need help," he said, and demonstrated it by walking steadily, if a bit slowly, to the examining table.

Annie fetched the lamp and lit a second one, then pulled the curtain that shielded the examining table should anyone else enter the room looking for medical attention. The man removed his hat, revealing thick, uncombed black hair that needed trimming, then gingerly shrugged out of his heavy shearling coat.

Annie took both hat and coat and set them aside, all the while minutely examining the man. She couldn't see any blood or other sign of injury, yet he was obviously sick and in pain. "Take off your shirt," she said. "Do you need any help?"

He looked at her with hooded eyes, then shook his head and unbuttoned his shirt as far as it would go. He pulled the fabric loose from his pants and shucked it off over his head.

A dingy strip of cloth had been tightly wound around his waist, and it was stained a yellowish, rusty color on the left side. Annie picked up a pair of scissors and neatly sliced the bandage, letting it fall to the floor. There were two wounds in the fleshy part just above his waistline, one in front and one in back. Red streaks surrounded the back wound, though both were oozing bloody pus.

A bullet wound, unless she missed her guess. She had seen enough here in Silver Mesa to give her a wide experience with them.

She realized that she hadn't removed her own coat and promptly did so, her mind on her patient. "Lie down on your right side," she instructed as she turned to her instrument tray and got out what she needed. He hesitated, and she lifted her brows inquiringly.

Silently, he leaned over to untie the thong that strapped his bolster to his thigh, sweat breaking out on his face at the effort. Next he unbuckled the gun belt and placed it at the head of the examining table, within

easy reach of his hand. He sat on the table, then stretched out to lie as she had instructed, on his right side and facing her. His muscles seemed to relax involuntarily as he felt the soft cushion of the mattress Annie had placed over the hard table so her patients would be more comfortable, then he shivered and tightened again.

Annie got a clean sheet and spread it over his bare torso. "That'll keep you warm while I heat some water."

She had banked the fire before leaving early that morning, and the coals glowed red when she stilled them with a poker. She added kindling and more wood, then fetched water and poured it into two iron pots that hung on a hook over the fire. The little room quickly heated as the fire grew. She placed her instruments in one of the pots to boil, then scrubbed her hands with strong soap. The tiredness that had weighed on her limbs during the trudge back from Eda's was forgotten as she considered the best treatment for her new patient.

She noticed that her hands were shaking a little, and she stopped to draw a deep breath. Normally her thoughts would be totally concentrated on the task at hand, but something about this man unsettled her. Maybe it was his pale eyes, as colorless as frost and as watchful as a wolf's. Or maybe it was his heat. Intellectually she knew it had to be fever, but the intense heat of his tall, muscular body seemed to wrap around her like a blanket every time she got close to him. Whatever the reason, her stomach had clenched into a tight knot when he'd pulled off his shirt and bared his powerful torso. Annie was accustomed to seeing men in various stages of undress, but never before had she been so acutely aware of a man's body, of the maleness that threatened her own femaleness on a very primitive level. The curly black hair on his broad, muscled chest had strongly reminded her that man's basic nature was animalistic.

Yet he had done nothing, said nothing, that was threatening. All of it was in her own mind, perhaps a product of her fatigue. The man was wounded and had come to her for help.

She stepped back behind the curtain. "I'll mix you some laudanum to ease the pain."

He pinned her with that pale, icy gaze. "No."

She hesitated. "The treatment will be painful, Mister -- ?"

He ignored the raised inflection that invited him to tell her his name. "I don't want any laudanum. You have any whiskey?"

"Yes."

"That'll do."

"It won't be enough, unless you drink yourself to unconsciousness, in which case it will be easier to simply take the laudanum."

"I don't want to be unconscious. Just give me a drink."

Annie got the whiskey and poured a good measure in the glass. "Have you eaten?" she asked when she returned.

"Not lately." He took the glass and carefully tilted it, then knocked the drink back with two strong swallows.

He gasped and shuddered at the bite of it.

She got a basin of water and set it beside the bed, then took the glass from his hand. "I'm going to wash the wounds while the water's heating." She removed the sheet and studied the situation. The wounds were so close to his waistline that his pants presented a problem. "Can you open your pants, please? I need more room around the wounds."

For a moment he didn't move, then slowly he unbuckled his belt and began opening the buttons on his pants. When the task was completed, Annie pulled the waistband down and away, baring the sleek skin of his hip. "Lift up a little." He did, and she slid a towel under him, then folded another towel and tucked it in and over the open garment to keep it from getting wet. She tried not to notice his exposed lower abdomen, with the silky line of hair arrowing downward, but she was acutely, embarrassingly aware of this man's partial nudity. This wasn't at all the way a doctor was supposed to feel -- she'd certainly never felt this way before! -- and she mentally scolded herself.

He watched while she wet a cloth and soaped it, then gently applied it to the infected wounds. He drew in his breath with a hiss.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, though she didn't pause in her task. "I know it hurts, but it has to be cleaned."

Rafe McCay didn't answer; he just continued to watch her. It wasn't so much the pain that had startled him into that quick intake of breath as it was the low throb of energy that seemed to leap from her flesh to his every time she touched him. It was almost like the way the air felt charged right before a lightning strike. He'd felt it even through his clothes when she had put her arm around him to help him to the table, and it was that much stronger on his bare skin.

Maybe the fever was getting to him, or maybe he'd just been without a woman for too long. For whatever reason, every time the good doctor touched him, he got hard.

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