

Listen With Your Heart

Chapter One

Encompassed by an acrid cloud of blue-gray gun smoke, Hunter Coleridge holstered his smoldering Colts. Exploding booms of gunfire echoed in his ears as the black-powder haze drifted away with a gust of icy wind. Marshal Tucker congratulated Hunter with a good-natured slap on the back while the lawmen surveyed the inevitable bloody denouement. Moaning and cursing, Sam Trommer's gang of twenty cattle-rustlers writhed in misery on the dusty Kentucky terrain. Nimble-fingered Hunter Coleridge had not mortally wounded any of the outlaws when he had thrown lead.

Marshal Trevor Tucker ran grubby fingers through the wiry, gray hairs of his moustache, his wise old eyes on Hunter. "Seems to me, you should've waited for another lawman, instead of taking on Trommer's gang all by your lonesome."

Swiping the black Stetson off his dark, mink-brown hair, Hunter swatted the cowboy hat absentmindedly against his ebony chaps. The ringing in his ears had not abated and the dust swirled away from his clothing. "I didn't need any help with this sorry lot. Now, don't glare at me. Just be glad this job's over and I didn't relegate any of Trommer's riffraff to the dust."

As deputized men began gathering injured outlaws, Trevor pulled Hunter away from the posse while poking his hand into his deep pocket. Speaking in hushed tones, the aged marshal waved two wrinkled missives in Hunter's face. "These are what held me up in town. The telegraph office had two telegrams waiting for you. One of them is a week old, being as how you've been out tracking down this lawless scum. A second wire came in this morning."

Hunter snatched the messages away from his old friend. Dread curled its talons in the pit of his gut, since word by way of telegram seldom contained good news. After scanning the brief dispatches, he lit the air blue with a streak of curses. "Well, Trevor, it appears as if my days as a peace officer are history. I can't put off my family responsibilities indefinitely. Now I must return home before my youngest brother damns his life to hell!"

"You go on home and do what your Pa expected you to do, son." Trevor frowned and pointed at the gun belt slung low on Hunter's hips. "If you feel the

itch again, ignore it. You need to stop chasing death and danger. Find yourself a sweet-tempered wife, a proper lady, and settle down respectable-like."

Wrists bound behind his back, Sam Trommer dragged his wounded leg as he stumbled toward Hunter. "Ya sorry law dog! I know ya'sa hidin' behind that badge, but carryin' on like the gunslinger ya are. Ya think it's over? Well it ain't, not by a long run! Some day when ya ain't prepared, I'm gonna come after ya. Big mistake, boy, 'cause if ya'da killed me when ya had the chance, ya'da lengthened your life expectancy."

Marshal Trevor Tucker smiled mercilessly. "Trommer, your dream of revenge dies with you. In case you forgot, cattle-rustlers hang right after their trial. You labeled Coleridge a gunslinger, but a fast gun serves himself. Hunter serves justice-the *only* reason you still breathe. Either way, you and your gang are dead men."

Hunter relinquished his badge, a silver star. Then he mounted his black stallion, Thor. "Goodbye, Trevor. I'm going after my belongings in town and heading out for the Rocking C as fast as possible. With any luck, Forrest will have abandoned his idiotic plan before I get there. If not, then I wage my next battle at home."

No sooner did Nicola Northcliffe and her friend, Elsa, reach St. Louis, than she received an unexpected telegram from her father. He ordered Nicola to await his arrival at Elsa Lemp's mansion, but neglected to mention when, or why, he was coming.

The two young ladies had just successfully completed Miss Priss and Miss Royce's finishing school in Hartford, Connecticut. After accepting an invitation to attend her first formal party, Elsa's coming-out ball, Nicola had accompanied Elsa home. Living in the rugged West, Nicola didn't know how many opportunities she'd have to actually function as a proper lady and utilize her genteel skills. Her father's evasive wire niggled at her, dousing dread over her excitement about the ball.

Elsa Lemp's mother, Agnes, put away her needlework as Nicola paced the floor in front of the fireplace once again. "Nicola, why don't you stop worrying about your father's visit? I'm sure he'll arrive within a few days and won't bring any bad news. I'll ask him if you can stay with us until summer ends, instead of going back to that dangerous Wild West. After all, how can you ever expect to attend the proper social festivities and use your refined talents way out there in that God-forsaken land? Nevertheless, find a suitable husband!"

Elsa smiled while Nicola hid a grimace. "Mama, Blaze doesn't want a husband. Suitable or otherwise."

Agnes Lemp shuddered. "Elsa, I do not know why you insist upon using 'Blaze' when she already has such a suitable first name of Nicola. Blaze may have seemed appropriate in the wilds of the Colorado Territory, but Nicola is ever so much more polished and civilized!"

"Actually, Mama, her family usually calls her Nicki when she's home. Besides, Blaze *is* her middle name. I think it suits her, what with all that mahogany-red hair of hers."

Nicola sighed, recalling school and two years of her etiquette instructor's ceaseless harping. "Miss Priss reminded me, endlessly, of the unsuitability of my nicknames-Nick and Nicki. Even my middle name Blaze. I've become accustomed to being Nicola." Indeed, Miss Priss nagged until she'd reformed the tomboy, Nicki Blaze.

"Bedtime, young ladies," Agnes announced. "Tomorrow will be a busy day, overseeing the final touches to the ballroom and greeting guests for Elsa's debutante party that night."

Suddenly, Agnes slapped her hands over her temples. "Oh dear! Hunter Coleridge must not have received my telegram about the party. Now our dinner will be short a person and possibly *ruined!*"

"Don't worry, Mama, calm down!" Elsa said to soothe her neurotic mother. "Hunter will come if it's at all possible. If not, then Papa will find a suitable stand-in."

After riding through the frosty mid-March night, Hunter slowed Thor and approached Paducah, Kentucky. The Coleridge family ranch was located outside the city limits, their home nestled in a peaceful valley. It had been some time since Hunter had been back. In the brilliance of the early morning sunlight, the beauty of the Rocking C awed him as it did every time he came home. A bitter laugh erupted from his chest, startling Thor. "Easy, boy. Here we are . . . *Home* sweet home."

Tyler, the impeccably dressed butler, opened the front door as Hunter reached to turn the doorknob. "Master Hunter, it's so very grand to have you home again!"

Hunter grinned, for all of his twenty-seven years of life, the butler had treated Hunter like his favorite Coleridge. "Thank you, Tyler. I'd say it's nice to be

here, but I believe I'll reserve judgement on *that* until after I talk to Forrest. Where might I find the romancer of trouble?"

"He's in the billiard room, sir. First, you surely wish to wash off your traveling dust and that lovely aroma of horse sweat?"

Hunter laughed. "Nope."

The butler sighed. "I'll leave you to your pursuit then. How could I have considered social etiquette standing in the way of your dogged determination once you've set your mind to a course of action?"

The eldest Coleridge marched directly to confront the youngest. Upon entering the gaming room, Hunter discovered Forrest quite thoroughly soused. "Hey, little brother. I see you've been patiently awaiting my return. Have you been besotted for a week?"

At Forrest's scowl, Hunter crinkled his nose. "Smells like you're trying to pickle yourself, or that's some new cologne. Phew! What is it? Essence of moonshine?"

Now glowering at Hunter, Forrest stood and circled him. "Well, it certainly took you long enough to get here. If I were you, I wouldn't talk about someone else being malodorous! And just for the record, I spilled most of this bottle on myself when I tried to pry it open. I may reek like a drunk, but I'm not foxed-yet."

Wasting no time, Hunter blasted directly into the heart of the crisis. "I gathered by the urgency of your telegram, Forrest, you're in a hurry for the old ball and chain. Men don't rush toward matrimony without careful consideration. Why are you so impatient for husbandhood?"

Cocking an arrogant dark brow, Hunter smiled chillingly. "Am I soon to become an uncle?"

Forrest leaned against the billiard table, his exasperation clearly present as he slapped the surface. "Of course not! I should have known you wouldn't understand, Hunter. The right woman has come along and I'm anxious to make her mine. Red is everything I hunger for at night."

Hunter stood face-to-face, staring eye-to-eye, with the youngest Coleridge. "It sounds like you're just randy for her. Try the wedded bliss of the marriage bed without the benefit of the actual ceremony." Forrest grinned wickedly while Hunter concluded, "Ah, so if she's so great in bed, make her your mistress."

After slamming the bottle of Kentucky bourbon down on the table, Forrest stiffened to a defensive stance. "Damn you! I don't want to insult her with such a crude proposition!"

Hunter narrowed his eyes menacingly. His voice dripped sarcasm. "Why not? After all, that's exactly what she's used to from all the men she's spread her leg-er-charms for in the past."

Forrest threw a violent punch toward his brother's crude mouth. Hunter caught the flying fist and twisted it behind Forrest, easily subduing his indignant baby brother. Refusing to retaliate with physical violence, Hunter wielded truth to inflict damage. "I know all about your lover girl, 'Red'. Once you started getting serious about her, I asked around about Miss Red. She's a money-hungry little harlot who sells her mistress skills to the highest bidder!"

"You've never even met her," Forrest growled. "Perhaps she's done things in her past, but *you* of all people shouldn't judge others for past reputations! I love her, Hunter. I *will* marry Red! People change, so has she."

"Yep, and I'm an angel. You'll marry her over my dead body!"

Both men struggled for the upper hand. Forrest broke free and viciously jabbed his brother's stomach. With a *whumpf*, the air burst out of Hunter's lungs.

"You did say over your dead body," Forrest snarled and then tackled Hunter down onto the stone-like floor. "I'll be damned glad to make that a reality!"

Unlike their many battles as brash youths in deviltry, the younger yearned to spill the older Coleridge's blood. After Forrest bruised one of Hunter's ribs, split his lip, and partially swelled his eye shut, Hunter had had enough of his sibling's unrighteous wrath. Even while realizing the pain his words had caused his youngest brother, Hunter also knew what he heard about *easy Red* was entirely factual. His claim of her being little more than a common tramp was valid.

Sprawled on the cold marble floor, Hunter rolled Forrest face down, straddled him, and pinned bloodthirsty fists between them. "I'm sorry, baby bro. It's for your own good."

"You are wrong!" Forrest shouted. "Red is good for me."

"You're so damned sure about your Red, you leave me no other choice but to *prove* how right I am about her! Your reformed Miss Red will drop you like a red-hot coal *if* she thinks I want her. Since I'm the oldest Coleridge, the most money

and land belong to me. She'll be panting to crawl into *my* bed as *my* mistress because *I* can offer her more than you can!"

Hunter jumped off Forrest and turned to walk away. He had no desire to beat his soused brother to a pulp.

Forrest seethed from his sibling's callousness. "Hunter, you better find a way to accept it. I'll marry Red! In fact, I leave tonight for St. Louis. Tomorrow morning, at William Lemp's mansion, I'll ask her father for her hand."

Slowly shaking his head, Forrest spat his warning between gritted teeth. "I can't easily excuse what you've said. I won't forgive you, if you say, or do, *anything* inappropriate to her! Do your duty as my oldest living family member and follow etiquette. Be there to meet Red and her father *graciously*, within twenty-four hours of my asking for her hand. Follow protocol and I will pardon you for your asinine behavior today."

Smirking, Hunter shrugged. "Forrest, I wouldn't miss it for all the world. I guarantee I'll do the right thing where you're concerned. After all, I do have your best interests at heart. Miss Red will definitely enlighten one of us."

Chapter Two

Nicola scrutinized her image in the oval looking glass. Her ball gown of pansy-violet Chambray gauze was trimmed with lavender-blue satin folds and blond lace. Despite her best efforts to ignore it, she itched constantly from her new horsehair bustle. She had styled her dark red hair into finger-puff curls, weaving in small violets as a crown.

Unbelievably, her likeness in the mirror reflected a beautiful product of Miss Priss and Miss Royce's finishing school. She flawlessly embodied the fashionable

and proper young lady of 1871. Not one of the guys. Not Nick, Nicki, or Blaze . . . This new woman was definitely Nicola.

Elsa strolled into Nicola's opulent guestroom, as if she were a spirit floating amongst the clouds of heaven. Her white debutante dress was nearly an identical style to Nicola's. Snowy white roses wreathed blond ringlets, bobbing as she walked. Elsa's exuberant attitude flowed over Nicola. "Blaze, every lady in St. Louis will envy us! Why, I won't be surprised if every man in this city tries to win our favors, if not also our hearts."

Prodded by a sudden impish urge, Nicola grinned and teased her excited friend. "Did your father hire bodyguards to keep the men away from you tonight? No? Let's hurry before your mama decides to hide you from all the eligible young gentlemen of St. Louis."

Elsa giggled as they made their way to her mama. "Thank my lucky stars for being out of school or Miss Priss would nag me. Our protocol instructor unfailingly reminded me that a lady neither giggles nor whispers."

After cupping her hand to her mouth, Elsa whispered, "You are my best friend and confidant, Blaze. I know it goes against everything we've been taught for the last two years, but do you think I might get my first kiss tonight?"

"I think you'll be lucky if that is *all* the men try to get from you."

Agnes Lemp gushed over her daughter. It required every bit of mental ability, and years of pounded in proper manners, for Nicola not to laugh aloud at Elsa's embarrassed squirming. However as Agnes began the rundown of their upcoming seven-course meal, Nicola quickly subdued her humor. Now she worried how one person could possibly ingest oysters, clear soup, fish timbale, filet mignon, duck roasted with currant jelly, palm root salad, various heavy desserts, and demitasse? Thinking of her tight corset, Nicola believed it preposterous for a lady to still breathe, nevertheless dance, after consuming so much foodstuffs!

Mr. Lemp escorted the ladies downstairs and into the grandiose cave system, which was located below the mansion and stretched all the way to William Lemp's brewery. Gas droplights, thickly petticoated with fringed crimson silk, illuminated the vast dining room.

Nicola gasped. She had never seen such a huge below-ground home extension, nor a more eccentric and extravagant basement.

Every rectangular table boasted white damask cloths, hanging to the floor on all sides, red roses on lace centerpieces, and embossed silver candlesticks. Heavily jeweled, hand-painted china was arranged with enough forks, knives, and spoons

for seven courses. Surrounding every plate, a dozen crystal glasses twinkled in the flickering candlelight. All place settings had been labeled with a personalized name card, specifically appointing a guest to his or her banquet chair. Only six individuals were seated at each imposing table.

The seating arrangements rotated male and then female. With each odd-numbered course served, a lady conversed with the gentleman on her left side. Nicola's right-handed side had Hunter Coleridge's name card, leaving her without companionship, or conversation, for every even-numbered course served. Hunter had wired that he would be late, much to Agnes Lemp's disappointment, but he would arrive as soon as possible. However, Nicola had consumed the sixth course before Hunter Coleridge made an appearance.

Nicola summoned her proper etiquette and good manners, preparing not to feel irritated with Mr. Coleridge's tardiness. At her first glance of Hunter Coleridge, Nicola forgot why she even remotely considered annoyance as a reaction to this man. Standing over six feet tall, dressed in a tuxedo, he set female hearts beating a staccato all around the room. His thick mink-brown hair fell perfectly into place, tempting women to muss it. Hunter's facial features, despite being slightly swollen as if from a fight, belonged to an ancient Greek God.

Unfortunately, the seventh course demanded that Nicola divert her attentions to the gentleman seated on her left side. She caught a whiff of Hunter's pure male scent and it totally distracted her concentration, making for a next to impossible dialogue with the kindly Mr. Elkhart. When the demitasse arrived, Nicola turned to gaze into violet pools of mirth.

His amused drawl sounded alluring to her ears. "For one so young, it must be quite an ordeal to imbibe a glass of wine with every course and top it off with liqueurs. A fine time, or maybe a dangerous time, to strike up a conversation with a male stranger. A man who you haven't received an introduction to, as of yet. Permit me to present myself, Hunter Coleridge, at your service."

"Mr. Coleridge, I'm pleased to make your acquaintance." She attempted not to gawk at his devastatingly handsome face as his sensual lips curled upward and revealed a gleam of white.

He smiled seductively. "The pleasure is all mine, I assure you, Miss . . .?"

Elsa had bounded from her table over to where Nicola sat. "Hello, Hunter," she said before turning to Nicola. "Blaze, we are about to go into the ballroom. Would you please come with me, since Mama is dragging me off to become presentable? You *know* how she gets."

"Certainly, Elsa. Will you please excuse us, Mr. Coleridge?"

Elsa whispered as they strolled across the dining room into the ballroom. "I took your name card from the place setting, so you can keep it as a memento. Does that sound too silly?"

Nicola smiled at her nervous friend. "Silly? Of course not! Thank you." Inwardly, she thanked Elsa more for the interruption. It saved Nicola from giving 'silly', a new, highly improper definition-like panting on Hunter. Whew!

As if Elsa observed her breathlessness, Elsa glanced from Nicola to the gentleman who had all the women salivating. "Sooo, what did you think of Hunter? He usually doesn't make a grand showing at the end of dinner."

"Actually, I-I . . ." Nicola stammered to a stop as heat flash-fired up her neck to burn her cheeks. "Do you suppose you might introduce us properly, so I may have a chance to dance with him? Or do you think he even noticed me enough to offer a dance?"

"Well, well, well, even Blaze isn't immune to handsome Hunter's magnetism." Giggling, Elsa teased her. "Hunter is quite the ladies' man. He's a confirmed bachelor, but you've sworn not to want a husband."

"Amen to that. I only inquired about a dance, not a romance!"

Agnes pulled Elsa away for her grand entrance into the ballroom as the official coming-out of a debutante. The men swirled around Elsa while the young woman basked in the sheer number of adoring gentlemen.

Feeling guilty for such a selfish thought, Nicola wondered if Elsa would ever have an opportunity to present her to Hunter. Nicola and the many young gentlemen who asked her to dance were not acquainted appropriately, so accepting their offers would have been indecorous. To escape the awkward position in which she found herself, Nicola strolled up the exceptional cave-basement's corridor to the balcony.

After securing two glasses of champagne, Hunter followed her. "Hello, again."

Once more, Nicola noted the air between them almost hummed with energy like the invisible sizzling zap seconds before a thunderbolt. Her heartbeat zoomed in pleasurable excitement, since Hunter had sought her out from the crowds of beautiful women indoors.

He nodded as if wordlessly acknowledging the tingle in the atmosphere before he held up a crystal fluke of champagne. "I know we have not been formally introduced, but may I offer you a glass of bubbly? I overheard Elsa label you Blaze. May I boldly ask you to call me Hunter, if I may call you Blaze?"

"Mr. Coleridge, thank you for the champagne, but you inferred correctly, earlier—about me already imbibing more than my share of spirits tonight. However, you may call me Blaze . . . Northcliffe. Birth cursed me with red hair, so my parents dubbed Blaze as my middle name."

Hunter smiled provocatively. "Well, Miss Blaze Northcliffe, how will I persuade you to dance if you won't even call me Hunter? Don't you want to try your champagne?"

"Mr.-er-Hunter, if I drink anything more, I cannot be responsible for my actions."

Presenting her with a rakish grin, Hunter arched one dark brow and his deep-voiced drawl became husky. "Ah then, Blaze, please drink. Maybe I would like it if you weren't quite so proper. I think you are a very beautiful young lady."

So surprised, she felt her eyes widen enormously.

"If my boldness shocks you, don't worry that I'll ravish you on this balcony. Fortunately for you, two hundred people dally in the ballroom behind us."

Although Nicola snapped her mouth shut from a little O, Hunter threw back his head and burst out laughing. She gulped her bubbly to steady her nerves, drinking all of her champagne in a few seconds. His deep laughter seemed to rumble with masculine satisfaction.

"Miss Blaze, would you do me the honors of the next several waltzes? I must claim you swiftly, before all the young pups attempt to steal you away from me. If any gentleman succeeds, I'm liable to react in an unseemly manner."

"My instructor at the genteel academy frowned on ladies dancing. Miss Priss called it—'hugging to music.' We learned the art of waltzing, but you will be the first man I've been with."

"Is that so?"

Mortified at her choice of words, heated fluid stung her cheeks. "I meant . . . We danced with only female partners at finishing school."

Hunter and Nicola glided across the ballroom floor with an ease usually born from familiarity. Before fully realizing it, she was on her third waltz in a row with him. Waltzing with a man three times was a serious social blunder signifying an engagement announcement soon to follow. What was she doing, defying propriety and the teachings of Miss Priss? From the effects of the alcohol and the gorgeous man dancing with her, Nicola's head began to swim.

As if instantly alert to her discomfort, Hunter escorted her to the balcony. With spring's warmth not yet arriving, the currents blew cold and refreshing.

For several minutes, they stood in companionable silence. Suddenly, Nicola shivered in the truly frigid breeze. The distinguished gentleman at her side queried, "Are you chilled?"

"Not at all. In fact, it feels rather invigorating." Nicola couldn't help but notice how Hunter's well-fitted suit enhanced his muscular physique. She still hadn't recovered from being held in his brawny arms as they waltzed. *That* was precisely the reason she believed it was an exceedingly warm night.

Hunter maneuvered her into a corner, standing in front of her and blocking the wind. "Miss Blaze, I presume you are experiencing the effects of too many drinks." He hugged her hands with his. "Yes, your hands are freezing. Would you permit me to wrap my tuxedo coat around you, before you catch your death of cold?"

Nicola buzzed with warm tingles all over, but as Hunter closed the gap between them, her stomach flip-flopped in a complete circle. Her eyelids fluttered closed. When she opened them again, he studied her in a strange and intent way. She licked her suddenly dry lips and her hand lifted, as if to touch his alluring face. Reality slapped her with the impropriety of her actions.

Oh my! Whatever was happening between them was too strong for the code of social propriety to apply to them. Was he feeling this too? Something wonderful, something scary, something pulling them together like an invisible lasso binding them closer. His nostrils flared as violet eyes followed the path of her tongue around her lips. He made a funny sound in the back of his throat and slowly bent his head nearer to hers.

Nicola shocked herself as much as him when she slid one hand in a caress across his face. But she *was* a healer, a part of her basic makeup, and had this overpowering need to take away all creatures' pain and suffering. Someone had hurt Hunter; he was in need of a healer. "Who would want to mar such a handsome man?" Shaky fingers traced the slightly swollen skin by his eye and lingered over the crack in his lip. "I wish I could take away your pain."

Hunter brushed his tongue tentatively across the soft digit on his lips. Then he drew her finger into his mouth and gently sucked.

A white-hot bolt jolted from her finger to her loins. Nicola jerked back her hand. Her heart pounded faster and harder like a Cheyenne drumbeat in warning.

Hunter's exquisite face lowered to hover, for a few short seconds, above hers. His lips grazed hers, expertly drawing her lower lip into his mouth. Cupping his hands around her face, his thumbs worked with a masterful precision to part the corners of her mouth. As his tongue traced her full lips and probed inside, coaxing and teaching, she opened innocently for him.

When he groaned and deepened his penetration into her moist depths, Nicola surrendered. Her hesitation halted and she gave herself over to the dizzying sensations Hunter aroused in her, feeling as if his mouth on hers singed her flesh and dissolved her bones. With every ounce of desire she experienced, Nicola dueled with his plunging tongue. She heard him groan longer, deeper, this time. Hunter must have realized her bones had turned to mush, since he wrapped her in his arms, pinned her to the wall, and supported her body by intimately pressing his against hers.

"Oh!" Elsa cried in dismay.

Instantly, the breathless couple broke apart.

"Blaze, I didn't know you were . . . I mean-I see you've met Hunter. I came to find you, so I could initiate the-um formal introductions."

Nicola opened her mouth, but no words would come. His kiss had stolen her ability to think.

After a nervous giggle, Elsa continued. "Your father has arrived. He's upstairs in the front parlor, waiting for you."

Oh sure! Nicola still yearned to be kissing Hunter, but her father just had to pick *now* to come-so Elsa could catch her acting like a harlot!

The effects of the alcohol vanished, when the stinging heat of embarrassment rose from her neck and spread to her face. Throwing a guilty glance at first to Hunter, and then to Elsa, she summoned the courage to squeak, "I see. Thank you, Elsa. I-I . . . goodbye."

Hunter charged after Blaze, but Elsa clutched his arm. "Wait, Hunter! She's staying with me throughout the summer. You may call on her here. Chaperoned, of course."

He could still picture the play of emotions flit across Blaze's lovely oval face before their kiss. The air between all but crackled and popped with something beautiful and rare. A streak of possessiveness had tightened his groan when he read her uncertainty, as if she wanted what she didn't understand, silently disclosing her virginity. When she had licked her enticing full lips, he instinctively had known she very much wanted him to kiss her.

After Elsa interrupted them, shock had widened Blaze's sapphire eyes and arched both her auburn brows. However Hunter did not believe it was either social blunder or the sudden arrival of her father. No, her surprised stemmed from the awakening of sexual awareness. Somewhere deep inside, Hunter had relished the idea of being the first man to taste her and kindle her feminine responsiveness. Oh yes, he must go after Miss Blaze Northcliffe now.

"Really, Hunter," Elsa continued and tugged once more on his arm when he started to follow after Blaze. "Don't make her any more anxious about seeing her father than she already is. She didn't know when he'd show up, or why he insisted they meet here."

Hunter exhaled his frustration. "Would the debutante grant me the pleasure of her next dance?"

Her finger shook sternly in his face. "Only if you promise me you aren't playing your usual debauched role as a rogue with my best friend. I mean it, Hunter! She's not *nearly* as experienced as you may believe, but push her in a corner, or play cat and mouse . . . She'll eat you alive!"

"I'll look forward to that tempting idea," Hunter mumbled while extending his arm to escort her into the ballroom. Then louder for Elsa's benefit, he added, "I promise!" Displaying straight white teeth in an engaging smile, he chuckled. "You have a very interesting best friend."

Nicola attempted to compose herself as she closed the distance to her father. "It's so wonderful to see you again, Father!"

Nicholas Northcliffe eyed his eldest child. It had been two years since he had seen her. "You've grown into quite a stunning woman. You are the picture of your dear mother, God rest her soul. I'm extremely proud of your accomplishments at finishing school. Miss Royce wrote glowing reviews of your proficiency."

Nicola shot him a lopsided grin. "As you know, Miss Royce was Mother's best friend from their school days. Did you truly think she'd say anything unkind about me?"

Shaking his graying red head, Nicholas chortled. "Perhaps, your opinion of Miss Royce's bias is correct. God knows, I had no idea your sister went to hell in a hand-basket while there."

Her father knew about Red?

"Don't look so startled! Recently I discovered quite a bit-more than I cared to actually, about your sister's disreputable lifestyle. That's partly the reason we came to meet you in St. Louis."

"Ariella came with you?" The last person Nicola expected to see was her sister, the woman affectionately renowned as Red.

Ariella Northcliffe strolled into the parlor. With an excited squeal of recognition, the dazzling and curvaceous strawberry-blond interrupted the father-daughter reunion. "Hello, sis! How does it feel to be the first offspring to graduate from Miss Priss's prison of perfect manners and morals? Come on, Nick. I read the radiant reports Miss Royce sent Papa."

"Hello, Red. You look gorgeous, as usual. I didn't expect you to accompany Father."

The striking redhead pouted prettily. "Papa insisted I be here. He's going to meet my fiancé in the morning."

Her father scowled.

Red quickly amended. "Forrest plans to ask him for my hand in marriage. I'm confident Papa will accept."

Their father's face revealed none of his true feelings. "Girls, proceed to our suite of rooms. We have some very serious business to discuss. First, I'll extend my thanks to the Lemps for their hospitality."

The sisters settled into their rooms. As Red unpacked her many trunks, Nicola probed for information about their father's secretiveness. However, Red had other more important things to impart to her sister. "Nicki, just you wait until you meet Forrest. He's simply the most handsome man you've ever seen!"

Nicola's mind flashed a picture of Hunter. She doubted her sister's lover, or any other man, could be more handsome. "Why are you so set on marrying Forrest?"

Red shrugged. "That's uncomplicated, Nick. Forrest is extremely rich and gorgeous, but most importantly . . . he's a superior lover."

"Do you love him?"

"He loves me. Quite frankly, I think I could tolerate several years of monogamy with him-until we produce an heir. I presume he'd allow me to have other lovers after that."

Shocked all the way to her toes, Nicola gasped. "Oh, Red! Will you always behave so outrageously? You honestly believe your husband will agree for you to *sleep* with other men?"

"Sleep? Hardly." Red rolled her eyes before snapping at her guileless sister. "Listen, Miss Perfect, you are a prisoner of propriety and too naive! That's the way things are done. He can provide for me, quite comfortably. In exchange, I bear him a brat. Don't look at me as if I've suddenly sprouted two heads!"

"More like sprouted horns." Nicola muttered.

"You won't keep your high and mighty proper behavior when you return home. A cattle ranch is no place to practice your ladylike manners, Nicki."

"You may be my younger sister, Ariella, but you had the first opportunity to attend the genteel academy. I remained at the Swinging N, managed it, and took care of everything else for Father. By the time I got my chance to enroll in finishing school, I was older than all the other girls. Your wild reputation, Red, nearly kept me from being accepted. The *only* reason I even attended was due to giving my word of honor to Mother, as she requested on her deathbed."

Wearing a smug mask, Red taunted her. "Nicola, you would've been better off if you never would've gone. How will you be happy now? Do you plan to practice your needlepoint and pour tea while you rope and ride? As soon as you return home, you will become Nick to Papa's ranch hands and Blaze to the Indians. Then the prudish Miss Nicola Northcliffe dies a slow and agonizing death!"

Before her famous redheaded temper could be riled, Nicola counted slowly, silently, to ten. "Red, I don't want to argue with you." She sighed wearily. "I assure you, I'll keep the attributes I've acquired the last two years."

Nicola lifted one shoulder and grinned. "Besides, if Father agrees, I'll stay here until the end of summer. After six months of city life, I'll be more than ready to go back to the ranch. Father needs me, so I'll honor his wishes in whatever way I can."

At that moment, Nicholas Northcliffe strode into their suite. "Now, my lovely young ladies, it's best you get some sleep. We have many important matters to address in the morning. I need my rest before squabbling with my stubborn daughters."

Nicola frowned. *Young ladies?* She could usually gauge her father's mood according to what he called them. If he said Nicola and Ariella, instead of their nicknames, it indicated his anger.

Her sister stuck her lip out in a dainty pout. "Papa, why do you feel we'll squabble?"

"We'll discuss it in the morning. Goodnight, Red . . . Blaze."

Chapter Three

At dawn, Nicholas stalked the halls of the magnificent mansion. He stopped frequently to rest his persistently aching leg. The ache was an ever-present reminder of the shell which shattered his kneecap during the Civil War. While he lay incapacitated in a Union hospital, erroneous word of his death had reached his wife at their ranch home. Heartbroken about her beloved husband, Gabriella's poor health had flared and she lost the will to live. His young children had believed themselves orphaned, so Nicki Blaze took control.

Dread seized him over the news he planned on breaking to his girls this morning-especially his stubborn Nicki Blaze. Although neither would accept his decisions joyously, the days of careful deliberation held Nicholas firm in his beliefs.

On this cool mid-March day, his first objective was to handle Forrest Coleridge. He hoped the business deal would occupy the young pup's time and

salve his ego. After breakfast, Nicholas would deliver his orders to his daughters. Straightaway, he intended to set the wheels in motion.

Impatiently drumming his fingers on the white damask tablecloth, Forrest Coleridge sat in the nearly empty dining room and waited for Nicholas Northcliffe. Memories of the fight with Hunter plagued his thoughts. Would his brother do his rightful duty by graciously meeting with Red's father? Could Hunter be correct about Red's inability to change? Worst of all, his brother's words had him wondering at his own true feelings for Red.

Is it lust? Is it love? Forrest's gut tightened in anger . . . These were not the musings a man should have before he asked for a woman's hand in marriage.

Promptly at seven o'clock, a lone elderly gentleman limped into the dining room and headed toward him. "Hello, young man. I'm Nicholas Northcliffe. You must be Forrest Coleridge."

Forrest stood. "Yes, sir." The men exchanged handshakes before seating themselves. "Thank you for meeting with me this morning. Red-I mean-Ariella has told me a lot about you. May I get you something for breakfast?"

"No, thanks for the offer. Don't worry about calling her Red. I usually call Ariella by her nickname, too."

Nicholas quit smiling and cleared his throat. "Son, I believe in getting right to the point. Red has informed me of your honorable intentions. I must say, I'm surprised you want to buy the cow when you can get the milk for free."

Forrest gulped a mouthful of coffee down his windpipe. For the next several minutes he continued to choke, while Nicholas pounded heartily on his back.

"Surprised ya, huh, Forrest?"

"I-I don't consider your daughter a cow, Mr. Northcliffe."

Sun-toughened wrinkly skin softened with something akin to compassion. His sky-blue eyes clouded with torment as if painfully aware of truths that he wished to hell he didn't know about his own flesh and blood. "I'm sure you don't think ill of my youngest offspring, or you wouldn't be here now. Still, we must examine the truth of the matter. Ariella isn't ready to commit herself to holy matrimony."

"But, sir-"

"No buts about it, Forrest. I'm taking Red to England and enrolling her in a fancy boarding academy to complete finishing school. I hope the strict nuns will change her into a respectable young gentlewoman."

Forrest snapped shut his gaping mouth. "Red is—"

Nicholas shook his head and held up one hand. "After her mother died, I let her run wild. Now I must correct my mistakes, or she won't be fit to make a good wife for any man. She'll be out of commission for, at least, one year. That's a long time, son. If you still feel the same about her after we return, we'll speak of this matter again. You're a good man and I'd be proud to call you my son-in-law."

Forrest struggled to keep his disappointment from transforming into anger. "Mr. Northcliffe, I don't want her to change. I love her the way she is now. A year is a *long* time to be apart!"

Nicholas gave him a knowing grin and continued his frankness. "Exactly, Forrest. She's fickle now. Even if we stayed in the States, my answer would be the same. You are a young man with a young man's *needs*. I imagine it won't be long before you see this entire matter in a whole new light. I'm sure it doesn't seem like it now, but some day you may truly be grateful for my decision."

Forrest mashed his molars, struggling to shut the stream of hasty words clogging his throat.

"In hopes of salving your ego, young Coleridge, I offer you an opportunity to divert your energies into business. My ranch foreman, Chad, tells me the Rocking C has an admirable breed of cattle. Would you be interested in striking up a different type of deal today?"

Forrest snorted his disbelief. "Mr. Northcliffe, I don't want to appear ungracious, but under the circumstances . . . I just need to go drown my sorrows in a good bottle of brandy. I definitely don't wish to discuss Herefords with you. If my oldest brother, Hunter, puts in an appearance to meet you, I'm sure you can negotiate a contract with him. Good day, sir."

Nicholas watched Forrest saunter dejectedly out of the dining room. Waving one of Lemps' dining waiters to his table, he bought a case of the finest brandy and had it delivered to Forrest's room. Successfully jumping the first big hurdle of the day, Nicholas moved toward his suite to face his daughters.

Red picked at her breakfast. Freshly baked croissants tasted like straw. Her apprehension increased while awaiting the outcome of her father's meeting with Forrest. If only she were sure of her papa's decision, Red could enjoy the breakfast

feast delivered to their rooms. Nicola certainly didn't help matters. For a moment, Red thought Nicola acted like she was suffering from a hangover. But that was something her very proper sister wouldn't ever have.

Preoccupied with inappropriate daydreams of Hunter, Nicola relived their kiss for the thousandth time. Her spinster's heart whispered, but she couldn't make out the words, deciding it must have whimpered. "Oh, Hunter," she breathed airily, "What have you done to me?"

Slowly shaking her head, she berated herself for her improper behavior and her overindulgence the previous night. Between her stomach's queasiness and her hangover's headache, she just wanted to be left alone with her fantasies of Hunter.

The sitting room door swung open and the young women heard the limping gait of their father. He entered Red's bedroom and his face remained unreadable. "Nicki, be a good girl and leave me alone with Ariella for a bit. Shut the door on your way into the sitting room. I'll be with you in a short while."

Seconds after closing the door, Nicola heard her sister wail. With every *tick-tick-tick*, Red's cries increased in volume and intensity. By the time her father joined her in the sitting room, Nicola's nerves were stretched as tight as a Cheyenne bow.

She paced continually. Nicola wasn't up to dealing with anything, wishing her father wouldn't impart his wretched news. Despite her silently wished-for longing, he divulged his plans.

"Father, I know your knee plagues you constantly these days. How can I condemn you for traveling to the spas of Bath, England? Must you drag Red along and force her into boarding school?"

"My mind is set on this course of action, Nicki. Now, I wish to reveal my plans for you while I'm in England." He ignored her groan. "I declined Agnes Lemp's invitation for you to stay in St. Louis through the summer. Let's talk of home for a smidgen."

Grateful for even a short reprieve, she inquired sincerely about a subject near and dear to her heart. "How's Chad?"

Her father grinned like a cat cornering a mouse. "Funny you should mention Chad. You know he's like my own son. He's lived with us since his father's death, nigh over fifteen years. After the Civil War, Chad spent the following years at college. I sent you to Connecticut for finishing school shortly before his graduation. You two haven't seen much of each other for close to five years."

Nicola wrinkled her brow. Why was he stating facts to her? "Father, I know all those things. Excuse me for saying so, but you're rambling and that usually means you're stalling."

"No, my clever girl! I think Chad would make an excellent guardian for you while I'm away." Her father ran his fingers through his grayish hair as if readying to match her stubbornness.

"I'm perfectly capable of—"

"Of course, I realize you believe you're too old for a guardian. Don't scowl, Blaze! What I'm trying to tell you . . . It's my fondest wish for you and Chad to marry, and take over the Swinging N for me."

Too stunned for words, she plopped into the overstuffed armchair closest to where she had been pacing. She stared up blankly at the fresco painted ceiling. "*Marry!* Father, you know I don't plan to wed anyone. I'm twenty years old, actually adjusted to the idea of spinsterhood."

She snorted her disbelief. "*Marry Chad?* You said so yourself . . . We've lived together for nearly fifteen years. He's just like a brother!"

"Do you love him?"

Again this morning, a vivid memory of Hunter flashed on the back of her eyelids. Hunter lowering his mouth to hers, coaxing and teaching. Nicola blew out a quick breathe as her stomach somersaulted. She was supposed to be concentrating on her father and her brother. "Love Chad? Yes, but as a br—"

"And he loves you the same way," Nicholas cut promptly.

"You told him this-this preposterous scheme?"

Scrunching his brow into a scowl, her father held firm. "Nicola Blaze Northcliffe, my mind is set on the matter. Give me your word. You *always* honor your oaths."

Defiance coursed through her system as Nicola crossed her arms over her chest and notched her chin as well as her stubbornness. "No way! I'm sorry, Father. I can't possibly give you my word to marry Chad. Why, I wouldn't be the least bit shocked if he hightailed it off the ranch when you left!"

Nicholas scoffed. "Hogwash! He gave me his word to consider it. I want the same from you. The way I have it figured, the two of you should be ready to commit yourselves to holy matrimony when I return from England in a year."

"*Damn it!* How can you do this to me?"

Admonishing her, Nicholas shook his finger in his eldest daughter's irate face. "Nicola! Mind your tongue. I surely didn't send you to that fancy genteel academy so you'd learn to yell crude words at your father."

Gritting her teeth, she asked pardon. "You have my apology, *sir*. As for my word, you'll just have to accept the same pledge you extracted from Chad. The best I can possibly promise is to consider it." Pausing for five seconds and weighing his impossible request, she announced, "I did and I won't-I can't!"

Her father looked like he might wish to throttle her. "Do you shame me by no longer honoring your word?"

Nicola clenched her hands into fists. How could he do this to Chad-to her? "Chad is my *brother!*"

"No! He is not! You share no blood. You will consider it for longer than a few short seconds. Chad gave me his word, but for the first time in your life you won't give me yours. It shames me and dishonors-"

"Fine!" She interrupted his successful attempts to force guilt upon her shoulders. "You are aware I always honor my word. I will consider it—that's all I'm promising—to consider if Chad and I could-um . . ."

"That's my sweet Nicki Blaze. Give it some thought. You're a bright young woman. It won't be long before you see reason."

"If you'll excuse me now, I think I'm going to be ill!"

Plagued by his thoughts, Hunter slept fitfully throughout the wee hours of the morning. His little brother was about to commit the biggest mistake of his life, and there wasn't a damned thing Hunter could do to stop it without alienating Forrest. When Hunter did manage to shut his eyes, memories of an innocent temptress teased him. His desire reminded him painfully that under her prim veneer, a wild wanton festered. He very much wanted to be the man who stripped away her shield of propriety. The highlight of his day would be a visit to the Northcliffe suite to see Blaze.

I wish I could take away your pain.

Her tender declaration had caught him off-guard, grazing his emotional armor like a stray bullet and lodging dangerously close to his heart. She won't betray you, his heart whispered. Blaze stirred more than his lust and Hunter surged out of bed, intending to discover what this rare chemistry between them could mean.

Positive that he could not conceivably face Forrest's joy, for a successful engagement to the hussy, Red, he chose the best course of action. As he dressed, Hunter sought the assurances he'd be able to offer Red's father-without throwing up his breakfast. Never before had he been at such a loss for the right words.

A world-weary sigh erupted from deep within him and he spoke to his reflection in the mirror. "Well, let's get this ridiculous farce over as quickly and painlessly as imaginable. No doubt, Forrest would fail to see the humor if I offer my heartfelt condolences, instead of congratulations."

I don't even know the infamous Red's last name, or the location of her father's suite! The notion hit him like a ton of bricks. Mirthless laughter as a companion, he ambled toward Forrest's room to discover the information he needed. "Splendid! I so wanted to encounter my brother this morning."

Nearing the end of the hall, he overheard a woman sob and an exasperated man shout, "Red, quit your caterwauling! I won't permit you to go speak with Forrest. He's most likely at the bottom of a brandy bottle by now. You certainly can't go in his bedroom, alone, to console him!"

Not believing his ears, Hunter halted mid-stride. There couldn't be more than one Red and Forrest. He must have found her father's suite! A surge of hope swelled to the surface. It had to be a sign that all wasn't exactly perfect in paradise! Before he could change his mind, or consider the consequences of an unexpected intrusion, Hunter rapped sharply on the mahogany door.

The doorknob turned, but a gruff order preceded the portal completely opening. "Red, go into your room and shut the door. Please try to contain your wails."

Red entered the bedroom, rebelliously leaving the door open.

Nicola and her father shared the sitting room, yet publicly airing grievances went against proper etiquette. Only the visitor waiting behind the closed door halted Nicola from unleashing her wrathful criticism of Red's treatment. She glared at her father, listening to her sister weep, and fought the urge to tear into him anyhow. Several minutes had passed since Red retreated into the separate room and flung herself onto her bed to cry, but her father made no move to comfort

her. Livid, and no longer able to ignore her healing instincts, Nicola stomped toward the bedroom to console her baby sister.

Her father waited until Nicola was almost in Red's room, and then jerked open the main entrance.

Pain stabbed Hunter's heart. Shock followed immediately, striking him dumbstruck. Hunter watched Blaze stomp the final few paces into the adjoining bedroom, slamming the door behind her with a *thud!* He had clearly heard Red's name spoken, but the only woman he saw was Blaze.

There's no way in hell Blaze could have been that good of an actress last night! No, something special and tender had blossomed between them. Hunter's mouth gaped before incredulously inquiring, "Mr. Northcliffe?"

"Yes, I'm Nicholas Northcliffe. May I help you?" As the boisterous sobbing continued, the elderly man huffed. "Excuse me momentarily, please," he gritted through his teeth.

After limping to the bedroom door, he opened it enough to state, "Red, calm yourself! I don't want to start receiving complaints about the noise!"

After Mr. Northcliffe called into the other room, Hunter knew there could be no other explanation. It wasn't a mistake. He hadn't misunderstood anything. Blaze had another nickname-Red! *Red Northcliffe!*

Trembling from betrayal, Hunter's hurt and fury intensified. "I'm Hunter Coleridge, sir. Forrest's brother and oldest living kin." Slitting his eyes, he growled menacingly. "I've come to greet you and welcome *Red* into the family."

Nicholas flinched. "Well, you can stop your glowering, son. There isn't to be a wedding quite yet. I suppose you've heard all about my Red. No doubt, you're thrilled to hear the nuptials aren't sealed."

Still reeling with trauma, after discovering the prudish Blaze was one in the same with the jaded Red, Hunter couldn't come up with a convincing lie if his life depended on it. "Forrest is a young man. Too young, in my opinion, to marry anyone."

"Ah, so you're a diplomat," Nicholas replied. "Come in, Hunter. I think I like you."

Hunter stepped inside, staring where he had last seen Blaze.

Her father dropped back in armchair and sighed. "If you need the bald facts about Red and Forrest, you'll have to ask him, son. I had a business proposition I wanted to run past him, but he preferred conducting business with a bottle of aged brandy. He suggested I speak with you about the arrangements."

"Business?" Hunter's brain refused to focus, since his heart spoke only of its aching loss.

"My ranch foreman claims that your Rocking C produces a superb breed of Herefords. I'd appreciate it if I could purchase a thousand head to procreate with my longhorns and better my livestock. If you'd be willing to drive them to the Swinging N, I'll double the price for each head of cattle."

At that point, Hunter was so stupefied, he would have agreed to anything just to move on to his uppermost concern. "You draw up the contract and you've got yourself a deal. Might I inquire about your daughter? What I mean is—"

"Wait a minute, son!" Chuckling, Nicholas held up his hands to halt Hunter's inquiry. "You haven't heard the rest of the bargain. My daughter is returning to the Swinging N, so don't fret about her getting underfoot."

Although Hunter scowled, Nicholas cleared his throat and continued. "I'll pay the drovers, who you hire, for the drive from Denver's railroad depot to my home, but I want you to act as the trail boss. None of the men will be my regulars, just cowboys from Denver you'll handpick for the job."

"Your daughter—"

"My daughter will inform our cook, Gus, when you plan to arrive, and send him to meet you with our chuck wagon. Gus will tell you the easiest route to my Swinging N ranch. Lastly, I'll require you to stay and keep an eye on the Herefords while my hands work the spring roundup."

Head and heart throbbing, Hunter swallowed hard against the alarming urge to vomit. There had to be a logical explanation for mistaking Blaze for Red, despite the mounting evidence to the contrary. Didn't there? "Let me think about your proposition. I'll let you know this evening."

Blaze's father clapped Hunter on the back. "I'll draw up the contract and expect your answer by nine tonight. Tomorrow morning, I leave for England."

Tapping his battered leg, the old gentleman grimaced. "This old war wound developed gout again, so my doctor insisted I visit the famous healing spas in Bath."

My youngest daughter is enrolled in a highly reputable finishing school over there, so we'll be gone for a year or longer-until Ariella graduates."

Torment stirred an evil bony finger in his mind, twirling Hunter's thoughts, swirling away the ability to comprehend. The misery eating Hunter's soul and reflecting in his eyes, sprung from questions about Blaze. Maybe he had seen her look-alike? "Mr. Northcliffe, I'll get back to you this evening with my decision. Sorry to hear about your war injury. Lots of good men were wounded and killed during bloody skirmishes. I should know. I joined up with the Union when I was barely seventeen."

Nicholas shook Hunter's hand and grinned. "Son, I know all about you and your family. It pays to do a little checking when your daughter starts talking marriage. Everyone in your Coleridge clan is a respectable man, in his own rights. I look forward to doing business with you, even if Red isn't going to become a Coleridge right away."

Staring toward the doorway in which Blaze disappeared, Hunter waited for her to exit and explain it all away as some horrid misunderstanding. Raking his fingers through his hair, his dogged determination kicked into high gear. Hunter bid Nicholas goodbye.

Disregarding the true motivation, which sent him straight to William Lemp's private section of the mansion, Hunter pounded on their front entrance. After a conversation he cut short with Elsa, he took cognizance of more than his supreme disillusionment. Blaze was indeed staying in her father's suite. Hunter had actually hoped there was some plausible reason he mistook the straight-laced Blaze for the promiscuous Red. An aching loss exploded in his chest, but Hunter presumed it was from being taken for an utter fool.

That little cheating liar kissed me, all the while intending to marry my brother! "No wonder Forrest bought her prudish act! I'll take the damned job her father offered me and I'll break his two-faced daughter for him! Just wait until I get that double-crossing woman alone, away from her family and friends in St. Louis . . . I'll make her life a living hell!"

A growl rumbled from his chest, the jagged rusty edge of betrayal prodded his heart. "Oh yes. Before I'm through with her, she'll be sorry she ever met any Coleridge! She'll do exactly as I warned Forrest, losing him and her chances of ever becoming his wife . . . After she begs me to make her my mistress."

As if feeling the anguish of his master, Thor pushed to a faster reckless pace until reaching the telegraph office. Hunter wired the Rocking C. He expected one

thousand Herefords and the Coleridge private coach on the Kansas Pacific by tomorrow.

Having accomplished that, he rode toward the shopping district. With no time to return to the ranch for his clothes, he planned to buy everything he hadn't brought along on this trip.

“You’re in my sharpshooter sights now, Blaze. I’ll have my revenge on Red,” he muttered beneath his breath.