

For Appearances Sake

By Kate Simon

Joseph Astley didn't want to go another damn party. He hated dressing in a tuxedo and he thought the top hats were ridiculous. He'd have much rather been riding his horse or playing cards in the private room at the Chandler hotel. He might have been able to avoid the party if it wasn't for his parents. It would be attended by what his parents called 'all the best people'. Joseph Sr. insisted it was good for business. He felt it was all about making the right connections. Their ranch had prospered but it was his father's investments in the new railroads that had elevated the Astley family and their money to the top of every guest list in San Antonio.

Joseph might have convinced his father to let him miss the latest party if it weren't for his mother. Mirabelle Astley was obsessed with the family's social standing. The family legend was that his grandfather was an adventurous member of the peerage who emigrated to Texas from England to make his own way. As part of maintaining their family heritage, his parents had been pushing him to find a wife.

"You're nearly thirty," said his mother. "You need to find a wife. Someone from a good family. You need an heir."

"Mother, this is not England and we are not royalty."

"If your grandfather had stayed in England, we would be."

He smiled and kissed her forehead. "If grandfather had stayed in England, he wouldn't have met grandmother and then I wouldn't be going to this party." He sighed as he followed his parents into the latest assemblage of San Antonio's fair maidens.

Elizabeth Parker didn't want to be here. She'd much rather be at home reading one of her books. Papa had made sure there was always the latest publications included in the shipments to his general stores. Mama didn't approve of her always having her nose in a book. She told Elizabeth that she was learning all she needed to know at Mrs. Primrose's school for young ladies. Her mother didn't understand that learning how to run a household, how to handle the servants or how to host the perfect dinner party was of no interest to her. Elizabeth wanted to learn, really learn. She studied the classics, science and mathematics. Papa always hid his copy of the newspaper for her to find and read. If her mother found out, she'd make a scene. Elizabeth placated her mother by spending time with their housekeeper, Marie Perkins, learning the particulars of running the Parker home. Marie had been with them since Elizabeth was a baby. She'd come to them as a war widow and worked her way up from maid to running the house. What her parent's didn't know was Marie Perkins was Maria Sanchez Perkins. She'd created for herself an image that enabled her to make a life for herself without her husband. Marie was warm and loving toward Elizabeth. Whenever they were alone in the house, Marie would teach her Spanish. Elizabeth was able to read books in Spanish but she needed to be careful where she spoke it. Her mother would have a fit if she knew her daughter understood the delivery men's rude jokes.

Elizabeth tended to hang back from the groups of females. They were all on the prowl for the richest husband. She knew they spent a fortune on new dresses for each party because the fabric travelled through her father's stores to the dressmakers. Her mother always picked the best fabric for her gowns and the other's hated her for it. She didn't understand why her mother was so keen for her to find a husband. She was only

fifteen. Her mother's logic was there were only so many eligible bachelors in San Antonio. Elizabeth needed to stake her claim before she was an old maid. According to her mother any woman over the age of eighteen who was unmarried or not betrothed was an old maid.

Elizabeth knew when he walked into the ballroom. It wasn't the murmurs from the other girls. She could feel his energy. She turned and saw him greet the host and hostess. Everyone else faded from view. She'd seen him in town. He had the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. He'd come into the store once when she was visiting and he smiled at her. The other girls were sneaking peaks at him too. She couldn't fault them for that. As the son of one of the wealthiest families in San Antonio, Joseph Astley was the prize they all sought. Everyone except her.

Joseph grabbed a glass of champagne from the waiter's tray and took a sip. He'd would have rather it was a whiskey but that would have to wait until after the party. He made his way toward the patio doors where he spotted Randall Prescott. "Hiding from the hungry lions?"

Randall snickered. "I'm a poor medical student. I'm of little interest to the match making mothers." He took a sip from his drink and smiled. "You, on the other hand, are prime beef on the hoof. You should just choose one and get it over with."

"Not you too. My mother is hounding me because I haven't chosen a wife, like it's picking out the latest coach. I don't see the rush. I'm only twenty eight."

"It's not like you don't have your pick of the crop." Randall nodded toward a cluster of girls. "Melinda Thorndike is giving you the eye."

Joseph looked at the tall blonde in the center of the clutch of girls. She was perfectly groomed with the latest styles. Just like her friends. He'd had the same socially approved conversation with each of the women in the room. He was already bored. "No thank you. I couldn't bear one more conversation about the weather." It was then he noticed a girl he hadn't seen before. She was faced away from the crowd, studying a painting. Her jet black hair was barely restrained by a deep green ribbon. She was fair skinned and slim. "Randall, who's that? I don't think I've seen her before."

"Who?"

"The girl by the painting."

"That's Benjamin Parker's daughter. You know, the general store owner."

“What? No. I remember seeing a little girl with Parker.”

“That’s her.”

“She’s a child. What’s she doing here?”

“From the look of her, she’s not that young anymore.”

Joseph glared at his friend before he decided to find out why she was here. Melinda batted her eyes as he walked in her direction. Her smile turned to shock as he nodded and walked past. Parker’s daughter noticed his approach. “What about this painting has you so fascinated?”

“It is lovely,” she said.

“Degas, I believe.”

She glanced back at the painting and smiled. “Yes. Too bad it’s a fake.”

Joseph chuckled. “How do you know?”

“The original is in National Museum in London.”

“Do you think they know?” he asked.

She glanced over at hostess and smiled. “I doubt it.”

He extended his hand. “I’m Joseph Astley.” He was surprised at her blush.

“I know who you are. I’m Elizabeth.”

“My friend said you’re Benjamin Parker’s daughter.”

“That’s right.”

“It can’t be. She’s a little girl.” She put a defiant hand on her hip.

“I’m fifteen.”

His heart skipped. She really was a child. “Aren’t you a little young for this party?”

“That’s what I told my mother but she’s determined to marry me off.”

“What does your father say?”

“He likes to keep her happy.”

“You don’t seem to be anxious to fulfill your mother’s wishes.”

“I think there’s plenty of time for that.”

Joseph didn’t like the idea that her parents were anxious to marry her off so young. He smiled and leaned closer. “I told my mother the same thing. Why don’t we look after each other tonight?”

“Excuse me?”

“We can protect each other from the marriage minded mothers and their offspring.”

Elizabeth looked at toward the clutch of females who were looking at them and whispering to each other. “That might be a good idea,” she smiled. “Melinda can be quite determined when she sets her mind to something.” She looked at Joseph and grinned. “Don’t worry Mr. Astley. I will do my best to defend your honor.”

In a move to drive Melinda and her cohorts mad, Joseph took Elizabeth’s hand in his and kissed it. “I am forever in your debt, Miss Parker.”

Elizabeth couldn't believe the most eligible bachelor in San Antonio was spending the evening with her. They talked about what they liked to do. She was surprised when Joseph wasn't put off when she said she'd rather be home reading. Most men didn't like women who read. At least that's what her mother said. He said he'd rather be riding his horse.

"Your horse? It's dark out. I imagine you have other hobbies?" she grinned.

"You've caught me out. I do enjoy playing cards with my friends."

"You gamble? Do you drink as well?"

"I do neither to excess."

"That's good to know. I should be so disappointed if you were dissolute."

"I'm glad I haven't fallen from your grace." Their conversation was interrupted by the butler announcing dinner was served. Joseph extended his arm to her. "Miss Parker, would you do me the honor of accompanying me to dinner?"

Elizabeth tried not to giggle at his exaggerated manners. "It would be my pleasure, Mr. Astley." She saw the look of delight on her mother's face. To be asked to be a gentleman's dinner companion meant he was interested in you. If her mother knew this was all a façade, she'd be furious. They passed by Melinda, who was giving her best fake smile to the son of the local banker. When she spotted Elizabeth on Joseph's arm, her gaze would have turned Elizabeth into a pillar of salt. She leaned into Joseph. "We're causing a stir."

"Good," he smiled.

She tried to maintain her composure as Joseph held out her chair, then took the seat next to her. "Our hostess looks upset. I think she was hoping you'd sit next to her daughter."

Joseph glanced down the table at Brennan's daughter, Sally. She looked at Joseph and batted her lashes, a well-practiced move, learned at Miss Primrose's school. Merely acknowledging her presence with a nod brought forth a giggle. He turned to Elizabeth and whispered. "That girl's sole topics of conversations are the weather and the latest fashions. I would rather stick needles in my eyes."

Elizabeth suppressed a laugh. "You're terrible, Mr. Astley," she whispered.

"No, I'm not."

She looked at his beautiful blue eyes. "No, you're not."

They spent the dinner chatting about Joseph's champion horses. They were envious of everyone in town but few could acquire one. "My father was distressed when you told him he'd have to wait until next year for one of your horses."

"Overbreeding leads to inferior stock," said Joseph. He set down his fork and looked at her. "I apologize, Miss Parker. I shouldn't be discussing such things with a young lady."

"I assure you, Mr. Astley, I am neither shocked nor offended. I am very familiar with the subject of animal husbandry."

"Oh really?" he smiled. "How's that?"

"I read about it."

“You read about a lot of things, don’t you?”

“I try. Papa indulges me. I tell him what I want to read and he orders it for his store.”

“What kind of books?”

“Art, history, science, mathematics, whatever I can find in Papa’s catalogs.”

“That’s very unusual for a young lady. What does your mother say?”

“Oh, you mustn’t say anything. Mother would never approve.”

“Your secret is safe with me.”

Joseph couldn't remember the last time he enjoyed a dinner companion as much as he had Elizabeth Parker. Actually he'd never had. Elizabeth was as intelligent and witty as she was lovely. He had to remind himself she was also near half his age. The meal was finished and the musicians were warming up in the ballroom. The guests were beginning to gather for the first dances of the evening. He knew he'd have to dance with some of the other women, particularly the boring Sally Brennan. But before that he would have just one dance with Elizabeth. More than one dance would be declaring his intentions towards her. As delightful as she was, Elizabeth was far too young. "Miss Parker, may I have this dance." He saw the shock on her face be quickly replaced by a polite smile.

"I would be most pleased, Mr. Astley."

They took a turn around the floor, with Joseph keeping to the back of the crowd. "Are you alright?" he asked.

"It's my first dance."

"You're doing quite well."

"Thank you," she whispered.

"I'm sorry it can be only one dance."

"I understand."

"You do, don't you?"

"Of course. Any more than one would cause a scandal. The purpose of tonight was to protect each other."

“True, but, Miss Parker, you are a most charming dinner companion and I have thoroughly enjoyed your company.”

Elizabeth gave him a warm smile. “As have I, Mr. Astley.”

Joseph was sorry when the music stopped. He leaned in and whispered, “Never let them change you.” Her cheeks blushed as she took his arm and he escorted her off the floor to where her parents stood. “Mr. and Mrs. Parker, your daughter has been the most engaging dinner companion.” Both her parents grinned with pride. “If you’ll excuse me, I must give my regards to our hostess.”

Elizabeth's mother was practically ready to announce her engagement. "Mother, please, stop. We had a very nice conversation and a dance. That's all."

"Did he mention coming to call?"

"No, Mother. Please. He's much older than I am."

"That's not a concern when he's Joseph Astley."

"Mother, he is not looking for a wife."

"Don't be ridiculous."

Her father saved her from further debate by asking her to dance. "Thank you, Papa. She won't listen to me."

"She has good intentions, Lizzie. She wants to see you settled."

"That's the problem. I don't want to settle."

Elizabeth had enough of the music and mindless conversation. The mother's all wanted to know about Joseph. Her contemporaries had chosen to ignore her, not that she minded. The truth was, she wished she could have spent more time with Joseph. He was so intelligent and interesting. Not to mention he was very handsome. She shook her head. He was a man and she was still a girl. She found her way to the side porch and enjoyed the fresh air. She glanced up at the stars and began identifying the constellations.

"Well, look who it is. "Little Miss Know-It-All."

Elizabeth turned and saw Melinda Thorndike standing on the porch with Sally Brennan and several of their followers. She had plenty of experience with them at Miss Primrose's school. "What do you want, Melinda?"

"We're just here to help," she smiled. Elizabeth thought she looked like a cat ready to pounce on a mouse. Melinda walked closer. "You know everyone is talking about how you embarrassed yourself with Mr. Astley."

"Oh really? I'm sure you're ready to tell me what offense I committed."

"You were hanging on Mr. Astley all through dinner. And you laughed like a common street urchin. You must understand, a man like Mr. Astley would never be interested in someone like you."

It wasn't that she cared but she was curious as to what Melinda perceived to be her failing. "Why is that?"

"Well, you're from the trades. You can't think he'd ever been interested in a shop girl. My father owns the bank, Sally's father is in steel."

"How nice for you."

"He danced with both of us," Sally offered.

"More than once?" Emily asked.

Melinda's cheeks colored but Elizabeth gave her credit for trying to recover. "I am the most sought after female in all of San Antonio." Sally shot her friend a look. Apparently this was news to Sally. Melinda began to list her valuable assets. "I will make a perfect wife. I am the perfect hostess. I am the best dressed. I have the fairest skin and the blonde

curls men love. Just look at yourself. You're so gangly, you look like a wobbly colt. You're dress maybe a passable style but you can nothing to hide that black hair of yours. It looks like you fell into a coal bin. You should set your sights on someone of your class. I'm trying to help you."

Elizabeth had held her tongue as long as she could. "Well, Melinda, I may be gangly still, but that's because I'm so much younger than you." Melinda's friends gasped. And as far as my hair is concerned, I'd much rather have my Papa's black hair than have to soak my hair in lemon juice to change the color."

Melinda screamed and charged Elizabeth. She pulled at her hair as Elizabeth tried to push her away. The rest of the girls ran off rather than get caught up in the may lay. Elizabeth held on to her own hair to stop Melinda from pulling it out.

"What is going on!" Joseph grabbed Melinda's shoulders. "Let her go!"

Melinda tried to recover. "Oh, Mr. Astley. She was being horrid to me."

"I highly doubt that. Go find your parents. It's time for you to go."

"Oh, but Mr. Astley, Joseph..."

"Go. Now!"

Melinda gasped and ran back into the ballroom.

"Elizabeth, are you injured?"

"No, I'm fine, thank you." She reached for her hair. "I'm afraid she's made a mess of my hair. At least she didn't pull any out, not that she didn't give a good effort." Even on the dark porch, she could see his smile.

“Thank goodness for that. I’m afraid she did damage the style. Perhaps I should get your parents so they can escort you to your carriage.”

“Thank you, Mr. Astley. I have no desire to walk through the assemblage and give them more gossip.” She waited until Joseph returned with her parents.

“Oh, Elizabeth, how could you?” cried her mother.

“Mrs. Parker, your daughter was very much the victim in this encounter. I saw what transpired. Melinda Thorndike behaved in a most unladylike fashion.”

Her father put his hand on Joseph’s shoulder. “Thank you for coming to our daughter’s defense.”

“You’re welcome, Robert. Will I see you at the Chandler?”

“You shall. The first whiskey is on me.”

Elizabeth looked out the window of the coach as they made the ride home. A man like Joseph Astley thought she was worth defending. She remembered his voice as he told her, “Never let them change you.”

Elizabeth stared into the mirror as she fitted her hair into tight combs. Her hands shook as she tucked a stray strand into the twist of hair. She looked at her reflection. She saw a drawn visage, older than her twenty-five years. Her black dress highlighted her pale skin. The last few years had been too much. Too much pain, too much loss. First, Papa was lost in a carriage accident. Her mother said she needed to travel to deal with her grief. Mother took her inheritance and moved to England where she felt she could live the life that God intended for her. Elizabeth had wanted to come with her but she'd insisted she stay in San Antonio to keep the business running. That was what was needed to feed her mother's lifestyle.

Elizabeth was truly alone. After the party where she was defended from Melinda Thorndike, Melinda had become the center of town gossip for months. She blamed Elizabeth and set about making sure she paid for it. There were no more invitations. Melinda made her an outcast. Since Mr. Thorndike was the town banker, no one was willing to anger his daughter. Elizabeth didn't mind at first. She was much happier with her books. As she got older, she had to admit the shunning was affecting her mother. She became increasingly hostile to her and her father. Her father started spending more and more time at the Chandler playing cards and drinking. It was on one of those trips home that his carriage overturned.

After Papa died, she needed help with the stores. So many employees, so many vendors. At first, he seemed like a godsend. David Hill had been a vendor. He offered to help her with the stores. It seemed the logical thing to do. It was 1890. As many strides as women had made, few ran their own business, especially not one as large as Parker Dry Goods. Things ran smoothly for the first six months. In the meantime, David began

to court her. It was lovely. She'd never had a proper suitor, not after the incident. He'd been so polite and attentive. They had a quiet wedding six months ago followed by a lovely wedding luncheon with a few guests. She'd felt something close to happiness. David told her to go back to the house and he would be along after taking care of some business. She went home and waited for her new husband to return. And waited.

David Hill's pressing business had been to go to the bank and empty Elizabeth's personal accounts. As her husband, it was his right. Once she discovered her accounts were empty, she found David had embezzled from the company. She'd spent the last few months trying to keep the stores afloat but once word got out the stores were in trouble it was a hopeless. Now, she looked down at the telegram the told her David was dead. He'd gone to Galveston and booked passage on a ship to England. There was a storm and the ship went down. There were no survivors.

She looked in the mirror and closed the last button on her gown. She was a widow with no means of support. The stores were closed. Soon she would lose the house. She'd sold off what she could, but that had gone to pay the last of the staff including Marie. She hadn't wanted to lose her but there was no more money to pay her. Marie had an offer from the Brennan's and Elizabeth wouldn't let her turn it down.

Elizabeth stood, bracing herself against the vanity. She had one last option. Joseph Astley.

Joseph had only been home for six months. He'd been traveling for nearly a year brokering deals for the company. Land purchases, business investments, and his favorite, buying horses. The Astley ranch bred the best horses in the country. He hadn't wanted to come back but his father's health had demanded it. Unfortunately, his presence did not prevent his father's death three months ago. Since then, life had been a blur of account books and meetings. He hadn't had the time to think about being in charge of the Astley Holdings. His mother had gone to visit her sister in Houston. He didn't expect her to return any time soon. She'd said she didn't care for all the men traipsing through the house. He'd tried to explain they were employees and business associates but she wasn't having it.

"I don't know why you couldn't do this in your father's office downtown."

"Because I prefer to be at the ranch."

"You and your horses," she huffed. "Why can't you just be a man of business, like your father."

"Mother, those horses provide more the fifty percent of the family income."

She waved a dismissive hand at him. Mirabelle Astley didn't accept anything that didn't fit her idea of how her life should progress.

Joseph poured himself two fingers of whiskey and took a sip. He looked in the mirror above the bar. He didn't like what he saw. The last few months had taken its toll. Maybe he'd take some time off. He could spend some time riding Harley. As good as that sounded, he knew it was impossible. There was too much to do.

At least he didn't have a family to divide his attention. His mother had all but given up her match making efforts. She had arranged for him to spend time with every available female in San Antonio. Now, most of those women were married. Just like Elizabeth. A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. "Come in."

His housekeeper opened the door to his study. "Mr. Astley, you have a visitor."

"I have no appointments, Mrs. Osbourne."

"Sir, it's Mrs. Hill."

"Who?"

"That poor lady who used to own the dry goods."

His heart raced. Elizabeth. He'd only seen her once since he'd been back. It was at his father's funeral. He standing at the graveside and looked up. There she was, holding back from crowd. After the service, he made his way through the crowd but she was gone. "Please, send her in." Elizabeth was shown in and he was stunned by her appearance. He'd seen her over the years in town. She'd grown into a beautiful woman but the woman who stood in front of him was terribly pale. She was also dressed in black. She extended her hand toward him.

"Mr. Astley, thank you for seeing me."

"Of course, Mrs. Hill." He indicated she should sit on the leather couch. He took the chair next to her. "May I ask the cause of your somber dress?"

"I received news this morning that my husband has died."

"You have my deepest sympathies."

“No need.”

“Excuse me?”

She glanced down and her clenched hands. “I take it you do not know the story of my marriage.”

“I don’t listen to gossip.”

“Well, that makes you a better man than the rest of the town. After my father died, my mother moved to England. I was left to manage on my own. David Hill was helping me with the stores. That’s when he began to court me. After our wedding reception he told me to wait at home while he conducted business. He never returned. It was only then I discovered that not only had he been embezzling from the company but he emptied my personal accounts.”

“I’m so sorry.” Joseph was angry but held his temper in check. His anger would not serve her. It was then he heard her stomach growl. “Please forgive me. I’ve yet to offer you any tea.”

She blushed. “You don’t need to trouble yourself.”

“I usually take tea at this time.”

This raised a small smile. “Is that so?”

“It is.” He stood and rang for Mrs. Osbourne.

“Yes, sir?”

“Will you please bring us tea, and some of those lovely scones you make.”

“Of course, sir.”

“Now, how can I help you?” he asked.

“I’m not here for charity. I’m here to ask for employment.”

“Excuse me? What about your stores?”

“The bank has taken control and my services are no longer required.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“You don’t need to feel sorry. You had nothing to do with my downfall.”

“I wouldn’t call it that. You’ve had bad fortune.” Mrs. Osbourne returned with a tea cart. She pour the tea and Joseph set the cup in front of Elizabeth. He handed her a small plate with triangle shaped cakes. “You must try these. Mrs. Osbourne is a genius with baked goods.”

Elizabeth took a small bite and smiled. “You’re correct. This is delicious.” She took a sip of tea and he noticed her hands had a slight tremble. “If I may continue our discussion?”

“Of course.”

“I’m am offering myself as an assistant.”

“I beg your pardon.”

“I could handle all your correspondence and make your appointments. I’m fluent in Spanish and French so I can assist with any foreign guests. I can manage a household...”

she paused and held tight to her shaking hands. “Despite my late husband’s maleficence, I am an honest person.”

He looked her in the eyes. “Of that I have no doubt.”

“Thank you,” she whispered and closed her eyes.

“Mrs. Hill, are you alright?”

“I hate that name,” she said before she slumped down on the couch. He reached for her before she slipped to the floor. He put her feet up on the couch and tucked a pillow under her head. He touched her forehead and realized she had a fever. “Elizabeth, can you hear me?” He ran to the door and shouted for Mrs. Osbourne.

“Yes, sir?”

“Mrs. Hill is unwell. Ring Dr. Prescott. Tell him he’s needed.” He sat down next to Elizabeth and took her hand. “I’ve called for help,” he whispered. After all these years, she needed him again. It seemed like hours before Mrs. Osbourne returned with the doctor. “Randall, thank God. She collapsed.”

“Elizabeth Parker?”

“She’s Mrs. Hill now. A new widow.”

Randall sat down next to her and touched her forehead with his hand. “She has a high fever. I want you to go out into the hall. Have Mrs. Osbourne come in to help me with her clothes.”

Joseph paced the hallway until Randall came out. “How is she?”

“She has the fever that’s been going through town. Normally, I’d say she’s young and should recover quickly. Given her condition she’s going to have a difficult time.”

“Is she with child?”

“No, she’s malnourished.”

Joseph’s heart sank. “What?”

“I’d say she hasn’t been eating regularly for some time.”

“What can be done?”

“She’ll need nursing and careful feeding to regain her strength. I’ll arrange for her to be sent to the hospital.”

“No.”

“What?”

“She’ll stay here.”

Randall put his hand on her shoulder. “Joseph, you can’t do that. Taking a woman into your home, this woman in particular. You’ll never recover from the scandal.”

“What do you mean Elizabeth in particular?”

“She’s the wife of a thief.”

“She had nothing to do with that and in case you didn’t notice, she’s wearing widow’s weeds.”

“Then send for someone to take her home.”

“There is no one. She’s staying here.”

Randall shook his head. He knew better than to try and dissuade Joseph from something once his mind was set. “Very well. She should be in bed.”

“I’ll carry her upstairs. Mrs. Osbourne can help get her out of these clothes and into a nightgown. Send me a nurse. Someone who can be trusted not to gossip about her charge. Tell them they will be well paid for their service and their silence.”

Joseph lifted Elizabeth in his arms. Even in the heavy clothes, he could tell Randall was right. She weighed less than a newborn foal. He carried her up the stairs to a guest room and set her on the bed.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Astley. I’ll take good care of her,” said Mrs. Osbourne.

“I know you will. Dr. Prescott will be sending a nurse. No one is to know of this.”

Mrs. Osbourne took the liberty of patting his shoulder. “I know, sir. She’s a good girl, always has been. She never failed to greet me by name when she saw me. She didn’t deserve what was done to her.”

“Her husband.”

“Not just him. What that wicked Mrs. Curtis did to her. Ruined her with you society people.”

“Who? Melinda?”

“That’s her. Made sure she was cast out.” She stroked Elizabeth’s forehead. “Poor girl.”

“I’ll let you see to her.” he said as he left the room. He walked downstairs and sat at his desk. Elizabeth had suffered because of Melinda but he never knew. He was too busy building his fortune. She’d come to him for help. He’d see to it she would suffer no more. He reached into the back of his desk drawer and pulled out a faded green ribbon.

Joseph picked at his dinner, biding his time until he could check on Elizabeth. The nurse had arrived at several hours ago. He wanted to give Elizabeth time to rest. She was so pale and slight; he was afraid he wouldn’t be able to save her. He thought back to the last time he came to her rescue. Ten years ago, he thought he’d come to her aid. All he’d done was make her an outcast. Now he’d seen to it that she would be the source of gossip again. He tried to tell himself that he wasn’t being selfish having her stay in his home. She had no one to look out for her. The public hospital would put her in a ward with a dozen others. In his home, Elizabeth would have the best care possible. He pushed his plate away. Who he was kidding? He would risk the condemnation of the town. That would be nothing compare to when she found his mother found out.

He knocked on the guest room door and the nurse opened the door. “How is she?”

“She’s resting comfortably. I’ve been bathing her head with cool cloths. I’ve been trying to get her to drink some water but I’m not having much luck.”

“Let me help you...I’m sorry. I’ve forgotten your name.”

“Sophie, sir.”

“Sophie, why don’t I prop her up with some pillows.” He grabbed some pillows from the settee and pushed them under her back. Sophie pour some fresh water into a glass.

“Let me,” he said as he reached for the glass. “Elizabeth, please take a drink.”

“Who?” she whispered.

“It’s Joseph. You need to drink this.”

“Joseph.” She took a few small sips and sat back.

“Oh, well done, sir,” said Sophie. “Now if we could get her to eat something, anything. The girl is a wisp.”

“What about ice cream? Mrs. Osbourne always keeps some of her ice cream for me in the ice box.”

“That would be fine if you can get her to eat it.”

“Please see Mrs. Osbourne. She’s probably still in the kitchen.” Sophie left them alone and he took Elizabeth’s hand. “How are you feeling?”

“Bored.”

“Bored?”

“I don’t like parties.”

“I don’t either.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll protect each other,” she whispered.

He realized she thought they were back ten years at the Brennan party. “Yes, that we will, Miss Parker.” Sophie returned with a dish of vanilla ice cream. “I’ll try and get her to eat. You should do the same. I’m sure Mrs. Osbourne has a plate for you.”

“Yes, sir.”

He waited until Sophie left. He didn’t want her to think they were both delusional. “Miss Parker, I’ve brought you some ice cream.”

“How kind,” she smiled and opened her eyes a bit. She took a spoonful and smiled. “So good.”

“Yes, it is. Have some more.”

“Mother doesn’t like it when I eat sweets.”

“I won’t tell.” He gave her another spoonful.

“You’re so kind,” she smiled and her head fell back on the pillow. “Are you going to ask me to dance again?”

“Would you like me to?”

She laid back against her pillows. “I would but the room is spinning.”

“Close your eyes.” He patted her hand. “There now, is that better?”

“Yes. I’m afraid our dance will have to wait.” She closed her eyes and fell back to sleep.

“Don’t worry. We’ll have that dance. I promise.”

She was cold. Why was she cold? She tried to open her eyes. Where was she? She felt a warm blanket cover her.

“There now, that’s better,” a familiar voice said. “Are you warmer?”

“Warm,” she whispered. “Joseph?”

“Yes, it’s me.”

“Where am I?”

“You’re in a guest room in my home. You fell ill.”

She opened her eyes long enough to see Joseph sitting next to the bed. “Why.”

“Why are you sick? The doctor says you haven’t taken care of yourself. You’re very weak.”

“Why am I here?”

“You fell ill in my home.”

She tried to push herself up. “I shouldn’t be here.”

Joseph pulled the blanket tight around her. “You need to stay in bed.” He touched her forehead. “You still have a fever.” He held out a glass of water. “Have a sip of this.” He held the glass to her lips and she took a deep drink. It felt good against her sore throat.

“Thank you.” She looked down at the nightgown. “How did I...you didn’t?”

“Of course not. My housekeeper, Mrs. Osbourne put you in one of her nightgowns. I have engaged a nurse to care for you. Her name is Sophie. She’s sleeping. I’ll wake her soon. That’s enough questions. Close your eyes. It’s time to rest.”

Elizabeth had many more questions but the blanket was so warm and she was so tired. She closed her eyes and hoped he heard her whispered “Thank you.”

Joseph came in after a long ride. He and Harley both needed it. It had been a difficult three days. Elizabeth had spent most of the time asleep. Sophie stayed with her, sleeping in the extra bed he'd had brought in. Mrs. Osbourne had done her best to make food that would help Elizabeth regain her strength. He checked on her but tried to keep his distance. She needed her rest. He hadn't seen her at all today so he walked up the stairs to her room and knocked.

"Come in," said Sophie. He was surprised to see Elizabeth sitting at the vanity while Sophie brushed her hair.

"You're up."

"Nearly," Elizabeth smiled.

"You look very much better, Mrs. Hill."

"Thank you, Mr. Astley."

"I think it would be good if she got some fresh air," said Sophie.

Elizabeth smiled and touched her robe "I'm not dressed for a constitutional."

"You seem to be a similar fit to Mrs. Osbourne. I'll see if she has something you can use."

"I don't want to put her out. I've already been too much trouble."

"I'll ask her for something for now and then I'll send into town for clothes."

"Oh, no, you mustn't. I have my gown and I should go home."

"Mrs. Hill, you've had a fever for three days. You're still weak."

“He’s right, Ma’am.”

“I’ll see if Mrs. Osbourne has something for you. Sophie, if you would please assist Mrs. Hill. I’ll change out of my riding gear and be back to escort you.”

“Oh, Mr. Astley. I don’t know.”

“I will show you my mother’s garden. She’s exceedingly proud of it. It’s also private from prying eyes.” He closed the door before Elizabeth could protest. He knew she was worried about the gossip but he’d done his best to keep her presence a secret.

“Mrs. Osbourne, can you loan Mrs. Hill some fresh clothes?”

“Of course, sir, but I’ve cleaned Mrs. Hill’s black gown.”

He thought for a moment. “She isn’t going in public. She’s only recovered enough for a walk in the garden.”

“Very well, sir.”

Joseph washed up and changed into some clean day clothes. He knew he was taking liberties, but she’d already said she hated being called Mrs. Hill. She probably didn’t like being forced to mourn a man who abandoned her. He walked down the hall and knocked on the door. “Mrs. Hill, are you ready?”

Sophie opened the door and he smiled when he saw Elizabeth. She was wearing a simple gown made of blue, homespun fabric. Her hair was gathered to the nape of her neck. For a moment, it was if ten years hadn’t passed. “Are you ready for our walk?”

“I think so.”

“Take my arm.” She took his arm and they slowly walked down the stairs. “Let me know if it becomes too much.” They walked out the back door and down the path to garden. There were flowering fruit trees, trimmed hedges, blooming rose bushes.

“Oh, this is lovely.”

“It’s my mother’s pride and joy.”

“She must enjoy gardening.”

Joseph chuckled. “Mirabelle Astley getting her hands dirty? No. She enjoys telling people what to do.” They walked down the path toward a bench. “Shall we sit?”

“Yes, thank you.” They sat and Elizabeth turned her face toward the sun. “That feels good.”

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m much better, thank you. You’ve been very kind. I should return to my home.”

“We’ve already had that conversation. I want to know how you really feel.”

“I feel better than I did. Mrs. Osbourne has been feeding me all kinds of delicacies. I shall need to visit a dressmaker to let out my dresses if I stay much longer.”

“There is something I wish to discuss with you. I hope you won’t feel I’m being too intrusive.”

“You’ve been so generous to me, hiring Sophie and Dr. Prescott to tend to me when you were under no obligation to do so. You may ask me what you will.”

“Very well, then.” He took a breath and looked into her blue eyes. “Dr. Prescott told me when he first examined you, that you were undernourished. Why haven’t you’ve been taking care of yourself? Was it your husband?”

It was Elizabeth’s turn to chuckle. “Do you mean was I grieving the husband that abandoned me at the altar? No.”

“Then why?”

She sighed and looked away. “I’ve done the best I could with what was left. I let the servants go. Marie was the last to go and I had to insist. She had a wonderful offer from the Brennans. She was always so loyal.” She wiped a tear from her cheek.

“You have that big house on First Avenue. Why don’t you sell it?”

“I can’t. It’s not mine. It’s my mother’s.”

“Does she refuse to sell?” He saw the look on her face. “You haven’t told her, have you?”

“No. Even though she’s moved to England, she wants to keep the house. She assumed David and I would live there.”

“Surely if she knew…”

“My mother would never recover from the embarrassment. She would consider it another of my failures. I have been a disappointment to her.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I didn’t make a good match when I was young. Now it’s far too late.”

“Too late? You’re only twenty-five. My mother has the same complaint about me. Now she has something to complain about. I’m an old man.”

Elizabeth laughed and he liked the sound of it. “You’re thirty-eight. That hardly qualifies you as an old man.”

Joseph smiled. “How do you know my age?”

“You are quite the man of business. Everyone knows everything about you. I’m nobody. How do you know my age?”

He took her hand and cover it with his own. “First of all, you are most definitely someone. Second, you told me.”

“When did I do that?”

“At the Brennan’s party. When I said you were too young to be there you told me, rather forcefully, that you were fifteen.”

“You remember that?”

“Of course. You’re very memorable,” he smiled. “This is why you came to ask for a position.”

“Yes. I hope I didn’t embarrass myself to badly. I’m afraid I don’t remember most of our meeting.”

“No, you were very professional. Let’s talk about that later. I think we’ve been out long enough for your first foray. Maybe, if you feel up to it, you could join me for dinner. I believe Mrs. Osbourne is making a chocolate tart for dessert.”

“Oh my. I love chocolate.”

“Then it’s settled. I’ll deliver you back to your room where you can rest before dinner.” He stood and held out his hand.

“Thank you, Mr. Astley.”

“You’re most welcome, Mrs. Hill.”

The next few days were the most pleasant Joseph had spent in years. Each day they would take a walk in the garden. Each day Elizabeth got stronger and he knew it would be a matter of time before he had no reason to keep her under his roof. He stood at the foot of the stairs and watched as she came down the stairs in one of the new dresses he’d purchased for her. They were simple dresses worn by a housekeeper, but Elizabeth looked as beautiful as if they’d been the finest gowns.

“Good morning, Mrs. Hill. You are looking very well.”

“Good morning, Mr. Astley. I am feeling myself again.”

“If you are up to it, I thought we’d walk to the stable. I could introduce you to Harley.”

“I would enjoy that, very much.”

They walked down the path to the large stable. Joseph kept Harley and a few others for himself. The rest of the horses were the best breeding stock in all of Texas. He walked down the row to Harley’s stall. He was surprised to see one of his hands in the stall, grooming him.

“Good morning, Walter.”

“Good morning, sir.” He looked at Elizabeth and nodded. “Ma’am. I’m just finishing up with Harley.” He opened the gate and walked toward the end of the stable.

“Hey boy,” Joseph called and Harley walked to the gate and placed his head over the edge. He rubbed his hand over the horse’s long nose. “Harley, this is Mrs. Hill.” He took her hand and rubbed it down Harley’s nose.

“He’s so sweet,” she smiled. “You can call me Elizabeth, Harley.”

Joseph smiled. “If you are on a first name basis, I think you should give him his treat.” He walked over to a box and pulled out an apple. He pulled a knife off the table and split it in half. He set half in her hand and held it to Harley’s lips. He sniffed then took the apple from her hand.

“That tickled,” she giggled.

He gave her the other half and Harley quickly took it from her hand. The horse nodded his head up and down and whinnied. “He likes you.”

“Do you think so?” she smiled.

“I do. Do you ride?”

“No. Mother said it wasn’t lady-like.”

“That’s a pity.” He saw a look of sadness cross her face. “I could teach you.”

“Really?”

“Of course. I think you would do very well. Harley is a big animal, yet he doesn’t frighten you.”

She smiled and pet his neck. “Who could be afraid of this beautiful boy?” Harley nodded his head and Elizabeth laughed. It appeared his horse was as taken with Elizabeth as he was. They took walk to the garden and sat on the stone bench. She reached for one of the roses. “It’s so beautiful here.” Joseph pulled a pen knife from his pocket. He cut the bloom from the bush and handed it to her. “Thank you.” She smiled as she enjoyed the scent. “It’s time for me to go.”

“Elizabeth...”

“No, it’s true. I’m well now, thanks to you. I should go home. There will be enough talk as it is. The longer I stay, the worse it will be. It will make finding work more difficult.”

Joseph took a breath. He had to do this right. “About that...”

“No, I put you in a difficult position.”

“Please, let me continue.”

“My apologies.”

“I have been giving thought to what we discussed. You are a very intelligent, well-spoken woman.”

“Are you saying you want to hire me?”

“No, I don’t require an assistant.”

“Oh...” she looked down at her rose.

He took her hand in his. "I don't require an assistant. I do, however, have need of a wife."

"What?"

"A wife. As you've said I am a prominent man of business. I need a wife who could act as hostess, run my household, our household. You wouldn't need to worry about anything married to me. I have done quite well. Marriage would also have the benefit of quieting our mothers on the subject."

Elizabeth pulled her hand back. "You don't need to marry me because of your pity for me."

He took her hand back in his. "I don't feel pity for you. Anything but that. I think you are an incredibly strong woman." He stood and pulled her to her feet. "Please come with me." They walked into the house and he led her to his study. "When I first met you, ten years ago, I thought you were the most charming, interesting young girl I'd ever met. I thought when you grew up, you'd be a beautiful woman, a woman any man would be lucky to call his own. I was right."

"Mr. Astley, I don't know what to say."

"Considering I'm asking you to marry me, I think it would be appropriate to call me Joseph," he smiled.

"Joseph, I appreciate what you're saying but there is no need to bind yourself to me for life because I made an amusing dinner companion ten years ago, or that you find me in difficult straits now."

If he was going to convince her, he had to show her he was serious. He reached into the back of the desk drawer and pulled out a length of dark green ribbon. He put the ribbon in her hand. "I found this on the porch after your parents took you home."

Elizabeth ran it through her fingers. "I was wearing this in my hair." She looked up at him and smiled. "You kept it all these years?"

"I kept it as a remembrance. I hope you don't think me foolish."

She looked down at the ribbon. "Yes."

"Yes, you think me foolish?"

She looked up and smiled. "Yes, I'll marry you."

He suddenly didn't know what to do. "Well, then. That's good."

"I will still need to go home."

"Very well, but I don't want to wait to marry. It would take at least a month or more for your mother to return from England."

"She'll mind, but I don't. Are you willing to potentially alienate your new mother-in-law?"

"I think I can win her over."

"Like you did her daughter?"

"Have I won you over, Elizabeth?"

“You aren’t the only one who remembers that night so clearly. You were the first man who ever spoke to me as an adult. Perhaps you still are. You seemed to be interested in what I had to say.”

“I was, I am.”

She stood and moved closer. “I know.” She leaned in and gave him the gentlest of a kiss.

Joseph took her hand in his. “Elizabeth, I won’t make demands on you. I know that this has been a difficult time.” He didn’t understand the look that crossed her face. “There is only one thing I will insist on.”

“What is that?”

“I will insist on clearing your household debts and I will provide for you at your home.”

“Will you always be this resolute during our marriage?”

He held her hands to his chest. “You will never want for anything. On this you have my word.”

Elizabeth smiled. “I believe you.”

Elizabeth had only been gone from her home for five days but it seemed like a lifetime. The last time she'd left her home she'd been a penniless widow. Today she was engaged to the wealthiest man in San Antonio. She'd only been mildly surprised when the grocer's delivery man arrived with enough food for a family of four. She was making herself a pot of tea when there was a knock at the kitchen door.

"Mrs. Osbourne! What a surprise!" Elizabeth opened the door for the smiling woman.

"Mrs. Hill I'm so pleased you're looking so well."

"That's in no small part to your wonderful cooking."

"Thank you." She held up a carrier. "I brought you one of my chocolate tarts. I know how much you like them."

"Oh how, wonderful. I was just making some tea. Will you join me?"

"How kind," she smiled. She set the carrier down and placed the tart on the table. "I've also brought a letter from Mr. Astley." She pulled the letter from the carrier and handed to Elizabeth. "The Mister said it would be better to communicate like this. You know how the town can be."

"Yes, I do." She set the letter on the table. "I shall read this after tea. I assume Mr. Astley has told you the developments."

"Yes, he has and if I may say, he couldn't have chosen better."

"Thank you. May I ask your first name?" she asked as she poured the tea.

“It’s Anna, Ma’am.” Elizabeth grabbed a two plates and forks, then cut each of them a slice of the tart. “I’m not used to being served. I’m the one to doing the serving.”

“This is just a tea between friends. I hope that will be the case, Anna.”

“Yes, Ma’am. I’d like that.”

Elizabeth took a bite of the tart and rolled her eyes. “Oh my, this is so delicious.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

“I’d like your opinion on something, Anna. How do you think the rest of the staff will take to my presence? I only met the one ranch hand while I was at the house.”

“Oh, don’t you worry about them. They all like Mr. Astley. He’s a benevolent employer and a kind man. Everyone who works for him will be very happy there will be a new lady of the house. His mother...well...”

“What about his mother?”

“I don’t wish to offend.”

“It’s a conversation between friends. Friends can keep confidences.”

Anna smiled. “Mrs. Astley can be a bit...too impressed with her family’s standing.”

“My mother is the same way. Mrs. Astley won’t like me as an addition to the family.”

Anna reached for her hand. “I’ve been with the Astley’s since the Mister was a boy. He was a determined little boy and he’s just as determined as a man. When he’s set his mind on something, nothing could dissuade him.”

“Not even when it comes to his mother?”

“Not even his mother.” Anna patted the back of Elizabeth’s hand. “Don’t you worry. The Mister will take care of her.”

Elizabeth cleaned up the tea dishes and put the rest of the tart in the icebox. Anna's visit had been very informative. She was going to have her hands full with her mother-in-law. She sat down and looked at the letter on the table. Her fingers ran over the heavy paper. She smiled at her name written by a very male hand.

My Dear Elizabeth,

As we discussed, I have telegraphed both of our mothers about our upcoming nuptials. I have told them we are to be married in two weeks. I will make arrangements for the service to be held here. Our list of guests will all be notified by the end of this week. I have engaged a dressmaker for your gown. She will arrive tomorrow. Mrs. Osbourne will return tomorrow with another of her treats. She can return with any communication you may have for me.

I look back on what I have written and realize it sounds like one of my business letters. You will have to forgive me. I do not look at our marriage as a business proposition. I am very much looking forward to spending the rest of my days with a woman of such intelligence and beauty. It may not be of the fashion but I feel as if I'm to marry my best friend.

Until we are together again.

Yours,

Joseph.

Elizabeth smiled as she wiped a tear from her cheek.

Mirabelle Astley was always a force of nature. Today, she was a full-blown tornado. “Joseph!” she shouted as she came stormed into the foyer. “Joseph, where are you?”

He took a deep breath and walked out of his study. This would not be pretty. “Hello, Mother. You didn’t let me know you were coming from Aunt Lydia’s so soon. I would have met you at the station.”

“How could I not come home after receiving your telegram. I heard you have that woman living with you? Joseph, what are you thinking?”

“Mother, Elizabeth became very ill while she was visiting. I did what I would do for anyone. I saw to her care.”

“You should have sent her home.”

“She has no one.”

“That’s because her thief of a husband ran off.”

“Mother, she is a young woman who was cruelly deceived. Her mother moved to England. She is alone in the world.”

“So, you should have sent her to the public hospital. I can’t believe you have her living here and now you intend to marry her? I won’t be able to show my face in town ever again.”

“Mother, calm yourself. Elizabeth recovered and returned to her home. But we are to be married next week.”

“I forbid it!”

“You can do no such thing.”

“How do you expect me to live in a house with the wife of a thief! I will never live it down.”

“Mother, Elizabeth will be my wife and lady of the house. If you don’t wish to live here, I will be happy to buy you a home closer to town.” Never in his life had Joseph seen his mother at a loss for words, until now. “Mother, come with me.” He took her by the hand and led her to his study. “Please sit.” He poured them both of a short glass of whiskey. “Here, drink this.”

“I don’t drink spirits,” she said as she knocked back the whiskey in one gulp.

“Of course, you don’t,” he smiled.

“Don’t be flippant.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” They set down their glasses and he took her hand. “Mother, I understand this comes as a shock. I am not marrying Elizabeth out of some sense of duty. I truly care for her. She is an intelligent woman who will make me a wonderful wife.”

“How are you so sure?”

“How are you so sure she’s won’t? Mother, all you know about Elizabeth is what has been bandied about in town. She was made an outcast by Melinda Curtis after I pulled the screeching harpy off Elizabeth.”

“But that was...ages ago.”

“Ten years. Apparently, Melinda never forgives or forgets. After Elizabeth’s father died and her mother left, she was all alone. A man took advantage of her. He embezzled

from the store. The minute he married her; he emptied her personal accounts. She was left with nothing. She had nothing to do with her late husband's thievery."

"The town will never forget her history."

"Mother, who in this town is more influential than our family?"

"No one."

"Who is on the top of every guest list?"

"We are."

"Wouldn't that make you the arbiter of San Antonio society?" Joseph spotted the twinkle in her eye. "If you accept her, the town will. All I ask is that you get to know Elizabeth, for me. Please, Mother."

"Very well." She pointed to the decanter and he poured her another shot which she quickly downed. "I may become a dipsomaniac before this wedding."

Joseph was grateful for the progress he'd made with his mother. She'd managed to calm down and had agreed to a luncheon to meet her future daughter-in-law. He looked down again at the letter Mrs. Osbourne had delivered yesterday.

Dear John,

You will be gratified to know that all your arrangements for my comfort have been met to a high standard. I appreciate your kindness in allowing Mrs. Osbourne to visit with me while we enjoy her delicious baked goods.

I will be happy to meet with your mother at lunch tomorrow. To be completely forthcoming, happy is a strong word. I do not wish for there to be any issues between myself and your mother. I will trust in you to help us build a bridge of understanding.

I am looking forward to seeing you again. Despite my illness, the time we spent together was the happiest I've been in many years. You have always seen me as I am. I can assume you approve of my manner since you've proposed marriage. I have always had the highest opinion of you, even before you rescued me that night on the porch. You are a kind and honorable man. You've always treated me as an equal and I hope to prove your faith in me as a wife. I shall give you one piece of advice for when we marry. If I appear distressed with you, all you need do is smile. I'll shall be appeased. In the unlikely event that fails, I recommend one of Mrs. Osbourne's chocolate tarts.

Until tomorrow,

Yours,

Elizabeth

Elizabeth took a deep breath as she stood at Joseph's front door. Soon, it would be her front door. She reached up to knock and the door opened. If she could see this smile on Joseph's face every day, her life would be happy.

"I heard the coach," he smiled. She could tell he was just as nervous as she was.

"Thank you for sending it," she smiled as he kissed her cheek.

She leaned close. "Tell me true, am I facing an angry coyote?"

Joseph shrugged. "More like a wary mama bear."

"Lord save me."

He led her into the sitting room where Mirabelle Astley was seated in a throne-like winged back chair. She looked up from her book. "Mother, I'd like to introduce you Mrs. Elizabeth Hill."

Elizabeth extend her hand. "It's a pleasure, Mrs. Astley."

Mrs. Astley took her hand and looked her up and down. "I understand you are a new widow, yet you are not wearing black."

She knew she was taking a chance by wearing one of her simple day gowns. "I decided there was no point in mourning a man who does not deserve to be remembered."

"You are risking the disapproval of the town."

Elizabeth tried to smile. "I think that particular boat has sailed." She caught amusement in Joseph's eyes.

“Why don’t we go in to lunch?” he asked. Joseph held the chair for his mother, then for Elizabeth.

“I’m looking forward to Mrs. Osbourne’s cooking. She’s a gem.”

“I understand you had the opportunity to appreciate her cooking for some time.”

Joseph appeared ready to jump in but she gave him a slight shake of the head. “I was visiting with your son when I fell ill. He called for Dr. Prescott who cared for me. Then Joseph hired Sophie, a lovely nurse, to tend to me. Mrs. Osbourne’s food ensured I had the strength to recover. I doubt without your son’s assistance I would have survived.”

“My son has always had a charitable nature.”

Elizabeth clenched her teeth at the reference. “You’ve raised a man of noble character.”

“Thank you,” she whispered as she reached for a crystal glass of lemonade.

“Mrs. Astley, I’m sure Joseph has told you of my circumstances. What he hasn’t, the town has. I will be happy to answer any of your questions.” She glanced at Joseph and he gave her a slight smile. She was on the right track.

“My son is a wealthy man.”

“Yes, he is.”

“You are penniless.”

“Mother!”

“It’s fine, Joseph. She’s only saying what is true. My husband took everything I had. I have no resources of my own.”

“Did your mother refuse assistance?”

“No Ma’am. I never told her. She moved to England after my father died. She had family there.”

“How did you manage?”

“When I came to call on your son it was to ask for a position.”

“You were looking for work?”

“Yes, Ma’am. I had hoped for a secretarial position. Before we could discuss it, I passed out.”

“Oh my.”

“I am well recovered now.”

“You rushed into this engagement.”

“Mother, I must protest. Marrying Elizabeth is not an impulsive action.”

“You’ve known her mere days before you announced your engagement.”

“Mrs. Astley, we met years ago. It didn’t take any time to realize your son is an exceptional man. While I was recovering, we took long walks. You have a beautiful garden.”

“Thank you.”

“We talked about many things. I admit I was very surprised when Joseph proposed marriage. But as I’m sure you know; your son is a determined man.”

Mirabelle looked at her son. “He’s always been that way. He was determined to learn how to ride almost before he could walk. My husband would sneak him out to the stable when I wasn’t looking.”

“It sounds like your husband was very much like your son.”

Her eyes teared. “Yes, he was.” She took a last bite of her roast beef and set down her fork. “We need to talk about the wedding. I don’t know how you expect to make a proper wedding in one week.”

“I thought we would have the minister here,” said Joseph.

“That’s all?”

“I don’t have many people I would invite.” Elizabeth didn’t say the only person she called friend, other than the woman who cooked their meal, was Marie Perkins, her former ladies’ maid.

“No. This will not do. We will have the wedding here. I will make the guest list. No one would dare refuse an Astley invitation. I will arrange for the dressmaker for your gown.”

“Oh, Mrs. Astley, you needn’t bother on my account.”

“This is not just for the two of you. This is for the family. I know your unfortunate history. If you are to have any hope of the town accepting you and taking your rightful

place as my son's wife, you need to stand before them as you marry. If I accept you, they will have no choice but to accept you."

Elizabeth managed a smile. "Do you except me?"

"Well, as we have said, my son is very determined." She looked at Joseph. "If this is what you want, then you will need to turn the arrangements to me."

He looked at Elizabeth. "Is this agreeable to you?"

She smiled and nodded. "Most agreeable. I am sure your mother can make a wonderful event. There is one thing I would like to discuss. I'd like to have something for your employees."

"Excuse me? You want to invite the help to your wedding."

"No, I understand that would be a bit much for the guests to accept. I was thinking of maybe a barbeque for the staff. Something informal for me to get to know your people and for them to get to know me."

"I think that's a wonderful idea, Elizabeth," said Joseph. "Between the offices and the ranch staff it would be thirty to forty guests."

Mirabelle sighed. "Very well, but after the wedding." She pushed herself away from the table.

"Mother, we still have dessert."

"I have a lot of work to do."

Elizabeth waited until Mirabelle left the room before letting out a breath. “Oh my,” she whispered as she reached for a drink of water. Joseph reached for her hand.

“You did splendidly.”

“Do you really think so?”

“If you can handle Mirabelle Astley, you can handle anything.”

Mrs. Astley had performed nothing short of a miracle with the wedding arrangements. Apparently, there was no obstacle that couldn't be overcome by the combination of Mirabelle's determination and Joseph's money. Elizabeth couldn't believe the image in the mirror of the dressmaker's shop. The ivory gown had large puffed sleeves and a curved, but modest neckline. Layers of lace circled the gown and led into a long train. She touched the satin sleeve reverently. "Oh my, she whispered.

"We're not finished yet," said Miss Margaret, the dressmaker. She picked up a long lace veil off a table and fixed it to her hair. She spread the veil over her shoulders to complete the effect. Elizabeth was so transfixed by the image; she didn't notice the tear running down her cheek.

"Miss Margaret, please give us a moment," said Mirabelle. "Is there something wrong with the dress, Elizabeth?"

"No, it's the most beautiful dress I've ever seen." She brushed her hand lightly over the lace. "I shouldn't be wearing this. I'm a widow."

Mirabelle put her hand on Elizabeth's arm. "Elizabeth, from what I understand, your husband absconded between the wedding and the reception."

"Yes," she whispered.

"Then by my reckoning, you have every right to wear this dress."

She gasped and looked at her soon-to-be mother in law. She understood.

"I don't think you need to be concerned about...after the wedding."

"Thank you," she whispered.

“Have you heard from your mother?”

Elizabeth braced herself against the memory of the telegram. “Yes. She is displeased I am to marry without her present, again. She said I should try not to make a mess of it this time.”

Mirabelle reached for her hand. “I don’t think you will. As a matter of fact, I think you are just the wife my son needs.”

“You do?” she gasped.

“All these years he’s resisted my efforts to him to find a wife. I’ve tried to make arrangements for him with the best families in San Antonio. Yet he never gave any of them a second look. He’s different with you. He seeks you out for conversation. He asks your opinion and you give it freely. He values you and you him. I can see the two of you being an effective force in this town.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Astley. I greatly appreciate your confidence.”

“Since we are both about to be Mrs. Astley, I think it’s time to call me Mother.”

Elizabeth had just hung up her wedding gown when there was a knock at the front door. She gasped when she opened the door to see her Marie standing in front of her carrying a small valise. She gave the woman a tight hug. “Marie, what’s happened? Have the Brennans dismissed you?”

Marie grinned. “No, Miss. Not at all. It was your gentleman, Mr. Astley. He’s hired me away from the Brennans. He says you will need your lady’s maid. He’s given me a most generous salary and I’ve seen my quarters at the house. They are lovely. That Mrs. Osbourne is very kind.”

“Yes, she is.”

Marie set down her bag. “I am to tend to you here until the wedding. You’ll need help with your gown.”

Elizabeth couldn’t believe her dear Marie was here. “Wait until you see it.” She took her by the hand and she dashed up the stairs to her bedroom. Her gown was hanging on the wardrobe door. “Look at how beautiful.”

“Oh, Miss. You’re going to be the most beautiful bride the town has ever seen.”

Joseph sat in the back of the coach as he waited for Sam to reach their destination. Normally he'd have ridden Harley wherever he wanted to go. Only his mother ever made use of the coach. Today he was riding as a passenger to pick up Elizabeth. They were to have a dinner with his mother and to discuss the wedding, now only two days away. The coach stopped and he exited. "Sam, we won't be long."

"Yes sir."

He knocked and Marie opened it. "Hello, sir. Good to see you again, Mrs. Perkins."

"Thank you, sir. Miss Elizabeth will be right down." Marie left him in the hallway. He looked up and saw Elizabeth coming down the stairs. She'd obviously made use of Marie with her more elaborate hair style.

"Elizabeth, you look lovely." He was properly shocked when Elizabeth threw her arms around his neck.

"How can I ever thank you? You brought Marie back to me," she said with tears in her eyes. "She's been the closest person to a friend I've had for twenty years."

He slipped his arms around her waist. "I'm so glad you're pleased. If we could sit for a moment, I have something for you."

"Of course." She led him to the parlor where they took a seat on the chaise.

"There is something I wanted you to have before the wedding." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small velvet box. He opened it and Elizabeth gasped. "I wanted you to have a proper engagement ring." He pulled the ring out of the box and slipped it on her finger. The platinum filigree surrounded a large, round diamond.

“Oh my,” she whispered.

He was nervous at her reaction. “Do you like it?”

“It’s magnificent. I’ve never seen the like.”

Joseph smiled. “I’m glad you like it.”

“Joseph, you’re too good to me. You’ve already given me so much.”

He cupped her cheek with his hand. “I’ve said you’ll never want for anything.”

“But I already have everything. I have a future with you. I need nothing else.”

Joseph felt he was suddenly overwhelmed in emotions he couldn’t control.

“Elizabeth,” he whispered as he leaned in for a kiss. He felt want coursing through him but he’d promised her he would make no demands on her. He pulled back and smiled.

“We should go. Sam is waiting out front.”

She sat back and nodded. “Very well.”

Why did he feel like everything was not well?

They had a lovely dinner then took their coffee in Joseph's study. Mirabelle pulled out a list of guests and handed it to Elizabeth. "This is the list of everyone who has accepted."

"Oh my, there are so many. Did anyone decline?"

Mirabelle chuckled. "Very few and only with the direst of excuses."

Elizabeth's breath caught. "Mr. and Mrs. Harold Curtis?"

Joseph sighed. "Harold is a business associate in the steel mill. I had to invite him. Unfortunately, that means we had to invite Melinda."

"Don't worry," said Mirabelle. "I'll make sure she behaves herself."

Elizabeth nodded. "Of course. I'm sure you have everything sorted."

"Joseph, I'm going to retire early. Why don't you take Elizabeth for a walk in the garden?"

"An excellent idea." Joseph extended his hand and smiled. "Elizabeth?"

"That sounds lovely." Elizabeth slipped her arm through Joseph's as they walked out to their favorite bench. She looked up at stars as far as the eye could see. "It was nice of your mother to give us some private time."

"Are you alright about the guests?"

"I knew there would be guests who would normally pass me by on the street. I thought I'd be okay. I realize I'm more nervous than I expected."

“Elizabeth, we will keep the busy bodies in line. Most of them are married to men who do business with me. Their husbands will keep them under control if they plan on continuing our business relationships.”

“Is that what you plan on doing, Joseph, keeping me in line?” She could see his smile thanks to the light of the house.

“Of course not. You are not some simpering social climber. You are an intelligent woman.” He took her hand in his. “I don’t think you desire a life of parties and the latest fashions. Am I wrong?”

“No, you’re correct. I’d much rather be reading in front of a fire than be at any party making conversation with people I don’t know.”

He brought her hand to his lips and gave them a quick kiss. “As would I. I think we will have a very pleasant life together.”

“As do I.” She braced herself for the most difficult of questions. “Joseph, I would like to speak with you about something.”

“Of course, anything.”

“You understand that my husband left me after the wedding ceremony.”

“Yes.”

“In matters of affection, I am not an experienced woman. Does that disappoint you?”

“No, not at all.”

“I have felt some distance between us in that matter. Is there someone else you’d rather be with?”

“Elizabeth, there is no woman in the world I’d rather be with.”

She felt herself relax. “Then I am confused as to why you keep me at arm’s length.”

“I thought you’d been through so much, and our marriage is happening so quickly, I didn’t want to make demands on you.” He sighed. “The truth of it is, all those years ago I thought you were the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen, but you weren’t a woman, you were still a girl.”

“Why didn’t you tell me then.”

“I didn’t want to frighten you.”

Elizabeth smiled. “I’m no longer a girl. Joseph, do you desire me?” She almost chuckled at the shocked look on his face.

“Yes, very much,” he whispered.

“Then I would like it very much if you would kiss me.”

Joseph smiled and leaned closer. Their kiss started as gentle and tender. Joseph coaxed and teased with his tongue until their kiss turned fiery. Elizabeth let him guide her. She matched each of his moves until it felt like a passionate dance. When they finally pulled apart, Elizabeth took a deep breath. “Oh my,” she whispered.

Joseph touched her warmed cheek. “Oh my, indeed.”

Joseph stood at the altar with Randall standing next to him as his best man. Since Elizabeth had no close friends or family, Randall's wife, Eve, had agreed to stand as her matron of honor. The size of the crowd was impressive considering how quickly his mother had put this event together. The number of guests had also demanded the wedding and reception be moved to a more accommodating space, rather than the ranch.

He wasn't the least bit nervous. He'd never been more certain about anything. The music began and the doors at the back of the church opened. Eve started her walk down the aisle. She took her place opposite the men. The music changed and Elizabeth appeared at the back of the church. The light behind her made her look like an angel. His angel. She stood next to him and handed her bouquet off to Eve. He leaned close and whispered, "You look beautiful."

"You look very dashing," she smiled.

Joseph tried to pay attention to the minister but all he could think of was Elizabeth. He reached for her gloved and held it tight. It seemed like forever before the minister said,

"You may kiss the bride."

He gave Elizabeth a kiss that was socially acceptable to the crowd but nowhere near the way he wanted to kiss her. The garden kiss was still burning in his brain. He must behave properly now, for appearances sake.

Elizabeth kept glancing down at her new wedding ring, cozying up to her beautiful engagement ring. She was Mrs. Astley now, lady of a grand house. She'd managed the receiving line, only because Joseph kept close to her. Even her mother-in-law kept some of the haughtier guests in line with a look. She would have Mirabelle teach her that.

The large ballroom at the Chandler hotel had been decorated with elaborate flowers including beautiful centerpieces at each table. She looked around and saw the guests had finished their meal and were enjoying the free-flowing wine. Now was a good time to slip away. "Excuse me, Joseph. I'm going to take a moment to freshen."

"Of course. I'll escort you."

"No need," she smiled. "I can find my way."

Elizabeth walked toward the room set aside for the female guests to refresh themselves away from the men and their cigars. She stopped when she heard a familiar voice.

"I don't know how she managed it. I mean really. Mirabelle must have pitched a fit. The disgrace of it, marrying the wife of a thief," said Melinda.

"She was never one of us," said a supporting voice.

"I did hear she stayed under his roof for days before Mirabelle found out. Even if she did compromise Joseph, I simply don't understand how a man of Joseph's Astley's position..."

"Not to mention good looks," the other voice giggled.

"I don't know how he could have married someone so unworthy."

Elizabeth pushed opened the door. “You’re right Melinda. Joseph is a brilliant man of business. He is also kind and generous. I’m not worthy of a man like Joseph but I will spend the rest of my days trying to be the kind of wife my husband deserves.” Melanie and her cohort’s faces went from indignation to shock. She heard a throat clear behind her. She turned to see Joseph standing behind her. “Joseph, I...”

“If you’ll excuse me, ladies, I was looking for my wife.” He took her hand and led her down the hallway.

“Joseph, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to embarrass you. They were being so rude and I lost my temper.” She stopped and looked around. They were in a heavily paneled room. There were a several card tables and crystal decanters on carved bar. “Joseph, where are we?” Instead of answering her, he cupped her face in his hands and pulled her into a passionate kiss. “Joseph,” she whispered.

“You are an amazing woman. I am so lucky you married me.”

“Lucky? I just made a spectacle of myself.”

He smiled as he touched one of her curls. “You were defending me, most aptly from what I heard. I am most fortunate to have a woman like you at my side.”

Elizabeth sat at her vanity as she brushed out her hair. Marie had helped her out of her wedding gown and into a beautiful negligee Mirabelle had purchased as part of her trousseau. Marie had said her good nights and retired to her quarters. She reached into the drawer and pulled out the length of green ribbon she'd taken from Joseph's desk drawer. Her hands trembled as she tied her hair with the ribbon and did her best to make a bow. She saw the door adjoining her husband's suite. Even though this was a ranch, the home's design was based on the style of English country homes. She was startled by a knock on the door. "Come in."

Joseph opened their adjoining door and smiled. "I didn't think you could look more beautiful."

"Thank you," she said quietly. Her heart was pounding. He was wearing a silk dressing gown and, for what she could tell, not much else. He reached for her hand and pulled her to her feet. He gave her a gentle kiss.

"Elizabeth, I don't want to press you for anything you're not ready for."

She touched his freshly shaved cheek. "Joseph, I trust you." She gave him a kiss and let him guide her. She didn't think her heart could beat any faster. He smiled and tilted his head. He noticed the green ribbon in her hair. "I hope you don't mind I helped myself."

"Of course not." He ran the ribbon through his fingers.

"I'm not a girl anymore."

“No, you most certainly are not,” he whispered as he pulled the ribbon from her hair. “You’re even more beautiful now than you were then.” He pulled her into a kiss that felt never ending. Before she realized it, he’d maneuvered her onto her bed. He let his hand travel under her nightgown, caressing her bare skin, as he kissed her lips, then her neck. Her breath caught. She’d never been touched like this. She made sounds she’d never made before and it seemed to be driving Joseph to coax more sounds from her. Her breathing quickened and her body tensed. She saw an explosion of colors as she cried out for him. It took a few minutes before she could speak. When she opened her eyes, Joseph was smiling.

“What was that?” she whispered.

“That was a sign.” he grinned.

“What sign?”

“A sign that we are going to be very good together.”

Elizabeth woke and realized she was alone in bed. She looked up in the darkness and smiled. The soft sheets felt cool against her bare skin. She had no idea what to expect but Joseph had been gentle and patient. She got out of bed and tied on her robe, smiling at the negligee that was now at the foot of her bed. She glanced out the window to the vast Astley Estate. The moonlight fell on the stables. Beyond the stables there were hundreds of acres. Now, she was an Astley. She looked at the closed door to Joseph's suite. She knew he'd returned to his own room because that was what married people did. Her parents had separate bedrooms, but the older she got the more she realized it wasn't just for propriety. She didn't want her marriage to be like her parent's marriage.

She opened the door and peeked in. Joseph was stretched out on his bed. His naked form illuminated by moonlight streaming through the window. She took a moment to appreciate her husband. Years of riding had left him trim and muscular. She moved close to the bed and ran her fingertip over his shoulder. "Joseph," she whispered.

"Hum," he muttered.

"Joseph."

His eyes fluttered open and he smiled. "I must be dreaming. There is an angel before me."

"I woke up and you were gone."

"I assumed you wouldn't want the servants finding us in the same bed."

She grinned with a new found boldness. "Well, it is our wedding night. Their assumptions about us would be correct."

“And you don’t mind?”

“I don’t mind,” she smiled.

Joseph’s smile grew to a large grin. “Well, then. Come to bed Mrs. Astley.” He reached out for her hand and pulled her into his bed.

Joseph looked at Elizabeth going over the plans for the staff barbeque at the large dining room table. She looked very much at home as lady of the house. His mother was assisting, but Elizabeth was in charge. She looked up at him and smiled.

“John, you’re home early.”

“Actually, it’s half past five.” He leaned over and kissed her cheek.

“Oh my, I had no idea it was so late,” said Mrs. Osbourne. “I should see if dinner is ready.”

“No rush on my account. I had lunch with Randall at the Chandler.” He moved over to his mother and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. “Hello, mother. If I may borrow my wife for a moment.”

“Of course, dear. Elizabeth, I’ll finish the list for the stationers.”

“Thank you, Mother,” she said.

He took her by the hand. “Come with me,” he said as he led her to the stairs.

“Joseph,” she whispered. “It’s dinner time.”

“I wasn’t thinking of that but I’m certainly glad you are.” He led her to her bedroom where Marie was brushing out some clothes.

“They’re all ready, Mr. Astley.”

“Thank you, Marie.” Marie left them alone in the room.

“What’s all this?” she asked.

He held up a woman's white blouse that was covered by a brown leather vest. Then he picked up a long pair of brown twill gaucho pants. "It's your riding outfit."

"What?"

"You can't be the lady of Astley Ranch if you don't ride. I thought we could start your lessons tomorrow."

She pulled the long pants apart. "You mean for me to ride astride?"

"Sidesaddle is a ridiculous English thing. We're American. My wife will learn to properly control her horse."

Elizabeth threw her arms around his neck. "Oh, Joseph, this is so exciting!" He gave her a kiss that quickly turned passionate. He pulled back and smiled.

"I suggest we continue this later or Mrs. Osbourne will be holding dinner for us." He loved her bright blush.

"Oh yes, quite right."

He held her hand as they walked downstairs. He was surprised at what marriage to Elizabeth was like. He thought they would marry and life would go on as it always had. Now he found while he was sitting in meetings he was thinking of how long it would be before he would see her again. He'd been looking forward to a business trip to New York but now he thought he'd extend the trip and bring Elizabeth to make it a honeymoon. His mother was sitting at the living room. "How goes the plans, mother?"

"Very well. Elizabeth has an excellent knack for organization."

"Thank you, mother," she smiled.

“We found the Horseshoe restaurant does a barbeque. They will set everything up the day before.”

Mrs. Osbourne entered the living room. “The house staff could handle the food.”

“Anna, you and the staff are guests. I don’t expect guests to work at the party,” said Elizabeth.

Mrs. Osbourne smiled. “Yes, Ma’am. Your dinner is ready.” They took their places in the living room as the kitchen maid, Maggie, served their dinner.

“Joseph, there is something I wish to discuss,” said Mirabelle.

“Yes, mother?”

“I found an available home in town.”

“What?” asked Elizabeth.

“Joseph has offered to buy me a home.”

“This is your home,” she said.

Mirabelle smiled. “I appreciate you saying that, my dear. It was my home and I had a very happy life with Joseph’s father. You are lady of the house now. It’s time you make it your own.”

“I’ll contact Sam Anderson. He’ll take care of it for you.”

“Thank you, dear.”

Joseph was surprised to see Elizabeth’s eyes well with tears. “Elizabeth?”

“I enjoy your company, mother. I will miss you.”

Mirabelle reached her hand to Elizabeth. “Thank you, dear. I enjoy your company as well.”

Elizabeth smiled. “You must promise me to visit.”

“I shall. And you must help me decorate my new home.”

Joseph smiled as he took a bite of his roast. His accounts would be taking a substantial hit, but it would be worth it.

Elizabeth could barely sleep for the promise of learning to ride. She curled up next to Joseph and smiled. They never slept apart. Even if the household staff was shocked, they would never say anything. Except for the occasional nap, she only used her bedroom for getting dressed. She slipped out of bed and washed up in spacious bathroom. Elizabeth was still getting used to the luxuries of being an Astley. She returned to her bedroom where Marie was brushing out her riding gear. "Good morning, Ma'am"

"Good morning, Marie."

"Are you looking forward to your lesson?"

"Very much so." She started to dress in her new gear. "As my husband says, it's criminal that anyone born and raised in Texas doesn't know how to ride." Marie helped her with her new boots and she saw her reflection in the mirror. "How do I look?"

"Like a real cowgirl," said Joseph.

Elizabeth's breath caught. Joseph was wearing a soft suede jacket the color of his hair. He wore a heavy pair of jeans and carried two Stetsons. One had a straight brim and the other was more curved. He placed the curved brimmed hat on her head. She looked at herself in the mirror. "Oh my. I do look like a cowgirl. Now if I could just ride like one."

They walked out toward the stable and Walter greeted them at the paddock. He had Harley tied on one side of the fence and a beautiful cream colored filly at the other side.

"Morning, Mr. Astley, Ma'am."

“Good morning, Walter.”

“Harley is itching to go so I tied him off. Lily is all ready for your lady.”

“Thank you, Walter. I’ll take it from here.” Joseph walked Elizabeth toward Lily.
“She’s a very calm horse. She’ll be good for you to learn on.”

“Hello Lily, I’m Elizabeth.” She reach up and patted the horse’s long nose. “You’re so pretty.” Lily leaned into to her as she hugged her neck. “We’re going to be great friends.”

Joseph showed her the basics of how to get on the horse, how to move forward, left and right. “Are you ready to leave the paddock? We’ll take a slow walk through the fields.”

“Yes, please.”

He opened the paddock gate then mounted Harley. “Follow me.”

She looked at him and smiled. “Any where.”

Joseph had enjoyed the past week, teaching Elizabeth to ride. He'd very much enjoyed helping soothe her sore muscles at night. He smiled as he pulled on his boots. Elizabeth had insisted they dress casually, as most of their employees were ranch hands. She walked into his room through the adjoining door.

"Are you ready? I looked out my window. There are quite a lot of people here already."

He stood and extended his arms. "Am I properly kitted out?"

She smiled as she looked him up and down. "Hello, cowboy."

He laughed and gave her a kiss. "You're not wearing your riding clothes."

"No, but it is a proper day gown."

"Let's go before they start without us."

The guests applauded as the Astley's entered the tent. They'd been quite the talk of the town, having their employees as guests. Elizabeth had insisted that any married employee should bring their spouse so there were near seventy people in the large canvas tent. He recognized most of the ranch hands, but he rarely interacted with more than a few of them. Joseph noticed that the staff from his town office were sitting, rather, awkwardly, at the same table. These two parts of his business had rarely interacted. Now he was beginning to think Elizabeth was right. They should all get to know each other. The men who keep the records of the stock should meet the men who take care of the stock.

Joseph waved to the crowd. "Thank you all for coming to help my wife and I celebrate. I hope you enjoy yourselves."

Walter came forward. "I've been chosen to speak for the men. We wanted to thank you for inviting this rowdy lot to celebrate your marriage." Everyone smiled as the lot of them gave a rowdy cheer. "We all chipped in and got a gift." He waved and two men carried a large, blanket covered object and set it on a table.

"This is very nice of you," said Joseph.

"Actually sir, it's a gift for your lady."

"For me?" Elizabeth smiled.

"Yes, Ma'am." He pointed to the men and they pulled the blanket away, revealing a beautiful, hand tooled saddle.

"Oh my," she gasped as she ran her hand over the smooth leather. "It's beautiful."

"We saw Mr. Astley is teaching you to ride and we thought you ought to have your own saddle."

Joseph looked in awe at the saddle. It cost a pretty penny. He looked at his men, who were all smiling broadly at Elizabeth's response to their gift. She leaned into him and whispered, "This is so extravagant."

"I agree. You should probably thank them," he smiled.

"Of course, of course," she blushed as she looked out to the guests. "Thank you, everyone for this wonderful gift. I will treasure it. I greatly appreciate the kindness you've

all shown me.” Joseph’s pride in his wife turned to shock when she repeated herself in perfect Spanish. The men smiled broadly as they applauded.

Joseph escorted his wife to the head table where they sat with the Randalls and the Andersons. Although both had been guests at their wedding, technically his doctor and his lawyer were employees. He held the chair for her as he whispered, “That was well done, my dear.”

“What?”

“Speaking to the men in Spanish. I know they appreciated it.”

“Thank you.”

Joseph watched as Elizabeth chatted as easily with his friends as she did with the employees. She visited tables to thank each person for her beautiful saddle, having animated conversations with them in English or Spanish, as the occasion required. Elizabeth looked up at him from one of the tables and smiled. No matter what the circumstances of their marriage, Joseph knew he had found the perfect partner.

Joseph smiled as he helped Elizabeth out of her gown. He'd gotten into the habit of helping her with her clothes at night.

"Do you think everyone had a good time?" she asked.

He leaned in and kissed her shoulder. "I think our party will be talked about for some time." He put her gown aside as he undid her corset. "I don't know why you wear this thing." He ran his hand down her slip-covered waist. "You're very slender."

"There are only so many conventions I can flout."

"Understood." He took her hand and led her into his room. "You know I have the trip to New York next month."

"Yes. I shall practice missing you terribly now, if you wish," she grinned.

He slipped his arms around her waist. "As charming as that sounds, I'd like you to come with me."

"What?" she gasped.

"I have business I must tend to, but there could be plenty of time to make this a honeymoon."

"Oh, Joseph!" she exclaimed as she threw her arms around his neck. She gave him a wicked grin. "I'll need a trousseau."

"I'm sure my mother will be delighted to help you with the purchases," he smiled as he led her to his bed.

New York had been incredibly exciting for Elizabeth. They had an elegant sleep compartment on the train, which was helpful since the trip took two- and one-half days. Joseph had spared no expense on their accommodations. He'd gotten a penthouse suite in the new Plaza Hotel.

While Joseph took care of business, Elizabeth enjoyed the hotel amenities. She couldn't get enough of the hotel's tea cakes. At night, Joseph took her to the most elegant restaurants. She'd seen her very first Broadway show and they'd been to several concerts. Her heart raced at the memory of their times at night. It had been wonderful to be so relaxed and not to worry about being the dignified Mr. and Mrs. Astley. In their suite, they had just been Joseph and Elizabeth.

Joseph checked in with the staff and looked through the mail. The maids carried in their luggage and took it up to their rooms. Mrs. Osbourne greeted them. "Welcome back. May I set a tea for you?"

"No thank you, Anna," said Elizabeth. "Joseph, if you don't mind, I think I'll have a nap."

"Are you unwell? You do look a bit pale."

"I'm just a bit tired."

"I will see you upstairs."

"There's no need." She pointed to the stack of mail. "I'm sure you have many important things to attend to."

He set the mail back on the sideboard. "I do, but nothing is more important than you."

Elizabeth blushed as she took his arm and he walked her upstairs to her room. He helped her out of her coat and handed it off to Marie.

"Welcome home," said Marie.

"Thank you," Elizabeth smiled.

"I'll assist her, Marie. She's to have a nap. Please see she's not disturbed."

"Of course, sir."

Joseph helped her out of her gown and corset.

"You're getting very proficient at that. If you ever give up being a business man, you could do well as a lady's maid," Elizabeth smiled.

"I just enjoy getting you out of your clothes," he smiled and gave her a quick kiss. He pulled back the covers on her bed. "Now, lay down and rest. I'll bring a tray up to you for dinner."

"Joseph, really, you needn't fuss. You have a household staff that can do that."

He sat on the edge of the bed and smiled. "I like taking care of you and I don't intend to share my pleasure with anyone."

Elizabeth smiled. "Very well. Who am I to argue?"

"Excellent." He gave her a quick kiss and stood. "Now, close your eyes and get some rest." He closed the door behind him.

Elizabeth smiled with the knowledge; she was in love with her husband.

Joseph walked into the kitchen. Marie was working on some sewing while Mrs. Osbourne was reviewing household books. “Marie, I’d like you to go around to Doctor Prescott’s and have him come see my wife.”

“Is she ill?” asked Mrs. Osbourne.

“She’s been very tired the last few days. We were very busy in New York but I want to make sure she hasn’t come down with something.”

“Yes, sir,” said Marie. “I’ll go right away.”

“Thank you. Let me know when you return.” Joseph sat in his study with a short whiskey. He stared at the stack of mail and messages but couldn’t begin to look through them. Elizabeth was so pale. She’d been sleeping a lot and he was terrified she was ill. New York was wonderful. He’d made several profitable deals but all he thought of was Elizabeth. He’d loved sharing new experiences with her. She was thrilled at going to shows and concerts. They had one dinner with his business associates and he’d enjoyed showing her off. She was charming and won them over. By the end of the dinner they’d all commented he was a lucky man. Yes, he was. Joseph was in love with his wife.

It seemed like forever, but it was less than hour later when Randall came into his study. “What took you so long?”

“Hello to you too. I was seeing other patients. Now, do you want to take me to see Elizabeth?”

“I’m sorry. Yes, of course.” Randall followed him upstairs and he knocked on Elizabeth’s door. “Elizabeth?” He opened the door and walked in. “Elizabeth?” he called again. His heart stopped when she didn’t answer. He shook her shoulder. “Elizabeth, it’s time to wake up.” He sighed with relief when her eyes fluttered open.

“Joseph?”

“Dr. Prescott is here to check on you.”

“Joseph, really, that’s not necessary.” She looked past Joseph. “I’m sorry he brought you out, Randall.”

“It’s no problem, Elizabeth.” He smiled at Joseph. “I’ll be sure to charge him for my time. So long as I’m here, let me examine you so your husband will calm himself.”

“Very well,” she smiled and sat up in bed.

Randall looked at Joseph and nodded toward the door. “Go on now.”

“But I...”

“Joseph, go on,” said Elizabeth.

Joseph paced the hallway, waiting for Elizabeth’s door to open. This was driving him mad. Is this what it was like to be in love? Finally, the door opened and Randall indicated he should come in. He stopped dead when he saw Elizabeth holding a handkerchief to her eyes. “What is it?” He went to her side and reached for her hand.

Randall patted him on the back. “Calm down or you’ll never survive the next six months.”

“What?” he gasped.

Elizabeth smiled. “These are happy tears. Joseph, we’re going to have a baby.”

Joseph sat on the edge of the bed, unable to take his eyes off her. “A baby?”

Randall smiled. “I’ll leave you two alone. And I’ll send you my bill.” He closed the door behind him, leaving Elizabeth and Joseph alone.

“Are you pleased?” she asked.

“What? Yes, of course I’m pleased.” He chuckled, “My mother will be ecstatic.” He touched her cheek. “How are you feeling?”

“Randall said being tired is normal.”

“Maybe you should stay in bed.”

Elizabeth laughed. “That’s what got me in this condition. Randall said to eat regularly and rest when I feel the need.” She curled her fingers through his. “I’m so glad you’re happy about the baby.” Joseph held her hand to his chest, feeling tears coming to his eyes. “Joseph, are you alright?”

He looked at her and smiled. “I love you. More than that first night, more than when you stood up against Melinda and her coven, more than I ever thought possible.”

Elizabeth touched his cheek. “I love you too. I always have.”

Elizabeth sat at the kitchen table as she had tea with Anna. It had become their ritual in the afternoon, despite the fact that she was having more and more difficult time fitting at a table. She ran her hand protectively over her large stomach.

“It will be soon, Ma’am.”

“Dr. Prescott says one more month. It can’t be soon enough.”

“Is the little one making you uncomfortable?”

“No, his father. Joseph is driving me mad. He hovers over me every moment he’s home. That’s why I’m so glad he had meetings in town today.”

“Is your mother in law due today?”

“No, thank God. She’s been a real blessing helping with the nursery, but I’m looking forward to most of the day to myself. Maybe after tea, I’ll retire to my room with a book.”

The housemaid, Janie, came into the kitchen. “Mrs. Astley, there’s a gentleman here to see you.”

“Did you tell her she wasn’t receiving?” asked Anna.

“Oh, yes, Mrs. Osbourne, but he insisted. I put him the front living room.”

“I’ll get rid of him.”

Elizabeth stood. “No need. I’ll take care of it.” She walked into the front room and stood in the door way. The man was facing away from her but he looked familiar. “I understand you wish to speak with me.” The man turned around and her heart jumped

into her throat. She was looking at a ghost. "David," she whispered. She didn't hear her own scream as the room went dark.

Elizabeth woke up in her bedroom with Marie was standing over her. “How did I get here?”

“Walter carried you before he went to fetch Mr. Astley.”

“Where is...the man.”

“He said he’d be staying at the Chandler when you want to talk to him. He seemed very unconcerned for your wellbeing. Do you know him?”

“Where’s my husband?”

“He’ll be here soon.” She handed her a glass of water. “Here, drink this.”

Elizabeth laid back and stared at the ceiling. How could this be? He was dead. He couldn’t have been in her living room. Marie answered a knock at the door. Joseph pushed his way in.

“Marie, make sure Dr. Prescott is summoned.”

“Yes, sir.” She closed the door behind her as she left them alone.

He sat next to her and took her hand. “Tell me what happened.”

“He insisted on seeing me. I went into the living room. He was there.”

“Who?”

“David,” she whispered.

“David Hill?”

She nodded. "I don't know how this is possible. I still have the telegram. It said his ship sank and there were no survivors. You can look at it! He's supposed to be dead." She started to weep as she rubbed her hands over her stomach. "Oh, God! Joseph, our baby! If I'm still married...the scandal. We'll never live it down!"

Joseph took her hand. "No. I'm your only husband. You're my wife. You're carrying our child. I will figure this out."

"But what if..."

"No. There is no what if." A knock on the door interrupted them. He stood and let Randall in the room.

"What's happened?"

"She's had a fright and she fainted."

"I'll examine her. Give us some privacy."

Joseph took Randall's arm. "If you have something that can help her sleep. She's very upset."

"I'll see what I can do."

Joseph gave Elizabeth a kiss as he wiped the tears from her cheeks. "Don't worry. We'll figure this out." He leaned in and whispered, "I love you."

He sat down in his study with a large whiskey. He'd needed to sort this out, but how? Walter knocked on the open door.

"Sir?"

“Come in, Walter.”

“Mr. Astley, I met the man who frightened your wife. I recognize him from town. It was David Hill.”

“Damn.”

“He said he’d be at the Chandler when the missus wanted to talk to him.”

“She won’t.”

“You don’t have to worry about us, sir. They’re won’t be any idle chatter. We like your missus very much. She’s a good woman, kind. The men and I are ready to protect her.”

“Thank you, Walter. I appreciate that. Right now, I need you to go to Sam Anderson’s office and bring him here.”

“Yes, sir.”

Joseph sat back and wondered how the hell he was going to figure a way out of this. Elizabeth was right. Even if they defied convention and continued to live as husband and wife, their child would never be accepted anywhere.

“Joseph?”

“Randall, how is she?”

“The baby is fine. Elizabeth is another matter. She’s horribly upset but she won’t tell me why.”

“Did you give her something to sleep?”

“I gave her just a few drops of laudanum. Any more would be too great a risk. Now, are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

“David Hill has returned from the dead.”

“Oh, God.”

“You can’t tell anyone. We have to sort this out.”

“Of course. I’m on my way home. I’ll be back tomorrow to check on her.”

Joseph extended his hand. “Thank you, Randall.”

“You’re welcome.”

Joseph finished off his whiskey while he ran the possibilities in his head. He could take Walter up on the offer for the men to defend her. After all, he had several thousand acres where he could bury a body. No, that would be satisfying but it would create more problems. He was still staring at his empty glass an hour later when there was a knock on the door. “Come.”

“You sent for me?” asked Sam. “Your man was quite insistent.”

“Close the door and sit.”

“What’s going on?”

“David Hill.”

“Elizabeth’s late husband?”

“Not as late as he was yesterday.”

“What?”

“He showed up and frightened Elizabeth to a faint.”

“How is she and the baby?”

“Randall says they are both okay. I need you to help me sort out this mess.”

“I understand your concern but if Hill is still alive, she’s still his wife. He can also lay claim to the child.”

“What!”

“If he is still legally married to Elizabeth, he can claim her child as his.”

“Joseph?” They hadn’t noticed the door opening. A pale and drawn Elizabeth stood in the doorway. He jumped to his feet and guided her to the small sofa.

“Elizabeth, what are you doing out of bed?”

Tears were running down her cheeks. “Can he take our baby?”

“Don’t you worry about it. We will do whatever it takes to protect you and our baby.” He looked over at his lawyer. “What are our options?”

“Well, your marriage was properly registered at the clerk’s office. I saw to it myself. I suppose the next thing to see is if your marriage to Hill was registered. You said he left right after the ceremony.”

“That’s right. The bank told me he used our marriage certificate to gain access to my personal accounts.”

Sam sat back against his chair. "Huh."

"What?" asked Joseph.

"Elizabeth, I need to ask you a very difficult question."

"Nothing could be more difficult than this," she said as she wiped her eyes.

"Was your relationship ever consummated?"

"Sam!" yelled Joseph.

"No, Joseph, it's alright. No, Sam. It never was."

"I can attest to that," said Joseph. Elizabeth blushed through her tears. He put his arm around her and pulled her close.

"If the marriage was never registered, that's a start. The minister may have registered it. Who performed the ceremony?"

"It was a Reverend Jones. I'd never met him before. David took care of everything."

"Do you know which church he served?"

"No, I don't."

"Do you have any paperwork related to the marriage?"

"Only the telegram that told me he was dead."

"Who sent you the telegram?"

"The Galveston police department."

"I'd like to see it."

“Of course.”

“Sam, what is it?” asked Joseph.

“Think about it. He was a thief on the run. If he booked transit on ship, why would he use his real name? He probably sent it so no one would look for him.”

“I never thought of it. All I thought was he was gone and wouldn’t be back.” She looked at Joseph. “I swear, I never gave it a thought the telegram was a lie.”

“I know, Elizabeth, I know.” Joseph kissed the top of her head.

“He lied to me,” she whispered. “Everything was a lie, even his death.”

Joseph looked up at Sam. “Everything was a lie.” Sam smiled and nodded. Joseph took Elizabeth by the hands. “Come now, I want you to lie down. Sam and I will handle this. Please don’t worry.”

Joseph sat in his study and sipped a whiskey. Sam was sitting across from his desk reviewing paperwork. "Are you sure this going to work?"

Sam looked up and smiled. "Trust me."

There was a quick knock and the door opened. "He's here," said Walter. He stood aside and David Hill walked in. Joseph fought the urge to punch the smile off his smug face.

"Sit." Joseph ordered.

"How is my wife? I couldn't help but notice she is great with child."

"Mr. Hill," said Sam. "I suggest you remain silent if you want to leave this meeting with all your teeth."

"Excuse me?" he asked.

"Listen to him," Joseph said through gritted teeth.

Sam opened his file. "Mr. Hill, in the matter of your marriage to Elizabeth Parker, we found no marriage certificate on file."

"That is of no matter. We are married and her name is Hill."

Joseph felt his jaw tighten, but he had to control himself. At least for the moment.

"Allow me to continue," said Sam. "We didn't find the marriage registered but we did find Reverend Jones or should I say Shorty Jones. He's a stable hand where you kept your horse."

Joseph enjoyed Hill's face going pale.

“You used a fraudulent marriage certificate to steal fifty thousand dollars from Elizabeth Parker. You ran off with her funds and the funds you embezzled from Parker Dry Goods. You travelled to Galveston, where your taste for high living and gambling left you penniless. Why you would risk coming back to San Antonio as you would be facing multiple charges and decades in prison? You saw a wedding announcement for the Astley’s. Being a well-known businessman, the announcement made the society columns in most of Texas. Elizabeth had married one of the wealthiest men in the country and you saw an opportunity.”

Hill sat back in his chair. “Well, I am impressed. Let’s get down to business. I certainly don’t want her or her brat. What are you offering me?”

Joseph jumped to his feet. Sam stopped him before he could pound him. “Joseph, sit. Let me finish this.”

“No. I’m done.” He looked at Hill. “We could have you charged with embezzlement and fraud but I won’t put my wife through the agonies of a trial.” He reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a thick envelope. He tossed it at Hill’s chest. “That’s one thousand dollars. It’s enough for you to start over in another town.”

“One thousand? That’s a pittance. One hundred thousand or I tell the press your wife is a bigamist.”

Joseph walked around his desk and grabbed Hill by the arm. “No, you won’t and I’m going to show you why.” He pulled Hill out the back door. Standing in a line were twenty ranch hands. Each of the men walked by Hill, looking him up and down. He leaned closer to Hill. “You will leave town immediately. If you ever see any of these faces again,

including mine, it will be the last face you ever see.” Hill looked at him with a mix of fear and defiance.

“You wouldn’t dare.”

Hill never saw Joseph’s fist coming until it was too late. He leaned over the sprawled body on his porch. “Get out, before I let them finish what I started.” Hill scrambled to his feet and ran off with the envelope clutched tight in his fist. Joseph became aware of the applause and cheers from the men. He nodded to the men and walked back in the house.

“I think that’s the end of him,” said Sam.

“Thank you for all your hard work.”

“You’re welcome. Elizabeth is a good woman.”

“Yes, she is.” He saw Sam out the front door and turned to see Elizabeth standing at the top of the stairs. “What are you doing out of bed?”

“I heard the men. Is it over? Is he gone?”

He walked up the stairs and led Elizabeth back to her room. “Please, lay down.”

She got under the covers and he pulled up the quilt. “Yes, it’s over. He’s gone and he won’t be back. He can’t make trouble for us. We have the proof that you were never married. If he comes back again, he will face prison.”

“Not to mention the men. I saw them out of my window. Did you threaten him?”

“Hell, yes I did. He was threatening my wife and child. I will do anything to protect you both.”

“I’m so sorry I put you in this position.”

“You did nothing wrong. I’m only sorry I couldn’t make him pay restitution for what he stole from you. He gambled it all away.”

Elizabeth put her hand to his cheek. “You and our baby are all I’ve ever wanted.”

He leaned in and gave her a gentle kiss. “I love you.”

Joseph watched as Elizabeth led Joey's pony around the paddock. He smiled at his son's determined face. At four years old, he was showing every indication of being a serious horse man. Or maybe that was just his paternal pride.

"When are you going to let Caroline ride?" he asked.

"She's only three. She's too young." Elizabeth pulled Joey off his pony, much to his distress. "That's enough young man. You need to get cleaned up for the party." She leaned closer to her son. "There will be a big cake."

"I like cake!" he exclaimed.

"I know, dear." She looked at Joseph and smiled. "All of Texas is aware of your love of cake."

Mrs. Osbourne joined them at the paddock. "The tent is up and everything is in place." The Astley employee picnic had become a popular, annual event.

"Thank you, Anna. Can you take Joey up to Marie? He needs to get washed up for the party."

"Of course." She took the little boy's hand. "Come with me, young sir."

"I'm to have cake!"

Joseph laughed as he walked over to Elizabeth. He slipped his arms around her waist. "We have time. Do you fancy a ride?"

She put her hands around his neck. "I'm afraid Lily will have to do without me for a few months."

He gasped and smiled as he spun her in a circle. "Oh, my mother is going to be beside herself. Another grandchild to spoil. I'll have to build a wing on the house for all the toys she buys."

"Don't blame your mother. Who bought Joey that pony?"

"I did."

"Who bought Caroline a dollhouse so big that her cat moved in?"

"I did."

"And you'll be no different with this one."

He smiled and rubbed his hand over her belly. "No, I won't."

"I guess I shouldn't steal your fun or theirs. Pretty soon we going to making our children go to those dreadful parties."

He smiled. "Oh, I don't know. They turned out pretty well for their parents." He gave her a deep kiss. "I love you."

"I love you too," she smiled. "We have some time before the party. Care to help me get ready? She opened the pocket of her vest and pulled out a familiar, long green ribbon. "I have a difficult time keeping this in my hair."

Joseph threaded the ribbon through his fingers and smiled. "Madam, I am at your service, always." He took her hand and kissed it as they walked back to their home.