

Simmer Down, Red

By

Mariella Starr

2017© Blushing Books® and Mariella Starr

©2017 by Blushing Books® and Mariella Starr
All rights reserved.

No part of the book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published by Blushing Books®,
a subsidiary of
ABCD Graphics and Design
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901
The trademark Blushing Books®
is registered in the US Patent and Trademark Office.

Mariella Starr
Simmer Down, Red

EBook ISBN: 978-1-61258-417-1
Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

This book is intended for adults only. Spanking and other sexual activities represented in this book are fantasies only, intended for adults. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual spanking activity or the spanking of minors.

Table of Contents

Prologue	5
Chapter One	7
Chapter Two.....	18
Chapter Three.....	29
Chapter Four	37
Chapter Five.....	44
Chapter Six.....	54
Chapter Seven	62
Chapter Eight	71
Chapter Nine	81
Chapter Ten.....	89
Chapter Eleven.....	97
Chapter Twelve.....	105
Chapter Thirteen	112
Chapter Fourteen.....	122
Chapter Fifteen.....	129
Chapter Sixteen.....	136
Chapter Seventeen	145
Chapter Eighteen.....	154
Chapter Nineteen	162
Chapter Twenty.....	171
Chapter Twenty-One.....	177
Mariella Starr	186
EBook Offer.....	188
Blushing Books Newsletter.....	189
Blushing Books.....	190

Prologue

1868 San Quentin Prison, San Quentin, California

For the second time in a week, Nate Forrester was taken to Warden Gideon Etting's office. He was bathed and clean-shaven for the first time in months. When he had regarded his face in the small mirror brought to his cell earlier that morning, he had barely recognized himself.

"Sign here and here," Warden Etting instructed, pushing two papers across his desk.

Nate read the first paragraph on the one paper before pushing it aside. "The State of California accepts no responsibility for sticking me in this hell hole?" he growled.

Warden Etting slid the pardon in front of Nate. "No one will apologize, Forrester. Yes, you were the wrong man and you were prosecuted for a crime you did not commit. You are also an educated man not prone to violence. You have proven it here. You can leave prison angry, lashing out for the wrong done to you, or you can accept it for what it is, be glad the mistake was rectified, and move on."

"Gillespie knew I didn't kill Flanders," Nate insisted.

"Maybe he did, maybe he didn't. If you go after Gillespie, the only one hurt will be you. Any doubts of your innocence would be disproven."

"At least if I kill the bastard, he can't convict another innocent man."

"True enough." The warden turned his back on Nate and looked through the bars on his office window. It was an act of trust, not something he would do with many men under his control.

"I'm seeing the governor in a couple of weeks, and I intend to resubmit your case. Though I don't expect anything to come of it, I will do the best I can. Meanwhile, I'm issuing you a dollar a day for the last seventeen months. It won't change the wrong done to you, but it will give you a fresh start somewhere. In the meantime, leave the state of California. Gillespie may lose his position as District Attorney for the County of San Francisco as well as his credibility over this. He is a man who does not like admitting his faults."

"If he comes after me again, he's a dead man," Nate promised.

Warden Etting nodded his head in understanding. "If it happens, make sure no evidence can link you to his death. Many a man has sworn to kill Frank Gillespie. You are not the first, but no one will hear it from my lips."

Nate Forrester walked through the gates of San Quentin Prison, a free man with five hundred and forty dollars in his pocket. He walked to the small port town of San Quentin, specifically built to house the families of guards and prison workers. No one gave him a second glance or regarded him with suspicion because he no longer wore cheap prison-issue canvas pants and shirt. Thanks to Warden Etting, Nate wore a twenty-dollar respectable man's suit.

Nate's first stop was at the general store where he bought a pound of salted ham, a pound of cheese, and a sack of hardtack crackers. He walked to the shipping office and his luck held since a ferry was leaving for northern ports in a few hours. Nate bought a ticket to San Luis Obispo. From there he would make his way inland.

He had time until boarding, so to avoid being conspicuous by hanging around the stage depot, he walked across the street to a peddler's wagon located in an empty lot. He found three

books to his liking and a decent pair of boots. The peddler eyed Nate's worn shoes, which were in sharp contrast with his new suit, but he did not comment.

Nate also bought a used valise for fifty cents, several barely worn shirts, and a pair of trousers that fit him. He took his leave of the peddler, walking past the livery and through the town until he found a waterway leading into the bay. He sat on the bank and devoured the meat, cheese, and crackers like the starving man he was, and then he leaned against a tree trunk with a full stomach. A little later, he changed into the secondhand boots and threw his old shoes in the water, watching as they sank from sight.

He checked the time on his gold pocket watch engraved with an inscription from his parents; his older brother had a matching one. Nate's watch had been confiscated when he entered San Quentin prison, and he had never expected to see it again. However, Etting returned it along with the twenty-four dollars and an assortment of odds-and-ends Nate had carried in his pockets at the time of his arrest. He laid back in the grass and let the sun warm his face. In two hours' time, he would leave this part of his life behind forever. He would kill or die before he ever spent another night behind bars.

Chapter One

Early summer 1869, Fremont, Nebraska

“You should at least think about it,” Elsa McCalla whispered. “You need a husband!”

“I do not need a husband, especially not Donal,” Lovina McCalla whispered back to her sister-in-law.

“Killian says Donal would treat you right,” Elsa insisted.

“Are you trying to convince yourself or me? You didn’t live with Niall, I did. I won’t have another like him,” Lovina exclaimed. “I already had one McCalla man, and he wasn’t the pick of the litter. You got that in Killian. I have no interest in remarrying.

“Donal wants to marry me for my land because he’s too lazy to file for a homestead and work it himself. He’s the second laziest man I have ever known, and I was married to the other! I also won’t be used as breeding stock so that he can claim the thousand-dollar bequest in his father’s will for having the first male grandchild.”

“The bequest is a pie in the sky kind of thing,” Elsa exclaimed. “Killian married me for love, not for the money!”

“Well, it’s good you know it,” Lovina replied. “Niall married me to avoid conscription in the army, and so he wouldn’t have to pay for hired farmhands!”

“Lovina, you need help. You can’t keep working yourself to death on the homestead!” Elsa implored, worriedly. “You need a man to work it!”

“I’ll hire one; I have before,” Lovina insisted.

“I know, and people talked,” Elsa replied in concern. “Killian wouldn’t allow it.”

“Killian may be the eldest brother of the McCalla brood, but he has no say over me.”

Elsa bit her lower lip and met her sister-in-law’s eyes. “It’s too brazen. The women in town will all think you are behaving immorally.”

“Why, because I need to hire someone? If they want to be ignorant, it’s their problem!” Lovina snapped. “Most of the town busybodies need to have their lips sewed shut to stop their gossiping and sticking their noses into other people’s business! I will not be forced into another bad marriage. You married well, so you don’t know what it’s like. I married Niall because he came with references from two ministers, and I was dumb enough to believe a preacher wouldn’t lie. Somehow those preachers forgot to mention Niall’s proclivities for cowardice, laziness, cards, and drink.”

“Sister, you shouldn’t speak ill of a good man who has passed,” Killian McCalla admonished sternly from behind them. The women turned around to face him. Elsa lowered her eyes at the chastisement from her husband.

Lovina’s chin jutted upward, her eyes flashing with temper. “I’ll speak the truth as it needs to be spoken,” she declared, standing her ground. “If my order is ready, I’ll be leaving.”

“I’ll drive you home,” Donal McCalla offered, stepping out from behind his brother.

“No, you won’t,” Lovina replied firmly. “I drove my wagon into town, and I’ll drive it home. I don’t want or need your help.”

Donal McCalla’s face reddened with anger and embarrassment. He glanced around quickly to see if any of the customers had heard her before he followed Lovina outside. “Preacher Davis

is expected here this weekend. I'm talking to him about your foolishness. He'll make you see the sense of us marrying."

"The reverend's opinion matters to him, not me," Lovina insisted. "I said no!"

"I'm not asking anymore, woman," Donal ordered, gripping her arm painfully. "You will take me as your husband! No other man around here wants a brazen, crazy woman like you. I'll get you out of those men's britches and have you acting like a woman!"

"These are your brother's britches I'm wearing," Lovina snarled. "I'm wearing them because he wasn't man enough to wear them himself! You mind your own business, Donal McCalla, because I'm not part of it!" She jerked her arm away from him and climbed into the wagon, hitching the reins and moving the wagon forward.

Nate Forrester stood not eight feet away. He had almost stepped into the fray when he saw McCalla grab the young woman roughly. He watched as the hot-tempered redhead drove away.

Lovina McCalla was an uncommonly pretty woman even dressed in loose and worn men's clothing. She had a headful of wild hair in an unusual bright shade of an auburn leaf of fall. She had pulled the glorious mass of color away from her face into a messy tangle of curls, which tumbled down her back nearly to her waist. He was unable to see her eyes from where he stood, although he had seen them earlier in passing. He knew they were vivid cornflower blue. For a small woman, she had a fine figure.

Lovina slapped a floppy man's hat on her head once she had the horses moving. Nate wondered why she wore men's clothing. Maybe she was too poor to dress differently. He imagined she would be striking when properly attired.

Nate witnessed the anger on the face of the shorter McCalla twin who he had been told was Donal. The twins certainly were not identical. He had dealt with Killian who owned the mercantile, and the store proprietor was fit and a good seven, or eight, inches taller than his twin. Donal McCalla was stocky with the pudginess of a man who either ate too much or did not work hard.

From what the land office clerk had told Nate, Mrs. Lovina McCalla owned the property he wanted. He had purchased a great deal of land adjacent to her property, along with four tracks of land from the Union Pacific Railroad and two more from the government. He had also filed for a homestead property, which was free land once he qualified it for Prove Up. Nate had a thousand acres total, but he wanted more.

Mrs. McCalla's three hundred and twenty acres adjoined Nate's and was already a free-owned homestead claim. It was hers to sell, as she was the widow of the late Niall McCalla. According to the hotel clerk, Mrs. McCalla had been a widow for more than a year and was having a hard time of it. Women normally lacked the strength to work the land for farming. He wanted the land for cattle grazing.

Nate had followed Warden Etting's advice and crossed the California state line four days after his release. He had spent months trying to rid himself of the anger he felt over his false imprisonment, and he had given a lot of thought to killing Frank Gillespie, but he was not a man who could kill in cold blood.

Eventually, he had made his way to Rulo, Nebraska, where his brother Cliff had settled. Nate claimed his share of the inheritance from their father and spent several months there, enjoying his freedom and passing the time with his brother who had never doubted his innocence.

After several months of licking his wounds, Nate contemplated on what he wanted to do. He decided it was time he got on with building his new life. Now, Nate was in the process of making good on a promise he had made to himself years earlier. He would carve a ranch from the Nebraska prairie, making it happen one way or the other.

Nate had finished his schooling at fifteen and put several years of newspaper experience under his belt working at the *St. Louis Gazette* before moving on to San Francisco as a reporter. After working there a few years, he had decided city living did not really suit him. He had no sooner made up his mind to change his career when the conflict raging between the north and the south disrupted his plans. He was working in the newspaper office in San Francisco when the war was declared.

At first, everyone had believed Washington politicians would come to a peaceful resolution. Certainly, the men running the government were smart enough to figure out how to stop the conflict before it got out of control. Sadly, they were not. Even so, most people who lived west of the Mississippi figured a war on the east coast would not have much effect on them. After all, it was an east coast problem three thousand miles away, and Easterners should solve it themselves.

By the fall of 1861, the war had not been resolved or decided in weeks as the newspapers, the politicians, and the generals had boasted. Nate was writing articles on the conflict in the eastern states, but as an earnest young man of twenty-three, he felt he had to put forth more effort than merely writing newspaper copy on the war.

Although he had lived most of his life in the slave state of Missouri, neither Nate nor anyone in his family believed in slavery. Therefore, he had traveled to his birth state of Illinois to enlist in the Union Army. Within weeks, he had been sent back to Missouri where he fought and survived three significant battles and several skirmishes before receiving a field promotion to sergeant. He was then transferred to General Ambrose Burnside's troops and had fought in two more battles before he was knocked unconscious on the battlefield in Fredericksburg.

Nate had awakened to find himself a prisoner of war. After a series of moves, he was ultimately confined in 1862 to the Salisbury Prison in North Carolina, a Confederate prisoner of war camp. He and several thousand other men were left to rot until the war officially ended in 1865. The gates had been opened, and they had been released. Nate had returned to St. Louis for a while. However, sentiments were harsh against a man from Missouri who had joined the Union side of the war. He returned to San Francisco to try his hand at newspaper reporting one more time.

He had been doing well until one night when police had roused him from his bed. Nate had been summarily accused, tried, and found guilty of killing a man he had never met. His sentence was life in San Quentin Penitentiary. After seventeen hellishly long months, a known murderer had confessed to the crime and Nate had been pardoned.

Nate was approaching his thirtieth birthday and figured he was about seven years behind where he should be in his life. If the Civil War and Frank Gillespie had not intervened, Nate would already have a ranch, a wife, and a bunch of little ankle biters to bounce on his knee. He had some catching up to do.

Even though he had been out of touch with women for a while, they fascinated him. Before the war and his imprisonments, Nate had been popular with the ladies. He found men companionable, but predictable, and he enjoyed how women were different. From one moment to the next, a woman had a way of turning a man and sensible logic topsy-turvy.

Nate adored all women, young and old, and he appreciated the quirks and qualities that made them feminine. He loved the uniqueness of women and enjoyed their humor and wit. Maybe it was because he had been raised without a mother until he was ten when his father had gone to town one day and came home with a wife. Once he had gotten over the shock, Nate had grown to love his stepmother, Dora.

Nate was a learned man, except he disagreed with the so-called intelligent men and their writings, which mostly gave women the short end of the stick. Doctors and ministers also claimed women were not as intelligent, clever or capable as men, yet Nate had never seen any evidence to prove their proclamations. Except for lacking the physical strength of men, in Nate's opinion, women were remarkable creatures.

He needed a woman. Having a wife was essential to his plans. A man needed the partnership, companionship, and comfort of a good woman. Nate also had a powerful physical need for a woman. He had been in a prisoner of war camp for nearly three years without any female contact. In San Quentin, once a year the warden brought women prisoners to the men as a reward for what he called *good behavior*. Even if most of them had been prostitutes, Nate felt guilty for using the woman who had been brought to his cell a year earlier.

Still, he had needs and reckoned deprivation could drive a man slightly crazy. He had seen enough of it in prison. Sex was only one reason Nate wanted to find a wife. Naturally, the physical benefits were a big consideration, but he wanted more. He wanted a woman who would share his values. He wanted a woman he could relate to, one who had the stamina to build a family and a future together.

Nate would give the Widow McCalla a few hours to cool her temper, before going to talk to her about her land.

Lovina was mad! She slammed the door on her cabin so hard it knocked her good straw hat off its coat peg, and the wooden sign she had painted and placed by the door fell over with a bang. She brushed off the hat and put it where it belonged and then picked up the Help Wanted sign she had used off and on for the last year. The last time she had hung the sign, only two men had applied, and she hadn't hired either. The first man was a known hard drinker and the second never looked her in the eye. He had focused on Lovina's bosom, and his gaze had never lifted.

She took a thick lead pencil and angrily scrawled additional words on the sign, stomping outside and hanging it on the fence gate. Lovina smiled and then laughed aloud at her silliness! No one would see the sign; she'd had no visitors in months. She gave a hitch to her loose trousers. She had chores to do. If she didn't do them, they would remain undone.

Lovina had always found work to be a good way of defusing her temper. She knew she had one, though she thought, in most instances, she was justified when it exploded.

The uncle who had raised her had a memory for proverbs and old sayings, which he often used to repudiate Lovina's words and actions of anger. "It is better to dwell in the wilderness, than with a contentious and angry woman," and "Open not thy mouth to speak evil," had been among his favorites.

Lovina could care less if she had a temper. She was sick of men thinking they could take advantage of her!

Nate Forrester had enjoyed his ride to the McCalla property. He had business with the widow, and he would make her a fair offer. His eyebrows rose when he noticed the sign posted on the fence gate. Under the carefully painted words advertising for help, was a humorous addition, probably written in anger.

The sign read:

WANTED: MAN FOR HIRE

Or a Decent Husband! Must be Clean and NOT Lazy or Plain Stupid!

He chuckled and plucked the sign from the fence post, dropping it when he heard a woman's scream. He didn't take the time to unhook the gate when he heard something crash and another scream of "No!" He leaped from his saddle, vaulted the fence, and ran to the house."

Nate burst through the door to find Mrs. McCalla pushed over a kitchen table with a man pulling at her clothing.

"Hey!" Nate yelled at the man who jerked his head around as Nate moved forward to help the widow. Lovina did not wait for Nate's rescue. She took advantage of the distraction and grabbed a cast iron frying pan from the table, swinging it with both hands against her attacker's head. He crumbled to the floor.

"Are you all right?" Nate demanded.

"Bastard!" the woman exclaimed, holding a hand over her mouth and heaving as she tried not to vomit.

"I'm not, and I hope you weren't speaking to me," Nate replied.

"Not you! Him!" Lovina snapped as a sob escaped before she could stop it. She fisted a hand to her mouth and bit into her tightly curled index finger to keep her chin from quivering from fright and anger. She protectively crossed her arms over her chest as she tried to gain control of her emotions. She turned her back to her rescuer to compose herself.

Nate rolled the man over with his booted foot. "It's Donal McCalla."

"My persistent brother-in-law," Lovina explained, stepping away from him in revulsion. She looked at her rescuer at last. He was the new man in town; the one people were whispering about because he was spending a lot of money and buying several sections of land. "Thank you for rescuing me."

"I didn't do much. You knocked him out before I got to him. What do you want me to do with him?"

She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. "Get him out of here, please."

Lovina followed Nate as he got a grip on McCalla's arms and dragged him across the floor none too gently. He lugged the man to the side of the house under a water pump and jacked the pump handle several times, dousing him. Donal McCalla woke up sputtering and gasping for air.

"What the fuck?"

"Watch your mouth," Nate growled.

"Who the hell are you?" Donal demanded.

"I don't need a name to knock your teeth out if you don't show respect in front of a lady."

Lovina glanced at her rescuer in surprise before saying, "Get out of here, Donal, and don't ever come back!"

"You are marrying me, lovie. I'm not taking no for an answer. You need a man, and I've done told everyone we're getting married. I have rights to you above all others."

Lovina pulled Nate's gun from his holster before he knew what she was doing and aimed it at the man struggling to his feet. Donal was bent over, rubbing the back of his head where she had hit him with the skillet.

"You have no rights to me, you son of a bitch! If you come near me again, I'll shoot you!"

"Oh, I'll be back, and you'll be my wife before I'm done," Donal threatened. "All I wanted was to try you out. A man don't want to buy a pig in a poke! I want to know if having you is worth marrying you to get it."

The gun fired and Lovina gave a loud gasp of surprise. Her hands were shaking, and by her startled reaction, Nate suspected she had not intended to fire the weapon.

Donal yelped and jumped, leaving toe boot leather behind. “Damn it, woman! You’re crazy!”

“I’ll show you crazy,” Lovina raised the gun again, the barrel of the revolver bobbing as her hands shook. The revolver was firmly removed from her fingers. Lovina eyed the stranger in a fury until she realized now he was pointing the gun at her brother-in-law.

“Unless you want me to go in front of the sheriff with a charge of attempted rape, I suggest you apologize and hightail it out of here,” Nate ordered.

“This ain’t finished!” Donal threatened. “I’m going to the preacher! I already declared for you, Lovina McCalla.”

“Apparently, the lady did not accept,” Nate disagreed, cocking the pistol. “Apologize!”

“Yeah, well, maybe I came on a little strong.”

“Strong?” Lovina screamed. “You! You! Bastard!” She grabbed a hoe leaning against the porch and raised it, but Donal McCalla was already making a run for the rear of the house. She ran after him with Nate following her. They heard the sound of horse hooves before they got around to the backside of the house, as McCalla was quick to put distance between them.

Lovina dropped the hoe and covered her face with her hands. “He will tell the whole town I was with him. He will do anything to force me to marry him.” She regarded the tall, thin man standing beside her, took a deep breath, and composed herself. She offered her hand to him.

“Lovina McCalla, I thank you.”

“Nathaniel Forrester,” Nate replied, shaking her hand.

Mrs. McCalla was prettier in person than what he had seen from a distance. She was indeed a beautiful woman even with her face flooded with color from fright and embarrassment. Since he was a good foot taller, Nate was able to scrutinize her closely. He noticed her face, eyes, and the glorious red hair. It was a color he had never seen before, somewhere between rose gold and copper. He also noticed the rise and fall of her ample chest as she was angry and breathing deeply. She was a well-proportioned woman, considering she was on the side of lean. He was a man favorable to certain assets of a woman.

“I didn’t do much,” he added.

“You were the diversion I needed to whack him over the head,” Lovina admitted.

“Has he tried this before?” Nate asked.

She shook her head. “He’s not been as persistent as he was this time. *A pig in a poke!* I should have shot him.”

“It was a crude statement,” Nate agreed, pointing his thumb toward the main gate. “Although, the sign says you are looking for a hired hand or a husband.”

Color flooded Lovina McCalla’s face once more. “I’m sorry. I was in a foul mood when I posted the sign; I had no intention of leaving it on the fence. I didn’t expect anyone would see it. Donal didn’t. He came in from the other side of the property. He’s tired of my saying no and is trying to force the situation. If you came for the job of hired hand, I do need one.” She took a deep breath and faced him. “I don’t need a husband, and no part of me would come with the job of a hired man!”

“Every woman needs a husband in these parts,” Nate disagreed.

Lovina ignored his statement. “Did you come for the job?”

“No, ma’am, I came with an offer. Now, having met you, I think I will make a different one.”

“Well, I owe you for helping me, so the least I can do is listen to what you have to say. Come on in the house, and I’ll make coffee,” Lovina offered. “I could use some. I was up at the

crack of dawn this morning to ride into town because I ran out yesterday. I've been busy doing chores since I got home, so I haven't gotten around to making it yet."

"I would appreciate some," Nate agreed as he followed her inside.

Lovina made the coffee and opened a tin of spice cake, cutting two slices. She cut the stranger's slice twice as large as the one for herself. Mr. Forrester was a tall man with a broad chest, but he was too thin. He needed to put on weight.

They drank their coffee and ate the cake in companionable silence at the kitchen table.

"Well," Lovina said at last. "What is your offer, Mr. Forrester?"

"It's Nate, ma'am. I came here to make an offer to purchase your land," he informed her. "Several days ago I purchased and filed for several tracks of land adjoining your property on three sides.

"I heard about it in town," Lovina replied. "You purchased six sections and filed for a homestead. That's an awful lot of land to farm, Mr. Forrester. Now, you want mine?"

"I'm not farming the land, ma'am, my intention is to run cattle. Ranching takes a lot of land and what I have isn't enough for the kind of ranch I want to build. Your property cuts a swath into mine. I came here to offer to buy your three hundred and twenty acres. You are a widow, Mrs. McCalla, and you can't run this place without help."

"I've been doing it for more than a year," Lovina disagreed. "As soon as I can hire reliable help, it won't be a problem!"

"I don't think you're being honest with yourself," Nate suggested, watching as Lovina's face flushed pink, this time with embarrassment and maybe a bit of temper. "I have already asked around town. The citizens of Fremont are talkers and free with their opinions. I think I've figured out the gist of what's happening here.

"Your brother-in-law, Killian McCalla, has put out the word for men not to hire onto your place. Apparently, he wants you to marry his brother, Donal McCalla, and he expects his brother to farm your property. I don't know why those two think your husband's property should have gone to them. I have heard your brother-in-law doesn't want it to pass out of family hands. Owning the mercantile puts him in a position of power as one of the unofficial leaders of Fremont, so most people go along with what he wants. Whatever his reasons, he is pushing his brother Donal to marry you. Nevertheless, I would hope Killian McCalla would not go so far as to approve his brother trying to force himself on you."

Lovina was becoming more upset by the second. "I don't appreciate you asking questions and nosing around about my family and me! Who has been running off at the mouth?"

"Simmer down, Little Red," Nate responded mildly with a quirk of his lips when her eyes flashed with anger. "I didn't ask about you, specifically. I was inquiring about your property, and I got an earful in return. I got several earfuls, in fact, which is why I have been able to figure out the situation. You might like to know most folks think highly of you. I hope it doesn't come as a surprise that your husband did not fare as well."

"No, I'm not surprised," answered Lovina, closing her eyes in shame. She pushed away from the table and stood to put the lid on the cake tin. She walked away to return the tin to a shelf and stood with her back to Nate for a moment while she collected herself.

"I won't marry Donal McCalla," Lovina asserted firmly. She turned around to face Nate, lowering her head and not making eye contact. "Donal is a coward and a bully, the same as my husband, Niall. I didn't know Niall was a coward when I married him, and I won't marry another man when I have full knowledge he has those same tendencies. I couldn't live with myself. Niall

put a knife through his hand so he wouldn't have to carry a gun or fight in the war. Donal took off to the northern territories and stayed gone until the war was over."

"Some men rise to the occasion, some don't," Nate stated simply.

"Did you serve?" Lovina asked.

"Yes, ma'am. I enlisted in the fall of '61. I joined the Union side. I had lived in slave territories most of my life. Nonetheless, I wasn't raised to believe it was right. I reckon you could say my father was neutral about the subject. He didn't believe in slavery, but he had no issue with people who did. I don't think anyone around had slaves where we lived. I can't remember it even being talked about until the trouble started brewing back east.

"I probably should have enlisted earlier, except I kept thinking smarter minds would prevail. I was much younger and optimistic then. Now I know Washington is full of blowhards and idiots, probably more so than most places."

Lovina covered her mouth as she smiled at his words, and his audacity to say them.

"I saw a few battles, some we won, some we lost, then I was injured and captured at the Battle of Fredericksburg. I spent the rest of the war in Salisbury Prison."

Lovina nodded her head in understanding. "It would explain why you are so thin. They starved you."

"Yes, ma'am, a lot of men died, more than a third of us. I've put on some weight in the years between, but I have remained lean."

Lovina covered his hand with hers in sympathy and felt a spark ignite between them. Startled, she quickly removed her hand.

"A lot of people are conspiring against me in town, Mr. Forrester. You're right. Killian is a respected man, and people mostly go along with what he wants. Niall hadn't been dead more than a month before Killian suggested a marriage between Donal and me. I know Preacher Davis is for it and the women in town think I am immoral because I don't want to take a husband. I don't think they mean me harm. They merely see it as me needing a man to work the farm. I see marriage to Donal McCalla in a considerably different light."

Nate studied her for a long moment. "Are you against marriage altogether or just with McCalla?"

"Especially with Donal and every other yahoo who has come knocking on my door so far," Lovina admitted with a wry smile. "I have had eight marriage proposals in the past year, none worth considering. What is your offer for my property, Mr. Forrester? If you bought it and, mind you, I would need cash money; at least I would have enough to leave here and start somewhere else."

"A proven homestead with a house and barn is worth about five hundred dollars," Nate said. "Honestly, Mrs. McCalla, I did come here with the idea of buying the property from you. I have had a change of heart since talking to you. I'm now going to offer you two different propositions."

"Do you have cash money?" Lovina asked. "I wouldn't be interested in any other kind of deal, especially one of those where you pay a portion upfront and promise to pay the rest later. Too many people renege on such promises."

"Yes, I have the cash," Nate answered guardedly. "I would offer you the full value of the property. Five hundred dollars sounds like a lot of money, and I know it's tempting, but don't think it would be so easy to move on. Mostly single men settled the territories, and Nebraska is no different. Although Nebraska is a state now, not much else has changed. An unmarried woman is rare, and she doesn't stay unmarried for long. Women on their own are targets for unscrupulous

men, and men wanting a wife will continue to hound you. Jobs for women are even scarcer, and those offered aren't decent.

"Besides purchasing the adjoining tracks of property to your land, I have also filed for an additional homestead track. To keep my homestead claim, I have to build on it and meet the government requirements. You already know those rules; you've gone through Prove Up. Mrs. McCalla, this farm is yours free and clear. You have a cabin and a barn, along with other outbuildings. Your property would be the logical place to reside as work begins on my ranch.

"I'm almost afraid to make my next offer to you."

"What is it?"

Nate took a deep breath. "I propose you keep your property and join it with my holdings. I'm offering you marriage. I will provide for you and protect you from the likes of Donal McCalla."

"Why offer marriage when you can simply purchase the property outright?"

"Because you need a husband, the right kind of husband. You need someone who will treat you like a lady with the proper respect. You need someone who will appreciate you for who you are and not for what you bring to the marriage table – primarily your property. You need a man who will treat you decently and make you feel like a beautiful woman. You are a beautiful woman, Lovina, and you shouldn't have to hide it in those men's clothes. You also need a man strong enough not to allow your foolishness."

Lovina recoiled at his words.

"I know you don't know me. I'll bet you didn't know half the men who have offered marriage to you. Unattached women are hard to come by, and the idea of contracting for a mail-order bride does not appeal to me. You are a beautiful woman," Nate stopped speaking and smiled at Lovina. "I keep repeating how beautiful you are and each time I say it, you wince. Apparently, someone has convinced you otherwise, yet you are a lovely woman. You don't deserve to live such a hard life."

Nate took Lovina's hand and turned it to reveal the calluses. "A woman's hand wasn't meant to carry these marks of labor. I am offering you a good deal, Lovina. I know you have tried to keep this place together, and what you have done is no small accomplishment, but it is not a woman's work. I'm not saying a woman can't do it. I'm saying a woman shouldn't have to do it. Farming is backbreaking labor, and it has killed many a man for trying. I'm offering you marriage and a partnership. I don't claim to be a saint, but I won't harm you, and I won't expect you to do a laborer's work."

As Lovina listened to Nate Forrester, something strange happened. She lost track of his words and the intent of the conversation as she listened to his voice. He had a low throaty timbre, and his words were spoken with a soft drawl. It had the lull of music to it.

When she realized she had lost track of what Nate was saying, Lovina regarded him in surprise. She had never felt this way before and was shocked to realize it was a physical attraction to the man sitting across the table from her.

Nate Forrester needed to put on weight. He was too thin for a man of his height. On the other hand, he was a good-looking man, a well-built man. Something trembled inside Lovina and she suspected she knew what the feeling was and from where it sprang. He was offering her kindness, protection, and marriage. Nate Forrester was appealing to all her senses.

"Ma'am, are you all right?"

"No," Lovina exclaimed. She jumped to her feet and refilled their coffee cups. "You have an unusual voice, Mr. Forrester, it has a soothing tenor to it. I'm afraid I was listening to your voice and not to your words. I apologize."

“Did McCalla strike you? Hit you in the head?”

Lovina laughed nervously. “No, I’m fine. I assure you, I am usually more attentive. Today has been unusual, to say the least. What were you saying, again?”

“I was saying, ma'am, you need a husband,” Nate replied with a firmer tone. “I know you put up the sign in a fit of temper. However, life is hard on women in these parts. Men naturally tend to be rougher, but a woman should be treated with respect and kindness.

“The sign spoke of your desperation even if it was humorous. Many crude and lazy men will try to take advantage of a woman with property. If we married, we would be equal partners, and you would have my protection as a husband.”

“You have an unusual perspective,” Lovina admitted. “Most men believe as soon as they marry a woman, what was hers becomes his, but it’s not the case in reverse. Would our marriage only be for the convenience of merging the properties?”

“No, ma’am,” Nate replied with a quick shake of his head, meeting her eyes straight on. “Not if you mean what I think you do. If I want a housekeeper and a cook, I’ll hire one. I would be your husband in every manner, and you would be my wife in every manner. We would share equally in the bounty of what our combined properties produce and, God willing, pass it onto our children. I would be faithful, and I would expect likewise from you. I will respect your opinions and view them alongside mine before we make final decisions.”

“We?” Lovina repeated, doubt creeping into her voice. She had never been part of a *we*. Not in her uncle’s home or her husband’s.

“Yes, ma’am. I would not discount your opinions simply because you are a woman. You would be my wife and my partner, although I will be head of my house.”

Lovina got to her feet and paced across the room. “May I be honest with you, Mr. Forrester?”

“Nate. If we are discussing a union, we should at least be on a first-name familiarity. Yes, ma’am, I want nothing except honesty.”

Lovina could not believe she was considering his offer, but she was. She thought he was being forthright with her and he deserved the same in return. “Nate, I do not know if I can bear children. I was married for more than five years, and I was barren.”

“It happens sometimes, but creating a child takes two. The fault might not have been with you.”

Lovina closed her eyes and avoided making eye contact with Nate. She had suggested such a possibility to Niall once. She shivered and rubbed her arms as she remembered. One of the main reasons she had no wish to remarry was her husband’s cruelty, both physical and verbal. He had shredded her spirit, leaving her with no dignity or self-worth whatsoever.

“What is it, Lovina?”

She shook her head as the soft timbre of his voice flowed over her. It was like warm molasses and made her shiver for another reason. She felt a hand on her shoulder, gentle, yet firm with reassurance.

She shook her head again, not responding to his question. “You needed to be warned.”

“So do you,” Nate replied, deliberately turning Lovina, so she faced him. “These are hard truths, but you need to heed my story before making your decision. I spent three years in Salisbury Prison during the war. I can’t be faulted for being there as a lot of men were in those camps. After the war, I returned to my job as a newspaper writer in San Francisco.”

Nate took a deep breath. “Most recently, I spent seventeen months in San Quentin Prison in California for a murder I didn’t commit. I was pardoned when the guilty man confessed.

“A lawyer by the name of Frank Gillespie sent me to prison. He knew I was innocent, yet he wanted a conviction, and guilt or innocence made no difference to him. If I ever run into him again, I will kill him.

“There is something else you need to know. I have lived without a woman for a long time, and I have built up a powerful need. It can’t be just any woman though; it has to be the right woman for me. It might take a while for me to work through my problem. As my wife, my problem would impact you. You need to know I would never force you, even if my desire to be with you already exists. I don’t know about other men, for me the desire to be with a particular woman only happens once in a while. I felt it the first time I laid eyes on you. You are uncommonly beautiful, and one look at you fires my need. I think we could make a good life together. For both our property needs and to create a successful marriage and family life, I would like to have children.”

“What about my inability to have them?”

“It’s a chance I’m willing to take. If we can’t have children, lots of babies are dropped off at orphanages. We would have our pick. We shouldn’t concern ourselves about what we can’t control. I can control this, let’s see how it goes.”

Nate lowered his head and kissed Lovina. The kiss was tentative at first and then soon exploded into something much more. He kissed her deeply, drawing her into him until she began to respond.

Lovina’s marriage with Niall had not been a love match, and she had grown to despise those ten to fifteen minutes while her husband used her. Still, she had fantasized about desiring a man the way the women did in the romantic penny dreadfuls Elsa passed on to her for reading.

This man was everything her husband was not. He was large, masculine, handsome, and he knew how to kiss. He was a clean man and a helpful one. She had taken notice when he removed his empty plate and cup from the table along with hers and had taken them to the dishpan.

It had been a long time since Lovina had wanted to be in a man’s embrace. Then it had been a forbidden dalliance with a boy when she was fifteen, and they had only gone as far as a few chaste kisses.

Nate pulled away from the kiss, seeing Lovina was as affected by it as he. He leaned in and kissed her once more. When she responded, he took liberties. His hands circled her trim waist, and he pulled her close to his body so she could feel his response.

Lovina broke the kiss, more because she needed to breathe than because she wanted it to end. Nate touched his forehead to hers while his thumbs lightly stroked the nipples of her breasts. He was breathing heavily while she was trembling. Nate stepped away, putting a little space between them, and Lovina lowered her eyes. His maleness was straining against the front of his trousers.

“I don’t think we would have a problem sharing a bed or each other,” Nate declared.

Lovina shook her head and licked her lips nervously, “May I have time to consider your offer?”

“Yes, as long as you don’t mind me hanging around here. I don’t want to leave you alone in case your brother-in-law shows up again. Why don’t you show me around your farm, and we can ride over and see my land markers.”

Lovina looked up into his eyes. “Do you like bold women, Nathaniel Forrester?”

“Within reason, as long as it doesn’t cross into impertinence or disrespect. In private situations, the bolder, the better.”

“Good,” Lovina declared, stretching on her tiptoes and circling her arms around his neck. “Kiss me again, please.”