

Swept Away

MARY ONNEALY



a division of Baker Publishing Group Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2013 by Mary Connealy

Published by Bethany House Publishers 11400 Hampshire Avenue South Bloomington, Minnesota 55438 www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Connealy, Mary.

Swept Away / Mary Connealy.

pages cm. - (Trouble in Texas; Book 1)

ISBN 978-0-7642-0914-7 (pbk.)

1. Texas—History—19th century—Fiction. 2. Christian fiction. 3. Love stories. I. Title.

PS3603.O544S94 2013

813'.6—dc23 2012040430

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

The internet addresses, email addresses, and phone numbers in this book are accurate at the time of publication. They are provided as a resource. Baker Publishing Group does not endorse them or vouch for their content or permanence.

Cover design by Dan Pitts Cover photography by Mike Habermann Photography, LLC

Author is represented by Natasha Kern Literary Agency

13 14 15 16 17 18 19 7 6 5 4 3 2

I'm dedicating *Swept Away* to my daughter Shelly. Shelly is a gifted storyteller. She's animated and charming, with a smile that lights up a room and a talent for drawing people in and making them happy to be with her. She's also a natural athlete. I figured this out the first time she grabbed the edge of my kitchen doorframe and climbed it to the ceiling. She was about three at the time. I actually knew before then. She had this stunt when she was about a year old, involving . . . well, best not to go into details on that one.

Shelly would make a great storybook heroine, bright and beautiful and sweet. Also, she's a pretty good shot and she looks great in a Stetson, which makes her fit in my books even better.



CHAPTER 1

OCTOBER 1868

The sharp crack of a cocking pistol brought Lucas Stone's head around.

"I'll shoot if you so much as twitch." The deputy's badge gleamed in the dim lantern light of the stable, and his aim was true.

"What's the problem here?" Luke straightened away from his horse, his hands spread wide and raised slightly. He hoped this didn't count as twitching; he didn't want to give the deputy an excuse to flinch.

"Those your saddlebags?" The lawman looked at the bags Luke had just thrown onto his horse and used the gun to point at them. Not a careful man. He looked to be about twenty, and none too bright.

"They are. What's going on?"

"I got a tip I'd find money in those bags. Money from a stagecoach robbery that happened in these parts last week. Had a man killed."

A shiver went up Luke's spine. He'd noticed his saddlebags were moved. He'd left them here with his horse and, since there was nothing worth stealing in them, he hadn't thought much of someone shoving them to the side, even going through them. Now he had a bad feeling that if he opened the bags, or let the deputy open them, there'd be something tying Luke to robbery and murder.

"You got a tip?" Luke tried to stall for time as he wondered who'd tried to frame him. Only one name came to mind. Flint Greer. A man who had good reason to not want Luke to make it home alive. "From who? I've only been in town a few hours. Just passin' through on my way home to Texas."

More honestly on his way to reclaim his home in Texas. "I just came in from far north. I have a bill of sale dated yesterday that proves I'm new to these parts." Luke reached for the breast pocket of his brown broadcloth shirt.

"Don't move!" The deputy's gun came up and his finger visibly trembled on the trigger.

"Easy." Luke wondered how the kid could believe there was a gun hidden in Luke's shirt pocket, but he slowly moved his hands away from his body. "You want to get the bill of sale yourself?"

Luke hoped he would come within grabbing distance. Nodding, the lawman edged toward Luke.

Luke knew plenty about being tough, having grown up in north Texas, a land of stark rock canyons and roving bands of Comanche and Kiowa. That alone was enough, but he'd also spent years fighting in the War Between the States, and more time living off the land after the war. And he was boiling with anger as he made his way home to avenge his father's death. Those things combined to make him a careful, knowing man. A dangerous man.

This deputy was none of those.

Luke was close to home now, and Greer, the man who'd killed his father, knew he was coming because Luke had sent a letter, along with a legal document, telling Greer to get off Stone land. Greer didn't want Luke to make it home.

Luke knew a setup when he saw one. Which meant there was little or no chance he could talk his way out of this. Which left fighting his only way out. He braced himself, determined not to hurt a lawman—at least not too bad. But once a jailhouse door clanked shut, Lucas expected the only way out would be as he was led to the gallows.

The deputy reached for Luke's pocket.

Luke shoved the kid's gun upward, drove his fist into the kid's belly, then slugged him in the jaw. Luke jerked the pistol out of the deputy's hand, chopped him on the skull with the gun butt, and grabbed the front of his shirt to lower him, unconscious, to the stable floor.

Luke flipped open his saddlebags to find a cloth cash bag. Dragging it out, Luke looked at it for a few long seconds, tempted. Considering its weight, Luke knew it was gold.

It would come in handy. It'd buy him enough bullets to start a war, which was exactly what Luke had in mind to do.

With some regret, but no interest in turning thief, he dropped the money, then double-checked the saddlebags to make sure there wasn't more. Whoever had tried to frame him hadn't wanted to part with too much.

If this was Greer's work, the man was thorough. So if the deputy was here in the stable, where was the sheriff? Luke eyed the doorway and was sure if he walked out, he'd be facing a firing squad.

With grim silence Luke finished slapping leather on his horse and led it to the back door of the stable. A black horse on a black night, and Luke always dressed to move around undetected. No shining hatband. No silver trim on his boots or Colt. No jingling spurs.

Easing the door open, he saw a stretch of land leading into a copse of trees. Behind those trees, a bluff rose. He'd seen it earlier. But could Luke's gelding climb the bluff? Being afoot in Texas was a good way to end up dead.

His horse was game, so Luke set out, leading his mount, listening for every night sound, his hand on his six-gun as they paced off the distance to the shelter of the trees.

No one stopped him. If this was Greer's work, he'd be furious. He was a man who hired his shooting done and he expected his money's worth.

Luke reached the trees and decided to trust the black to find a way up. Mounting, he rode up the bluff and over the top. As soon as he was out of hearing distance, Luke slapped his horse's rump and they picked up the pace in moonlight almost as bright as day.

While he put space between himself and the posse that was bound to be coming, Luke wondered how much Greer had paid to kill Pa. Top dollar most likely, because the job had been done right.

Pa dead.

His S Bar S Ranch stolen.

Luke was headed home to set things right.



"Ruth, stop dawdling back there," Pa Reinhardt shouted.
"I need you to take the reins."

Dawdling? It was all Ruthy MacNeil could do to keep from snorting with contempt. She'd been working since before sunup at twice the speed of any of the Reinhardts. But she knew better than to ask questions when Pa Reinhardt used that voice. Usually the back of his hand followed quickly if she didn't move fast enough.

She shoved the last box, containing the food and skillet, into the bed of the covered wagon and hurried around to swing up beside Ma.

"About time." Ma turned up her nose as if Ruthy smelled bad.

Ruthy didn't even comment on Ma being there, settled in, while Ruthy cleaned up the campsite. That was the way of things in this family she'd been dragged into.

Ma rested her aching back.

Pa yelled and doled out punishment.

Her dear brother, Virgil, leered.

Ruthy worked.

At the thought of Virgil, a chill drew Ruthy's eyes forward to the wagon ahead. Virgil was swaggering toward the second family wagon. He stopped before he climbed up on the high seat and looked back at her.

They'd be married when they reached California—Pa and Ma had declared it so. Virgil was willing. How Ruthy felt about it had never come up.

"You look dreadful, Ruthy. Virgil will despair of such a slovenly wife." Ma scowled, her usual expression. "Get that coat off. It will be blistering hot today."

Ruthy looked to the northeast, and the dark thunderclouds made her doubt Ma's forecast. Rain most likely. Ruthy felt a twinge of caution as she wondered if it was already raining upstream. How high was the river they planned to ford?

Virgil turned away and climbed up onto his wagon, so Ruthy didn't mind shedding the stifling coat that concealed her curves from Virgil's crude attention. She tossed it through the opening into the wagon box.

"Leave your hat on, for goodness' sake. Maybe you can keep that awful freckled skin from getting sunburned again. You're peeling now from the last time you were so stupid as to leave it off. It covers that flyaway hair, too. Red marks you as Irish trash. You look a fright. You're lucky my son is willing to involve himself with such as you."

She didn't respond to Ma's comments on her appearance. Her long, loose-fitting coat, flat-brimmed hat pulled low over her eyes, and clunky boots suited her. Everything she owned except her skirt was a hand-me-down, mostly from Pa and Virgil since she'd grown taller than short, stout Ma just after her fourteenth birthday.

Yet it suited Ruthy to dress like this. She wasn't interested in drawing a man's attention, and that included most of all Virgil. She could only dream that he found her too ugly to be of interest. But his disgusting behavior, which she worked daily to avoid, indicated he found her red hair and freckles to his liking.

Which was nothing but the worst kind of dirty shame. Ruthy had the reins in hand and sat waiting for the rest of the wagon drivers to get in place.

"Move out!" Finally the trail master hollered the order to the five wagons that remained in this once-long wagon train.

The lead wagon creaked as it began to roll and within a few paces dropped over the deeply cut riverbank. Another vanished, then another. Virgil was gone next—not forever unfortunately. Pa followed on foot between Virgil's wagon and the one Ruthy drove. He'd lead Ruthy's team across. With another glance at those thunderheads, she slapped the reins on her oxen's backs, feeling the need to get this crossing over with fast.

The Reinhardts' two wagons brought up the rear. They'd been with a much larger group when they set out from

Missouri, but the majority of the group had stopped to homestead in Kansas.

This group was headed for California along the south path of the Sante Fe Trail. Ruthy had no intention of reaching that destination with them. But the Reinhardts didn't need to know that.

As she descended the trail, she could see the lead wagon halfway across the wide, fast-moving water. They'd forded countless streams and rivers. Ruthy had lost interest in where they were as the miles plodded along, day after day, on their journey westward.

She heard thunder and an unusual burst of nerves shook loose a warning. "Pa, maybe we shouldn't cross just yet. Rain could raise this river real fast."

"Those clouds are miles away, you little half-wit."

"But it's raining upriver."

Pa didn't even look at the water, though he did take a glance at the sky. "Shut up and do as you're told."

Shut up and do as you're told. That would be her life forever if she married into this family. She'd been looking for a chance to run away and beg for protection and hadn't found one. And she feared greatly what tactics Pa, Ma, and Virgil might use to force her to say, "I do." The only way to stop the marriage was to be gone from the family and never be found.

Her turn came to ford. She had a reaction so strong, Ruthy felt as if God himself had struck her with terror. If she'd had her druthers, she'd have hopped to the ground and run straight back up to the top of the bank. But Pa led the oxen forward, and Ruthy stayed on the seat.

Just as the last wheel left dry ground, her nigh ox took a slight turn downstream, dragging its partner along.

Pa caught at the halter and yelled at the plodding beast, shoving at it to keep it moving forward.

"Mind what you're doing, Ruth." Ma gave Ruthy's arm a stinging slap that almost knocked the reins out of her hands.

Ruthy fumbled but hung on to the leather and drove with a skill that wasn't proper for a woman. She did as many chores outside as inside for the Reinhardts and was handier than any of them.

Ahead of them, the lead wagon had reached the far bank and begun to climb. It was a long way up to the level prairie.

Her wheels slid and water slapped against the wagon's underbelly.

Ma caught at the seat with a faint cry of alarm as the wagon lifted until it was floating. "Can't you control this team?"

A deep-throated shout drew Ruthy's attention in time to see Virgil's rig begin to drift. That surprised Ruthy because the lead wagon had rolled across on solid ground. Was the water level rising? Virgil's oxen veered downstream, pushed by a current moving faster than even a few seconds ago.

A deep rumble turned Ruthy's attention to the north for a quick glimpse of the clouds, heavy with rain.

At least the rain wasn't falling here. This river didn't need another cup of water to make it rush along even faster.

"I've got to go help Virgil." Pa looked back at her. "I've got these boys back in line. Try and hold 'em steady this time." He knew well enough that Virgil wasn't as good with a team as she was. No one was going to admit that, but Pa still knew where he was most needed. Virgil's team was swimming now, which gave them no direction except to be pushed along with the current. Ruthy noticed the wagon ahead of Virgil was floating too, its oxen's backs

underwater as the slow-moving beasts fought to make it across to dry land. She felt her own wheels leave the floor of the riverbed.

"Glad we're getting the ford done now," Ma said. Though she was clinging to her seat, she didn't seem to realize the peril they were in. "The whole train would be across by now if you hadn't slowed us down."

Knowing that to be a lie, Ruthy didn't bother to respond. Suddenly the rumbling thunder seemed closer, louder. Pa had reached the back end of Virgil's wagon and was clinging to its side, pulling himself forward with his feet floating. How could he guide the oxen when the water was over his head?

Ruthy's heart sped up as her team began swimming. She saw Pa look up at the clouds. The man on the lead wagon, now halfway up the riverbank, shouted at his beasts and cracked his bullwhip to speed them along. A second wagon reached the shore. A horse tied to the back of the third wagon pulled frantically against its reins and snapped them. It charged past the other wagons for the shore. The horse was doing better than the rest of them. The train master, the only man riding horseback, kicked his mount trying to reach dry ground. His horse stumbled in the rising current and plunged to its knees. With a shout of fear, the train leader lost his seat and went underwater. The horse swam for the bank.

Her jaw tight as she fought futilely with the reins, Ruthy knew her wagon wasn't going to make it. None of them still in the water were going to make it.

Turning to study the sky, a noise drew her eyes lower. A slap of rushing water gushed around a curve upriver. Right after the slap, a wall of water blasted around the bend, reaching the top of the riverbank. It rushed at them with the force of a runaway train.

Ma turned to see what the noise was. Her scream cut through the roar of floodwaters.

Pa froze as he faced the oncoming water. Then he scrabbled at the canvas cover of his wagon and tried to pull himself up the side of it. Virgil cried out in terror.

"Ma! Get in the wagon!" Ruthy tried to catch Ma and shove her inside.

"Let go!" Ma clawed at Ruthy's grip and leapt off the wagon seat into the river.

Water raged straight for them. Not even the wagons that had reached land were high enough.

There was no time for Ruthy to do anything but twist and dive into the covered wagon. She hit the bed just as the water slammed the wagon onto its side.

Water gushed in through the tightly gathered ends on the front and back and closed over Ruthy's head. She banged into something hard. Stars exploded in her eyes.

Tumbling, sinking, then flying upward, Ruthy had no time to do anything and no strength to hang on to a world gone mad.

The water lifted her high just as the wagon cover was torn away. She dragged air into her lungs. She tried to see what had happened to everyone else in her moment above water. There was wreckage but no people. Pa was gone, the team too. The wagon. Ma. Everyone.

Another wagon, flipped on its belly, raced ahead of her. Ruthy heard the pathetic bawl of an ox and saw one emerge out of the depths, only to sink again.

A man's head popped out of the water, but before she could identify him or see if he was alive, she fell, plunging

downward. The water smacked her into the side of the wagon box. Her shoulder caught on something, and each pitch of the water wrenched at her arm until it felt like it was being torn off.

Sucked down beneath the torrent, the world went silent. Dragging at her pinned arm, she fought for freedom, for life as she desperately held her breath. Her lungs blazed hot with pain.

Something crashed into the wagon and smashed it apart, but her arm remained trapped between a pair of wide planks. Everything erupted upward, dragging her along. She choked, sucking air into her lungs between coughing, terrified of how long she'd have before being dragged under again and not allowed another breath. A tree loomed only feet ahead. Crashing into the tree, chunks splintered off the planks she was riding. But the two boards pinning her held. She clung to the slender remains of her makeshift raft.

Before her, the river curved. The floodwaters blasted into a steep, stony bank. She saw Virgil just ahead, his limp body drove hard into the unforgiving rock. He took the terrible blow at full speed, his arms and legs flailing as he struck. She saw no sign of him fighting the water or being aware of the impact. Ruthy knew it would be impossible to survive. And she was racing straight for the same wall of stone.

A scream ripped from Ruthy's throat just as a fist of water punched her. She hit the granite bank. A hard crack stunned her and left her numb.

The floodwaters pulled her down into darkness.



CHAPTER 2

Leaned low over his gelding's neck, pounding out the miles, Luke put space between him and that rotten little cow town.

A posse had come, as he'd predicted, but with a good jump on them, there'd been time to leave a false trail. They followed it. Still, he pushed hard for hours, careful about tracks, keeping off any trails a normal man might use. Luke had learned to be sly in the woods and he used every bit of his skill. The posse would probably go home. But he wasn't about to get cocky. His horse needed a breather, but he wanted more miles between him and that lynch mob.

Trees ahead told him he was coming up on a river. He'd forded the Arkansas a while back, which made this the Cimarron. He was getting close to home. Slowing to find a way across, he made out a game trail so faint that only hard years surviving in the West told him it was there.

Urging his horse onward, he wended his way down the steep bluffs. If it was shallow, he'd wade for as long as he could, pick a stony spot where he wouldn't leave tracks and come out a long way from where he'd gone in.

If there was any pursuit left, that ought to end it. The sides of the river were slick with mud. The game trail was treacherous. The grass and brush were knocked flat. Floodwaters had recently rushed by, running so high they reached the top of the bluffs.

When he reached the bottom, Luke hesitated to head downstream. To be caught by another flash flood would mean certain death in these depths.

Which meant few men following would go this way.

A good enough reason for him to choose it.

The water was smooth and shallow. His horse stopped to take a long drink, then moved along in the cool October breeze, the running water gurgling and tumbling around his hooves. They made good time for several hours and, as Luke began to watch the banks for a way to climb out, he saw boards ahead. Frowning, he wondered if a rancher lived nearby and had lost a wagon in the flood.

Then he got closer and saw someone lying on the boards. *A woman!*

Rushing forward, he gained dry land and tied his gelding to a shrub.

He dropped to his knees beside her, knowing the chances of her being alive were slim. He tried to roll her onto her back and realized her arm was wedged into a knothole in one of the planks. She was warm—alive. Her chest rose and fell. Carefully he worked her loose from where she was caught.

He lifted her into his arms and carried her to the slim strip of sandy soil along the bank. Lowering her to the ground, he saw an ugly gash in her matted red hair. Judging by the condition of the battered-down grass, he estimated the floodwaters had passed through here at least a full day ago. She'd been a long time trapped on that plank.

"Miss?" He gently patted one of her pale, dirt-streaked

cheeks. She moaned but didn't wake up. Pretty little bit of a thing. Ash white skin with red splotches peeling as if she'd been in the sun too long. She'd had a hard time of it.

With a quick look he decided she had no injuries except that crack on the head—none on the outside anyway.

"Miss, can you hear me?" He had no idea how to make an unconscious woman wake up until she was good and ready. The presence of those varmints on his back trail goaded him. He couldn't leave her and he had to press on, so the only choice was to take her with him. He lifted her gently.

He couldn't make good time with a double load. But he was close enough to home that caution was more important than speed. His horse could take it slow. He covered up his tracks, mounted up, juggling the woman and his reins, and headed on for his north Texas ranch.

Unless a town had sprung up since he'd left Broken Wheel, there wasn't anywhere to leave her this side of home. And he had no intention of turning away from his course.

They headed downstream as Luke kicked around his choices. All he knew for sure was that he'd just picked up an unwilling passenger on his way to start a range war.



Ruthy's eyes blinked open and the pain knocked them shut again.

"You awake, miss?"

The world was rocking. Her head throbbed, and only knowing how bad it would hurt to move kept her from being sick to her stomach.

The flood. Her hand fumbled at the front of her dress. She was too dry to still be floating.

"My head." She tried to reach for the pain and something... or someone... restrained her arms. That brought her eyes open again. She was ready for the pain this time and kept them open to focus on a man... rocking her? He was dark, his eyes a velvety shade of midnight brown. He had a deep dimple in his chin that drew her attention for too long. His hair was black as coal, his skin so tanned he almost looked like an Indian. But his perfect English, laden with a Texas drawl, said he wasn't.

"You've got a mean bump on your skull, miss. Best not to touch it."

Then she noticed the horse.

"Where are we? Who are you?" She remembered Ma and Pa Reinhardt and Virgil. What had become of them?

"I've got some questions too, miss. Name's Luke Stone. I found you run aground on a riverbank. Looked like you'd been riding the current a while. Where's home? Don't you worry, I'll help you get back to your people."

"I-I don't know exactly where we were. Our wagon train got caught in a flash flood." Her throat sounded ragged.

Luke reached for his canteen, and Ruthy was suddenly aware of a thirst so terrible it felt like its own wound.

"The whole train? Aren't they fifty or a hundred wagons long? How'd you lose all of them?" The man stopped lifting the canteen, and Ruthy was so desperate she almost reached for it to wrestle it away from him. Her arm hurt bad enough she decided not to start a fight with a man whose corded muscles looked to be more than up to besting her in a struggle.

"We were five wagons, split off from the main train. All five were hit. I think two of them were out of the river and headed up, but then the water came." She shuddered

and buried her face against Luke's chest. "It was a wall of water. It came around a bend as high as the top of the bank. There was rain upstream."

"Should've had sense not to cross." The man adjusted his grip so her head was lifted a bit and she could see the world better. His strength was so great that he moved her to suit himself with only the slightest shift of his broad shoulders. He raised the water to her lips.

"I wasn't in charge or we'd have stayed on high ground until the sky cleared." When had Ruthy ever been in charge of her own life? She sipped the water and it seemed to soak into her mouth before it even reached her throat. She drank again.

"Don't drink too fast or you'll cast it up." He lifted the canteen away.

She wanted to grab at it, fight him for it.

"So what about the rest of your people?" It was almost as if he were offering her the water in exchange for answers to her questions. But no one would be that low-down, would they? Then Ruthy thought of the Reinhardts and decided nothing could surprise her.

"I don't know how anyone could survive that flood. I don't know how I did." She remembered her wagon tumbling. Oxen bawling. She'd seen Virgil's body. No sign of life. Ruthy clutched Luke's shirt, felt a terrible agony in her arm, but held on anyway. "I should go back. See if anyone made it." Ruthy lifted her eyes to Luke Stone. "Can you take me? Can we ride upstream and search?"

True, she had plans to escape her family. Ma slapped her and Pa was a lazy complainer and Virgil paid her disgusting attention. True, they'd never spoken a kind word to her while she toiled for long hours every day for years. True,

they were none too smart and none too clean and none too honest. But that didn't mean she wanted them dead.

Much.

"No, we can't," Luke said.

His answer caused a wave of relief so strong she felt guilty. "Why not?"

She realized no matter what his reason, she was going to accept it.

"I'm headed south, and I'm in a hurry." His horse continued to wade relentlessly in a direction away from where she'd last seen the Reinhardts.

Ruthy hoped he remained strong in his refusal. A woman saved from a deadly situation couldn't exactly dictate where her savior was riding, now could she? This way, the choice to go back and spend days on a futile search was out of her hands. Why of course she'd have gone back and hunted for those dreadful Reinhardts. Except Luke was in a hurry. She had no choice in the matter; she had to go along in whatever direction he was heading.

Why did she feel as if she were making excuses to God? It was because when her turn came to stand before the pearly gates, she needed to be ready when He asked her why she'd left her family to drown, that's why.

She debated, then decided there was no sense asking for forgiveness yet. She needed to quit sinning first. It was wrong to be so cheerful, and she did her best to suppress it.

"Why are we in the water?" She saw the steep banks and a cold curl of terror did plenty of cheer suppressing. "More water could come. We need to get to high ground."

"Nope. Not yet." Luke seemed unusually alert. Of course she was comparing him to Pa and Virgil, who looked on the edge of napping most of the time. Luke's focus moved

left to right, behind him, overhead, always his eyes roving. The alertness went beyond just watching. He was listening, smelling, most of all thinking. Ruthy knew what that was like, because hiding in the woods when Virgil was hunting her had given her sharp skills of her own.

Even so, she felt like she was buried alive at the bottom of these high banks. Ruthy was tempted to shake the man for his terse answers. She decided to avoid questions he could answer with yes or no. That wouldn't be hard. That was mostly how she spoke to the half-wit Reinhardts.

"Tell me why we're riding in the water."

He looked down at her, his eyes shaded by a broadbrimmed western hat. She had the sense that he was making a decision, and she was afraid she wouldn't like it.

"Miss, I don't know you, and it ain't polite to go asking a lot of questions in the West. If I tell you my business, you may have cause to regret knowing it."

"Are you an outlaw?"

"Not in any honest court in the land, I'm not."

Which meant he was.

"I'll get you to the nearest town, and you'll have to make your way from there. Folks will help you find your family." He seemed hard and knowing about the land, but not a cruel man, at least not in his handling of her.

A small shudder was uncontrollable. "I had plans to leave my family when the opportunity arose. They aren't my family, more like I . . . I worked for them. It's a shame they probably all drowned, but I won't miss having them around. Maybe I can find a job in this town."

It would be wiser to get on a stage and travel far and fast before she settled down, but she had no money for a ticket. Her only possessions were the extremely filthy and battered clothes on her back. It wasn't going to be easy to put space between her and the Reinhardts. But if they survived, maybe they'd think she was dead. Yes, of course they'd assume she'd drowned. They wouldn't hunt her any more than she planned to hunt them. She could risk stopping for a while. Earn a bit of money.

"I know a man or two in Broken Wheel, the closest town. They might help you find work. Best to not let on you know me, though. I've got trouble to face and a bad hombre might decide to make you part of it."

So he was taking her to his home. She was tempted to blurt out her fear of Virgil finding her—although she was quite sure he was dead. But just in case, she'd like to ask Luke for his protection. Except if she did, it might annoy him to the point he'd turn around and find the Reinhardts and hand her over, the better to shed any responsibility for her.

Of course to do that, he'd have to veer from his course.

"Where are we?" She thought they'd been in Indian Territory when the flood hit, although they'd been riding for weeks and she admitted to being more than a bit lost.

"Texas. You've floated a fair piece, miss. Probably one river ran into another more than once while you were floating along. Doubt we could find your family if we tried."

Which suited Ruthy right down to the ground.

"Can I have some more water?" She wondered how long it'd been since she'd eaten.

He let her drink longer this time until her belly was full and her throat much soothed. The quenched thirst wed to her relief at being irretrievably lost made her aching head heavy. "Is it a long way to Broken Wheel?"

"I hoped to make it there by nightfall. Once I leave this streambed, I'll make better time."

"Well, wake me when we get there." Her eyes flickered shut.



Luke was tempted to laugh. She was a trusting little thing to fall asleep in a stranger's arms. Not all that worried that he might not be an honorable protector, never mind that his arms would get mighty tired.

A pretty little thing, too. She was coated in long-dried muddy water. Her red hair was stiff, her sunburned skin peeling. So calling her pretty was saying a lot.

He wouldn't mind seeing her all cleaned up.

It looked as if he had little choice about carrying her while she napped, and so he did as he was told. The sun was at high noon and he rode along, not pushing his overly burdened horse, enjoying the shade of the towering trees lining the stream. The banks showed the ravages of the flood that had passed through, yet there was no sign of a storm upstream so he stayed down here, lengthening the stretch between entering and leaving the waterway, to make pursuit all the more difficult. He finally picked a rocky spot, rode up onto the plains and headed for home at a fast clip.

They'd covered a fair distance, and the land was taking on the broken look, with the layered red rocks that surrounded his ranch, when he spotted a rocky stretch, wooded, with a spring trickling from a stone. His horse could use a break, and his little saddle partner should probably have more water and something to eat. He'd've finagled a meal without stopping if not for her, but he couldn't show up in Broken Wheel before dark anyway.

Reining in his horse, he swung down with his arms full of sleeping woman.

Her eyes flickered open. They were so blue, so pretty that they seemed to glow out of her dirty face.

"You're strong." She spoke so softly he leaned close to catch every word. Those blue eyes blinked and fluttered and he had to think for a while before he figured out what she'd said.

"You're not a big parcel to carry around." The way she watched him, her words, woke something up inside him. He felt himself turn into her protector, a man who would fight wars to keep her safe. He looked at her pretty pink lips. They were all tidy despite what a mess she was everywhere else. He realized he was thinking of kissing those lips and it was like a cannon exploding.

Straightening, he laid her on the ground so fast it might've counted as dropping her. Stepping away to give her a bit of time to gather her wits—and maybe gather his own—he hitched his horse to a scrub mesquite and pulled beef jerky and hard tack out of his saddle. He kept real busy refilling his canteen with cool water, then settled in to rest his back against one of the countless flat slabs of stone that dotted these broken red rock canyons.

He managed all of that in the time it took her to push herself to a sitting position. She groaned with every move.

"Are you hurtin', miss?" He couldn't do much but sympathize, but he could offer her that.

"Hmmm." It wasn't exactly an answer, but he got that she was agreeing.

Then she lifted her hands to eye level and gasped. "I am filthy."

"Well, floodwater'll do that to a woman."

"So true." She flinched and rubbed high on her right arm. "I ache all over, but this shoulder—"

"Your arm was stuck in a knothole all the way to your shoulder. Being pinned to the boards you were floating on probably saved your life. It kept your head above water while you were unconscious."

Moving cautiously, she lifted the skirt on her calico dress, a badly faded brown, which was probably the mud. Luke had no idea what color it was supposed to be.

She put her hands in her hair and visibly shuddered. She was close enough to the spring, a spate of water gushing from a crack in the rock, that she just crawled over, stuck her hands in, and washed almost frantically. When she was satisfied, she filled her hands with water and drank deeply.

"Be careful, miss. Drink slow and don't overfill your belly right at first or you'll get the collywobbles." Luke wasn't sure a real thirsty person could keep from drinking to excess, but he saw her fight for control and win. She was a tough little thing. "What's your name?"

She threw him a nervous look over her shoulder. "I can't stand what my hair feels like. It's caked with mud." She stuck her head in the gushing water and let it drench her. The water ran brown as it rinsed her hair. He suspected the move had more to do with not answering his question than with a real need to wash her hair.

Speaking from under the water, she asked, "You don't by chance have a bar of soap with you?"

He did and he handed it over. "I intend to reach Broken Wheel around nightfall and make contact with my friends Dare and Vince. They'll be expecting me, and we've got a lot to do."

"I'll be quick." She rubbed the soap into her hair, which to Luke's way of thinking wasn't a quick choice.

SWEDT AWAY

"Could you please leave me a moment of privacy? I need to wash . . . um . . . more thoroughly."

It was no more than the absolute truth. "All right, but don't be all day about it." Luke moved into the woods and stayed facing away from her. "Call me when you're done."

But Luke remembered enough about his ma and little sister to be resigned. So he got comfortable and settled in for a nap.