

Chapter 1

Arizona, 1884

"You're blooming crazy, Jake. Blooming crazy." Cassidy Howard shifted in the leather chair and placed her dusty, booted feet on the polished surface of Jake Stinson's antique maple desk. She let her hands flop on the overstuffed arms of the chair.

"I'm desperate, not crazy." Jake twisted a cigar between his fingers. "And get your feet off my desk before you scratch the wood." He dropped her feet to the floor and wiped the dust from the polished surface.

Cassidy shifted slightly and placed her feet back on the desk. A grimace crossed Jake's face and she laughed. "Then you must think I'm crazy."

"Cassandra, you're the only one who can do this for me. I'll pay you well." Jake looked at her feet, shrugged and sat behind the massive desk. Lighting his cigar, he blew a puff of gray smoke that hung in a cloud above the kerosene lamp.

Cassidy looked at Jake for a long moment. She'd known him for nigh on fourteen years since he'd found her alone on the streets of Glendale, Arizona. He'd offered her a job cleaning house for him. She'd refused. "You can't pay me enough to ride through Apache territory. No amount of money is going to pay me for my hide or my scalp."

Jake leaned forward. "Cassandra, please."

"You know you're pushing your luck here, Jake. I hate it when anyone calls me that and you know it." She stared into his slate gray eyes and read the panic. "Why can't you just wire the money to Sonora?"

"I told you, Señor Rodriguez won't take anything but gold for his cattle. The gold has to be there in three days." He stood and walked to the window, pulled back the heavy velvet drapes and stared out across his land.

"You got a bit of a problem, don't you, Jake?" She smiled at him. Her response had been quick when his wire asking for her help had arrived. She'd helped Jake many times over the years after building herself a reputation with her sharp-shooting and fast riding. Often she'd transported money for him in his dealings. She'd even been known to stand up in a land feud a time or two.

A year or so back, she'd have done this job for him without even thinking on it. But somewhere along the way, her hide had become more important to her. He'd offered her two hundred dollars, which was a lot of money right at the moment seeing as she had a two dollar gold piece and two bits in her pocket. Hardly enough to pay for a room and dinner at the hotel. She shrugged her shoulders. Another night on the ground wouldn't hurt her any, though she'd been looking forward to a hot bath. The river got mighty cold.

"Cassandra Howard, how can you be so cruel. You know I'd do anything to help you. Haven't I always been there for you? Helped you all I could?"

Cassidy laughed. Lowering her feet to the floor, she leaned forward and took a cigar from the box on Jake's desk. She

sniffed it slowly. Jake only had the best. But always at someone else's expense. "If you hadn't tried to cheat Rodriguez the last time you dealt with him, you wouldn't be having these problems now." She bit the end off the cigar and put it in her mouth, reaching for a match.

Jake grabbed the cigar. "Ladies don't smoke."

She looked down at her buckskin pants covered in trail dust. "If I was a lady, you wouldn't be asking me to ride into Mexico carrying twenty-five hundred dollars worth of gold." Standing, she walked over to a cabinet and took out a bottle of whiskey. After pouring two glasses, she handed one to Jake.

"What will it take to get you to do this for me?" Jake threw the golden liquid down his throat.

Cassidy sipped her drink. "I'm not going, Jake. I've only seen twenty-six years and there are a mighty lot of things I want to do before I die. One of them isn't being chased across the Arizona territory by a bunch of wild Apaches on the warpath. I've seen enough of them to last me a life time."

"But, Cassandra, you've done it before. Last year you rode down to Sonora for me." Jake rose and poured himself another drink.

"Last year they hadn't just escaped the reservation. And last I heard they were headed for Sonora themselves. I don't cotton running into them on the way." The night the Apaches had swooped down on her parents' home still haunted her sleep. The sound of her mother screaming would never die from her ears. Cassidy had barely escaped that day. If she hadn't made it out the back window and to the deserted wolf's den where she stayed for two days, she'd have ended her brief twelve-year-old life with her parents. Sometimes she wondered why she hadn't. But she'd never regretted surviving. Life might be hard, but she enjoyed every moment of it. She'd built herself a life of freedom, free from the constraints put on women. She came and went as she pleased and refused to wear a dress or a corset.

Granted, at times when she saw a woman holding a babe in her arms, she longed to find a man and settle down. But she'd make a lousy farmer's wife. Hell, she'd probably make a lousy wife. She didn't cater to anyone, especially not a man.

"Cassandra, please. I'll give you three hundred dollars if you do this for me. It won't take you but three days to get there. Once you're in Sonora you can have a fine time with that much money."

"Jake, I'm not going. That ride's a hard three days. Insanity doesn't run in my family."

"You have to go. I'll be ruined if you don't."

"You should have thought of that earlier." Jake was one of the few men she could call friend, but she didn't trust him not to take advantage of that friendship.

"I know you're broke. Where else are you going to make that kind of money for three days work?" He relit his cigar and puffed away on it. The sunlight from the window played against the smoke. "Besides, if you'll go, I'll let you use the guest room tonight."

"That's so sweet of you, Jake. If you were a gentleman,

you'd let me use the guest room anyway."

"All right. But I don't see why you won't go to Sonora for me. I'll give you four hundred dollars and you're robbing me at that."

"No one has ever robbed you, Jake Stinson." Cassidy laughed.

"If you want to see me in ruins, Cassandra, then just sit there and refuse to help me. And after all I've done for you over the years."

"I've returned your favors tenfold, Jake. But you know that. You're just trying to make me feel guilty and it won't work. I gave up feeling guilty about anything years ago." She sipped at the amber liquid in her glass. Looking across the desk at him, she smiled. "I'll be going to Sonora for you when hell freezes over, Jake. And stop calling me Cassandra. I hate that." She let the whiskey slide down her throat, heating her body on the inside. It would help stop the cold when she made camp tonight. Staying at Jake's would only give him more of an opportunity to work at her.

The pouch of gold coins bounced against Cassidy's chest as she urged Storm forward. It had to be mighty cold in hell about now as she headed for Sonora with Jake's gold. She glanced behind her. Nothing stirred. But the hair at the back of her neck prickled and she urged the horse on faster across the sparsely grown ground. Once she made the mountains, she'd feel safer. They offered protection, a place to hide if the need arose. She didn't like being out in the open.

She must have had too much whiskey. Otherwise she'd never have agreed to this foolhardiness. Everyone knew a renegade group of Apache had broken free from the reservation. No one knew exactly where they were, but most figured they were heading for Sonora, just like her.

Of course, if she made it, the five hundred dollars Jake had finally paid her would keep her in style in Mexico until the Apache calmed down and she could safely return home. But, maybe she'd head out to California. She'd grown tired of Arizona. Or maybe she'd just keep going north until she got to Colorado. That was some mighty pretty country. She could hunt and trap this winter and spring and have a stake so she didn't have to sleep in the dirt most of the summer. Then maybe she'd buy herself some female trappings and set her cap for a man. The hankerin' to settle down kept growing in her. She never expected to have a big place like Jake did, but a small spread and some young 'uns to tend seemed better and better.

She glanced around again. The prickling at the back of her neck increased. Something niggling at her mind told her she wouldn't be seeing Colorado this winter or any winter. She should have listened to her first instinct and stayed home. The pouch slung around her neck and Jake's cattle weren't worth her life. Dying in the wilderness hadn't been in her plans.

Cassidy glanced around again. Her heart skipped several beats and sweat beaded on her forehead under her hatband. Riders swooped down from the foothills. Their whooping told her she'd

found the renegade Apache. She leaned forward, close to Storm's neck. She loosened her hold on the reins and clicked her tongue at him. "Give it all you got, boy, or you're gonna end up an Indian pony."

The animal's shoulder muscles moved beneath her arms as he stretched out his legs. She gauged the distance to the first rock-covered hill that would offer her sanctuary and wondered if Storm could run full out that far. She slid her rifle from its scabbard. Cradling it in the bend of her arm, she held it ready. A small distance seemed to grow between her and her pursuers. She urged on Storm.

Out of nowhere, another group of riders appeared. They must have come from behind the slight rise to the west. They were close enough she could see the paint smeared across their faces. An arrow whizzed past her head. She fired her rifle and saw one of the riders sway on his mount. Dust swirled up around the Apache, obscuring her view. She fired again. Another arrow whizzed past her. "Come on, Storm. You can outrun any Indian pony. You're the best."

As she fired again, she held her breath. The carving on the stock of the rifle dug into her fingers as she tried to reload. The screams of the Indians swirled around her and the picture of the last time she'd seen her mother flashed through her mind. An Apache with a knife at her mother's throat.

Cassidy sucked in a long breath, steadying herself and clearing her mind. Clinging to Storm with her knees, she took careful aim at the Apache rider closest to her. As she fired he tumbled backwards from his mount. The rest rode on, closing the gap between her and them as they cut in at an angle.

She pressed herself as flat to the horse as possible. Storm snorted at her, smelling her fear, and extended himself as though running from the devil. The distance to the rocky outcrop didn't appear to lessen. A coldness filled her. Would she die out here, alone? Would Jake think she'd stolen his gold?

Shifting slightly in the saddle, she fired at the Apache closest to her. "Damn," she muttered under her breath as the man never wavered. One last bullet remained in the chamber. She wouldn't be able to reload without giving them too clear a target at which to shoot. If she could only make the rocks.

She looked at her goal. The rocks stood too far away. A devil wind appeared not far in front of her, swirling the dirt into an enormous cloud. If she rode through it, would the Indians follow her? But if she got caught in the wind, neither she nor Storm would be able to breath and he would falter. And this wind grew to a proportion she'd never seen before. A giant wind sucking in everything around it. She had to swerve away from it, which put the rocks farther from her.

Taking in a deep breath, she tried to calm her heart and concentrate on Storm's movement, becoming one with the animal. Carefully she aimed her rifle and fired. This time she could hear the man's scream as he tumbled sideways from his mount.

A fiery pain shot through her back. An arrow. She couldn't draw in a breath. Her chest hurt. It had to have buried deep into her back. She started to sway and grabbed Storm's mane.

"Don't let them mistreat you," she said to the gray horse.

Sadness swept over her. Now she would never have a family. She'd never settle down. The regrets at all she'd miss in life welled up in her. She didn't want to die, but she knew she would. It hurt to breathe and when she did, pain, not air, filled her lungs.

Storm swerved back toward the wind. "No, Storm," she whispered, unable to draw enough strength to change his course. "No. You can't go into the wind."

The wind and dirt whipped around her. She couldn't breathe. She started sliding from the saddle and couldn't hold on any longer. "Damn you, Jake. May you rot in hell for this."

The ground knocked the rest of her breath away. The pain in her back raced through her as though someone had lit her afire. Her head hit a rock and she screamed, a scream lost in the wind and the pain.