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SUSAN KAY LAW

AUTHOR OF
JOURNEY HOME
AND HEAVEN IN
WEST TEXAS

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TAKE A CHANCE
ON

ONE LONELY NIGHT

ONE LONELY NIGHT



SUSAN KAY LAW



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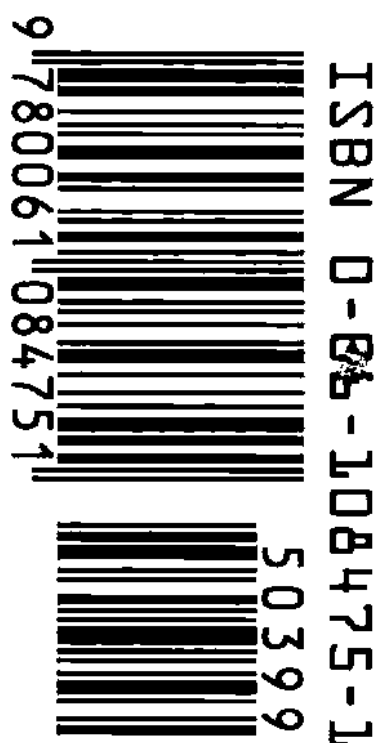
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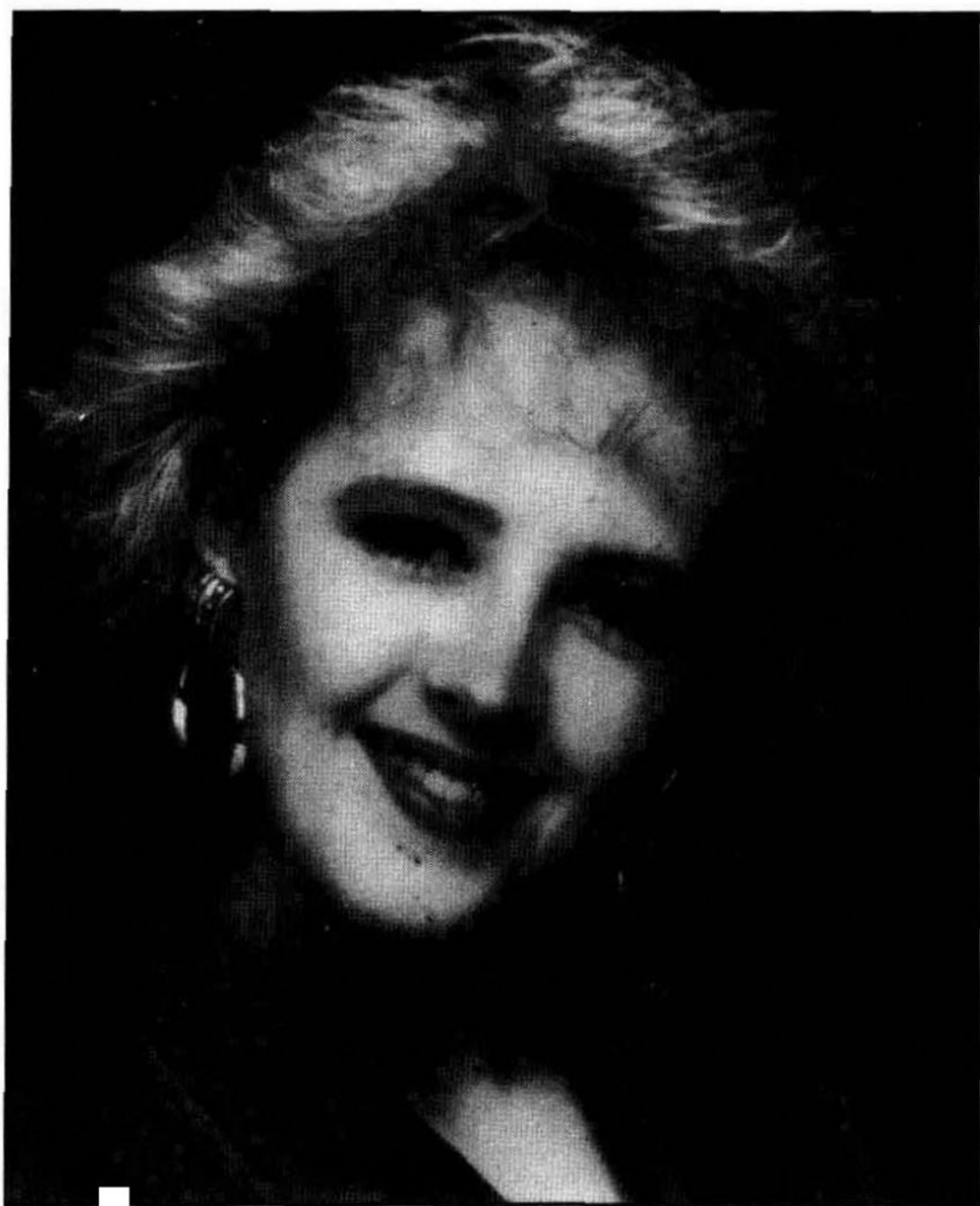


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SUSAN KAY LAW is the author of five previous novels, including *Journey Home*, winner of the Romance Writers of America Golden Heart Award. She is also a contributor to HarperMonogram's historical romance anthology, *Baby on the Doorstep*. Susan Kay Law currently lives in Minnesota with her husband and two sons and can be reached at Box 828, Hopkins, MN 55343.



NIGHT OF PASSION

Kieran's words echoed in Margaret's head. *Sometimes not taking the chance is the biggest chance of all.*

He looked at her steadily, his eyes dark as dusk in the low light. She knew she could never do what he urged her to, and yet she couldn't bear to have him see her cowardice. Finally she pushed away from the table and went to stare out the window in the guise of checking the weather.

The wind moaned, as if in agony. Transparent veils of snow sifted like smoke over the ground, the moon slicing cold light over knife-edged drifts.

"It looks like it should be clear tomorrow. Good for traveling."

He came up to stand behind her shoulder. The solid bulk of him was almost familiar now, his sounds, his scemys.

"It sure is ong morly hightbesaid at last.

She looked up at him over her shoulder. The moonlight cast hid in lve and black, that beautiful face with itmes of parn and living. And suddenly she saw her life attertomorrow, endless empty days and empty nights and empty beds and not even any memories to fill them, until she'd wither up like an unwanted flower and blow away and nobody would even notice the difference.

She took a deep shuddering breath. "It wouldn't have to be."



BOOKS BY SUSAN KAY LAW

Journey Home
Traitorous Hearts
Reckless Angels
Home Fires
Heaven in West Texas
One Lonely Night

WITH LORI COPELAND AND CASSIE EDWARDS

Baby on the Doorstep

Published by HarperPaperbacks



*To my comrades from Lester Prairie High School,
class of 1980:*

*Colleen Radtke (Jon, you too!), Julie
Hawkinson (who tells more people about my
books than anyone short of my mother), Merri Lea
Kyllo, Sheila Jilek, and Sherri Ruesink.
With deep thanks for your enthusiasm about
my books, and great joy that our paths in life
brought us all back together again.*

*Special thanks to Merri Lea, who, when we
were in junior high, shoved a copy of The Flame
and the Flower in my hands and said, "You gotta
read this!"*

And I did. I guess I owe it all to you!





Acknowledgments

Big thanks to the always-brilliant Connie Brockway, for plotting above and beyond the call of duty;

and to the inimitable Krissie Ohlrogge, for giving me *Redemption*.



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1884

“Redemption, Dakota Territories.” Kieran McDermott murmured the name to himself, testing it out. It seemed a strange place to find a murderer, a town called Redemption. He’d look there all the same, for the instincts honed over two decades of hunting urged him on.

The small rented room on the outskirts of Chicago was dim, sparsely furnished with battered furniture and ragged curtains. Outside, a train rumbled past, clouding the air with smoke and harsh sounds.

Kieran ignored it. He occupied the cheap room not because he couldn’t afford better, but because it simply didn’t matter to him at all. He’d learned to disregard such trivialities years ago.

A map was spread out on the lopsided pine table in front of him. Pins stabbed through the thin

paper, indicating crime sites, their scattered arrangement holding no pattern that he could discern.

If there was one thing that marked his quarry, that was it. The man had no pattern, no favorite methods at all. He was as likely to invest months posing as a colleague or employee, gaining access to vast company funds before quietly absconding with them, as he was to recruit a gang and stage a bold, bloody daytime holdup of the largest bank in Milwaukee. Years of crimes, all over the Middle West, without coming close to being captured. Crimes that wouldn't even be linked together, if it weren't for his single, signature habit—he sent notes thanking his victims.

So he had pride, Kieran thought, pride and arrogance enough that he couldn't stand his successes going completely unnoticed. There'd be no reason to send the notes—indeed, much safer not to—other than to claim his work.

It wasn't the sort of job that Kieran would normally accept. The wealthy businessmen and profitable enterprises that had been robbed could well afford it. They could command dozens of law officers to catch the Uncatchable Man—as the newspaper writers had recently dubbed him—and hire detectives of their own, as well.

But then there'd been a young girl drawn in, a lovely fifteen-year-old girl—sixteen now, Kieran reminded himself. And a broken and distraught father had begged him to help, and the hunt had begun.

Kieran mentally sifted through the bits of evidence

he'd collected, a witness here, a train record there. The hotel chambermaid who'd taken note of the strangeness of the young girl being found in her "father's" bed one morning. The experienced Minneapolis detective who'd chased a lead all the way across Minnesota before being found, stabbed to death, in the Big Sioux River.

For nine months Kieran had followed the trail. Longer than he'd chased anyone, except the first.

That one had taken him ten years.

Despite his work, the trail would still seem pitifully thin to anyone else. It didn't matter to Kieran; he felt it, the razor-sharp focus of his attention, his senses, and the rising churn in his blood that always told him when he was narrowing in on his prey.

He reached forward and placed his finger on the tiny dot on the map, just east of where the Missouri River snaked its way through the southern half of the Dakota Territories. "Yes," he whispered.

It would be Redemption.

Margaret Thayer lit the tiny stub of candle—saved from last year for just this purpose—that was carefully pushed into the exact center of her birthday cake. The cake was small, thinly frosted in white icing, an indulgence she'd earned by prudently drinking her coffee unsweetened for the previous two weeks.

Her thirty-fifth birthday. And she was entirely alone, just as she had been for the past three.

Outside, the wind raged and battered her small



house. An unusually vicious late-April snowstorm drove needle pricks of snow through the air with a whistle like bullets. After a week of mild temperatures and clear days, the sudden storm was a shock, as if mocking anyone foolish enough to believe that spring had come to Dakota. Though Margaret had stuffed every crack she could find with rags, the wind still forced its way in, fluttering the small candle flame.

Thirty-five years *old*. When so many of those years had seemed to pass so slowly, how in the world had she gotten here so fast? At church services, just last Sunday, Martha Ann Perkins—who Margaret knew full well was three months younger than she was—had confided she was soon to become a grandmother. A grandmother!

Margaret's goddaughter Carrie, whom she still thought of as a tender, towheaded six-year-old, had married, known a man, conceived a child. And here it had been almost twenty years since Margaret herself had been so much as kissed. Even then, only once, a quick stolen mashing of lips that was so long ago she could no longer conjure up even the slightest memory of the feeling.

A loud thud made her jump, her heart race. Was she now to become a foolish, fearful woman, too, who jumped at every stray sound? For surely it was nothing; likely the wind had just ripped a loose board from the shed and flung it against the house.

The candle's flame wobbled, diminished, threatening to extinguish itself before she even had a chance to make a wish. Best to be quick about it.

Margaret had long ago given up wishing for things like love or fortune or even happiness. Now, her dreams were more modest.

Please, I just want something to happen.

And, with a quick huff of breath, she snuffed the meager fire.

This time there was no mistaking the sound for a wind-borne object. The thudding was steady and hard, a heavy fist against her door.

For a brief, ridiculous instant, she thought that perhaps someone had remembered her birthday after all. But none of her acquaintances would come out in this storm; it would be sheer stupidity. The stupid did not survive long in the territories.

What, then? The banging grew slower, weaker. For a moment she considered ignoring it. Certainly that would be the wisest course; a woman living alone two miles from town couldn't be too careful. And everyone in the area had more sense than to go out in weather like this. Still, what if there was an emergency, a desperate need for her assistance?

Well, she could hardly let whoever was out there die on her doorstep. Surely there was not that much danger. Far more likely that someone had merely been lost in the storm than they'd deliberately gone out in it to find her and do her harm. Still, she checked the loading of her shotgun and propped it up against the wall within easy reach before she opened the door.

Cold and snow blasted her, stinging her face. A tall figure swayed in the doorway, long dark coat flapping stiffly in the wind. Not a slice of skin showed between the battered, ice-coated felt hat

pulled low and the turned-up collar hunched high around the ears.

"C-cold. Din' 'spect . . ." The words were slurred. He moved forward a shuffling step. "Storm," he said, and toppled over.

"Oh no, don't do that!" He pitched straight into her arms, a heavy, frigid weight. She valiantly struggled to keep them both upright, but she was not a large woman and she slowly sank beneath the burden.

Oh, dear, she thought, as the hard plane of the floor painfully met her hip. Perhaps I should have been a bit more specific with my wish.

Something *good*.

Had he simply died right on top of her, just like that? He didn't move, and his weight made breathing hard. She squirmed, easing herself from beneath him until he rolled to one side with a thump. She was free.

Margaret scrambled to the door and leaned against it, forcing it shut against the wind. She dropped to her knees beside the still form, tugged off the hat, and turned down the stiff fabric of the coat's collar.

She'd never seen this man before. For surely if she had, this face she would have remembered. Cleanly sculpted features, not marred a whit by the lines bracketing his mouth and eyes. A fall of heavy dark hair, thickly iced with silver. Skin pale as the blowing snow outside, a stark contrast with the dark stubble of a few day's beard.

Strange to think of a man as beautiful, but there was no other word for this one.

And he was still alive.

Beneath her fingertips, where she'd placed them against the curve of his neck, she could barely detect his pulse. Faint, and far too slow, but there just the same.

"Can you hear me?" When she got no response, she grabbed his shoulders and shook hard, nearly shouting this time. "Wake up! We've got to get you up."

The hard, driving bits of sleet had scored his eyelids with tiny cuts, leaving them swollen and red. When he blinked his eyes open, she found the purest blue she'd ever seen.

"Sorry," he mumbled "Din' know . . . I . . ."

"Not now. We've got to get you warm, and the floor's too cold. I can't get you up myself, and you have to help me. Do you understand?"

"Unnerstan'." He didn't move.

She lifted his limp arm and looped it around her shoulders, locking her own arms around his chest. "Come on," she urged him. "Get up!"

He moaned—not a pained sound, she judged, but one of exhaustion and protest. How long had he been caught in the storm?

He tried; she had to give him that. But it seemed as if his limbs weren't entirely under his command, and she had to pull and tug and shout, taking as much of his weight as she could, dragging him to his feet.

They stumbled toward the bed together, once bumping hard against the wall—of course *she* was the one nearest the wall, and took the brunt of it—and twice nearly pitched to the floor. Finally, they