

Beautiful **Dreamer**

Elizabeth Lowell



WILLIAM MORROW

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Beautiful
Dreamer

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*For Heather,
daughter, friend, fan*

Prologue

The blue pickup truck was dirty, scratched by brush, and looked too battered to pull the faded single-horse trailer behind it. The truck's tires showed the scars of passage through four-wheel-drive country.

Like the man at the wheel, there was a lot more underneath than the rough outer surface revealed. Beneath the dust and marks of hard use, the tread on the tires was thick. The pickup's engine was powerful and well tuned. The mare riding patiently inside the trailer was hot-blooded and superbly trained. A single one of her colts would have been worth more than a new truck and trailer combined.

The truck went past a sun-faded road sign that said WELCOME TO RIVERDALE: POPULATION 47.

There was neither river nor dale to greet the visitor, but there was no law against dreams.

He parked the truck in front of a country store, got out, and stretched to his full height, casting a long, wide-shouldered shadow over the afternoon land. The store was closed. A hand-lettered

placard told anyone who cared that the door opened when and if the proprietor felt like it, and if it was an emergency, you should try around at the back. Cards stuck on the outside of the dirt-streaked front window asked for workers or work, tried to buy or sell ranch equipment, and generally served as an informal newspaper.

One of the cards said simply: *Rio, if you read this, head for Nevada. A woman on a ranch called Valley of the Sun needs you.*

He pulled off the card and tossed it into the glove compartment of his pickup. There were other papers in there, sheets and cards and scraps he had gathered all over the West in the past month. The notes said essentially the same thing.

Go to the Valley of the Sun.

He shut the compartment with a snap and went around to the horse trailer. "What do you think, Dusk? You game for a few more miles?"

The elegant mare snuffled through the trailer window and lipped lazily at his open collar. He rubbed her soft muzzle, stretched again, and waited.

When the wind breathed over the high plains, he listened for the sound of his name. It came as it always did, a long sigh that called, *Brother-to-the-wind*.

And he answered as he always had. *I'm here.*

The wind turned and swirled around him, pressing at his back, pushing him south.

"You sure, brother?"

The wind pressed harder.

He got back into the truck and headed south.

One

Even in late October, drought ruled the Nevada ranch known as the Valley of the Sun. Thirst was a dusty shadow clinging to all life. The wind was always restless, always whispering of distance and the secrets of an empty land.

To the east of the ranch, a range of mountains known as the Sierras Perdidas rose dark and silent above the dry landscape. The mountains themselves were lush with the gifts of water—valleys thick with grass, high slopes rippling with forests, and a few sheltered snowfields glittering like diamonds far above the sunbaked afternoon.

Hope Gardener was too far away to see the snowfields or the water-rich valleys or the forests, but she knew they were there. They were always there, a dream to tantalize the ranchers who lived with the dry reality of the high desert that lapped around the mountains like a sagebrush sea around green islands. Even so, Hope wouldn't have traded a single one of the tawny, thirsty, harsh sections of her ranch for all the Sierras Perdidas' easy beauty.

But she wouldn't have minded some of the *Perdidas'* tumbling wealth of water.

She wasn't greedy. She wasn't asking for a deep river that ran year-round, or even a stream that ran upside down, concealing its water a few feet beneath a dry riverbed. She wasn't asking for a lake shivering with wind and trout.

A pond, though . . .

Yes, just a pond. Sweet water that could ease her cattle's endless thirst. Water to soothe and nourish the tender roots of alfalfa and oat hay. Just one source of water that would stay wet no matter how dry and hard the rest of the Valley of the Sun became.

"Why not ask for hot and cold running money while you're at it?" she asked herself sardonically. "If you're going to dream, dream big."

Her generous mouth turned down in a smile at her own expense. She came from a family of dreamers. Not one of them had managed to be lucky or good enough to make the dreams real.

She had vowed to be different. She was going to be the Gardener who would make the Valley of the Sun profitable again. Or at least possible to live on without going bankrupt.

"Then I'd better get to work, hadn't I?" she asked her reflection in the dusty, cracked, sunstruck windshield.

Nothing answered her but the rumble of the diesel engine and the wind keening through the open window of the ancient truck. She had stopped on top of a rise in the rough, one-lane dirt road to give the engine—and herself—a breather. The water truck dated from a time before power steering, automatic shift, and power brakes. Despite the strength of her deceptively elegant body, the truck gave her as much of a workout as she gave it. First gear was so cranky that she often parked on a slope and rolled downhill until she could coax the engine into second gear.

"C'mon, Behemoth. It's just you and me and my beautiful, thirsty cattle. Don't let me down."

As soon as she slipped the hand brake, the empty truck began to roll. She gathered speed in neutral until she had no choice but to engage the clutch or risk losing control of the truck on the steep slope. She double-clutched, shifted, muttered unhappily, and double-clutched again. This time the ancient water truck's gears grumbled and gnawed into place.

She patted the dusty instrument panel and settled in to wrestle the truck to the water tank. Road noises echoed around inside the truck's sun-faded cab. The steering wheel bucked hard in her hands. Instantly she braced her body and muscled the rented army-surplus truck back out of the ruts that drew tires like a magnet drawing iron dust. Muscles in her arms and her shoulders knotted in protest. She ignored the burning aches just as she ignored the exhaustion that had made her lose attention long enough to get trapped in the ruts.

"Just one more load," she promised herself. "Then you can kick back and watch Beauty and Baby drink."

At least, just one more load of water for today. Tomorrow was another day, another time of Nevada's seamless sunshine baking the dry land, another string of hours when only dust devils moved over the empty land. *And this battered truck*, she reminded herself silently. *Don't forget poor Behemoth, lurching over this lousy road like a dinosaur on the way to extinction.*

Like the Valley of the Sun itself, dying.

Hope set her teeth and forced herself to pay attention to the pot-holed road rather than to her thoughts circling like vultures around the certainty of the death of her ranch and her dreams. She reminded herself that tomorrow could bring many things. Just one of them would be enough to keep her dream alive.

One of the old wells could begin producing water again, enough water to see a core of her breeding stock through this endless drought.

The price of beef could rise, allowing her to sell the cattle she couldn't water at break-even prices.

The bank could decide that the last hydrologist's report on Silver

Rock Basin indicated a good probability of water and lend her enough money to go after it.

A hydrologist who wasn't a con artist might answer her ad and find the artesian river she believed flowed deep beneath her ranch.

It could even rain.

Hope leaned forward to peer out the dusty windshield at the Perdidás. A few wisps of water vapor clung to their rocky, rakish peaks. Not enough clouds. Not nearly enough. Rain might fall in the mountain high country in a day or two or three, but not in the high desert of her ranch, where the land cracked and bled sand and the cattle gathered around dry wells to bawl their thirst.

For an instant her reflection stared grimly back at her from the dirty glass. The western hat concealed everything about her face but the lines of worry and weariness thinning her otherwise full mouth. Her hazel eyes were just a flash of light within the dark shadow of the hat brim. Her loosely curling, bittersweet-chocolate hair was swept up and hidden from the sun beneath the battered crown of her hat. A few tendrils had escaped to lie along her neck, held there by the moisture that heat and the effort of controlling Behemoth had drawn from her fine-grained skin.

"Oh, boy, if your agent could only see you now," Hope muttered.

She made a face at the reflection of herself that faded even as her eyes focused on it, like a mirage shimmering above the empty desert.

"It's a good thing your fortune was in your legs, not in a pretty little-girl face. Because you aren't a little girl anymore. What will it be next birthday—twenty-six? And what do you want for your birthday, big girl? A well, you say? A nice, deep, clean, sweet, endless well?"

Hope's laughter was musical and humorous and sad. Almost twenty-six years ago her father had brought in a well that was nice and deep and clean and sweet. He had named it, and his just-born daughter, Hope. But the well hadn't been deep enough. Un-

less a miracle occurred, it would run dry by her twenty-sixth birthday.

The empty water truck rattled and shook down the steep grade to the Turner ranch boundary. More than miles separated the two ranches. One ranch had water. The other did not.

It was as simple and final as that.

No fences separated the two ranches. It wasn't necessary. No Turner cattle would wander miles away from water onto dry Gardener land. As for Gardener cattle, there had never been enough to wander anywhere. There had been plans, though, and dreams. Her grandfather's. Her father's. Her own.

And there had been the land, a land Hope loved as she had never loved anything else. Other girls had dreamed of boyfriends and babies, honeymoons and happily-ever-afters. Hope hadn't.

Any desire she might have had to share her girlfriends' dreams had died on her eighteenth birthday. What little trust in men and love she'd had after that night had been ground to nothing as she saw her own mother and Julie, her beautiful older sister, go through hell in the name of love.

Watching them had taught Hope to pour her faith and dreams and hungers into the land. Its tawny power called out to her senses as no man ever had.

The land endured and love did not.

Deep inside herself, she had always known that she was a woman born for enduring things. Unlike her mother, Hope knew she wouldn't be able to walk away from a man she loved. Unlike her sister, Hope couldn't go from man to man, leaving behind pieces of herself until nothing remained but a hollow smile.

A jerk from the steering wheel yanked Hope out of the unhappy past into the demanding present. She wrenched the steering wheel hard, holding the lumbering Behemoth to the rutted road.

The truck rounded a shoulder of the rugged hills and dropped down into a long, narrow valley. At the lower end of the valley, one

of Turner's windmills rose thinly above the land. There was a startling flash of green around the machinery, sagebrush and willows and grass gone wild, a silent shout of vegetation signaling the presence of water.

The patch of lush green was just under ten acres. In the center of the ragged emerald saucer sat a circular metal tank that was filled to overflowing by the windmill's tireless turning. The windmill's metal straw went more than six hundred feet into the earth, sipping up water that was clean and cold and pure.

Cattle lay in the lacy shade of huge clumps of sagebrush and desert shrubs, chewing quietly, waiting for the sun to descend. The Herefords' russet hides made a rich contrast to the green oasis.

Despite Hope's weariness, she shouldered open the stubborn cab door and jumped lithely to the ground. A quick look beneath Behemoth's ungainly barrel assured her that the lower valve was closed tight. After a brief struggle with balky canvas coils, she connected the intake hose. There was another struggle to connect the hose to her patchwork pump.

The portable generator that ran the pump was so old that it had to be started with a hand crank. She had discovered the pump rusting in the barn almost three months ago. That was when she had the idea of hauling Turner water to Gardener cattle in the hope of surviving until the rainy season began.

At first it had been a trip every three or four days through the searing August sun to supplement her ranch's overworked wells. But by October the rains still hadn't come, not even to the high country of the Sierras Perdidas. She'd made the trip to Turner's well every two days, then every day. Twice a day. Four times a day. Dawn to dusk and then even longer as the drought continued and the water table fell more and more, slowly going beyond the reach of her ranch wells.

When the wind alone couldn't draw enough water from the depths of the land, she had connected portable generators to three of her windmills. Now, on the last day of October, her generators

worked around-the-clock to bring up less and less water. And Hope—Hope worked until she couldn't lift her arms to drag Behemoth around one more bumpy curve. Only then did she sleep, a sleep haunted by the bawling of thirsty cattle.

She pulled off her leather work gloves, stuck them into the hip pocket of her jeans, and picked up the battered tin bucket that leaned against the pump. Like her cattle, Behemoth's radiator had a bottomless thirst.

A gust of unseasonably hot wind swelled through the narrow valley, making the windmill's arms turn with lazy grace.

As Hope reached to dip the pail into the huge circular trough, she hesitated, caught by the beauty of water welling over the lip of the metal pond. The fluid silver veil fell musically to the ground, creating a rich, dark ribbon of earth that cattle had churned into ankle-deep mud.

The mud didn't bother her. It made her envious. She would have moved heaven and earth to see mud like that around her own wells. Her stock tanks didn't overflow slowly, turning baked ground into a wealth of earth oozing with promise. Her own wells couldn't even keep up with the searching, dusty muzzles of her cattle.

Balancing on the plank walkway that she had made over the slick mud, she braced herself against the tank. Overflowing water was a cool shock against her thighs and a dark stain spread down her jeans. She set down the dry bucket, put her hat inside, and thrust her arms elbow-deep into the sweet water. She brought her cupped hands to her face in a silver shower of moisture and laughter that was as musical as the sound of water overflowing.

Deep within one of the nearby thickets, a horse moved restively at the sudden sound of laughter. The rider bent his dark head next to the horse's and murmured softly. The mare quieted, returning to her three-legged doze.

With the silence of a shadow, the man flowed out of the saddle. He had heard the truck's labored approach and had watched

Hope's efforts to set up the makeshift hose that would fill the empty truck. He had lifted the reins to guide his horse out of the concealing brush to offer help, but something about her had stopped him.

Though obviously tired, she moved with the grace of a wild thing as she filled the big truck's steaming radiator and coped with the ancient equipment. Slender, determined, she used an instinctive knowledge of leverage when her own strength wasn't enough to handle the awkward machinery. A hip braced here, a shoulder thrust there, a quick twist of her hands, and she coaxed the ragged canvas hose into place.

And then her laughter came, as bright and unexpected as water in a desert.

Now her faded jeans and shirt clung wetly to her, revealing a body as surprisingly lush as the dark tumble of her hair burning beneath the sun. She was long-legged, elegantly curved, and her breasts were completely outlined by the wet blouse.

He couldn't help responding to the picture she made as she stood arched against the sky, totally lost in her sensual response to the sparkling water pouring from her outstretched hands. He wondered if she would come to a man like that, nothing held back, nothing calculated, a quicksilver woman laughing and shimmering in his arms.

A slight smile softened the otherwise unyielding lines of his face. No wonder John Turner had kept trying to lure Hope into his bed by proposing marriage. If rumor was true, she kept turning him down, had been turning the rancher down since she came back to the ranch two years ago.

That had made him curious enough to ride his mare out to the well on a day that was hot enough to cure leather. He'd wanted to see a woman who cared more for a doomed ranch than she did for any man, even a rich white-eyes.

Any other woman would have given in to the inevitability of sink-

ing water tables and drought-ridden land. Any other woman would have shaken off the Valley of the Sun's brutal demands like a dog coming out of water and would have been happy to curl up at Turner's big feet.

But not this woman. She was out here alone, a battered tin bucket in one hand and her dreams in the other.

Hope put on her hat, filled the bucket, primed the pump, pulled on her gloves with a few practiced motions, and began wrestling with the crank that was supposed to start the generator. The iron handle was long and had been in the direct sunlight. Even through leather gloves, the rough iron felt warm.

Like Behemoth, the machine was stubborn. Hope had to use both hands and a lot of determination just to make the crank turn. To make it turn fast enough to start the generator took every bit of strength she had.

With a grimace she forced her tired arms to drag the crank around quickly. The generator sputtered and almost caught. Encouraged, she worked harder, thinking of her beautiful black breeding cattle waiting by their hot, dry trough. Far too hot for October, nearly November. Far too dry.

If it wasn't for this wretched generator, she would have been forced to sell off the last of her range cattle and the first of her Angus. The thought gave strength to her aching arms. The generator coughed and shivered, but refused to catch.

"Let me help."

The quiet male voice startled Hope. She let go of the crank and whirled around.

Only the man's quickness saved her from getting a painful rap as the crank's long iron handle leaped upward, completing the circuit she had begun. He lifted her out of danger with one arm and with the other hand snagged the crank handle.

Automatically Hope balanced herself by putting her hands on his shoulders. Even as she wondered who he was, her senses registered

the bunched strength of his arms and the long, resilient muscles of his torso and legs.

The man moved and she found herself safely on her feet again as suddenly as she had been snatched off them.

"I—thanks," she managed.

He nodded but didn't look away from the generator.

Hope watched while he worked the ancient machine with a power and coordination that fascinated her. He was well over six feet tall, long-limbed, wide-shouldered. The hair that showed beneath his battered Stetson was thick and straight, as blue-black as a raven flying through the desert sky. His clothes were dusty from riding, but otherwise clean. A shadow of satin-black hair showed in the open front of his faded blue work shirt. His skin was dark, almost mahogany. His boots were like his leather belt—supple, worn, of the highest quality. The buckle closing his belt was smooth silver with an intricate inlay of turquoise, coral, and mother-of-pearl.

She recognized the Zuni workmanship and the cryptic symbols telling of a shaman calling down rain upon the thirsty land. Gradually she realized that the buckle was not an ornament for this man. Like his hair and his skin, the symbols were part of his heritage.

The generator surged into life, sucking water from the circular trough. The hose leading to the truck began to swell. She watched as the man studied the generator, made an adjustment in the hose coupling, and listened with a cocked head to the engine's racket. In some ways he reminded her of her stallion, Storm Walker. There was a physical assurance about him that spoke of horizons explored, tests passed, and a primal awareness of his life in relation to the land around him.

The hose became as tight as a sausage. Water shot out in a fine spray from the coupling he had adjusted. There was less water wasted than usual, because he had tightened the coupling more securely than Hope ever had been able to.