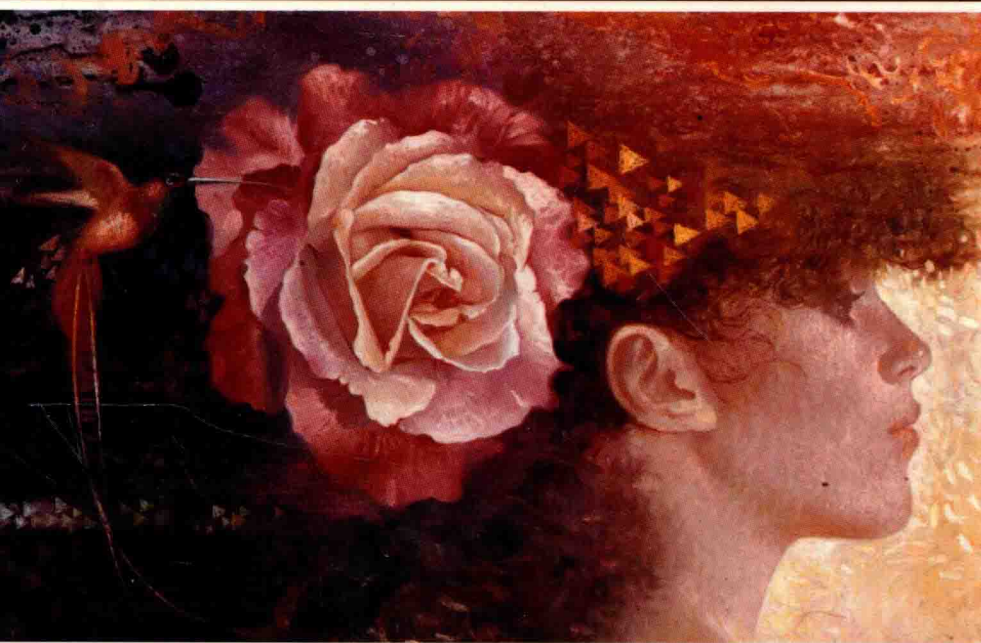


*ELAINE
BARBIERI*



*More Precious
Than Gold*

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PRECIOUS
THAN GOLD*

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KENSINGTON BOOKS

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Prologue

A leaden sky hung threateningly over the denuded hillside as Carolina braced herself against the biting wind. The muddy ground tugged at the hem of her gown as she walked between the uneven rows of grave markers and finally dropped to her knees beside the one she sought. Tears blurred her vision as she stared at the roughly carved name.

Bittersweet memories swept over her. She remembered the first time this man had held her in his arms. She recalled the tremor in his voice, the promise in his eyes, and the taste of his lips. She remembered that he had trembled as well as she in that ecstatic moment when their eager flesh had met, and that she had loved him so.

The wind whipped harder, flaying her with loosened strands of pale hair. Covering her face with her hands, Carolina sobbed. Her memories of him were so keen that they were almost debilitating. But somehow lost amid the joys, sorrows, and regrets was the most crucial detail of all—that exact moment when everything changed, and the beginning became the beginning of the end.

Chapter One

1876

Black Hills, South Dakota

The ground trembled under the thunder of approaching horses as gunfire from the circled wagons grew heavier. Savage war whoops echoed above shouted commands from within the grouped wagons, drowning out sharp cries of pain signifying another of the wagon train party had fallen.

Covering her ears against sounds of the lethal scene, a terrified young woman burrowed lower between boxes stacked beneath her wagon. She slid out a hand to adjust the canvas sheeting shielding her from sight just as a heavy body thudded to the ground nearby and a painted face loomed suddenly above her. Yanked viciously to her feet by her hair, she looked up, frozen with horror, to see a war ax swiftly descending.

Shattering pain was simultaneous with the sound of a gunshot and a piercing scream that she did not recognize as her own.

Darkness.

The smell of smoke penetrated the young woman's unconsciousness and she coughed, then coughed again. It was so hot

She struggled against her discomfort, fighting to overcome the throbbing in her head that robbed her of lucid thought as she forced her eyes open.

Fire!

Managing to drag herself out from under the burning wagon, the young woman collapsed a few yards away. Uncertain how much time had elapsed, she opened her eyes again to a twilight that was strangely without sound. The pounding in her head continued as she touched a shaky hand to her temple. She drew it back sticky with blood and a desperate urgency invaded her senses. Forcing herself to her feet, she took one wobbling step, then two. A keening wail started within her mind as she surveyed the carnage around her.

Bloodied bodies, grotesquely mutilated, littered the ground against a backdrop of charred and burning wagons. Staggering among the debris, she shook one grisly form and then another, to no avail. They were all dead. . . .

Turning, the stunned young woman saw another body illuminated by the flames of the wagon under which she had been lying, and a new sobbing began inside her. Fighting the heat of the blaze, she inched closer, crawling on her hands and knees, until she stared down into the smoke-blackened face of a young man. Blank, lifeless eyes stared back at her and she screamed aloud.

Not him! He couldn't be dead!

The heat of the blaze grew more intense, driving her back. Swaying to her feet, she fled blindly. Breathless, the hammering in her head growing more intense with every step, she stumbled, then picked herself up to run again. She was still running as daylight waned and darkness closed around her.

The call of a bird penetrated the young woman's confused dreams, and she awoke with a start. Her eyes snapped open, renewing the pain in her head which had been with her through the dark hours of the night. She looked at the unfamiliar wilderness surrounding her, at the slope of heavily foliated hills and great natural walls of stone illuminated by the first light of morning, and her panic grew. She was cold. Her throat was parched and sore and the drumming in her head was unrelenting. Fear and a strange

panic assailed her as another misery which had struck her during the night grew stronger. Dragging herself to her feet, she stumbled on.

The sun was high when the young woman was unable to walk any longer. The throbbing in her head was intense, but it could not compete with the pains that knifed through her body, doubling her up, bringing her to her knees.

Collapsing, she writhed in agony. The sun blazed a brilliant red against her closed eyelids as she cried out aloud. She was being torn in two, to die alone in the wilderness. It wasn't supposed to be this way. . . .

A sound in the brush, and the young woman caught her breath. A vision of the painted face of death returned and her eyes snapped open once more to see a horse and rider had drawn up a few feet away. The heavily bearded man was on his knees beside her in a moment. She was caught by the intensity of green eyes shot with gold as he studied her, and by the unexpected resentment she glimpsed there as his dark brows furrowed and he questioned her sharply.

"You're havin' that baby now, aren't you?"

Another pain, more severe than the last convulsed her. Unable to speak, the startled young woman clutched her distended stomach. Her eyes widened in sudden realization.

Oh, God . . . she was having a baby. . . .

His forehead beaded with sweat although the morning was chilled, Drake McNeil stared at the wild-eyed young woman lying on the ground. He swore under his breath as he crouched beside her. He looked at her head wound, then at her small, white hands where they clasped her bulging stomach. No one had had to tell him that the smoke he had seen on the horizon a day earlier marked the spot where Indians had caught up with another party of gold seekers, and no one had to tell him that this woman was probably the lone survivor of that train.

With an angry sound of disapproval, Drake turned to his horse and retrieved his canteen. Kneeling back beside the young woman, he supported her shoulders carefully and held the canteen to her

lips. She drank greedily, her light eyes closing a moment later as she drew back sharply with a small, incoherent sound.

Another thing no one had to tell him was that this woman's time was near.

The woman's face contorted with pain. She cried out, and Drake's heart began a slow pounding. He swore again under his breath, then addressed her flatly.

"I'll do the best I can for you, lady."

His bearded face stiff, Drake raised her skirt.

There was no present, only pain. Floating in a nether world beyond consciousness, the young woman heard the bearded man's voice, but it was not his words that gave her ease. The tone of his voice was reminiscent of one she had heard before. It teased her pain-filled mind.

Reaching out, she grasped his hand. He looked up at her and she saw that he was angry . . . resentful, but she also saw—

A breathtaking pain shattered her thoughts and the young woman cried out aloud. Another pain followed, and another until her confused mind whirled in an agony without end.

Then a sudden, momentous thrust . . . sweet release . . . a baby's cry.

Darkness.

Chapter Two

Keenly aware of the unnatural silence of his cabin, Drake stooped to add another log to the already blazing fire. His expression dark, he glanced around him, scrutinizing the hasty shelter he had erected a few months earlier to protect himself from the rigors of winter in the Black Hills wilderness. He had made the furnishings himself—a rough table and chair and a cot that spared him the dampness of the dirt floor. They had been sufficient for his needs, but it had not been until that particular moment that he had become fully aware of the crudeness of his surroundings, of the dank smell of mildew, and of the chilling dampness that the fire did not dispel. Drake glanced at the woman who lay sleeping on the cot nearby and his discomfiture increased. The woman's shuddering had intensified and he knew her condition was not good. Her head wound was severe and she had suffered from exposure to the severe dip in temperature the night before he had found her. She had also lost a lot of blood.

His concern deepening, Drake strode to the corner of the room and picked up a fur robe lying there. Back at the woman's side, he adjusted it across the blanket that covered her, but he knew it would do little good. Beneath the dirt and bloodstains that marked her face, he could see her color growing hotter. Her temperature was rising.

Taking an anxious breath, Drake looked toward the small wooden crate on the table a few feet away. His stomach clenched as he assessed the infant resting quietly within. Wrapped in the remains of her mother's petticoat, the grime of birth washed from her fair skin as well as his awkward hands had been able to manage it, the little girl was motionless except for the occasional pursing of her incredibly dainty lips.

As he watched, the infant's fine features wrinkled into the preface of a wail, and panic rose anew in Drake's mind. With a soft string of oaths that he knew was unfit for her dainty ears, he picked up a small, knotted cloth lying beside her and dipped it into a nearby cup. He lifted the infant into his arms and touched the moistened cloth lightly against her lips.

There it was again . . . that tightening in his stomach in the moment before the baby seized upon it and began sucking. Still holding the infant a short time later as her almost translucent lids drifted closed, Drake was momentarily incredulous. Damn it all, how had this happened? How had he come to be standing here, in a cabin in the wilderness, pacifying a baby with a sugar teat? How had he become responsible for a sick woman whose name he didn't even know—a woman who would probably not survive another week in her present condition? And what in hell would he do with this baby if she didn't?

His frustration building, Drake lowered the infant back into the wooden crate, more acutely aware than ever before that he was in the middle of hostile Indian territory, several days from the nearest town. He hadn't minded the isolation when he had first arrived. He had actually anticipated the eventual arrival of other prospectors with distaste, although he had known it was inevitable. General Custer's announcement that the sacred Black Hills of the Sioux were rich in gold had started a determined influx of gold seekers, despite the illegality of any claims they might attempt to stake. The first to arrive the previous year had been driven from the hills by the army and their gold had been confiscated. Others had managed to avoid army patrols only to suffer the same fate as this woman's wagon train. But others, like him, had proved that no one could keep them from going where they wanted to go.

Drake's huge hands balled unconsciously into fists. He had

settled into this ravine while snow was still on the ground and fierce storms had guaranteed that the Indians had gone to winter on the reservation. He had taken only enough time to erect this simple cabin before setting up a crude placer mining operation in the nearby stream, and in the months since that time, his work had netted him enough color to make the effort more than worthwhile. His small sack of gold dust was growing. Everything had been progressing according to plan, until now.

Drake controlled the urge to curse again. He was still uncertain what had prompted him to start over the hill to investigate the sounds that had echoed down to him as he had worked. His present predicament was his reward.

An unexpected whimper from the woman who lay on his cot a few feet away interrupted Drake's frustrated thoughts. The woman jumped with a start, in the throes of a vicious dream if he were to judge by her thrashing about and the look of terror on her face. He walked instinctively toward her and stood looking down at her twitching face. It was strange . . . He had just delivered this woman's child. He had touched her intimately, in ways he was certain no other man had ever touched her before. He knew she was in pain and that her life lay in his hands, but he felt more contempt than sympathy for her. She was an adult, responsible for her own actions and for the stupidity and greed that had brought her to her present state of affairs. He told himself that although they had both come to the hills in search of gold, his decision had been carefully weighed. Before making it, he had assessed the risks, knowing he could expect no help or protection from the army on land that had been legally ceded to the Indians years earlier. He had then accepted full responsibility for his actions, knowing he had no one to blame but himself should anything happen. Most important of all—the only life he had put at risk had been his *own*.

Drake unconsciously turned toward the sleeping infant. For all intents and purposes, this woman had signed her unborn child's death warrant with the first step she had taken onto Indian ground. She had needed only to wait for it to be served. She had not waited long.

The young woman's thrashing increased, and Drake raised his bearded chin in an unconscious gesture of defiance. The painful

truth was obvious. The baby's survival depended on the survival of the mother. He'd do his best for the woman just as he had said he would, but the contempt remained.

Seating himself on the edge of the cot, Drake withdrew a cloth from the pan of water lying on the floor nearby. The young woman regained consciousness with a start as he attempted to clean the bloody gash on her head. She made a strange, choked sound, terror in her gaze as it met his. Her silver eyes held his stare for long moments before the terror faded abruptly and she closed her eyes.

Drake's contempt soared. She trusted him . . . without knowing who or what he was! She was even more of a fool than he had thought her to be.

Drake drew himself abruptly to his feet. He stood towering over the sleeping woman before picking up the pan beside the bed and walking to the fireplace. Returning with warm water and a bar of soap, he sat beside her again, his expression stiff. Knowing he could not put off the task any longer, he lathered the cloth, the heat of the woman's brow searing his skin as he cleansed her wound. She was mumbling incoherently when he drew back, satisfied the wound was finally clean and intensely aware that his ministrations could not stop there.

—More angry by the minute, Drake began working at the buttons on the woman's dress. She was a pathetic sight. Her hair was matted with dried blood, her face scratched and blackened with smoke, and her clothes torn and bloodied, but he felt little pity. Knowing he had no choice he stripped her free of her clothes and wrapped her in a blanket without sparing her nakedness a conscious glance.

Returning from the fireplace with fresh water, Drake lathered the cloth and cautiously bathed her face. Small, unexceptional features and smooth white skin emerged from beneath the grime, revealing unexpected youth. Continuing his chore, he told himself it made little difference that the narrow shoulders he scrubbed so carefully seemed hardly strong enough to support a woman's tasks, and that the small, pink-nippled breasts did not appear adequate for the task of nursing the babe. He frowned at arms that did not give the appearance of any great strength, at a rib cage and stomach that seemed remarkably flat, considering the

great protrusion there only a few hours earlier, at barely curving hips . . .

Drake's hand momentarily stilled. His throat tightened as he viewed the stains of birth on this slight woman's female delta and slender thighs. Only a few hours earlier this thin, almost childlike body had brought new life into the world. He had taken the child from this woman's womb. He had heard its first cry—and he knew he would never forget it.

Drake continued his work without pausing again until the woman was spotlessly clean, redressed in his only spare shirt, and carefully wrapped to avoid further staining. Finally sitting back, he assessed her silently. Pale brown hair, dark brows, small, ordinary features, and so painfully thin. . . . She was a plain, colorless little wren, but he had learned the hard way that a young, innocent face often concealed a heart as cold as stone. Beautiful or plain, all women were the same. Some were luckier than others, that was all.

The gold band on the woman's finger caught the light and Drake thought of the young woman's husband. That fellow had already paid the price of his greed. Would she pay as well?

A violent shudder wracked the woman's slender frame and Drake's jaw tightened.

The long night yielded abruptly into day in a way that Drake had come to know was typical of the Black Hills. Hardly conscious of the brilliant sunshine streaming through the small windows of the cabin, he wearily rubbed his bearded chin as he assessed his unwelcome charges.

Well, they had made it through the night.

Stretching the stiffness from his broad shoulders and powerful arms, Drake flexed hands cramped from the delicacy of the tasks he had been performing for hours on end. All was quiet. He knew, however, that the silence was only temporary. As she had throughout the night, the infant would soon begin with a whimper that would build into a hungry wail. He would then pick her up and spend a few frantic minutes attempting to satisfy her with sugar water. She would fall off into a restless sleep afterward, only to begin crying again a short time later. That routine had

established itself mercilessly throughout the night, and he knew with steadily growing apprehension that sugar water had its limitations. The babe would soon need more nourishment.

Frowning, Drake looked back at the infant's mother. The woman was temporarily quiet, but the deep flush to her skin revealed that she was not doing well. He had spent the night splitting his attentions between her and the infant while thoughts of childbed fever raised his anxiety. The woman was a fool, but he did not wish her dead.

As if in response to his thoughts, the woman cried out softly. A glistening veil of perspiration appeared on her skin and the violent shuddering he had fought during the night resumed abruptly, with a vengeance. Within moments, her eyes grew frenzied and her teeth began chattering audibly, and Drake knew the time had come for drastic measures.

Snatching up the nearby bucket, Drake walked to the door. Back from the stream a few moments later, he stripped the blanket from the woman's shaking form and plunged it into the cold water. He wrung the blanket as dry as his shaking hands could manage and taking a deep breath, covered her with it.

If he lived to be one hundred, Drake knew he would never forget the stark terror in the woman's eyes or the eerie cry that escaped her quivering lips when the cold blanket touched her heated skin. Nor would he forget the accusation in her fevered gaze. In the space of a moment, her disoriented mind had registered betrayal and declared him an enemy. She became a fragile bird, struggling in the clutch of a dark predator, panicked, wild, determined to win her freedom, even at the cost of her life.

Resolved that he would not let her pay that price, Drake clasped the woman's arms against her sides, restraining her with the weight of his torso. The erratic beating of her heart pounded against his chest as she continued fighting him, but she was weak. Knowing she could not survive much more, Drake cupped her thin face between his palms and forced her to look up at him.

Uncertain if she could hear him, much less comprehend his words, Drake rasped, "Stop fightin'. Listen to me! I'm tryin' to help you, not hurt you, damn it! I won't let you die, but you have to do your part! You have to relax—lie easy. I'll do the rest."

The woman's struggle continued and panic nudged his senses

as he continued harshly, "You trusted me before and I helped you. I'm tryin' to help you again. Listen to me, please. . . ." Despising the plea that had entered his voice and the fact that he did not even know her name, Drake promised, "I want you to get well."

The woman's struggles slowed and Drake felt a surge of hope. Knowing the battle was not yet won, Drake drew closer to her, fixing her gaze with his as he whispered, "I'm goin' to try to get your fever down. You have to trust that I'm doin' what's best for you. Will you let me do it? Tell me you trust me."

Drake waited for her response as the woman searched his face with her wavering gaze. He stared at her lips as they struggled to form words that would not come, and his throat tightened. She could not afford to expend any more energy fighting him. He needed to regain her confidence if he hoped to save her life. He pressed, "Do you trust me?"

The woman's lips moved again and Drake leaned closer. His heart began a furious pounding as she forced a single, hissing sound.

"Y . . . yes . . ."

Drake drew back abruptly. Forcing aside reaction to her weak response, he turned to the task before him. The ritual began . . . soaking the blanket in cold water . . . wrapping the shuddering woman until it warmed . . . soaking the blanket again . . . racing steps back and forth to the stream . . . endless moments of uncertainty.

The sun was high as Drake returned from the stream with fresh water and walked wearily through the doorway once more. His senses suddenly acute as he approached the bed, he stopped abruptly. Something was wrong. The woman was motionless, her thin face devoid of color except for a faint tinge of blue around her still lips.

Beside her in a second, Drake grasped her arms. Her body was cold. He shook her, unwilling to accept—

A small sound, and Drake froze into motionlessness. The woman's lips moved as she whimpered again. Her eyelids fluttered and relief flushed his senses.

"You're all right. . . ."

Again a single word. "Yes."

Chapter Three

Light pressed against her closed eyelids and the young woman fought to respond. She had floated in the darkness for so long—but she had not been alone. The sounds of a deep male voice had echoed in that void, allowing the image of clear green eyes to supplant the painted face of death that had terrorized her dreams. The throbbing in her head had responded to gentle probing, and the fire that had burned under her skin had cooled just as the voice had promised. She had known it would.

The man had asked her to trust him, and she had. He had not seemed to realize that the plea was unnecessary. She trusted him because she had recognized him the moment she had seen the startling color of his eyes and heard his voice.

The woman slowly opened her eyes, struggling to focus. The pounding in her head had lessened, but her body ached and her breasts burned. Her arms were leaden weights that refused to obey her as she attempted to raise her hand. Abandoning the attempt, she looked uncertainly around the primitive cabin.

Stark log walls met her view, their sole decorations a variety of canvas bags, cooking equipment, and harnesses hanging from nails. A pot boiled over the fire in a fireplace across from her bed, and standing at the nearby table, a big man fussed over a wooden box resting there. She knew it was he, and although she