

A woman is shown from the chest up, holding a large, multi-colored quilt. The quilt is draped over her shoulder and extends across the frame. The background is a soft-focus landscape of rolling hills and mountains under a warm, golden sunset sky. The overall mood is peaceful and nostalgic.

THE KINSHIP *and* COURAGE SERIES

BOOK *no.* TWO

No Eye
Can See

JANE KIRKPATRICK

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR *of* ALL TOGETHER IN ONE PLACE

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*This book is dedicated to
my husband, Jerry,
for always helping me to see.*



CAST OF CHARACTERS



The widows, *All Together in One Place*

Suzanne Cullver, a former
photographer
Clayton and Sason, her boys
Mazy Bacon, a farmer
Elizabeth Mueller, Mazy's
mother
Ruth Martin, a horsewoman and
auntie to Jason, Ned, Sarah,
and Jessie
Lura Schmidtke, a business-
woman
Mariah, her daughter
Matthew, her son
Adora Wilson, a shopkeeper's
wife
Tipton, her daughter, age 15
Charles, her son
Sister Esther Maeves, a contrac-
tor for mail-order brides
Zilah, Mei-Ling, and Naomi,
the surviving Celestials

Shasta City characters

Seth Forrester, a white-collared
man
Zane Randolph/Wesley Marks,
Ruth's husband
David Taylor, a stage driver
Greasy, a gold miner
Oltipa, a Wintu Indian woman
Ben, her son
*Nehemiah Kossuth, hotel owner
and silversmith
*Ernest Dobrowsky, jeweler and
gunsmith
*Sam Dosh, editor, *The Courier*
*Rev. Hill, a pastor
*Koon Chong, a Chinese
merchant
Johnny, a Cantonese helper
Estelle Williams, a banker
*Actual people in Shasta City,
1852

No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived
what God has prepared for those who love him.

1 CORINTHIANS 2:9 (NIV)

*I'm not afraid of lightning nor the wolf at my door
I'm not afraid of dying alone, anymore.
But when journeys are over and there's fruit on the vine
I'm afraid I'll be missing what we left behind.*

What We Left Behind

by MARV ROSS

Home is not only the place you start from, but the place you
come back to...where dreams are sustained, hurts healed,
where our stories are told.

From *Landscapes of the Soul*

by ROBERT M. HAMMA

prologue

His arms outstretched, he called to her, his voice deep and far away. “Look up here, then. At me.” Suzanne Cullver found his gaze behind round lenses, the sun glinting off the wire frames. “I’ll catch you if you fall,” he said.

She heard, wanted to believe, but she hesitated, watching her husband brace himself against the current as he stood in the middle of the stream. He didn’t belong here. Something was wrong, but she couldn’t imagine what. He wore butternut-colored pants with a row of silver buttons just below his waist. Water splashed up high on the pant legs he’d rolled up to his knees. Suspenders, two lines of cedar-red tracks, marked his bare chest. He looked boyish, hair falling over one eye, a wide grin of encouragement given just for her. “Put your foot on that rock, there.” He pointed with his chin to a gun-gray stone smeared with moss of green.

“It looks...slick,” Suzanne said above the water’s rushing. Bryce’s bare toes shimmered jagged beneath the water swirling around his legs. She could see the sinew and muscle of his calves, how he held himself steady against the push of water. He looked so sturdy. Then in an instant, he whooped aloud, arms circling like a windmill. His face took on a flush of worry—but then he laughed, his hearty life-loving laugh, as he straightened, keeping himself balanced.

“It’s not so bad out here in the middle,” he said. “Just look up. Keep your focus and you’ll be fine. Just like the good photographer you are.”

Her mind drifted with the word. *Focus*. She remembered something about the word in Latin meaning *hearth*. The hub of home. Why that word?

She felt a pain in her side, a sharpness that irritated her. She set it aside. Instead, she gazed down at her feet, surprised to be able to see them. Then she lifted the hem of her ruffled skirt and stepped forward into the stream. Stay focused? On what? The water, the rocks, him?

She became aware of sounds around her. Mules grinding at grain. Oxen bawling. Women chattering and the scent of lavender and herbs. The sounds floated through the air as she slid down the grassy bank—no, drifted—toward her husband.

Now Suzanne could see herself as though from a distance, her tapered nails holding the embroidery of her lingerie dress, her reticule dangling at her narrow wrist. She shivered with the coldness of the stream covering her slippered feet. She longed for the warmth of Bryce's hands.

"I'm falling!" She heard the warning in her own voice. "Bryce? I'm falling. Help me."

"You're fine. Keep coming."

He smiled, oh, how he smiled at her, so warm, so brushed with feathery love. He pushed the shock of dark hair from his eyes, adjusted the tiny round glasses, bent, and reached for her outstretched fingers.

She could see her own face reflected in the water then, her full lips, the blush of geranium petals she'd rubbed that morning against her rounded cheeks. Wispy strands of hair the color of spun gold drifted over her eyes, eyes as warm as summer, as rich as sable. Inviting, everyone said. Water pooled in them. Could that be? How could she see herself? And in such a fast-moving stream?

Suzanne felt a pain again at her side, then the cold and something else—an ache of knowing and not wanting to, of waking and not wishing to leave. "Bryce," she said again, a cry this time arriving on a wave of anguish that tightened her chest. "Bryce!" His name caught in her throat. She knew he could not stay in this still place while water swirled about, knew her cry could not keep her from waking to what already was.

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She felt the wetness press at her eyes as the dream-state drifted away—taking with it the sight of the man that she loved.

Awake, she blinked back the tears. This was her life now. The sounds of the women and oxen, those were real. And the darkness—her darkness. She lay in it, resigned. She was not a wife reaching out to her husband, but a widow, a blind widow, wistful and full of desire.

eye for an eye

Autumn 1852, west of Fort Laramie

The sucking in of his own breath broke the desert silence. He forced himself to relax, open his mouth slightly. Noisy, this habit of breathing. He would have to change that once he reached his destination, change the way he took in breath as he'd changed the way he dressed, the way he'd now survive. The shallow breathing had allowed him life, when he merely existed inside the smell of his own stench, inside the walls of that Missouri prison. Back then, he took in gasps of air. He forced his tongue against the roof of his mouth and kept from crying out when the beatings couldn't be stopped.

But now he straightened his shoulders, inhaled deeply of the dry air around him. The trail west looked long and empty, but it lured him. Enticed him.

She enticed him.

He forced his heartbeat to settle into a rhythm as steady as a guard's night stick tapping against iron bars. Back then, he had transformed his pain and humiliation into something driven, something of steel that pounded inside him like a hammer. And he'd thought of her. Every day. A woman more loathsome than what he had become. It was her flesh the canes struck against; her body he imagined would someday lie awake as he had—listening for the raspy breathing of a guard or an

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inmate gone mad. Someday she'd hear her own breath sucked in with worry and confusion, hear her racing heart seek freedom. It was her world he would torment. He'd make her wonder whether the sounds she heard were rats scurrying across a floor or the steps of someone coming in the night for her as she lay unguarded.

a satchel named desire

1852, beside the Humboldt River

The last week in the life of the Celestial known as Zilah began as it had those past few days on the desert: hot, yet scented with hope. Trying not to wake them, Zilah pulled her trembling body from the straw mattress she shared with the boy Clayton and his mother, Suzanne. Out of habit, she looked up and scanned the narrow wagon, seeking the white shawl that held the baby, Sason, suspended in his cloth cradle from the wagon's iron bow.

All fine. Baby all fine, sleep.

She swallowed, took in a deep breath. Her heart raced.

No reason, no reason heart race like startled dog.

Zilah fluttered over the unseeing mother who said two, three times a day now, maybe more: "I'm so glad you'll be with us in California, Zilah. We couldn't do it without you, we just couldn't."

Why she say that? Not do what without Zilah? What she plan, that woman?

Missy Sue made moaning sounds but did not wake.

Neither did the boy, neither one. This was good. Once awake, the child Clayton moved like dust chased by whirlwinds, racing, racing. "Boy like satchel named desire, always looking, wanting, try fill it much," she told his mother once after a morning crawling after the

child beneath wagons, whisking him, too close behind the tails of oxen switching at flies, too fast.

“I suppose you’re right, Zilah,” Missy Sue told her. “We all are just satchels of desire, wanting things to fill us up.” Suzanne had twisted her yellow hair then, into a roll at the top of her head as they’d sat outside in the shade of the wagon. “Still, it’s desire that drives us. All of us. Why should it be different with a small boy?”

Finished, Suzanne had stood and reached for the leather halter worn by the dog that behaved as the woman’s eyes. “My husband always said that desire was nothing to fear. It need only be focused.”

“Yes, Missy Sue,” Zilah told her, almond eyes dropped to the ground. Zilah wasn’t certain of the meaning of the word *focused*. Keeping safe, that was Zilah’s wish, what she filled up her satchel of desire with. Spiders of fear ran up her spine. Who knew what kind of husband waited for her in California? Who knew what danger lurked behind the eyes of people? So much was uncertain.

This morning beside the Humboldt, all in this wagon slept on.

This good.

Zilah dropped through the oval canvas opening, landing on the earth soft, like a bat dropping from a clinging place. The wide blue silk pants fluttered at her ankles.

No more long dress now. Not wear dress. Catch on sage and stickers. Wear legs now. Better, like Missy Ruth.

Zilah looked for the slender woman dressed as a man, whip on her hip. Did not find her.

Must be with horses, always with horses.

Zilah, turned, listened, then looked up. Two red-tailed hawks danced above her. Wind threaded through their wings. She watched the pair rise, catching currents over the white desert sand like children catch snowflakes on their tongues—one moment there, then gone. Zilah sucked in a deep breath, cowered.

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Bird hurt me! Fly close! Too close!

She swatted at them, swirled herself around in the dirt, batting at birds high above.

She watched then as something black with small ears and a long tail sniffed beneath a wagon.

Bear too close! No bear. Dog. Belong Missy Suzanne. Stay away! Stay away!

Zilah shook her head, took in a deep breath. All the other women still slept, and she felt alone in this vast bowl of sagebrush and sand held by mountains with purple arms. She headed out. Hard white pebbles pressed through her thin slippers as she shuffled past the wagons. The day promised more sand and rock and uncertainty once they left the safety of the Humboldt.

Today, they headed west, Seth Forrester said, away from the sureness of the river trail, out across the desert. Her stomach filled with butterflies. Her arms ached and she shook.

Carrying boy Clayton, too much. Make weak, steal strength.

She scowled, her eyes squinted into a thin, dark line. She patted her face, felt the pockmarks left there from a long-ago disease. Her face felt moist.

Child Clayton cause much energy to flow. Bad child. Need too much.

He already wore three summers on his narrow frame and moved quickly, tiring her.

Boy steal strength. On purpose hurt me.

Zilah noticed a band of moisture above her lip. She wiped at it with her palm, felt dampness there, too. Noticed the scar on her hand where a dog had once bitten.

No get sick, not now, not now!

She found the water bucket. The round of the wooden dipper settled at the narrow base before she tipped it slightly to cover the bottom of her porcelain bowl. She lifted the bowl and drank. Others shared the wooden dipper, but Zilah liked the bowl. Her bowl. Over the

lip, she could see the heat of the amber desert build and shimmer like agitated snakes above the surface of the sand.

The water carried a sour taste, and she wrinkled her flat nose. The liquid reminded her of the time of the graves, foul tasting, laced with death. She swallowed. Her throat hurt more today. She did not wish to speak of it to anyone, did not wish to see the fear in their eyes the way she'd seen it when the others had died. She'd developed a cough in the last week, a thickening that made her swallow often and yet not cough it clear. Why now, when everyone else walked well? Why now did she fear illness and what it might bring? She clucked her tongue, dismissing. So much came wrapped in the rice paper of the unknown.

Zilah filled her cupped hands with water as warm as blood. As she drew her palms toward her face, her fingers looked pink instead of their usual olive and the lines in her palms seemed to move like tiny worms swimming across her wide hands. She splashed the water at her feet, staining her blue pajamas wet. She shook her head. She tried again to bring the alkaline liquid against her pocked face.

She stared at the bowl with the yellow bat on it that sat before her. When so much had been thrown out and left behind on this journey west, this precious gift from her sister still survived, still blessed her with the assurance of home and the sacrifices she'd agreed to make. It meant good fortune, the yellow color, and the bat itself stood for wisdom. The character for the word was the same as *prosperity*, and Zilah smiled at that thought as she washed her face with water held by both wisdom and riches. So far, on this journey of wagons with women, both had been her gift. Until the return of this sickness. She dabbed at her eyes with the wide silk of her sleeve.

Still, no one knew the future, one's "lot," as the woman Mazy called it. Mazy spoke of a Lord said to know all their lots who was a kind father who wanted the best treasures for his children, "to meet the desires of their hearts."

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But Zilah had been orphaned early in her life and was unfamiliar with kind fathers.



Suzanne Cullver blinked her eyes open. She shivered with cold as her hands patted for the single blanket pulled from her. Probably her son Clayton gripped it in his pudgy fingers. No, he'd slept close to Zilah last night. She patted around, didn't feel the blanket or her son. She must have kicked it off herself. She felt the dry desert air take the moisture from her eyes, heard water again but knew now it was not the stream in her dream.

The Humboldt, that's what they'd called the river she could hear. They'd followed it for days now, and she could imagine the muddy banks with the lowering water levels like steps marked in varying colors on the side, but she could not see it. She'd heard about the green meadow surprising them at this ford, green in late September, and she'd felt the cool of the cottonwood trees and not just the shade of the wagon shadow at dusk.

She heard rustling sounds, muffled voices of the women she traveled with. Eleven women heading west to who knew what, bound together by the deaths of their husbands and brothers and loved ones—and their agreement to care for each other.

Then the lone man's voice, Seth Forrester's voice, reminding her that today was a different day. Seth had joined them at the Humboldt, had already been in California. He knew an "easier way through the Sierras," he said, and he would lead them on that new trail, lead them to their new homes by another way.

She took a deep breath. The changes tired her, or perhaps it was the constant interpretations she had to make, still getting accustomed to her world without sight, without Bryce.

At least one thing was certain: She had a plan for her own future

once they reached California. This was her focus. She smiled. She was not yet willing to accept that perhaps the Asian woman was an answer to a prayer—not her prayer. She didn't pray much herself these days. But it might be Mazy's prayer, or Elizabeth's, that God answered. Those two insisted God was in their every day; he wasn't just someone sitting far off in a flowing robe.

Fate. That was what it was for Suzanne. Fate had placed her here as a blind widow, and now fate was tending her and her children. And fate would allow her to buy out the contract of the Asian woman known as Zilah. Doing so would help Sister Esther, who now had one too many Celestials for the number of husbands promised. Best of all, Zilah was someone who could tend her children but not interfere with Suzanne's life, not try to tell her how to raise them. It was a good blend of stepping out into newness while hanging on to something old and solid—it would accommodate Suzanne's need for independence.

"Clayton? Are you there? Zilah?" Suzanne listened for the breathing of her son. Odd, she heard no answer.

Maybe Zilah had taken him out already. "That won't be good," she said out loud.

Pig, the slobbery dog, barked outside the wagon Suzanne slept in. "I know, you heard me and now you're pestering. I'm getting up," she told him. The chill chased away the warmth. She felt her way into kneeling on the mattress, sweeping the air before her like a woman washing a table. She rose, then touched the hanging blanket that held her youngest son, Sason, a name that meant *joy*.

"I must have been delirious when I named you that," she said softly, her touch swinging the shawl hammock. She listened for the baby's coos. Heard only the smacking of his lips in sleep. "I haven't given you much joy at all, have I?" she whispered. Her breasts ached, but she decided to dress first since Sason slept. She'd change, step out and call for Clayton, then get Zilah to help her place the baby at her breast.

She thought of the dream as she pulled the ribbons of her night-

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dress, then lifted it off over her head. Her heart ached. She missed her husband, missed the scent of him, his tender touch. Only in her dreams did she see those she loved as they appeared before she lost her sight. Only in sleep-swept images did her husband still smile and gaze at her through eyes of devotion and love. In her sleep, Suzanne saw him and herself—ageless—along with familiar landscape and color and light. Only then and not when she chose. It was just one more desire out of her reach.

Suzanne Cullver, former photographer and wife, desired now to just get dressed by herself in a wagon near the Humboldt River. She sighed, slipped her arms inside the wrapper, pulled it around her. Her fingers fumbled at the buttons. Then she found an apron to tie against her waist, gathering the yards of material around her slender frame.

What had Bryce said? Keeping focus. A photographer's sound advice even to a woman without sight. She scoffed to herself. Bryce had always stained the world with positive colors.

Still, she had direction now: Zilah could care for her children while she found a way to make a living before her resources ran out.



Elizabeth Mueller yawned wide, glad for the cool nights that flushed the hot sand of its blistering heat. This place, this Lassen Meadows it was called, at least offered temporary shade. Even if the cottonwood leaves clattered in the fluttering wind making her think for a moment it just might be a rattler there beside her tent. Elizabeth grunted as she rolled in her blankets. She was big as a house but still lacked enough padding on her hips to scare off the morning pain. Ah, well, it could be worse, much worse, and for many on this journey of women begun as wives and sisters and daughters it was.

Faster than a flash flood, what began as a journey west from Wisconsin and Missouri and places even farther east became first eleven

wagons of widows turning back home, then ended with three wagons turning west again. They tried to grasp that life as they knew it had ended. They could never go back to what was.

What they had now was each other, all together in one place. And they'd come this far, stretching themselves to do new things, helping each other, getting through storms, desert crossings, arguments and misunderstandings and grieving. Lots and lots of grieving. Elizabeth wore two years of widowing on her own broad shoulders, but for her daughter, Madison "Mazy" Bacon, it was now just three months wearing a widow's threads.

Elizabeth pushed her arm against the warm earth and sat up. The eastern sky unveiled a pink as deep as ripe cherries streaked white with wispy clouds. Wasn't there something sailors on Lake Michigan always said about morning pink meaning warning? Well, that couldn't apply to this part of the country. This land was made up of all sand and shore and not a sea in sight. Elizabeth counted on smooth sailing.



Zilah watched, wary. People stirred.

What they want? Trouble me. They trouble me.

She moved closer to her water bowl, the bat's wings on its side open in flight. Clayton ran under a wagon.

That a small boy or white fox?

Her attention turned to the sounds of the woman Elizabeth walking with her slip-hip from her tent to the bumbling woman Lura's tent. "Get up, Lura. Time's awasting."

Why so noisy? No need make noise.

Zilah pushed her hair back with wet fingers, twisted the shiny black strands into a butterfly at the base of her neck, held it hostage with long wooden sticks. Someday, she wanted ivory hair sticks and pure rice powder pressed against her cheeks to fill the pockmarks. But for now,

she settled for the warm water and feeling clean if only for the moment. She shivered again and held herself with her arms, squeezing her eyes shut, hoping to stop the shaking.

“You ladies best bury those morning toilets,” Seth Forrester said, walking up from behind her.

Why so loud? No reason, no reason make so much noise!

Zilah turned to him, scowled. The tall, yellow-haired Seth man—as Zilah thought of him—had been present at the crossing of the Missouri when there were many wagons, many men, husbands and sons. The Seth man offered kindness, tipping his tall hat even to her, a simple Asian woman on her way to marry a foreigner. Traveling with them the first few days out, he’d helped Sister Esther and her brothers teach English classes to Zilah and the other three Celestials, and then he’d ridden on, not bound to any wagon train or person. “I’m a gambling man,” he told them all. “Though all of life’s a game of chance.”

“He no teach us chance games,” Zilah had complained to the other girls. “Just English.”

Then months later, just a day past, he’d ridden back to them from the west, already having taken a shortcut known as Noble’s Cutoff.

All together, the women voted to let him lead them to Shasta City, California, leave the safety of the familiar trail where the dust drifted thick with the wheels and feet of previous travelers. They would rise up across the desert, then rumble through the mountains, not over them, but through, the Seth man said. To a new home in mining territory. Then Zilah and Mei-Ling and Naomi would take a wagon or the stage-coach south to Sacramento City, to their husbands, instead of walking there in quick-quick steps, beside this river as they had been.

“There’s gold in every stream, I’m saying,” Seth told them at the campfire. Zilah felt chilled and feverish even last evening, but she heard the words through the canvas as she helped put the boys Clayton and Sason to bed. “The place is humming with new blood, new life, wealth from the water and the land, and wealth to all the folks bringing in

wares to supply them. Even folks from your homeland, Mei-Ling. Chinese by the dozens there, I'm saying, and not many women, of any race."

"Indians?" Adora asked, her voice a too-high whistle. The sound had grated on Zilah's ears. Adora traveled with her daughter, Tipton, and had lost a husband to cholera and a son named Charles to disappointment.

"Yes ma'am. There are Indians. All the miners and such moving in is stretching their ways a bit, but I think we'll work things out with them. They're reasonable, and there's gold enough to go around, by my eyes. Don't have to be greedy. Truth is, the Indians aren't interested in the gold, just the streams. They prefer the salmon."

Elizabeth grunted. "Best you talk to the Mohawk tribe and the Virginia slaves about our nation's history of reason and greed," she told him. "And how we use cruelty as a tool to get our way, too. *There's* a history to ponder."

"History can hold a soul hostage," Seth said. "Make you think you can't change. California, that's a place that welcomes change with open arms, says 'step right up and see what you can do you never thought you could.' Look at me, leading a train of women. Is that a risky gamble or just good luck?"

Zilah's eyes furrowed with the stream of words. She knew neither Mohawks nor Virginia slaves. She did know stories of cruelty. And women with little say in their own destinies.

Uncertain of what waited for them in "the States," as the Seth man called California, Zilah had voted for the plan to head to Shasta City. In her history, she had never been asked such a question, where she wanted to go. Even coming west had not been her choice, but a way to save face, to send money to her brother-in-law who had taken a worthless girl into his home and fed her to keep her alive. Yet in this new land, next to a dusty wagon, someone asked her desire, and she had nodded her head and said, "I go Noble's."

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Then everything changed. Another death—Betha—this one not the cholera that took most of the men. This one leaving four small children needing more tending and new paths to walk. Her heart raced again.

No, no.

That death and the others had happened before the Seth man arrived to lead them from the river, hadn't it? Yes, she was sure now. An aunt returned to care for the four motherless children. Ruth Martin. Yes, the woman with the whip who rode horses. She wore men's clothes, with men's pants covering her legs, just as Zilah now did.

But that was before, weeks before. She pressed her fingers against her temples. Zilah's head felt full of webs, mixed up her thinking. Was that when her throat began to hurt, her eyes start their watering? She shook her head. She'd forgotten her straw hat.

Everything different here, like rice paper once wrapped around treasure that now crinkles, never smooth again.

She squinted at the morning sun. Seth closed in on her, where she stood beside the wagon. Her heart raced. He walked close enough to touch her, leading a pair of oxen. He tipped his hat, then stopped the oxen in front of Suzanne's wagon, talking and working them back on either side of the wagon tongue. His white hat shaded one of the animal's heads as he leaned to the oxbow. The man ran his hands along the oxen's backs, disrupting flies as he drew the chains to the wagon tongue.

The noise of the oxen shaking their heads at flies and the chain being strung startled Zilah. Her ears hurt, and her eyes ran water like snow melting from high mountains in spring.

Why crying?

She did not feel like crying, and yet the water came. She fisted her eyes, wished she could make the noise stop. It was the fault of the sounds and the sand and the heat.

"Make too much noise," Zilah said. Seth stood at her words, lifted his fingers to the brim of his hat. "Why you look at me?" she asked. "Too loud, too loud!" She put her hands to her ears.

“You’re shaking,” Seth said, reaching out his hand to her elbow.

Zilah found his words cunning, like a fox. She jerked away.

“Zilah? Something wrong?”

“Who Zilah?” she said, her shrill voice hurting even her own ears.

“Name Chou-Jou. Who tell you my name Zilah?”

“Why, you did. And Sister Esther,” he said.

“Who Sister Esther?”

Seth shook his head. “You know who that is, she’s your...the woman who manages the marriage contracts, why you’re heading to California. Maybe it would be good if you stepped over to her tent. Here, let me help you.” He reached out.

Maybe he steady me. Maybe he strike me.

She couldn’t be sure so she struck first, her fingernails leaving a track of red welts on the back of his gloveless hand.

“Hey!” he said, jerking away.

She could see by the look in his blue eyes that she startled him, but she couldn’t think why. He was being thick, making a game of her. She had to defend.

“Looks like you’re running a fever Zi—I mean Chou-Jou, is it?”

“You make fun of name,” she screamed. Her heart pounded, and she couldn’t catch her breath. She breathed through her mouth, gasping in air.

“Best you sit down, Zilah,” he said. “I’ll get us some help.”

“Name Chou-Jou,” she screamed, then, in her flatfooted gait, she brushed past him, holding the sides of her head, staggering toward Sister Esther’s tent. Her eye caught something moving. *A dog! No, boy. Small boy. Clayton.* The child smiled at her as he stood next to the tall wagon wheel. He waved, and she thought she saw him sneer. *He show teeth! No boy, a dog. He try to bite! Stop him!* She had to catch him, had to protect. She turned and headed toward this danger.



NO EYE CAN SEE

In the mirror on the back of the wagon, Tipton watched Zilah lumber across the sand then turn toward Clayton. Good, someone was looking after the boy, keeping him from trouble. Suzanne certainly didn't notice. Well, she couldn't, Tipton guessed, not really. Tipton gazed at the mirror as she dotted alum onto the blemish on her narrow chin. Those Asian women had strange habits, running with their hands to their heads. Her eyes looked at the lupine-blue sky surrounding her heart-shaped face framed by wispy blond curls. At least her hair was growing back, and less of it remained on her combs when she pulled them out. Elizabeth said it was her eating that affected her hair. How ridiculous. Some old woman's thinking. Whatever the cause, neither her face nor hair could take much more filth and grime. She wore a bonnet every day to keep the sun off the peach complexion that everyone back in the States said "just belongs with that creamy blond hair." Without soap and decent water, she didn't feel clean, didn't feel the least bit creamy or peachy at all. She just felt parched and dry and old, much older than her fifteen—almost sixteen—years that had already seen the death of her father and fiancé and the disappearance of her brother, though the latter she considered a blessing. Charles Wilson was not a man to be trusted.

With the tips of her fingers she pinched her cheeks until they blushed red. At least she had blood left. That was something. "Good morning, Mr. Forrester," Tipton said, being bold. She watched as the man turned slowly away from his staring at Zilah, a frown on his face washing into warmth as he saw her. "You look quite smart this morning."

Seth Forrester tipped his hat and smiled, showing even teeth, all still there and not yellowed by tobacco like so many old men she knew.

Tipton thought to carry on the conversation with him, but he seemed distracted, rubbing at his hand. He turned as though looking for Zilah, then bent to the wagon tongue. She picked up her combs and wash basin and headed toward her mother's tent. Seth was a nice man

but old, probably twice her age. Tyrell, her true love, had been older too, but he was different. He'd been perfect. And he was gone. She'd never find someone to love her like that again, of that she was sure. Still, it was good to know that despite the devastation of this journey, the blast of wind and sand acting as pumice to her skin, even with thinning, matted hair, she could still engage in flirtation.



“Already working us into a routine, I see,” Mazy Bacon told Seth as she caught up with him. Mazy carried a line-dried linen that stuck out stiffly over her arm, and she held a bar of glycerin at the waist of her bloomers once red, but now faded to orange. “A woman needs routine,” she told him, pushing her auburn hair, kinky from a just-freed braid, back from her face. A wide blue scarf tied into a band caught her hair at the back of her neck.

“Does she?” Seth asked.

Mazy carried herself like a woman used to wearing the weight of disappointment. Seth liked her spirit of determination and honesty when he'd met her briefly back in Kanerville. He found her even more intriguing these three months later, now a widow. She was young, yet the word *wisdom* came to mind when he looked at her. From what the others told him, Mazy somehow wove the women together and brought them this far without taking away their independence. That was no easy task. He'd seen a few officers in the war succeed at it, but a whole lot more fail.

“Routine has a way of getting changed out on the trail,” Seth said. “Figured that'd be a truth you of all people would know by now.”

“Doesn't mean I don't long for consuming certainty—for something more than that the desert'll be hot and dry. And that Tipton and her mother will clash.”

Seth laughed. “Suppose so,” he said. “Even so, one routine we do

need to follow is to break camp earlier, try to get on the trail while it's yet cool. It's a distance between the watering holes. There'll be a couple of days of just plain hot and sand that could bog us down. Once we edge around the desert toward Black Rock, there's a cut, at High Rock, and a spring before we start the next desert stretch. Maybe we could take a day there, just for those routine things you women seem to need. Have you talked with Zilah this morning?" Seth said then.

"I imagine she's helping Suzanne, although I haven't checked."

Seth removed his hat and ran his hands through the thickness of hair. He needed a haircut. It would have to wait until he reached Shasta City. "Seems to be acting strangely," he said. "Told me her name wasn't Zilah, that it was Chou-Jou or something. Acted like she didn't know who Sister Esther was."

Mazy's green eyes grew larger. "What happened to your hand?"

"Strangest thing," Seth said. He put his hat on, then turned his hand to look at the back of his palm. "Don't think it broke the skin. She scratched at me."

"Zilah did? You weren't wearing gloves?" Mazy reached for his hand, clasped it firm in both hands, her thumb tracing along the welts. Good hands, she had. Strong. He looked at her face but couldn't catch her gaze, she was so focused on his wound.

A tamed antelope dragging a leash bounded out from behind Mazy and her mother's tent. Elizabeth Mueller shouted and laughed after it.

Mazy dropped his hand. "We'd better get Mother to take a look at that," she said. "Wouldn't want it infected." She waved toward her mother who signaled "in a minute." Mazy turned back to Seth. "Maybe Zilah misunderstood something you said. I could ask Naomi or Mei-Ling to translate. Their English is better. Or maybe she's just tired, wants to get where we're going to be for a time, wake up with the same view more than two days in a row. I understand how all this newness wears at a soul."

Seth shook his head, fingered the red welts. "More than that," he

said. "She looked... I've seen that look somewhere before. Can't place it exactly, but I remember it wasn't good."

"Not...cholera." Mazy whispered the word.

"No," he said. "Not that." Seth coughed. He had to remember what these women had been through, not dwell on the troubles, but not forget them either. "Got to finish hitching up." He pulled on his silk neckerchief. "See if you can hustle along your lady friends. You surely don't need to pretty yourself more."

"If you're going to tell tall tales about how well a woman looks when she knows the truth, your credibility's bound to be brought into question. Not good for a new leader. I'd best go check on Zilah," she said, dropping her eyes. She turned and walked in her broad stride, away.

Seth nodded. He liked this woman. He liked her a lot. But he hoped her strength didn't grow from a rigid streak.



Suzanne slipped out of the wagon, as the dog, Pig, brushed at her knee. She felt for the leather harness, put it on the dog's back, then held the handle that stuck up stiffly. She'd dressed herself just fine. Now for the boys. "Clayton?" she called out. "Clayton? Where are you?"

"It's me, Mazy," the woman said, "approaching on your left." Suzanne smelled fragrant soap.

"Have you seen Clayton or Zilah?"

"Neither one. But Seth has. Zilah, at least. She's acting strange, he says."

"Left without telling me this morning. That's certainly not like her," Suzanne said. "And she's never taken Clayton without saying. The baby'll be awake soon." She reached for the bodice of her wrapper, the mere mention of the baby's waking causing her breasts to ache at their fullness.

“Have Pig take you to the morning fire. Lura has one going beside her tent. Maybe Mariah has Clayton—oh, there he is!”

“Where?”

“That’s odd.”

“What?”

“Zilah has him. They’re out in the sand. Maybe he has to do his necessary thing. Are you training him, Suzanne? He’s sitting down it looks like.”

“I didn’t tell her to do that. It’s not safe, is it? Aren’t there snakes and stickers?”

Suzanne heard Mazy’s intake of breath. “What is she doing?” She clutched at Mazy’s arm. “Tell me! Mazy?”

“Mother! Seth! Come quick!”

Suzanne heard her son wail. “What? What’s happening?”

“Oh, Lord, please,” Mazy whispered. “Zilah’s—wait here!” Mazy peeled Suzanne’s gripped fingers from her arm before Suzanne heard Mazy turn and run.



Boy making too much noise, too much. Follow all time. Put him by flower in garden, plant him. Water him. Make him wait, grow up, leave Chou-Jou be.

“No cry! You bad boy. Scare Chou-Jou. No hit Chou-Jou when walk by wagon. No hide! You stay in garden now. You stay. Sit dow. Sit dow!” The desert sand tripped her, made her feet heavy. She yanked at the boy, forced him hard again to his bottom, his wail piercing her ears. “No cry!” she screamed. “No cry!” She struck at the boy but he moved, quick like a fox. No, like a snake. He slithered between her legs, crawling, crying. She spun around. She couldn’t see him; her eyes were filled with tears, her mouth, too, so many tears. She choked, coughed. She rubbed her hands across her lips, looked at the back of her palm. All

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white and foamy now. She felt Clayton move. She grabbed the boy's feet, held him, pinched his ankles. She could not breathe, not swallow. She looked up.

Sun, all yellow, mean good luck.

She squinted toward a noise at the wagons. Hot. Snakes run toward her! One wears hat, walks upright, calls her Zilah.

Not Zilah! Who Zilah?

She could not breathe. Her heart pounded. *Strike back! Stop snake on ground, snake up tall. Stop, stop.* Her world turned black, then white.

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