

A Bargain Struck

Liz Harris

Extract



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Chapter One

Baggs, Wyoming Territory; July 1887

The stage came to a halt in a cloud of dirt and grit.

Ellen O'Sullivan lifted the oiled leather flap that covered the glassless window and looked out. Dust kicked up by the horses' hooves swirled up around the sides of the coach, and she coughed. With one hand holding her poke bonnet firmly in place and the other covering her mouth, she leaned slightly out and glanced around.

They'd stopped in front of a tall, wood-framed building. As far as she could see, it was the first in a line of buildings that straggled a wide, dusty track. Hitch racks had been dug into the ground along the front of the building, and a number of saddle horses were tied to them. Several men clad in worn, dirt-covered jeans hovered among the horses; a few others stood talking in groups in front of the entrance.

One of those men would be Connor Maguire, she thought, and she dropped the flap.

She sat back against her seat and breathed heavily. Beads of cold sweat gathered on her forehead – she could be about to make a dreadful mistake, a mistake that she might have to live with for the rest of her life.

She took her handkerchief from the small bag that hung from her waist and wiped her forehead, pushing back her fear.

She couldn't let herself think like that, not after enduring four uncomfortable days on an overcrowded train, and one seemingly never-ending day on a jolting stagecoach; not after choking day after day on whisky fumes and tobacco smoke, unable to escape either the rancid odour or the open stares of her fellow passengers. She'd put up with it all just to meet this man, and now that she'd reached her destination, it was much too late to question what she'd done.

Or rather, what she'd not done.

But she'd had no choice. To have stayed in Omaha would have been a mistake. She'd been right to come to Wyoming in search of a new life, and if Connor Maguire could understand why she'd not been completely honest with him, and if he could forgive her, then that new life could be a good life.

The door of the stage was flung open. Dust and the stench of manure and sweating horses filled the coach, and she coughed again.

'This is it, ma'am. This is Baggs. It's just you to get off,' the driver told her, and he stood aside to let her get down.

Her hands shaking, she pulled her hat more closely around her face and climbed slowly down the steps, her limbs stiff and unwilling to move, her petticoats sticking damply to her legs. She reached the ground, straightened her skirt and looked about her.

Some of the men had stopped what they were doing and were staring at her, openly curious, but no one appeared to be making a move to come over to her. She glanced to her right, saw that her travelling bag had been unstrapped from the back of the stagecoach and thrown to the ground, and went over to it. Grit crunched noisily beneath her high button boots at every step.

Her heart beating fast, she took up a position next to her bag, tied her bonnet ribbons into a tighter bow and stood waiting, her eyes firmly on the ground.

'Be you Mrs O'Sullivan?'

She gave a slight jump. Shaking inwardly, she drew in a deep breath, and looked up. A tall man in a suit was standing in front of her, twisting a broad-rimmed felt hat in his hand.

'I am. Yes,' she said. Piercing blue eyes scrutinised her face. She attempted a smile. 'And you must be Mr Maguire.'

He nodded, his eyes never leaving her face.

Self-conscious, she put her hand to her cheek, then slid it to the ribbon beneath her chin. Her heart pounding, she untied her bonnet, took it off and smoothed down her hair. 'My hair is thick with dust. I fear I'm very travel-stained.' She could hear the

nervous edge in her voice. Fixing her gaze on the broad shoulders in front of her, she stood very still.

Silent, he stared at her. Then he cleared his throat. 'The Justice of the Peace is waiting in the roadhouse. With two witnesses.'

She forced herself to raise her chin and look directly into his face. 'And you still wish this?'

It was a moment before he spoke. 'I believe in honourable behaviour, ma'am, and I always honour the agreements I make,' he said quietly. He bent down and picked up her bag.

A lump came to her throat. 'Thank you, Mr Maguire. I promise, you will have no cause for regret.'

'That is to be hoped,' he said flatly. 'For afterwards, I've ordered you a room for the night, and a tub of hot water. You will feel stale after so much travel, I'm sure, and you will wish to bathe. And there will be a meal for you. For my part, I'll go straight to a friend – we have business to talk over. I'll come by for you tomorrow morning, when you've had breakfast. We must start early if we're to reach the house before sundown.' He paused. 'I hope that this suits.'

'It does suit. Thank you, Mr Maguire.' She put her hat back on and tied the ribbon tightly.

He nodded again. 'Then we can go.' And he started to walk.

Guilt swelled up inside her. Swallowing hard, she followed a few paces behind him.

His face impassive and his eyes fixed on the infinite horizon, Connor headed the wagon out of Baggs and across a vast expanse of blue-green sagebrush spiked with clumps of golden rabbitbush and spears of purple asters.

Sitting next to him, clutching the side of the wagon with one of her hands and gripping the wooden seat with the other, Ellen clung on tightly as the wagon raced across the uneven ground at full speed, jolting her sharply whenever it hit a rock or a deep rut. From time to time, she turned to stare from one side to the other,

watching mile after mile of emptiness fly by, an endless wilderness of sage-green shrubland, broken only by patches of yellowing grass and the occasional glimpse of an isolated claim shack.

More than once she glanced across at Connor and wondered about trying to strike up a conversation with him. But while he looked more relaxed than he'd done the day before, having changed into denim jeans and a light-blue flannel shirt, the grim set of his mouth daunted her. Instinct told her that any attempts at conversation would prove unwelcome, and each time she'd turned away from him and continued to stare in silence around her.

As the morning drew to a close, the desolate beauty of the brush desert gradually gave way to gently undulating hills and lush green meadows. A line of trees in the distance suggested that they were following the course of a river, and soon she saw Connor pull on the reins to angle the wagon so that it was heading in that direction.

As they drew closer to the trees, she caught fractured glimpses of a verdant meadow beyond the foliage and blue-green water. Reaching the first of the trees, Connor slowed the wagon and began to guide the two horses skilfully between the slender trunks of the tall aspens and aromatic pines. A heady scent enveloping them, they made their way beneath a canopy of branches until they came out of the shade and on to an open expanse of grass that led to the water.

She gazed in front of her. On the other side of the river which was meandering across the meadow, sparkling in the bright light of day, a wide, tree-studded patch of green stretched far into the distance where it met a line of dark-blue mountain ridges that were framed by an azure sky. Her face broke into a smile and she turned to Connor.

He continued to stare fixedly ahead, clicked on the reins and increased the speed of the horses. She turned away and held on

to the side of the wagon more tightly.

‘We’ve gotta cross the river,’ he shouted above the creaking of the wagon and the pounding on the ground of the horses’ hooves as they gathered pace, his voice breaking up at every jolt of the wagon. ‘The crossing will be easy. There’s been scant rain this summer and the water’s low. Hold tight.’

With a loud clatter as their hooves hammered across the white pebbles that lined the water’s edge, the horses dragged the wagon into the shallow depths, its wheels grating stridently. Water splashed up its sides, spraying Ellen’s dusty boots and dampening her skirt. She gripped the wagon more tightly as the horses pulled them deeper into the water, their necks straining.

They reached the other side and the wagon gave a mighty shudder as the horses pulled it clear of the river.

‘Are you all right, ma’am?’ Connor asked, glancing across at her as he pulled on the reins and brought the wagon to a halt.

‘Ma’am?’ she repeated in surprise, turning to him. She glanced down at her left hand, at the thin gold band that glittered in the light, and she looked back up at him. ‘Not Ellen?’

‘No, not Ellen, ma’am. I don’t know you.’

‘Then in answer to your question,’ she said, her voice shaking, ‘I am all right, thank you. The dress is calico and it will soon dry. Thank you for asking.’

He nodded, dropped the reins and jumped down to the ground. ‘We’ll break now – the horses have need of water and we must eat.’ He unhitched the horses, took the bits from their mouths, pulled off their bridles and gave them a slight push in the direction of the water. With a toss of their heads, they made straight for the river, their flanks steaming.

Ellen climbed to the ground. Aching all over, she stretched herself, put her hands on her hips and arched her back. Then moving her shoulders in circles to rid them of their stiffness, she walked down to the water’s edge and stood a little way downstream from the horses, watching them drink their fill from

the water that lapped against the pebbles.

The late morning sun beat down upon her, and without the cooling effect of the wind that the moving wagon had thrown back at her, she began to feel hot and uncomfortable in her tight bodice. Kneeling down, she gathered her skirts and petticoats and bunched them between her knees, then she cupped her hands, scooped up some of the clear water and lowered her face into it. Then she ran her wet hands across the back of her neck. Feeling slightly fresher, she dried her face on her underskirt, stood up again and smoothed down her damp garments.

‘If we don’t have rain before long, we’ll see the rivers dry up like the springs have done. The land’s startin’ to crack up.’

She turned sharply and saw that Connor was only a few steps away from her. He was standing in the water, which was trickling over the toes of his brown leather boots, his hand shielding his eyes from the glare of the sun as he scanned the river in both directions. He’d rolled his sleeves up to his elbows and the tanned skin on his forearms gleamed gold.

She swallowed hard.

‘It certainly is hot,’ she ventured, her mouth dry. ‘Now that we’ve stopped, I can feel the intensity of the sun.’

‘It sure is intense, as you put it,’ he said, his eyes still on the river. ‘It’s been an unusually hot summer with little rain, same as last year. I’ve known years when we’ve woken on a morning in August and found a light frost, but I doubt it’ll be that way this year.’ He turned to her. Deep-blue eyes stared at her from a sun-browned face, eyes without warmth. ‘Reckon we’d better eat now and be on our way again.’ He started to walk back to the wagon.

She watched as he took a large canvas bag from the back of the wagon, carried it over to the cottonwood tree and sat down in the shade of the wide, silvery branches. As she stood there staring at him, at his face which was dappled from the sunlight that slipped between the leaves, she ran her hand slowly down her cheek. Then she tightened the ribbons of her bonnet so that

its sides were flat against her face, and she went and sat under the tree a little way back from him.

He opened the bag and pulled out two packets of food and two canteens of water. Leaning across to her, he passed her one of each, then he sat back upright, opened the other packet, took out a slab of cornbread and started to eat. At the sight of the food, she realised how hungry she was, and she hurriedly unwrapped her parcel and began to eat the cold chicken and cornbread that she found inside it.

Neither spoke as they ate.

His meal finished, Connor stood up. 'You might want to freshen up – put water on your face, make yourself more comfortable. We won't see a river again until we reach the house. The creeks between here and there are dry. I'll see to the horses, and I'll fill the canteens again. If you'll pass me yours.' He held out his hand.

She finished the last of her water and handed the canteen to him. He went down to the river, refilled the canteens, then stood nuzzling the mouths of the horses, his back to her.

Understanding that he was giving her privacy, she ran quickly to a nearby clump of bushes. When she'd finished, she went down to the river, rinsed her face and hands, and wiped her face dry.

Returning to the tree, she saw that Connor had already cleared away the remains of their lunch and had hitched up the horses again. He was standing on her side of the wagon, waiting to help her up to her seat. She hurried over to him. As she reached him, he offered his hand to her.

She took a step towards him, went to take his hand and stopped. 'Are we not to talk at all?' she asked, trying to keep the tone of her voice light.

'Not if we want to get to the house before sundown. Of course, you may prefer to go slow enough to talk, and then bed out beneath the stars tonight. It can be mighty cold when the sun goes down, but if you want to do that ...' He shrugged his

shoulders.

'No, I've no wish to do that,' she said quietly, and she gave him her hand and allowed him to help her up.

The moment she'd cleared the steps, his hand released hers and he went around to the other side of the wagon, climbed up to his seat and picked up the reins. One of the horses threw back its head, whinnied and struck the hard ground with its hoof in impatience. He clicked the reins and moved the horses forward.

She glanced across at his profile. His face was cold, distant. Not once, from the moment that she'd come to an agreement with him after their exchange of letters, had she allowed herself to look forward, to think about how he might react when he saw her, saw what the bonnet wouldn't be able to hide completely, but if she had done so, she wouldn't have expected that. Angry, maybe, or bitter and accusing, but not coldly polite, and silent.

She felt a chill inside her. She should never have come to him like she had.

Anxiety building up within her, she faced the way ahead and stared with unseeing eyes at the mountain ridges veiled in a haze of deepening blue.

Chapter Two

The sun was sinking behind the mountains, smothering the grassland with lengthening shadow that slowly spread out from the deep grey hills, when Connor steered the wagon sharply to the left, on to a broad, heavily rutted track that stretched out ahead of them into the gathering gloom. Their heads down, the horses gained speed, and the wagon swayed wildly from side to side as its wheels ground against the deep-sided walls of the ruts. Ellen clutched her seat with both of her hands, and fixed her gaze on the blurred shapes that were taking form at the end of the track.

This must be Connor's land, she thought, and that must be his homestead. They'd soon be there. Her stomach gave a sudden lurch.

The shapes took on features and became buildings. She guessed which one was the main house from a faint amber glow that came from within one of the structures. She couldn't see the house clearly, though, half hidden as it was by a large barn which stood a little way back from it between the track and the house, but she could see enough to know that it was made of sawn wood, not logs, and that beyond the house there was another large barn, and a few smaller buildings behind that.

They reached the low fence that encircled the yard and the buildings, and Connor pulled back on the reins and brought the wagon to a halt in front of a wide, cross-beamed gate.

'We're here,' he said. He turned slightly and nodded towards the grey-hazed fields to their right. 'You can't see it now as the light's almost gone, but Liberty Creek flows across our land. Even when the water level is low, as it is now, we still have water, and that makes us better off than a lot of our neighbours.'

She heard his love for his land in his voice.

'You have a good position,' she said, and she ventured a smile

in his direction.

'I've got my folks to thank for that.' He jumped down, went up to the gate, pulled up the iron bar and swung the gate open. Returning to the wagon, he climbed back up and urged the horses forward. 'Yup,' he said. 'Back in '65, two years after the law had said they could, my folks staked their claim here. Five years later, it became theirs in the eyes of the law, one of the first of the homesteads in the Territory of Wyoming, and we Maguires have been here ever since. They're gone now, my ma and pa, but the land that they claimed has served the family well, and will continue to do so long after we've gone.'

They pulled up in front of the house. Through the window, Ellen could see that the light was coming from a lamp. Her heart missed a beat. She put her hand to her bonnet. 'Will I meet your daughter tonight?'

'Nope,' he said, getting down and going around to her side. 'She's with my neighbour, Peggy Thomas. She and her husband, William, live further up the creek. Bridget will not be back till after sunup tomorrow. And Aaron and the men will be in the bunkhouse by now. Aaron's my foreman. He'll have done the animals and lit the lamp for us before finishing for the day. So you'll not meet anyone tonight.'

He offered her his hand. She took it and started to climb down, her joints stiff in the cooling air. When she reached the ground, he let her hand go and moved to the back of the wagon.

'Will I cook us dinner?' she asked as he lifted out their travel bags.

'There's no need. Peggy will have left a meal when she collected Bridget. She's a mighty fine neighbour. So, no, you've no chores to do tonight. I'll fill you a tub of water as I expect you'll want to wash, and then we'll eat. When I've filled the tub, I'll come out here, rub down the horses and feed them. And I'll check on the rest of the animals. Aaron's a good foreman, but ...' He shrugged his shoulders.

‘Thank you,’ she said quietly.

He nodded. ‘You’re welcome, ma’am.’ He picked up the bags and led the way into the house.

The kerosene lamps that stood on the shelf and on the wood table in the centre of the room threw out a warm glow as they ate the meat loaf that Peggy had left them. Neither spoke to the other. Ellen finished first, and she sat quietly, waiting for Connor to come to the end of his meal. The moment he did so, she pushed her plate away from her, moved the lamp to one side and stared at him across the table.

‘We’ve had our food and you’ve still not spoken to me. You didn’t speak on the journey. I can understand that it would have been difficult to have been heard above the noise of the wagon, but you didn’t speak to me at lunch, and that would not have been difficult, and now not at dinner. Are we never to talk?’

He sat back in his chair and looked at her. ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘Tell you?’ she echoed.

‘You know exactly what I mean.’

She paused a moment. ‘You’re right, I do,’ she said. ‘And I’ll answer that – of course I will, you’re entitled to an answer. But first of all, I’d like to ask you something.’

He shrugged his shoulders. ‘Sure, if it helps.’

‘Why did you advertise for a wife?’

‘Because my daughter needs a woman in the house, someone who can tell her a woman’s things. And I need someone to do a woman’s work around the place. Bridget is eight now and she’ll be going to school. She’s helped me a deal since her ma died last year, but now that she’s gonna to be gone for much of the time, I need someone to do what she’s been doing. I’ve got men to help with the men’s work, but the men wouldn’t do a woman’s work. A man wouldn’t.’

‘And Peggy Thomas? Couldn’t she help?’

'I rely on her too much already. She's a good woman, and a true neighbour, but she lives half an hour away. When the snow melts and the rains come, the track's all but impassable because of the mud. And no one can leave their home in the winter. We get snow several feet deep and blizzards that last for days. Besides, Peggy has her own house to look after. I can't expect her to look after mine, too.'

'You could have got a housekeeper; you didn't need to take a wife. A housekeeper would have lived here and looked after the house. And she'd have helped with your daughter.'

He glanced across to the window. 'A man has needs,' he said bluntly. 'And going to the rooms at the back of the roadhouse in town is not for me.' He turned back to her. 'Having a woman in the house, doing all the things a wife would do – exceptin' one – it wouldn't be easy. I wouldn't want to be in that position and I wouldn't want to put any woman in that position either. And there's Bridget to think of ... Taking the woman who was gonna live in my house for a wife seemed the right thing to do.'

'I can understand that.'

'And I want a son,' he added. 'I want a boy. I love my daughter, but she'll never be able to run the place. A boy would. A son would take over from me, just like I took over from my pa.' He leaned forward, his forearms on the table. 'I've answered your question, so now will you answer mine? Why didn't you tell me?'

'I will in a minute, I promise. But first, did you get many replies to your advertisement?'

'A fair number. Why?'

'And why did you choose me out of all of them?'

'I guess I wanted a woman who knew about farming, but she also had to be a woman with some education. Bridget's education is important. It was for my wife, Alice, rest her soul, and it is for me. You had education so you'd be able to help her with her lessons, and you knew farming. And you've been married before, so you'll know what a woman needs to know – about the house

and everything.’ His face broke out in a sudden smile. ‘And I picked you for your name.’

‘My name!’ she exclaimed, sitting back and staring at him, puzzled. ‘You mean Ellen?’

‘No, I mean O’Sullivan. I come from Irish stock, and I want Bridget and my son, if God gives me one, to know their heritage. I thought they might learn it through you. I figured your husband was Irish, and Irish men marry Irish girls so I thought you would be, too. And I was right – you told me your family originally came from Ulster, just like mine.’ His smile faded. ‘Well, do I get my answer now?’

‘You wanted someone educated, who knew about farming. And as you said, I *am* educated and I *do* know a bit about farming. I’m a widow so I know what to expect from a man and how to keep house. I’m of childbearing age and might give you a son, and I have an Irish background. So in me you got what you wanted, and that’s all that really matters.’ Her voice shook on her last few words, and she bit her lip.

‘But it’s not, is it, ma’am? I saw the way that folks in Baggs looked at you. You can pull your bonnet across your face as much as you like, but it’s not enough. I saw their faces when you got off the stagecoach and I saw them when I collected you this morning. And my daughter will see those looks of distaste, too. She’ll see them every time she goes into town with you, every time that her friends come to the house, if her friends still want to visit. I have to think of Bridget as well as me. You should have told me before you came and let me decide.’

‘If I had, you’d never have given me the job.’ He opened his mouth to speak. ‘No, don’t try to deny it; you know it’s true. You’ve as good as said so yourself. If I’d written to you that I had the mark of a horse’s hoof on the side of my face, that it covered the whole of my cheek, you’d never have picked me – you’d have taken one of the other educated women with an Irish heritage, who can farm and look after a house. That’s why I didn’t tell you.

Just because I'm marked by an accident, it doesn't stop me from being everything you wanted in your wife.'

He looked her squarely in the face. 'And you really believe that? Truthfully?'

She held his gaze, then dropped her eyes and slowly shook her head. 'Of course I don't. I know that the way that I look matters, but I wanted a home and a family very much, and I knew that this was my only chance.' She raised her eyes to his. 'I know I should have told you, and I'm truly sorry that I didn't for your sake, but not for mine.'

'So you—'

'Please, Mr Maguire,' she went on quickly, trying to keep from her voice the desperation that she felt growing within her. 'Please, let me show you that I can be a good wife to you. After all, you married me after you'd seen my face. You went ahead with the wedding, and you brought me all the way here to your home. You could have said no. You could have walked away the moment you saw me, but you didn't. So please, give me a chance.' She stopped abruptly. Her forehead creased in a frown. She put her hand to her cheek and stared at him in puzzlement. 'If my appearance was so important, why *did* you marry me?'

He held up his hands. 'I don't know; I really don't know. I spent last night asking myself the same question and I couldn't come up with an answer. Maybe it's like I said in Baggs, it's being true to my word. We made an agreement and you left Omaha to come here because of that agreement. Maybe it's because I'm running out of time – Bridget starts school in about four weeks. Maybe it's just that I didn't want to write any more letters to women. Maybe it's that I'm not looking to have again what I had with Alice – no one could ever find that a second time – and you'd do the chores as good as anyone else. I guess it's one of those, or a bit of them all.' He paused and stared at her. 'Well, I reckon that means that you get the chance you want.'

She looked him steadily in the eyes. 'You won't be sorry that

you married me, Mr Maguire. I promise you.'

'That's as may be.' There was an awkward pause. 'You must be tired.'

'Yes, I am,' she said, and she stood up.

He got up, picked up the lamp from the table and handed it to her. 'I'll be in shortly. You go ahead.' She took the lamp from his hands, and he turned away. As she went through to the bedroom, she heard the front door close behind him.

Connor stood with his back to his house and stared ahead of him at Liberty Creek. Moonlight stroked the flowing water, which gleamed with ebony lustre in the black of night.

Behind him, he could hear the sound of someone moving around inside the bedroom, the someone he'd taken to be his wife.

He thrust his hands into the pockets of his jeans and strolled forward.

Why *hadn't* he walked away the moment he'd seen her face, seen the red rawness of her cheek, the garish, mottled folds of skin which starkly ridged the side of her face where her wound had ill healed? He could have turned and left her there, and no man alive would have blamed him. But he hadn't. *Why* hadn't he? He'd been asking himself that question since the moment that the Justice of the Peace had said the words that made them man and wife.

He'd certainly been furious enough to walk away.

It had been all he could do to keep his voice steady as he'd talked about honourable behaviour and then to lead the way to the roadhouse and the Justice of the Peace.

He'd wanted to shout at her, to show her how let down he felt, and how angry he was that his daughter would have to suffer the cruel taunts made by those around them. He'd wanted her to feel the weight of his frustration at knowing that he didn't have time to start his search all over again, not with the distances involved,

not with Bridget being about to go to school – yet he'd kept silent.

Why?

He stared ahead into the darkness. Was it that, if he was being truly honest with himself, he had felt another emotion, too, an emotion that he didn't want to admit to himself, didn't like himself for feeling? Was it that he'd felt an overwhelming sense of relief when he'd seen her face?

Was that was the real reason why he hadn't turned away from her?

If the woman he took for his wife had been a beautiful woman, there was a risk – only a slight risk, but a risk nonetheless – that he might have begun to feel about her in a way that he didn't want to feel.

He would never love another woman the way he'd loved Alice. His heart would belong to Alice until the day he died, and that was only right. In truth, the moment that he'd looked on Ellen O'Sullivan's face, an anxiety that he hadn't even realised he'd felt had lifted. It would be so much easier to remain true to Alice's memory if he were living with someone who looked like Ellen. And he'd felt a tremendous relief.

He had loved Alice since he was nine years old and she'd walked into the schoolhouse on her first morning there, an eight-year-old carrying in one hand a small tin pail with a cloth over the top, and a slab of grey slate in the other.

As she'd turned to push the door shut behind her, she'd knocked over the water pail that stood on the bench next to the door. The other children had burst out laughing, and she'd gone red. But he hadn't laughed. He had jumped up as fast as he could, run over to her and picked up the water pail. As he'd straightened up, the pail in his hand, he'd looked into glistening green eyes that were shining at him with gratitude, and he'd fallen in love at that moment.

Long before their school years had ended, they'd known that they would stay together forever. Only it hadn't been forever –

he'd been nineteen when they'd wed and they'd been married for less than nine years – and his grief at losing her a year ago was still every bit as intense, every bit as painful, as it had been on the day when she'd slipped away from him.

He'd waited as long as he could before bringing another woman into the house, but now that the time had come that he must do so, he was glad – yes, glad – that it was someone who looked like Ellen, someone who could never touch his heart, someone who'd never threaten his daughter's memory of her mother.

He felt guilty for finding a benefit to himself in another person's great misfortune, but that was the way he felt, and there was nothing he could do about it.

He turned to look back at the house. It was silent. She'd stopped moving around; she'd be in the bedroom, waiting.

He took a deep breath and went towards the house.

Ellen sat on the edge of the bed in her flannel nightdress, just beyond the reach of the pale glow which spread out from the lamp that she'd set down next to a large china bowl on the table in the far corner of the room. Her long brown hair fell over her scarred left cheek; her right cheek faced the door.

The door opened. She felt herself stiffen, and she made a conscious effort to relax.

Connor came into the room, closed the door behind him, hesitated and then walked over to her. Standing square in front of her, he looked down at her. 'This be all right with you?' he asked, his voice tinged with awkwardness.

She pulled her hair further across her cheek, glanced up at him, her hand against her hair, and tried to smile. 'Of course. It's part of our bargain, isn't it? You've kept to your word, and I'll keep to mine.'

He nodded, and went across to the table, pulling his braces down over his shoulders as he walked and tugging his shirt free

from his jeans. She glanced at him just as he started to undo his shirt, and she caught sight of a lean, sun-browned chest. A lump came to her throat, and to her dismay, her eyes filled with tears. She put her hands to her eyes and tried to push them back.

He slipped off his shirt, dropped it on to the table and started to unbutton his denims. Then he looked across at her, and stopped. His hands fell to his sides and he took a step towards her.

'What is it?' he asked. 'You've been married before so you know what to expect. I won't hurt you. Is that why you're afeared?'

She pulled her hair further across her cheek and turned away from him.

'I'm being stupid,' she said, her voice shaking. 'Please, don't pay any attention to me.'

He didn't move, and she felt his eyes on the side of her head.

'Is this too soon for you?' he asked. 'We've had a long day, and I can sleep in Bridget's room tonight, if you wish.'

She shook her head. 'No, I don't wish. I want to begin our life as man and wife tonight. I'd like you to lie beside me. Please, Mr Maguire.'

He gestured helplessly. 'Then why are you crying?'

'I'm not really.' She paused. 'It's just that I wish ... I wish ...' She stopped.

He waited a moment, then sat on the bed next to her, leaving a small space between them. She turned her face further away from him.

'What is it you wish? Tell me, will you?'

She took a deep breath, turned around and looked into his face, her hand holding her hair in place. 'I wish I didn't look as I do now. I know you wouldn't have chosen me if you'd had the chance to see me before I got here, and I wish that my face was as before the accident. If it was, I think you would not feel such distaste for me. For this.'

He met her eyes.

'No, I would not have chosen you, ma'am ... Ellen ... That's true. But as you said yourself earlier this evening, I agreed to marry you after I'd seen you. I needn't have. And I told you that I would like to have a son.' He gave her a wry smile. 'As far as I know, there's only one way to bring this about. So my distaste, as you put it, cannot have been so very great. Wouldn't you agree?'

She gave him a watery smile.

'But before we go further, I think we must free your hands,' he said. 'If you are to live here as my wife, you must get used to me seeing your face.' He leaned across, gently took her hand and moved it aside. Then he gathered up the hair that hung in front of her left cheek, held it to one side and stared at her scar.

She edged back from him.

He released the hair, and smiled at her. 'There, now I've seen it so you've no need to hide yourself from me any more. One day I'll ask you about the accident, and you'll tell me about it if you want to, but not tonight. Tonight's about sealing our bargain.'

He stood up, went across the room to the lamp and lowered the wick. The flame extinguished, when he turned back she was lying beneath the quilt, waiting for him.

His hand went to the buttons on his denims and he walked forward.

To be continued ...

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