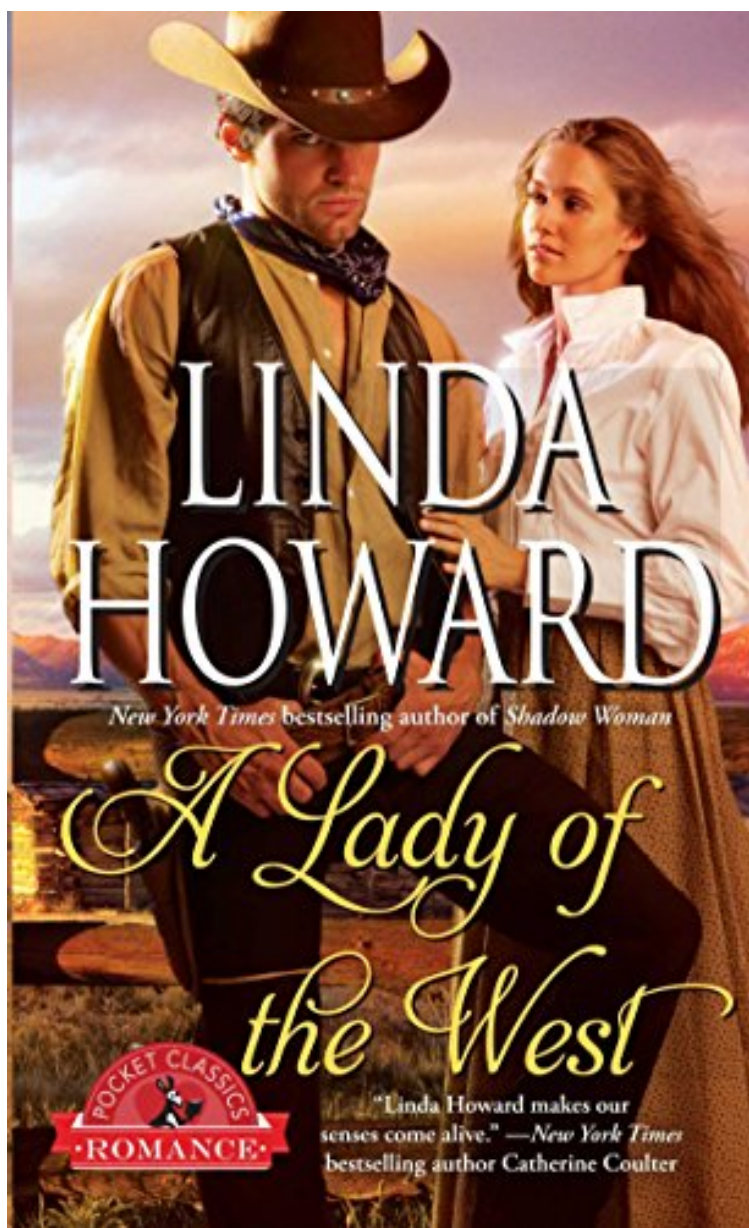


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## A Lady of the West



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land war, they will fight for Jake's birthright...and seize at all costs the love that is their destiny.

Prsentation de l'diteurNew York Times bestselling author Linda Howard sets a tale of power, suspense, and passion in the savage New Mexico Territory.Only true love could redeem....Victoria Waverly, noble daughter of the war-ruined South, is sold in marriage to a ruthless rancher. Honor and pride help her endure life as a wife in name only but nothing can quench her forbidden desire for hired gunman Jake Roper. His gaze is hard, but tenderness he can't hide promises to unveil to Victoria the mysteries of love. Only true love can destroy....Jake curses his burning need for Victoria, for he wants nothing to stand in the way of his drive to reclaim Sarratt's Kingdom -- the ranch that is his legacy and obsession. But ancient wrongs and blazing passions will bind together the aristocratic beauty and the powerful cowboy. In a bloody land war, they will

fight for Jake's birthright...and seize at all costs the love that is their destiny.ExtraitFrom "Chapter One""Major Frank McLain stepped into the sun and watched the buggy approach, his eyes narrowed with anticipation.She was finally here.Fierce, gloating satisfaction filled him. He'd never been good enough before, but now a damned Waverly would be his wife. Her mother was even a Creighton -- Margaret Creighton -- and the girl had the Creighton looks herself, all pale, calm elegance, and aristocratic bones.Victoria Waverly. Before the war her family would have spit on him. Now she was marrying him because he had money and all they had were empty bellies and impeccable bloodlines. The war and the hunger it had created were the world's greatest equalizers. The Waverlys and the Creightons hadn't blinked twice at marrying their daughter to him in exchange for a more comfortable life.He could barely wait. He'd wrenched this land from the Sarratts with blood and death and pure guts, and made it his; he now owned more land than any plantation owner in the South ever had, made his name one to be reckoned with in the territory, ran more cattle and employed more men than anyone else around, and still something had been lacking. He'd never gotten what he'd wanted more than anything else in his life, and that was a lady at his table, a true aristocrat to share his name. There had never been any hope of it before, but after the war he'd gone back to Augusta, back to the town where he'd grown up as poor and despised white trash. He'd searched there for the perfect woman of his dreams, and he'd found Victoria. His heart beat faster just thinking about her. He had waited four months for her to arrive, and now she was here. They would be married that night.One of the men standing behind him shifted to get a better look."Who's that in the buggy with her?" "Her little sister and her cousin, Emma Gann, came with her," McLain answered. He didn't mind that Victoria had brought some family with her. He kind of liked the idea of having them under his roof. Men from all over the territory would probably come to court them. White women were still a rarity, and true ladies were as precious as gold. He had a pleasant moment's thought of the alliances he could forge with advantageous marriages for the two young women. By God, he'd build an empire that would make the Sarratts look like two-bit dirt farmers. Twenty years had passed since he'd killed the last of them and taken the land, but he still hated the name. Duncan Sarratt had always looked at him as if he were trash, and that bitch Elena had acted as if he'd dirtied the air she had to breathe. But he'd gotten both of them, made them pay, and now he lived in the Sarratt house. No, goddamn it, it was his house, just as it was his land. There were no Sarratts anymore. He'd made sure of it.The half dozen men standing behind him were, in a way, just as eager for the buggy to roll to a stop. Oh, there were some white whores in Santa Fe if they wanted to ride that far, but all of the women on the ranch or anywhere nearby were Mexican. The few white women in Santa Fe who weren't whores were the wives of soldiers, or the odd rancher's wife. These women coming in now were supposed to be good women, but only the Major's wife would be off-limits. Hell, they all knew him. If he wanted to plow his wife's sister, he'd do it and not think twice. So they watched the approaching buggy with hot eyes, wondering what the women would look like, not that it mattered.Will Garnet spat on the ground."The Major is acting like a fool over this woman," he muttered."Ain't no split-tail born worth this much fuss."The few men who heard him agreed, but didn't say anything. Only two men on the spread were immune to the Major's rage, and Garnet was one of them. He was in his early forties, with dark hair graying at the temples, and he had been with the Major from the first. He was the foreman and did pretty much as he wanted, with the Major's blessing. They all walked lightly around him, except the man standing a little away from their group, his posture relaxed and his eyes cold under the brim of his hat. Jake Roper had only been on the ranch a few months, but he, too, seemed immune to the Major's anger.They had all been hired as cowpunchers or wranglers, but it was a fact that some of them had been hired more for their handiness with a sidearm than for their bulldogging ability. A man who had made his fortune the way McLain had needed to keep an eye out for his enemies. Not only that, but a spread as big as his was vulnerable to rustling and

lightning raids by the Comanche. So McLain had built his own private army of gunmen, and Jake Roper was the fastest. Even the other gunhands tended to steer clear of him. Garnet might have a mean streak in him a mile wide, but Roper was ice clear through. Garnet might backstab a man, but Roper would squash out a life with as little thought as if he'd stepped on a bug. Roper himself had little interest in the women. The Major was making a fool out of himself but it didn't bother Roper. He gave his boss a sidelong glance, but all his contempt was hidden behind his cold eyes. This fancy, high-nosed Southern lady wasn't so special, not if she was marrying McLain. He had a good idea what she was in for. But she'd chosen to come here; she could damn well make the best of it. When the buggy reached the front of the house, it stopped and McLain stepped forward. He lifted his arms to help one of the women down. "Victoria!" She stood, but instead of allowing McLain to lift her from the buggy, she placed a gloved hand on his forearm and stepped down. "Major," she said calmly, and lifted back the veil from her bonnet. Roper's first impression of her face was that it looked like it belonged to a bloodless porcelain doll, very correct and passionless. Yep, a lady, all right, all the way down to her lace drawers -- and God forbid any man should see them. Her hair was light brown, what he could see of it, and her voice had been low. That was a blessing; shrill, screeching women disgusted him. The next woman to alight, also with a gentle hand on McLain's forearm, was a bit on the plain side, with dark brown hair and brown eyes. But Roper thought she had a sweet smile. He eyed her consideringly. He figured this was the cousin. The next one didn't wait for assistance, but jumped to the ground with a small gurgle of delight. She tugged her bonnet off, and whirled it by its strings. "Oh, everything's beautiful," she breathed, looking around with wide eyes. Standing beside Roper, Garnet stiffened and swore under his breath. She was a young girl rather than a woman, but she was stunningly beautiful. Her hair was a golden blond mass, and she had big, dark blue eyes. Roper figured a girl like that was going to cause a lot of trouble among the men on the ranch. The little sister was just too pretty to leave her alone. "Garnet! Roper!" Both of them stepped forward, faces blank. The Major was beaming like an idiot as he turned toward them. "Victoria, my dear, these are my two right hands, Will Garnet is my foreman and Jake Roper makes sure we're all safe here. Boys, say howdy to my intended, Miss Victoria Waverly." Victoria's eyes showed nothing as she gracefully held out a slim gloved hand to the foreman. "Mr. Garnet," she murmured. "Ma'am." His hand enclosed hers, and he looked her up and down in a way that made her draw back nervously. She met his gaze and was made even more uneasy by his eyes, which were flat and expressionless, like a snake's. She withdrew her fingers as quickly as possible, resisting an urge to wipe them on her skirt. Instead, she turned to the other man, "Mr. Roper." She looked up at him and froze. His hat was pulled down low over his eyes, but she could still see them glittering coldly at her. He slowly, deliberately lowered his gaze to her breasts and stared at them for what seemed an eternity to her, before raising his eyes to meet hers again with contempt. Roper ignored her outstretched hand and merely lifted the brim of his hat. Victoria dropped her arm and turned away, her discomfort intensified. If Garnet's manner was offensive, this man was frightening. His face was still, yet he had looked at her with such obvious disrespect that it shook her. No one, not even the Yankee soldiers, had ever looked at her like that. It took all her self-control to appear calm as she turned to the man she had come three-quarters of the way across the continent to marry. "If you don't mind, Major, we'd like to freshen up now. The dust is terrible." "Of course, of course. Carmita! Show Miss Victoria and the girls where they can wash." His voice was harsh when he spoke to the servants, and Victoria gave him a quick glance. She had been raised to never be rude to a servant. But the short, round, middle-aged woman who answered the Major's summons wore an expression of perpetual good nature. "Please, this way" she said with a warm smile. Victoria turned to find her cousin, Emma, close behind her, but her sister Celia had wandered off toward the corrals. Victoria called to her, and as the girl skipped back, her face aglow with delight, Victoria didn't miss the way most of the men were looking at Celia. Men everywhere looked at Celia with pleasure, but this was different. They watched the girl the way a cat might watch a mouse. Victoria ushered Celia into the house ahead of her, wondering desperately if she had done the right thing in bringing the girl with her. At least in Augusta she wouldn't have had to deal with these threatening strangers. Emma fell into step with Victoria, and her cousin's fine dark eyes mirrored her own uneasy impressions. "Those men..." Emma murmured. "Yes," Victoria said. The huge house was Spanish in style, the walls made of thick, whitewashed adobe. Coolness enveloped them as they stepped inside, and Victoria's spirits lifted as she looked around. The walls were clean and white, the spacious rooms were enlivened with colorful rugs. On the second floor Carmita led them past the first door on the right but opened the second, and beckoned Victoria forward. "Your room, seorita," she said. Victoria was pleased by what she saw. The floor was of dark wood, and a curtained, four-poster bed was set against the left wall. On the right was an enormous armoire. There

was a washstand bearing a simple white pitcher and bowl, and a mirrored dressing table for her toilette. Under the window was a chaise longue, and across it was folded a cream-colored blanket. "It's lovely," she said, drawing a huge smile from Carmita. Celia whirled around the room, sending her skirts flying. "A room of your own!" she crowed. She and Victoria had shared a room for as long as she could remember, and this was an unimaginable luxury to her. "And Emma and I will have rooms of our own, too, won't we?" Victoria looked at Carmita, who nodded. "Yes, of course," she told her sister as she smoothed a golden strand of hair from Celia's face. No, there was no way she could have left her in Augusta with their parents, who were bitter and joyless after the death of their only son in the war. Celia needed laughter and sunshine, and she gave it back in abundance. But she was a fragile, vulnerable girl. Like a hothouse bloom, she needed careful nurturing to flourish. "May we see my room next? Please, may we?" Her enthusiasm was contagious, and Victoria found herself laughing with the others as they trooped down the hallway. "How many rooms are there in the house, Carmita?" she asked. "Fifteen, seorita. Eight downstairs, seven upstairs." "You are the housekeeper?" "Si. There is also Lola, the cook, and my daughter, Juana, who helps me in the house." Victoria had caught a glimpse of a black-haired young woman when they arrived. "Was it Juana I saw at the stables?" Carmita's face hardened. "No, seorita. That was Angelina Garcia. Juana does not go to the stables." "What does Angelina do?" Carmita only shrugged, and didn't explain. Victoria made a mental note to ask again about this Angelina. The rooms assigned to Emma and Celia were identical, square and plain, but possessing simple charm. Celia bounced on each double bed in turn, ecstatic at their good fortune, and even Emma's eyes held a fragile hope that things were looking better at last. Victoria tried to muster some of that same sense of optimism, but instead her heart could manage only the slow, heavy beat of dread. She had to marry Frank McLain, and only desperation had brought her to this pass. He had been outwardly kind, but she doubted she would ever be able to make herself feel comfortable with him. At the thought of marrying him, a shudder shook her. He was barrel-chested and thick-necked, like a bull, though he wasn't very tall; the combination made him appear brutish. Victoria felt suffocated at the idea of sharing a room with him. She had brought Emma and Celia with her thinking that at least they would have food and clothing enough to be secure. The war had reduced them, quite literally, to starvation, and the Major had seemed their only hope. But after meeting those men -- Garnet and Roper -- and seeing the others standing back with their awful interest in Celia, she had to doubt her wisdom in taking her cousin and sister from Augusta. Roper had stared at her with contempt in his cold eyes. She shivered and decided she would stay far away from the man. She was glad he hadn't taken her hand when she'd offered it; she was glad he hadn't touched her. Yet she wondered why he had looked at her like that, as if she were trash. Never in her twenty-one years had anyone done that; she was a Waverly, her mother was a Creighton, and both families could trace their roots back several centuries to English nobility. Before the war, they had been at the top of the social pyramid. Before the war... Before the war, she reminded herself, a lot of things had been different. She straightened her shoulders. She had lost the privileged way of life she had been born to, the luxuries, the comfort and protection of wealth. She had gone from having it all to having nothing, but she had coped. She had kept her head high even when she was hungry, even when her dresses were threadbare and she shivered with cold, when her only pair of shoes had holes in the bottom. Dresses and shoes had never been the sum of her existence, so she had never mourned for the loss of them. What the war had done was shatter her family, taking a cousin here, an uncle there. Emma's fianc had been killed the first winter, and the echo of sadness had never left her eyes. Emma's mother, Victoria's mother's sister, had died in '63. Her cousin had come to live with the Waverlys. Then Victoria's adored older brother, Robert, had been killed in the Wilderness campaign. After that she had also lost her parents. They still lived, after a fashion, but their hearts had died. Victoria had always known that Robert was the magic one, the center of the family, but she'd never been jealous of him, because she had dearly loved him, too. She and Celia had been loved, or at least she had thought they had been. But with Robert's death, her parents had grieved until there was nothing left to give their daughters. She thought of the home she'd left, of her parents locked in bitterness for what was lost, and knew that she couldn't have left sixteen-year-old Celia there alone. Celia was different and sometimes others grew impatient with her. All of her life Victoria had stepped between Celia and trouble, and she wasn't going to stop now. Carmita interrupted Victoria's thoughts as they left Emma's room by saying, "The Major, he said the wedding would be tonight. You have your dress, yes? I will get the wrinkles out." "Tonight! A chill ran through Victoria." "Tonight? Are you certain?" The housekeeper looked puzzled. "Of course. He has sent for the padre. He told me this himself, this morning." Victoria said nothing more but went with Carmita back to her room, where the trunks had been delivered. With Emma's assistance, they sorted through everything until

they found the dress (paid for with the Major's money) that Victoria had brought to be married in. Carmita took it off to be steamed. Silently Victoria began putting her clothes away in the armoire. Emma joined her, efficiently folding and hanging. After a moment Emma said, "You know, you don't have to go through with it. We can always go back home." Victoria leaned against the armoire. "How can we? Do you truly think the Major would pay our way back? No, I agreed to the bargain, and I'll keep it." Emma paused in the folding of a delicate lawn nightgown, which had also been purchased with the Major's money. All of their clothing was new and had come from him, even their underwear. Emma's eyes were worried. "Have we made a mistake in coming here?" "I hope not. I pray not. But those men downstairs...the way they looked at Celia -- ""Yes. I saw." Victoria walked to the window. The land was beautiful, incredibly so, but alien to everything she had known. She had expected a calm, peaceful ranch, and instead she sensed an undercurrent of violence she couldn't explain. "I feel uneasy," she murmured. "Those men are so threatening. That sounds silly, doesn't it?"

But I didn't expect them to be armed." "The territory is still a dangerous place. I expect most men are armed." "Yes, of course. It's just so different from home. The Yankee soldiers were armed, but that was expected." "And they didn't look like the gunslingers we've heard so much about." "Or read about in that dreadful dime novel Celia bought in Texas." The two young women looked at each other and smiled, remembering the lurid descriptions that had had Celia wide-eyed. Emma's common sense calmed her, but Victoria couldn't entirely dismiss her own uneasiness. A faint blush rose to her cheeks as she returned to the chore of unpacking, and she darted a quick glance at Emma. Her cousin was two years older than she, and had been engaged. Perhaps she was in possession of more information than Victoria was. "I wonder if he will sleep in here?" Emma looked around. "It doesn't seem likely. If he intended for you to share a room, wouldn't he have put you in the room he already occupies?" Relief almost made Victoria's knees go limp. "Yes, I should have thought of that." "Perhaps that door connects with his room." Emma pointed. Victoria walked to it and twisted the knob. It opened into another bedroom, obviously occupied. She quickly shut it again. "I'd thought it was to the privy." At least now she knew they definitely wouldn't share a room, thank God. But that wasn't all that worried her. She busied herself hanging the sensible skirts and shirtwaist blouses she'd insisted on having for everyday wear. "Do you know what will happen tonight?" she asked in a low voice. "Afterward -- when we're alone." Emma's hands stilled, and she bit her lip. "Not really. Didn't Aunt Margaret tell you before we left?" "No, except to say that I must do my duty. That's all very well, if I only knew what my 'duty' was. I feel so stupid! I should have asked. You were engaged; what did Aunt Helen tell you?" "I suppose she thought she would wait until right before the wedding, for she never told me anything. The things I heard in school -- ""Yes, I know. I imagine I heard the same things, but I can't believe they are true. The only thing I really know is that married people may sleep in the same bed." And have babies. She barely contained a shudder at the thought. She didn't want to have the Major's children; she couldn't even bear for him to share her room. Emma bit her lip again and thought of Jon, her fianc. After they had become engaged, he had often kissed her in what she knew must be an improper manner, but it had been so wonderful she had gloried in it rather than rebuking him as she ought. He had held her tightly and touched her breasts. He had used his tongue while kissing her, though at first she'd been shocked. And when he'd held her so tightly against him, she had felt a hardness in his trousers, and she had instinctively known that it pertained to what happened between a man and his wife, that mysterious, fearsome unknown they'd whispered about so avidly in school. Jon. The long years since his death had eased the brutal grief, but not the yearning. She had loved him, but more than that he had begun awakening her physical senses in a way that left her feeling her aloneness even more keenly than she would have. Still, she knew that she would rather be alone than be the one who married Major McLain. Victoria was truly the only family Emma had left, for she had never been close to her aunt and uncle, and Celia, though happy and lovable, would never be able to share the memories of growing up together as she and Victoria did, or the responsibilities of adulthood. She clenched her fist and looked at her cousin, who had agreed to marry Major McLain in order to protect her family. For all her air of fragility there was steel in Victoria, and fierce determination. Emma knew more than anyone that it was Victoria who had somehow managed to keep them all fed these past two horrible years when no Southerner had had enough food, Victoria who had bartered and economized, who had spent hours laboriously tending a small vegetable garden in the backyard. Now her cousin needed information, and no matter how embarrassing the discussion was, Emma decided to give it to her. She cleared her throat. "Jon -- used to touch my breasts." Victoria was very still her eyes wide and troubled. She tried to imagine the Major touching her there, and shrank from the idea. "And he used to get hard. His -- his privates would get hard." Emma looked down at her clasped hands and couldn't look up again. "I think a

husband does something between a woman's legs with his privates, and that's what makes a baby." Victoria felt as if she couldn't breathe. Dear God, did she have to let the Major rub his privates against hers? He would have to lift up her nightgown, and he would have to be unclothed.... Nausea made the back of her throat bum, and she swallowed. The horrible image of his thick, brutally strong hands on her breasts, pulling up her gown, made her whirl away and clench her fists. Emma stared at her hands. "Of course, Jon never did anything to dishonor me," she murmured. "But I wish he had. I liked it when he kissed me, and touched me. I wish he had done the rest of it, too, and perhaps I would have had his child." They had been so strictly raised that for Emma even to think such a thing was scandalous, but Victoria couldn't feel shocked. Emma and Jon had been in love, and for them to do that even unblessed by marriage seemed far less obscene than the proposal that she do the same thing with the Major inside the marital bonds. With that realization, she felt the truth of Emma's aloneness and moved to touch her cousin's shoulder. "I won't feel as frightened now, knowing. Thank you. She made her voice firm. Emma gave her a little smile. "I don't know that much. Most of it is guessing. I suppose we should have asked." "Much good it would have done us. Can you imagine Mother saying even as much as you have?" Emma hesitated. "Will you tell me?" She blushed. "I mean, when you know for certain." Respectable women never talked of such things, but Victoria nodded. She didn't feel daring, only desperate. She and Emma would have to bolster each other and work together to protect Celia, who saw good in everyone and therefore knew neither danger nor caution. Victoria looked around the room. It was pleasing in its simple colors, larger and airier than she was accustomed to, as were all the rooms in the house. Tonight she would become a wife and would no longer be Victoria Waverly, but Mrs. Frank McLain.

Someday she might be a mother. This, it seemed, was to be her role in life, and her duty was to fill it impeccably. She had been raised to be first a perfect lady and then a perfect wife, an ornament on a man's arm and a capable mistress of his house. In her world women were gentle and graceful, charming and concerned only with a woman's activities. A wife always deferred to her husband. She would try to be the lady she had been raised to be, try to always be gracious and proper. She knew nothing else she could do; there was no backing out, so she might as well make the best of it. Many women had married men they didn't love and led fulfilled lives; Victoria was certain she could do the same. But when she thought of the coming night, she couldn't stop shivering. Will Garnet couldn't get the little blonde out of his mind. Her glowing face was perfect, and he bet her breasts would be nice and round, instead of drooping like Angelina's. Hell, Angelina would lie down for any two-bit saddle tramp who had the price, so there wasn't anything special about her. Now, that little blonde... she was a virgin for sure, she had that look about her. Garnet wanted to be the first. He wanted to see that beautiful little face when she got it for the first time; he bet she'd like it, after she got used to it some. Not like her cold stick of a sister. The boss wouldn't be getting anything in his bed except a poker. Garnet cast a sidelong glance at Roper, who was sitting at the table in the bunkhouse. He didn't have much use for the man, and he knew the feeling was likewise, but they would both be at the wedding. Boss's orders, just to make certain no trouble interrupted the ceremony. Garnet grunted and spoke to the gunhand. "The boss's woman ain't much, is she? But, damn, that little sister sure makes up for her." Roper was cleaning and oiling his big .44s, and never looked up. Familiar anger rose in Garnet. If Roper wasn't so damned fast with those guns, he'd have kicked his ass a long time ago. But nobody pushed Roper, not even the Major. If it had just been that, a bullet in the back would have taken care of him. The thing was, any back-shooter would have to make damn certain Roper was dead, and most of the men thought Roper wouldn't go down that easy. He'd only been on the ranch a few months, and they still didn't know much about him, other than he was damn good with horses, snake-quick with a gun, and as cold-blooded and deadly as a rattler. It was in his eyes, those cold, clear, emotionless eyes. Roper never let his guard down.

Even now, while he was cleaning his .44s, he only unloaded one at the time. Nor were they his only weapons; a big Bowie knife, all fourteen inches of it, rode in a scabbard at his left kidney, and another knife, this one thin and balanced for throwing, was in his right boot. Those were the only ones Garnet knew about; he figured the gunslick had at least one more hidden somewhere on his body. But what really made the men wary of Roper was the way he'd killed Charlie Guest a couple of months back. Guest had always had more mouth than sense and was a bad-tempered bully on his good days, so Garnet really didn't give a damn that Roper had killed him. It was the way he'd done it. Guest had taken a dislike to Roper and started mouthing off at him, and got even madder when the gunhand had ignored him the way he was doing Garnet now. Then Guest had made the mistake of going for his gun. He'd never made it. Before he could even clear leather, Roper had been on him, moving so lightning fast that Garnet still wasn't quite sure what had happened. Roper had dropped Guest to the bunkhouse floor and planted a knee in his back. He'd hooked his left arm around

Guest's neck and pushed on the man's head with his right hand. They'd all heard Guest's neck pop like a chicken's. Without even breaking a sweat, Roper had left the dead man lying on the floor and gone back to what he'd been doing like he'd never been interrupted. The dead silence in the bunkhouse had been broken when one of the cowpunchers blurted, "Why didn't you shoot him?" Roper hadn't looked up. "He wasn't worth a bullet." The Major liked having a man like Roper in his employ; he felt it gave him a certain stature. Garnet didn't like the way the Major was depending more and more on the gunslick, but was helpless to do anything about it. Nobody on the ranch was going to take him on after what he'd done to Guest. Goaded by his silence, Garnet snapped, "That little blonde's mine." Roper flicked a glance at him. "Fine." Somehow, the indifference stung Garnet. Nothing touched Roper. The man wasn't human; he didn't even use Angelina's services. Garnet had begun to think something was wrong with Roper in that way until they'd gone into Santa Fe and Roper had holed up with a woman the entire three days they'd been there. The fool woman had watched him leave with a dreamy look in her eyes. Just under his breath Garnet said "One of these days, gunslick, I'll get you under my sights." Roper lifted his head and smiled in a way that didn't change the expression in his eyes at all. "Any time." Copyright 1990 by Linda Howington From Publishers Weekly As long as Howard's ( McKenzie's Mountain ) feisty and mostly likable protagonists are caught up in intrigue and sheer survival, her tale of revenge in 1860s New Mexico is fairly absorbing; but when action gives way to romance, the story trades momentum for ordinary lovers' spats. Victoria Waverly, daughter of a Georgia family devastated by the Civil War, replenishes the family coffers by marrying Frank McLain, a crude New Mexican cattle rancher. Unbeknownst to Victoria, McLain acquired his ranch by murdering its previous owners. However, the dead ranchers' two sons, Jake and Ben Sarratt, escaped and now, after 20 years, are ready to take revenge on their parents' murderer and reclaim their home. Jake is working incognito as one of McLain's gunslingers when his plan is complicated by the arrival of the innocent and beautiful bride: when they kill McLain, Victoria will inherit the property. Consequently, one more step is required before the Sarratt brothers can regain their family ranch: Jake, who desperately desires Victoria, must persuade her to marry him--or he must kill her. Copyright 1990 Reed Business Information, Inc.