

SUSANNAH'S
ROSES:
CHAPTER ONE

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PROLOGUE - THE IMPOSSIBLE CONDITION - PART I

3 January 1861

It was proving almost impossible for Susannah to contain her excitement. She was so excited she had her hands linked behind her back and was springing off the balls of her feet as she walked. She was trying hard to act appropriately and in the manner befitting a lady of her station (as she had been told numerous times) but she was not carrying it off well. She looked across at Harry, trying to be coy and look through her lashes, as she had been taught, but again failing miserably. The excitement of it all was simply too much and all the deportment rules had disappeared over the horizon.

She was aware, however, that her parents were stationed less than twenty feet away and any impropriety would be the first nail in the coffin of their marriage. She did not think it would take much for them to start hammering it closed. Their agreement to the union had been two years in coming, but even then it was conditional. The restrained excitement was clear in her voice when she spoke.

'I cannot believe they have finally agreed.'

Susannah brought her left hand out in front of her and admired the giant sapphire winking on her finger. She loved the dark, night-sky colour of the stone. It suited her more perfectly than a diamond ever would have. The fact that it

was rectangular was an added bonus; she much preferred that shape to oval or round. A huge smile stretched across her face as she thought about the large bunch of pink roses he had also brought with him. She could not wait to be enveloped by their divine scent again.

Harry grinned at her statement and her action of admiring the engagement ring. Anything out of the ordinary was always a risk and he was glad she liked it. He was also walking with his hands linked behind his back. In his estimation, if he held his hands it would stop him from reaching out to Susannah. He had made it this far. No use in destroying two years of patiently waiting with one impulsive gesture. Her parents being stationed where they were was a very effective deterrent. They had made it clear they were watching.

Harry looked across at Susannah a slight frown knitting his brow.

'We are not quite there yet. I still have to build you a house before they will let us marry.'

Susannah chewed the inside of her lip for a moment, even though she knew it was not ladylike, before she replied.

'You are the most capable man I have ever met. That will not be an impediment. Not to you.'

Susannah smiled. It only took a second for her face to light up.

'You will not let me down.'

Harry smiled a tiny smile. He loved her confidence in him, but he had his doubts. To work his own station and have time to build a house fit for Susannah in twelve months was going to be a tall order. And her parents knew it. They had set him a seemingly impossible goal, which was why they had finally given in and agreed to let he and Susannah marry, subject to that one condition.

It was a canny decision on Arthur's part. If Harry failed, he lost Susannah's respect and the opportunity to make her his wife. If he succeeded, Susannah lived in the luxury to which she was accustomed. Above those considerations, however,

the condition was a forceful statement that Arthur fully intended to call the shots regarding his daughter. For Harry, it was a first-hand taste of why Arthur was so successful in business. He was as ruthless as he was shrewd, and he never gambled on something he could not win. In this instance though, he had underestimated Harry's fortitude. Getting the house built was going to be difficult, but not impossible. Arthur did not have Harry's measure yet and this gamble on his part was not a sure thing.

The biggest risk Arthur had ever made was in emigrating from England with his wife, Elise, and their two children, ten years before. It was a chance that had paid off handsomely, though. One year after disembarking at Port Adelaide, Arthur had earned enough money to start work on the station homestead and had completed it with the help of his workers six months later. The family had moved out from Adelaide and the Hale empire had been launched. His success with both sheep and cattle had ensured that Arthur Hale was a prominent South Australian businessman.

His standing and his devotion to his wife and children were the reasons behind his initial refusal to let Harry court Susannah. Arthur wanted better for his daughter than Harry could provide, so he had said. He had looked Harry in the eye and told him that affection and love counted for very little in a marriage, the ability to provide and a position of respect in the community were what mattered and he doubted Harry's ability to provide adequately for Susannah off his small landholding. Harry did not necessarily disagree with him on either count. It would be difficult to give her the life that she was accustomed to with his limited means, and respect and provision were important, but how sterile it would be to base a marriage on that alone.

Arthur, however, had underestimated the stubbornness and tenacity of his daughter. Susannah had been smitten with Harry since their first accidental meeting. She had been looking for her father whilst they were in Adelaide and had taken a

completely wrong turn. Harry had noticed her discomfort and her slightly frantic glances around. Harry had stridden over to offer assistance before any of the unsavoury characters that had been hanging around had intercepted her.

Harry had remarked that she should not be alone in this area of the city and she had dropped her eyes and agreed, saying that she had slipped her chaperone in order to find her father. Harry had bitten back a smile and extended his arm, insisting on escorting her to her father's location. He had found her engaging and intelligent, unlike most of the twittering females of his acquaintance. He had not for a second thought she would form an attachment to him in the thirty minutes it had taken to escort her. He was so far outside her social circle that the idea would have been laughable had someone suggested it. It was not until he had received a visit from Arthur Hale, warning him off having any contact with his daughter, that he had known anything about it.

Susannah, despite her father's wishes, had remained steadfast in her choice of Harry, and in an attempt to turn her attention elsewhere, the Hales had sent Susannah to England for six months to stay with Arthur's brother and his family. Three months after her return, here they were. Susannah was holding firmly to her desire to marry him. He still could not understand why she would want to spend the rest of her life with him, given that he could not provide for her in the manner her father had. Each time he had pointed this out to her, she' had been very vocal in her disagreement. Eventually he had capitulated, as had her father, although Arthur's submission had come wrapped up in what he thought to be an almost impossible condition.

Harry did not share Arthur's certainty that it was unattainable. He was not sure that he could build the house in a year and he was not sure that he could not. There was ample stone on the property to build it; that was not an issue. The Aborigines had not called the general area Kanyaka, the place of stone, for nothing. His uncertainty attached to his capacity

to successfully be both grazier and builder. Impossible or not, he had determined to give it his best shot.

They were off to a good start, though. The sapphire that graced Susannah's finger he had discovered by accident when he was out one day with Li, the little Chinaman who had attached himself to Harry when the former had fled west from the Victorian goldfields. They had been leading their horses down a dry river bed, and had stopped to rest for a moment. Li, whose eyes darted all over the place and saw everything, had picked up the greyish lump and become even more animated than the little man usually was.

'This good stone. Not common here.'

Li's eyes had been alight and he had turned the rock around and around in his hand. Harry had failed to understand the excitement Li had found in a lump of rock.

'Me cut. You give girl. Make nice ring.'

Harry had honestly had no idea what Li had been on about, but had nodded in the manner that he usually did when he didn't understand, but did not think he was agreeing to anything drastic. Why would he possibly give Susannah a piece of grey rock? Having forgotten all about it, Harry had been surprised when Li had arrived a week later with a sizeable, and as far as Harry could tell, well cut sapphire. Li had beamed with pride when he handed it over. Harry had offered him money for it but Li had been adamant in his refusal waving the idea away frantically.

'No. Harry help Li. Now, Li help Harry.'

And so his and Susannah's engagement had been launched. When Harry had sought an audience with Arthur and asked for his daughter's hand, showing his intention with the sapphire now mounted into a gold ring, Arthur had been reluctant, but the sapphire had been persuasive. That size was not common and as far as Arthur was concerned it opened the door to possibilities.

Arthur's interest in the union though, was reserved hence the condition. Harry felt the weight of its burden heavily. He

could not afford to fail; too much rested on it. He glanced discretely at Susannah again and a smile full of affection curved his lips. No, the stakes were too high; he definitely could not afford to fail.