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CASTLE ROCK



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AUTHOR'S NEW INTRODUCTION

I wrote *Castle Rock* many years ago, but its theme recurs in many of my books. What went wrong in the lives of those involved? What led someone with other good qualities to put themselves and their desires above the lives and happiness of others? *Castle Rock* explores family dynamics and the warping of character when ordinary people succumb to temptations.

Many terrific mysteries focus on social issues, but I am always more absorbed in individuals, why they do what they do, what matters to them, what lifts their spirits or destroys them. Agatha Christie once wrote that traditional mysteries are parables. I believe, too, that the mystery affords readers an opportunity to question their own attitudes and responses to life. If this, Dear Reader, is how you live . . .

Castle Rock is a romantic suspense novel. I enjoyed writing about Serena and Jed and Uncle Dan and Danny, and I hope today's readers will enjoy reading about them and the New Mexico they love.

It was dangerous. Serena knew that, but she had always been a fool for danger. She bent a little closer to Hurricane's neck and urged him to go faster. Behind her, above the clatter of the horses' hooves and the rattle of stones falling from the narrow trail, she heard Jed's shout.

"Serena, stop! For God's sake, you little fool, stop!"

A tiny smile flickered on her intent face, but, eyes narrowed, hands steady, she and Hurricane thundered down the trail, faster, faster, faster. The tough bent shrubs clinging to the rocky mountain wall melded into a blur. She could hear nothing now above the whistle of the air, the labored breathing of Hurricane, and the thunder of his hooves. As they reached the final curve, Serena felt an instant's doubt. Had she, this time, gone too far? Could they, could she and Hurricane, manage the turn at this pace?

Then, oh good horse, good horse, he kept to the curving trail, and then they plunged out onto the broad level sweep of plain with Castle Rock gleaming a hard red in the distance. Serena laughed aloud and her long silky black hair blew back from her face. Her green eyes shone with excitement and triumph. Gradually, she reined Hurricane in. What fun, what incredible fun.

Jed pulled even with her and Hurricane and Chieftain slowed together. Serena flashed Jed a blithe smile, but he scowled in return. As the horses, their necks and flanks stained with sweat, slowed to a trot, he asked angrily, "Are you crazy?"

Her heart began to race. He had been so aloof until now, so perfectly the new employee. Oh, she had his attention now. She liked the way anger lighted up his startlingly blue eyes and how the furious pace had ruffled his thick black hair and brought a flush to his darkly tanned face.

She laughed. "Don't you like to live dangerously, Jed?"

He stared at her, then, abruptly, without warning, he reached out and pulled her close to him and kissed her as violently as she had ridden down the trail. Hurricane and Chieftain moved uneasily against each other and Hurricane gave a low whinny.

Serena, surprised, then delighted, welcomed the pressure of his lips on hers, the hard feel of his hands against her shoulders.

He released her abruptly and pulled away on Chieftain. His blue eyes still glinted with anger. "You could have killed yourself. And Hurricane, too," he said accusingly.

Serena smiled again. "I have a lot of confidence in Hurricane—and myself."

"Do you always take such damn fool chances?" he demanded.

The horses were walking now, weary after their hard ride. Serena urged Hurricane into the lead.

She took her time answering. It seemed important suddenly to answer truthfully. She didn't want there to be artifice between them. Not now. Not ever. She looked back and, for an instant, remembered last summer and Peter. Peter had attracted her, too. But this time it was different. Jed was different. What was it about Jed that gave him an aura so distinctly different from anyone she had ever known? Was it the easy way he lounged in his saddle? The way his faded Levis and worn flannel shirt fitted his lean body? The intent look in his eyes when she came near?

She felt confused suddenly. It was none of these. Or all of them. Or was it, really, the workings of her own desire, investing this handsome stranger with qualities of power and grace? Was it, she wondered brutally, the fact that he was here, an undeniably attractive man, and she was lonely?

But, whatever there was going to be between them, let it begin honestly.

"I'm afraid," she said slowly, "that I do take chances. Always." Her green eyes looked at him gravely. "Is that . . . such a bad thing, Jed?"

Then Uncle Dan caught up with them and they were once again

Jed Shelton, the new hand, and Serena Mallory, the young and lovely ward of Dan McIntire, owner of the magnificent Castle Rock ranch.

Dan McIntire dominated the barren country. He rode a huge coal black horse and the two of them threw a massive moving shadow against the sandy dusty ground. McIntire's face was rugged, seamed by summer suns and winter winds. He was frowning as he looked toward Serena.

"A little too fast there, honey."

"Hurricane was born to race."

"Not down a canyon trail."

"Hurricane knows the way."

"Even a smart horse can make a mistake."

Serena knew the best defense. "Now Uncle Dan," she chided, "you are a great one to give advice about horses. Everybody in the county has warned you about Senator." As she spoke she looked at her uncle's horse. Senator moved jerkily under tight rein. His eyes rolled. He was, everyone knew, a dangerous undependable beast, so why was Dan McIntire so stubborn about him?

Uncle Dan knew the best defense, too. "Oh, get along with you, Serena. I've managed Senator for ten years now." He looked down grimly at the big horse beneath him, black ears flattened. "Senator and I have an understanding. I'm boss."

"Well, you'd better never let him forget it," she said lightly. She dug her boots into Hurricane and they surged ahead of the men. "Are we almost there?"

"Just about," Jed replied.

The little party broke into a trot, clattering across the cactus-studded plain. A half-mile ahead rose the immense jagged mound of red rock, curved and crenellated into a thousand exotic shapes, that gave the ranch its name, Castle Rock.

"It was at the north end. I saw it yesterday from the plane," Jed explained. "It's damn strange."

They rode three abreast now and Dan McIntire was looking up toward the mass of rock. "Is there anything more beautiful in the world?" he asked, his deep voice soft.

It didn't require an answer. This was Dan McIntire's world, the rugged emptiness of New Mexico, where the sun burns high in a sky that seems to stretch to infinity, lighting the earth in delicate colors, tan and beige merging into camel, and yellows so pale they shimmer like silk.

Serena, too, looked up toward Castle Rock. She felt a burst of happiness. Could there ever be a happier day? To ride, the light warm breeze stirring her hair, with two men who in sharply different ways pleased her so, to be young and free, at home in a world she understood. She wished, suddenly, that this morning could go on forever, nothing changing. She reached out, gently touched her uncle's arm. "Oh, it is lovely, isn't it?"

She was so glad she had accompanied them this morning although the object of their ride didn't interest her. Why should she care about an odd pile of stones that Jed had noticed from the air? He had been up in the Aerocommander, the five-passenger single engine plane her uncle used to keep tabs on the herds. It was another plus for Jed that he could pilot the plane.

"There are two of them," Jed was repeating, "one just at the base of Castle Rock and the other about a hundred and fifty yards due east."

But, when they reached the first stone pattern, even Serena was intrigued.

"Really, Uncle Dan," she exclaimed, "this is strange."

Dan McIntire sat astride Senator and stared down at the neatly piled stones with a puzzled frown.

Someone, and this was obviously the work of human hands, had taken stones, most of them nearly the size of a softball, and arranged them in two diagonal lines that crossed at midpoint to make an X almost fifteen feet long.

"The other one," and Jed waved his hand to the east, "is just like this."

"Two Xs," Serena murmured. "Whatever for?"

"I don't know," Dan McIntire said slowly, "but I don't like it."

"There are Navajos . . ." Jed began, but the older man shook his head.

“No. There wouldn’t be any reason.” McIntire turned and looked back across the flat country. Nothing moved in the bright morning sun, and the land stretched away for miles, only an occasional saguaro cactus breaking the horizon. “But there are always eyes on the desert. I’ll ask Joe to send out the word, ask if anyone’s seen any strangers.”

Joe Walkingstick had worked for her uncle as long as Serena could remember. Joe and his wife, Millie, had been gentle and welcoming to the orphaned child who came to the ranch to stay when she was only twelve years old.

Jed was off Chieftain now, kneeling beside the foot of the X, picking up one of the stones. He scanned the ground. “It took a while to find stones all about the same size.”

Senator moved restively. Uncle Dan steadied him. “It looks like some kind of marking.”

Jed frowned. “Yeah. But what for? Out here in the desert with nothing but miles of emptiness. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“I don’t like it,” Dan McIntire said again, his voice a growl.

Serena understood that tone. This was McIntire land and nobody else’s. Her uncle would fight about that. He didn’t take trespassing lightly.

“Maybe some hunters . . .” she began.

“Not here,” Uncle Dan objected. “Not unless they were after coyotes. The deer are all up in the mountains.”

They left it, finally, still puzzled, but there didn’t seem to be an answer.

Serena rode decorously all the way back to the hacienda, still savoring her wild descent and Jed’s fiery response. He couldn’t treat her so formally now. But when they drew up at the corral and dismounted, he spoke to her uncle. “I’m going to check on the new foal.”

“Good, Jed, then come on up to the house for lunch.”

“Thanks, Mr. McIntire, but I believe I’ll eat with the hands. I want to hear what they found in the Big East,” and he smiled and rode off.

McIntire looked after him in surprise. “It’s not often that anyone turns down one of Millie’s lunches. That’s a different young man.”

“Yes,” Serena agreed dryly. She was quite sure she understood Jed’s skittishness, but she had no intention of explaining to Uncle Dan.

“I like that young man,” Uncle Dan continued forcefully. “I’m glad he’s staying with us. Of course, I don’t know how long that will last. It was a lucky day for us when his car broke down.”

As they walked up the graveled path toward the hacienda, Serena remembered the spring evening two months ago when Jed had walked up to the front door, a duffel bag slung over his shoulder. She had looked at him in surprise when she answered the front door. The hacienda was thirty miles from a narrow state highway that linked it, after another twenty miles, to Santa Fe.

He had smiled. “My car’s given out on me. Would you have a phone I could use?”

“Really?” She had paused. “Were you coming here?”

“No. I’m afraid I’m lost. I was looking for a ghost town, Los Miros, and I must have taken the wrong road.”

“Yes,” she agreed equably, “you must have.” Los Miros was forty miles in the opposite direction.

The upshot was that he stayed for dinner, and the next day, Dan McIntire flew him into Albuquerque to get parts for his car. But Jed admired the ranch so much and talked about when he had worked on ranches in Texas and been so knowledgeable that Uncle Dan asked him if he’d like to stay awhile, the spring roundup was coming up and he needed more men . . .

Yes, it was certainly a lucky day when Jed’s car broke down . . .

Uncle Dan pulled open the huge wooden door of the hacienda. As Serena stepped inside, she shivered. It was always cold when you first came in. The twelve-inch walls held the cool in summer and the heat in winter. Still, it was chilling to step from bright sunshine into shadow.

A door slammed upstairs and boot heels thudded loudly on the broad, curving stairway that led down to the entry hall.

“Granddad, hey Granddad, why didn’t you take me?”

Danny jumped the last half-dozen steps. Dan McIntire swept him up in his arms, smiling. “You were up too late last night, Danny, when Jenny foaled.”

“Aw, Granddad, I could have gotten up. I love to go to Castle Rock. And you took Serena and she was up late, too.”

“I don’t need as much sleep as a growing boy,” Serena said quickly.

Danny wriggled out of his grandfather’s arms, still looking unhappy.

Dan slipped an arm around Danny’s thin shoulders. “I’ll tell you what, Danny, you and I will take a ride to Castle Rock next week. We’ll have Millie pack us a big picnic lunch and I’ll show you the trail that crosses the ranch near Castle Rock and . . .”

Serena followed them into the dining room, smiling at the two of them, Uncle Dan so huge and Danny so little. Danny would be ten in the fall. He was small for his age, slightly built, and not very robust, rather like his mother. Serena remembered Claire as a gentle and delicate woman with a quiet smile. Danny’s father had been cheerfully loud and vigorous.

Serena’s smile slipped away. When she remembered Danny’s parents, she recalled her own mother and father, Tom and Kitty Mallory. She carried in her mind a very clear memory of that last day when her mother said goodbye to her, “You’ll have fun visiting the ranch, sweetie. Daddy and I will be back next week.”

They had gone as guests on Dan Jr.’s yacht and an unexpected storm struck the Gulf. They found pieces of *The Sand Castle* for the next several weeks but no survivors. Serena Mallory, age twelve, had no other living relatives, nowhere to go, no one to take her. She marveled again at Dan McIntire’s great heart. He made nothing of it. Castle Rock would be her home, though she was only the daughter of friends with no call of kinship. Castle Rock would always be her home.

Serena slipped into her place at the huge mahogany table. The table seemed even larger with only a few of them to eat. There would soon be more to seat at meals. Castle Rock was not only a working ranch but, during the summer, a dude ranch. It always surprised Serena that Uncle Dan had opened the ranch to vacationers even though the visitors were always a small group. Perhaps the added company helped ease the pain he felt when his only son was killed and there were suddenly empty places at his table. It was the summer after *The Sand Castle* went down

that four cabins were built among the fir trees in the high ground that rose behind the hacienda. She and Will and Julie had always looked forward to the coming of summer, for there would be new faces and new friends. The ranch gained a quiet reputation among travel agents and there was always a long list of applicants.

But now she and Uncle Dan and Danny took their places at one end of the long table. The guests would not arrive for another week.

Uncle Dan looked across the table at Serena and frowned. "Where's Will?"

"Perhaps he didn't hear the bell, Uncle Dan," Serena said quickly. "I'll go see." She started to push back her chair, wondering as she did why she continued to have an impulse to protect Will. He had heard the bell, of course. How could he have missed it? He knew Uncle Dan expected promptness at meals. It was a small thing, but to Dan McIntire a courtesy to be expected, especially when the dudes came.

Then Will appeared in the doorway, his red hair tousled, his blue eyes vague. "Sorry I'm late. In the middle of . . . Well, anyway, sorry," and he hurried awkwardly to his place.

He was, Serena thought, so big that he stumbled over himself. It was odd that those massive hands could wield a paintbrush so delicately, creating paintings with clarity and grace. His blue eyes, now so vague, must in reality see more than most ever did of the incredible variations in color that made the New Mexico landscape hauntingly different.

As Will sat down, he looked toward her, and his openly adoring gaze made Serena feel sad.

She wished things could be different. She did love Will—like a brother. And that's all there was to it.

She smiled at him and abruptly his face lit up. As Millie brought in their lunch, he leaned close to Serena. "I've got some things I'd like to show you, some things I've just done."

"I'd like to see them, Will."

"Maybe after lunch . . ."

Uncle Dan broke in, "Will, I've been meaning to check with you. The phone bill shows a half dozen calls from the ranch to New York.

Serena said she hadn't made them. I think there's been some mistake and . . ."

"Oh." Will hesitated, looking uncomfortable. "It's not a mistake."

Uncle Dan lifted an eyebrow in surprise. "If you made the calls, that's fine."

Will tugged at his thick reddish beard. "Yeah, I've talked to New York a lot lately." He flushed. "Thing about it is, I may be able to set up a show there."

"In New York?" Uncle Dan asked interestedly.

Will nodded slowly.

Serena felt sure suddenly that Will was lying. She had known Will for so long, he and Julie. She knew them . . . Serena put down her fork, reached for her ice water to try and ease the dryness in her throat. Before last summer, she would have said she knew Will and Julie so well that nothing they ever did could surprise her.

But had Julie's actions really surprised her, a small cold voice asked within? She knew Julie, yes. Beautiful Julie, small and delicate and blonde, with a kind of beauty that took your breath away. But Serena knew what lay behind that lovely face and bubbly smile, knew the childlike self-interest that could be so shocking. Was it any wonder that Julie had thrown herself at Peter?

Serena drank, but the tight ache in her throat didn't ease.

Almost. That was a word to conjure with. Lost kingdoms, lost lives, lost loves. It was always a mistake to cling to *almost*. And didn't the outcome mean that Peter was not the man for her?

But Serena had thought he was the man for her, and that was what hurt so much, what made her wary now. Peter's turn from her to Julie made her wonder if she could ever be sure of anyone. In her mind, she remembered Jed and the look of pleasure in his eyes when she came near.

"Serena, don't you think that's right?"

She looked blankly at Will, realizing she hadn't heard a word he had said, but his expression was familiar. It was the same look he had given her through the years when he was out of his depth and needed help.

“Oh, I agree, Will, I certainly do,” she said quickly.

His blue eyes smiled at her, then he looked back at his uncle.

Dan McIntire was nodding slowly. “I can see the justice of what you say, Will, and we shouldn’t stand in the way of science. But I’ve never wanted to have a lot of strangers roaming around the ranch. Of course, these archaeologists could learn a lot from our ruins—”

Serena smiled to herself. Her uncle was fiercely possessive of Castle Rock Ranch, even to the point of calling the Anasazi ruins “our” ruins. They had been there, of course, long before the first Europeans entered the desert and mesa and mountain country peopled by the Pueblo Indians. The Anasazi were America’s first apartment dwellers, their adobe complexes built into sweeping curves in the sides of golden sandstone cliffs from CE 700 to 1300, the height keeping them safe from foes and predators. The great culture waned after 1300, brought down, many archaeologists, believed, by drought, still New Mexico’s greatest enemy. The Castle Rock ruins, unspoiled and untouched, attracted many archaeologists, but Uncle Dan had refused to permit excavations. Serena realized that Will, desperate to steer the conversation away from himself and the telephone calls to New York, must have suggested that Uncle Dan change his mind. It was a sure-fire way to distract him.

“—and I might let some of them dig if they promised not to do any damage.” Dan McIntire frowned down at his plate. “I don’t know, Will. I’ll think about it.” His troubled gaze moved to Serena. “Do you think it would be a good thing, Serry?”

She felt a rush of love for him as he called her by the childhood nickname. Uncle Dan was such a good man. He tried to always do the right thing, to them, to the land, to the people of this stark, magnificent country. She hesitated. “I think,” she said gently, “that it would be all right, Uncle Dan. We could be very particular about who we permitted to come and for how long. We could insist they not disturb the old burial grounds. It could be arranged so that no harm would be done.”

They were still talking about it, listing the pros and cons, when Millie brought in dessert, pineapple sherbet, and announced, “There is a long-distance call, Mr. McIntire.”

When he had left the dining room, Serena turned to Will. "Who are you calling in New York, darling? The Mafia?"

Will hunched his shoulders and didn't look at her. "Oh no, no, just a gallery, a fellow I met at a show last year in Santa Fe. You know the kind of thing."

His voice was so evasive Serena felt more certain than ever that the art show was a lie from beginning to end. She frowned. Will looked strained and tired.

"Will, what's wrong?" she asked suddenly.

"Nothing."

"Will, I know you," she said gently. "Please, let me help. Whatever it is."

He did look at her then, and the pain in his eyes shocked her.

"I can't tell you," he began, and then the dining room door opened. "Shh. Here comes Uncle Dan."

Dan McIntire was smiling as he sat down. "Good news, you two. Julie's coming home."

For an instant, Will and Serena turned frozen faces to him, both of them, Serena realized oddly, caught up in shock. But why, she wondered, should Will feel this way? He had always followed where Julie led. Will adored his sister.

Uncle Dan dipped into his sherbet, too busy talking to see their reaction. "I'll fly into Albuquerque and pick them up. Their flight gets in at four tomorrow . . ."

Serena managed a smile and tried to say the right things.

They. Of course. Julie and her new husband, Peter.

How in the world could she bear it?