



THE
HOLLIS BOYS
BOOK 1-3

*Sinful
Hearts*

Author of the *DALTON BOYS SERIES*

EM PETROVA

OUTLAWS OF LOVE

Hollis Boys book 1

Em Petrova

Outlaws of Love

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Chapter One

With a shiver of apprehension, Annabelle sank into the hip bath that was filled with tepid water. She glared at the wooden plank door of her rented room, daring anyone to come through it uninvited. What kind of place was this? She'd heard the West was uncivilized, but had never dreamed that there wouldn't be locks on the doors. What was she going to do tonight?

She cast a glance around the small, dingy space, hoping to see a piece of furniture substantial enough to stop an intruder but light enough she could shift on her own. Her gaze lighted on the single set of drawers—tall and as broad as a man. Well, she mused. Not *any* man. She'd seen her fair share of stout, pasty men on her travels across the country by stagecoach. Knowing she now had the freedom to look at whomever she chose without the intrusive gazes of society on her sent a thrill through her.

Of course, there was the small matter of her escort, a newly married couple who were friends of her father. But they were often too caught up in each other to notice where her gaze landed. Now the Clarks were on the other side of the hotel, and she couldn't help but wonder if they'd gotten a room with a lock.

She wished she had thought of the unlocked door before slipping into the bath. She should have moved that chest of drawers first. But the heated depths had called to her. After her dusty travels, she wanted nothing more than to peel off her grungy clothes and enjoy a soak. It wasn't until she had gotten into the water that the problem occurred to her. After all, she didn't need a lock to bathe back in Boston.

I'll hurry.

Quickly, she lifted the linen cloth she'd brought all the way from home and began washing. At one time the cloth had been white as a dove and scented with lavender. Now it was stained from the road dust that had caked her skin daily for the past month. But it was the cleanest she had.

She hastily swirled the cloth in the water and ran it over her sticky throat and down her shoulders. Just as she reached the crest of her breasts, the door burst inward.

A shrill scream bubbled up her throat. Before she could let it out, a huge brute of a man stomped across the room and clamped a hand over her mouth. She struggled beneath his steely grip, tasting the salt of his flesh and drowning in the musky scent of male mingled with leather and horses.

She jackknifed into a ball instinctively, curling up like a possum as she tried to hide her soft, womanly parts from this monster's gaze—and worse—his touch.

Again, she opened her mouth to scream.

He leveled his gaze on her, the depths of his eyes speaking to her loud and clear.

If she wasn't quiet, he'd kill her.

She swallowed the cry, staring over his fingers with horror as he one-handedly unbuttoned his shirt and tore it off. The thick cloth hit the floor in a cloud of dust. And then he was stepping into the tub with her, lifting her and plopping her smack dab across his hard thighs to claim her mouth.

Her heart drummed nearly out of her chest. What was he going to do to her? At this point, death seemed a better alternative to being violated by this man. She'd be soiled forever—and her fiancé wouldn't accept her.

A squawk escaped her, and her attacker sealed his mouth more securely over hers, cutting off all noise and air.

At that moment, the door burst open again. A whoosh of cool breeze washed over her bare shoulders and back. *Help me!* Before she could utter a sound, the man restrained her further by slipping his fingers around her throat.

To an outsider, it might have seemed a loving gesture, but any thought of escape fled as his rough fingertip settled over her pulse. His thumb pressed the hollow of her throat. If she dared to move, he could choke the breath from her. Or snap her neck. Judging from the hard muscles beneath her, she knew a flick of his wrist would break her neck.

“Oh! Sorry, madam.” A man gulped a breath of air from the doorway. “I mean no disrespect. I was looking for a criminal.”

The man in the tub with her kept on kissing her like they were alone, angling his head and plunging his tongue deep into her mouth until she was dizzy for air.

A strange fluttering began in her core, and she wondered if this was how it felt to faint. Though she, like all the women in her Boston social

circle, laced themselves tightly into corsets, Annabelle had never lost consciousness as a result of this practice. She had abandoned the practice once she decided to travel without a maid, but it appeared she would learn to swoon anyhow.

The door closed, and the man's grip lessened. She instantly began to struggle. Thrashing and kicking, she fought for a gulp of air.

Tearing his mouth away, he pinched her jaw between his fingers until she thought he'd pop her bones. She felt like a delicate bird in the beak of a vulture.

She wasn't going down without a fight. She balled her fist and struck rock-hard flesh. If she were to die, she'd damn well deliver a bruise or two.

His gaze smoldered into hers, and she gasped at the fury she saw there. "Hold still, little girl, or else." All at once, she was acutely aware that no one was around and she sat nude on his lap, without a single barrier between her taut nipples and his bulging chest.

She opened her mouth to bellow, but he clamped his fingers tightly over it.

"Dammit, woman, you don't have much sense, do you?" Up close, each black hair on his jaw, every nuance of his strong features seemed amplified. He was huge.

And hard.

A ripple of terror snaked down her spine. His arousal was obvious, the thick length jutting into her backside through the cloth of his pants.

She struggled. His eyes flared wide, and too late she realized her movements might be giving him pleasure. She fell still once more.

He chafed his big thumb over her lower lip, his gaze locked to it. "Damn, that was good."

With that, he slammed his lips over hers again. The second touch of his lips didn't shock her as much—she now recognized his taste and texture.

What was she thinking?

She swung her hand in an arc and connected with the side of his face. He growled in response but never released her. The prickly hairs on his upper lip bit into her flesh, and she knew her skin must be reddened from his forceful contact. Hitting wasn't working. She couldn't scream. How could she alert her escorts to let them know she was in trouble?

Oliver would never hurt me this way.

Tears sparked in her eyes at the thought of her fiancé. She was so close to him now—a mere day's ride from the man who'd asked her to come to Texas and marry him. She would have done anything to escape Boston and the idea of a massive wedding and reception. She loved her home and even her controlling father, but she could do without society. It had made her inordinately happy to know Oliver was a railroad man, and he couldn't just abandon his duties building the line for a Boston wedding.

She'd thought Texas would offer the freedom from the rigid rules and an escape from her Eastern reputation. "Sweetheart Annie" she was called, for her demeanor and inability to speak against anyone.

Well, she was finished with that. Out here, she could be a completely different woman.

And she didn't want to be *this* woman—a weakling who was about to be taken advantage of.

She was trapped in the arms of a tyrant, and he was kissing her and kissing her...

She moved to punch him, and he caught her fist, gently crushing it in his. He flexed his fingers until hers screamed. Just when she thought she couldn't endure the pressure on her joints, he relaxed his hold.

He eased away slowly and finally released her mouth.

She immediately opened her mouth to utter a scream, but his gaze cautioned her.

"Now, lady, we can do this the easy way or the hard way."

She held her eyes wide to keep the tears from tumbling down her cheeks. Though she longed to hurl herself facedown on her lace coverlet on her bed in her own house, she wasn't about to let this man see her cry.

He smiled. "I see you have a bit of a spine. That's good. You'll need it where we're going."

Her heart rushed up her throat, followed by bile. The back of her throat clamped on the sensation that she was going to vomit. "Going?" she managed to choke out.

"You don't think I'm leaving a tasty little morsel like you here to turn me in to the authorities? Not a chance. Besides..." He cut off, staring down at her like a beast ready to pounce. "Well, you're coming with me."

He eased his grip slightly, and she took her chance. Exploding out of the water without a care for her nudity, she raced for the door. As she reached for the handle, he caught her around the waist. The jolt knocked the breath from her.

He plucked her off her feet and heaved her over his shoulder. Her mind spun, and she gasped for air. Stars burst behind her eyelids, and she kicked in futility. He stomped to the bed and flipped her onto her back. She bounced once.

In a rush, her lungs filled. Tears spurted from her eyes, and she fought to find a way out of this situation. There was no doubt in her mind that she was going to be raped.

He shook his head as if to clear it and then gripped the edge of the coarse wool blanket and brought it over her bare form. She quivered. She wanted to shriek for help but swallowed it as soon as he leaned over her. His male scents filtered into her senses again. She pinched her eyes shut, expecting his kiss—his body pressing her down into the mattress.

Instead, he drew the other corner of the blanket over her, wrapping her tightly. Before she could gain her wits, he lifted her in one big bundle and carried her to the single window, which looked out on a back alley.

Why, oh why hadn't she insisted on having a room next to her escorts'? She was being carried out of here, and they'd never know what had become of her!

With one hand, he threw the window open and stuck his head out to peer at the street. She clamped her fingers into fists to keep them from trembling. Shivers of fear rolled over her from head to toe. His arm flexed around her middle, his warmth so close to the crest of her buttocks.

The blanket pinned her arms to her sides, and there was no way to break loose. Her heart slammed the wall of her ribs. He tightened his hold. And in one jarring movement, he slipped over the windowsill with her.

The cooler air struck her hot face and dried the tears on her cheeks. Very well. She was done crying. Anger burned in the pit of her belly instead—at herself for not moving that heavy furniture in front of the door and at the hotel for not having locks. At her fiancé for not fetching her from Boston himself. And at this madman who had captured her.

“Hold on, lady,” he ordered a split second before the ground fell out from under them. Along with her stomach.

* * * *

For an excruciating moment, fear boiled in Xander as he caught sight of the riders on the ridge. If he'd dragged this innocent woman into a shootout, he'd never forgive himself. Hell, he might not forgive himself anyway.

Hunching around her, he spurred his horse faster, determined to outstrip the sheriff and his cronies. He checked behind him again and again, his fear dissipating as the riders turned from small dots into specks on the horizon. Finally, they dropped out of sight.

For long minutes, Xander galloped across a wide-open plain before the horse began to slow. Xander applied a bit of pressure to the mare's side using his knee, and the animal obeyed at once, taking off toward a cluster of trees clinging to a grassy knoll.

Xander threw another cautious glance over his shoulder and saw no one followed them. He'd outstripped the small-town sheriff and his cronies, but he still had Texas bounty hunters and half the might of the railroad bearing down on him. After all, he couldn't simply stop the production of an operation the size of the Southern Gorge Railroad without gaining some attention.

For the hundredth time in the past few days, he contemplated what he and his partner James had done. They had stopped the railroad. For now, no one was laying more tracks and stealing more land to lay the tracks on. Some of that land had belonged to his family—land that was to be his once he married. The SGR had dug in with their picks and axes, laying steel and timbers on the section of land near the spring where his house would have someday gone.

He wasn't alone. The SGR—or Southern Gorge Railroad—had been eating up the homesteaders' land from here to the tip of Texas. When the SGR began taking the valuable property these people needed to make a go of it here in the West, Xander had taken offense. When the huge operation got their hooks into a portion of the Hollis family ranch, he'd taken action.

Yes, he and James had formed a brotherhood against the railroad, and their motto was “rob from the rich and give to the poor.” Just like Robin Hood in the tales his father had told him when he was a boy.

He and James had done a lot since they joined together. Most recently, they stopped the laying of a twenty-mile stretch of track when they hijacked a wagon train and forced the drivers to abandon their supplies. The men had

backed away peaceably when they spotted Xander's and James's Sharps rifles. Well, all except one cheeky lad who shot back, which landed James miles from civilization with a bullet through the side.

The woman shifted and reminded him of more present problems. Xander gazed at the woman's profile. She was more feminine than any woman he'd ever laid eyes on. And he should never have brought her with him. How was he going to finish what he started with the SGR with a woman to care for? Hell, he'd never even be able to sleep because she'd take off the instant his eyes shut.

His mind cast about for ways out of his dilemma. He could drop her at the next town, make sure she had money to purchase a dress, since she was still wrapped in nothing more than the blanket, and send her to the hotel he'd stolen her from on the next stagecoach.

But then she'd surely go to the authorities, and he'd have a kidnapping charge as well as several counts of robbery. Plus the law would have a pretty strong idea of his position.

He held the girl snugly to his body while he thought, grinding his teeth as her ass pummeled his groin. He definitely didn't need the complication of keeping her, but fuck, he didn't want to let her go.

She refused to meet his gaze. By the determined line of her mouth, he guessed she was hatching an escape plan. And she looked mad enough that he wouldn't be surprised if the plan included trying to scalp him.

Like hell she's escaping. I'll tie her to the saddle first.

In fact, that was exactly what he'd do. Besides rope, he also had a fresh change of clothes in his saddlebag that she could put on. Of course, the shirt would come to her knees, and the breeches would need to be cinched double, but they'd have to do until he got to a general store or encountered a dress on a wash line.

He spurred the horse over the crest of the hill, scouring the area for anyone who could ambush them. He breathed a sigh of relief. There was no one after them and nowhere for his captive to run. From their vantage point, he could see for at least a mile, and there was nothing around but the swaying grasses and a lone deer in the valley.

The area reminded him of his family's ranch here in Texas. He longed to return and leave behind bringing justice to the people. But it was too late for that. He and James had started it, and they'd damn well better finish. They

could win against the SGR. And if they didn't? Well, the legal system in this region wasn't as well developed as it was in the east. No jurors to be had, and if they were found, they'd probably had land stolen by the railroad too.

Realizing they had paused a little too long, he glanced down at the ball of fury in his lap. She wadded up her fist and cuffed him. His head snapped with the force of her blow, which was nothing compared to a blow by a meaty hand but surprisingly strong for her size.

A laugh rumbled up his throat and burst from him. Her emerald eyes sparkled, and she swung at him again. He caught her wrist and attempted to glare at her.

"Don't try that again, lady. Now tell me your name."

"Annabelle St-Stearns." Her voice was clogged with the tears that bulged against the roots of her dark lashes.

"Dammit, you've already puked on me when we jumped out the window. Don't start crying on me too."

Annabelle glared at him, but her voice quavered. "What are we doing?"

He shot her a look. Did she think he was going to hurt her?

What else would she think?

Still, the thought rankled. He slipped from the saddle and then reached up to pull her into his arms. She shrank away and nearly tipped over the other side. He caught the blanket before she fell, and it slipped off one bare shoulder.

A cry burst from her, and she broke into hysterical weeping. "Please, don't rape me. I'll do anything. Help you get away. Give you money. Anything."

He stared at her for a long minute, giving her his best glare. It always worked on his little brothers when he meant for them to do what he said. Using it now might mean he'd scare Annabelle into staying put. After days in the saddle, he was too damn tired to chase after her.

On the other hand, he didn't want her to believe him a tyrant, murderer, and rapist. He wanted her to desire his kisses the way he wanted hers.

He shook his head hard. "Darlin', it's been a long time since I've felt a soft woman beneath me, but I'm no rapist. Now let me help you down, and I'll give you a spare shirt."

She quivered, and her long, chestnut waves bounced around her face.

They'd tumbled down from the loose bun on her nape after their jump from the porch roof and sprint across town. Her chest worked with her sobs, and a strange burning took up residence in his throat.

He dismounted and then edged his fingers beneath her warm, round thighs. He pulled her roughly into his arms. She issued a squeak and clutched the blanket to her throat. Her tears fell faster, glimmering in the late afternoon sun.

“What are you doing out here all alone?”

“You brought me here,” she hiccupped.

The corner of his mouth quirked up. He pitched his voice low, hoping the soft way he cooed to horses worked on a distraught female too. “I mean why are you in the West? It's obvious you're an Eastern gal. Well-bred.”

She straightened her spine, and her chin came up a notch. “That's true. I have someone important to meet out here.”

He released her and shifted toward the saddlebag. Popping the buckles, he cursed himself once again for his stupidity. Stealing a woman was never prudent, but snagging one who had someone waiting for her was plain stupid.

If they ever found out, none of the Hollis men would look kindly upon this rash decision.

Reaching into the bag, he located his rough cotton shirt. It would chafe her sensitive skin, but it was the best he could do. Besides, that coarse blanket was rougher.

Images of him working over her feminine skin ripped through his mind... Scraping her with his beard, marking her. He shuddered and clamped down hard on his control before he could do anything remotely like bend her over his arm and kiss the hell out of her again. Or more.

He licked his lower lip and looked up into her tumultuous gaze. A pang of remorse washed through him as he studied the brilliant depths of her eyes. Eyes the color of the spring grass at the Hollis Ranch.

Spring was long gone, and the sweeter, drier scent of autumn was in the air. The cool wind blowing out of the north reminded him that he didn't have long to find a place to hole up for the winter.

He missed his pa and the rest of his family.

They'd sure be happy to see me ride in with Annabelle.

He shook himself. What was he thinking? She was no more his than the

railroad supplies he'd robbed from the wagon train.

"Put this on," he said more harshly than he intended.

Tears spilled down her cheeks as she accepted the white cotton shirt. She shot a glance at the group of trees.

"Go and seek your privacy. I'll care for Pete."

She looked behind her. "Pete?"

She made him forget his annoyance. "My horse." He patted the mare's thick chocolate mane. "It's a long story, but we have hours together to ride. So I'll be happy to tell it to you."

She stared at him evenly, her face suddenly smooth and expressionless, though tears still zigzagged down her pale cheeks.

"Hurry back here and we'll have a bite to eat before we ride again." He tore his gaze from her swollen lips and busied himself with the straps of the saddlebag.

From the corner of his eye, he saw her head toward the trees, the blanket trailing in the dry grasses behind her and her chestnut hair streaming down her back. A soft breeze played up and lifted a tendril.

"You're a damn idiot, Xander Hollis," he muttered to himself. *Why, why, why?* Because he couldn't help it.

When he'd thrown that hotel room door open and set eyes on Annabelle's gorgeous face and milk-white shoulders above the lip of the wooden tub, a primal urge had gripped him. Sure, she'd saved him from the dim-witted sheriff, who had believed them lovers. But once he'd slipped into the bath with her and learned the curve of her ass on his lap, he'd lost all sense of reality.

Then he'd kissed her, and he'd stopped thinking.

"James will laugh his fool head off, you know that, Pete? I'll never live it down." At least with his best friend, he'd only receive ruthless ribbing. When his family found out what he'd done, he wouldn't have to worry about living it down. He'd have to worry about *living*.

He shot a glance at the tree line. Annabelle was completely concealed from his view. A spear of disappointment hit him, followed by heavy guilt. She'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time, and he'd used her as a pawn in his game.

"I have to let her go at the next town," he told Pete, and she nickered

and tossed her head in response. He gazed into the big brown eye of his horse. “Was that agreement?”

You’re really an idiot if you think your horse is going to help you decide.

Movement from the trees caught his attention, and he whipped around, his hand on his weapon. His heart drummed slowly, flipped over, and then galloped out of control.

Annabelle drifted out of the trees, wearing his shirt and carrying the blanket over her arm. His shirt hung to the tops of her knees, and the sleeves had been rolled to her wrists. Somehow, the sight of her in this loose garment was more tormenting than seeing her in the nude.

He dragged his eyes from her shapely calves and ankles. Hell, even her bare toes enflamed him.

Get your head on straight, man. Dump her off at the next town and head out to collect James.

As she approached, his balls clenched up tight against his body, and his cock stiffened painfully. In a blink, he envisioned her in a dozen ways—bent over the saddle with her ripe ass up in the air. Hitched against a tree while he drove into her in one thrust.

He quickly wiped the lustful expression off his face before she begged him not to rape her again. That didn’t set well with him.

She came nearer. A wisp of hair blew across her lips, and she swiped it away with a trembling hand.

Diving into his other saddlebag, he came out with a packet of hardtack. “Here. It’s not much but will hold you over until we reach the next town.”

“What do you intend to do with me?”

He worried his lip with his teeth. Should he tell her his plan to leave her in town and ride off alone?

Was that what he was going to do?

“I’m no outlaw in the sense you’re thinking, lady.” He leaned against Pete’s side and bit into a piece of hardtack with fierce determination.

“I assure you that I don’t need a list of your crimes.”

She took a piece of dried meat but held it gingerly without taking a bite.

He clenched down on the growl that threatened to erupt from his chest. The inexplicable need to explain his choice of lifestyle burned in him. He

twisted away and stomped off, putting Pete between them to keep from grabbing Annabelle and ravaging her.

She turned her back on him and leaned against Pete's side. Xander stared at her for a long minute, struck by how comfortable she was around horses. Just how civilized was she? At this moment, he'd never believe her an eastern flower by looking at her. With her dark, windswept hair and his shirt bagging around her lithe frame, she might be a native or a homesteader's wife.

Suddenly she raised her hands and pressed her fists against her temples. Her shoulders shook.

Realizing she was again crying, he kicked his boot heel into the grass. A puff of dust lifted. "Dammit, woman, why are you crying now?"

She gasped. Whirling on him, she fixed him in her watery gaze. Beneath the tears lived a hard spark of anger.

Triumph blossomed in his chest. He'd rather face her wrath than her sobs.

"You dare mock me? You have no right to even speak to me!"

Obstinacy rose up inside him. He stormed around the horse, causing Pete to skitter sideways in alarm. He rested a palm along the mare's side to calm her as he laid into the woman he'd kidnapped.

Her eyes widened as he loomed near. He could imagine what he looked like, glaring down at her and wanting to kiss her at the same time. "Listen, honey. I will talk to you anytime I want. You're in my charge, remember?"

"Release me! I have people in high positions who will search for me."

"Oh, is that so?" He couldn't tear his gaze from the plump set of her lower lip, still swollen from his kisses. "And who might these important persons be?"

She jerked her chin up another haughty inch. His cock clenched at the thought of dropping his mouth to her soft throat and nibbling her until she quivered for more.

"You are testing me, woman. But you won't win. Once you get that through this pretty little head, we'll get along much better."

"I am not your...your woman or honey. I expect you to speak to me as I deserve to be spoken to. You're the one who stormed into my private room, invited yourself into my bath, rudely rolled me up in a blanket, and jumped

out a window with me. I am a proper lady and demand to be treated so!”

She drove one little bare foot into the grass in her anger. A rumble of laughter vibrated his chest before he could check it.

“What is funny?” Her voice rose in pitch.

He shook his head, more confused and excited and annoyed than he’d ever been. Hell, he felt like he’d just leaped off the cliff into the river near his home—the rush of falling, followed by a hollow belly. Splitting the water and plunging into the cool depths. Coming up sputtering with joyous laughter.

Sobered by the tears glittering in her eyes again, he sought to soothe her. He took a step closer. Heat radiated through the flimsy cotton of the shirt she wore and kissed the front of his body. The hair on his nape lifted in response.

“We don’t have to be at each other’s throats, Annabelle.”

Her mouth opened with a soft *pop*. The pink flesh of the interior of her mouth beckoned to him—tormented him. He stared at her tongue, the memory of its silken feel igniting him.

Her tone was outraged. “We’re supposed to be bosom friends? The kidnapper and his abductee?”

He didn’t like the way she said that. No, he didn’t.

“You don’t know my reasons,” he growled.

“No, sir, I do not. I don’t know your name either.”

“Xander Hollis, son, brother, cousin, friend, and outlaw.” He tipped his hat to her.

She waved an irritated hand. Suddenly realizing she wielded the hardtack, she stuck the end in her mouth and wrenched a piece off with her teeth. Then, turning her back on him once more, she stared across the landscape at the swaying grasses and the miles separating her from the place he’d stolen her from.

He shifted toward Pete’s head, smoothing her coat in long strokes and whispering to his horse. At that moment, Pete might be the only creature in the world that understood him.

Chapter Two

The sun sank over the lip of the land, retracting its warm fingers as it did. Annabelle shivered uncontrollably despite the woolen blanket that was tucked around her. Her muscles ached from being locked against racking tremors.

Xander slowed the horse and gripped her shoulders. “Here,” he grumbled. He plucked her into his arms as if she weighed no more than a newborn babe and settled her upon his hard thighs. “You’ll be warmer against my chest.”

She opened her mouth to say was already against his chest while riding before in him the saddle but shut it as his scorching heat enveloped her. Tendrils of warmth threaded through her, and she shuddered in pure pleasure. Being in the arms of Xander Hollis was like being tucked in her bed in Boston with her very own hot-water bottle.

He flexed his arms around her, bringing her closer. She settled her head under his chin and tried not to think about whether she should enjoy this. After the trials of the day, she’d enjoy what pleasure she could. Even if it was offered from the man who’d kidnapped her.

A jolt of worry hit her, and her heart flipped with despair. What would Oliver think when he turned up to meet the stage in Smithville and found she wasn’t there? He’d send a telegram to the towns she was to stay in along the route and ask about her. In the meantime, the Clarks didn’t know her whereabouts and had surely contacted her father immediately. Between them, did she have a chance of being found?

She was on good terms with Oliver—good enough terms to know he’d never give up the search to find her. When her father had hired him on as a manager to oversee this line of the Texan railroad, Oliver’s tenacity had won her daddy over. After Daddy bestowed a new title, a personal driver, and a fat expense account on Oliver for his work on the railroad, the man had turned around and asked for more—by requesting her hand in marriage.

Later, he’d taken her outside under the big golden moon and held her hand as he asked her to be his wife. When she said yes, her world had altered

irrevocably. At that moment, she was no longer her daddy's little girl and heiress to the SGR fortune, but a grown woman who would head out West to meet her fiancé after Oliver had settled. And she'd finally have that opportunity to escape convention. She'd heard that in the West, a woman could be freer. She prayed Oliver would allow her to exercise these newfound liberties.

You can't get any freer than this. Tearing across the countryside half-clad and in the arms of an outlaw.

And she was glued to him like a wax seal to a jar of honey.

She stiffened, but before she could draw back, he locked his arm around her and restricted all movement. His breath ruffled her hair as he spoke.

"Easy, darlin'. No use shivering. I can at least offer heat if not a comfortable bed."

It rose to the tip of her tongue to say, "I'd be in a bed right now if you hadn't barged into my room and kidnapped me." But she bit off the words because she was too exhausted to fight with him again.

For hours, they'd argued and finally screamed themselves hoarse. It had felt great to express herself without holding back anything.

But he hadn't either. He wasn't about to budge in his decision to take her along to witness his acts of depravity, and she wasn't going to agree with his idea that they could become friends.

I can't believe he used that word, she thought for the thousandth time. The thought was ludicrous. Even if they'd met in a Boston parlor, she wouldn't enjoy his company. He was hard-nosed and harder headed, overbearing and demanding. If she never laid eyes on him, it would be too soon.

But he sure was warm. Beneath her ear, his heart throbbed, slow and steady, seemingly in time to Pete's hoofbeats on the grassy ridge.

Suddenly the horse shifted its footing, and Annabelle opened her eyes to find they were descending. In the distant valley, she spotted the faint outlines of buildings.

"What town is that?"

"Far as I know, it doesn't have a name."

She twisted her face up to look at him. The dim moonlight glinted off

the dark hairs sprouting on his jaw, and his cowboy hat cast his face in shadow, lending him a more sinister air.

Jerking upright, she arched away from him. For a few minutes she'd become lulled by the rhythmic rocking of the horse and Xander's warm body, when she should be plotting her escape.

She peered through the darkness. It was probably one of the small towns that sprang up to accommodate the railroad workers, providing luxuries like beds, baths, and warm meals to hard-working men. Not to mention women.

"Are we heading there?" Part of her wanted to jump for joy. In a town, she'd have an opportunity to run from Xander or draw attention to herself and let someone know she needed help. But part of her wondered if she could escape him in such a small place. As they neared, it looked to be ten wooden structures at most.

Still, she had to try. She steeled her spine and mentally listed all the possibilities that might come up once she was in town. She could break free from Xander and find a lawman.

As soon as this thought popped into her head, she squashed it. Xander wouldn't turn his back on her for a minute, and physically tearing from his iron hold was impossible.

She tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear and squinted harder at the buildings. Maybe she could get Xander drunk and then flee. This idea had some merit. She'd seen more than one man in his cups since beginning her travels. However, Xander seemed to be fixated on his goals, whatever they were. She couldn't imagine him sitting at a bar, tossing back hard liquor, when he was a hunted man.

That left one option.

She could hide in a bordello.

Makeshift towns like this were almost entirely made up of soiled-dove houses. If Xander was like most disreputable men, he'd seek release.

She gave a shudder of disgust.

He snaked an arm around her waist and hauled her back against his chest. She struck his hard body with a grunt. A soft laugh vibrated from him.

"Why are we going here? I thought you were hiding." As soon as the words erupted from her mouth, she wished she could bite off her tongue. *What's the matter with you, Annabelle? This might be your only chance to*

get away.

But she didn't want to face a posse that might await them in the valley. If Xander Hollis wanted to get his fool head shot off, then good for him. She didn't wish to be part of it.

She peered up at him. "Exactly how much is the bounty on your head?"

The corner of his hard mouth crept upward, slow as molasses. "Not much. And don't get any ideas. The broadsheet doesn't say 'dead or alive.'"

She released a huffing breath at his insinuation that she would kill him in order to be rid of him. She didn't care what he did as long as she wasn't involved. If he let her go now, she'd rush to Oliver's side, marry, and raise a group of little Standishes on a nice ranch here in the West, running the household as she saw fit while he traveled with the railroad.

She waved a hand toward the town. "Do you plan to let me go here?"

He gazed down at her, his eyes narrowed and the muscle in the corner of his jaw fluttering. A heartbeat stretched between them. Her limbs began to tingle, and her breasts ached. The memory of the rough feel of his mouth working over hers tipped into her brain, and suddenly, she could nearly taste him.

She sank her teeth into her lower lip, unable to tear her gaze from his wide, full mouth. Back in Boston, Oliver had kissed her fingers on the eve of their engagement and sent shocks of pleasure through her. But that was nothing compared to the earthquake Xander Hollis's kisses had caused.

The horse rolled beneath them, jostling them together. Before she could blink, Xander cupped her nape in his big palm and drew her mouth to his. The first brush of his lips ignited her.

Battling her body's reactions, she held perfectly still as he slanted his mouth over hers. His dark, musky scents filled her head, and a knot took up residence deep in her belly. She clamped her fingers into tight fists, and her mind raced. Why was he doing this? Was he purposely trying to cause a reaction in her to prove that he was in charge of everything—from her welfare to her desires?

She broke away a fraction, but he snagged her back, lifted her high on his lap, and drove his tongue between her lips. A hot coal of passion formed inside her chest. Her sex clenched hard at the feel of his velvet tongue.

He drew back enough to growl, "Open for me, Annabelle. Let me taste you."

Without thought, she obeyed. He swept her mouth with his tongue, tasting her inner lips, her teeth, the moist walls, before driving deep.

A shiver rent her. His groan ripped through her, and she answered with her own. Beneath her thighs, his cock swelled, pressing deliciously into her. Using one palm, he applied pressure to her lower back, swaying her closer. If she was any nearer, she'd be part of him.

Lurid images spun through her brain. She knew enough from Boston parlors and parties to know what went on between men and women in the bedroom.

Except you're on the back of a horse under a vast Texan sky with a man who is not your husband.

She jerked in his hold, but he refused to release her. He followed her with his mouth, sucking on her tongue until she quivered. Small noises burst from her—pleas for him to stop changed to uncontrollable mewls of pleasure.

“Give yourself up to me, baby. You feel this attraction; I know you do.” His hot words slid into her consciousness and peeled away another layer of her control. For long minutes, she let him kiss her, forgetting that she was half-naked in only his cotton shirt and that he was holding her very inappropriately. Their surroundings fell away, and she only knew Xander's strength and warmth. She no longer cared that he wasn't her fiancé.

My fiancé!

Tearing away with a cry, she begged him to stop. “No, Mr. Hollis. You take liberties I do not condone.”

His dark eyes glittered. He stroked the corner of her mouth with his big thumb, sending a tendril of heat straight to her core. Cream flooded the sensitive folds of her pussy, and she clamped her thighs together tight to either stop it or ease the ache.

“Like hell you don't condone,” he whispered hoarsely and claimed her mouth once more.

He swallowed her gasp and fed her a rumble of his own. He manipulated her limbs until she straddled him, with her intimate parts directly against his thick length. The thin barrier of the cotton shirt did nothing to prevent her from knowing the rougher fabric of his pants. She struggled to keep still—to not wriggle wantonly against him.

Stop this, Annabelle. Put an end to it.

Deep inside her, a new woman hungered for this contact, and

Annabelle couldn't stop her from seeking more.

Wasn't this what you wanted? Freedom to feel?

She threw her arms around his neck, sending his hat tumbling to the ground. His grin spread over hers as their tongues met in desperate need.

He squeezed her waist, kneading the untouched flesh. When he splayed his fingers over her rib cage, the tips of his fingers grazed the curves of her breasts.

"What is it about you?" he rasped between kisses. "You make me forget my best friend is laid up with a gunshot wound." He bit her lips lightly until she squirmed. "You make me forget my purpose out here."

She wanted to ask exactly what his purpose was, but the thought fled when he captured her nipples between his fingers. A long moan spiraled from her.

"Oh God, Annabelle." He dipped his mouth to her throat and pressed a blazing trail of kisses up to her chin. For long minutes, she lost herself in the bold touch of his fingers against her nipples and the scrape of the hair on his jaw.

"Baby, you make me think of home. Tucking you into bed with me and waking to the sun coming up over Hollis Ranch."

His words broke through her haze of passion. She tore away. "Get off me, you...you wild man! I told you, I don't welcome your advances."

Anger sparked in his dark gaze. "You seemed pretty welcoming a minute ago, Annabelle."

In a fury, she threw herself over the side of the horse. Her bare feet hit the ground, and her ankle turned over, wrenching the tendons painfully. She toppled backward and struck the ground hard. Pain shot up her spine and radiated through her ankle and foot.

"Dammit, woman." Xander landed beside her, and he whistled shrilly to stop Pete from galloping away.

Annabelle's hair drooped into her eyes and clung to the tears wetting her cheeks. Xander gripped her under the arms and attempted to haul her to her feet, but she fought him.

"My ankle hurts, you boor!"

Gently he set her down again. The cool grasses tickled the backs of her bare thighs, and she suddenly realized her shirt was rucked up above her

waist. A blush scorched her face, raising a faint dew of perspiration at her hairline. She pinched the fabric and wiggled it down over her hips.

But not before Xander saw.

Everything.

Noisy sobs rushed up her throat.

“Oh, hey,” he cooed. He gently encircled her ankle with his fingers. “Does it hurt that bad?”

“Yes!” she wailed. Between her swelling ankle, her state of undress, and being kidnapped, she’d reached her limit of endurance. This wasn’t what she’d had in mind when she decided to come to Texas and embrace her wilder side.

She glared into his face and jabbed a finger at him. “Take me back!”

He shook his head. “Can’t do that, darlin’.”

“You can’t keep me forever. You’re already wanted for—for something! Now you’ve added kidnapping to your record.”

“That’s right. It’s too late. Might as well ride it out until I’m caught.” He spoke slowly as he worked his fingers over her painful ankle.

She hissed at his touch.

“I don’t think it’s broken. Just pulled muscles. That was a stupid thing to do, jumping off the horse.”

Indeed it was. How was she going to escape him now? Hobble off to the bordello without him seeing? Then somehow slip away before she was mistaken as a painted lady?

“Just leave me here.” She slung her arms around her knees and rested her head on her arms.

He chuckled. “Sweetheart, there are a lot of things I plan to do with you. Leaving you here is not one of them.” He scooped his hands beneath her bottom and lifted her.

She stiffened at the intimate way he gripped her hips. He seated her securely in the saddle and stood between her knees, gazing up at her. Without his hat, he somehow seemed more vulnerable. Less frightening and more human.

He’s still a kidnapper. And God knows what else he’s done.

“Now sit still while I get my hat, and then we’ll be on our way into town.”

She hated his conversational tone—as if they were husband and wife traveling together across the countryside—because it did things to her stomach. She didn't want to think of him as anything but a monster and criminal.

What can he possibly think of you? Kissing him like a wanton, letting him pinch your nipples?

Heat flamed in her face, and she was thankful for the fading daylight. Only a faint band of purple striped the horizon where the sun had sunk.

Her mind raced. Could she make it on foot alone? If she was able to steal Xander's canteen and a supply of dried beef, she might have a fighting chance. Sure, she had no idea where she was in relation to her destination, but she was resourceful. And if she wandered into a town with a bank, she could use money from an account she and her father shared for clothes, food, and a carriage. A hotel room until Oliver could fetch her.

Hopefully, next time, she'd secure a room with a door lock.

Xander bent to scoop up his hat, and in a split second, Annabelle knew what she must do.

Hastily, she straddled the horse and set her heels into Pete's sides, urging the mare to run.

The horse surged forward.

"Whoa!" Xander's bellow rang, but the horse had already drawn up short. Annabelle was flung with the movement and nearly rocketed over the horse's head. She gripped the saddle horn before she met with true disaster just as Xander's heavy hand came down on her thigh.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Trying to get away from you!" She quivered inside at his expression. His brows were drawn into a sharp V, and that tic was back in his jaw. He puffed like a steam engine, his hot breath creating a plume in the cooling air.

"Not on my horse, lady." He took a moment to stroke Pete's mane and whisper a soft word of praise before swinging into the saddle behind Annabelle.

* * * *

Once in town, she realized there was no hope of escape. Xander drew a length of rope out of the saddlebag and bound her hand and foot, and then secured a length between her and a tree, with Pete hobbled nearby. When she

opened her mouth to scream, he stomped back to her, tore off the kerchief around his neck, and used it to gag her. She had sadly miscalculated her timing. They were far enough away that no one would see her or hear her scream even if she wasn't bound.

She wished she could shoot bullets at his back with her gaze and silently fumed at this injustice. True panic was settling over her like an itch she couldn't scratch. What if she never escaped him? If nothing else, it was only a matter of time before he dragged her into true danger and she found herself in the midst of a gunfight. What would her daddy do if he never heard from her again? And Oliver?

Tears coursed down her cheeks. She fought to hold them back for fear her nose would get stuffed and she wouldn't be able to breathe since she was gagged. Pure self-loathing claimed her as she thought about how she'd reacted to his kisses and touch.

Shame burned in her cheeks. Why had she allowed herself to respond?

The answer was crystal clear even to her fear-fogged mind. Besides Oliver's soft brushing of his lips over her knuckles, she'd never been kissed. Xander had awakened a new rush of sensation inside her and had overwhelmed her with his big male body. If Oliver had kissed her this way outside her house in Boston that moonlit night, she would have responded in kind.

Would I? The question burst in her mind. Oliver was a businessman—able with words and manners but not in physical strength. His form appeared feeble compared to her kidnapper's. Xander's power emanated from his body and actions. Oliver's good breeding would never allow him to ravage a woman the way Xander Hollis did unless they were married.

Would he even then?

Before she could contemplate that question, she slammed the lid on that train of thought. The last thing she needed was for Xander's sudden insinuation in her life to shadow her plans to link herself to Oliver.

Because with Oliver, you know you can roll over him and get what you want.

She sucked in a harsh breath. She'd never admitted this fully even to herself, yet there it was. Her fiancé was weak enough that she knew she could get her way—gain the freedom she craved. That was why she'd agreed to marry him, when she wasn't particularly drawn to him.

Suddenly, everything seemed like Xander Hollis's fault.

She glared across the short distance between her and the town. Up close, the buildings were more ramshackle than she'd originally thought. The boards on the building nearest to her were askew, sticking up above the roofline at haphazard angles. One wall looked ready to collapse under the load.

Piano music and raucous laughter drifted to Annabelle on the breeze. Xander had disappeared between buildings, and she could only guess at his intentions. For all she knew, he was murdering men to pick their pockets.

Even as she thought this, she disregarded it. No, she didn't know why he was a wanted man, but he hadn't raped her, which meant he couldn't be all bad.

Her wait was excruciating. Bound around her middle to the tree as well as being tied ankle and wrist caused a deep-rooted panic to lift in her again and again. She clamped down on it and focused on the horse nearby.

Pete was a good piece of horseflesh. In Boston, her father had kept a small stable of horses that were used for everyday jaunts into the city. But at their country estate, a beautiful selection of horses was available to Annabelle, and she'd spent many hours galloping the countryside. It was the closest she got to independence in Boston.

She loved caring for the horses too, though most gentlewomen left this to the grooms. The feel of a brush in her hand and the smell of hay in her nostrils thrilled Annabelle.

She had to admit Xander took good care of his horse despite their rough living arrangements. This mare received no feed mixed with sweet molasses but dined on the supple grasses she could forage. But it was evident her master cared for her. He had attempted to care for Annabelle too, until she ran.

The nearby saloon doors opened, and a group of men spilled out. The sun had set, and now darkness swallowed the forms of the men. Could one of them be Xander?

* * * *

Quickly, Xander untied the knots of rope securing her hands and feet, then released her from the tree. He grabbed up the bedroll he'd nicked from the back of a railway worker's horse and unrolled it beside Annabelle. Then

he sank to it, leaned against the tree, and pulled the sleeping woman into his arms.

She stiffened at once, suddenly awake and probably spitting mad because he'd touched her. But he couldn't stop himself—she was the only good thing that had happened to him in too long. Having James at his side all these months had been a comfort. And since leaving him to recuperate, Xander had realized how deep his feelings for his friend ran. Time apart had helped him understand and accept the stirring of passions caused by James's presence. Once he reached his friend, he was through wasting time. He'd tell James how he felt.

On the other hand, he had a sumptuous woman at hand who made his blood boil. She offered everything he'd ever dreamed of in a future. Beauty, wit, and a challenge in bed. All these years, he'd dreamed of erecting a house on his land and settling down with a woman like Annabelle.

Emotion warred in him. Would he have to choose between the man he'd grown so close to during the past year and the woman who'd just leaped into his life?

Well, he didn't have to find out yet. Before Annabelle could scramble off his lap, he trailed his fingers through her hair, soothing her as he did Pete when she fussed.

“Shh, darlin’, we’re safe for the night. Rest, and soon I’ll feed you proper.”

Her belly growled in response to his words, and he chuckled softly, lashing her closer to him. Her legs stretched along the length of his, and her warm little bottom nestled perfectly against his groin. Fuck, if he slept this way, he'd surely dream of grasping her hips and burying himself in her from behind, feeling each round globe slapping his body as he thrust—

“Release me.” Her tight words broke through his haze of need.

He realized his swollen cock pressed into her. “No,” he grated out, battling the urge to rub against her. “You’re tired and cold. I’ve provided a warm bed. Sleep now. There are many hours ahead of us tomorrow.”

A long moment of silence stretched between them. Finally, she said, “At least loosen your hold. I can’t breathe. I’m not going to run.”

Judging by the weary way she slurred her words, she was too exhausted to try to escape. He relaxed his hold. She grew so still he believed her asleep. When he stole a glance at her, he was surprised to find her staring at him, her

eyes wide and shiny, reflecting the moonlight.

“What trouble are you in?” she whispered so faintly he had to dip his head to catch her words over the sough of the wind and the voices still drifting to them from the town.

He drew a deep breath and released it slowly. Her hair fluttered against his lips, and he nearly groaned. “It’s complicated.”

“I’m intelligent enough to follow.” Her tone told him she was on the verge of pulling free from his hold. And he couldn’t have that. Not at all.

He splayed a palm over her spine and secured her against him. “There are men stealing land from the people here. Homesteaders. Good people who have worked hard for what they’ve got. I’m trying to stop them.”

She searched his face. “How?”

“In some cases by stealing the land back. Most of my work is in stopping the company by destroying the supplies that take so long to arrive from the East. We send workers running from their jobs forever. We steal and destroy the documents evicting the people from their land. Out here, men and supplies are hard to come by. It takes forever for the mail to bring more letters. In time, the railroad will either give up or fold. We’ll do anything to stop them...and I’m willing to do more.”

She swallowed hard. “Killing?”

“Hasn’t come to that yet, but it was a near miss. My partner took a hit. He’s laid up with a Sioux caring for him. Hopefully, he’s on the mend, because I need to get him the hell out of there before the law finds him. That’s where we’re headed.”

“And I’m...coming with you?”

He gazed into her worried face and wondered whether or not to tell her the truth—that he had no intention of letting her go now. Or ever. In town, he’d gotten the weapons and ammunition needed to protect what belonged to him.

“You are, Annabelle. And I got you a new dress for the occasion.”

* * * *

Xander doffed his hat and swiped a trickle of sweat from his temple. He’d like to blame the rising sun for his heightened temperature, but he couldn’t. The sight of Annabelle in a proper dress constricted his chest and made his cock throb.

He locked his gaze on the swell of her hips as she approached, too aware of the way the ripe curves felt beneath his hands—and seated atop him. With his thumb, he caught another bead of sweat that escaped his hairline. Damn, this was going to be a long day. After five minutes in the saddle with her bouncing around on his cock, he'd be lucky to possess a single thread of control.

She pinched the fabric in one dainty fist as she glided through the tall grass toward him, wearing the homespun dress. It was simply cut with a scoop neckline and full sleeves. The bodice nipped in at the smallest part of Annabelle's waist and flared slightly over her womanly hips, but it was a good four inches too long for her petite stature.

The fabric tangled around her feet, and she tripped to a stop, nearly rocketing headfirst into the turf before him. He caught her just in time and dragged her back into a standing position.

Staring down at her with an amused smile wasn't the most gentlemanly thing to do, but hell, he was no gentleman.

"Where did you get this gown?"

"Found a bag sitting in the lobby of the boarding house. Thought it might fit you."

"You stole this from a proper lady? Not some harlot?"

He didn't try to check the rumble of laughter that burst from him. "Annabelle, have you actually ever seen a harlot?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

He shook his head, mesmerized by the green fire in her gaze. "No painted dove would be caught dead in a plain dress like that. And yes, that dress belonged to a woman traveling with her husband."

A mottled blush crept up her throat to stain her cheeks. For a heartbeat, he waged an internal war, wanting to swoop in and capture her rosebud lips.

"Why would you steal it from such a lady?" Annabelle planted one hand on her hip and threw him a scathing look.

"Because you needed a dress."

"But it might have been her only other dress!"

"It wasn't," he said, stunned by her concern for a woman she didn't know. "There were two dresses in the bag. I took the simpler one."

He didn't tell her that he chose the cotton gown because it was the type

of dress she'd wear on his ranch when he took her home. He nearly choked at the direction of his thoughts. *Yeah, you're in that deep.* There was no backing out now. He might as well accept it all—the ball with the chain.

Gripping the hilt of his knife, he withdrew it in one swift motion. Annabelle stumbled back, tripped on her long hem, and toppled onto her backside. She hit the ground with a grunt.

“You keep falling at my feet, darlin’. Pretty soon I’m going to let it go to my head.”

She glared up at him from beneath a loose curl, which had fallen over her eye. “If you must know, my ankle is still sore, you insufferable—”

He set the point of the knife into the fabric above her ankles and sliced it. She issued a sharp cry as he tore the cloth.

When the extra fabric was removed, he extended a hand to help her to her feet. “I’m no seamstress, but I think that will do for now. At least you won’t fall on your pretty little face.”

He chanced a look at her and realized too late that this was a mistake. Her perfectly square white teeth were sunk into her plush lower lip, and damn, how was he ever going to keep from taking her before he convinced her to marry him?

Reaching out, he gently hooked the loose tendril of her hair and directed it over her shoulder. A shudder racked her. Of revulsion? He didn’t think so, but he hated the thought. He hadn’t given her a choice when he stole her away, but when she stood up before the pastor with him, she’d say “I do” under her own steam.

A loud *clank* sounded suddenly, and he jerked away from her and scanned the land. The town below them still slumbered, but in the distance, a small group of men rode in their direction.

“Hurry!” he barked.

She gaped up at him, still crouched in the grass.

“Onto the horse, woman! We ride!” He gripped her wrist and yanked at her. She catapulted into his arms, struggling.

“Wait,” she cried, twisting and turning as if to reach for something. “I want that band of cloth!”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, lady.” He snagged it from the ground, lifted her bodily, and in two steps, heaved her into the saddle. Leaping up behind her,

he set his heels into the mare's sides. "Yah!"

Pete lurched forward at a dead run. Annabelle locked her legs more tightly around the horse, the gown rucked up to expose her bare thighs.

"Hold on," he said, locking an arm around her midsection to keep her in place. He glared at the knot of riders coming toward them. Railroad men, he'd bet his life on it. Men armed with the papers to evict people from their land. Who would they come after next? The family a half mile away with the scanty acreage and five little mouths to feed?

He spurred his horse faster toward his enemies, determined to look danger in the face and come out on the top of this game. "Not this time, gents," he grated out.

Annabelle threw him a look over her shoulder. "What's going on?"

"Hold tight and be quiet. If you say a word or give any indication that you don't want to be with me, you'll be sorry." As they thundered across the plain, his mind whirred through all the possible scenarios. The men might recognize him and pull their weapons. If this was the case, Annabelle would be in danger. How would Xander keep her safe? Toss her to the ground and hope she wasn't injured in the fall or shot on the way down?

No, there's still a chance they won't recognize me.

Though he and James had been on their crusade for almost a year, the wanted posters with their likenesses were just now circulating. And personally, he didn't find the portrait of himself very accurate. If anonymity was on his side, he could easily ride up to the group, divest them of the land-grant orders, and be safely off within minutes.

He set his jaw with grim determination. These bastards weren't taking any more land from his people.

Annabelle's hair whipped as Pete raced across the land, closing the gap quickly. The men had stopped in their tracks and watched Xander come.

Where are those papers, you bastards? I'll find them. He set the heel of his hand on his weapon and didn't slow his horse until he saw the whites of the men's eyes.

Four men made up the group. Two appeared to be Texans—they wore buckskins and boots that had seen true wear. The other men were certainly easterners, judging by their soft leather gloves and the way they sat their horses.

Xander tightened his arm around Annabelle's waist, squeezed his knees

to bring Pete to a stop, and then trained his gun on the man on the right—the one with the bulging saddlebag.

“Hand over that bag, sir.”

The man’s eyes flared wide, and he started to sputter.

Annabelle’s breath was a high squeak as she caught the glimmer of Xander’s gun from the corner of her eye.

One of the Texans whipped up his rifle.

“Not on your life,” his enemy said.

“Put down your gun and give me the bag,” Xander insisted.

A man from the middle broke free of the small knot and circled around Xander and Annabelle. Xander danced his horse sideways, tracking the threat while keeping the other three men in his vision. Annabelle quaked in his grasp, and he wondered how long she’d hold her tongue.

“Look, gentlemen. We can do this easy, or things can get nasty. I don’t think you want to be on my bad side.” He narrowed his gaze at the softest-looking man, believing he might back down.

“We’re not giving up our possessions so easily.”

He touched his trigger, and a shot exploded inches from the riders’ horses. Dust flew, and Annabelle issued a strangled shriek.

The boldest man circling Xander whipped out a six-shooter. Before he could shoot, Xander had his other pistol in hand and fired. His bullet struck the target, and the gun flew from the man’s fingers.

“Damn!” he cried, shaking his hand to alleviate the sting caused by the blow.

Xander didn’t bother to hide his grin. He flipped the cylinder in the gun, bringing another bullet into place. “Who wants to play roulette?”

“We’re not giving—”

“How much do you want?” The softest of the men had his wallet out and was thumbing through some bills. A bead of sweat snaked from his thinning hair into his eye. He blinked rapidly to dispel it.

“I don’t want your money. Give me the bag, and I’ll let you ride out of here without harm. The bag, gentlemen, and you’re free to go.”

“What about the woman? You seem to be restraining her.” The other Texan glared at Xander.

A deep itch began in Xander’s core, and he shoved it down before he

really lost his temper. Right now he was playing with these men. But if anyone dared to try to take Annabelle from him, hell would open up, and the devil himself would be unleashed in the form of one berserk outlaw.

He slid his arm free of Annabelle's waist and held it out to the side. "See? This lady isn't going anywhere." He applied the faintest pressure to her thigh with his, and he dropped his head so his breath whispered over her throat. She shivered.

Suddenly, he whipped up his rifle, which was tucked into the side of the saddle. The weakest of the men hissed at the sight of the double barrel bearing down on him. "Enough talk. Throw down your weapons and give up the bag or I eliminate what looks to be a very important railroad man from the earth."

"Railroad—" Annabelle burst.

He clamped a hand on her waist and lightly applied pressure, urging her to be silent.

Quickly, the man looking down Xander's sights fumbled with the straps holding the leather bag to his saddle. It swung free, and he tossed it in an arc to Xander.

He fielded it expertly and dug his heels into his horse's sides in one fluid motion. Pete's haunches bunched, the energy building, ready to spring. In a blink, they shot forward. Annabelle was thrown to the side, and Xander caught her before she pitched to the ground. As they thundered away from the men, he twisted around in the saddle, keeping his gun at the ready. No one was going to shoot him in the back.

He dropped his mouth to her ear and growled. "Stay low, doll."

As he flew across the plain, his heart thudded and fury fed him, elevating him to a high. He wasn't ashamed to admit he liked this kind of rush—it thrilled him to know documents that would put many people off their land would never reach their destination. Now he'd love to get some wagons filled with building materials in his grasp. It had been a couple weeks since he and James had hijacked a shipment. If only James were here.

But Annabelle was, and sharing the moment with her flooded him with emotion. He wondered if she'd understand his reason for taking this mission.

In minutes, the horse's pace had a half mile of distance between them and the railroad men. Xander allowed her to slow, but it seemed Annabelle's sweet little bottom rose and fell against his groin more at this speed. His cock

brushed over the crest of her ass again and again, and he ground his molars against the need to toss her gown over her head and sink into her tight sheath.

“Are you okay?” he asked her, trying to focus on some coherent thought—*any* thought besides tearing open that flimsy bodice and gathering her nipple on his tongue.

She turned so her face was in profile, and her eye flashed. “What do you think?”

Before he could respond, he spotted another group of men breaking over the rise. He squinted into the brilliant glare of the sun. If they were railroad men, there could be more trouble than he could outrun. Then he saw who they were. With a whoop, he spurred his horse and took off, up the steep ridge.

“What is it? What’s going on?” Annabelle’s voice was frantic.

The riders saw him too and drove their horses toward him, the hooves eating up the ground between. The clouds shifted, and the sun glinted off the forms of the men Xander would know from a mile away.

They came together with a raucous cry. Xander’s brother Drew yanked his horse to a stop and threw himself over the side, then gripped Xander to yank him down.

“Xander Hollis, the outlaw himself. It’s been too long since I’ve set eyes on you, Brother.” Drew’s dark eyes glittered with excitement as he squeezed Xander hard.

Xander knocked off Drew’s hat, set his knuckles against his scalp, and delivered the hard rub of their childhood. “Little Bro.”

“Hey, what about me?” Xander’s other brother Adam skidded to a stop, the wide, boyish smile Xander remembered plastered all over his face—a face that had matured in the year they’d been apart.

Xander broke away from Drew and snagged the youngest Hollis boy in a bear hug. “Well, if it isn’t Dam Hollis.”

It was a joke among the family. Both Alexander’s and Andrew’s names were shortened to Xander and Drew. It only made sense to shorten Adam’s as well.

Adam clapped him on the back with a new force that revealed his muscles had matured as well.

The sound of a throat clearing, followed by boots hitting the turf,

brought Xander's attention around to his cousins Graham and Nolan. Of his twelve male Hollis cousins, these two, closest in age to Xander, were also his closest in spirit. How many scrapes had they gotten into as kids? He could still remember tying up the chickens' feet so they couldn't move, or scouring their fathers' adjoining ranches for snakes to hang in one particular tree where they'd lead the younger Hollis boys and scare the hell out of them.

"Fancy meeting up with this kind of riffraff out here on the plains!" Nolan, the biggest of all the Hollis men, rushed at Xander, locked his arms around his waist, and heaved him off his feet.

Xander roared with laughter as Nolan bounced him a few times before setting him down. He turned to Graham.

And found Graham's gaze pinned to Annabelle.

A knot of possessiveness tightened instantly in Xander's chest, and in two strides, he came up against Pete's side. Reaching up, he gathered Annabelle into his hold and set her softly on the ground beside him. When he looked up, he was jarred to still find Graham's gaze on her.

Was she staring back? She didn't belong to him, after all, but damn if the thought didn't spear him with jealousy.

He snaked an arm around her shoulders and anchored her to his side. He leveled his gaze at his cousin and silently dared Graham to test him. They might be close, but they'd had their share of fallouts over the years, mostly because of Graham's inability to see reason once he set his sights on a goal.

That goal better not be Annabelle.

"Who's the woman?"

She tried to tug free of Xander's hold, but he clamped his fingers around her waist and forced her to stand still. Dammit, she didn't know she was his yet, but did she have to appear so uncooperative? If his family discovered he'd kidnapped her, all hell would break loose. Then they'd carry the story back to his ma and pa, and he couldn't have that.

"This is—"

"Sweetheart Annie," Drew said slowly, a smile quirking up the right side of his mouth.

She jerked at the sound of the name as if Xander had plunged a knife into her back. Her dove-white hand fluttered to her lips.

Xander's chest surged with annoyance. What did that name mean? And

how did his brothers know her?

“Naw, it can’t be,” Adam said, sagging at the knees to peer into Annabelle’s face.

She twisted from his scrutiny, almost turning to Xander for protection. He nestled her more securely against him and glared at his brothers and cousins in turn, lingering on Graham, who was still gawping at her.

“Sure is, Dam. I just saw her face in the paper two days past.” Nolan, who was usually the quietest among them, spoke up.

Xander jerked his gaze to him. “Paper?”

“Yeah, the one out of Austin. It circulated at the Feed and Seed. I saw it when I went into town to get supplies for Ma. There was an article about Sweetheart Annie, daughter of the railroad millionaire Bedford Stephens, and how she’s traveled to the area to marry.”

“Excuse us,” Xander heard himself say. He plucked Annabelle off her feet and carried her a short distance away, out of the earshot of his family members. Behind, he heard Drew’s guffaw. Obviously they’d caught the shock on Xander’s face.

He grasped Annabelle’s upper arms and forced her to look at him. “Is that who you are?”

“Y-yes.”

“Daughter of the man I’m battling every day of my life?”

Surprise flitted over her delicate features and lit in her green eyes. “Is that who you’re fighting? There are several railroads in this part of the country. When you said you were fighting railroad people, I would never imagine you thought him so unfair.”

“Hell, yes,” he ground out through clenched teeth. “I don’t like looking like a fool in front of my family.”

“That’s really your family? Not an outlaw gang?” She attempted to peer around his shoulder at the knot of men behind him, but he pinched the point of her chin between his finger and thumb and directed her attention back to him.

“My brothers and cousins. Dammit, why didn’t you tell me about your family? Now I’ve kidnapped a millionaire’s daughter.”

“Well, you didn’t stop to ask before throwing me over your shoulder and leaping from the window!” The fire was back in her eyes, but she twisted

her hands together.

He started to pace away, his mind spinning with how this would look to an outsider. Fighting the railroad was one thing—kidnapping the daughter of the man behind the operation was entirely another matter.

He doffed his hat and scuffed his hand through his hair. “I didn’t know who you were. You know that, right?” He waved a finger beneath her nose. She followed its path and then smacked his hand aside.

“I don’t know anything, Mr. Hollis. Or is that your real name?”

“Of course it is,” he shot back, wanting to throttle her for concealing her true identity and tear into his family for recognizing her. Of course they’d never rat him out, but Xander resented the fact that they knew more about his woman than he seemed to.

He curled his fingers around her shoulders and stared into her eyes. “You will tell me everything. Now.”

She gulped but squared her shoulders. Her hair was tangled from riding, and he wished he could place a pearl-handled brush in her hands. Hell, he wished her could seat her between his knees and brush the long waves himself.

“I’m Annabelle Stephens, daughter of Bedford Stephens, owner of the Southern Gorge Railroad.”

“You said it was Annabelle Stearns.”

“I lied! You kidnapped me. What was I supposed to do?”

He lowered his brows and glared at her. “And your picture...in the paper. Why?”

At this, she grew flustered. A faint blush crept over her cheeks. “I-I’m not sure. I haven’t seen the article, and I know nothing of it.”

“But you’re called Sweetheart Annie?”

Her face flushed dark red, and he knew she wasn’t telling him everything. “That’s the nickname given by my father.”

“And others know you by this?”

Even her earlobes reddened. “It wasn’t used to my face, but yes.”

He had to get his hands on that newspaper. “And did I hear this right—you’ve come to the West to marry?” He practically roared the last word. Utter fury burst inside him that any other man had ever looked at her, let alone asked her to be his wife.

She hunched her shoulders around her ears. “Yes, that’s right.”

“And who, may I ask, is this man?”

“Oliver Standish, my father’s colleague.”

Xander snapped his hands into tight fists. If there had been anything to hit within distance, he would have. He let his eyes slip shut and pitched his voice low in an effort to control himself. “*The Oliver Standish, who’s in charge of the rail line crossing this area?*”

Confusion settled over her pretty features. She sucked her lower lip into her mouth and then released it. “I haven’t seen Mr. Standish in several months. I am not privy to the information involving changes in his role in the family business.”

Xander whirled away from her and punched the air. *Family business.* That business was stealing food from the tables of the Texans he called friends. Did she have any idea how her father was hurting the people by stealing their land and therefore their livelihoods to meet his own ends?

And now Oliver Standish, the well-known man in charge of it all, was not only sinking his hooks into the landscape but becoming part of the “family business” by way of a marriage proposal.

Xander stormed back to Annabelle and lifted her onto tiptoe, thrusting his face into hers. “You’re not marrying him.”

“Release me this instant, Mr. Hollis!”

“Do you hear me, Sweetheart Annie? You’ll marry that man over my dead body!”

“What business is it of yours? I’m just a captive—a pawn in a strange game I know nothing of. You’re fighting the railroad, but I don’t know why. The railroad will bring commerce and good to the people of the West.”

He glared at her, mesmerized by the pout of her lips and the tip of her nose but infuriated with her lack of sense. “How do you suppose you’re gaining this land, Annabelle?”

Her gaze flickered downward and then darted back to his. “Through land grants, of course. Given by President Lincoln—”

He nodded hard, cutting her off. “You’re right on some counts. But that was public land—property the President was free to give. What about the territory already owned by homesteaders?”

“I-I don’t know.”

“They steal it,” he rumbled, inches from her face. Her sweet scent wafted toward him, filling his nose and stirring his body with lust.

“I don’t believe you,” she said in a voice that quavered, but something flickered behind her eyes. For a moment, she looked down as if in shame. Then she smoothed a lock of hair behind her ear and met his gaze. He heard her stomach growl.

From the corner of his eye, he glimpsed his cousin Graham moving toward them. With a growl of frustration, Xander caught Annabelle’s wrist and towed her back to where his family stood.

“Do any of you have food in your bags?” he asked without further niceties.

Adam strode to his horse. “I do. Got some of Ma’s biscuits wrapped up here...” He rummaged around in his bag and unearthed a tidy parcel tied with string. The outer layer of newsprint kept the biscuits wrapped in cheesecloth safe from the elements. Xander’s mouth watered for a taste. It had been too long since she’d sent him off with a care package.

He thrust his canteen into Annabelle’s hands. “Feed her, Dam. Drew, walk with me.”

His brother nodded, and they started away from the group, when Xander suddenly realized Graham was following. He stopped and waved for him to join them, glad to have him away from Annabelle.

He spared her a glance to ensure she was okay. Adam had opened the packet of biscuits, and she had a fluffy confection in hand, prepared to bite into it. Xander’s stomach rumbled. He hoped someone would save him a biscuit, although it wouldn’t hold him over for long. He needed the eggs and ham to go with it.

“What are you doing with her, Xander?” Drew asked without preamble.

“I came across her and couldn’t leave her,” he said.

“You haven’t married her yet. She doesn’t look like a well-bedded woman,” Graham said.

Xander stopped walking. “Don’t talk about her that way.”

Graham stared at her over Xander’s shoulder. “She’s a virgin—I’d bet my life on it.”

“Shut up.”

“At least Xander can say she *is* a virgin. He’s upheld his honor by

waiting to get her to a preacher first,” Drew said.

“Is that your intent? To marry her?” Graham’s gaze slid from Annabelle’s curves to Xander’s eyes.

He made a sharp gesture with one hand. “I never thought I’d butt heads over a woman with you, Graham, of all men. What do you think you’re doing?”

His cousin’s mouth hardened, and the sun flashed in his dark eyes. “What I think is she’s worth it.”

In one step, Xander closed the gap between them. “Forget it. She’s mine.”

“She doesn’t seem that smitten with you. In fact, it looks like she wants to escape you.”

Drew edged closer, obviously prepared to throw himself between them if it came to blows. Which it might. Xander itched to wring his cocky cousin’s neck.

“You’ve never been one to mince words, Graham. Spit out what it is you’re trying to say.”

His cousin thwacked his hat on his thigh. A puff of dust rose from his clothes, and Xander wondered how long they’d been riding and where they were going.

Graham took one step toward Xander, bringing them almost chest to chest. “All right. I want her. I’ll even marry her. I’m not ashamed to say it.” Graham’s statement fell between them like a dead weight, pulling them under the dark waves of animosity. In all their years, they’d never come to blows, but today might be different.

“You don’t know her.”

“Does it matter?”

“Matter? Hell, yes, it matters! Weren’t you raised a Hollis?” Even as Xander said this, he knew he was a hypocrite. He’d overlooked his upbringing and tossed away everything he’d been taught about how to treat a woman in order to justify keeping Annabelle by him. Now he might lose her to Graham. Or worse, to that weasel Oliver Standish.

Graham shook his head slowly. “This has nothing to do with the way we were raised, Xander. I don’t think that woman wants to be with you, and if this is the case, I’m fighting for her.”

Xander locked his jaw against the urge to roar. Behind him, he heard the faint strains of Annabelle's voice as she talked to his other family members. Jealousy reared its sinister head. Suddenly he hated that she'd hold a conversation with them—that she'd talk to anyone but him. Was she telling them her secrets? Or how Xander had kidnapped her?

He twisted on a boot heel and started back toward her. Graham caught his shoulder, and he spun on him with a growl. "Leave it, Graham. She's with me, and that's the end of the discussion."

"We'll ask her and find out for ourselves, shall we?" A wicked gleam Xander had never seen before glinted in his cousin's eyes.

Before Graham could circle around him and stride off toward Annabelle, Xander brought his hand down on his shoulder. Hard. He dug his fingers into the thick muscle as they glared at each other. Up close, Xander saw pure determination oozing from Graham's very pores.

What his cousin forgot was that Xander possessed the same raw resolve.

"We'll ask her," Graham said again.

"Like hell." He shoved him back a notch and strode away, reaching Annabelle in a flash.

Her eyes widened as he stormed up to her, removed the packet of biscuits from her hand to shove them at Adam, and then threw her into the saddle. Vaulting up behind her, he saw his brother's stunned face.

"We're outta here. Give Ma my love."

"Wait, Xander. You barely let us know what's going on—"

"No time."

"He means he's not waiting long enough for me to ask Sweetheart Annie if she really chooses to be with him," Graham stated behind him.

Annabelle gasped. She twisted in the saddle, trying to look at Xander, but he held her by the arms to keep her from doing so. If he saw fear in her now, it would be the end of him. He'd have to give her to the care of her family members, trusting his brothers to get her back to the hotel from which he'd stolen her. Then she'd most likely fall in love with Graham on the way there.

No, Xander couldn't meet her gaze.

Graham stepped to the side of their horse and stared up at Annabelle.

“Come with us.”

She trembled. What could she be thinking? She’d said she was nothing more than a pawn in Xander’s game. She didn’t know that he wanted her for his own, that he wanted to do right by her by marrying her and keeping her happy for the rest of her life. There hadn’t been time, but he should have made the time. Dear Lord. There was also the not-so-small worry of James. He had to tell her more about the man he didn’t think he could cut from his life.

“We’ll take you home to our ranch, Annabelle. Provide the comforts I’m certain you aren’t receiving from a life on the run with Xander.”

“I don’t like this,” she said faintly.

Xander tightened his grip on her waist. “Don’t listen to him. This is between him and me—an argument I never dreamed I’d be having with my own cousin.”

With that, he set his heels into Pete’s sides and wheeled around. Throwing one last look over his shoulder, he called to his family, “Tell Pa I’ll be home as soon as I can! And let them know James is all right!”

Galloping across the land with the wind blowing straight into his face, he regained some of his control. He sighed and brought her closer, tucking her head beneath his chin. She was worth a fight with his family, and before long, she’d see the justice in Xander’s path and stand by him. Oliver Standish would be a distant memory.

At least you got the documents. Eventually they’ll replace them with copies from out east, but you can continue to shove their noses into the dirt until they understand the people of Texas will not stand for this.

Yes, that was important. His cause must be his utmost priority, although Annabelle’s protection was threatening to become even more so. And he couldn’t leave James after all they’d done together—after what James had come to mean to him.

When he was sure they were far enough away from Graham for Xander to calm down, he’d stop and burn the pile of documents. He’d demand Annabelle tell him more about her past.

And he’d make it known that she was his future.

Chapter Three

Annabelle stared despondently at the pile of kindling Xander had gathered. When the first wisp of smoke curled from the dry grasses and leaves he'd sprinkled over the sticks, she felt as though the last of her hopes blew away too.

She was never going to get away.

Would Oliver fight for her? Perhaps, but getting word to Oliver that she needed him would be impossible. That left only her and her wits.

Through her lashes, she cast a look around the landscape. Xander had moved off to the right again and was busy tearing a dead limb from a tree. The land acted as a natural funnel, with a broad swath of green grassland set between a high ledge and a wooded area, where they were stopped.

The scents of the burning wood made her think of cook fires, and her stomach rumbled. That biscuit the Hollis men had provided had been the tastiest thing she'd eaten since leaving her Boston home. Thoughts of Letty the cook's thick stew or lemon meringue pie tormented her. Surely Oliver would see she was provided with a similarly skilled cook. *If you ever see him again.*

Xander had succeeded in pulling down the dead branch, and it struck the ground with a heavy *thunk*. He curled his fingers around the end and hefted it with ease. As he closed the gap between them, she stared at his muscular form. The broad set of his shoulders did things to her insides she didn't want to contemplate.

At that moment, he lifted his head and caught her eyes. The dark, brooding look left his face to be instantly replaced with something more intensely animalistic. It should have frightened her, but a shiver of heat coursed through her belly to warm her sex. Her nipples bunched up hard beneath the thin fabric of her homespun dress, making her feel suddenly exposed. Could he see her body's reaction to him?

Quickly, she dropped her gaze and fought to gain control. She hated the unsettled way she felt in his presence, knowing she wanted more from this rough outlaw than to escape him. The dark tendrils of need were mixed up

with the lack of restrictions she wanted. He drove her to do things she'd never do ordinarily. Pushed her past the bounds of her comfort, which was exactly what she'd hoped to do when agreeing to come West.

"You all right, Annabelle? You're wearing the strangest expression."

Irritation leaped in her veins. She shoved her hair over her shoulders and glared at him. "Of course I'm not! What kind of delusions are you having? We're not on good terms! You kidnapped me—" She bit the words off through her tightened jaw. "And I want to be released. Now!"

Her thigh muscles jumped with the urge to run. *How far would I get before he catches me?* Most likely she'd manage only a couple steps before his long arm snagged her back. Her stomach muscles ached from his strong clutch around her middle for the past day. No, he wasn't about to walk away and leave her to escape. Did the man ever sleep? Take care of bodily needs? She hadn't even seen him seek privacy in the trees. He seemed like a machine—a steam engine barreling across Texas with wrath in his heart and an arsenal strapped to his horse.

But she had to try to get away from him. She had to shove through her paralyzing fears and fight for her freedom. Who else would?

Rather than rise to her outburst, Xander heaved a great sigh. He planted a foot in the center of the ten-inch-diameter branch and, with a shove of his foot, cracked it in two. He let one length fall onto the fire and kicked the other aside. Finally, he squatted before her.

She twisted her gaze from him, hating him, hating her need for him. She wanted those kisses that scorched her to the tips of her toes.

He's nothing special. A kiss from Oliver would feel the same.

As this notion passed through her head, she realized she was lying to herself. Compared to Xander Hollis, Oliver could barely be called a man. His narrow shoulders and the attention he paid to his appearance suddenly seemed effeminate in comparison.

"Why do they call you Sweetheart Annie?"

"Because, dammit, I'm sweet." Her words came out more thickly than she'd like. She wished she could tip her head back and bray at the sky like the coyote she'd seen last night howling at the moon.

He chuckled and snapped a fat twig in two using only the pressure of his thumb. "You are sweet, that's for certain. You know, my partner, James, is going to love you."

“Just what I need.”

Xander went on as if she hadn't spoken, breaking more sticks for kindling. “He's my oldest friend. You've never met a more easygoing man. Put him in a tight spot against a man with a gun, and he doesn't turn a hair. In fact, he cracks jokes. One time when we were riding about a month ago, we were good and sick of rough living. I suggested we go into town and find a bed, but he insisted we might as well string ourselves up from the nearest tree —”

She winced and remained silent, though the vision of him and this unknown man swaying in the Texas breeze made her stomach tighten.

Seeing her response, he turned the conversation. “Yeah, James is a good guy. Willing to give up his comfort to help. He's one I'll always want at my back. I've never felt closer to another soul.”

At this, a thread of unknown emotion wove through her. “Closer than you feel to your brothers?”

He nodded immediately. “I love my little brothers, but there's something stronger between me and James.” A foreign look crossed his face. She studied him for a long minute, trying to pinpoint what it was.

“I miss him, I truly do.” He stared into the distance for a long minute.

Annabelle's belly knotted tighter. Would he miss her if she managed to break away?

What are you thinking? You've lost your sense!

Her gaze shot up in time to see him lick his bottom lip. Slowly. His gaze seemed to attach to her, and the low throb she'd felt when he kissed her took up residence between her thighs again.

He tossed the stick aside and reached for her. His big hand curled around her ankle.

White heat shot up her calf to the sensitive back of her knee and onward to nestle in the slick folds of her pussy. He slipped from his haunches to his knees and, using only his grip on her uninjured ankle, pulled her to him. She unraveled across the ground like a length of ribbon. Once she was stretched out, he covered her with his big body.

She gasped at the initial shock of his weight pressing her down. He propped his upper body on his arms to keep from crushing her, but she wanted more. To feel all of him.

He closed his eyes and brushed his nose over hers, filling her head with the masculine scents of musk and leather and the sweet tang of growing things.

“Darlin’, you are the sweetest woman I’ve ever laid eyes on. Even when you’re fighting like a little cat, I want to stroke you and tuck you against me.”

She mused that she should take offense to his reference to her, but the feel of his hips against hers drove that thought from her head. His cock bulged against her, prodding the V of her legs.

An inner voice yelled at her. *Wanton woman! Fight him off!*

But the mysterious new woman, the one she’d always longed to be, had landed into her body, and that woman enjoyed every inch of Xander Hollis.

“I hated warning off my cousin for you, but I would have laid him unconscious before I let him take you.”

A thrill ripped through her at his words. Her heart tripped and sped out of control.

He opened his eyes and stared down at her. Up close, she was able to study the golden flecks around his pupils and the little lines at the corner of each eye, gained from squinting into the sun.

“No one is taking you,” he murmured a split second before his mouth descended. The brush of his hard lips pulled a groan from her, and he answered with one of his own.

She opened her mouth to him, and he took immediate advantage, plunging his tongue deep. The first velvety flip sent her senses reeling. He slanted his mouth over hers and drank from her, holding her prisoner with his body and each twist of his tongue. He stole her worries, and she no longer thought of sneaking away from this man—she only longed to get closer. The golden expanse of sky no longer existed, and the soft crackle of the fire vanished, replaced by the blazing feel and dark, flashing eyes of Xander Hollis.

Kidnapper.

Wanted man.

She wanted him.

He gripped her leg and hitched her thigh around his hip, rocking against her rhythmically. The grasses beneath her loosed their spicy fragrances.

“Sweetheart, I haven’t told you yet, but I’m telling you now. I want you with me.”

At the first touch of his mouth, she began to soften. Before she could decide whether to act out against him, he sank his tongue between her lips and chased hers. A rumble of satisfaction stuck at the back of his throat as he explored her mouth.

He dragged her onto his lap, far from the flames or any errant sparks, and cupped her breasts. Her breathing hitched, and she arched against his palms.

“Mine,” he rasped, dipping his mouth to the hollow of her throat. He traced a small path of kisses there before continuing farther. Reaching into her bodice, he smoothed her satiny flesh.

“Mr. Hollis...”

“Xander.”

“Please.”

He caught her gaze and held it as he flicked his tongue over the tip of one round breast. His balls clenched up tight to his body at the same moment her nipple hardened on his tongue.

Her head fell back, and her breath came faster. He laved her bud for long minutes, learning each peak and valley of her flesh. She knotted her fist and thumped his shoulder. He grazed her lightly with his teeth, and she hit him harder. Did she seek to force him to stop or was she urging him on? He only knew one thing—he couldn’t release her now, not even if a posse was bearing down on them. He was going to have her.

He found the hem of her gown and eased it upward, inching his fingers along the smooth expanse of her outer thigh. She squirmed in his hold, her fingers finally landing in the hair at the back of his head and twisting.

Drawing her nipple deep into his mouth, he explored her round thigh. Her exquisite heat spurred him on, and he held his breath as his fingers met her soaking folds.

She quivered, and he bit down on the need to blow. Her aroused fragrance struck his senses, and he could hold back no longer. He had to taste her.

Staring down into her passion-blurred eyes, he arched a brow in question. Would she throw him off her or allow him to claim her?

The corner of her lip twitched upward in a soft smile of agreement.

In one swift movement, he bared her, pulling her dress to her thighs. Before her flesh could pebble from the kiss of the southwesterly breeze, he spread her beneath him. Their gazes clashed, and in the depths of her eyes he read her desire. Passion was stamped on her delicate features, and he hungered to see more. To watch her as she came apart in his arms. Came apart around him.

He sank down the length of her body and captured her cunny in one big bite. Her flavors burst on his tongue, dizzying him. His cock throbbed and demanded entrance. He wanted to sink into her hot depths more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life.

Her belly dipped sharply at the first stroke of his tongue. Her sex pulsed, and a trickle of fresh cream flooded his mouth. He groaned against her, and she rocked upward, riding his tongue.

Pushing back the hood of her clit, he located her hard core and ground it against her body.

“Ohhh.” A shuddering sigh left her. He played over her wet seam, gathering all her juices on his tongue. When he slid his tongue down to her honey hole, she cried out. Fist locked in his hair, she forced him harder against her.

He plunged his tongue deep into her, grinding his rough jaw against her sensitive skin. When she stiffened, he knew she was close to release. Slowing his pace, he swirled his tongue around her stiff nubbin. Once. Twice.

She splintered. Her pussy pulsed beneath his mouth, and he applied pressure to her pearl, extending her orgasm, driving her higher.

“Xander!” A faint trace of fear tinged her voice. “Please, Xander. I need to still this quiver inside me.”

Quickly, he knelt over her, fumbling with his pants. He shoved them down his hips as she pinched the cloth between his shoulder blades and dragged his shirt over his head. He stared down at her, taking in the pink flush on her cheeks and the light dew on her hairline.

Did she understand what he was about to do? And that it was irreversible?

“I will take care of you. Annabelle, you're mine.”

She fell still beneath him.

Realizing she was no longer kissing him back, he drew away a fraction. “What are you talking about?” she asked.

“I want to make you my wife.”

The flat of Annabelle’s hand struck Xander’s face with a *crack*. He jerked to a stand, stumbled back and fell, still tangled in his pants.

It was foolish, but she jumped up and turned to run.

Annabelle’s breath was a harsh rasp, and a spear of pain stabbed her lungs. She yearned to look back over her shoulder at the place but didn’t dare.

Sprinting full-tilt down into the valley, she silently cursed the fact that she didn’t have shoes. Her feet were raw and bleeding from the sharp rocks and thorn bushes. Damn that man, and to hell with Texas!

I’m leaving and no one will ever know the truth about what happened between us.

But did she want to leave him?

She pushed herself harder in answer. Her fingers were already cramped from holding up her long skirts. The high grasses slashed her calves, and tears smarted in her eyes.

She squeaked as a steely hand grasped her upper arm and swung her up. Trembling uncontrollably, she attempted a peek at his face.

The determined set of his jaw scared her more than the flash of his eyes. How had she allowed herself to get carried away enough to even consider sharing her body with him? If she lived to be a hundred-fifty years old, she’d never forgive herself for her loss of judgment.

He made a sharp gesture, slashing the air with his enormous hand. “You’re not going anywhere, Annabelle.”

Images of him bursting into her room, of rolling her roughly into a blanket and leaping from a second-story window with her revolved through her mind. She found her voice. “Don’t you dare harm me, Mr. Hollis!”

“Dammit, woman, you call me Xander. And I’d never hurt you, though the thought appeals right now!” His mouth twisted on his words, bringing attention to his white teeth and the contrasting dark sprinkle of facial hair on his upper lip. Too well she recalled the little shivers she’d known when he kissed her between her thighs.

Again, there was the harlot she'd become. Why couldn't she clamp off these rampant thoughts—or better yet, the feelings he raised in her? She didn't want to feel her heart quicken or her mouth water for a taste of him. And the last thing she needed was the longing that practically choked her.

“What did you plan to do once you got away from me? What about food? Shelter? Are you equipped to care for yourself out here?”

“I wouldn't be *out here* if you hadn't dragged me here! I'd be in a stagecoach on my way to Oliver right—”

He yanked her onto tiptoe, crushing her breasts up against his chest. His eyes flashed as he bent over her—bent her backward.

“Don't. Say. His. Name. That chapter of your life is over, Annabelle. He doesn't exist to you anymore. It's you and me.”

A shudder ripped through her, part fear and something darker. Something akin to pleasure. The strength radiating from his very limbs excited her.

You are his lover...

She clamped down on that thought. No, that was a mistake. She wasn't going to make any more fumbles or do anything remotely like fall into the grass with him and let him kiss her senseless.

She stiffened her spine. Sweetheart Annie would never think these thoughts. When her father had granted her this nickname, she'd been nine years old. He proclaimed that her disposition was what every woman in the world should strive for. As the years trundled by, she was again praised for her calm and kind ways. Oliver had told her he had been drawn to these traits in her. Now the qualities people loved in her were becoming buried beneath the Texan sky. Squelched by the outlaw who'd managed to steal her whole existence. She wasn't sweet; she was wild to learn more from this man.

Oh heaven. And suddenly she knew that was exactly what she wanted.

Xander shook her a little. She swayed on her toes. “Do you hear me? You're never going to meet Oliver.”

“I heard you,” she whispered hoarsely.

He glared at her for a minute. “What is going on in that pretty little head of yours?”

Heat climbed the walls of her core and took up residence in her cheeks. Right now, she felt far from attractive. But the expression on his handsome

face told her he thought she was.

Their gazes clung. He walked his fingers up her spine and rested them at the base of her skull, sending threads of need through her shoulders and to the tips of her fingers. She clasped her hands tightly to keep from touching him. But it was too late. His head was descending, and she was stretching up to meet him.

Their mouths met with furious need. She gulped back the gasp that filled her lungs and drowned in his scents. Her pussy clenched hard and released a flood of cream to wet her inner thighs. The idea of him stretching her, filling her, drove up her desire another notch.

He didn't need to guide her arms around his neck. She did that on her own. And he didn't need to urge her to open her mouth—she parted her lips and accepted his tongue as if she'd done this thousands of times.

In a rush of sensation, she tossed away all sense and let herself feel. Her veins throbbed with a deep need she'd known only since meeting Xander. He splayed his hand over her lower back, drawing her against him with a bump. Heat clawed her insides like an animal. Suddenly, she felt out of control—reeling. Her need to be touched seemed insurmountable—until he slipped a hand under her skirts and found the wet seam of her sex.

She moaned into his mouth, and he responded by whipping her up into his arms and carrying her deeper into the trees. His steps were slow and deliberate as he took care not to trip with her, but he never released her mouth. In his arms, she quivered with expectancy. Was he going to make love to her again?

Did she want that?

Yes, she did. No longer could she lie to herself on that front. She'd freely given herself to him and would do so again and again because she couldn't stop herself.

He knelt with her and placed her gently on a soft bed of leaves. In the shelter of the trees, the sun no longer shone on them, and she felt utterly protected. Knowing he meant her no harm, she only felt his power to keep her safe.

His gaze steadily bore into hers. She reached up and sank her fingers into the soft mass of his hair. Some of his family members had possessed the same thick, wavy, dark hair, but on Xander, it was more striking.

He hovered over her, his broad chest inches from hers. Too far away.

She wanted to feel his weight pressing her down as he filled her.

She wriggled restlessly, and he made a harsh noise in his throat. “If you want this, why did you run?”

Remorse washed through her, accompanied by confusion. She had to return to her old life, didn't she? He told her no, and her body agreed that this was where she belonged, with Xander. He was an outlaw, and her life was in danger every day as a result. He was directly affecting her father by prohibiting the SGR from proceeding with its expansion.

But she wanted Xander. He stroked something deep inside her that she didn't understand and couldn't name.

“I can't stay with you forever,” she whispered. She said this but no longer knew if she meant it. She tried to avoid his stare but failed. Each golden fleck of his eyes drilled into her soul.

“You can and will, Annabelle. What will it take to convince you to let go of your ideas and follow your instincts?”

As she recalled his kisses and caresses, her body responded. Her breasts ached for his touch, and her sex throbbed. She shifted to ease it.

He suddenly held her too tightly, and she found herself gasping.

“I'm going to ease my hold on you, but if you try to run again, so help me—” He broke off, struggling for control.

She shook her head frantically.

He was going to prove to her that she belonged to him, and now.

“If I take this step, there's no going back,” he warned.

“I know.” She whimpered, raking her nails over his shoulders.

“Annabelle, you're mine.” He quickly divested her of her dress. Kneeling between her thighs, he teased her moist folds with the tip of his erection. She seemed so tight, but he knew they'd be a perfect fit. He kissed her, fanning the flames of her desire until she writhed against him.

With urgency, she rocked her hips upward. “Please!”

With one solid thrust, he rooted himself in her.

Her cry of pain blistered his heart, and he went completely still to allow her to adjust to his invasion. But damn, she felt so good. Heat clawed at his insides. If he didn't move soon, he'd spill his seed inside her without stoking her fires of desire again.

He wanted their first time to be perfect. Beneath the vast Texan sky, he was joining them as man and wife. With or without the preacher and the piece of paper, Annabelle was his. And he'd like to see anyone who dared to tell him otherwise.

She whimpered.

"It's all right, love. The pain will pass in a moment."

"I don't—"

"Shh." He placed his mouth over hers, swallowing whatever protest she was about to make. Tenderly, he kissed her. After a long minute, he tasted her rising need. When she hesitantly touched her tongue to his, he growled his satisfaction.

His cock throbbed within her heated walls, and he thought he'd burst. Slowly, he eased out, testing her pain tolerance. She moaned, and he stopped.

Suddenly, she locked her ankle around his hip and surged against him. "Please."

She didn't need to ask twice. Sliding out almost to the tip, he met her tumultuous gaze as he sank into her tight sheath. Pressure built in his balls until he practically bellowed with need.

He caught her nipple between his thumb and forefinger as he kissed her and plunged into her sweet body over and over. His world narrowed, and his cares fell away. The past months spent on the run were meaningless. His battle with the SGR was nothing in the face of this passion. Even James was, at the moment, a distant thought.

Small, squeaking gasps escaped her. He sank his teeth into her lower lip and tugged. She ran her tongue over his upper lip, and in a blinding burst, he came. He pumped his hips wildly, bathing her walls with ropes of hot cum. She clung to him, riding his erection until he felt the first contractions of her body around him.

"That's it, baby. Let go. Give yourself to me." As the waves of bliss rocked her, he held her tightly, watching the ecstasy play over her face.

After long minutes, his senses returned. And apparently hers did too, because tears filled her eyes and overflowed, tracking down her flushed cheeks.

He caressed the ripe curve of her hip and crushed her to him. Breathing into her hair, he sought to soothe her.

She shook her head. Several hairs clung to the moisture on her cheeks. “Get off. Please.”

“No. Baby, look at me.” He waited patiently for her to do his bidding. “There’s a reason you gave in to me. You listened to your body.”

“I’m ruined!”

Anger flared inside him, but he shoved it firmly down. “No, you’re mine. The instant we can find a preacher, we’ll make it official.”

He caught the horror etched on her face and, cut to the quick, rolled off her.

“I can’t do this. I *didn’t* do this. Please take me to the nearest town, Mr. Hollis.” She scrambled to her feet and clutched her dress to her chest to hide her nudity. Then she turned around and began to dress.

For a long minute he simply stared at her. She’d been wild beneath him, had begged him to touch her.

That was her body speaking. When her rational mind took over, fear rooted in her once more. He had to unearth her bodily needs again and make her see that passion like they’d shared didn’t appear every day.

He threaded his fingers through his hair and cursed himself. Slowly, he approached her. Her back was to him and her face in her hands. Soft weeping met his ears and further tortured him. He stepped up behind her.

“Darlin’, let’s talk.”

She opened her mouth to say something but shut it abruptly. Then she tried again.

“I’m frightened by the feelings you bring out in me.” Her voice was strangled.

He drew her against him, simply holding her until she felt the worry flow from her, to be replaced by a need so great, she ached. She smoothed a hand down his spine, and he moaned in reaction. He lifted her and gently lay her down.

He dipped his mouth to her ear.

“Tell me you want this, baby.” He captured her nipple between a big thumb and forefinger, twisting it lightly until she cried out.

She arched her neck and pinched her eyes shut at the pleasure he wrought. Her pussy throbbed, and moisture soaked her inner thighs. “Yesss.”

“And this.” He released her nipple and ran his hand down the swell of her hip and around to the junction of her thighs. Through the cloth of the gown, he rubbed her pussy. The coarse cloth against her sensitive folds ratcheted up her desire another notch. He poked the fabric into her body, and she shuddered with a fresh wave of need.

Suddenly he removed his hand, leaving her gasping and wanting. She gazed up at him through a haze of passion. “Xander...”

“What do you want, darlin’? To leave me?”

At that moment, she couldn’t imagine why she’d run. If she left him, she’d never be satisfied with her dull life, sitting in parlors with other ladies, talking about trivialities. And she’d forever long for this—Xander’s touch.

She shook her head. “I want—” Could she say the words?

He was going to force them out of her. He let his hips fall, bringing his stiff cock against the V of her thighs. She mewed and ground against him, but he withdrew before she gained any satisfaction.

“Want what, Sweetheart Annie? You might be the daughter of a railroad tycoon, and you surely don’t deserve to be on the run, but you’re not who you think you are.”

More confusion settled around the creases of her brain. Before she grappled with understanding, he pressed his body to hers again. This time, he lifted her against his cock. She rose sharply up the steep incline of bliss as his cock pummeled her through the barrier of his pants and her dress.

“Who am I?” she gasped, clinging to his shoulders and trying to force him down for a kiss.

“You’ll have to figure it out.”

“Help me.” She rocked against him, begging with her body for him to love her.

For a split second, their gazes clashed. And then he rolled off and kicked away his pants. She focused on the hard length dancing against his stomach, stunned that it had fit inside her. The thick purple head oozed a clear cream.

She wet her lips. A low growl rumbled in his chest. Her gaze snapped back to his.

“Do you want to taste it, Annabelle?”

Heat blossomed in her. She dragged her gaze away from his and fixed

it on his body once more. He seemed to swell before her eyes. The veins circling the rigid shaft enticed her. How would it feel in her mouth?

She gathered her knees beneath her. Slowly, she lowered herself toward his waiting shaft. Heat ebbed from him, luring her in closer. And his scent drove her on.

Before she reached him, he caught her jaw on his palm. “Kiss me first, baby.” He guided her up the length of his hard body so she lay across him. Being in this position gave her the power, and she suddenly felt free. She let go of her inhibitions, and all thoughts of escaping him fled. She wanted only to taste him and explore his body as he’d done hers.

He waited for her to make the move, staring up at her with a hunger in his eyes that made her belly clench. “Take what you want from me, and maybe you’ll discover who you really are.”

How did he know more about her than she did? He’d known her for mere hours.

“Don’t fight it, baby doll. Come to me.”

She swooped in and claimed his mouth. The first taste was a heady rush in her soul. He tasted of fresh grasses, as if he’d chewed them while she was gone. The rough hair on his face prickled against her skin, and she reveled in it. She drank from him steadily, curling her tongue over his, angling her head to reach the depths of his mouth.

Lying atop him, she crushed her aching breasts to his chest. For long minutes, she kissed him before she lost her battle against the need to touch him. He waited patiently as she unknotted her fists and cradled his face in her hands. She scuffed her fingers over his coarse jaw hair, eased them around his nape, and learned the soft depressions behind his ears. Tearing her mouth away, she dipped her tongue into one.

“Annabelle...” He gripped her waist and dragged her fully atop him, bringing her in contact with his raging hard-on once more. Spikes of need pummeled her, and her heart raced.

She traced a path of kisses down his throat to his chest. Each rounded part of his chest enticed her. She’d never seen such perfectly bronzed skin or muscles. When he’d plucked her up into the saddle and she’d felt his warm body against her back, a raw satisfaction had settled in her body. Her mind might not believe she belonged with him, but her body had other ideas.

Somehow, she needed to settle the dispute between the two.

Reaching the rounded swell of his chest, she placed a tentative kiss to his nipple. The dark bud was like a jewel, taut beneath her tongue. Was this okay? His mouth on her nipples had been pure joy. Did men enjoy this touch as well?

He gripped her nape and pressed her harder, a long groan spiraling from his chest. Joy burst in her at the knowledge she could unhinge him as he did her. Growing bolder, she flicked her tongue over his nipple. Then, instinctively, she gently sank her teeth into it.

“God, baby, I’m going to come undone.”

She smiled against his flesh and moved to the other nipple, stroking it with her tongue for long minutes before sucking it. His cock grew against her belly, and she writhed against him, wanting to feel him spear her. The ache in her could only be eased by him.

Nearby, the horse whickered. The sound dug into Annabelle’s psyche, and a thread of worry wove through her. What if they were discovered? Her reputation was already tarnished—if she was found in the throes of passion with a man who wasn’t her husband, her name would be blackened. Sweetheart Annie would be no more. Her father would be crushed. And Oliver...

Xander twisted her hair in his fist, tugging slightly. She lifted her gaze to his.

“Let go, darlin’. It’s just you and me.”

How did he read her soul so thoroughly? Were her worries etched across her features for anyone to read? Or was Xander so attuned to her that he understood her hesitation?

He cupped her breast. Even through the weave of her dress, his touch was scalding. The fires of her need were stoked again, and she forgot about her worries. Passion raged unchecked within her. Yes, she wanted this as badly as he did.

Without warning, she wrapped her fingers around the base of his cock. A harsh groan burst from him, driving her onward. She nipped a path down his hard stomach to the soft nest of pubic hair. The musky scents of their previous lovemaking sent her pulse racing out of control. And the ropes of juices oozing from the head of his swollen shaft tipped her over the edge.

She parted her lips and swallowed his throbbing head. The salty flavors exploded on her tongue, and she moaned her pleasure. The dark heat in her

core doubled. Tripled. She clamped her thighs together to hold on to the mind-blowing sensation as she sucked his cock deeper into her throat.

A shudder racked his big form. He tangled his fingers in her hair, drawing the waves aside to see her face. “Goddamn, baby, you’re beautiful.”

She squeezed her eyes shut and drew on his length, thrilled by the joy she was giving him and the feeling of power she possessed. Flicking her tongue down the length of his rod, she let his head nudge the back of her throat several times. Then, cupping his balls in one hand, she lightly kneaded them, learning their texture.

She’d never done something like this before or even heard about it. Would he like it? Touching him this way sent wicked shivers through her, and she didn’t want to stop.

His reaction was swift. He threw his head back and roared his delight. “Yeah, darlin’.”

She bobbed over him, drinking in his cock and working his balls with one hand. When she slid a finger beneath his sac to a smooth spot before his anus, he shouted. spurts of his juices struck the back of her throat, and she swallowed instinctively. As she gulped the hot juices, her pussy pulsed, eager for her own release.

Sinking her fingers into his hip, she held him to her as he bucked, pumping his erection into her mouth again and again. Soon he slowed and she followed him—lapping at his sensitive rod. She circled her finger over the sweet spot, which had driven him over the edge, and a last droplet of cream coated her tongue.

He collapsed back, his stomach muscles heaving with his sharp intakes of breath. A slow smile spread across her face as total power coursed through her. He glanced at her and went still. His face spasmed, and her smile fell away.

“What...?”

“God, Annabelle, I’ve never seen you smile.” His gruff tone sank to the tips of her toes, raising a heat in her heart. He dragged her up his body and locked her against him. Burying his nose in her hair, he drew great breaths.

“Don’t stop, sweetheart. I want to make you smile all the days of your life.”

Could she really go through with this? Be with him forever? It went against her beliefs to sleep with a man and not be bound to him. She’d given

herself, and that meant she already belonged to him. She might as well be his wife. But what of their circumstances—he on the run and she the daughter of the man Xander vowed to bring down? If she agreed to marry him, would he back down from this war with her father?

She felt his lips moving tenderly over her hair, and the warmth in her chest expanded. “Xander, what if I do stay with you?”

He fell still, and then his hands convulsed on her spine, drawing her closer. “There’s no ‘what if’ here, baby doll. I’m not letting you go.”

Ignoring his focus on her, she plunged into the question plaguing her mind. “I mean, how can we continue this way, with you fighting the railroad?”

A heavy sigh sounded beneath her ear and ruffled her hair. “You’ll see for yourself what your father is doing with the building of his railroad. He’s hurt many people, Annabelle, whether you want to believe it or not.”

She raised her head to meet his gaze. “He’s not an evil man, Xander. Please don’t make him out to be.” She truly hoped her father hadn’t hurt people as Xander suggested.

He stroked her hair in response. “His orders harm people, Annabelle. Texans are struggling because of it. James was shot because of it.”

She sat up, suddenly annoyed. “Your partner was shot when you threatened the men trying to do their jobs.” A partner who Xander spoke of with a tenderness that made her jealous. Yes, she realized. That’s exactly what had prickled her when he spoke of James earlier. His voice resonated with emotion that should only be reserved for someone like a wife. He sat up too. To her surprise, he nodded. “That may be, but soon you’ll see the whole picture.” Their gazes held, his dark eyes a caress. She felt herself relent once more, pulled out of character by his nearness and the way he stared at her like she was a tempting morsel and he a hungry animal.

Xander cradled her head in one big palm and gazed into her eyes. “James is a good man. And you’ll see the truth soon enough.” Something in his voice made her look at him hard. And made her stomach knot with worry.

But then, as if suddenly remembering she hadn’t received release, he caught her around the waist and tossed her gently into the soft leaves. Before she could gasp, he covered her mouth with his. Wild desire lifted in her sharply. Her pussy clenched, and a trickle of cream ran down her inner thigh.

“Please, Xander. I need you.”

He stared into her eyes for a long heartbeat. “Too soon for me to fill you, though I’d love nothing more than to bury myself in your sweet body. But I can give you release in other ways.”

With that, he shifted onto one hip and slipped his hand beneath her skirt. Trailing his hand up her inner thigh, he located her hot center. She hummed her delight as he smoothed his fingers over her slick seam.

Gently, he parted her lips and nudged her throbbing bud with a forefinger. She twisted her face against his chest, giving herself up to his blissful touch. Yes, this was where she belonged—she’d never felt so alive in the drawing rooms of Boston or standing in the darkness with Oliver’s gloved fingers pressing against hers.

She let her thighs fall apart, silently begging for more of Xander’s touch. He circled her nubbin maddeningly, building the heat inside her. An intense burn took up residence in her belly. If she didn’t release soon, she’d scream.

Clamping down on her rough gasps, she lifted her hips, bringing her sex against his fingers. He dropped his mouth to the crook of her neck and drew her flesh into his mouth, sucking until she thought she’d burst. The world fell away, and she no longer knew anything but the rough pads of his fingers on her clit and the building pressure.

All of a sudden, he thrust a finger deep into her sheath. She cried out, bucking madly. Needing more. Needing his cock.

He curled his finger inside her and stroked a knot of nerves that sent her flying. Her pussy contracted hard; cum drenched his fingers. She issued a long, low moan, which he swallowed with his kiss. His tongue mirrored the action of his finger, sinking deep then darting away, drawing out her orgasm until stars burst behind her eyes.

She realized she’d stopped breathing and dragged a burning gulp of air through her lungs. She came down slowly. He drummed his finger into her flesh less insistently, until the last pulsations ebbed away.

A shiver tore through her, and he gathered her to his chest, holding her tight. Would she ever get enough of his exquisite attentions? Even as her body vibrated with the aftershocks of her release, she craved more. Wanted him with every ounce of her being.

At that moment, she allowed her worries to fall away, and she gave up complete control. She wasn’t going back to her old life. She’d never know

Oliver as her husband. Never see the world through the eyes of Sweetheart Annie again. She was no longer that person. Her innocence was gone, and as long as she was in Xander's arms, she didn't care.

He spoke against her ear and made her quiver all over again. "You all right, darlin'?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"And you're mine, is that right?"

"Yes." She said it shyly, a warm blush creeping over her face and seeping into the pit of her stomach. She'd just come apart in his arms—of course she was his. Whether she would have selected him as her mate or not, it was too late. He'd been right when he said her body had chosen. Maybe with Xander, she could truly become the person she'd fought her entire life to be.

"All right. As long as that's settled, we'll sleep now and travel tonight when it's cooler." He stretched out on the ground with her tucked against his side. "You know, we're not far from reaching James. He's going to be mighty glad to meet you."

She made a soft sound in her throat but didn't speak. He continued. "He always said someday I'd find myself a feisty woman to call my own, and he was right. I'm just glad I found you first, because James has one up on me in the looks department."

Twisting her face upward, she looked sidelong at him. What was she thinking to put that glint in her eye?

"It's true. Many a female has set her sights on him, but he's never been willing to settle down. Especially after the war. He had a difficult time return to civilian life for the first few months. We all did. Especially—Well, that's not my story to tell. Yeah, I think James will be very happy to set eyes on you."

Would James truly accept her? That last night he and James were together on the prairie before he'd been shot, Xander swore he'd detected a light of attraction in his friend's gaze. It had been brewing for months in Xander, but could James feel it too? Xander had to find out. But first he needed to secure Annabelle. She pillowed her cheek on his bicep and trustingly let her eyes slip closed. Within minutes, her breathing was deep and even. The rise and fall of her chest mesmerized him until he finally succumbed to exhaustion.

Before he fell asleep, he wondered how Annabelle and James would react when they first met. One thing was for certain. Tomorrow he'd find out when she set eyes on the injured man.

Chapter Four

Annabelle slipped off Pete's back and launched herself forward, catching the man, who could only be James, as he fell over in a dead faint. He was sweating and blood stained the side of his shirt.

"Help him!" she cried, clutching the man around the waist as he toppled over. She nearly crumpled under his weight, but suddenly, a wiry man appeared from the hut. He sprang forward to support James's weight.

Xander's boots thudded into the dirt, and in one stride, he reached them. "I'll take him," he said in a tight voice, then heaved the limp man over his shoulder.

Annabelle watched with her heart in her throat as Xander took the man inside the little hut. For a moment, she was frozen, unable to force her feet to move forward. How had she come to this place? Seeing James's state made her wonder what would happen if she fell ill—or worse, Xander did? Without him, she'd be lost and alone, aimlessly wandering the unknown land.

The man in the yard was staring at her. She started when she realized his dark, unnerving gaze was on her. His long raven hair was tied with a leather thong and fitted with a feather, and he wore leather breeches but no shirt.

A scorching blush climbed her throat and face, and she quickly averted her eyes. In the past few days, she'd definitely become educated on the male form.

The Indian gestured for her to follow him, and she did.

Inside, she stifled a cry at the terrible odor. She blinked into the dark interior, wondering what had died. The single room was outfitted with a narrow cot along one wall, where James laid. Xander hovered over him, wiping his friend's face with a damp cloth. When she moved to his side, Xander looked up at her with such anguish on his face, her heart rolled over.

She grabbed the cloth from his hand and knelt beside the pasty form of James. The cold moisture of the dirty floor sank through the fabric of her dress, and she suddenly found she knelt in some sticky substance.

"What the...? Xander, is that blood?" She jumped to her feet and

bumped against the cot, jarring James awake.

His blue eyes darted to and fro wildly and he started to rear up. She placed a palm on his chest and cooed to him. "It's all right, James. Lie down and let us care for you."

Xander growled low in his throat and whirled on the Indian. "How long has he been this way?"

The man shrugged, moving into the ring of light thrown by the fire. "On off. He improve," he said in broken English.

"He's improving?" Xander doffed his hat, drawing Annabelle's attention to the ceiling, where several stiff, furry objects hung.

Bile rushed up her throat, and she bent forward, gasping for clean air. She'd just found the source of the smell—dead animals.

"Let's get him out of here. The smell alone would keep a man from recovering!"

Xander gathered James up and carried him outside. Annabelle followed on his heels. When the cooler air struck her face, she drew a gulping breath. Out here, a fire had been started in the middle of the dirt yard, and a big pot hung over the flames. Her finicky stomach turned from nauseated to starving in a split second as the scents of cooking food reached her.

Her nostrils flared, and her stomach gave a loud protest.

"Your woman is hungry."

"Feed her up, Falling Water. She's ridden too long without a meal." Xander gently laid his friend a few feet from the fire, then stomped back into the shack for the water basin and cloth.

The Indian quickly dished up a wooden plate of stew and handed it to Annabelle. She shot a guilty glance at James. She should really care for him.

"Go on," he said weakly, giving her a curl of one lip that was almost a smile. "Eat. I'll live."

She examined him for a long minute, the plate in her hand forgotten. Would he live? She wasn't so sure.

"Please," he said in a stronger voice.

Xander flashed her a strained smile. "Do as the man asks, baby doll."

"Baby doll," James echoed. "Interesting name."

A laugh bubbled up Annabelle's throat. She sank to a stump near the fire and lifted the wood spoon provided to her, scooping up a rich bite of

vegetables. The flavors burst on her tongue, and she moaned, then shoveled in another bite.

Falling Water made a noise of approval and handed her a piece of thick bread studded with corn. She sank her teeth into it and chewed hastily.

“Hand her a canteen before she chokes,” Xander said with a flash of a smile. “Annabelle, meet James Merriman, the toughest man you’ll ever know. James, meet Annabelle.”

“Pretty lady.” James’s voice was wistful. He leaned up on his elbows and stared at her unblinkingly as she ate.

She ignored his rude manners and continued to swallow gulps of the delicious food. Chewing around a piece of meat that could be possum for all she knew, she wondered when James had last eaten. Any animosity she’d felt for him during the ride here had vanished the instant she saw his state. Pure concern filled her. She wouldn’t be surprised if he made everyone feel tenderness toward him. Maybe it was his big, soulful eyes.

“Falling Water, do you have more for the lady? She’s almost finished.”

She waved a hand to protest, but another ladle full of the stew was dumped onto the center of her plate. Xander nodded and turned back to James.

“You’re not mending well.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that, would you, Falling Water? I’m doing as well as any man with a putrid hole in his side.”

She dropped her spoon and stared at him. Seeing the bulk beneath his clothing on his left side, she assumed he was bandaged there, right above his hip bone. Her hands trembled to think of this big man taking a shot that had almost wiped him off the earth—and still might. Between his sandy hair and striking eyes, she found him endearing. His cheeks were hollow and his Adam’s apple too prominent, but she knew he was a man to be reckoned with when in his prime.

And something about his broad shoulders made her think of a child’s toy bear—something to drag into bed and cuddle.

A scorching blush set her cheeks on fire, and she dropped her face before the others could comment on it. But it was too late—James had found her gaze on him and caught her blush.

“What’s going on in that head of yours, Miss Annabelle? Or is it Missus?” He looked to Xander, who shook his head.

“Not yet. Give me time.”

“Well, Hollis, we don’t have much time, I’m afraid. There’s fighting to be done.” James heaved himself into a sitting position and motioned to Falling Water for the canteen.

The man brought it to him immediately. James took a long, deep pull from it, and then backhanded the moisture from his full lips.

Xander set his hand on his friend’s shoulder. “What do you mean?”

“Falling Water has been scouting for me a bit, and he discovered there are riders heading this way. Railroad men.”

Annabelle stiffened. Any one of these men could be friends of her and her father—could be Oliver. Though she could no longer entertain the idea of spending her life with him, she still didn’t wish him harm.

When she glanced away from James’s pale face, she found Xander’s solemn gaze on her. Defiance rose inside her, and she mentally dared him to mention the railroad in front of James. The man might not be able to withstand this added worry.

As if in silent understanding, he kept his mouth shut. “How close are they?”

Everyone looked to Falling Water. He pointed to the west. “I spotted them camped about a mile off. Eight men on horseback and one with a team and wagon.”

Xander’s chin came up a notch. “Carrying supplies?”

Falling Water nodded once. James pressed his lips into a tight line. He was sweating heavily but not from the heat. Likely from pain or fever.

“You can’t be seriously entertaining the idea of fighting these men. You’re in no condition—” She broke off, shocked by her boldness and the familiarity with which she spoke. As if she was invested in these men.

Was she? Xander, certainly, whether she was comfortable admitting it or not. James was nothing to her. A total stranger.

But something in the set of his shoulders put her at ease, and his eyes spoke to her. Xander cared for him; that was evident. His gaze devoured James, the crease between his brows speaking of James’s importance in his life.

“James, are you good enough to sit a horse and steady enough to shoot?”

He managed to gather his legs beneath him and let out a whoop. “Damn, you know it! I have my feeble moments, but what I need is a fight to put me to right. Falling Water, get my weapons, if you please. I have some men to disarm and supplies to stop from reaching their destination.”

Annabelle set her plate on the ground and stood abruptly, her fists knotted at her sides. The food she’d just wolfed down sat heavily in her stomach. Overhead, a group of big black birds wheeled on the light breeze, circling closer and closer to earth, probably following the sickening smell wafting from the cabin.

“Annabelle, you stay here. Bar yourself inside and don’t let anyone in, no matter what you hear.”

She gasped at Xander’s commands. Shook her head hard. “No.”

His dark brow lifted sternly, and she was suddenly reminded of how afraid she’d been of him...until he’d proved his touch could inspire ecstasy. She wadded the fabric of her dress in her hands and fought her rising need to scream.

Without tearing his gaze from her, Xander said, “There’s a ranch nearby. Do the SGR men intend to take it?”

“Yes,” James responded instantly. “They don’t know we’re coming to help.” A grin stretched across his rugged features, transforming him from sickly patient to handsome man. A bracket appeared around the corner of his mouth, and Annabelle became fixated on it for a long minute before she realized a deep dimple lived there too.

Xander paced in front of her, breaking her trance. She shook herself. What was she doing? The vixen who had urged Xander to make love to her had overthrown all her good sense, and now she was looking at other men too.

I need help.

Xander’s long legs flashed in front of her as he paced. Between his strides, she caught glimpses of James’s gaze on her. When Xander stopped moving, James gathered his feet beneath him and stood.

Annabelle surged forward to catch him if he were to faint again, but he braced his legs wide and grinned at his accomplishment.

“What are you two planning? You can’t storm into a fight when James is clearly ill.”

He waved a hand. “I’m a little weak but can still shoot straight and true,

Miss Annabelle. Now Falling Water, I need those weapons. Xander, we won't need Pete. I have the perfect place for us to set up on an outcropping within walking distance."

She clenched her fingers into tight fists and tipped her face up to the sky, praying for patience. This man couldn't walk ten paces without falling over, yet he believed a short jaunt to an outcropping to engage in a gun battle was feasible?

Falling Water disappeared into the cabin and returned with an armload of guns. James began strapping a leather holster around his hips and slid two six-shooters into the pouches. Then he slung a rifle over his shoulder and looked to Xander expectantly.

Falling Water passed Xander a small tube that appeared to be made of some kind of dried skin. The Indian nodded toward her. What was going on? They didn't expect her to carry bullets for them or something, did they?

A dark look shadowed Xander's features, but he nodded.

She could stand no more. She gripped his forearm. "You can't do this."

"Darlin', it's all right. You'll be safe here, and we'll make short work of it."

"Just what exactly do you plan to do?" Her voice raised a notch, and she battled the panic she felt. They couldn't leave her. What if Xander was injured? She'd only shot a gun a handful of times, but she could help.

He wrapped his big fingers around her upper arms and leaned over her. "We're going to stop the railroaders from taking that ranch's valuable property. By my guess, their tracks would go straight through the house. Is that right, James?" he asked without tearing his gaze from Annabelle.

Her gaze latched on to his hard lips, and a sliver of icy dread slipped into her belly. If he was killed, she'd be left alone out here in the middle of nowhere with an Indian and a man who would probably perish from his gunshot wound.

Tears sparked in her eyes.

"Hey, don't do that." Xander trailed his fingers over the crest of her cheek. The tenderness brought on her tears full force. Her nose stung, and she gave a great sniff, trying to hold back the wail that threatened to come.

Xander sank to the stump near the cook fire that she'd just vacated and gathered her onto his lap. She curled against him willingly, wrapping her arms tightly around his neck.

“I’m frightened!”

“I know, but there’s no need. You just sit tight here and let us do our work. There’s plenty of food. Fill your belly and rest.”

“What if something happens to you?” Once she’d voiced her worst fear, it seemed entirely possible that she’d never see this man again. He’d be dragged to the authorities and hanged as an outlaw. Or shot dead on sight.

Tears poured down her face, making her feel more pathetic. She honestly didn’t wish to see him hurt or killed, though he probably deserved it for his actions against her father’s business.

“Hate to break into your private talk, but we’ve gotta get moving.” James checked his gun for ammunition and glanced off into the distance.

Xander tipped her onto her feet, and she stood between both men, hemmed in by their big male bodies and feeling more despairing than she’d ever felt—even when he’d kidnapped her, she’d been angry. Now she felt as if the entire world had lost all meaning and sanity, and she floated aimlessly, drifting between the whims of men.

She spun away and stomped toward the cabin, uncaring that the small stones in the yard cut into her bare feet.

“Annabelle!” Xander’s voice carried to her, and she stopped walking but didn’t turn around.

Without responding, she went into the one-room structure and shut the door. She would have slammed it but was afraid the building would fall down around her ears.

“Don’t come out unless you hear me tell you to!”

The pungent smell struck her, and she glared up at the fuzzy bodies in the rafters. They were actually skins stretched across boards and left to dry. One dark brown fur drew her eyes, bringing to mind the muff she carried back in Boston to keep her hands warm. Suddenly she longed for her home. Whizzing across the countryside in the sleigh with her fingers toasty inside the muff and a thick, evergreen-colored blanket across her thighs. Coming in to drink chocolate and nibble on some lovely light cakes Letty had freshly baked.

The meal she’d eaten seemed to have vanished, leaving her hungry again. At the same time, a sickening feeling settled in the pit of her stomach. No matter how hungry she’d been, she couldn’t eat now, especially with that noxious smell in her nose.

Casting her gaze around the walls, she searched for a window. When she saw none, panic rose in her chest. She was locked in here with one way out. What if there was a fire? Or someone breached the single door? After all, it had happened before. This time she might not get a man like Xander.

“Oh, to hell with this.” The unfamiliar curse rolled off her tongue as if she’d said it a thousand times. She grabbed the door handle and whipped it open just in time to hear a series of shots ring out.

Her heart lodged in her throat, and she sputtered around it. Frantically, she looked around for a weapon—a club, knife, anything to protect herself on her way to the ridge where the men had gone.

Her gaze fastened on a pair of pistols in a holster hanging on a peg beside the door. She ripped them down. Bullets jingled in a small pouch attached to the belt, and her fingertips tingled with relief. At least she wouldn’t have to go searching for ammunition.

Swinging out the front door, she gulped the fresh air. Another shot echoed, and she followed the sound. Tromping westward, she blinked into the bright sun, trying to see the men. Some five hundred yards off on high ground, she caught the flash of sun on steel.

She walked away from the ridge, hoping to get a glimpse of what was going on below. She didn’t want to walk up on Xander, James, and Falling Water. Crouching down and gripping the gun belt, she inched forward. The ground sloped uphill, and she lay prone when she neared the edge.

Heart drumming in her ears, she peeked out over the valley.

Her breath caught. Below, a group of men stood in the tidy yard of the ranch, closing in around a knot of people. The breeze ruffled a woman’s skirts and her long hair, and she placed a protective hand on the head of a small child, hitching a baby higher on her shoulder.

A wellspring of worry bubbled up in Annabelle’s core. What was going to happen to these people—this family?

She threw her gaze around the clearing. Who was shooting? She didn’t think it was her men but those below in the ranch yard. The SGR men were firing shots at this family? Or had the ranch owner fought to protect his property?

A wagon filled with supplies stopped in the yard behind the other riders, and the driver jumped down with a shotgun.

No! she wanted to shriek. Shouts sounded, and the rancher lunged

forward. He struck the body of another man, and they tumbled into the dirt, rolling. The faint *thud* of fists carried to Annabelle on the breeze, but she ignored them and fixed her sights on the little family. The woman thrust the babe into the small child's arms and gave her a shove toward the house. The child took off like a shot, bolting as fast as her legs would carry her.

Annabelle's heart thumped as the wagon driver hefted his weapon and took aim.

"No, no, no." She couldn't sit by another minute. Why weren't her men taking charge?

She gathered up the gun belt and ran. Her muscles burned as she rocketed up the steep incline. Xander lay on his stomach with his legs cocked apart and his rifle braced on his fist. At the sound of her rustling skirts, James twisted around, a mighty grin breaking over his handsome features. Falling Water turned too and pierced her in his eagle's gaze.

Without sparing her a glance, Xander said in a weary voice, "Didn't I tell you to stay in the cabin, woman?"

She hurled herself between him and James and dug a pistol out of the holster, breathing hard. "What are you waiting for? They need help before someone loses his life!"

He pivoted his head slowly and glared at her. "You can't mean to save those SGR men?"

At that moment, a railroad man gripped the arm of the rancher's wife and threw her down. The rancher ran forward to protect his woman.

Fury exploded in Annabelle's chest. She shoved a bullet into the chamber, trained it on the yard, which wasn't far below from this angle, and pulled the trigger.

Her shot missed its mark and struck the ground feet from the man who had pushed the woman.

"Oh, now you've done it," James said wryly and squeezed off a shot. His mark was true.

The man dropped, and the rancher's wife clawed her way along the ground, trying to reach safety.

"Open fire, boys," Xander said. His mouth twisted into a smile.

"Don't hit the woman!" Annabelle shrieked as the guns went off around her, deafening her. She trained her gaze on the child, who'd narrowly

made it safely into the house, and the woman who had gotten to her feet and was trying to flee.

Xander's bullet hit the earth inches from one man, and he leaped, twisted around, and vaulted onto the back of his horse.

"You've got one on the run," James noted.

"One's not enough." Xander rose up on his elbows and fired several shots in rapid succession. Bullets pinged all around the railroad men, and dirt sprayed up in a thick cloud.

Annabelle sank her teeth into her lower lip, set down her weapon and twisted her hands into a knot as she looked on. A quiver began low in her core, and pretty soon, she was trembling all over. She'd never witnessed a gunfight before. In fact, the only shooting she'd seen had taken place on her father's country estate for sport. She couldn't tear her gaze away but counted her heartbeats, waiting for a man to fall down and cease to move.

One of the SGR men realized where the shots were coming from and opened fire on them.

Xander placed a big palm on her head and shoved her down even as James circled her waist with his arm and dragged her away from the edge. She struggled, wanting to see. Afraid that if she looked away, the rancher would fall—or his wife.

"Keep down, Miss Annabelle!" James reloaded.

Falling Water pumped several shots into the valley, and Xander cried out.

"What? What happened?" She dug her knees into the earth to wriggle back to the ledge.

Xander hitched his heavy thigh over hers and pinned her to the ground before she could see what was going on.

"Let me up!"

"Be still, woman. Do you want to get your head shot off?"

A shiver of fear rippled down her spine. She glanced from Xander's precious head to James's to Falling Water's. She didn't know the other two men well, but she didn't want to see them harmed. And James was already so weak...

She rested her face on her palms and fought her tears. For the hundredth time, she asked herself how she'd come to this place. Right now

she could be in the sitting room at her father's house, reading from various books of poetry.

But if she were back in Boston, she'd be under her father's thumb and not free to hurl herself in the dirt and shoot at the men he'd hired. Xander hadn't been exaggerating when he said the SGR was stealing from the people.

She tried again to steal a peek over the edge, but this time, James shoved her down. His warm palm on the crown of her head sent a shiver down her spine. At that minute, Xander's gaze met hers, and he flashed a grin.

"You didn't really know you were on our side, did you, darlin'?"

She shook her head, straining her hearing to catch the faint argument going on below. The creaking of wagon wheels sounded, alerting her to the fact that the driver must be pulling out of the yard.

Falling Water rolled onto his back and reached into a leather pouch at his waist for more ammunition. His quick, accurate movements drew her attention, and she realized if not for these men, she would have done more harm than good for the ranchers.

"They're moving off," James said quietly. She gave him a sharp look and saw his breathing was shallow once more.

"Are you in pain?" She reached for him, but he waved her off.

"Not any more than usual. A man can't stay in bed forever. But thank you, miss."

Xander crawled down the slope and gained his feet. "I'm going after them."

She gasped and rocketed off the ground. "No, you're not!"

He stopped and cocked a brow at her, a smile playing about his hard lips. "No?"

"That's right." She found herself caught up in the sensual allure of his gaze. The warm chocolate depths seemed to dance, and the golden specks twinkled with amusement.

"You started this particular war, Annabelle. Now I need to finish it."

A shudder racked her, and she folded her arms across her chest. "How?"

"I intend to get those supplies and the papers stating the SGR owns part

of that ranch. Now you stay here with James. Falling Water rides with me.”

The Sioux unraveled from the ground in one wiry length and loped down the hill toward the cabin.

Xander pressed his thumb beneath her chin to draw her gaze to his. “Stay here. If you disobey me this time, there will be hell to pay, Annabelle.”

She studied the harsh set of his jaw and knew he wasn’t bluffing. “All right. But be careful...”

His eyelids fluttered at her words, and a spear of shock tore through her. She’d spoken without thought, but what she’d said meant she was deeply embroiled in this relationship.

She wholeheartedly embraced it.

Stepping forward, she threw her arms around his neck, drawing him down until she could reach his mouth. “Be safe, Xander Hollis, and when you come back, we’ll talk about that marriage proposal.”

Behind her, James chuckled softly.

Xander shifted his weapons to one hand and lashed her to him with his free arm, staring down into her eyes until she grew dizzy from not breathing. When he brushed his lips over hers, it was like a whisper. A bubble of need began in her core, and she craved more.

“Is that so?” he growled.

In a flash, she imagined her life with this man. He wouldn’t care if she yanked up her skirts and ran across a field or went into the barn to brush her horse. And so far, Xander had let her speak her mind—even rail at him. Binding herself to him felt right on so many levels.

She closed her eyes as he nuzzled her throat. “Yes.”

“Better get a move on before the SGR’s are gone,” James said.

Xander raised his head and captured her lips, sweeping the walls of her mouth too briefly, then pulled away with a grin. Before she could respond, he’d released her and started off toward the cabin and his waiting horse.

Annabelle watched him go, letting the waves of heat curl and break inside her at the sight of his hard backside.

“I’m happy that Xander’s finally found a good woman.”

She spun at James’s words and sank to her knees beside the man, who was obviously struggling with pain. He gripped his side and rocked slightly. Sweat poured down his face and soaked the collar of his shirt.

“Ohh. Tell me what I can do for you.” Her heart wrenched to see his jovial features twisted in anguish.

“Just need...a rest. And maybe a drink.”

She glanced around and realized the men only had weapons on the outcropping. Not a canteen in sight. She started to get up to fetch one, but he snagged her back with a hand around her wrist. His grip was stronger than he looked, and she took heart from that. Perhaps he wasn't as bad off as she'd thought.

“Where do you think you're going? Xander just told you to stay put.”

“But you need—”

“Doesn't matter.” He shook his head and shifted into a lying position. She dropped to her knees again in a puddle of homespun cotton skirts and gathered his head onto her lap, stroking the slick hair off his face and using her sleeve to dry his skin.

He stared up at her with an expression of shock. “You don't know me, yet you're caring for me. Why?”

She opened her mouth to reply, but nothing came out. She didn't really know. The old Annabelle would have called for a Boston doctor, told the servant to mop his brow with cool water, and then quickly fled.

Because that's what was expected of you.

But that wasn't who she was. The layers of her personality went much deeper, and she loved this new side of herself—the side she'd always longed to unearth.

She found her voice. “You're Xander's friend, and he wouldn't want you to die.”

James's bright gaze drilled into her. “You think I'll die?”

She shook her head. “No.”

He caught her fingers. “You lying?”

Her gaze snapped to his and held. Her heart flipped over and sped out of control, thundering through her chest like a wild horse on the prairie. Because of Xander, she felt she knew this man better than she did. Locking gazes like this was too intimate, but how could she tear away when he looked at her so imploringly?

His fingers pressed hers, warm and dry but not overly hot. Relief washed through her at the knowledge he wasn't fevered but sweating from

the pain and exertion of having a gun battle with a hole in his side.

“I’m not lying,” she said in a strong voice. “Will you let me examine your wound?” She knew nothing of injuries or medical care. Surely the Sioux knew what he was doing with herbs and such. But Annabelle wanted to see for herself.

He gave a short nod. “All right, but you might swoon. Then Xander will get his dander up.”

She felt the corner of her mouth lift at the thought. “That’s true, but I don’t swoon, James.”

He pinched the fabric of his shirt and hitched it up. She followed the ridge of muscle at his hip upward to a thick bandage stained with rusty old blood.

“When was this last changed?” She touched the bandage lightly.

“Day or two ago.”

“I think it needs air,” she said decisively, shocking herself with her bold opinion. In the past, she’d never dare to speak out this way.

“I don’t know... Xander wouldn’t want you looking at another man.”

“This is different. I’m not accosting you—just taking care of your wound.” She started to loosen the knot holding the bandage in place.

He squeezed her fingers to stop her. “Truth is, Miss Annabelle, I don’t know if I can tolerate you removing the bandage.”

She stared into his bright eyes. “I’m doing it. And you’re going to talk to keep your mind off it.”

His grin twitched up crookedly. She picked at the knot. The scent of crushed herbs and an underlying tang of blood reached her, but she continued on, determined to see what was keeping James from healing properly.

If he can ever heal.

She halted the thought as soon as it flitted into her brain. She wasn’t going to entertain that idea. At all. If she had to watch Xander bury his best friend, she’d crack.

“Tell me why Xander’s horse is named Pete,” she said.

His grin broadened. “An interesting story. Have you met any of the Hollis family?”

“A few.” Her stomach clenched at the memory of Graham.

“Well, he has a cousin named Peter. A rough guy—will fight anyone.

He wanted to fight for this cause, but Xander refused to let him.”

She pulled one end of the knot free. “Why not?”

“Peter’s too young.”

“And you’re not? Or Xander?”

At this, he guffawed. “Darlin’, you’d better not let him hear you say that. We’re old enough to know what we’re doing. Do you?”

She abandoned the knot and stared at him for a long minute. The wind picked up on the ridge and blew her hair into her eyes. Was this a hypothetical question, or was he truly asking if she knew what she was doing? And about what? About her virtual agreement to marry Xander?

Turning her attention to the bandage again, she battled her emotions. “I think I do.”

He placed a warm hand on her forearm, and she met his gaze. “He’s a good man. The best. He’ll make you happy.”

“I hardly know anything about him.”

“Well, I can help there. I have more dirt on that man than on my boots. What do you want to know?”

A lump formed in her throat. She longed to ask about his past women—did he court anyone?

As she gently tugged the bandage on James’s side free, she squelched her thoughts. But it was too late. A jealous worm had wiggled into her mind.

Because you care for him.

James hissed when the cloth pulled away from his rib cage with a sucking sound.

“Sorry! Sorry, sorry, sorry.” She focused on the raw flesh on his side. She held her breath. Tears filled her eyes.

“That bad, huh?”

She gulped back the salt in her throat. “It’s not as bad as I thought, but I don’t like it.”

He chuckled. “Believe me, I’ve grown rather tired of it too. Can you do anything for me?”

She shot a look toward the cabin, wondering if Xander had ridden out and if she’d be able to get James safely down there to cleanse the wound.

He seemed to recognize her hesitation. “Don’t think he won’t follow through on his promise to punish you.”

“He hasn’t hurt me yet.” Really, he’d had plenty of opportunities to harm her but hadn’t. Other than frightening her by gagging her and tying her to a tree. And there had been that slap on the rump...

James released a rumble of laughter. “He’d never lay a hand on you. But you might not like his stubborn side.”

She prickled with irritation. She’d seen a hint of this and agreed she didn’t wish to see more.

“Getting the cold shoulder from Xander is no picnic, let me tell you.”

“Well, tell me something else, then.”

“Like what?”

“You did promise to tell me why his horse is named Pete.”

“So I did,” he said softly. “The pain must have gone to my head.”

She set the bandage aside and let the air get to the seeping wound on his side. It looked hot and aggravated. When they got back to the cabin, she was going to wash it out and let the air get to it, even if that meant James went shirtless.

A coil of heat settled low in her belly at the mental image of him without a shirt. It was impossible not to have glimpsed the golden ridges of his abdomen when she removed the bandage.

From where he lay with his head in her lap, he stared up at her. A furrow had appeared between his long eyebrows, and a crease of pain emphasized his mouth. She wished she could concoct a pain tonic for him. Back in Boston, he’d be given laudanum.

“As I said, Peter is a fighter. Sometimes it gets him in deep trouble. This particular time, he owed everything to a card sharp in a local saloon—guns, horse, even the shirt on his back. He sat there for hours, playing hand after hand in attempt to win back his possessions. Otherwise he’d have to walk home and face his brothers and cousins and tell them the truth.”

She placed her fingertips over the worry line on his brow and lightly massaged. His flesh was warm, and his face felt good beneath her hand. He let his eyes flutter shut and heaved a sigh of pleasure before continuing.

“Then Xander walks into the saloon, having been sent by his cousin to collect Peter. He spots him in the corner, offering up anything he could dream up in exchange for another round with the man he played against. But the player said no and got up from the table. He went outside, and the two

Hollises followed him. Just as the card sharp seated himself atop Peter's horse, Xander fired his gun between the horse's legs. The mare reared up and tossed off the rider. He hit the ground, and Xander quickly stripped him of Peter's possessions."

"But the man had won it fair and square. Peter shouldn't have been so foolish."

James opened his eyes and gave her a smile that tweaked her heartstrings. Tenderness rose up in her. "That's true, and Xander knew it. He took out a wad of cash and threw it at the card player, then sent him on his way."

"He didn't put up a fight?"

"No one would dare argue with Xander. Why do you think the railroad men stick up their hands and relinquish the supplies and documents?"

"One didn't." She gestured toward his side.

He chuckled. "True enough. But that man didn't meet Xander's full wrath until after he shot me."

Fear slid into place in her belly. "Did he kill him?"

"I'm not completely sure. I was unable to remember events after I was hit."

She peered at the hole in his side. Surely he'd move more easily if the blood caked on the wound was cleaned.

"What happened after Xander saved Peter?" she asked.

The sunlight glinted off the stiff hairs on James's jaw and set the golden streaks in his hair ablaze. "He dragged Peter home. His family was grateful, and Peter was too. He thought to get off the hook without any consequences, but Xander doesn't work that way."

A tight knot of wanting captured her out of the blue. Images of Xander hovering over her as they made love flashed through her mind. She tightened her hands into fists as the urge to feel the hard, warm planes of his chest sent her spinning out of control. The dips and swells of his muscles reminded her too much of Xander, but this man was beautiful in his own right. If James had a healthy glow on his now wan cheeks, Xander would be right about his looks. James was absolutely breathtaking, although Xander underestimated his own rugged good looks when he said he was left in the shade by James. Both men might have been Greek gods modeled from stone.

“What did he do?” She couldn’t keep the hoarseness out of her voice and hoped James didn’t notice.

“He demanded payment.”

She raised her brows.

“One horse,” he explained. “And he changed the mare’s name to Pete.”

A smile spread over her face. Tilting her head back, she let the sun warm her. The blissful heat reminded her of a long soak in a hot bath. She was sweaty and grungy and very much in need of a wash, but for now she’d enjoy what she had.

When she opened her eyes, she found James staring up at her. “You’re a beautiful woman, Miss Annabelle.”

A flush crawled over her throat and face. How was she meant to respond to such a statement? In her former life, men didn’t so boldly compliment a lady. And the bald desire on James’s face unnerved her.

She shifted, wishing she hadn’t drawn his head into her lap. Suddenly it felt too intimate. Was she really a wanton woman? First she’d allowed Xander to bed her, and now here she sat with another man’s head resting on her thighs and a flutter in her heart.

At that moment, the thunder of hooves put a halt to her musings. James struggled to sit up, rolling to the side and pushing off the palms of his hands rather than using his stomach muscles. She gripped his shoulders and helped him.

When she spotted Xander’s big form bobbing over the lip of the land, her stomach flipped with joy. Behind him rode Falling Water, his gun held high overhead in victory and a grin lighting his previously solemn features.

She ran a few steps toward Xander. He leaned over in the saddle and handed her a sheaf of papers.

“All for you, Annabelle. Do with them as you wish. Consider it a wedding gift.” He dismounted in one fluid motion.

Dumbstruck, she stared at the parchments. After reading a few words, she realized they all said the same thing—a certain amount of land belonged to the Southern Gorge Railroad, whether the landowner approved or not.

She cast a glance over her shoulder at James, then looked back at the man she was soon to make her husband. The breeze kicked up and blew her hair straight back from her face. The long tendrils danced, and her nipples

puckered. Without a corset to hide this, they were all too visible. Xander's gaze latched on to them, and power welled in her. Yes, this was right. She was going to embrace her new status and stomp Sweetheart Annie to oblivion.

“James, do you have a tinderbox?”

Xander tossed his head back and roared with laughter. James lurched to his feet and pulled a tinderbox from his pocket. She dropped the papers into a heap, and Falling Water came forward to stack them up better while James struck a spark.

Clutching her around the middle, Xander dragged her against him, bringing her spine against his hard front. His cock nestled against her buttocks, stirring.

He dipped his mouth to her ear. “You’ve made me a very happy man, Annabelle. I promise to be a good husband to you.”

She shivered, both at his words and the moist heat of his mouth against her ear. “When will we marry?”

He turned her into his arms. The length of him enticed her. Dark heat welled in her belly and went south. Her pussy contracted and released a flood of cream. “First, we get James out of here. We’ll head southwest toward my home. Along the way, there are several towns boasting a preacher.”

“What if James isn’t well enough to ride? I examined his wound...” Her worry sounded in her tone, and Xander looked at her hard. Without a word, he beckoned for Falling Water to come near.

“Help James get back to the cabin where Annabelle can give her opinion on his wound.” Over her shoulder, he spoke to James. “We can’t stay here long. They’ll come after us.”

“Ride now, Brother. Take her and go.”

“No.” He shook his head hard. “You’re like family to me, my man. And more.” His throat closed on his words. “We’re not leaving you.”

* * * *

Xander paced before the front door of the cabin, wild with the need to get on the trail. He and Falling Water had divested the SGR men of their documents and lit their wagonload of supplies on fire, leaving the men to ride off unharmed. But it was only a matter of time before a posse rode for them. And he didn’t want Annabelle anywhere near that.

His stomach clenched, and his balls drew up tight against his body at the thought of her in peril.

He sent a long look at the front door again, wondering what she'd found in regards to James's wound.

Falling Water approached on silent feet, his hands filled with supplies for Xander to take with them. He held out several skins of the rendered fat from animals. The pungent smell gave Xander's stomach the gripes, but he accepted it anyway.

"Your woman needs this. She is thin."

He gave a hard nod. In the few days they'd been riding, she'd lost weight. Her face was gaunt and her cheeks beginning to hollow. The fat would sustain her until they reached the Hollis ranch and his ma could round out Annabelle's curves with her home cooking.

But she wasn't going to like the fat. In fact, he expected her to protest very loudly.

He threw a glance at the door again. Should he check on her progress? He was asking a lot of her to care for James. A sliver of icy cold dread ran down his spine at the thought of the war he'd fought for so many years. Such heartbreak he'd seen in the war-ravaged states as he marched from one location to the next. He'd seen women caring for his friends, their faces shocked at first, but their features hardened over time as the atrocities no longer affected them.

He didn't want Annabelle to become that person. He liked her just the way she was—sassy and sweet rolled into one feminine package.

His cock stirred at the thought of bedding her. The minute she came out of the house, he was going to make off with her to a discreet place and take her. He had to have her—to connect, feel her clenching and releasing around him.

And pour his seed into her.

Besides, they wouldn't be alone for long. Soon James would be with them, with an eye on their every move. While Xander didn't give a damn if James felt uncomfortable while he stole away with his woman, Annabelle might.

Something stirred low in his belly at the thought of his friend. Where once there was only camaraderie, he noticed the strong set of James's jaw. Or the length of his thigh clamped around his horse. He couldn't pretend his

cock didn't dance with the thought of touching James as much as it did Annabelle.

Could he go forward with his plan to take action and reveal his desire for James with Annabelle bound to him?

With swift, jerky movements, Xander packed the supplies on the horses. His need was rising, along with something he hadn't felt in a long time—panic. He had too much to worry over. What if he couldn't get Annabelle home before they encountered a real battle? Today's shootout had been mild at best. It had been simple enough to run the men off the rancher's land and divest the SGR of valuable supplies and documents. When the rancher had spotted the fire, he'd come racing to the scene on horseback, heartily thanking Xander and Falling Water for their help in saving his land. Xander had burned to say it had all begun with Annabelle's shot.

But it was only a matter of time before bad luck caught up with them. He'd seen this phenomenon more than once in the war. They'd fight for days without a casualty and then suddenly lose half their men in one devastating battle. He couldn't risk Annabelle's life.

He planned to stick to the more desolate parts of the land in hopes of avoiding the bounty hunters. He even wanted to stay away from the SGR men at this point. His sole goal was to get her home and safely into the arms of his family.

Spinning at the sound of the door opening, he watched her back through the door, her hands filled with a basin. She walked ten paces across the dirt yard into the high weeds and tossed out the filthy water. Then she bent over, choking and gasping.

In a blink, he was on her, holding her around the middle and bundling her long hair off her face while she vomited. Her stomach muscles jumped beneath his forearm, and he cringed at the pain he'd caused her. For long minutes after she'd emptied her stomach, she heaved.

Her knees sagged, and he swung her up into his arms, cradling her gently as he crossed the yard again, far from the smell. He sank to the stump near the fire with her on his lap, careful not to jostle her. She hung limply in his arms, and his heart swelled with protectiveness.

He dug his handkerchief out of his pocket. It wasn't exactly clean, but there wasn't much other than dust on it. Using it to wipe the perspiration from her face, he scanned her features for more distress.

Her emerald gaze ticked up to his and held. “I’m sorry.”

A hum vibrated his chest. “Baby, don’t be sorry. For heaven’s sakes, we’re in your debt.”

“I—” She cut off, and a hot blush scorched her cheeks. A minute passed while she struggled with her words. “I’d tend to James all over again if necessary. You were right when you said he’s a special man. I’d hate to see anything happen to him.”

Xander grinned. “So he got to you too, huh? He has a way of doing that. When I first introduced him to my family, it took them about thirty seconds to fall over themselves to help him. Whether he was shirking his duties at home or trying to get out of a scrape, my family always stuck up for him.”

“I think he’ll be all right. I cleaned out his wound. It wasn’t exactly festering, but the herbs Falling Water packed in it were causing more irritation.”

Xander pressed his lips into a hard line. Deep down, he worried that he’d made the wrong decision in recruiting Falling Water to care for James. The man was trustworthy, but some of his ideas of medicine were far from those of white folks’.

Annabelle seemed to sense this. She trailed her fingers over his face. “You did well by him. He needed a doctor, but they’re scarce. And you couldn’t exactly take him into town to be treated.”

He stared into her eyes, suddenly lost in the depths. Her features were soft—her lips full and sensuous, her cheekbones high, the tip of her nose perfectly upturned and her eyes wide and heavily fringed with black lashes. The color was returning to her face.

“Annabelle, are you feeling better?”

“A little. I’d like a drink.”

He glanced around and spotted a small bucket with a bit of water sitting by the ash of the cook fire. Leaning over, he snagged the handle and dragged it near. He passed it into her hands, and she tentatively put the wooden rim to her lips, looking at him over the edge as she drank.

She drained it and then lowered the bucket. He took it from her and set it aside without removing his gaze from the moisture on her plump lips.

“Better now?”

“Yes.”

“Good, because I have to have you.” With that, he pressed a kiss to her throat. The first contact was pure lightning. She angled her head to accept him, and a groan formed in his chest. He settled her more solidly on his lap, tipped her over his arm, and devoured her skin the way he’d wanted to for hours.

Each stroke ignited the fires deep in his core, and his cock swelled against her tight little bottom. Memories of her sheath pulsating around him threatened to undo him, but he gritted his teeth against it and pulled her closer.

The silken texture of her flesh maddened him. Had there ever been a woman like her?

He slid his hands up her torso to capture her breasts. The weight of them in his palms sent him spiraling out of control, and he rocked his hips upward, nudging the thick head of his cock against the V of her thighs. She rocked back.

“Damn, baby, you’re so good.” He stood with her snug against his chest and sauntered across the yard to a patch of tall grass that would conceal them. The sweet-smelling grasses crushed beneath his boots and scented the air. She’d been several days without access to a bath, but she still smelled of flowers and growing things.

He laid her tenderly upon the ground and stretched out atop her. She circled her arms around his neck, her fingers twisting in the hair on his nape. She tugged lightly, urging him to kiss her.

He took immediate advantage. Slanting his mouth over hers, he located her hem and traced small circles up her outer thigh to her hip. She squirmed when he pressed the soft indentation above her hip bone and his mouth watered to taste that delectable spot.

Digging his thumb into it gently, he raised a gasp from her. He swallowed her sound and broke free of her mouth to kiss a path along her collarbone to the tips of her breasts. The peaks swelled beneath the cotton of her bodice. Through the fabric, he pulled on each with his lips, drawing them taut and then bathing each with the point of his tongue until the cloth grew wet. She wrapped her thighs around his hips and rhythmically rose and fell against him.

The moist heat ebbing from her pussy drove him mad. With a growl, he

threw up her skirts, fumbled with his pants, and unleashed his cock. In an instant, he was poised at the quick of her.

He gazed into her passion-glazed face and smiled. “I’ve gotta have you, darlin’.”

“Don’t leave me wanting,” she answered.

She threw her head back and hissed her pleasure as he joined them in one solid thrust. He buried his cock to the root. Cum oozed from the tip and soaked her walls, mingling with her cream.

She raked her fingers down his spine. Need roared in his veins, and he shoved it down for one heart-shattering second, wanting to feel her all around him. For a split second, he feared he’d gone about this all wrong. She should have a ring on her finger and a down mattress beneath her. She should know about his urges toward James.

“Please, Xander!”

He withdrew slowly, pulling out almost to the throbbing tip before driving deep once more. Sliding his hands beneath her ass, he drew her up to meet his thrusts. His balls clenched up tight against his body, and heat pulled low in his abs. When he came, it was going to be bigger than any yet. But he wanted to bring her there first.

Dragging his mouth from one breast to the other, he swirled his tongue through her dress until she writhed. He fumbled with the tiny pearl buttons at the top of the bodice, but they were beyond him. With a rumble, he reached into her top and drew her breast out into the open air. Before her nipple could pucker from the kiss of the breeze, he swallowed the nub on his tongue.

The feel of it hardening in his mouth thrilled him to the core. Since the moment he’d set eyes on these little pink jewels, he’d wanted to taste them, to pleasure her with his mouth.

She pressed on his shoulders. “Xander, what...? Someone might see.”

He continued his slow torment, determined to make her let go of her inhibitions. It suddenly was very important to push her, especially if he was going to mention his involvement with James.

As he glided his tongue in a circle around her nipple, she started to quiver. “Yesss,” she breathed against his ear. She tongued his ear and then swiped his lobe.

He forgot all his reason in a rush of feeling.

He sucked her nipple into his mouth, twirling his tongue around the ridged edge of her areola. His desire built as they moved against each other. His cock slid through her slippery folds until he knew he was about to explode.

He drew on her nipple and cupped her buttocks, jamming his shaft into her tight body. “I can’t hold off. Come with me, baby. Come on my cock.”

His words sent her flying over the edge. She tensed, her pussy gripping him tight. Ropes of hot cum spurted from him, bathing her walls, and he bit off a roar of pleasure. Jaw locked, he opened his eyes to watch her face as she splintered, even as he pumped his cock inside her.

The pleasure on her face stunned him with its beauty. She pinched her eyes shut, and her lips fell open with a harsh rasp. The pink interior of her mouth tormented him. He dipped his head and plunged his tongue into her mouth as he drove into her tight body.

She clung to him. And in that moment, he realized how completely she’d given herself to him.

Emotion welled in his chest as he kissed her. He’d known from the way she responded to his initial kisses in the hotel bathtub that she held more passion in her plump lower lip than most women did in their whole bodies. His determination to drive her to accept it had helped him succeed in the end.

She gave one last shudder as her orgasm washed away. He pressed soft kisses to her mouth and down to her throat.

“Xander, you make me feel so...”

He lifted his head and waited for her to continue. “Yes?” he prompted when he could take it no more.

“Out of control.”

He didn’t try to stop the smile from spreading across his face. “Darlin’, I’ve felt out of control since I marched on to war at the age of sixteen, and I’ve never looked back.”

“You like how it feels?”

After a moment, he nodded. “I guess I do. There’s excitement in not knowing what’s coming next.”

“But doesn’t it frighten you sometimes? I was so afraid when I shot over the ridge at those men—*my* men. Men my father hired to complete a job.”

He rolled off her and hitched her atop him, cupping her thigh and drawing it across his body. “That’s what makes you strong, Annabelle. You were afraid to take action, but that didn’t stop you from shooting.”

“I had to stop them!”

He caressed the depression of her lower back. “I feel the same way, Sweetheart Annie.”

She shook her head hard. “I don’t want to be called that anymore, Xander.”

He studied the set of her lips and the spark of anger in her eyes. “All right. But you need to tell me why.”

Agitation seemed to pulse through her body. He almost detected its hum in her muscles. “I hated that person. I never wanted to be Sweetheart Annie, but the title and actions were forced upon me.” Her voice rang clear with anger.

He traced a path up her spine and under the heavy waves of her chestnut hair, holding her nape. “You don’t need to be her. You already killed her off.”

She started. “Do you think so?”

“Would Sweetheart Annie disobey my order and crawl up that ridge with a gun and shoot at her father’s men?”

Immediately, she shook her head. “She wouldn’t be anywhere near this place but safely in a parlor somewhere.”

With Oliver Standish. He tried to shove the thought down before it floated into his consciousness, but it was impossible. He had a niggling feeling that the man would show his face in their lives. If he was engaged to this woman, he wasn’t about to let her go easily. Anyone with eyes and a man’s lusts would do anything in his power to secure her. Hell, Xander had.

“Would Sweetheart Annie give herself to me?”

Her lips formed a soft smile. “No.” He squeezed her to him. “I’ll give you the parlor, Annabelle, but I’ll never expect you to be someone you’re not.”

She lightly sank her teeth into the point of his chin. “That’s good, because I can’t go back now. You’re right—Sweetheart Annie is dead.”

“And now who are you?”

Her eyes glowed emerald, like the spring grasses on the Hollis Ranch.

“Yours,” she whispered.

With a groan, he flipped her over and positioned his hard cock at the juncture of her thighs once again. “That’s right, baby. And I dare any man on earth to try to take you.”

Chapter Five

James wouldn't stop staring at her. As Annabelle realized his gaze had speared her for the fifth time in as many minutes, heat climbed her face. What she didn't want to admit was that same inferno blazed in her core at his look—it was like he could touch her.

"How is your side faring after a day's ride, James?" She let her gaze slip away, afraid if she looked upon his rugged countenance, her expression might give her away.

"I'll survive."

Xander stood a few hundred yards off, scanning the countryside for riders. So far, they'd avoided all travelers. Relief had settled in her belly that they hadn't come across anymore SGR men. Eventually one would recognize her. While many of her father's workers had been hired here in the West, some he'd hand-selected. Like Oliver.

She swallowed hard at the thought of him. No longer did she entertain the ideas of being with him—she couldn't imagine herself with anyone but Xander. But Oliver would search for her. She was supposed to have met him yesterday.

And today, she would have been his wife.

Now she was no one's wife but Xander's lover and the obvious object of James's desire.

"I'm glad to hear it's not troubling you overly much, Mr. Merriman."

"You know you don't need to call me by that formal name." He picked apart a blade of grass.

The spicy scent reached her, and she drew a deep breath, gathering the scent into her lungs. Between the fug of the men and her own sweaty, sticky body, she'd welcome any fresh smell.

She ignored James's request not to call him by his formal name, because she needed the barrier. She'd been raised to keep her distance from men she wasn't attached to. Though she rejoiced that she now didn't have to follow the rules of her upbringing, she strongly felt this was the best course

with James.

Casting a glance around the place where they'd stopped to make camp, she wondered if there was a nearby stream. James had built a fire and Xander had rubbed down his horse and fed her a few dried apples. Falling Water had given him before setting the animal free to graze. Then Xander had gone off to search the area for any danger.

As she looked on, he strolled to the edge of the small knoll he'd chosen to conceal their fire from anyone traversing the prairie below. The fabric of his pants pulled tight across his big thigh muscles. A knot tightened in her belly as she remembered all too well the feel of those thighs crushing hers into the ground.

She shifted to ease the sudden throb between her thighs. Between riding and his thorough attentions, she was sore. A cool bath sounded blissful right now.

Lifting her head, she called out to Xander. "Is there water in which to wash?"

He turned slowly, his hat low over his eyes. She sucked in her breath sharply at the beauty of his profile—strong jaw, straight nose. Yes, she'd chosen correctly. Oliver Standish could never stir her this way. No one could.

No one?

From beneath her lashes, she peered at James. He lounged nearby, the tip of his rough boot inches from her bare foot. She drew her knees up, tucking her feet under her dress.

Xander started toward her, his shoulders relaxed and his slow strides indicating he'd spotted nothing out of the ordinary. "There is a stream down that way. If you'd like to wash, I'll take you."

Excitement fizzed in her chest. The thought of getting clean thrilled her. She jumped to her feet and skirted James to get to Xander.

Something warm brushed her ankle as she passed—James's fingertips.

She leaped a good six inches off the ground at his scorching touch. Why would he do that? How would he dare with Xander staring at them? The beauty of the landscape seemed to fade. The deep, smoky purple of the evening sky and the amber grasses transformed to a white haze in her confusion.

She threw a look over her shoulder at the man lounging on the ground. Their gazes locked. And in that instant, the beauty of the world was

magnified. Her senses were heightened. A warm sandy lock of hair streaked with blond from the blistering Texas sun tumbled into his glowing eye. She heard the rustle of his clothing in the faint breeze.

“I’ll take you to the stream, Annabelle.” Xander’s voice sounded a fraction of an inch from her ear, and she jerked again. His warm hands clamped on her upper arms, and he rubbed her flesh. “Jumpy, aren’t you, darlin’? Come on. Have a bath, and you’ll feel like a new woman.”

She tore her gaze from James and swung her head to look up at Xander. Her breath caught in her throat. His gaze drilled into her soul. Heat pooled inside her as she realized he wore only an expression of absorption on his face. No sign of jealousy or suspicion tainted his handsome features.

There’s nothing to be jealous of. James is casting a line into the pond, but I’m not biting.

Her body reacted to the man the same way it reacted to Xander though. And that thought scared the hell out of her.

Stepping into Xander’s embrace, she tried to forget the heated look James gave her or his caress on her ankle. Maybe he was just being overly friendly. She’d cared for him, and it was possible he felt a connection because of that.

But you’re also the only woman he’s seen in far too long.

Xander slid his arm around her waist, and she allowed him to lead her out of the camp, toward the source of water that would hopefully purify her thoughts as well as her body.

Away from James...and temptation.

* * * *

Xander’s cock stiffened at the first glimpse of Annabelle’s golden skin. The fading sun leeches every bit of the atmosphere from the land—until there was no sky or earth but only strong colors. The reddish brown hue of her long hair, the waves swinging forward to kiss the delicate pink of her cheek. The ruby tips of her breasts.

For several hours he’d found himself tormented by James’s presence too. Between them, Xander was practically in pain. He’d exchanged a couple dark looks with James that set his blood boiling, but he hadn’t had a moment to talk to him privately. He felt Annabelle should know about his desires first, since he’d already claimed her.

He stopped breathing as her gown puddled around her ankles. She stood before him in true glory—dips and curves. His gaze latched on to her hips.

His feet seemed to move forward of their own volition—as if he were a puppet on a string. In two steps, he was with her. The warmth of her body seeped through his clothes, and his erection raged, growing longer and harder until he thought it would burst the bounds of his flesh.

A soft smile spread over her full lips. “Aren’t you bathing too?”

He doffed his hat and rubbed a hand through his dusty, sweat-dried hair. Lord knew he needed it, but he couldn’t let down his guard while they were away from camp. He was certain there were no humans for miles, but this far from the safety of the fire, wild animals might take an interest in them.

In Annabelle. She’d make a tender morsel for a mountain lion.

He rested his palm on the grip of his pistol, mentally checking the chamber for the round he’d need to take down a big cat if one sprang out of the bushes at her.

“You go on and wash. I brought the sliver of soap I carry.”

She gasped. “Soap?” Lunging at him, she patted his pockets. He laughed and held open the pocket on the side of his leather vest. She slipped her warm little hand inside and removed the hard wad of soap made by his mother.

Bringing it to her nose, she inhaled the fragrance he’d thought long ago faded. “Lemon and sage.”

“Yes.” He smiled at the memory of home that suddenly rose up in his mind. It would do his heart good to get to the Hollis Ranch. How was his father faring without him to help with the herds? Were his brothers pulling their weight or simply gallivanting around the countryside?

They had to have been traveling into the nearest big town for seed when he saw them. On their ranch, they grew several winter crops such as cabbage, greens, and squash that were shared with his uncles’ families for personal consumption. In turn, his uncles raised pigs and produced goat milk products, but the Hollis family’s income came from beef cattle alone. Between the three big ranches, the Hollises were one of the most prosperous families in the region.

Certainly well fed.

But Annabelle wasn't. Xander sank his thumb into the depression above her hip bone and gazed into her eyes. "Get cleaned up. I'll guard you."

As she glanced around, a shiver of fear passed over her face. "Against what?"

He set his lips into a tight line and shook his head. "You're safe enough. But I refuse to be anything but careful with you," he said in a roundabout answer.

She continued to look at him with mistrust, but eventually the faint chuckle of the water over the rocks lured her into the depths of the stream. He fixed his gaze on her ripe buttocks disappearing into the waist-high water. His cock bounced against his buckskins, demanding exit.

A harsh rasp left her as the cool water permeated her pores. She gave a full-body shiver but continued on, dunking her head and threading her fingers through the tangled tresses until they flowed free down her back, wet and sleek.

She turned in profile, soaping her palms and scrubbing at her scalp.

"You're not going to have any hair left, the way you're attacking it."

"I can't help it. It feels so good to get the grime off. I've never been so dirty in my life." She gave a little laugh.

A trickle of warmth spread through him. "When I get you home, you'll have a hot bath every day if you wish."

"Really?" She paused, her hands still in her hair and her breasts thrust forward with her pose.

An ache settled in his balls. To keep from stomping into the water fully dressed, dragging her onto the bank and spearing her on his cock, he focused on the fact that she knew nothing of his life other than that he was an outlaw.

"The Hollis Ranch is prosperous. It lies in a fertile valley, and our crops are plentiful. We raise beef and horses."

She dropped her hands, her eyes gleaming in the dying light. "Horses?"

"That's right. The house is a long, sprawling beauty with a wide front porch to take your ease in the evenings and look out upon the glory of the land."

She stepped closer to where he sat on the bank. "You love it."

He nodded, a lump suddenly rising in his throat. "I do."

Returning to her bath, she caressed her limbs with the bit of soap.

“Who lives there?”

“My ma and pa and two brothers, Adam and Andrew. My cousins live on two neighboring ranches.”

She stiffened. “Including Graham?”

His jaw locked at the reminder of Graham’s stubborn advances on Annabelle. “Him too, yes. But he won’t trouble you, I promise. Graham is still trying to hunt down his old life after spending years at war.”

A rustle in the low brush along the right bank drew Xander’s attention, and he shifted into position, prepared to shoot anything that stepped out—animal or otherwise.

To distract Annabelle from his actions, he continued to talk in a low voice. “After the war, Graham didn’t come home for many years. Said he couldn’t face his family after the atrocities he’d committed. But hell, we all did. We had to in order to survive.”

From the corner of his eye, he watched her sink into the water and rinse her hair.

“When he finally came home, we welcomed him with open arms, but he’s felt out of place since.”

“You seem to have adapted,” she noted, squeezing the water from her hair.

“I’ve had my share of moments, but I’ve placed that part of my life firmly in my past.”

There was a long silence as he watched the movements in the brush slow. The rustle of the grasses indicated a small animal like a possum. If he could nail it, they’d have meat tonight, and he wouldn’t need to feed her the rendered fat.

“That’s your past, Xander, but what sort of future do you have as an outlaw?”

She’d finished bathing and sloshed slowly through the water toward the bank, shivering. He kicked himself for not having thought to bring the bedroll to dry her, but her question burrowed deep into his conscience.

Yes, what sort of future did he have? He had no chance of a normal family life while he was a wanted man. Trouble was how to clear his name now. He couldn’t exactly give up his endeavor to bring down the SGR. But now that he was all but married to the heiress of the Southern Gorge

Railroad, he had to find a way to make peace.

“I’ll take care of you no matter what.”

“I trust you, Xander. But the law knows your name, do they not? That means they could easily track you to your home.”

“True enough and they have. My family had no idea of my whereabouts and so didn’t need to lie for me. But once I get you home, that will all change. Then, when the law comes knocking, you’ll know where I am.”

She pulled her dress over her head. The fabric clung to her wet skin, and the droplets of water created sheer spots on the slope of her breast and her spine where her hair hung.

The weeds had stopped moving. No chance of finding that possum tonight. Or maybe... Xander squatted and peered closely at the dim ground. Was that a boot imprint he saw? About James’s size? Heat infused him.

“Come on, darlin’. You need a warm fire and food, then sleep. Let me worry about what’s to come.” While she bathed, he noticed how thin she’d grown on the trail. He’d have to feed her the fat tonight.

He led her through the dark to the camp. James lay in the same spot, his arms stacked beneath his head, looking at the new stars speckling the sky. Xander released Annabelle, and she crossed the camp slowly, skirting carefully around the fire, to take up a position opposite James with the leaping flames between them.

For a long minute, Xander watched them. The lines of each of their bodies spoke to him. He wanted to sink against James and feel his strong body. Hell, he wanted to see him with Annabelle. Lord, what a tangle.

Going to the supply bags, Xander located the meager supplies he’d taken away with Falling Water’s blessings—a packet of new hardtack and a tube of life-sustaining fat. Annabelle wasn’t really eating the hardtack and had refused the few wrinkled apples, so he’d fed them to Pete. Xander had no choice but to make her eat the fat.

With a sigh, he grabbed the bedroll and a canteen and started toward her. Each step closer, he felt his doom. She wasn’t going to be happy. In fact, he expected her to fight like a wildcat.

She eyed him warily. Obviously, his concern at her reaction was etched on his features. Quickly, he cleared his facial expression and sank to the ground beside her.

Hugging her knees, she stared at him unblinkingly. “What are you up to?”

Laughter resounded from James’s chest. Xander peered at him through the flames, hoping his look of warning did the trick.

Forcing nonchalance, he untied the string securing the bedroll and unfurled it on the earth. Here the sun had baked the grasses into dry spikes. Before starting the fire, James had used a small shovel he carried in his supplies to scrape away the dry turf so it didn’t catch fire. Now Xander wondered if the grass would act as a cushion or crackle with every movement. It certainly ruled out lovemaking—James would hear every shift even if Xander could keep Annabelle quiet.

Once the blanket was spread out, he urged her onto it. She tucked her bare feet up under her dress. “Are you cold, sweetheart?”

“A bit. The fire helps.”

“I’ve got something.” James awkwardly lurched to his feet and crossed the short distance between the fire and the place where his horse stood cropping grass. He had to hobble his horse, Switchback, because the gelding did just what his name suggested. If left to his own devices, he didn’t stay put but ran all over the land. He’d earned his name as a pony after James had sprinted over the countryside, following the trampled grasses, switchbacking across the prairies to find him.

Annabelle watched James’s activity. While she was distracted, Xander passed the skin tube that Falling Water had given him into her hands.

She let it fall to her skirt, which was stretched between her knees. “What is that?”

“Food. For you.”

“Food?” Her eyes lit with a hunger that made Xander’s heart ache. He had to get her real food soon. She’d devoured so much stew and bread at Falling Water’s camp that the Sioux had laughingly said he needed to hunt for a week to replenish his stores.

She plied the end of the pouch. When the smell hit her, she gasped. Clapping a hand over her nose and mouth, she narrowed her eyes at him over her fingers. “What’s that smell? It can’t be food!”

He nodded and stuck the end of the tube into his mouth, squeezing the end and drawing a bit of fat onto his tongue. He fought to keep from shuddering. He’d lived on fat before, but he disliked it greatly. Although

while fighting the Yanks, there had been times his belly was so hollow, he would have eaten a vat of the stuff if it had been at hand.

The greasy, pungent substance coated his tongue and threatened to make him gag. He swallowed hard and she watched his throat, as if expecting to see the sinister product burst from his flesh.

“It’s animal fat. Boiled down and cooled. It creates a type of paste. It will sustain you until we have real food.”

“I can eat hardtack. I like it.” She cast her gaze around the camp and let it settle on the saddlebags where the hardtack was kept.

He nodded. “You can have that too, but Annabelle, I want you to eat this. You’re growing too thin.”

Something shivered over her face—an unreadable emotion. Shock? Surprise? Fear?

“I want you to eat this.” He handed the skin back to her.

She opened her mouth but emitted no words at first. “Is this what Falling Water gave to you?”

“Yes. He realized you were growing too thin. Living off the land is hard. You’re burning a lot of energy riding, and we don’t have the proper food to balance that.”

She waved the tube beneath her nose. When she got a whiff of the noxious fat, she jerked her head to the side and pinched her eyes shut. “I can’t.” She shoved the tube at him.

“Sweetheart—”

“No, Xander. I don’t even know if I could kiss you after you ate it.”

“Oh, you’ll kiss me.”

“I hope you’ll wait until I’m asleep before you do that.” James appeared out of the darkness. Bundled in his arms was a woolen blanket. At the sight of his friend’s only source of warmth, Xander’s chest tightened. He wanted to advise him to keep it—that he was in no condition to shiver all night. But to do so would wound James’s pride, so Xander held his tongue.

A new admiration rose up in him for his friend’s thoughtfulness.

“Here you go.” Before she could accept the blanket from him, he stooped and draped it over her shoulders.

She snuggled into its depths and smiled at James. “Thank you.”

Xander tried again with the fat. “Annabelle, I’m asking you to eat this.

You don't need to eat the whole tube. Just a few swallows will help you."

"If I eat it, I'll be sick."

James sat down near them. "He's right, sweetheart."

Her shoulders twitched, and her gaze flew to James. An instant grin spread over Xander's face. Of course she was unaccustomed to males using such terms of endearment. It wasn't uncommon for the Hollis men to call their mothers, aunts, and anything without male parts honey, sugar, or darlin'. James had picked it up along the way. But could there be something more?

Did Xander want that? Sharing her was something he'd spent too much time considering. And she might be far from open to that suggestion even if he got past his possessive bent.

Annabelle didn't respond to him but glared at Xander. "Get the hardtack. I'll eat double."

"You'll break all your teeth eating that much," James mused.

"Come on. I'm trying to take care of you. That's my job now." Xander held the tube inches from her lips. Hell, he hated the idea of forcing the vile shit down her throat, but he couldn't have her collapsing from sheer exhaustion. And he wasn't about to take a skeleton home to his ma. She'd cuff him around the ears if she saw how thin Xander had allowed Annabelle to grow.

She pressed her lips into a tight seam. "I can't. Please don't make me."

"Don't force me to order you."

"You can't!"

"Can."

"You wouldn't!"

"Three swallows and I'll leave you alone."

"You'll never make me eat it again?"

He shook his head lightly. "At least not tonight."

She turned to James, trying to get him to side with her. "You wouldn't do this to your woman, would you?"

"If she was growing scrawny on the trail, then yes. If he doesn't make you, I will." The muscle in the crease of James's jaw fluttered as he ground his teeth. Since he was a kid, Xander had seen him do this. He even ground them at night sometimes. Lately, he'd wanted to plant his mouth over James's to make him stop.

Annabelle made a soft noise of dismay. She drew the blanket over her head and hid herself completely.

“I think we’ll have to hold her down, Hollis.”

“No!” She burst from the cover and glared at them each with teary eyes. “All right. I’ll do it. Three swallows.”

“That’s my girl,” Xander said soothingly.

“I’m not Pete!” She grabbed up the skin and stuck the end in her mouth, pinching a bit of the fat between her lips.

The expression on her face was priceless. If Xander didn’t care about her happiness so much, he’d be rolling on the ground laughing. James snorted and quickly pressed his fist to his mouth to control more noises.

She swallowed, eyes streaming. Then, with a gasp of air, she issued a scream into the sky. “Ughhhhh!”

“Two more, baby doll.”

“It’s hideous!”

“It’s not so bad,” James tried. When she doubled up her fist and threatened him with it, he gave in. “All right, it *is* that bad. But it’s necessary. Go on, darlin’.”

Without another word of protest, she gulped down two more mouthfuls. Then she cast the skin aside, far from Xander’s reach. “Water, please.”

Xander handed her the canteen, and she drained it.

“Heavens, I can’t get that taste out of my mouth.”

“Try this.” James leaned over and yanked a twist of grass out. “Chew it for a bit and see if it helps.”

“Now I really *am* Pete,” she said before shoving the wad between her teeth.

Xander finally released the laughter he’d been holding in. She was a bright sun in his dark world.

After a few minutes, she carefully removed the grass from her mouth and threw it into the fire, where it popped and sizzled. Her shoulders drooped, and her eyelids soon followed.

“Here, lie down.” Xander stretched his legs out and patted his thigh.

She curled up on one side with her head in his lap and James’s blanket tucked around her. Xander stroked the still-damp hair from her temple over and over again until he felt her muscles relax.

“She’s asleep.” James spoke quietly.

Xander stared at the shell of her ear and the curve of her throat, tenderness creeping through his chest and spreading warmth through his limbs. A darker heat sank low in his belly, tightening an invisible knot of wanting. He ached for her. Riding hours with her round little ass bumping his groin with every rise and fall of the horse threatened to steal his sanity.

“Talk to me, Hollis. Where did you really find her?”

Xander met James’s frank gaze. He knew Xander wasn’t exactly in a position to go courting, but should he tell his friend he’d stolen her out of a bathtub? His ma had always taught him to spill the beans, so he did.

Relating the story took some effort, because the more he talked, the more he realized that he sounded like a real criminal—making away with a naked woman. He lifted a tendril of her hair and rubbed it between his thumb and forefinger. The satiny texture stimulated his need, but he shoved it down.

You’re not waking her so you can throw her over your shoulder and have your way with her in the weeds. He couldn’t stop his gaze from kissing the strong planes of James’s body either. Damn, he was in trouble. How frankly could he speak to him? He wouldn’t mind trying to have his way with him, either.

When he finished the recounting of how he’d found her, he swallowed hard against his remorse. “I shouldn’t have done it, James.”

“Why do you say that? Look what you have here—something very precious.”

“I know, but I went about it all wrong. How the hell can she ever truly trust a man who would do that to her?”

“She already does. She ate the fat, didn’t she?”

“That’s true. But I wish I hadn’t acted so rashly. It was damn ungentlemanly of me to leap into that tub with her to save my hide.”

“But she responded to you. Am I right?”

“Yes.”

“And you both liked it.”

Xander stared at his friend hard. “If she’d been a dead fish, I would have jumped out the window without her, that’s true.”

“So the circumstances under which you met weren’t ideal, but it’s worked out in the end, Xander. Don’t be so tough on yourself. She doesn’t

appear to harbor ill feelings.”

“There’s a lot of trouble to be had between us, though. Being the daughter of Bedford Stephens, she can’t be happy that I’m trying to bring down the company.”

“She fought with us to protect that ranch.”

“She saw for herself what I’d been telling her for days—that people are being hurt. She reacted to that because she has a good heart, but she still has loyalty to the man who raised her.”

James tossed a few more sticks onto the fire, layering them to keep it burning longer. “I say you’re one lucky bastard, Hollis.”

“I am.” He smiled down at Annabelle’s sleeping form. She’d given so much of herself, and all he’d provided was discomfort and a shock of reality. He had to get her to the ranch with all haste. If for no other reason than to keep her from eating more of that damned fat.

He caught James’s faint sigh. Looking up, he found his friend’s gaze on him, steady and intense.

Chapter Six

Xander's long strides ate up the ground between him and Annabelle. She shrank against the horse's warm side. Thoughts of escape were bright in her mind—not because of the man but because of what he carried.

A shudder of disgust rocked her, and her stomach cramped at the sight of that skin in his hand. His face was grim, and there was no doubt in her mind that he intended to make her eat more of that foul substance.

His boots fell on the dry grass and dust swirled around his ankles. She shook her head and ducked around Pete's other side. Maybe if she ran...?

"You can't get away from me, baby. Remember?"

"I don't want what you have in your hand."

From her right, James guffawed. She cut her eyes at him, hoping he realized he wasn't helping her cause.

"Sweetheart, you know it's for your own good. I wouldn't ask if—"

"You weren't trying to torture me?"

A grin broke over his face, cutting a bracket around his mouth and drawing her attention to the dark hair already sprouting on his jaw. He'd bathed in the stream early this morning before she'd awakened, and had bladed the hair from his face. Damn, he was a beautiful man. He knocked the wind from her, and desire was a hot stone in her belly. It had been too long since she'd felt his searing kisses and hotter caresses. Was he refraining from touching her for James's sake?

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught James bearing down on her. Her muscles locked, and she twisted her fist in Pete's mane, prepared to swing into the saddle and try to spur the reluctant horse away from the camp.

"Grab her," Xander ordered.

James's wrapped his fingers around her elbow before she could react. His hard chest came up against hers, and she twisted away, fighting the feelings his nearness caused.

Bumping into Xander's solid form, she gasped. *Trapped*. Knowing what was coming, she clamped her lips shut.

“Now, Annabelle, don’t make us pin you down and force this into you. Three swallows before we get on the trail. After a long slog across the lip of this canyon, your stomach will be clawing to get at the fat.”

Behind her lips, she made a sound of protest. James pressed nearer, confining her between their big, overwhelmingly male bodies. Her nipples bunched up tight beneath the flimsy cotton of her dress. Tendrils of heat sank low into her pussy and ignited the knot of nerves she most wanted stroked.

She turned pleading eyes on James, believing her charms might work on him. His gaze rooted her to the ground, and she realized she couldn’t budge an inch even if they moved away. His sun-streaked hair fell into one eye—an eye clear of fever and pain today. He was moving easier too, which was a sure indication he felt improved.

“Why doesn’t James have to eat it? He’s weaker than I am.”

The man laughed, a full, rich sound that ruffled her hair.

Xander joined him, his low voice mingling with his friend’s to create a music that burrowed deep within her. The empty chasm she’d carried in her soul for years was suddenly filled, and she knew she belonged here. In the middle of nowhere with these rugged cowboys.

Outlaws.

She didn’t care. She only cared about curing the restlessness she suffered from.

Xander dipped his head and whispered into her ear. His hot breath raised the fine hair on her body. “The faster you eat it, the faster I can put you on my lap in the saddle.”

She gulped. The idea of his thick erection rubbing against her needy pussy all day drove her wild. Yesterday, the pressure had grown until she thought she’d explode, but she hadn’t gained release. Perhaps today he’d slip his hand beneath her skirt as they rode and touch her.

Unstitching the seam of her mouth, she parted her lips and allowed him to squeeze a bit of the rendered fat onto her tongue. Bile collected at the back of her throat, and she fought to keep from losing her dignity.

When the disgusting stuff had made its way down her throat and settled in a sick ball in her belly, she gulped copious amounts of water. Then, finally meeting Xander’s eyes, she said, “I’d do anything for another of your mother’s biscuits.”

James groaned and clutched his stomach. “You had to mention those

biscuits, didn't you?"

"Let's ride, and we'll reach them faster." Xander patted her on the bottom, his broad palm cupping her globe, his fingers prodding the crease beneath. White-hot need captured her pussy, and it released a trickle of cream.

James leaned in and drew a deep breath, his nose inches from her hair. She tensed in response, but her body throbbed. Her nipples tightened almost painfully. Xander gripped her waist and plucked her off her feet, settling her astride in the saddle. She tried not to wiggle to ease the ache between her thighs even as she avoided James's steady gaze.

"What is your mother like?" She hoped to distract him from her need, though the spark was quickly growing to an inferno.

"You're going to love everything about my ma," Xander said, vaulting up behind her. He tucked her tight against his chest with his familiar arm locked around her waist. James crossed to his horse and loosened the rope keeping it from running away.

"His mother's the best cook in the world."

"Better than yours, James."

"No lie." The man hitched his foot into the stirrup with the barest of wincing and seated himself atop Switchback.

Xander probed her ear with his tongue, and his cock jammed harder against her buttocks. "James's mother burns everything."

"I used to pretend to eat my meal and then ran like hell across the fields to get to the Hollis Ranch in time for supper." He set his heels into his horse, and they took off.

Xander didn't immediately follow but nuzzled her throat. "You're so goddamned alluring, Annabelle. I need you."

She twisted, threw her arms around his neck and drew him down for a kiss. The instant their lips brushed, a series of explosions detonated in her core. Her nerve endings pinged. Her breasts grew heavy with need. And her pussy pulsed, begging to be stroked. Stretched. Filled.

"Please, Xander. Touch me."

"Mmm." His chest rumbled against her side. Gliding a hand over her knee and up her inner thigh, he located the V of her legs. Through the fabric of her dress, he rubbed her heated folds.

Grasping her skirt, she hitched it up to expose her pussy to his fingers. She stole a glance at James's back. He was still riding, either giving them a moment of privacy or oblivious to the fact they weren't following.

Xander's hard lips commanded hers. At the first touch, she opened her mouth to him, and his tongue swept inside. He tasted the walls of her mouth, his tongue working deeper against hers. When he strummed the bundle of nerves between her thighs, she gasped.

Quivering with need, she writhed against him, seeking more of his maddening touch. The blaze of desire in her belly was uncontrollable. If she didn't get release soon, she'd go insane.

She'd tossed out her inhibitions and admitted that she craved his touch. When he stroked her, she lost all sense of time and place, which couldn't be a good thing. She was about to arrive at the Hollis family ranch, where people would surround them day and night. And James couldn't be far away, could he?

Xander tore his mouth away. "How long will it take, baby doll?" How many times do I have to do this"—he circled her clit once, twice—"to make you come on my fingers?"

"Oooh." Flashes of delight sparked behind her eyes, and her world narrowed to include only Xander's leather-and-musk scent and the pressure of his callused fingers against her sensitive tissues.

Even when the hoofbeats of James's horse sounded nearby, she couldn't open her eyes and make Xander stop. He parted her thighs with one hand, exposing her completely to the air and surely to James's gaze.

Xander's words drowned out all cares. "That's it, baby. Come for me. Feels good, doesn't it? Your pussy is so pretty, all tight and wet. Your clit so swollen. You want to come for me, don't you?"

In a blinding burst, she splintered. Wave after wave of blissful sensation washed over her. She clung to Xander, her gasps suddenly swallowed by his kiss. He ground her nubbin into her body, extending her release. Cream soaked his fingers.

James gave a soft moan.

And Annabelle's eyes shot open. The man was mounted not five feet from them, his horse dancing slightly. James's gaze was riveted between her thighs.

Xander lifted his head, looked right at James, and thrust his finger deep

into her body.

A haze of rapture settled over her as another orgasm broke over her. The waves pounded her, the pinnacle sharper and more fulfilling than the last. Sensation ripped through her, and she stopped breathing for a minute. When she cried out, James's gaze flashed to hers, caught and held. As her release pounded through her muscles, she couldn't look away if she wanted. She was trapped again—between Xander's adept fingers and James's stimulating stare.

Xander rumbled against her ear, stroking the knot of nerves deep inside until the final quiver racked her.

James licked his lips very slowly, and she zoomed in on the bead of moisture gleaming on his lower lip, wondering how he would taste. Needing to know. When he moaned softly, more juices squeezed from her.

All at once, she came back to herself. *What's wrong with me?*

Xander withdrew his fingers and brought them to his lips, lapping off the long digits. Still James looked on.

Over her head, she sensed their gazes locked. What did Xander think of his friend watching their intimate moment? If his steel-hard cock against her side was any indication, he liked it. He rocked against her, and she knotted her fingers to keep from gripping his shaft and giving him release too. But not with James looking on.

She clutched her hem and covered herself. She trembled both with worry and excitement. Was she becoming someone she didn't want to be? How could she stop it? It was too late—the genie had popped out of the bottle. Now James knew secrets about her, like the shape of her thighs and the tender lips between them. He knew how she looked when she broke apart.

Xander had shared her release with his best friend, openly fingering her to completion while the man looked on. And then he'd licked off his fingers as if tormenting him.

And Annabelle now knew the feeling of absolute freedom of having two men's attention riveted on her. Could she ever feel Xander's fingers on her without thinking of James's stimulating gaze? The mere thought sent her heart pounding out of control again.

* * * *

The low croak of peep frogs shattered the air, their chorus a sure sign it

was about to rain. Judging from the bruised-looking clouds scudding across the sky, they were in for a soaking. After riding half a day with Annabelle's luscious ass against his cock and the scent of her on his fingers, Xander needed the cool a good dousing would bring.

He brought his fingers to his nose and inhaled the sweet traces of her arousal. God, she'd been wild. After she realized James was watching, she'd been untamed. Did she even know how she'd bucked and pleaded with him to make her come again? He didn't think so. For a brief moment, she'd given all control to Xander, entrusted him to make her feel good even while his friend looked on.

Why *had* Xander allowed James to watch? Never before had they experimented with a woman in this way. As younger men, when one would get lucky, the other would often drown his loneliness in a glass of whiskey. Sometimes they'd find a solitary spot and wait for each other. Other times, they'd be close enough to listen.

Over the past hours of travel, Xander had examined his reasons for touching Annabelle in front of James. He still couldn't figure out why he'd done it, but he knew one thing—it had thrilled the living fuck out of him.

He searched for the pair now. James had taken her to the pond for a drink while Xander cared for the horses. A small group of trees would shelter them from the worst of the storm. After a bit of exploration, he'd also found a small cave cut into the rock where three people could comfortably bed down. By his guess, the rain was going to last several hours and through the night.

What are you thinking, man? You can't share her.

Was that what he was thinking?

An echo of thunder sounded across the land. The couple was making their way back from the pond. The top of Annabelle's head was visible to Xander as she moved closer to James. Too close.

Why didn't that bother Xander? When Graham had tried to move in on her, fury had ruled his mind. But James would never try to steal her.

Lightning zigzagged across the sky, and Xander broke into a run just as the sky let loose. Torrents of rain lashed his spine, and rivulets streamed off the brim of his hat. Annabelle was already soaked, her dress plastered to her like a second skin, her ripe little nipples beckoning for his kiss.

James spread his arm over her head in an effort to keep her dry, but it was too late.

“Let’s get her to the cave!” Xander called into the rising wind. He latched on to Annabelle’s drenched form and ran with her.

Ducking beneath the entrance of the cave, he turned back to make sure James was all right. In the past couple of days, his injury seemed to have improved greatly. Xander wondered if Falling Water’s herbs had actually hindered his friend from healing quickly. The Sioux had done his best for James, but it seemed pure water had helped more than weeks of convalescing with the Sioux.

Or maybe it was Annabelle. Xander knew he’d come back from the dead for Annabelle’s touch. Would James?

James launched himself into the cave as Xander set Annabelle on her feet. She was quaking violently, shivers rolling over her uncontrollably. Her teeth were locked against the chatters that threatened to overtake her.

“You’ve gotta get her clothes off,” James said.

Xander was already working the buttons of her bodice, peeling the fabric over her head and discarding it on the floor. Then he quickly ripped off his own drenched clothes. James followed suit, his cock dancing against the ridges of his stomach.

“X-Xander!” Another shudder speared her.

Without a word, Xander crushed her to him, and James moved in on her other side, sandwiching her between their bodies.

A tremor ripped through her, and she moaned. Gripping James’s shoulder, Xander watched his need cross his rugged features. His gaze connected with Xander’s and Xander’s cock lengthened until it was a hard sword of lust. He’d known only torment for days. It was time to take what he wanted. From both.

He claimed her mouth. Her sweet flavors burst on his tongue, driving up his desire another notch. He slanted his mouth and drank from her, aware that James was caressing her bare sides.

Their hands met, and Xander turned her into his friend’s arms. James growled his pleasure. In unspoken agreement, James kissed her.

Her knees weakened, and Xander caught her, lashing her back to his front, sealing them together with a thin layer of moisture from the rain. James fed her his tongue and swallowed hers while pumping up the growing need in Xander’s rod. Precum oozed from the swollen tip. He fisted it once, smacking the swollen head of his cock lightly over her bare ass.

He reached around her front and cupped her breast, pinching and rolling the hardened tip between his fingers until she thrashed about for more.

James released her mouth, gazing upon her face with an expression of complete fascination.

Xander swirled his fingertip over her other nipple until it strained. Then, cradling it gently, he guided it to James's mouth.

As her rosy bud disappeared onto his friend's tongue, Xander groaned. He bent his knees and nudged her slick folds with the head of his cock.

She clenched her fingers into the hair on James's nape and forced his head against her breast. Damn, Xander needed to sink into her hot pussy. If he didn't have her soon, he'd blow all over her ass.

He placed his mouth against her ear, sending his heated breath into it with his words. "Tell me how good he feels, Annabelle."

She issued a sharp rasp. "Sooo good."

"Suck on it, James. She needs more." Dark heat claimed Xander's control as he gave this order.

James met his stare over the span of her body. Xander's gaze locked on his friend's tongue stroking her hard nipple.

Reaching between her legs, Xander found the fire of her need. Juices flowed down her inner thighs and soaked her pussy. He couldn't bite back a moan, and it echoed off the walls of the cave.

"Fuck, she's so wet."

"Mmm. I need to feel." James lifted his head and dipped his fingers between her legs. He and Xander played against her, running their fingers down her slick seam to her opening and back up. And touching each other at last. The concept sent Xander's need higher and higher. Feeling the warm steel of James's muscles against his and breathing in his scent were everything he'd dreamed of and more.

Xander flashed a grin at him as they worked over her clit. Her legs went out from under her, and Xander lifted her against him, splaying her slightly for James's attentions.

She squirmed wildly in his hold as James painted her juices over her nubbin.

"Christ, she's slipperier than the road to heaven. And Lord help me, I'm about to sin." James dropped to his knees and buried his face between her

thighs.

She gasped at the first caress of his tongue. Xander's cock stiffened further at the sight of another man pleasuring her. Briefly, he wondered if this was the right path to share a woman with a man he'd been hungering for, but then she shuddered and issued a cry as she instantly came for James. The ecstasy lighting her features was beautiful to behold.

A pink flush climbed her bare flesh, and her small gasps quickened to soft mews, then cries of need. "Please. Yes! Oh, I'm there." Her last word turned into a lusty scream.

James thrust his tongue deep into her pussy, lapping up all the cream. When the last shiver ebbed away, he lifted his head. His eyes gleamed, and her juices clung to his lips and jaw.

"Fucking delicious."

"My turn. You hold her while I fuck her." Xander waited until James stretched out on the dry floor of the cave, and then passed her limp form into his arms. He positioned her atop him, holding her nude body around the waist.

Xander's heart swelled as he met Annabelle's passion-filled eyes. Her lips were parted in anticipation.

"I need you to fill me," she rasped.

"You've got me, love." He nudged her knees apart, and James held them lightly, his big fingers brown against her pale skin. Beneath her buttocks, James's balls peeked out. Suddenly, lust pounded through Xander's veins, hotter and heavier than ever before.

Poised at her pussy, he met her gaze. "Call my name as I slide in, darlin'."

With a solid thrust, he rooted himself balls-deep. Her silken walls hugged him tightly, still pulsating from her release.

"Xander!" She wrapped her legs around his hips as James splayed his fingers over her breasts. The ruby tips were perfectly fitted between his friend's middle and ring fingers. Xander locked his gaze on the erotic vision, biting back his roar of pleasure. Damn, she was hot. And tight. If he didn't move soon, he was going to blow inside her.

The head of his cock throbbed, demanding he thrust. Now.

Drawing out almost to the tip, he watched her expression shiver. James

burrowed his face in the crook of her neck and kissed her, mouth open and his tongue swirling over the elegant column of flesh. Her long waves caught on the hair sprouting on his jaw.

Xander slammed into her, rocking both her and James. Hell, who knew this would be so good? So hot?

“Rub her pearl while I drive into her,” he ordered James.

Without lifting his mouth from her throat, James slid his hand down the flat of her belly and cupped her mound. Xander thrust again, and James ran his finger around Xander’s cock as he did.

Fuck! “I don’t know how long I can hold back.”

James pulled back the hood concealing her core and thrummed it tenderly. She stiffened, her pussy contracting around Xander’s cock.

“I’m getting close. Oh, it’s soo good,” she cried softly.

James pinched her nipple with one hand while swirling his finger around and around her straining nubbin. White heat lashed Xander’s insides. Pressure built in his balls, a fullness that needed to be sated.

When he claimed her mouth, her flavors threatened to send him over the edge. Gritting his teeth, he held off his release, wanting to feel her shatter around him.

As Xander plunged against the bundle of nerves that would send her flying, he and James exchanged a grin.

Suddenly, Annabelle’s muscles clamped down on his shaft. She stopped breathing. He thrust one more time, gaining a fraction of an inch that stole his control. He came hard, spurting hot ropes of cum deep into her pussy. Madly, he raced on, driving faster and faster as she came apart in James’s arms.

Xander’s cock twitched repeatedly, and his back bowed under the sheer ecstasy of his release.

Without warning, James gripped his neck and drew him down, planting his lips directly over Xander’s. Shock tore through Xander. He inhaled sharply.

And caught the scent of Annabelle’s arousal on James.

She moaned, cupping both their jaws and holding them together. James exerted the slightest bit of pressure until Xander’s lips gave way, and their tongues met with passionate need.

Emotion Xander had never anticipated welled in his chest. James was an extension of him—it felt right to share Annabelle with him, and loving him had happened long ago.

It's time.

He slanted his mouth over James's again and again, drinking in his need. Between them, Annabelle quivered.

Tearing away from the kiss, he gazed into James's blurred eyes. "You haven't released."

"In months. Been too ill the past few weeks, and before that, we were far from women," he panted.

Annabelle made a quiet noise. Xander stamped her lips hard with his before gently easing from her body.

Without a word, she gained her knees and swallowed James's thick length. He bucked against her, his cock disappearing into her throat and the curls of his pubic hair brushing the bow of her lips.

Xander growled, his cock instantly aching again. He fisted it once. His eyes widened in surprise when James's fingers wrapped around his cock.

"Let me. I've always wanted to."

Xander edged closer, his emotions warring. His best friend, who he'd slept beside in the hay, gone to war with shoulder to shoulder, and fought the SGR with—wanted him? A shiver sliced through his body as the heat built once again. Fast. Too fast. In seconds he was on the verge of emptying his balls all over his friend's fist.

He stared at Annabelle's cheek bulging around James's mushroomed head. Xander held her hair off her cheek in order to get a better view. She flashed her eyes at him, then James, the flush on her cheeks deepening.

"Damn, baby, that feels... So. Damn. Good." James bit the words off, the muscles of his stomach tensing as she bathed his shaft with her tongue.

James squeezed the head of Xander's cock so perfectly. Why had they never played before? In the war, he'd seen many men couple physically, and it had ignited him to know what they were doing in the privacy of tents and the trees. Listening to them had gotten him through some lonely hours.

"Come in her mouth, James. Let her drink up your cum." Xander's gritty tone echoed quietly throughout the cave. Outside, the rain poured before the entrance, a screen of water.

“Come closer, Hollis.” James rolled onto his knees, then shifted over, drawing his cock almost completely from Annabelle’s mouth. He gave Xander a look that sent him over the edge. Annabelle moved until she was lying on one hip, leaning up to reach James’s cock. Xander gained wobbly legs and closed the gap between him and James. In one thrust, he drove his cock into his friend’s hot mouth.

James came apart. His hips bucked as he plunged his spurting cock into Annabelle’s mouth. She gulped quickly, her throat working to swallow every drop.

And Xander exploded. Rich cum shot the back of his lover’s throat. A shudder racked him. He’d never recovered so quickly after an orgasm. James’s advances had driven him mad with need.

As he emptied his seed into James’s mouth, Xander growled his pleasure. The strains of the past months of being on the run fled, leaving only the three of them in this warm, dry cave. The rain had lessened to a steady patter, enclosing them in a private cocoon. Xander wondered how long they could hole up here. They could use the rest. With the pond nearby, there was sure to be game enough to feed Annabelle.

They didn’t need more than each other to satiate their desires.

They tumbled into a tangled mass of limbs. Xander and James cradled Annabelle’s soft body between them, ensuring her flesh never touched the cooler rock floor of the cave. He closed his eyes and let his mind drift.

His thoughts sped ahead to the moment they reached the ranch, and beyond. After this encounter, could he tear Annabelle from the other man she’d so obviously wanted? Could he provide a home for the three of them? These were questions he couldn’t answer. As wanted men, he and James had more than enough trouble to handle on their own. Now with Annabelle to think about—and her attachment to both of them—they had to tread more carefully. The last thing he wanted to do was leave her alone before they’d truly had a chance to live.

Their encounter left him craving more. Judging by her wild response, she’d been as caught up in the moment as he and James. But after she had time to examine their unconventional link, would she back off?

Now that he’d tasted both, he didn’t want to give them up. Maybe once they finished this damn war, things would become easier.

How *were* they going to wriggle out from under the heavy thumb of the

law? Somehow, for her, they had to try.

Chapter Seven

Annabelle stole yet another peek at the men seated around the fire, ribbing each other like schoolboys. Her body still hummed from their thorough attentions.

Another ripple of shock tore through her. Had she really allowed two men to make love to her? She didn't know who she was anymore. Sweetheart Annie had thoroughly been murdered the instant she kissed James.

She couldn't bring herself to feel guilt for their encounter. She'd enjoyed every racing heartbeat. And the fact was—she'd do it again.

Judging by the searing looks Xander and James were giving her, that was going to happen, and soon.

The flames of the campfire the men had built at the entrance of the cave leaped. Sparks floated on the current of air, dazzling her eyes. A bright white imprint continued to float behind her closed lids. She stretched out her hands to absorb the warmth.

Her dress was nearly dry and clung only to the skin on her spine and under her arms. She was thankful the cloth was thin. If she'd been wearing one of her Boston silks, she'd be dripping for days.

Her old days in Boston seemed a lifetime ago. Yes, Sweetheart Annie was dead, replaced by a woman who shot at thieves and who bedded two men at once. Her pussy pulsed at the memory of Xander's shaft deep inside her while James flicked her clit. Then watching them kiss...

She shivered.

"Cold, darlin'?" Xander's low rumble infiltrated her thoughts. He scooted around the fire and drew her into his lap. She snuggled against his chest, wondering how James felt about this. While she cared for him and wanted him the same way she wanted Xander, she recognized that her feelings ran deeper for Xander.

Right now. You don't know how you'll feel after a few days.

It was true. Within hours of giving herself to Xander, she'd known her path. Wherever he was, she belonged. She stared at James's soft hair falling

into his eye and thought she could lose her heart to this man too.

Xander cradled her against his chest. Beneath her cheek, his heart throbbed, slowly and rhythmically. What did he feel for her? Possessiveness. Tenderness at times. But did he love her?

Suddenly, it mattered very much. She was going to marry this man, and while emotional attachment in a relationship had never seemed important before, now she needed it.

Her throat clogged, and she swallowed hard.

“You all right, Annabelle?” James’s quiet baritone sounded inches from her.

“Yes.”

“I set a few snares while you and Xander were down at the pond washing up. With any luck, you’ll have a rabbit for dinner.”

Her stomach cramped with hunger at the thought. Outside, a light rain continued to fall, but a few stars dappled the vast sky. Where were they?

“How far are we from the ranch?” she asked.

Xander raked his fingers through her hair, working out the knots with his gentle touch. “A couple days’ hard ride. With any luck, we’ll head out tomorrow. But there might be flooding, and if so, we’ll have to take the high ground. That means more danger because the bounty hunters might travel where we do.”

Annabelle shoved down the panic rising in her chest. What would happen to her if he and James were caught? If she wasn’t shot on sight for being with them, could she talk her way out of charges? Being the daughter of Bedford Stephens would surely hold some clout. But she didn’t know if she could free them—they’d committed so many crimes against the SGR.

She sat up straighter in his lap. “If we leave Texas...”

“Whoa, whoa, darlin’. We can’t leave. This is our land.”

“But eventually you’ll be caught here.”

Xander met James’s gaze. “That may be, but I’m not going to abandon those who need me.”

She wanted to scream, *I need you!* But didn’t. Swallowing the fear and hurt that threatened to choke her, she rested her face against Xander’s chest.

He stroked her spine, and she felt another hand in her hair. The pressure was different from Xander’s, and she realized James was touching her. She

didn't think she'd ever get enough of being drugged by their kisses.

Turning her mouth hungrily into Xander's, she smoothed her tongue over his lower lip, urging him to give her what she needed most.

A rumble in his chest revealed he was more than willing. She let her eyes slip shut and enjoyed the velvety flip of his tongue over hers. When a third tongue was added to the mix, she started. She yanked her men in close, drawing them tight against her.

If anyone tried to tear them from her, they'd find a very unhappy woman on their hands.

Xander applied pressure to her spine, bringing her flush against him. James broke away from the kiss and began to nibble her nape, holding her hair in a bundle. His kisses sent chills down her back and low into her belly. Since they'd made love to her earlier, the hungry ache between her thighs had been a constant companion.

She ran a hand down Xander's chest, low on his abs to his waistband. His cock nudged her fingers, and she moaned with pleasure.

"I want to taste it while James is inside me." Her brazen words stunned her. For the hundredth time since Xander had stolen her from her past life, she wondered who she'd become.

Waves of warmth spread through her belly and took up residence in her pussy. It throbbed once. Twice.

James scooped her into his arms and carried her to their makeshift bed before the fire.

Her pulse raced, and her breath came faster.

A heart-stopping smile spread across his face and crinkled his eyes at the corners. As if he understood her trepidations, he said, "Don't be afraid of me, honey. I'll never hurt you."

"I'm not afraid," she whispered, tilting her face up for his kiss.

He dropped his mouth inch by inch. When they were a fraction apart, he took a moment to gaze into her eyes. "Such beauty. What luck I've fallen into."

"Me too. Two handsome men to care for me."

Xander spoke from beside her. "This is how I want it to always be—the three of us. Isn't that right, James?"

He nodded, a grin splitting his face.

“James and I have felt this brewing for some time, but it doesn’t work without you.”

Again, James nodded.

Annabelle sucked in a sharp breath. The thought of being with them forever thrilled her, but what about the particulars? She opened her mouth to ask how they expected strangers and loved ones alike to treat them, or what happened when she was with child?

James silenced her with his kiss. His tongue swept the cavern of her mouth without permission, and she succumbed to him immediately. She lost herself in the motions of his tongue as Xander manipulated her body. He splayed her wide and pressed her knees upward to expose her wet pussy to his mouth.

At the first brush of his scalding lips, she gasped. James drove his tongue deeper into her mouth, swallowing her sounds as Xander plundered her other moist lips. The roughened hair on his jaw scraped her inner thighs deliciously. Cream oozed from her folds, and he dipped his tongue into her seam to gather it with a groan.

James tore his mouth away. “She’s like honey, isn’t she?”

“Mmm. I can taste your body on her mouth, James.”

Xander’s hot words sent her flying. She gripped his head and drew him down harder. He sucked her hidden pearl until she thought she’d lose consciousness. Her men worked so well together. How close were they exactly?

“Make her come. Get her wet enough to take my cock.” James stroked her nipples into hard buds while Xander sank his tongue repeatedly into her pussy.

The fire increased. Her world narrowed, leaving only the quiet rasp of James’s breath against her throat and Xander’s torturous kisses between her thighs.

In a blinding flash, she came. Lightning coursed through her veins. Each contraction rocketed her higher. The peak curled and broke. She cried out and suddenly found the overwhelming scent of James’s musk in her nose. She opened her eyes as he poised the velvety head of his cock at her lips.

With a mew, she swallowed his shaft. Swirling her tongue down the length, she swallowed the thin rope of cum that threaded from the tip. She applied pressure with her mouth as Xander slowed his kisses.

He lapped her bud gently, bringing her down expertly. But she was still needy. She needed to be stretched. Filled.

Xander's mouth disappeared at the same time James pulled free of her. With cocks in hand, the men switched positions. She rested back on her elbows, watching as her new lover slid between her thighs. She lifted her gaze to Xander.

"Let me taste you." She opened her mouth.

His eyes were dark with desire. A shadow fell across his face, drawing attention to the chiseled set of his jaw and his broad cheekbones. He took a moment to support her shoulders on a bundle of dry clothing. Resting back on the garments, she accepted his cock in her mouth.

A full-body shudder racked him. His thigh muscles stiffened against her cheek, and he prodded the corners of her lips with his rough thumbs. "Take it all, Annabelle. Take me."

She moaned around his thick shaft as he eased it firmly into her throat. She reveled in the feel of the swollen head against the roof of her mouth.

"That's it, baby. Damn, James, I don't know how long I can last. What are you waiting for?"

James raked his fingers lightly down her inner thighs, causing her to shiver with pleasure. The heat in her core grew to a throbbing she couldn't ignore. "Christ, she's soaking."

"Fuck her. Now." Xander's harsh command issued through clenched jaw.

James didn't hesitate. He drove his hands beneath her ass, lifting her to take his cock. In one solid thrust, he joined them. She cried out, instantly pulsating at his invasion, her senses still heightened from her recent release.

Xander moved his hips, dragging his cock along her tongue as James withdrew almost to the tip of his erection. She whimpered, needing to be filled.

"God, yes!" James plunged deep at the same time Xander did. She swallowed his big shaft, gripping her other lover with the muscles deep in her body. "She's tight. So damn tight."

She snaked her tongue around Xander's length. The bright flavor of his precum burst on her taste buds. If she never left this cave, it would be too soon. Spending her life here between the two men who could grant her these freedoms was her only dream.

They withdrew and then filled her again and again. The knot in her body pulled taut...

And she splintered.

James roared with delight. "She's coming... All. Over. My. Cock." Heated spurts of cum bathed her sex.

Xander tensed. With a scream that echoed off the walls, he came. Annabelle gulped his juices as fast as they flowed, riding the haze of her orgasm, stunned by the beauty of the men making love to her. Golden muscles rippled and hair dripped into blazing eyes. Safely guiding her through the twists and turns of the pleasures she barely understood.

Swallowing the last drop of cum, she stared up at Xander. Their gazes caught and held. Tender sparks shot from the depths of his eyes. He caressed her cheek, threading his fingers in the hair above her ear.

James continued to twitch inside her. Aftershocks pinged through her being, and she issued a long sigh of contentment.

Xander caught her against him. Being suspended between two powerful men was more than she could have ever asked for. The dream of settling down with one man had fled in the reality of this match.

James slumped forward, lashing his arms around her waist. Xander nudged his friend's head up and planted his mouth over his. Annabelle bucked one last time at the erotic sight.

"You're driving me wild," she whispered.

They fell apart, laughing softly.

"Maybe you're feeling left out," Xander said, pressing gentle kisses down her jaw to her lips.

She spent a long minute kissing him before James demanded his due. When she kissed him, she felt the weakest part of her heart give way.

Suddenly, he was inside. Locked within her heart forever. Just like Xander.

Relaxing in their hold, she drifted on a sea of ecstasy, dreaming of a quiet piece of land and a comfortable farmhouse where she could greet them at the door after a hard day's work.

Xander's chest rose and fell against her side. She dropped her head to James's shoulder. For long minutes, they remained in a wreath of complete happiness.

All of a sudden, a wild shriek rent the stillness outside.

Xander set her aside and jumped to his feet. In a flash, he had his pants and was shoving his feet into the buckskin. “That’s Pete.”

“What do you think it is?” James was on his feet too, naked but with gun in hand. He trained it at the entrance of the cave.

Annabelle hunched her shoulders around her nudity, too stunned to think.

Xander threw her dress at her. “Put that on. James, you stay with her while I check on Pete.”

With terror pounding in her chest, she watched him stomp across the cave with a rifle at the ready. All at once, the cloud of fear cleared, and she jumped to her feet. Throwing a wild look at James, she asked, “What could it be? James, you have to go after him. What if it’s a band of men looking for you? Or common robbers who happened by and saw our horses?”

He inched toward her but didn’t tear his gaze from the entrance. “The weather is too foul for it to be men, sweetheart. Just sit tight. Xander can handle himself.”

To keep from going out of her head with worry, she threw on her dress. Wringing her hands, she stared at the opening of the cave until her eyes blurred. The rain that had slacked off earlier now fell in a torrent. When had that happened? While they were lost in the throes of pleasure, obviously.

Pulse throbbing in her neck and eardrums, she waited. James stood stock-still as if carved from a beautiful piece of teakwood. His chiseled torso met his hard hips in a deep V of muscle. His biceps bulged, and cords stood out on his forearms, the gun a perfect extension of his outstretched hand.

“I’m scared.” Her whisper was almost undetectable. Still, she hadn’t meant to say that aloud.

James shifted to one hip, bringing his hard flesh in contact with hers. She relaxed slightly, eased by his nearness.

When another few minutes had passed, she could stand it no more. “James, please, go after him!”

“Listen.” He cocked his head to the side.

She threw out her hearing but could detect nothing over the sound of the rain. “Wh—”

He hushed her with the flick of his fingers. She strained to hear or see

or feel even a change in the air currents. Trembling, her muscles burned to take action, yet she was too afraid to budge from her spot. She curled her toes into the cool rock floor.

The scuff of a boot sounded, and Xander's hat brim appeared around the wall. She surged forward with a cry, uncaring that he was soaked to the skin and streaming water. She had to put her hands on him to ensure he was all right.

She drew up short.

He wasn't all right. Pain radiated from the set of his shoulders. Lifting his head, he met her gaze, and a spike of panic rooted her in place.

"What is it?" James's cool voice reached her.

"Big cat tracks."

"Did you see it?"

"No, but Pete did. It chased her, and she jumped into the ravine." A tremor ran through him.

Annabelle pressed her fingers to her mouth and tried to withhold her gasp of despair. His horse—companion, pet, friend. "Is she...?"

He shook his head, and droplets of water splattered her. She let the icy beads stream down her face and throat, not bothering to wipe them away. Xander was suffering. There was no time to consider her physical comforts.

"She's maimed. Twisted at the bottom. James, I couldn't—"

But James was already getting dressed. He thumped his foot into his boot and gave Annabelle a long look. Meaning oozed from it, but she couldn't discern what he wanted her to do. Comfort Xander? Big cats and stampeding steeds couldn't keep her from doing that.

She stepped forward until her bare toes met his hard, wet boots, and wrapped her arms around his waist.

His arm came around her, and he buried his face in her hair.

"I've got it, Brother." James squeezed his shoulder hard before vanishing into the night.

* * * *

When the shot rang out, Xander's bowels turned to water. He bit back the roar of grief that bubbled into his chest. Annabelle shook with a sob, turning his attention from his pain. He wrapped her tightly in his arms and ducked his face into her hair.

Drawing deep breaths of her scent fortified him against the torrent of tears that threatened.

You're not getting emotional over a horse. How many have you put down over the years? Growing up on a ranch, he'd had no delusions that his beloved mare had to be attended to in this fatal way. It was part of a cowboy's life. He'd seen animals caught in fences, attacked by coyotes...

He swallowed hard, and the lump of salt in his throat dissipated slightly. Annabelle clung to him, quivering as if it were freezing.

"I'm so sorry, Xander. I know how you must feel."

He kissed her hair and smoothed a hand down her spine. "It happens, darlin'."

"I know, and I'm still sorry."

James's footsteps sounded beneath the lash of the rain. True alarm was steadily rising in Xander. Now they were left with one horse and meager supplies. Sure, he had enough bullets to take down some game, if he could find any. With the rain, most animals were holed up in dry places. They were lucky no animals had sought shelter in this cave. Despite their fire, some brazen species might come closer.

If I get a chance at that cat, I'll roast its ass for dinner.

James appeared, his hair slicked to his head and rivulets sluicing off his form. He caught Xander's gaze, and a quiet moment passed between them. In that simple look, Xander read a million things—how their friendship was more solid than ever and was only enhanced by their new status as lovers, a silent agreement to do everything in their power to care for the woman they shared. And the realization that they were truly in trouble.

With one horse, they couldn't possibly all get out of here. After this heavy rain, they'd surely be trapped between flooded lowlands.

Somehow they had to get a horse. The best option was to come across an Indian and trade him for his mount. But judging from their distance to the nearest village, it was unlikely an Indian would be nearby. They were five miles from a makeshift railroad town, and the Sioux that Xander knew steered clear of the drunken debauchery of these places. The little towns served as hotbeds of sin for the railway workers passing through.

Because of the vices in these towns, a lot of fights broke out. And that meant a lot of men patrolled them.

They had some decisions to make, and soon. First, they had to find a

way around Annabelle.

He pulled away from their embrace to clasp James's hand. He stared into his friend's grief-stricken face. "Thank you."

James nodded hard. "I hated to do it."

"I know."

Silence descended, and James cut his gaze toward Annabelle. When Xander glanced down at her, he found her staring at them openly. Nothing had gotten past her keen eyes.

"Out with it," she said, planting a hand on the curve of her hip.

James shook his head. "Had to get a real astute lass, didn't you?"

"Well, I didn't exactly quiz her before I slung her over my shoulder and carried her out of the boarding house."

She balled up her fist and smacked Xander in the upper arm, her face mottling red. "Yes, I can see there's something up between you. James's eyebrows look like caterpillars about to climb off his face. And Xander, you're not exactly wearing a poker face either."

Xander strode to the entrance and looked out. The world felt a bit hollow without Pete in it. But right now, he had worse things to worry about.

He spun to find Annabelle in James's arms. And damn, seeing that did things to the pit of his stomach. Emotion welled in him. He had to get them out of here with all haste. While James was on the mend, he still wasn't 100 percent. And if they had to protect Annabelle...

"We need another horse," she said.

"Among other things."

"Such as?"

"Food."

Her eyes widened perceptibly. "Hardtack?"

"Our supplies are awfully low."

"I'll stop eating it. I'll live on the fat." She gulped and turned a bit green around the jawline.

That she'd give up the food she could stomach for the food she couldn't in order to keep him and James in hardtack longer made Xander's heart bloom with love for her.

Yes, dammit. Love.

"We can't wait for the stores to run out. I see the skies clearing to the

west. I think I can ride out to the next town and get some food and a horse.”

She straightened as if shot in the back. “You can’t just ride into a town and steal a horse.”

“Who said I’d steal it?” Xander countered.

“All right, then pay for it. Either way, you can’t. You’ll be at risk. What happens if you’re captured and James and I don’t know where you are or if you’re alive—” She broke off and smashed the back of her hand against her teeth, holding in the cries that would escape.

“Hey...” James reeled her into his embrace, and Xander enclosed both in the circle of his arms.

“We’ll be all right. All of us.”

“How? We need a horse and supplies, and neither of you are in condition to obtain them. You’re wanted. James is wanted, and he’s not able to ride fast and hard—”

“Like hell I can’t, lady. Want me to show you how hard I can ride?” He rocked his hips against hers, bringing his erection against her belly.

She cut him off. “I’m going.”

“Oh hell no,” Xander ground out.

She yanked free from both him and James and glared from beneath the tumble of hair hanging in her eye. “It makes sense.”

“What does? To send a woman out alone in unfamiliar territory into a town where anything might happen to her?” A tendril of fear wove down Xander’s spine. “Not happening.”

She grabbed up a discarded rifle and balanced it on her shoulder, pointing it toward the outside. “I can shoot. And ride.”

“You don’t know your way!”

“I can follow directions well enough. James here probably thinks I’m clever enough to do so.”

Xander groaned. “I think you’re the smartest woman I’ve ever met. That’s not the point.”

James folded his arms and watched the exchange with a half smile on his face. Xander burned to wipe it off with a swift punch to the teeth. Yep. That should cure him.

“You need protection.”

“Again, I can shoot and ride. I can outmaneuver anyone on Switchback.

He's fast."

Xander jammed his fingers through his hair. "I can't let you do it. Besides, there's another reason why you can't go."

She peered at him suspiciously. "Which is?"

"I don't exactly have money for a horse. Or anything to trade, for that matter."

"So you *were* going to steal it."

"Not just from anyone. From an SGR worker, if I saw the opportunity."

"That settles it." She lowered the gun and walked back to the pile of clothing and supplies strewn about the cave.

"No, it does not settle it, Annabelle. What could you possibly tell me that will convince me that I should send a woman into town after a horse and food?"

She scooped up a belt with dual holsters and strapped it around her narrow hips. Xander's irritation took a detour at the vision of that thick leather wrapped around her curves. He tore his gaze away, but his traitorous eyes returned in a flash.

A small smile graced her features as she realized he was ogling her.

He snapped back to the argument. "Well, what are your reasons?"

She shot them each a grin, eclipsing Xander's world. "Let's go over the things I *can* do. Ride, shoot, and follow directions."

He slashed the air with a hand. "Yeah?"

"And one very important thing I have that you don't..."

"Is?"

She stretched onto tiptoe and kissed his jaw. "I have freedom to go where I please. The law's not looking for me."

Chapter Eight

The cool breeze lifted the hair off Annabelle's neck, drying the perspiration on her nape. For the thirtieth time since setting off for town, she twisted around to look back toward the hidden cave.

Her stomach bottomed out as she realized she'd gone too far to see the men she loved standing at the entrance, watching her go. Tears prickled her eyes, and she blinked them away quickly, steeling her resolve.

You're the one who volunteered for this mission. Grow a spine and get on with it.

Facing forward once again, she transferred the reins to one hand and from under her skirt withdrew the thin strip of cotton Xander had removed from her hem. Before she left, she'd tied it around her upper thigh like a garter, much to her men's delight. Xander had whipped her skirt up before she could blink and entered her from behind while James went down on his knees before her to lick her pussy.

Heat rose in her at these memories. A dull shock wove through her simultaneously. How had she become so insatiable? Gaining freedom in this way had never crossed her mind. She'd only hoped to get out from beneath her father's strict rule and find herself.

But she wasn't about to complain. The sweet ache in her sex was too good.

While she was in town, she planned to take more control of her freedom. Buying a horse was only one of the errands on her list. She wasn't riding five miles into an unknown town barefoot without visiting a cobbler, if one were present.

She ticked off the items she needed at the general store. Food supplies were at the top of the list of necessities, but she also wanted her own canteen. Riding was hard work, and she hated taking a single drop of water that Xander and James might need. Besides those items, she'd like a bar of soap and some hairpins. If she was to meet Xander's family, she wasn't doing it grungy, barefoot, and with her hair trailing down her back. It was bad enough she was sunburned and thin.

A shudder ran down her spine at the thought of eating more of that fat. Of course Xander had her best interests at heart, but she'd do anything to keep from eating the foul stuff.

Her stomach rumbled, and she wondered if there might be a bakery in town where she could get a few biscuits.

Ahead, the telltale landmark loomed—a tree with a distinct pointed shape, standing all alone to the far left. She clucked softly to Switchback and guided him toward the tree. Xander's words were a hot litany in her mind. *Stop at the tree and head due east.*

Though she refused to relent to the overwhelming fear burning in the pit of her soul, she admitted to its presence. Upon setting off, she'd whispered to herself, "I'm scared."

She glanced over her shoulder one more time before she and the horse dropped into the valley. She must be a little over a mile away from Xander and James now. Four to go. She'd soon have food and the few bits that would make her life a little more comfortable.

And she'd be alone.

Time to employ her plan.

If the town was big enough to house the railroad workers, there had to be a post office to send a telegram to her father. She needed to let him know she was safe. And she wanted to urge him to stop what he was doing to the people in Texas. Surely the railroad didn't need to tear so much land from the owners. Or perhaps he could compensate them. She knew there wasn't much to be said in a telegram, but she hoped to get the gist of her message across.

Of course, she realized by sending the telegram from this town, she could be tracked this far, which meant Oliver might come after her. She'd have to deal with him eventually. She wasn't going into hiding forever, and it was only right that he'd learn she was never going to be his wife.

She shook herself a little. There was no time for speculating. She had to try to convince her father that he was wrong to demand the land from the residents. She hadn't shared this bit of information with Xander or James. If she had, they never would have let her come.

She turned her head from left to right, sweeping the landscape for dangers. A lone deer stood in the high grasses, its graceful neck arching to the ground to nibble the new shoots growing near the stream.

Annabelle breathed a sigh of relief. She had her bearings. The stream

fed into the pond where they'd all bathed. Xander had pointed to the thin, silvery band cutting across the land, saying if she followed it, she'd eventually end up in San Antonio.

The sky was clear, and the breeze continued to tease her hair into her eyes. Remembering the fabric in her hand, she gripped the horse with her knees and bundled the long mass off her neck, tying it securely with the cloth as she'd seen her maid do as a child.

A sigh of relief passed her lips as the cool air rushed over her hot neck. *Soon I'll be back with Xander and James, and we'll go on to the Hollis Ranch.*

She wanted to make a good impression on Xander's family. How would they react when Xander announced the three of them would be residing together? Would the Hollises think of her as loose?

Switchback angled his body into the rising wind, and Annabelle gave him his head. She patted the gelding's smooth chestnut hide, thinking of Pete.

We can't get to the ranch without a horse. First, she had to reach town.

The sun was rising high in the sky and beginning to scorch her. Her already burned cheeks and nose grew fiery hot. Perhaps the general store would boast a woman's hat among its wares as well.

She kicked the horse into a faster pace. The rolling action made her intimate parts sorer than they already were. Xander had suggested they refrain from loving her for a few days to let her recover, but her needs stomped a heel on that idea. Would she ever get enough of those two beautiful men?

For long minutes, she lost herself in the memories of their searing touches and enflaming kisses. And seeing them focus on each other really drove her wild. Would they make love while she was away?

Heat sank low in her belly at the lurid images flitting through her head.

A far-off sound of hooves beating the earth drew her attention. She scoured the countryside and spotted a cloud of dust following a small group of riders about half a mile off. She stared at them hard, her heart pounding out of her chest. Would they see her and turn around?

If so, she had weapons. Xander had directed her to shoot on sight if need be. Men bearing down on a rider swiftly meant harm, and she wasn't to allow them to get that close.

She fondled the grip of the six-shooter in her hip pocket. Before she'd

ridden off, James had insisted she take a few shots at a distant tree. When she'd hit it four times out of five, he'd given his approval with a long, tongue-swirling kiss.

Once more, she wondered how it had happened—how had she fallen for two men? Never in her life had she considered the possibility of such a situation. A bigger concept to wrap her head around was how Xander's possessive nature didn't extend to James. When it came to his best friend, he gave her to him willingly.

A tingle of heat captured her clit, and fresh moisture trickled from her folds. She clamped her thighs tighter around Switchback and urged him forward.

The band of riders ahead had fallen out of sight. She followed their tracks, knowing they were most likely heading to town.

By the time she spied the wooden buildings, the sun was scorching, her canteen was empty, and she had a cramp in the middle of her back. After riding distances cradled against Xander, she'd forgotten the toll riding solo took on her body.

The knot of fear in her belly tightened. What was her story? A lone woman riding into town would raise questions. She needed to let the people know she had men at the ready to protect her. She'd had no idea what she might face in town. After all, she'd never been on her own.

Even from this distance, she saw the streets were bustling. The discordant sounds of two pianos in two separate saloons warred on the breeze. Slowing her pace, she picked her way toward town.

She tried to fortify herself with thoughts of food, clean clothes, and supplies, but she trembled.

When she neared the edge of town, she used all her senses as Xander had told her to do. It was quite a bit smaller than Boston, but streets branched from the main one. Taking heart, she dismounted and walked Switchback into the stables.

A rough man wearing a leather shirt and the brand-new denims that she'd seen a lot of westerners wearing greeted her with a grin. His face crinkled into grimy wrinkles, making him appear less frightening.

“What can I do for you, ma'am?”

She passed him Switchback's reins. “My husband is detained elsewhere but would like this horse fed and cared for until our return.”

He nodded, swallowing her tale of her husband without a blink of suspicion. “Will do.” He named a price, and she asked if he’d accept payment after her visit to the bank.

“Indeed, ma’am.” He patted Switchback’s side and led the horse away.

Her knees knocked a little with relief. The ease with which she’d spoken her lie surely meant she could carry things off. Feeling brighter, she set off down the boardwalk, pausing to read the shingle of each establishment, memorizing the places where she needed to stop.

The tallest building on the block actually was painted a deep green. It had to be the bank. Quickening her pace, she strode toward it. All types of men made up this town, from the Chinese workers the railroad had hired to a couple of men in the most elegant clothes she’d seen since coming West.

She peered at their faces from beneath lowered lashes, heart racing out of control. If she met with Oliver here, she was doomed.

“Good day, madam,” one said, holding the door of the bank open for her.

She nodded, keeping her head down, and stepped into the cool interior of the bank. Taking a moment to let her eyes adjust to the dimmer lighting, she pivoted to look at her surroundings. A smooth stone counter stood at one end of the room, and tall windows graced the front. The floors were highly polished, and the vicious scents of the street fell away, leaving only the bright scent of tobacco and something minty.

“May I be of assistance?” a man behind the counter asked.

She approached him. “Yes, I’d like to withdraw from my funds in Boston.”

“Of course.” Dipping a quill in ink, he waited for her particulars. When she related the name on the account and gave a password only she and her father knew, the teller’s eyes widened, and he stumbled over himself to quickly reach the bank manager.

Leaning against the counter, she watched with growing amusement. Her father had set up an account in both their names for her to use along her journey. Had he ever considered she’d be dipping into it to supply the very outlaws who were trying to bring down his empire?

She tapped her forefinger on the stone counter. While she didn’t wish to see her father hurt, he certainly knew of emergencies happening here in the West. This was most certainly one.

Gazing out the window, she spotted the general store across the way. With cash in hand, she'd feel better about gathering supplies. And bargaining for a good horse meant she'd need even more cash.

The bank teller returned with a small envelope. He passed it to her with much reverence. Though she was glad of her situation, it irritated her that he tripped over himself to help her.

"Are you staying here in our wonderful town?" the banker asked.

"Um...no, I'm passing through and on toward the Hollis Ranch outside San Antonio," she said quickly, pleased she had a ready answer.

Thanking him, she signed the paperwork and swept out the door with as much dignity as a barefooted woman could possess. At least he hadn't questioned her identity further.

Speaking of her bare feet, crossing the main street was going to be a challenge. The boardwalk was filthy enough, but steaming piles of horse manure, mud, and the men's tobacco juice mired the dirt.

She lifted her head a notch and headed toward the store, dodging the filth as best she could. Tightly gripping the envelope of money, she moved to open the door, but a man suddenly opened it for her—one of the well-dressed ones. He seemed familiar.

Looking up into his face, she studied his features, trying to place him in a Boston parlor. Could he have drunk sherry with her father after a decadent meal prepared by the cook?

She quietly thanked him and passed inside, worry a tight ball in her stomach. She drifted around the goods, too aware of his gaze on her back. Did he recognize her? She thrashed herself for not paying better attention to the endless streams of men her daddy hired to work in this branch of his company.

The low shuffle of steps behind her made the hair on her neck prickle, but she refused to look around and show her fear.

Get your feet beneath you, Annabelle. Purchase the supplies and the horse, and leave town.

First she located a clothing section, and after outfitting herself with a simple cotton gown the color of drinking chocolate that wouldn't show as much dirt from the trail, she turned her attention to the men's shirts. Xander's was quite threadbare, and James's shirt had a hole in the side, torn by a bullet. But none of the shirts on display seemed big enough for them.

Mentally calculating the width of their chests in comparison, she heard a shifting footstep behind her.

“Please allow me to help with your purchase, ma’am.” The well-dressed man appeared at her elbow.

A shiver of unease threaded down her spine. The last thing she needed was trouble.

“Oh, my husband will be along shortly. He’s meeting me here, and then he can choose for himself. Thank you for your interest.” She turned, presenting him with her back in dismissal even as her throat closed off with terror.

For a long minute, she waited to hear his footsteps retreat, staring at the cloth of the shirts until her eyes blurred. So much for taking her time to find the items she wanted. Half turning, she sent a sidelong glance at the man’s back. Then she grabbed up the only pair of women’s boots on the shelf along with a hat, a lethal hatpin with a pearl, and a handful of hair pins from a jar.

She dumped all this along with the dress she’d chosen on the counter and asked after the food supplies she needed. Minutes later, the parcels were wrapped in brown paper and piled on the counter.

“Where would you like these delivered?”

Thinking for a minute on her options, she finally told him to take them to the stable, where her husband would pack them. The man gave her a strange look, then glanced at the latest newspaper resting on the countertop. Her heart leaped into her throat. *Please tell me my photograph isn’t in that publication.*

Glancing around, she saw several pairs of eyes on her. Damnation, how was she going to pull this off if people recognized her? They’d know she was bluffing about a husband and therefore become more of a target.

Leaving the store, she longed to put on the new boots. Though they weren’t the quality of her shoes abandoned in the hotel where Xander had found her, they would suffice. Out here on the prairie, she didn’t need finely tooled Moroccans.

On her way down the boardwalk, she caught a whiff of succulent meat cooking. Her stomach cramped, and she stopped for a moment, curling around the pain, mouth watering. The envelope of money seemed to throb in her hand, begging her to buy some food and devour it immediately.

As she reached for the door of the shop, a hand flashed in front of her,

blocking her way. She jerked her head up, and her gaze collided with that of the well-dressed man. A spike of fear pinned her to the boardwalk, rendering her speechless.

Twisting on her bare heel, she started off in the opposite direction. Heart drumming, her thoughts flew. How fast could she run? Why was this man forcing his presence on her?

Quickly, she strode across the street, ducking between horses and wagons to reach the other side. Then she launched herself down the boardwalk in the direction of the stable.

Throwing a careful look over her shoulder, she continued on, determined to shake the man. She dodged behind a big group of men outside the saloon. One caught her wrist and dragged her to a stop.

The stench of alcohol fumed from his mouth, and her nostrils pinched shut involuntarily to avoid the smell.

“What’s the rush? Stay and talk with us.”

“Let her go.” The voice sounded from behind. She knew without turning it was the man who followed her.

The drunkard gripping her wrist released her. He looked around, barely able to focus his eyes because of the amount of alcohol in his system. His words slurred together. “Yessir. Sorrysir. D’int mean nothin’.” Unable to talk and stand at the same time, he stumbled forward, directly in the path of the man following her.

She took off like a shot, flying down the crowded boardwalk toward the stable. Her breath rasped sharply in her lungs, a scream burning at the back of her throat. Hopefully, she could reach the stable without the man following her. If not, she prayed the stable master would protect her.

The aroma of hay and oats reached her, and she realized she was at the entrance of the stable. She ducked inside, blinking into the darkness. Streamers of light fell through the high, slatted windows. Dust motes danced in these, swirling in the air currents.

“Back already? Your packages were just delivered, ma’am.”

A rasp left her, and a wave of dizziness washed over her. Relief almost made her crumple. She just wanted to mount Switchback and leave with her purchases and the new horse.

“I wish to buy a horse. Quickly,” she said, tossing a glance over her shoulder.

“Yes’m. I have some good stock, if you’d care to look.”

“I don’t care to look. Give me the best, strongest, fastest steed you have. Saddle him and tie his lead to my horse. Please, sir, I’m in a hurry.”

Raucous laughter drifted from the nearby saloon, and she rubbed her arm where the drunk’s touch still chilled her. She feared her stalker even more. She had to get away from here with all haste. Besides, everyone seemed to be staring at her. She was almost certain they recognized her as Sweetheart Annie.

The stable master sprang into action when she waved a fan of bills in his face. He loped to a back stall and unhinged the gate. Leading a sixteen-hand steed out by a short rope, he tossed her a grin.

“Best we’ve ever had, ma’am. He’s a might headstrong, but if you have a firm hand, he’ll settle quick enough.”

Along the wall, she saw the items she’d purchased. With a cry, she tore open the parcel containing the boots. The stable master stopped what he was doing to watch her.

She waved a hand, shooing him on. “Hurry!”

Her fingers flew over the boot laces. When they were untied, she jammed her foot into one, then the other, bending at the waist to tie them. After days without footwear, the leather felt hard and foreign. At least her toes weren’t pinched, but when she walked, her heel slipped. If she had to hike any distance, she’d be one big blister, especially without stockings.

The stable master was just cinching the saddle around the steed’s girth. The horse shook its great black head and stretched its lips over its teeth.

Best they ever had? No, with no time to waste, I’ve likely become the proud owner of the most difficult horse the stable has ever seen.

Annabelle flew across the space to where Switchback was tethered. With a few quick movements, she untied James’s horse. The saddle rested on a hay bale outside the stall. She led the reluctant horse from the stall and started shoving the parcels into the saddlebag. Once she was done, the stable master quickly saddled the horse. He couldn’t move fast enough to suit her. In seconds the townspeople might bear down on her. Hell, Oliver might show up.

“Please hurry!” She stretched to reach the stirrup. She cursed her short stature and tried again.

“Here, ma’am. Please don’t strain yourself.” The stable master placed a

short three-legged stool by her feet.

She thanked him hurriedly, planted her foot in the stirrup, and hurled her leg over the animal. Before the man could see up her skirt, she tugged it down the best she could, but it was still bunched up. He had an ample view of her ankles and the lower parts of her calves, but there was no time for shyness now.

“I must be off. Tie the horses together so I can easily lead the new steed, please.” She glanced up at the entrance of the stable. The sun was brilliant, casting a glare. She saw an occasional body cross before the door but couldn’t make out anything but a shape.

Her heart picked up speed. Was the man wearing the suit and the derby lurking outside, waiting to trap her?

“I’ve got you all set—”

“Is there a back entrance?” she interrupted.

He shook his head as if unable to switch thought paths as quickly as she. “Back entrance?”

“Yes, for me to leave by. I have attracted an unwanted male interest, if you know what I mean. My husband will be very upset if this man tries to detain me.”

“Of course, ma’am. Let me grab your horse’s rope, and I’ll lead you out.”

She peeled off several bills—more than the horse, saddle, or his trouble were worth—and pressed them into his hand. His face crinkled with surprise.

“Thankee, ma’am. My wife will be happy for the extra padding.”

“Thank you for the service.”

Switchback faced into the open air. He caught a whiff of freedom and bobbed his head excitedly. Annabelle looked over her shoulder at the horse she’d purchased. In the daylight, it seemed bigger, blacker, and more foreboding than in the darkness of the stable. Now that she saw it, she wondered if even a wrangler like Xander could break it.

No time now. We’re off.

She set her heels into her horse’s sides and sent him surging forward. He hit a full gallop a few hundred yards outside of town, hooves thundering the dry prairie. Dust rose in a cloud behind. A bit of her fear fell away, and she was able to think more rationally.

It wasn't until she was well on her way that she realized she'd forgotten to pick up a bar of soap at the general store.

And that she'd inadvertently told the banker her destination.

* * * *

"Dammit, she should be back by now." Xander stomped to the opening of the cave and stared out at the gathering thunderclouds.

James paced near the back wall. "She's barely made it there, Hollis. Don't get upset."

He glared at his friend. "Easy for you to say."

As if he'd waved a red cloth before a bull, James instantly fired. "Easy how? Because you think I don't have anything invested in her?"

Xander's ire flowed away. He knew how the man felt from James's tender expression when he looked at Annabelle. Hell, any man who took a good look at her wanted to cradle her in his arms and protect her.

And that was what he was afraid of.

"What was I thinking to send her into town alone?" He rammed his fingers through his hair and yanked. "Dammit!"

"Calm down, Xander. She's all right."

"How do you know?"

"How do you *not* know? She's pretty level-headed and can adapt under duress, in case you haven't realized it before now. Both of us tried to tell you that before."

Xander glared at his friend. Mutual lover of the woman he planned to marry. "How did you learn so much about her so quickly?"

James grinned—the same easygoing, broad grin he'd worn at eight. "Easy. I watch her and listen to what she doesn't say."

This caught Xander off guard. "What are you talking about?"

"Anyone could see she was itching to be part of the West. When she rides, she closes her eyes and lets the breeze wash over her. Did you see the glint in her eyes when she aimed that pistol at that tree?" He pointed toward the distant tree.

Xander followed his finger. A hollow ache formed in his stomach. James was attentive in ways he wasn't. Did James deserve her more? For the first time, he truly looked at James as a threat to his relationship with

Annabelle.

He stared hard at his friend.

“Hey—what the hell are you thinking? You know she’s head over heels for you.” James moved in, each step careful and slow.

Xander was more attuned to this man than ever. For years, James had been an extension of himself. Wherever they went, they went together. Now he looked at him in a brand-new light.

His gaze was drawn to the leather gun belt slung low on his hips and was almost able to feel the flex of his muscles beneath his fingers as he sucked his cock. The long night of lovemaking should never have ended. They needed Annabelle.

His shaft nudged the cloth of his pants and oozed a drop of precum. He reached out and snaked a hand around James’s nape, bringing him near until their foreheads bumped.

“You know I love you, my man. You’re like family to me.”

“But you’d never share Annabelle with your brothers.”

“No.” His guttural reply echoed. “And I’d never do this to my brother.” He slanted his mouth over James’s. The hard meeting of his lips ignited the fires deep in Xander’s core.

James growled into his mouth and locked his arm around Xander’s back, yanking him in. Their hips collided with a ferocious bump, and Xander ground his straining erection against him.

For long minutes their tongues dueled. The pressure mounted in Xander’s groin as he rubbed his cock against the thick bulge in James’s pants.

James gripped his upper arms and slammed him against the rock wall. A grin spread over James’s face, and Xander sank his teeth into his lover’s lower lip.

“Damn you.” James bit him back.

The rough pleasure this man could give him fueled a darker need he’d never admitted to before. Where Annabelle was tenderness and passion, James was bald lust mingled with the deep camaraderie they’d always shared.

Cock throbbing, he shoved his hips against James, watching his eyes hood with pleasure.

“Fuck, yeah. Do you think she’ll mind if she walks in and finds my

cock buried in your mouth?” James asked.

“How about my cock buried in your ass?” A shudder of need broke over Xander at the thought of slipping into his hot body.

“How long do you think it will be before she can take us both? I’m dying to try it.”

Xander gripped the big muscles of James’s ass and hitched him against him. “She needs time. We’ll work up to it.”

“Shit, I’m gonna come just thinking of it.”

“Don’t waste it.” Xander reached into James’s pants and unleashed his cock. His thick shaft slithered onto his palm. He stared hungrily at the purple-headed steel length, wrapped his fingers around it, and pumped it once.

A dribble of cum wet his fingers. Xander released him and raised his fingers to his mouth, flicking his tongue over his digits, gathering the salty cream.

James moaned and closed his eyes, sagging slightly against Xander.

“She won’t mind,” Xander rumbled, capturing his mouth once more.

They sank to the floor, Xander’s back riding down the wall as James tore at the front of his pants. When he had Xander’s cock in hand, he tore his mouth away. His eyes glowed like two bright pools on a moonlit night.

“Suck it,” Xander commanded.

“Fuck, yes.” James yanked his pants down, and Xander kicked off his boots. He sucked in his breath at the cold touch of rock against his flesh, but when James covered his meaty head with his mouth, white heat lashed him.

He grasped his friend’s neck and forced him to take it deeper, watching the outline of his erection bulging his cheek. “Goddamn, that’s good. Deeper, James.”

His lover flashed his eyes at him and took him to the root. Xander squeezed his eyes shut as his head struck the back of James’s throat. He bucked, and James pinned him down with one hand on his lower abs.

James reared back. “She can’t take you that deep.”

“Only in her pussy. But I’m going to test the depths of your body next.”

Sucking his length into his throat once more, James angled his body so Xander could reach him. He gripped his hip and drew him closer, then rolled James’s shaft through his fist, smoothing the cum that oozed from the tip.

Blissful minutes passed as James tormented him with his hot mouth and

unforgiving pressure. Christ, he'd be lucky if he didn't blow in his mouth.

He stopped him. "Enough. I want to drill you."

James lapped the head of Xander's cock one more time before straightening. Xander pulled off James's boots and pants and abandoned them in a heap. James reached between his shoulder blades, pinched the cloth of his shirt, and drew it over his head, leaving him bare.

Xander's gaze traveled over his friend. He'd seen him bathe countless times in rivers and streams, but until a year ago, he'd never looked upon him in this way. Yet taking him seemed as natural as riding. Or loving Annabelle.

They exchanged a grin.

"Get on your knees," he ordered.

James leaned down and placed a kiss on the plump head of Xander's cock before obeying.

For a moment, Xander simply stared at the lines of his lover's body. Pale sunlight streamed through the entrance, beading on the ridges of James's flesh. His chiseled ass angled upward, ready for Xander to grip, part, and plunge between.

Xander's cock bobbed against his stomach. He caught it between his fingers and squeezed the head hard, biting back the urge to come. He smacked it against James's ass once, bouncing it on the seam.

He probed his thumb into his lover's seam and slid it downward until he reached his puckered nether hole. James moaned loudly. Spurred on, Xander ran his thumb around the ridges, learning each before applying pressure to the hole.

"We need lubrication." He cast a look around the cave at their meager supplies. What could they use to grease the path? He'd seen his fellow soldiers use everything from spit to cooking grease. Fleeting, he thought of Annabelle's juices. Of driving his cock into her body and making her come on him, then pulling out and plunging into James.

Inspiration seized him. Pumping his cock in one hand, he dipped his head and lapped at James's secret entrance. A full-body shudder gripped his lover, and he issued a groan of pleasure.

"Fuck, I can't take it."

Xander tasted him, sending his tongue into the opening deeper and deeper. Then he rocked back on his heels and licked his fingers. Placing one

at the pucker, he gently eased his finger inside.

Fire consumed him as James's hot body gripped his finger so perfectly tight. As tight as Annabelle's sheath.

He spent several minutes finger-fucking him, thrusting deeper with each pass until James arched and bucked against his hand. He sank his finger to the base, then withdrew it and added a second.

His lover went wild. His muscles twitched, and he twisted his head sharply to the side. "I've never felt anything like this, but I can't hold back. I'm going to blow."

"Not yet." Xander deliberately kept his voice hard, knowing if he didn't, his friend would give in to his release. But damn it, Xander expected to gain pleasure too.

He withdrew his fingers. James made a noise sounding like a plea. Xander smoothed a hand over his spine as he placed his moistened head at James's entrance. "Oh, you'll get what you want. And more." He bit his promise off between his teeth as he slid his head past the muscular barrier of James's body.

James released a hiss. When Xander slowed, James twisted around to shoot him a look of pure hunger. "For Christ's sake, man, now!"

Gripping the base of his cock, Xander eased in inch by exciting inch. The searing heat of James's body shrouded his erection and threaded through his groin. Pressure mounted. If he didn't move soon, it was going to be too late. But he didn't want to injure his lover either.

"Think of sinking into Annabelle while I do, joining in her tight little body. Because that's what I'm doing now," James said.

His hot words drove Xander over the edge. With a solid thrust, he sank balls-deep. He went absolutely still, fighting a losing battle with his control. "Fuck, I've gotta move."

Pulling out halfway, he eased his way into James's body again, mindless of anything but the sheer bliss pulsing in his veins. But he wanted it to be good for James too.

"Stroke yourself. Rub your cock." His gravelly tone gave away how close he was to coming. If only Annabelle were here to witness this act.

Soon.

James gave a long, low moan with each of Xander's thrusts. His

shoulder muscle flexed and released over and over as he fucked his fist. Exquisite heat whipped Xander's core.

"Come on, dammit. Spurt for me," he urged his lover. And then he was flying, pounding into his tight ass and roaring his ecstasy. James's body pulsed heavily around him, and the soft wet splats on the dirt indicated he'd gained release too.

They rocked together as the seconds ebbed by. Slowly, Xander returned to his senses. He ran a hand over James's ass and then pulled free of his body.

The scuffing noise of a shoe on rock raised the hair on the back of his neck. *Annabelle doesn't have shoes.*

Slowly, he turned. Immediately his gaze latched onto the beautiful woman framed in the entrance of the cave—their cave. He gained his feet, and James followed. Sweat slicked both their bodies, and they were panting for breath. Their cocks were still erect and glistened with moisture. If those things didn't tell her what they'd been up to, their nudity did.

In two steps, he hoisted Annabelle into his arms and turned with her into the depths of the space. He planted his mouth over her throat, feeling a complete rush at her return. Safe and wearing a new pair of women's boots.

"You started without me."

"We'll remedy that," he said, searching her eyes for signs of her displeasure. When he saw only a haze of passion, he ducked his head and claimed her mouth.

"My turn," James rumbled, looking half-asleep after all they'd done before. He grasped Annabelle's upper arms and turned her into his embrace.

She came to him eager and openmouthed, accepting his tongue, then Xander's as they methodically stripped her.

As Xander mapped the contours of her body with his rough fingers, she writhed for more. A new burst of heat claimed him, and he realized he'd never fully be fulfilled without two lovers. There were too many delicious opportunities and too few minutes to spend enjoying each other.

He anchored her spine against his body and nodded to James. "Go between her legs. Lick her until she comes."

She gasped. Xander used his foot to nudge her feet apart. James dipped his head to the V of her thighs. He inhaled deeply.

“Honey,” he murmured a split second before he stroked her moist folds with his tongue.

She bucked, and Xander dropped his mouth to the arch of her throat, kissing and nipping as their lover lapped her pussy. Her round little ass ground against Xander’s groin, igniting new fires. He nudged her ass with the head of his cock, thinking of what James had said about sharing her body. Fuck, he couldn’t wrap his mind around the idea. Being inside her at the same time, slipping against each other through the thin barrier, would likely claim his life. If he did recover, he’d want to do it again and again.

He flattened her breasts beneath his palms, lightly caressing the valley between. Her nipples bunched up as hard as jewels against his flesh. Without hesitation, he pinched them. Rolled them. Pulled them taut.

“I’m going to...” Her harsh rasp echoed in the cave and made the fine hair on his body stand up.

He growled against her ear. “That’s it, darlin’. Let go for James. Drench him with cum.”

“I need...” She arched against him.

“What do you need, baby? This?” He slid his fingers down the seam of her ass to her sweet channel.

“Yes! I need you to fill me.”

He thrust his fingers deep into her pussy and felt the point of James’s tongue flicker over his hand. Annabelle rocked wildly between them, pinioned on his fingers and James’s tongue. The strength went out of her quivering limbs, and Xander supported her completely.

He curled his fingers against the knot of nerves that would send her over the edge. “Fuck my fingers, Annabelle. Ride them until you come.” He applied pressure against the inner wall of her body and then released it. Juices soaked his hand. He caught her earlobe in his teeth and worried it insistently.

Feeling her stiffen, he knew she was close. God, would he ever get used to this bliss? Pleasuring a woman he could no longer live without? Making wild love to his best friend?

“Xander! I’m... James!” She shattered. Cream gushed over his fingers. He groaned at the scorching wetness, eager to sink his cock into her body. Soon. After he and James had bathed.

Her body rose and fell, contracting around Xander’s fingers. He pulsed them hard until she was too sensitive to go on. She hung limply in his hold,

her breasts resting on his forearm.

James worked over her slippery folds, gathering all her love juices. When he lifted his head, a fine string of cum connected her body to his lips. He gazed up at her and Xander with love.

All at once, Xander knew completeness unlike any before. This was his life now—loving two people when the thought of loving one had never entered his head. Now he couldn't survive without it.

I'll finish this war and then make a life with them. His silent vow bred images of a comfortable home and a little string of children, both his and James's, cared for by all.

He stared down at James's smiling face and hoped he could safely bring them through this ongoing battle with the railroad so they could fulfill Xander's new goal.

Chapter Nine

James drew Annabelle against his side as they stood on the low ground, watching Xander fight with the new horse. James's chuckle vibrated her side when Xander finally caught the short reins of the dancing steed. The horse tossed its head, trying to pull free. She should have secured two more horses, but there hadn't been time to think about it. Fear had constricted the blood flow to her brain.

Xander dug in his heels and was dragged across the turf a few feet as the horse backed up.

"He's a heller," James said. "What did the stable master call him?"

"He didn't offer a name," she said, feeling suddenly a little shy in James's arms.

Hearing the tone in her voice, he turned her to face him. His bright gaze searched hers. "What's going on in that pretty little head of yours, Annabelle?"

She let her gaze slide away, back to the man now struggling to get his foot into the stirrup.

"Maybe you should hold him while Xander mounts him," she suggested.

"Maybe. Or maybe you should tell me what I want to know." Using one big finger, he nudged her chin up to meet his gaze.

"I don't know, James..."

"You do. You're worried, aren't you? I can tell by this line right here." He brushed his thumb over the space between her brows.

At his tone of understanding, tears sparked in her eyes. She lowered her lashes to keep him from seeing, but it was too late.

"Hey, darlin', nothing can be that bad. I mean, we're out here, free, and we have each other."

"But for how long?" Her fear, once voiced, doubled in strength. Suddenly the pressure bore down on her, hammered her into the earth. What happened when they reached the ranch? Xander and James went off to finish

their war, leaving her among strangers to wait for word that they'd been killed or captured?

James swept her against him. She pressed her face to his hard shoulder, breathing in the musk and leather smells she associated with both her men.

Her men. If they were lost to her, she'd splinter.

"You leave the worrying to me and Xander. The Hollis men are pretty damn good at taking care of business."

"You're not a Hollis." Her words were muffled against his chest.

"Technically, no. But I've been part of that family for nearly my whole life. I have just as much Hollis in me as they do, even if I don't carry the blood." He drew back to stare into her eyes. "Trust us."

She started to nod, but a grunt drew her attention to Xander. She and James looked up to see Xander sprawled on his back and the new horse ten feet away.

She plastered a hand to her mouth to stifle the giggles, but James issued a roar of delight.

"Show him who's boss, Hollis!"

Xander jumped to his feet, tunneled his fingers through his hair, and glared at the horse. "Damned if I won't!"

"Maybe his name should be Hellfire."

"Shut up, James." He softened his scowl to a smirk and let off with purpose toward the horse.

It backed up again. Before the steed could inch far enough away, Xander lunged and came up gripping the reins. In one smooth movement, he swung himself into the saddle.

Annabelle's heart thumped. Seeing him seated on the impressive horse did things to her insides. His strong thighs gripped it hard, and the horse fell still. Gently, Xander ran his fingers through its mane. He leaned in and spoke quietly to it, but she caught snippets on the breeze.

"...winner...kick your ass...keep her safe..."

She straightened. James reeled her closer with an arm around her waist.

Xander called out. "I'm going to take him for a gallop. Stay close to the cave."

James nodded.

Xander wheeled around and shot off across the countryside, the horse's

long strides eating up the prairie as he carried her love away from her.

She shivered.

James chafed a hand over her arm. "Come inside. The fire's still lit."

She allowed him to lead her back to the mouth of the cave. She eased a bit once inside, stunned that in a short amount of time, this cave had become home. She looked around at the dim interior, knowing in a few short hours they'd set out for the Hollis Ranch. Afraid of doing just that.

James encircled her in his embrace. "Now what's worrying my sweet woman?"

"Am I your woman?" She met his gaze, and a knot of heat grew in her core.

"Damn straight. Do you doubt it?"

"A little." She dropped her gaze. "Will it really work once we get to the ranch? Out here, no one censors our actions."

A smile cut into James's hard features, tilting up the corners of his full lips. "You don't know the Hollis family. They'll accept it."

"And the townspeople?"

He held her at arm's length and sagged at the knees to peer into her face. "You care what others think?"

"I—I'm not sure. I do have family."

His face fell, and she realized it sounded as if she was turning him away. She bracketed his face in her palms.

"I don't mean it that way. Please, James, don't be hurt. No, I don't really care what others think. It's just an unusual situation, and I'm not married. I'm a little worried."

He nodded. "Xander will take care of that soon."

She studied his open face. Was he hiding his true feelings? "You don't mind that Xander will be the one to marry me?"

At once, he shook his head. "He claimed you first."

"And you?"

His eyes narrowed with resolve. "I claim you both."

With that, he kissed her. He ran his tongue along the seam of her lips until she opened to him. Then he plundered her, tasting and exploring her mouth until she trembled for more. For his touch.

Would Xander be upset by their personal interlude? She didn't think so.

After all, the men had taken advantage of her absence.

James was already reaching under her skirts. He moaned when his fingers located her hardened pearl. “Damn, so ripe and ready for me. Like a peach.”

She tilted her hips to give him better access to her throbbing pussy. She’d never get enough of his touch or Xander’s.

When he eased a finger into her sheath, she pinched her eyes shut. “Come inside me, James. I need you.”

He fell still, but his muscles strained under her hands, belying his calm exterior. “You want me like you want Xander? As if you were alone?”

She stole a look at him. “Why are you asking?” Would he tell her it was wrong? That her decisions weren’t right for her, Xander, or him? What would she do if he did?

A soft breath of a sigh left James. Pain crossed his face, and he buried his face against her hair. She felt his lips moving over her tangled locks. “Baby, I wanted it to be this way. For you to love me as I love you.”

Shock ripped through her. How had it happened in such a short time? She’d fallen for him quickly, but the idea that two amazing men would love her was hard to believe.

Before she could speak, he planted his mouth over hers, sealing off her words and stealing all rational thought. She lost herself in the swirl of her senses, feeling, tasting, smelling only this man.

He overpowered her as Xander had done from the first. For long minutes, she feasted on his mouth, chasing his tongue in bold torment. When he lifted her and turned for the garments and blankets spread on the floor, she knew this was right.

Tenderly, he laid her down and stretched atop her. He pressed his forehead to hers and stared into her eyes. At this close range, she noted the dark flecks around the outer edges of his eyes and the thick fringe of his lashes.

“I’m going to take you, Annabelle, and make you mine. Just as you’re Xander’s.”

“Yes,” she whispered, her heart drumming a staccato against her chest wall. She reached for his shirt hem, aware of his warm flesh beneath her fingertips. Her nipples bunched at the thought of being pressed to his chest, rubbing the sparse hair there.

He grinned when she removed his shirt. He drew her dress off smoothly, like he'd practiced this waltz countless times. In the recesses of her mind, she almost heard the lilt of a waltz, though music like that didn't play in a Boston parlor. This was the song of pure, unadulterated passion. And love.

Her skin met his, and she gasped with pleasure. He trailed a path over her sides and down to cup her buttocks. She quickly divested him of his pants, glad he'd left off his boots when they'd originally gone outside to watch Xander work with the horse.

James's warm gaze probed the depths of hers. She marveled at the pale light gleaming on each individual hair on his jaw. "This is our marriage ceremony, baby. For better or worse."

With a grunt, he sank into her pussy. She cried out, arching her neck at the ecstasy of his invasion. Her heartstrings tugged harder and snapped.

He began to move, withdrawing slowly as his tongue worked hers. The movement of his tongue drove her need up another notch. She angled her body upward, taking him deeper. When she felt the tip of his cock brush her deepest spot, she locked her legs around him to hold him there.

His kisses enflamed her; his hands couldn't touch enough. He plunged deeper with each pass, gaining that precious fraction of an inch that would shatter both their universes.

"Annabelle." His guttural groan sounded in her ear and vibrated within her soul.

"Yes, James. I need you. More." She ran her tongue over his in desperate wanting.

His cock throbbed within her. When she felt her walls quiver in answer, she knew she was forever lost. With a cry, she tumbled headfirst into the warm waters of release. The wave curled and broke. Her pussy pulsed in time to her heart as hot spurts of his cum lashed her body.

He brought her down slowly, each caress more tender than the last, until both of them lay spent in one another's arms.

A scuffing step sounded, and they looked up. Xander stood in the mouth of the cave, wearing a broad grin. "Well, it's about time." He took a step farther inside, and the firelight cast a warm glow over the rising bruise on his cheekbone.

"How was your ride on Hellfire?" James asked.

Xander leaned against the wall, his eyes exploring her and James's entangled limbs. "We can't call the horse Hellfire now. I've renamed him."

"Named him what?" James lifted his head from the slope of Annabelle's breasts, which he'd been worshipping with his tongue.

"Bruiser," he answered, and they all burst into a fit of giddy laughter.

Annabelle felt the weight of worry relent slightly. Though until the moment she and her men were safely at the ranch, she'd stay on guard.

* * * *

Ten miles from home and Xander felt he was already there. Everything from the lay of the grass to the scents of cedar gave the suggestion he was working the fields with his father or listening to the women talk in the kitchen while he and his cousins gobbled milk and cookies.

With each step of the horse, though, Annabelle grew more withdrawn. She was strung as tight as a bow, and on more than one occasion, he'd caught her with her finger stuck in her mouth, chewing a short, oval nail.

James had informed him while she slept that she was worried about the Hollis family not accepting their situation. Xander wasn't exactly sure how they'd take it, but he was confident in their love for him. Hell, after the years they'd spent praying for his safe return from the war, they'd be plain happy to see him.

If they didn't care he was a wanted man, they wouldn't care who he chose to love.

James rode a few steps ahead, sitting easier in the saddle than Xander had seen him in a long time. At last it seemed his wound was healing.

For the tenth time in a mile, Bruiser came to a complete stop. Xander grumbled his agitation, and Annabelle hunched forward around her uncontrollable giggles. While the horse situation frustrated him to no end, he enjoyed hearing her carefree laughter. He pressed a kiss to her temple, inhaling her fresh scent. They'd bathed in the cold stream a few miles back, and she'd donned her new dress. It didn't hug her curves the way he liked, but the color gave her a warm glow. When he got her home, he'd make sure his ma fixed her up right. He imagined a woman would be a welcome addition to a family made up almost entirely of males. Many a time he'd heard his mother and aunts lamenting the smell of feet, clumps of mud on their clean floors, and the male species' general disregard for anything with

ruffles.

He ran a hand down to the indentation above Annabelle's hip. He'd like to see a few ruffles on her. Her new hat bumped his jaw, and he smiled. She showed obvious satisfaction in her new dress, hat, and shoes, so he was happy. The only thing that would make him happier would be if he'd been able to buy them for her.

Once he got her home, his status would change. In that locality where he lived, a Hollis man could trade for just about anything he needed. When it came time to build them a home, he'd have no trouble obtaining the supplies, and he had a built-in crew to help him in his family members. If he could disentangle himself from this war he'd begun.

Not for the first time, he thought of Graham with a note of apprehension. What would he find when they arrived?

He locked his jaw. Soon it wouldn't matter what Graham or anyone thought. When they arrived, he'd call for the preacher straight away.

Bruiser set off again, trotting a bit until he drew abreast of Switchback. James shot him a crooked grin from the shadow of his hat. "Still having trouble, I see."

Xander didn't know if he wanted to wipe that smile off his face or grab his neck, haul him in, and cover his mouth with his own. Sweet Jesus, between him and Annabelle, they were going to kill him with passion.

He shifted in the saddle, his cock bumping against her ass. She presented him with her profile. Her lips were stretched wide in a beautiful smile that stole more of his heart, if such a thing were possible.

A stray wave curled against her lip, and he tucked it back under her hat. "My ma's going to be over the moon with you."

A light pink blush tinged her cheeks. She sank her square, white teeth into her lower lip. The sight of the trapped, plump flesh drove him suddenly mad with want.

Reeling her tighter against his chest, he lashed her lower lip with his tongue, tasting the sweet berries she'd eaten hours before when they'd stopped to rest. Her fingers were still stained from picking them, and he longed to suck off each one while holding her gaze.

A soft puff of breath passed her lips. "Xander..."

"Yeah, darlin'?"

“Will I ever stop wanting you?”

“I hope not. I know I won’t. But we can’t stop now. There’s not a spot of shade, and we don’t want your white skin to burn more than it has.” He grinned down at her, aware of James staring at them.

He urged Bruiser onward, and James continued alongside them.

Annabelle’s voice sounded quietly. “You really think they’ll like me?”

He nodded against her throat, nuzzling every fragrant inch. “They’ll love you. Wait and see.”

When they finally crested the hill above the Hollis Ranch, Xander’s heart pounded with excitement. James had reached the summit and stopped, looking out over the valley where the house and buildings were located.

“What’s going on?” Annabelle asked.

“We’re here. This is our land.” Xander spurred Bruiser, but the damned horse stopped dead again. With a growl of frustration, Xander dropped the reins. “Let’s dismount and walk down. Are you up for it?”

She stretched her legs and groaned. “I’d love to. What will we do with the horse?”

“Leave him in the pasture with the others.” He gestured with his jaw toward the distant group of horses spotting the countryside.

A smile spread across her face so bright, it stole his breath. This was it—the true test. She didn’t need the Boston parlors or the railroad connections. She needed only the verdant fields speckled with horses, James, and him.

At least he hoped this was the case.

He quickly dismounted and reached up for Annabelle. The soft give of her waist beneath his hands threatened to undo him, and he stole a kiss before her boots touched the ground.

“Hey!” James called after a moment. “We going to stay up here on the hill?”

Xander flashed a smile. “Maybe.”

“Well, hell, why didn’t you say so? I’m all for it.” He made to slide off Switchback, but Xander stopped him with a wave and laugh.

“Onward. Our horse is staying. He can come down for a rubdown or not. I’m tired of dealing with his contrariness.” He caught Annabelle’s hand and began towing her down the hill as fast as her shorter legs could go.

A figure came out of the barn and started crossing the yard. Xander stuck his fingers into his mouth and blew. His shrill whistle brought the figure's head up at once. From here, he would know his brother Adam's outline if he were blind in one eye.

Adam stopped and whistled back, then doffed his hat and waved it frantically over his head. In an instant, the front door of the big house opened, and his family streamed into the yard.

At the sight of his ma, tears threatened. When his pa ran out into the yard, Xander really choked up.

He wrapped Annabelle's hand tightly in his and took off faster. James flew down the hill in a full gallop, stopping short in a cloud of dust. The family gathered around his horse, and he was practically pulled off and passed around for each to hug.

Xander glanced at Annabelle's smiling face. "You're going to be all right," he said matter-of-factly.

Her emerald eyes sparked. "How can you tell?"

"You don't look remotely frightened at the prospect of meeting my family."

With a whoop, he started to run, towing her behind him. Adam reached them first, scooping Xander up around the waist and jogging him up and down in a bear hug. Xander clapped his back, and a puff of dust bloomed from his clothes. Adam set him down and tugged on the brim of his hat to Annabelle. Xander turned to his father next, happiness squeezing his heart tight.

"Good to see you whole, Son." He clasped him tight, thumping him on the back. The familiar scents of home clung to him—horse and hay, gun oil and bread.

Xander's stomach rumbled, and his father released him with a laugh. "Nothing's changed. He's just in time for a meal, Margaret."

Turning, Xander found his mother right behind him, a white embroidered handkerchief pressed to her streaming eyes. "My boy," she cried, and flew into his arms.

He stooped to hug her, aware she was a bit thinner. From worry? He hoped not, but his status as an outlaw surely had a hand in it.

When he set her on her feet, Drew was there to shake his hand, yanking him in for a hug.

They all turned at once to Annabelle. A scorching blush kissed the tips of her ears. Xander's heart flipped a little at the sight. He slipped his arm around her waist and reeled her close.

"Everyone, this is Annabelle. My fiancée." He claimed her lips, almost forgetting everyone else.

"Looks like we need a preacher right quick," Adam said with a chuckle.

Xander grinned and nodded. "That's right. The sooner the better."

His mother moved forward and stopped before Annabelle, a smile crinkling her blue eyes. Some said Xander resembled his mother in features, but where his coloring was night, hers was day. Her honey blonde hair was drawn into a loose bun at the back of her head, and a few wisps floated around her face. For the first time, he thought of his parents as not just parents but partners in life. What was that like?

Xander needed Annabelle in his life the way his father relied on his mother—depending on her to support him through thick and thin, crop failures and droughts. Xander wanted to spend his days in the field, working alongside James, his father, brothers and cousins, working the ranch into something bigger and more fruitful than anyone had ever seen. Then he wanted to come in from a hard day's work, scoop Annabelle up, and bear her off to bed with James in tow.

"Welcome to our family, Annabelle. You look like you could use refreshment." His mother glared at Xander, and he knew instantly he was in for a tongue-lashing about his lack of care for a delicate woman.

He scuffed the dirt with a boot heel, prepared to take it. She was right, after all. Going forward, he planned to treat Annabelle with the kid gloves she was accustomed to wearing in Boston.

Annabelle gave a quiet reply, and his mother led her away with an arm around her waist. Xander watched them go, his heart swelling to enormous proportions. Any more emotion and he'd burst.

His brother Drew leveled him with his dark gaze the instant the women were out of earshot. "What do you think you're doing, dragging a woman into your mess, Xander?"

He might be willing to accept his mother's confrontation, but facing his brother was a different story. "It's not as if I went courting, Drew."

"I can imagine. You never did tell me where you found her."

Anger boiled low in Xander's chest. When he spoke, his voice sounded as if he'd gargled glass. "What are you implying?"

James was suddenly beside him, shoulder-to-shoulder, creating a wall of defiance if anyone dared to slight Annabelle. His father stepped in.

At sixty-four years old, Frederick Hollis was still a force to be reckoned with. The broad shoulders of his sons were echoed in his, and though his face showed a few more lines, he was just as formidable now as he was when Xander was a child.

"Hold up, Drew. That's mighty unfair, not to mention ungentlemanly. Your ma and I raised you better."

"You didn't question where I'd found her when we met on the prairie some days ago," Xander said, glaring at his brother.

"There was no time. You fought with Graham and ran off."

Xander clenched his hands into fists. "Graham was out of line. He had no right to challenge me for her."

"Who-oo," his father said, wedging himself between his sons. "Graham attempted to steal Annabelle from you?"

Xander nodded hard.

"Why?" Frederick stared at the house across the vast field—the home of his brother, father of Graham, Nolan and Clay. On the opposite side of the ranch lived the other Hollis family. Cousins Peter, Kel, and Whitfield had yet to see them ride in.

"I'm not sure. He's always been a stubborn ass, but I never would have thought he'd pull a trick like that." Xander stared after Annabelle and his mother, who were just disappearing into the house.

His father clapped him on the back. "Let's get you and James a meal, then a couple of beds. I'm sure after sleeping rough, you need it."

Xander's and James's gazes met. Was his friend thinking the same thing as him? The corner of James's mouth quirked up, but Xander recognized the worry deep in his eyes.

He turned to his father. "That's what James and I wanted to talk to you about. Annabelle stays with me. So does James. We only need one bed."

Chapter Ten

Xander's mother, who Annabelle had been told to call Margaret, came at her with a set of curling tongs at the same time his Aunt Dorothy tied the bow of a rich, white linen cape over her shoulders.

Across the room, Annabelle met his Aunt Felicia's happy gaze. "A true vision." She clucked.

Margaret nodded and sniffed, dew-eyed as she assisted her new daughter-in-law-to-be to dress for her wedding—a wedding that was going to take place in less than an hour.

Annabelle gulped. Though she wanted nothing more than to be joined forever to Xander, she was more than a little uneasy at the thought that her father wouldn't be here to give her away. Xander's father would do the duty, and while she already adored the man who reminded her so much of her love, she couldn't help but wish her father were here.

Not that he'd ever approve of the match.

The defiant voice of the new Annabelle reverberated in her mind. *Xander is who I love. If Daddy doesn't like it, that's his problem.*

"Her skin fairly glows against that white linen. And the delicate lace on the cape suits her small stature," Felicia said. Annabelle studied the woman's face, still pretty though no longer youthful. The wide set of her golden brown eyes reminded Annabelle of her son Graham. Last night there had been a celebration in honor of her and Xander's union, with the entire family present.

Annabelle had carefully avoided Graham, but she felt his gaze wherever she moved. Once he'd moved in quite close to her, and she swore she caught him drawing a deep breath, as if inhaling her scent.

James had come to her rescue, gathering her up and pulling her off a way. No one had stopped him.

The fact that the Hollis family thought nothing of James touching Xander's almost-bride shocked her. They truly seemed to accept James as part of the union.

A sweet ache began deep in her core at the thought of a wedding night. Of course James would be part of it. Upstairs, the antique bed which had been custom-built for his grandparents had been sprinkled with flower petals and the room lit with beeswax candles.

Suddenly, Felicia sprang off her chair and dropped to her knees before Annabelle. She fussed with the hem of Annabelle's gown—a silk of cornflower blue that Felicia had worn on her wedding day.

Annabelle smoothed the skirt with her gloved hands. The silk wasn't as fine as the dresses she'd once owned, but it didn't matter. In fact, she'd never cared about appearances, knowing it was for others and not herself. She had been content to gallop across Texas in a homespun dress, although she'd been thrilled to have new boots.

A silvery tear tracked down Felicia's smooth cheek, and she swiped it away. "Reminds me of the day I married my Robert. I was so happy. My own ma was a fine seamstress, you know, and she made this dress. Ordered the fabric from a catalog in the general store."

"It's lovely," Annabelle said sincerely, stretching out a hand for Felicia to grasp. The woman squeezed her fingers, then released her and gained her feet with the fluid movement of a younger woman.

"Xander will fall to his knees at the sight of you," his mother said, winding another lock of hair around the hot iron. The heat wafted against Annabelle's face.

"Sure is nice to have one of our boys marrying up," Dorothy added, rummaging in a small wooden box and coming out with pearl earbobs.

Margaret's face loomed before Annabelle's as she arranged the curls she'd just made. "Even if it's not the perfect timing." She pressed her lips into a line.

Annabelle's stomach did a little flip at the reference to Xander's and James's status. That morning, the sheriff from the neighboring town had ridden into the Hollis Ranch, asking after the men.

Xander and James had hidden in the nearby root cellar while the sheriff's man inspected the barn. When he didn't see Xander's horse, Pete, he left, satisfied that the rumors that the Hollis and Merriman boys had returned were false.

They were safe for now, but for how long? They couldn't hide out in the root cellar among the potatoes and beets forever. Eventually, the law

would find them.

Which meant they had to be acquitted of their crimes. And the only way that could happen was if her father intervened and refused to prosecute them.

She quivered, and Margaret looked at her hard. “Now, don’t go getting all worked up, dear. Xander is a Hollis, and though James wasn’t born one, he’s like kin. They’re resourceful. It might seem that they won’t win this little tiff with the railroad, but eventually, the big-shot owner will see the light.”

Annabelle shook her head. “No, he won’t.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Actually, I do.”

Silence fell swiftly, and all three pairs of eyes settled on her. Margaret’s face paled. “What do you know about the trouble with my boy?” she whispered.

Annabelle opened her mouth to speak but shut it with a snap.

Margaret grasped her hands and stared into her eyes. “What do you know, Annabelle?”

“I know the owner of the SGR. I’m not certain he will relent in this matter.”

His mother’s hand fluttered to her throat. “How well do you know him?”

Annabelle dropped her gaze to her twisting hands. “He’s my father.”

Aunt Felicia issued a low wail, and Margaret stumbled back to collapse into the chair. Aunt Dorothy simply blinked through her small wire-rimmed eyeglasses as if stunned.

“I’m sorry to tell you this now. But I couldn’t go forward and marry your son without you knowing.”

“That makes you...Annabelle Stephens? Sweetheart Annie?”

“Lord, she is!” Felicia gasped. “I saw your portrait in the newspaper!”

Dorothy peered at her more closely and then patted her hand. “You’re much lovelier in person, dear.”

Annabelle smiled softly at her. “Thank you.” Steeling her spine, she looked Xander’s mother in the eye. “Do you believe I’m no longer the right match for your son?”

Margaret worried her lower lip beneath her teeth. “Of course I wouldn’t

assume that. The right match for Xander is the woman he chooses. That's not for me to say. He is all Hollis man, and no one could possibly tell him he can't have what he wants, including me, who spent twenty hours birthing him." She pitched her voice low. "He says he wants both you and James, and who are we to argue? If it makes you all happy, then you shall have it. And if he wants to marry the daughter of the man he's trying to bring down, I can't question him."

Annabelle wished she hadn't brought about the lull in the excitement with her announcement. Yet when she met the gazes of his mother and aunts, she saw nothing but concern. No anger. It could have been much worse.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. Soon she would walk down the stairs and put her hands into Xander's and become his wife. She'd never look back and regret it, but she wasn't exactly thrilled at the prospect of him and James going off again to fight for the rights of the people.

She'd racked her brain again and again, only come up with one solution—she had to contact her father.

Margaret stood and drifted back to Annabelle's side. "Let's reflect on the joy this special day warrants. In a few minutes, you'll be a Hollis."

Dorothy spoke up. "But never forget your roots, my dear. Sometimes when the winds threaten to blow us over, that's all we have."

Annabelle's heart quickened. She gazed into Dorothy's eyes and understood exactly what she was saying. Perhaps she could use her ties with her father to help the men she loved.

The next few hours were a whirlwind of activity. A blur of faces, flowers, and the delicious scents of a huge wedding feast baking in the kitchen filled the house. The deep tones of Xander's voice as he spoke his vows resonated within her soul, as did his luminous gaze on hers, steady and comforting. When he turned her face up for the kiss, her world shifted into place, and she knew without a doubt she had made the right choice.

After that, she was passed from him to James, who whispered his congratulations before planting a kiss of his own squarely on her lips. Then she was embraced by his mother, father and two brothers. The other Hollis males filled the parlor, and each demanded his chance to welcome her to the family.

When Graham presented himself before her, she shrank a little in fear.

"Please don't, Annabelle." His soft tone reminded her of the one

Xander had used on her when she needed reassurance.

She lifted her gaze to take in the guilty expression on his face. His hard features were softened by the look. The long, straight brows, so similar to Xander's, knitted together between his wide-set eyes. He held out his hand, urging her to take it.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw Xander's gaze on them. Her husband's legs were braced wide as if ready to do battle, but the big muscles of his shoulders were relaxed. At that moment, James appeared, and they exchanged a few quiet words. James started toward her, but Xander pulled him back and sent Annabelle a nod.

With a quiver low in her belly, she allowed Graham to lead her out the back door and down a few steps to the kitchen garden.

The spice of growing things reached her nose, along with the sweet scents of honeysuckle growing wild near the door. The hot sun beat down on the wreath of curls Margaret had so artfully created on Annabelle's crown. Through the cape and silk, the warmth bathed her shoulders.

Graham was staring at her with such intensity she shifted back toward the door, prepared to leave.

He wrapped his big hand around her forearm. "I'm sorry. Don't go. I won't hurt you." When she hesitated, he added, "Xander never would have let you come with me if he thought I would."

Of course, he was right. She released the door handle and stepped out of the shadow of the overhanging roof and into the sunlight once again.

"I wanted to formally apologize for my behavior that day we met." He dropped his gaze to his hands. He picked at his fingernails. "It's just that when I saw you...I went a little crazy."

His admission hung in the air, and a shiver of fear snaked down her spine. She tossed a glance at the wooden door, wondering if she'd be smart to run through it now.

"You're new to the family, and I don't know how much you know."

"A little," she said, drawn by the way his throat worked with emotion.

"Well, I was in the war, same as Xander and James were. But they made it out whole." His dark eyes penetrated her, almost begging her to understand his meaning.

She looked over his frame, every bit as big as Xander's, and saw no

apparent injuries. No amputations or visible scarring, no hunched back or twisted limb.

A rumble of a laugh left him, but it was sad. Too sad. “You can’t see my injuries, Annabelle. They’re in here.” He pointed to his chest. “And here.” His head.

Tears suddenly burned at the roots of her lashes, threatening to tumble down her cheeks for the man who was giving her a glimpse at his most vulnerable self. Her—a stranger. Why?

“I’m sorry.”

He bobbed his head. “Many are worse off than I am. But after the war, I didn’t come home for a long time. I couldn’t face it. Face them.” He looked at the door. Behind it, a chorus of laughter sounded.

Graham turned his gaze on her. “See, I’m not the same person they knew before. I saw too much, committed too many crimes.” His voice wobbled. “And I lost. A lot.” His voice broke.

Instinctively, she reached out for him and captured his hand between hers. Tilting her head back, she looked into his eyes. “My woman—” Again, he stumbled, and she knew by the gruffness in his tone, he was about to fall. “She looked an awful lot like you, Annabelle. So when I saw you, I wanted you, wanted more than anything to get back what had been torn from me...” He gulped back the tears.

She clung to his hand, wishing she could do anything to ease this man’s pain.

“I’m sorry if I frightened you. I never meant to. Seeing the fear I’d put in your eyes was one of the worst moments of my life. Please forgive me.”

“Of course. There is nothing to forgive. And I am so very sorry for your loss.”

Graham broke. His shoulders shook with the silent sobs that gripped him. With a cry of despair, she went onto tiptoe and wrapped him in her arms. Her chest burned with unshed tears.

He gripped her like a drowning man, his steely fingers biting into her waist, drawing her closer, breathing in gulps against her throat. His hot tears wet her skin. “I loved her so damn much.”

For a long minute, she held him, wishing she knew how to ease his pain. The far-off noises of the farm mingled with those of the party within. A party to celebrate her nuptials. But Graham would never have that with his

love, and that broke her heart. At the same time, it strengthened her resolve.

She and Xander had a chance. They were already blessed to have James with them and loving people around them who supported this unusual decision. And though her men were wanted and on the run, she knew the secret to setting them free. After they'd set her free, she had to return the favor.

Graham straightened and backhanded the tears from his cheeks. He attempted a small smile, which she returned. "I thank you heartily for allowing me that ease."

"I wish I could do more," she said sincerely.

Hesitantly, he reached out and guided a stray curl back into place, his eyes devouring her. "Xander is a lucky man."

"Does he know the things you've told me?"

"Of course. Last night, I shared a nightcap with him in the barn and told him everything. But I thought you should know too."

"I'm glad you told me. If you ever need to talk about anything, please think of me."

He nodded, his eyes shining with fresh tears. "There is one more thing—something Xander doesn't know."

She held her breath. "What's that?"

"Her name was Bella."

She gasped. Besides looking like the woman who haunted him, her name must positively torment him. She stroked the back of his hand.

From the tight set of his lips, she knew there was more. His words were barely audible. "And she was my wife."

* * * *

Xander caught James's arm and tugged him into the big, walk-in pantry. James's shoulders shook with laughter. "What—are we nicking biscuits like when we were eight?"

"No, I'm stealing this." He slammed his mouth over James's, tasting instant desire as their tongues met. Passion burst inside Xander, capturing his groin and spreading through his limbs.

James gripped him tight, one arm locked around his back, one hand clamped on his nape, drawing him closer and closer still.

“Where’s our girl?” he asked. “You trust her out there with Graham for so long?”

Xander sank his teeth into James’s lower lip for that remark. “Damn right, I do. Besides, she’s on her way in. Hear the back door close?”

James fell still, listening as Xander did. Annabelle’s voice drifted to them as someone stopped her to talk.

A dark ache began low in Xander’s groin. If he made it through the rest of the afternoon’s festivities, he’d be surprised. Seeing Annabelle sweep down the stairs on his father’s arm, glowing in a stunning blue silk and her eyes like jewels, had sent flames of need licking through his body.

“Your wife is looking for you,” James said.

“You’re okay with the fact that she’s my wife?”

Shock rippled across James’s features. “What? Hell, yes, Hollis. I thought we straightened this out back in the cave before we bound ourselves.”

At the mention of their private love nest, Xander’s cock strained against his pants—pants that had been his father’s and reserved for special occasions but were too tight for his son and especially too tight during his wedding day.

“Just making sure, James. I don’t want any tension between us. Tonight is going to be perfect for Annabelle.”

James quirked a brow, but his mouth was tight with worry. “Sort of a last hoorah before we set off tomorrow.”

“She doesn’t know that yet. We won’t tell her until later.”

James sighed. “She won’t like it.”

“Fuck, I don’t like it either. But it’s got to be done.” Damn, the last thing he wanted to do on their wedding night was tell her they were going off to finish what they’d started with the war against the railroad. But now that she was safely in the bosom of his family, he felt the burning need to find the last of the supply wagons heading to the main junction. And by his estimate, they had a few more bags of documents to lift.

James shoved him back a few inches and paced the confines of the pantry. “Dammit, there has to be another way! If you want tension, we’ll have enough of the romantic kind on the wedding night.”

“There isn’t. You know it. We can’t keep running.”

“So we’ll turn ourselves in after we finish our job and hope they don’t string us up from the nearest tree?”

“If we find the right counsel, yes. You know as well as I do most of these lawmen are Texans. Their land is being stolen along with everyone else’s. We might play to their sympathies.”

James jammed his hand through his hair, ruffling it at his temple. “And if the plan fails? What then?” His gaze burned with pain.

Xander knew that pain—the pain of leaving Annabelle. And damn if James didn’t instantly put two and two together.

He pierced Xander in his hard gaze. “Dammit, what are you playing at? Why did you marry her if you thought for a moment that you wouldn’t come out of this a free man?”

Xander dropped his head against the rough wood of a shelf holding jar after jar of jellies and pickles. “I can’t think about that.”

“But you did, and that’s why you sent her out there with Graham to let the man make amends.”

Xander cut the air with his hand. “Nothing will happen to you and me.”

“But if it does, Graham wants her. And they’re now on good terms.”

Emotion boiled in his chest. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to make sense of the situation. “Fuck, I don’t know what I’m doing, James. That’s the God’s honest truth, and I’m scared.”

His admission dropped into the space between them, a quiet rasp.

In two steps, James was upon him, seizing him in a strong hold that would choke the breath from Annabelle. “Then don’t entertain that plan anymore. We fight to the end, but we’re not giving ourselves up like dead game for the buzzards.”

Xander dropped his forehead against his, breathing heavily to control his panic and his lust.

“There you are.” Annabelle’s tinkling voice preceded her into the pantry. “You’ve started the honeymoon without me.” She tripped across the space and into their arms.

Chapter Eleven

Tingles of delight threaded through Annabelle's body as Xander tipped her back onto the plush bed and covered her with his body. The pressure of him atop her sent her heart racing with excitement.

Below stairs, the celebration had continued on after Xander and James stole her away. Someone had unearthed a banjo and was plucking a fast tune. The rhythmic thump suggested boot heels on the gleaming plank floor.

Xander's grin spread over her throat. "They're thrilled for an excuse to have a party."

"The Hollises always are. I was glad to see my parents there," James said, unbuttoning his shirt and stripping off his string tie.

She watched him with hooded eyes as he unleashed inch by inch of his bronzed flesh while Xander kissed a trail across her collarbone and flicked the soft depression between the ends with his tongue. She gasped at the rough feel of his jaw against her flesh.

Cradling his face, she brought him upward to capture his lips. The first brush of his hard mouth started a flame in her. The second lit the bonfire.

He angled his head and sucked on her tongue, sending thrills of delight through her. Her heart thudded in time to the beat downstairs. She lost herself in the taste of her new husband, knowing this was her place—beneath him with James at the ready.

When she tore her mouth free, she gasped, "James, come to us. We need you."

Without hesitation, he let his pants drop to the floor and stepped out of the puddle of fabric. His cock rose up from the nest of golden brown hair, purple-headed and hard as steel.

She beckoned him with a flick of her fingers, and he inched near the side of the bed. Xander reached out and snagged him around the hips, hauling him into bed with them. The mattress bounced beneath his weight.

James lightly pinched the point of her chin and urged her to open for his kiss. She obeyed immediately, giving up control to the two men who

would safely guide her to the peak of bliss and down into the calm sea afterward.

Between them, they cradled her, kissing and stroking her breasts through the cloth of the gown until she thought she'd splinter from the sheer pressure inside her.

Xander pawed at the dainty buttons on her spine, and she giggled. "Easy, this is your Aunt Felicia's dress. I can't return it with forty-two buttons missing."

"Damn." He dropped his head to the slope of her breast and sighed. "Are there really forty-two?"

"Don't worry, I'll get them." James rolled her onto one hip and began methodically popping the buttons. As each bit of flesh was exposed to him, he leaned in and wet it with his tongue. "One, two, three..."

Lightning flashes of need burst behind her eyes. She locked her sights on Xander, never wanting to ever climb out of this bed. Because she knew when she did, the moment would come for them to leave.

She ran her palms over the hard planes of his chest, reveling in the dip and swell of his chest and the flat lines of his stomach. She spent some time on his buttons too and beat James in the race.

Easing her fingers beneath the fabric of Xander's shirt, she slid it off his shoulders. Burying her nose in the crisp mat of hair on his chest, she inhaled deeply. The spice of the man was still present, no matter how many baths in the creek he took. She hoped the musky scent never faded.

James plucked open the last button at the top of her buttocks. He parted the fabric, smoothing her sensitive skin with his rough palms. A shiver rent her.

"Damn, Xander, she's so beautiful. Look at this curve." He kneaded the hollow of her hip. Xander tugged the bodice of her dress off her shoulders, trapping her upper arms so she couldn't touch him.

She made a soft noise of protest, and he silenced her when he commanded the tip of her breast with his tongue. It puckered at the moist heat of his mouth, and she arched, trying to force him harder. Behind her, James spattered kisses down her spine to the crest of her buttocks.

He trailed his tongue into the top of her seam, and a flood of cream squeezed from the folds of her pussy. Felicia had insisted she wear a pair of lacy step-ins, and the cloth clung to her wet sex.

James eased the lace down farther, exposing her buttocks to him. He kneaded each globe lightly, teasing her with the tips of his fingers on the sensitive undersides near her thighs.

His hot breath washed over her spine. “We’ve gotta get this dress off her. Now.”

Xander answered with a growl. Suddenly, she was flipped and the dress removed. James planted his mouth over hers, and Xander tore her away to plunge his tongue deep. They passed her back and forth until she was dizzy and no longer could tell James’s taste from Xander’s. They mixed in her head—a wedding cocktail.

“I get her front. You get her back.” Xander’s voice resonated within her, shocking her to awareness.

Before she could draw breath, James was nuzzling the seam of her buttocks once more. Chills of bliss rippled down her back.

Xander nipped one breast, then the other, his mouth fleeing too quickly.

“Please,” she begged, trying to draw him back.

He shook his head and continued down her belly to the heat of her.

“Mmm. Love that vanilla soap,” he murmured, nuzzling her curls.

Her pussy clenched hard at the feel of his hot breath. When he opened his scalding mouth over her needy flesh, she quivered uncontrollably.

Reeling from his touch, she focused on the pressure he applied with his tongue on her hardened pearl. So when James eased his tongue down her seam to her private opening, she sucked in huge breath of shock.

“Easy, baby,” Xander whispered against her folds. “Let him explore. Trust us.”

His warm, wet tongue worked down, down, until he found the secret spot. Her pussy contracted as he probed it. Xander lashed her to him with an arm around her hips even as James urged her to spread her thighs.

Mindless ecstasy tripped through her veins. She rocked between one tongue, then the other, the pressure gaining momentum like a runaway freight train. A few more strokes and they’d send her over the edge.

Just when she didn’t think she could take anymore, James inserted his finger in her nether hole.

With a cry, she shattered. James’s voice was a hot litany in her ear as he plunged his finger to the knuckle and thrust. Xander sucked her clit firmly,

his tongue working the button to extend her pleasure.

“That’s it, baby. Let yourself go. Come for him. For me,” James said.

The music in her body escalated, grew to a fever pitch. “Please!”

“Give her more,” Xander said, vibrating her pulsating pussy.

James sank his finger deeper while she continued to shudder uncontrollably. Xander brought her down with expert slowness. She twitched as aftershocks ripped through her.

Her breath was a harsh rasp in her ears, drowning out the muffled noises below. Xander lifted his face and licked the juices off his lips with a smile.

Without a word, James stretched out on the bed and drew her atop him, her back against his front. He latched on to her throat, sucking and kissing until she writhed. His thick length lay against her ass and a frisson of fear ran through her. She surely couldn’t take his cock from behind. He was too big. His finger had stretched her to her limits.

Hadn’t it?

Dark heat climbed her walls. She sank her nails into Xander’s bicep and James’s thigh. “I need more. Please.”

James reached between her thighs and gathered her juices. He coated her ass with the slick fluid, running his fingertip around the ridged edge until her sanity was threatened.

Xander poised at the entrance of her pussy. The thick head nudged her, and she cried out with need.

“Slowly,” he directed James.

“Not slowly,” she responded, panting for air.

James’s laugh rumbled against her back. But he dipped a finger into her ass, making her mew with delight.

She hooked a heel behind Xander and yanked him in. He buried his cock inside her, and he groaned. She scraped his back, urging him deeper. Needing him to fill her.

James plunged his finger farther into her body, and Xander shuddered, his eyelids fluttering. “Christ, I can feel your finger, James.”

Did they mean to enter her at the same time? A flush washed over her, prickling her skin. Her fevered state heightened further when James added a second finger.

Xander bucked harder in response. His pleasure drove her over the edge, and she came apart once more. Waves of bliss struck her, knocked her flat, and raked her out. She surrendered to the peaks and curls, riding her husband's cock and their lover's fingers.

Each grunt bursting from Xander's chest made James's cock grow against her. She wriggled, trying to force him to slip inside her instead of his fingers. His breath was a sharp rasp in her ear.

"No, baby. It's too soon. We'll tear you in two." He sank his teeth into her earlobe and worried it back and forth as Xander's body stiffened.

He fell still. "I don't want to blow. Not yet. James, get inside her. Now."

In one smooth movement, Xander withdrew, and James took his place, filling her just as fully, his swollen head brushing the spot Xander had just repeatedly nudged. The pressure built in her to insurmountable heights. She wasn't alone. The quivering of James's thighs against hers gave away his tenuous hold on his control.

Xander took his moist cock in hand and circled around behind James. His eyes darkened as he eased his cock right into James's ass.

The bed shifted beneath their rocking bliss. James bucked upward, impaling her as deeply as he could as her world narrowed once more. She was going to burst, and this time, she wasn't going to recover. They would surely kill her.

Xander's thrusts drove them both higher, until the rapture of their union became too much. The cords in Xander's neck stood out as he unloaded his juices into James with a roar. James ground upward, spearing her, almost cleaving her in half as contraction after contraction splintered her senses. Hot ropes of cum lashed her channel as James erupted.

She floated between them, suspended on the pinpoint of joy, battling to hold on to this moment. Because she knew that with the sun's rise, her world could dim.

* * * *

Annabelle lay sprawled across both Xander and James. After the passion-filled night, she was spent. But Xander couldn't allow her to drift off before making her understand that in a few hours, they'd ride out.

He trailed a hand down her spine, raising the fine hairs on her body.

James kissed her shoulder.

“Annabelle, we need to talk,” Xander said.

In an instant, she was on her feet, clear across the room and with her back against the wall. She hunched around her nudity, and he imagined she was suddenly chilled without his and James’s personal heat.

Xander swung his legs off the bed and gazed at her steadily, prepared for the rampage she’d surely go on.

“No.”

“Baby, you know we have to go.”

The sight of her long, unruly locks quivering around her face as tremors overtook her did things to his heart he could never undo. He tunneled his fingers through his hair and stood, easing toward her slowly.

“We’ll finish our fight and be back before you know it. You’ll be safe here with my family.”

She shook her head hard. “Don’t want your family. I want you and James.” She lifted her chin a stubborn notch.

James sat up and scooted to the edge of the bed, closer to her. She didn’t react badly, so Xander took a step in her direction.

She threw up a hand to stop him. “I want to hate you for doing this to me!”

He shook his head, feeling her words like a blow. “What do you mean?”

“You made me love you both, and now you’ll leave me alone.”

James stood and made his way forward. She threw a frantic look around the room, then lunged toward the nearby dresser and snagged two cold candles off the top. She cocked her arm and hurled one straight at James’s head. He ducked with a surprised, “Goddamn!”

The second candle glanced off Xander’s hip. His chest burned with emotion, hating that he’d brought her to this. She was backed into the corner, determined to fight her way out. To fight to keep them by her side.

“Come any closer, Hollis, and I’ll run out this door screaming,” she threatened, her lean thigh muscles twitching with her promise.

He held up both hands. “All right, darlin’. Just calm down. James and I will be back as soon as we take care of some business.”

“This is your business, damn you!” She made a sharp movement to

indicate herself. Her curse almost made him smile—not because she was so irate but at how much she'd changed from the woman he'd stolen out of the tub.

James slid his foot along the floor, and Xander followed. Her gaze bounced from one to the other, clinging. Tears glittered in her emerald-bright eyes.

“Of course you're our business. You're our *only* business, Annabelle,” James said, feet from her. “That's why we have to go. To try to gain our freedom. For you. For us.”

“Oh, I hate that I look in your eyes and want to fall into your arms. I'd rather stay mad,” she huffed. “No, you're not going out there to be shot or hanged from a tree. And I will not ride out to your trial if they don't kill you.”

“With any hope, you won't have to.” Xander reached for her delicate wrist, expecting her to resist. He wasn't disappointed.

She jerked her arm from his grasp and glared. “Take a step back, Xander. You can't make this all right. Because...” Tears spilled down her pale cheeks, wrenching his heart. “I love you both, and if you leave me, what do I have? I would never want to return to Boston or to Oliver.”

“Don't even say his name!” Xander burst. “You'll never be his.”

Her face went still, but tears continued to track down her cheeks. “You won't be around to care if you're caught.”

“I won't be caught.” It wasn't exactly a lie. Giving themselves up wasn't the same. But she didn't need to know that. And, dammit, he was still bristling about her bringing up Oliver Standish on their wedding night. Or next day, as it were.

James stepped forward and caught her in his arms. Xander pressed forward, and James made room for him.

She sagged in their hold. “I don't know why I'm fighting. You'll do what you want. And I have no strength to argue with you. When I look at the two of you, I only see how blessed I've been. No matter what happens, I'd choose you again.”

Xander threaded his fingers in her hair, memorizing the expression in her eyes as he leaned in to claim her lips. “We'll be back, baby doll. Until then, you sit tight and let my family care for you. My mother gave me hell for letting you grow thin on the trail. Don't let me come home to a full-blown tongue lashing.”

Annabelle shivered, and Xander scooped her up against his chest, bearing her back to bed, where he and James flanked her. Minutes passed as her emotion got the better of her and exhaustion won out.

While she lay asleep in the glow of sunlight, he and James quietly dressed and left her. At the door, Xander turned back to take one last long look at her body, praying he wouldn't hurt her in the end. Praying for the outcome he and James needed to get back to their lives with Annabelle.

Chapter Twelve

Annabelle sank her hands deep into the bread dough and let her mind drift. Surviving the long days and even longer nights without Xander and James called for a lot of busy work.

Margaret knew this and gave her any task she could to help take her mind off her worries and longing. And she'd discovered that kneading dough soothed her to some degree.

But it also was mindless, so she had a lot of time to think. What were Xander and James doing today? Where were they? No word reached them, though Xander's brothers Adam and Drew often rode the countryside, hoping for a glimpse of them or someone who had seen them. Each day they returned with no word, Annabelle sank deeper into despair.

"That dough looks perfect today," Margaret said, interrupting her thoughts. The woman stood at the scrubbed table, cracking eggs into a big bowl for breakfast.

"Not too much flour?" Even to Annabelle's ears, her voice lacked enthusiasm. It was hard to get excited over bread, even if she'd finally mastered the recipe and could at least boast this skill to her husband and their mutual lover.

"No, it's just right." Margaret poked a wiry forefinger into the dough and nodded. "Now that you've got the art of bread making down, we'll move on to biscuits."

Annabelle's belly rumbled at the mention of her favorite food here at the Hollis Ranch. Ever since her first taste, she couldn't get enough of Margaret's biscuits. There was a fresh batch baking right now. The buttery scent wafted through the kitchen.

Her thoughts fled once again, out the window to the waking countryside. The sun peeked over the edge of the ranch and spread its glowing fingers across the land. The Hollis men had been up for hours, out in the barn, caring for the cattle. She wished with all her heart that Xander and James were among them and that in a few minutes, they'd stomp inside for breakfast at the big table. She'd love to see them seated shoulder to shoulder,

tucking into the eggs and thick slabs of ham.

“When do you think we’ll have word?” she asked Margaret for the millionth time since they left.

Margaret shot her a worried glance and whisked the eggs harder, whipping air into them so they were light and fluffy. “Not rightly sure, dear. Xander will have a care for you and hopefully send word soon.”

She flipped the dough and dug her knuckles into it.

“Do you care why they’re doing this?”

“If you’re asking if I don’t care about the cause of the people, that’s not the case. I care very much. I only wish—” She broke off, ruminating over the fact that her father was triggering these troubles with his orders. Not for the first time, she considered leaving the ranch to go into town and post a letter to him.

She’d been avoiding it because to do so would put the focus on her. She simply dreaded telling her father about her marriage and her new claim on freedom. Right now, he surely worried about her welfare, believing her missing. But that somehow felt better than meeting his wrath and disapproval.

No, his Sweetheart Annie was long gone.

Margaret melted a bit of lard in the big cast-iron skillet. The smell struck Annabelle, and a wave of nausea made her stomach pitch and heave. She pressed her wrist to her forehead, wondering if Margaret was using a different lard than usual.

“Uh-oh,” Margaret said, quickly dumping the eggs into the pan and turning to face Annabelle.

“What’s uh-oh?” She swallowed hard against the lump of bile in her throat.

“I’ve seen that look before. The scent’s not agreeing with you?”

She blinked at Xander’s mother, stunned that she’d pinpointed her ailment. “How did you know?”

Margaret gave the eggs a cursory stir, then crossed the space to clasp Annabelle’s forearm. “It might be too soon to tell,” she said, almost to herself. Then she looked at her daughter-in-law closely. “Annabelle, when did you meet Xander?”

“I have no idea. I’ve lost all track of time out here.”

“But you were supposed to meet the other gentleman on what date?”

Annabelle related the date, and Margaret counted on her fingers. “Yes, it’s entirely possible.”

“What is?”

“That you’re with child.”

Annabelle’s heart seized. For a moment, she stared blankly at her mother-in-law, fear a hot ball in her belly. Then her heart flipped and sped out of control. Tears burned in her eyes. “I-I...can’t be.”

“Mmm. Maybe not. Could be a passing illness or a simple case of fatigue. But the first thing that heralded the news of my three pregnancies was the way my stomach turned at the smell of lard in a pan.” She clasped Annabelle’s shoulder and hugged her lightly, careful to avoid Annabelle’s flour-coated hands.

Annabelle slumped against the woman, wondering if she could be right. Frantically, she counted backward. She knew almost nothing of babies or this delicate condition, but she’d heard her maids talking. And there was always a hushed bit of gossip in the Boston parlors.

“You haven’t had your courses, have you, dear? With your state of thinness when you arrived with Xander and James, I wouldn’t be surprised if you skipped a month, but—”

“No, you’re probably right,” she whispered. Her legs wobbled, and she sank heavily to the chair. Margaret quickly went back to the cookstove, stirred the eggs, and returned with a towel, which she handed to Annabelle. She wiped the flour from her hands and stared at the small window facing the golden fields.

A baby. But whose? Suddenly her relationship with two men seemed more complicated than she’d imagined. Would one become angry when the father of the baby couldn’t be determined?

Margaret squeezed her shoulder. “They knew this could happen going into it.” How did she again guess at Annabelle’s thoughts? “It’s not the most unusual situation I’ve ever heard of. Sometimes out here where women are scarce, men share. Xander and James aren’t fools. They knew you could get with child. They’ll raise it together.”

“If they ever return,” she murmured. Worry swelled to enormous proportions. If she was left alone, what would happen to her and this baby? She knew the Hollises would never turn her out, but she couldn’t depend on

them so much. With no man to work for her and a child, she'd be dead weight.

Of course, Xander and James weren't exactly here to own their share of the work. Which meant she had to do something about it. Now.

She stood abruptly, and the chair scooted across the plank floor. Margaret looked at her with concern, but at the smell of burning eggs, she rushed to the stove, wrapped a towel around the handle of the skillet, and yanked it from the flames.

Before Annabelle had reached the door, Margaret ordered, "Don't you dare think about riding out alone, Annabelle Hollis!"

She paused with a hand on the door and a smirk on her face. Hearing herself referred to as a Hollis almost made her laugh with joy. If only Xander were here to share the news. And if he were here, James would be too.

The sweet heat clawed at her insides at the thought of them.

At that moment, a shout sounded from the yard. The voice was muffled through the door, and though Annabelle didn't make sense of the cry, Margaret did.

"Riders!" She grasped Annabelle's upper arms and, with a light shove, sent her toward the stairs. "Don't come down, no matter what you hear!"

Annabelle dug in her heels. Panic threaded through her chest, dumping icy water on any warm thoughts she'd previously entertained about her men or the baby. "I won't be sent away like a child!"

"You're *with* child," Margaret hissed. "Now get upstairs and let us take care of this!"

"What if they have word of Xander and James?"

From the hollow look in her mother-in-law's eyes, that was exactly the information she expected.

With a soft cry, Annabelle pushed past Margaret and hurled herself through the door and into the yard. Her heart thundered in time to the hooves of horses as the riders pulled to a stop in the yard. Dust clouded around the men. Drew was suddenly there, legs braced wide and his hip thrust forward to reveal the gun he wore and was obviously ready to use.

Annabelle surged forward, her feet moving under their own steam, her mind detached from her body. What happened? *Oh Xander. James. Please be all right!*

She edged into the circle and looked up at the nearest man on horseback. A rivulet of frigid shock ran down her spine. It was the man from the town where she'd purchased Bruiser—the man who'd followed her and made her wonder if she knew him.

Then the other rider caught her attention, and her knees weakened.

"Annabelle!" Oliver Standish dismounted in one smooth motion, his boots thudding to the ground inches from her. He gripped her upper arms and drew her into an awkward embrace.

"Get your hands off her!" Drew barked. The Hollis family flocked around her, circling Oliver and the man he rode with.

When Oliver didn't move, someone jabbed a gun in his ribs. He dropped his hold on her and slowly raised his hands head-level. His blue eyes darted around him, then to Annabelle.

"Why are you threatening me? She's Annabelle Stephens. I haven't been away from that vision so long that I can't recall her features."

Drew cocked his weapon from over her shoulder. "She's Annabelle Hollis, wife of my brother."

"Wife!"

"And you will not lay another hand on what belongs to him."

"Hollis?" Oliver's eyes flared as the name sank into the folds of his brain. "The Hollis man who's wanted for robbing the SGR men, stealing documents and supplies?"

Annabelle stared from Oliver to Drew and back again. She needed to stop Oliver from twisting this new bit of information he possessed and using it as ammunition against Xander.

"Annabelle—"

"Mrs. Hollis to you, mister," Drew drawled.

"Mrs. Hollis," Oliver amended. "Please, may I seek private conversation with you?"

"No," Drew answered in a tone harder than the steel that built the rails of her father's railroad.

Oliver blinked, his mouth a white seam. Surely he felt himself up against the wall of Hollis flesh. Despite him being the enemy, Annabelle remembered she'd been prepared to marry this man.

She settled a hand on Drew's forearm. "I'll speak with him. He means

me no harm.”

Drew’s jaw flexed, and a muscle in the corner jumped. “No.”

“Drew, Mr. Standish will give his word that no harm will come to me. Isn’t that right?”

“Of course.” Oliver’s tone was strangled. All at once, she feared the pain she’d caused him. In one fell swoop, he’d discovered his fiancée, lost her, and found she was married to a man trying to kill his livelihood.

Xander’s father spoke up from somewhere to her left. “Allow them a moment of privacy, Drew. There are enough of us to keep an eye on the man.”

She threw a glance around and saw not only Xander’s immediate family but several of his cousins as well, including Graham. Her gaze met his for a split second before she swung it back to Oliver.

“Follow me if you’re so inclined,” she said in her most proper Boston voice. Her heart flipped at the now unfamiliar sound. Where had that come from? The minute she was in the company of a man from her former life, she became Sweetheart Annie again?

Maybe with Oliver I never could have been the woman I needed to become. A bright flash of need for Xander and James sparked in her soul. Desperation made her knees weak as she led the way to the wide front porch.

When they reached the seclusion and shade, she leaned heavily against a porch post, aware of the knot of nausea in her belly once more. Oliver’s boots quietly thumped the wooden floorboards.

He spoke first. “I hardly know what to say.”

She faced him and met his pain fully. “I’m sorry, Oliver. I didn’t mean for this to happen. I didn’t mean for you to learn about my marriage in this way.”

He swallowed hard, his eyes glinting brightly behind his small oval glasses. “I certainly never expected to come here to find you married. I only thought to bring you back with me where you belong.”

She straightened in surprise. “You mean you knew I was here?”

“Of course. I followed your trail after you withdrew funds a month or more ago. Did you not tell the man you were headed to this ranch?”

When she didn’t reply, he went on.

“Were you coerced into this marriage with...Hollis? Shall I intervene?”

His tone was almost gentle, as if he would tiptoe around his rejection and coax her into changing her mind.

She shook her head. “I belong here, Mr. Standish. I’m sorry you had to learn of the dissolution of our engagement in this way, but I cannot undo my tie to Xander.”

He winced. They shared a long look, and then he dropped his gaze. “I’m sorry to hear it. I looked forward to our union, as did your father.”

Rocking a little on her heels, she clutched the post for support. “What does my father know of my whereabouts?”

“He knew you withdrew funds, of course, and that you never turned up to meet me. And the couple who escorted you on your travels were frantic with worry about your well-being.”

“Again, I apologize.”

Oliver nodded, staring off toward the muscled group of men in the yard who surrounded his companion.

“Will Father come after me?” Her voice shook slightly.

“You’re his only heir. Of course he must get in touch with you. You can’t just disappear into the wilds of Texas, Annabelle.”

But that was what she’d wanted. And she still could, after she cleared Xander’s and James’s names.

“Will you help me, Oliver? My husband and his friend ride against the SGR for the good of the people. My father is stealing their land—valuable property these people need to survive. Will you help me to undo his wrongs?”

Oliver’s eyes narrowed. “The good of the people? Surely they see the good in the building of a railroad that will bring new commerce to them.”

She shook her head. “It’s not that simple. That’s the corporation’s view. Not those who actually live here.”

“People such as yourself now?” His gaze raked over her simple dress and common boots, her lack of gloves and the bun at her nape, which was most likely askew.

She nodded, standing proudly in the face of his disdain. “That’s right. I’m a Hollis, and I stand behind them. I’ve seen firsthand the pain inflicted on families. You must back away and return the people the land that’s rightfully theirs.”

“Not possible.” His tone hardened.

“Then compensate them for what you’ve taken. My father’s accounts are filled with the money made off other people’s pain.”

Oliver tapped his hat against his thigh. “You believe he’ll agree to this?”

“I must try. If you ever cared for me, you’ll help me.”

His eyes burned. “Don’t. Don’t use that against me. I truly wanted you and not the power behind your name.”

She dipped her head, feeling a niggling of shame.

“I speak the truth. But I cannot do this for you. And I’ll be damned if I allow that man to steal more from me than the woman I was to marry.” With that, he pivoted on his heel and strode off toward his horse.

The Hollis men tensed immediately, weapons at the ready. They parted to allow him to mount his horse. Oliver sent a long look in her direction before yanking the reins and sending his horse into a gallop. His companion followed at his heels.

As one, the Hollises started toward her. Alarm sent her into a flurry of action. She took off, running to the barn as fast as her legs would carry her. She had to reach the post office to send a telegram to her father before Oliver could. He must hear the story from her.

“Annabelle!” a male voice called after her, but she ran on.

In the barn, she paused to allow her eyes to adjust to the dim light. The instant she focused on the shape of a horse, she hastened to open the door of its stall. Ripping down a saddle from the partition between stalls, she struggled to heft it onto the mare’s back.

“Let me help you.” Graham appeared at her side. He took the weight of the saddle from her and lifted it easily.

“You’re not going to try to stop me?”

“Seems to me you know your mind. But I won’t let you ride alone.”

She nodded. “Thank you.”

A scant minute later, she was astride the mare with Graham at her side, thundering across the land to reach the small town where she could post a letter and a telegram to her father, suggesting he give the lands back to the people or pay them for their troubles. Asking him to drop the charges against her husband and their lover.

And begging him to do it for the love of his grandchild.

* * * *

Two miles away from home, Xander almost wheeled Bruiser around and headed back. His heart ached for Annabelle already. The first day, he and James had done little more than hash out their plan and talk about Annabelle's involvement and safety. Today they were both silent, lost in their own pain and melancholy.

And what the hell had he been thinking to take this particular, headstrong horse? His father had offered his own steed. Drew had also nodded toward the stall that housed his mount. But Xander had chosen to take Bruiser, partially because Annabelle had selected the horse for him.

James rode alongside, staring off into the distance and utterly silent. The set of his jaw spoke volumes.

"Out with it, Merriman. What's on your mind?"

James gazed at Xander, his soft lips pursing and reminding him of what he could do with that mouth. "You know what my problem is."

Xander edged nearer, close enough to grasp James's nape and yank him in for a kiss if he wanted. "Do I?"

"Hell, yes. Your plan to give ourselves up will only get us killed. You want Annabelle to read about it in the *San Antonio Express*?"

He issued a sigh that hummed through his vocal chords and came out as a groan. A bead of sweat snaked down his temple, and he swiped it away with irritation. "You have a better plan, James? Because I'd sure as fuck like to hear it. We're wanted. With prices on our heads. Bounty hunters traverse these plains each and every day in search of us." He waved a hand at the surrounding fields of gorse and wildflowers. "I, for one, would like to get back to my life. When I began this fight, I never expected to meet a woman to settle down with, let alone find myself eager to set up house with my best friend as the third party."

James's eyes flashed.

"We're embroiled in a mess that I want nothing more than to get out of. I don't know any other way out."

James spoke quietly. "You think swinging from a tree is the answer?"

"I have no intention of allowing anyone to take me down. But getting ourselves before a judge is the only clear way out, as I see it."

“Hell, the sun has addled your brains. No judge will rule for a couple of ex-soldiers who took it upon themselves to fight for the people. He’s going to be in Bedford Stephens’s pocket.”

Xander prickled at the name of Annabelle’s father.

“Unless, of course, you plan to tell the man you’re now his son-in-law.”

He grunted. He wasn’t about to drag Annabelle’s name into the mire of the situation. “I will not use her name to free us. Stephens will see our side.”

“And if he doesn’t? You prepared to say your good-bye to that pretty little wife of yours?”

Irritation was a hot stone in Xander’s gut. He glared at James, thinking he’d just as soon strike him as look at him. “How about you? You ready to leave the woman you’ve fallen just as hard for?”

“Shit, no. That’s what I’m trying to tell you, Xander.”

“What do you suggest, then?”

“Flee. We run. Go back and pack her up and bundle her off to a new life. New identities.”

“Where I come from, that’s called cowardice.”

James threw a hand out. His fingers wrenched around Xander’s forearm so hard the bones flexed. “Say that again.”

Xander tore his arm away. The horse danced sideways, setting much-needed space between them. “I’m a Hollis. I won’t give up who I am or where I belong because I was too afraid to fight for what I believe in.”

“I’m not afraid either, man. How could you believe I am? I’ve been with you from the start, battling the railroad at your side. But I see things a mite bit differently. Annabelle gave up her world and everything she knew to be with us. She threw herself headlong into our lives and trusted us to catch her. Without us, she’ll fall. There’s nothing to catch her.”

“She has my family.”

“Hell. You’re just as stubborn as you were at ten when you refused to admit you cheated at cards.”

He locked his jaw against a bark of laughter that suddenly threatened to burst out. He had cheated, but when caught red-handed refused to surrender the extra card he’d plucked from the deck. To this day, he’d never given in to James’s accusation that he’d stolen it.

“Isn’t this what I’m trying to do? Admit I was wrong in beginning a

war I either will never win or don't care enough to continue? I just want to go home, James. I want to spend my life with Annabelle. And you, goddammit."

"So do I!" James roared. Bruiser skittered to the right and nearly collided with James's horse.

Ahead, a trail of dust indicated riders. Not just any riders, but a group spread out across a quarter mile, with rifles evident on their backs. Bounty hunters.

"Then here's our chance," Xander said, setting his heels into Bruiser's flanks.

The horse shot off like lightning, flashing across the land, outstripping Switchback in seconds. Behind, he heard James's cry, followed by the drum of hooves. From the corner of his eye, Xander caught sight of his friend.

"Damn you, stop!" James bellowed.

Xander continued on. There was no choice. He had to give himself up and hope for a fair trial and a ruling in favor of a Texan who'd been angry on behalf of other Texans.

James cursed and drew beside him once more. His hand lashed out, and his fingers knotted in the fabric on Xander's back. With a jerk, he attempted to rip him from the saddle.

Xander roared and kept his seat, his thigh muscles clenched hard around the horse's sides. He sent a punch at James, but the horses widened the gap between them before his knuckles could connect.

"Stop and fight like a man, Hollis!"

With a growl, Xander drew up short and leaped off the still-moving horse. He caught his balance and locked his muscles for battle. James slowed and dismounted a little more gracefully. The horses stopped a few yards away and circled them as they slowly advanced on each other.

"There's no other way," Xander argued, knotting his hands into fists. He had no problem beating the hell out of his best friend. He'd done it before.

"I say there is. We clear our names by putting Annabelle's name out there."

"No goddamn way I will allow that." Xander swung, catching James in the midsection. The man doubled over with a grunt. But in an instant, he was up and throwing punches. His fist grazed Xander's cheekbone, glancing off. He crouched low and tried to tackle Xander around the waist, but he had

fought with James a dozen times this way and anticipated his move.

He backed off at the last minute. James spun around with a bellow of fury. Xander sent a kick at his chest, but James grabbed his boot. They tumbled into the ground with loud grunts. Xander rolled atop him, pinning him to the ground.

James brought his knee up, prepared to unman him, but Xander squeezed James's knee until he squirmed.

"We'll do this for Annabelle."

"Like hell! If you want to give yourself up, fine! I'll ride it out and go home to her a free man."

"What did you say?" Xander rammed his fist into his mouth.

James retaliated with a blow of his own to Xander's ear. A ringing noise resounded in his head, and he rolled off. James lay flat on his back, hand clutched to his bleeding lip.

"You gave me a loose tooth, you bastard!"

"Good."

"You're a stubborn ass, Hollis."

"Thank you. That's what will make me a free man."

"That's what will get you killed."

"Why? I got away with cheating at cards all these years, didn't I?" Xander's gaze met James's. In that instant, the animosity fell away, leaving only the pure camaraderie they always shared.

James's chest rumbled with laughter. "Figures you'd finally admit it to manipulate me."

Xander rolled into a sitting position, throwing a glance at the horses to ensure they were still near. The riders hadn't seen them, as they were moving away. "I concede, James. I cheated. And I'll concede on this argument as well."

James peered at him suspiciously, his chest rising and falling hard. "Say what's on your mind, man."

"I have a new plan. Hit them hard tonight where they can't afford to be hit."

"You mean...?"

Xander nodded. "Yeah. You saw that newspaper lying on the table at the ranch before we left. Said there were eight hundred men ready to set

tracks not forty miles from here. I say we ride into their midst and cut them off at the knees. We stop them. Without that bit of track, they're going nowhere. Locked up and at a standstill. Then we ride into San Antonio and hire the best damn legal counsel we can. We bring a countersuit against the SGR for stealing the people's land. And we'll see if that doesn't gain some support."

A grin spread across James's face. The light glinting off the hair on his strong jaw drew Xander like water to a thirsty man. He reached for him at the same time James did.

They tumbled together in a tangle of limbs. Xander pinned him with his gaze a second before he claimed his mouth. The hard meeting of their lips ignited the passions in Xander, drawing the anger from him and putting it to better use.

James ran his tongue along Xander's lip, and he issued a harsh moan. Opening his mouth, he slanted it over James's, taking from him again and again, devouring him, demanding the man relent if not to his ideas, then to his needs.

James threw a leg over Xander's hips, trapping him against the rough turf. He plied him with tongue, flipping it over his until Xander thought he'd burst. The pressure low in his groin grew, and his cock ached with every pass of James's tongue.

Fuck, we don't have time for this.

He tore himself away, staring down at James as another wave of passion threatened to steal his sanity.

James understood their tenuous position and released him. He sat up and brushed the stray blades of grass from his hair. Reaching for his hat, he gave Xander a look that seared straight to his balls.

"You know I'd take you right here on the plains if there wasn't a posse half a mile from us, ready to haul your ass in, right?"

"Yeah, I do." Xander positioned his own hat on his head and jumped to his feet. James unraveled beside him, holding his side a little as he did.

"Still pulls around the edges," he explained with a grin. Then he cuffed Xander on the shoulder. "Get into that saddle, Hollis. We've got a hard day's ride to reach that operation. I want to get it over with as quickly as possible and get back to our lady."

A grin spread across Xander's face as he thought of riding into the yard

and spotting Annabelle running toward them, arms outstretched and joy on her beautiful features. “Let’s hit the trail, man. I need to get both of you in my bed.”

He swung onto Bruiser’s back, cursing the horse when he resisted but mentally thrilled with their plan of action. Raiding a camp sounded right up his alley right now. Especially this camp, which was rumored to have a brand-new shipment from the east. If they managed to take them out, it might set the SGR back forever. Hopefully they’d give up the fight and abandon their efforts to build in the West.

After he and James looted as much as they could, they’d head on to San Antonio and find the best damn lawyer Hollis money could buy. Then they could make their case against the railroad, charging them with theft of land.

Within a few weeks, he could be back on Hollis lands as a free man.

Chapter Thirteen

Robert Hollis, Xander's uncle, had a farm that was only a good, loud bellow from the ranch Annabelle now called home, but at the moment, it felt like miles. They had all ridden over there to help birth a new calf, but Margaret had clucked her tongue and insisted Annabelle stay home in her condition.

She wrapped her fingers around the small bulge of her lower belly and smiled despite her agitation at being left behind. The baby was a constant comfort to her. She hadn't heard from her husband or James in many months, and the baby was all she had to keep her mind occupied.

Because she didn't know which one was the father, she thought of them both as such. In her mind, the baby had Xander's dark eyes with James's straight nose—a handsome new Hollis to add to the ranch.

With a sigh, she poured herself a mug of hot water and let the tea leaves steep. Graham had brought her some all the way from Mexico. They spoiled her here, each and every one of them. From Adam's insistence that he help her down the stairs each morning to the small gifts that turned up for her when Drew returned from town—a peppermint stick to suck for her nausea or a velvet ribbon—they cared for her greatly.

The cousins all took turns doing good deeds for her too. And today, she hoped to use it to her advantage. She needed a favor from a particular Hollis. One she knew would bend over backward to grant her wish.

Graham. The man was slowly easing from his shell. The strain she'd first recognized in him was being replaced by ready smiles. He'd haltingly begun to talk about his time in the war. Though he never mentioned his love again, Annabelle knew it was only a matter of time before he cleansed that festering wound too.

Just as she expected, she heard a scuffing step on the porch. Graham looked in the kitchen window and smiled at her. She waved him in.

"I knew you'd never leave me here alone."

He ducked his head and hid his blush. "That's true. By my thinking, a woman should never be left unattended. We men should dote on you."

She laughed, feeling freer than she had in a long time. She offered him some tea, but he refused. He turned a wooden chair backward and straddled it, piercing her in the unrelenting gaze she'd become accustomed to.

Thinking it prudent to get her request over with, she spoke. "Graham, I have a favor to ask."

"Anything," he said immediately.

They shared an easy smile.

"How could I refuse? You've listened to me talk these long months and never gained anything in return."

"I have," she said. "I've gained a good friend."

His lips tipped up again, and he leaned forward in his chair, crossing his arms over the back. "What is it you'd like?"

"A horse."

He knitted his brows together and dropped his gaze to the soft swell of her belly beneath her palm. "Where do you intend to ride?"

"I don't." When confusion sparked in his clear eyes, she continued. "Xander lost his horse Pete."

"Yes, I was sorry to hear that."

"I've heard there's a mare on your farm that is the offspring of that horse."

He nodded. "That's right."

"And that she's expecting the grand-foal of Pete."

A grin stretched Graham's handsome features—features so similar to Xander's it made her heart turn over. She let her gaze slip away and struggled for control of her emotions.

Silence stretched between them, but it wasn't uncomfortable. By now, they knew when to give the other room to work out hard emotion. When she lifted her gaze, his was there, steadying her.

"You're one of my closest friends, Annabelle. And for you, I suppose I could give up that horse if you promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"That you don't name the damn thing after me."

A laugh bubbled up her throat. She stretched out a hand, and he clasped it. "It's a deal."

* * * *

“How long do you suppose it will take for that newspaper to reach Annabelle’s hands?” James asked, tossing the paper into the flames, where the news of their impending trial and countercharges curled and went up in smoke.

Xander nudged the log with his toe and stared at the sparks that spiraled up into the blue velvet sky. Stars spangled the world above, and he focused on one, wishing he had Annabelle with them to share their campfire.

And more. He longed for her in his bed.

“Maybe we should head home. We can’t do much until the trial date anyway.”

At the railroad camp, they’d waited until the men were drunk or asleep and then stole to each wagon, gathering up anything with wood to burn. They hauled away shovels, axes, and picks to later feed to a bonfire. Xander had taken one with which to dig a massive hole. James had rounded up all the railroad spikes he could find, and they buried them. Again and again, they went back to the encampment, stealing anything they could carry, laughing that the drunken crew meant to keep watch would be in trouble come dawn.

After that, they’d headed straight to town, walked into the office of the only lawyer, and told their story. At first the man known as Justice Jenks had stared them down until Xander felt his skin prickle. But in the end, he’d offered them a chair and a drink while he listened to their argument.

“Jenks said not to drag our families into this mess if we can avoid it. I want to go home to see Annabelle more than anything. God knows I long for her with every bone in my sorry body. But I don’t want her at a trial.”

Xander nodded. He sank his head between his knees. What had she been doing all this time? Often, he and James would lie beside each other at night and share stories about what they thought she did to pass the time.

“We’ve gotta go back.” Xander stood abruptly.

James narrowed his gaze at him. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I can’t sit here any longer. We’re a day from home if we ride hard. The horses are rested. We can make it by nightfall.”

“And go against Jenks?”

“James, we’ve been away from our families for more months than I care to count. My wife is at home—” He cut off.

James waited for him to go on, but Xander couldn't force the words around the lump in his throat. "Pining for us?" he prompted.

He slashed the air with a hand. "I don't know. I can't think straight."

Gaining his feet too, James squeezed Xander's shoulder. Hard. "She's not going to run home to her daddy, Xander."

"No." He ground out the words that popped into his head. "Dammit, I haven't been a good husband." He spun away and stalked off to catch the rope trailing behind Bruiser, who was just now becoming compliant to his master's wishes.

"Oh, here's that stubborn Hollis attitude I relish," James quipped.

He whirled on him. "Well, I haven't. I stole her out of a bathtub, forced her to be with me—"

"She came to realize you'd done her a favor."

"Kept her on the trail until she was exhausted and half-starved."

"And showed her more love than she'd probably seen in her lifetime."

"Made sure Graham kept watch over her." This final sentence was a harsh whisper.

"Yeah, well, I've always known you're an asshole." When Xander didn't respond, James gripped his nape and drew him in until their foreheads bumped. "We're trying to bring the frayed ends of our lives into order so we can make a new one with Annabelle."

"I hate being in limbo." He hated that he needed her so much that his heart burned for her.

"Me too, man."

"Let's go home. Jenks has to know my family will see that trial date in the paper and come running anyway. If they do come running, I'm bringing Annabelle in myself, riding right in front of me on Bruiser."

"Hell, no. She'll be with me on Switchback."

Xander couldn't help but smile. "All right. We'll share. But I've made my decision, James. We're going. Now."

"All right, but there's one more thing." With that, James planted his mouth directly over Xander's. The rough bristle of his unshaven jaw scraped Xander's skin, igniting a passion he hadn't felt in too long. Out here, they'd had little opportunity to get physical with each other. The last time had been days ago.

Xander brought his lover up hard against his body, feeling his arousal through his pants. James ground against him, and Xander issued a groan. “Damn, when I get you home, I’m going to stay inside you for a week.”

“That a Hollis promise?”

He flashed his friend a grin as he gripped the saddle horn and whipped his leg over Bruiser. “Yeah. Now mount up, Merriman. We’re going home to our woman.”

Chapter Fourteen

The lurch of the wagon slammed Annabelle with a wave of nausea. Her already raw stomach threatened to revolt, but she choked down the bile and locked her jaw.

At her side, Margaret gave her a concerned look.

“I’ll be all right,” Annabelle said, anticipating her mother-in-law’s argument for her to stay home. How many times had they gone over this? From the moment Annabelle had spotted that article in the newspaper and the ink drawings of her men, she’d been adamant that she was going to the trial.

Knowing Annabelle wasn’t about to back down, Margaret nodded. She passed her the canteen.

Annabelle cradled it on her lap and stared across the landscape. The world was much different from when she’d first come to the Hollis ranch. Spring was in the air and the lands verdant green. Blossoms dotted the trees along the trail.

She settled her back against the bed of the wagon and watched the clods of dirt kicked up by the hooves of the riders behind the wagon—Xander’s brothers, all the Hollis cousins, as well as his uncles. His father was driving the wagon that the women had insisted on riding in with Annabelle, who couldn’t exactly sit a horse and jostle the baby.

Her chest ached with unshed tears. Would this baby arrive without the men who loved her present?

She tried to draw a deep breath, but her chest was so tight she felt starved for air. She forced herself to relax, taking in her surroundings. The green of the new grass, so bright she blinked, the tiny white flowers crushed beneath the wagon wheels and springing up again in the tracks.

The low tones of the men’s voices mingled with the clank of metal and leather. Dorothy and Margaret spoke softly, their heads bent together. And Felicia was seated on the wooden seat beside Xander’s father because her back was paining her.

Annabelle turned her attention inside her body, focusing on the baby, who was not a bit happy at being bounced around. He protested with several

hard kicks that stole her breath. She pressed her palm against her abdomen and urged him to settle.

Scouring the distance again, she noticed a cloud looming to the right. It seemed to rush along the ground, coming straight for them. She narrowed her eyes to get a better look, fear sprouting up in her core.

Graham, who must have been watching her, followed her line of sight, whipped his rifle up to his shoulder, and bellowed. "Attack!"

The wagon lurched to a stop, and Frederick jumped down with his pistol trained on the dust cloud.

"What is it?" Annabelle cried, gathering her feet beneath her.

Margaret gripped her arm and tried to force her down. "Get down and get low. Riders are coming, and a lot of them."

Graham's horse loomed into sight, and Annabelle looked up into his face. His mouth was hard. "Stay down as she says, Annabelle. Xander asked me to protect his wife, and you must obey me."

"Damn, there are two dozen men, at least," Drew exclaimed. He exchanged a look with Adam that sent a spear of terror straight to Annabelle's toes.

She curled her fingers around her baby and sank back down into the wagon. Margaret slid an arm around her shoulders and tugged her head down to rest on her shoulder. Her smooth palm did nothing to ease Annabelle's panic.

"What do they want?"

"Don't know. We have little enough supplies to steal," Frederick answered.

"Hold steady and get ready to fire, lads," a male voice ordered.

Frantically, she watched the men bear down upon her and her family, the riders bouncing out of rhythm in their saddles. Close enough now to see their eyes.

She loosed a scream as she realized several wore bandannas tied around the lower halves of their faces and had their hats pulled low to keep from being recognized. This was no random attack; she could feel it in her veins. Somehow, they'd become a target.

"Get the wagon!" one bandit commanded in a gravelly voice.

Frederick fired a shot over their heads, and the horses took off.

Annabelle's spine dug into the wooden side of the wagon. Frederick gave a sharp, "Yah!" to the horses, and then they were racing away.

She scrambled to her knees, her gaze locked on the Hollis men, who were suddenly encircled by the group of bandits. "They'll be killed! Go back! They want me." She didn't know how she knew this, but her gut instinct told her so. When the man ordered the others to seize the wagon, he'd looked directly at her.

Her stomach flipped, and bile rushed up, bulging against the back of her throat.

"They're coming for the wagon." Margaret's voice wobbled.

A rider thundered alongside them, faster than their weighted-down wagon. "We want the woman."

"You'll get her over every dead Hollis body!" Margaret screamed.

The man lashed out and struck her with the butt of his gun. Blood burst from her brow, and a knot rose immediately as Xander's mother slumped in the bottom of the wagon.

"Damn you. You answer to me, you coward!" Frederick yanked the reins and drew to an abrupt stop. Dorothy jumped over the side of the wagon, hitched up her skirts, and took off sprinting toward the men who were now engaged in battle.

Annabelle scoured the man's face. "What do you want with me?"

The man's blue eyes leveled over the top of his mask. He tipped back his hat and tugged down the cloth to expose his entire face.

Her blood ran cold. "Oliver..."

Another man rode up and made a sharp gesture. She cowered back against the side of the wagon, curling around her baby. A third man took a swing at Frederick, who whipped up his gun and shot him in the kneecap.

A bloodcurdling shriek rent the air, and the man dropped. Annabelle sent a worried look at Margaret, who was stirring.

Don't wake up. I can't bear it if you're harmed more.

"Get the hell out of here! No one is taking Annabelle!" Frederick raged, the cords of his throat standing out and the muscles in his forearms jerking as he trained his weapon on Oliver, then the other masked man.

From behind, several shots sounded, and she screamed. What if something happened to one of the other Hollises? She'd never forgive

herself.

“Take me, but leave them alone,” she said in a loud, clear voice.

Oliver grinned, and Frederick jabbed at him with the barrel of his gun. At the last minute, Oliver dodged the blow.

“You’re not taking Annabelle. She’s a Hollis, and she’s worth nothing to you.” Frederick’s harsh tone shook with fury.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” the other man said. She stared closer at him, her heart tripping faster as she recognized his voice. “She isn’t a Hollis but a Stephens. And she’s worth a few million dollars.” Her father yanked off his mask and stared straight at her.

Before she could open her mouth, she caught sight of two men riding hell-bent for her, their broad shoulders set with determination. Men she hadn’t seen in months.

A wave of blackness struck her, knocked her flat. She crumpled. And then everything went dark.

* * * *

Xander roared until his throat threatened to rupture. “No! Goddammit, that’s my wife!” He sent Bruiser tearing across the land, his hooves swallowing the distance between them.

When he neared the wagon, he pushed off and leaped into the bed. The thud of his horse’s hooves brought his mother around. She surged upward, and his father shoved her back down with a hand on her shoulder. Felicia had climbed down and cowered behind the wagon—he heard her whimpers.

But he had eyes only for Annabelle. She lay in the bottom of the wagon, pale and unmoving. “James, you take care of these bastards,” he barked and gathered his wife to his chest.

She felt fragile in his hold. He’d forgotten just how feminine she was after months of only James’s embraces. He cradled her head on his palm and stared into her face.

James raged at the men. One he’d never before set eyes on—a man with blue eyes and a day’s growth of hair on his face. The other was Bedford Stephens, millionaire railroad tycoon. And he was dressed as a common bandit.

“That’s my daughter, and we’ve come to claim her.”

“She’s not your property to claim. I have the document stating she’s my

wife,” Xander said in a hard tone. His gaze was drawn back to the beauty in his arms, stunned by the fullness of her lips and the delicate blue vein that ran across her closed eyelid.

Darlin’, I’m here. Open those beautiful eyes and look at me.

“She was my fiancée first.”

Xander jerked up his head just as James crushed his fist into Oliver Standish’s face. He toppled off his horse as if in slow motion, his eyes rolled up in his head. The sound of his body hitting the dirt didn’t give Xander enough satisfaction. Little besides the sight of two narrow graves would be enough.

“Say that again,” James taunted the man’s limp form.

Bedford Stephens brought his horse up to the side of the wagon, and he reached for Annabelle. “I’ll give you a million dollars right now for an annulment.”

Xander’s heart pounded with absolute bloodlust. Carefully, he lowered Annabelle into the bed of the wagon. He stood and in one step, came up against the side, on a higher level than her father. “Don’t you dare insult me.”

“A million and a half.”

“Why would you pay me off? What do you hope to gain?” He sneered at the man, wishing he could snap his neck but knowing to do so would send him far from Annabelle—to the grave. He’d be hanged for such a blatant crime.

“Her name’s been tarnished, and the reputation of my company is at stake. You thought word wouldn’t get out that she’d married the outlaw who fights me every leg of the rail line? Take the money I offer and apply for the annulment immediately. We’ll tell the world she was taken by force.”

If only you knew, you bastard. He glared at the man who was more his enemy now than ever. Hatred boiled in his gut.

“No deal,” James said, sighting down his weapon at Bedford.

He shifted. “Have some sense, man. She’s not worth what I’m offering. Your family will be secure. Your children.”

Margaret gave a strangled cry, and Xander shot her a hasty glance. At his feet, Annabelle’s leg twitched.

“No deal,” Xander repeated.

“What can she mean to you? Two million?”

Rage exploded in his chest, and he launched himself over the side of the wagon. He collided with Bedford, knocking him off his horse. They plummeted to the ground. Xander struck with a grunt, and he rolled onto one hip, sinking his fist into the man's mouth. Teeth gave, and his knuckles stung as they split.

"There's no amount of money that can buy her, you son of a bitch!" He cocked his arm once more, but a small body wedged between him and her father.

Annabelle.

Xander's gaze met hers, and in that instant, he lost all control. He'd shoot the man in cold blood and bury him out here on the prairie if need be. But Bedford wasn't taking his wife.

"No!" she cried, throwing up a hand to stop the arc of Xander's fist.

He let his arm dangle at his side, fingers tingling with the need to inflict damage. "Sweetheart, get back."

"That's right. She's Sweetheart Annie, my daughter. She belongs with me, not as the wife of a wanted man!"

"He's only wanted because he's fighting to stop you from stealing from the people of Texas," she spat, eyes sparking with anger.

Xander's lips twitched, and he almost smiled.

"Either you drop the charges against Xander and James and compensate those whose land you've commandeered, or I go to the papers. All of them. I'll spread the word across the country so fast, you won't know what hit you. Everyone will boycott your railroad."

"And you'll harm yourself. It's Stephens' money that kept you comfortable your entire life," her father retaliated.

She gained her feet and brushed the dust from her skirt with one hand, glaring at her father until the man's eyes slid away. "None of it matters. It never did. I won't be boxed in by you anymore, Father. Out here, as Xander's wife and a member of the Hollis family, I'm free."

"Free to be a hussy!"

White-hot anger ruptured Xander's hold on his control. He drove his fist into the man's gut. His opponent doubled up, wheezing and rolling as spittle and vomit ran from his lips.

"Sweetheart Annie is dead," she said in a flat tone, gazing down at her

father. "My place is here. With Xander and James. We have a baby to raise."

Xander's head snapped up. In two strides, James had her in his arms, turning her to scour her body for evidence that what she said was true. Xander gripped her elbow and swung her toward him, needing to see for himself. Was it true? Or was she bluffing in order to send her father away with another reason why she refused to regain her place in the Stephens household?

"My God," he whispered as his gaze lit upon the tiny bulge beneath her skirt.

James slid a hand protectively over it, his long fingers splayed to cup the child. Their child.

Her father rolled onto his knees, then stumbled to his feet. He swayed, but his gaze never left the three of them.

"It's true. A child." Xander buried his face in her hair, and she wrapped her arms tightly around his waist. James locked them both in a death grip.

Bedford snorted. "I never thought I'd see the daughter I raised act thusly."

Oliver had come to and now made a choked noise as he gained his mount and headed off in the other direction. Behind them, the fight was breaking up, with the Hollises left standing. Several railroad men lay on the ground, and many more were fleeing on horseback.

Annabelle pulled free of Xander's and James's holds and faced her father. "I beg you to see the harm you've brought to many. Sure, the railroad will help the people of the West. But if you do nothing but take, take, take, you'll never receive. I'm not so witless that I don't know the money you've poured into this endeavor."

"I owe the people nothing. The railroad needs their land, and they'll be glad of it later."

"But now they're starving because you've taken their fields and the land where their animals graze. Or in some cases, the railroad will run straight through their homes. Where do they turn when their houses are torn down for your gain? I beg you to see reason. To pay the people the two million you were prepared to pay for me to leave Xander."

"What kind of woman have you become?" Her father shook his head sadly. "I see the strong will your mother used to possess."

She rocked as if struck by his words and raised her chin a notch higher.

“I will endeavor to pass that trait on to my offspring.” Winding a hand around her midsection, she stared at her father with tears in her eyes. “I do not wish to part badly with you. You are still my only blood. I carry your grandchild.”

He twisted from her gaze as if she cut him to the quick. He paced away, and Xander watched him warily. The man was never going to accept her plea. He’d surely cut her from his life and continue to take from the Texans in order to build up his empire—an empire that was meaningless without an heir.

“Only you can set my husband and our lover free,” she called. Her voice rang in the silence. “You were willing to fight to bring me home, but you won’t lift a finger to help me gain my dreams?”

He whirled. “Your dreams include these two men—” His voice broke on his anger. “And to live out here as a common ranch wife, raising a string of children who will grow to be outlaws like their father? *If* he’s even the father!”

She held her own and took a step forward. Her shoulders shook, and Xander supported her with an arm around the waist, prepared to catch her if she swooned again. Damn, this was too much for her. In her condition, she shouldn’t have all this excitement. Hell, for that matter, what was she doing out here bouncing around in a wagon?

“This is what I always dreamed of. A big family to rally around me. The Hollises have sheltered me and given me more joy in a few short months than I experienced in a lifetime in Boston. Here, I can speak my mind, and no one censures me for it. I don’t have to be a sweetheart, complying with everyone’s whims but my own. Sweetheart Annie is no more, Father. But I’m here, and I’d love to invite you into my life. To get to know the new me and to see your grandchild blossom like the wildflowers in the fields.”

Xander’s heart flipped at her words. She didn’t resent a single moment. When he’d stolen her from the hotel, he’d gone with his gut, and it had been the right path for them all, including James. They’d all found love in the most unusual of ways but it was a love that was strong and true.

He rubbed his thumb over James’s hand where it rested on Annabelle’s waist. Their gazes met.

“Father,” she prompted, quivering with emotion. She lifted her gaze to Xander, then James, her eyes shining with unquestionable love.

Bedford Stephens took a hesitant step toward them. His hand trembled

at his side, and he clenched it into a fist. "I'm willing to negotiate with the homesteaders whose land we've used."

A cry burst from Annabelle, echoed behind from Xander's mother.

"And I'll allow these men to go free if they swear never to interfere with my operations again."

Xander nodded.

"Agreed," James said with a grin.

"As for embracing this life you've adopted, daughter, I'm not certain I can. But I'm willing to discuss it further."

"Back at the ranch," Frederick spoke up from his post by Xander's mother.

Annabelle surged forward and hugged her father. The man squeezed her back, and when he lifted his gaze, tears stood in his eyes. He nodded at Xander, and he returned it. He might agree to peace for the moment, but the man had a lot of work to do to prove himself. His family and James would help him keep an eye on Bedford, that was for sure.

Then, drawing his wife into his arms, he captured her mouth in a heart-soaring kiss as their baby thumped between them.

Chapter Fifteen

The musk-and-leather scents of Annabelle's men filled her head. She closed her eyes and let them sweep her into the house, first in James's arms, then transferred to Xander's. She tipped against his chest as he started up the staircase to their bedroom.

"She's got to be exhausted from that encounter and riding half the day. Get her into bed, and we'll keep watch until she wakes." James's baritone sent shivers down her spine.

Opening her eyes, she focused on Xander's handsome face inches from hers, memorizing each crease around his eyes and each bristly hair sprouting on his jaw that she'd forgotten in his absence.

"If you two think I'm going to sleep, you're crazy."

Xander's chest rumbled against her. "Is that so?"

"You can't make me."

"No one can make you do anything you've decided against, Annabelle." He kicked open the bedroom door and crossed the room with her. James's footsteps sounded on their heels. The three of them fell into bed together in a heap of tangled limbs.

James tilted her face to the side and claimed her mouth, his tongue sweeping deep after the initial brush of his lips. Juices bubbled up and overflowed in her, pooling in her sex. She inhaled sharply to gather more of his flavors.

Dark, forbidden passion clawed the walls of her core. After so many months spent languishing for their touch, they were here. And eager to please her, if their rigid cocks against her were any indication.

"Annabelle, we can't overtax you by loving you the way you want."

She stared at James's handsome face and caressed a path down his jaw with her thumb. "That's true, unfortunately," she said in an overly despondent voice.

Xander groaned and dropped his head to her collarbone, breathing hard. "Damn."

She couldn't help but grin. "It's good to know you still want me."

"Want you? Christ, woman, we've wanted nothing but you!" he exclaimed.

James nuzzled her throat. "It's true. We're done with being on the run. We're ready to settle. And thanks to your negotiations with your father, we can do just that."

"I only ask one thing," she said.

Both men fell still and looked at her expectantly. "I need you. Both of you. Now."

"But—"

"Lovemaking won't harm the baby. I asked your mother."

James rocked against her, grinding his hard cock. "We'll take it easy. Slow. And we can wait to share your body at the same time until after you've recovered from the delivery."

At the thought of them slipping into her body together, a fresh flood of cream squeezed from her folds. Hooking an arm around each, she drew them. Opening her mouth, she invited them to kiss her. Her mouth watered for a taste of them together.

Xander's groan rocked her as he probed the corner of her mouth. James sank his tongue into her mouth flipping his tongue against hers. Xander added his to the mix.

For long, mindless minutes, they teased each other. She relearned the textures of their tongues and the taste of their personal musk. A shiver of need wended through her. God, how had she survived a single minute without these men by her side, let alone months? Looking back, her days all blended together, the tedium broken only by a laugh shared with Graham or the occasional holiday.

Xander ran a hand down her torso to gently cup their child. A child who would be raised in a loving home with three people who would give their lives to ensure its happiness.

Xander withdrew to stare into her eyes, and his throat bobbed as he fought to find words. "I can't believe it, Annabelle."

Her lips spread in a smile. She looked at him, then James, her heart fuller than she'd ever thought possible. "It's ours. I dare anyone to question where he belongs."

James quirked a brow. "Ours?"

She nodded. "I think of him as a Hollis. And James, I guess I think of you this way too."

"Now that we're free, I'll take you home to spend time with my parents. They didn't have enough time to get to know you at the wedding," he said with glowing eyes.

The pressure low in her belly demanded her attention, and she wriggled her hips. Taking her cue, Xander slid his hand downward to cup her mound through the cloth of her dress. Her pussy clenched and released, begging for his touch even as James lowered his head to her breasts and drew one hard nipple into his mouth through her bodice.

She moaned, tossed her head back as ecstasy washed through her. Heat threaded through her as they stroked and kneaded her flesh. She emitted several sharp cries when Xander tugged up her skirt and plunged a finger into her hungry folds.

She gripped him with her interior muscles. He painted the juices of her arousal over her clit.

James moaned. "I can almost taste her honey. Damn, Xander. Go down and get that cream to share with me."

His heated words thundered through her skull like a group of wild horses trampling the prairie. She held her breath as Xander obeyed.

From the V of her thighs, he flashed his gaze at her before dipping his tongue into her sensitive seam. She bucked upward, and James reached into her bodice, pulling her breasts free one by one. His rough fingertips worked her nubs back and forth while Xander lapped at her needy pussy.

Juices drenched him, and he groaned, vibrating her sensitive tissues. Around and around, he flicked his tongue over her clit. She strained for more, her hands fisted in the bedcovers as her men nipped and kissed and licked her.

When she could hold back no longer, she stiffened. And came. Release spiked through her. She twisted and arched beneath his tongue. He drove it deep, stroking her pulsating walls.

Before she could come down, he surged upward to plant his mouth over James's, sharing her flavors between their strong tongues. For a long minute, she watched James lap at the love fluids. She came down slowly, her nerves pinging and the aftershocks still racing through her veins.

She reached for their waistbands, eager to touch the velvety steel she'd craved for so long. Xander thrust his hips forward, bringing his length into her hand. She unfastened his pants and unleashed his rod. James followed. She curled her fingers around each thick shaft and pumped them softly until cum oozed from the tips.

"I want them both in my mouth. Come here."

With shining eyes, Xander and James hitched themselves onto their knees and poised their cocks at her mouth. She laved each with her tongue, wetting the flesh that stiffened further for her.

"Mmm."

"Christ, I'm going to last fourteen seconds, darlin'." James bit off the words.

Xander pressed forward until his thick head filled her mouth. She sucked on it, drawing James forward until the mushroomed head chafed against Xander's. She locked their shafts together with her fingers and tried to suck both at the same time. Her lips stretched.

Xander shuddered. "Make that ten seconds." He watched her for another moment before pulling back. "I can't. I'm going to lose it, and I want to bury my cock in your hot little body."

"Good, because I get your ass," James rasped.

Electricity ran rampant through Annabelle's body as James gathered some of her cream and lubricated his shaft. Xander hitched her legs around his waist, and in one thrust, he joined them. Buried to the root. Pulsating.

"I'm ready to blow. Fuck. She's so hot. So tight, James."

"Shit, so are you." James eased his way into Xander's body, driving him deeper within her.

The pleasure washing over Xander's features filled her heart with joy. Over his shoulder, she met James's hooded eyes and knew completion. Her pussy contracted once. Twice.

And Xander began to move. He and James timed their actions, going slowly at first. Then as the pleasure grew, they slammed harder, fucking deeper with each pass. Bliss curled through her belly. She savored the burn, never wanting it to end.

When Xander sank into her wet flesh one more time, she splintered. "She's coming," he groaned and unloaded his hot cum into her pussy.

James's jaw clenched. He drilled into Xander's body and tipped over the edge of his own release. They rocked together for long minutes, slowing, breathing more deeply as the waves ebbed away.

With a gentle movement, James withdrew from Xander's body. He collapsed onto the bed besides Annabelle and drew her into his arms. Xander fell forward with a final grunt, holding them both but careful to keep his weight suspended so he didn't crush her.

Her senses returned, and she realized she heard voices below, lifted as if in celebration. Excited voices.

"What do you suppose it is?" she asked against James's shoulder.

He caressed her damp hair off her forehead. "Unless the house is about to blow up, I don't care. I'm happy to be home."

"Soon we'll have a home of our own," Xander said. "The top forty is already marked out for a cabin. James and I did it before we left. My brothers and I can start felling trees tomorrow."

She sighed with pleasure at the thought of her own space, though she'd miss Margaret's biscuits. Snuggling deeper into their arms, she again heard the happy voices below.

"I think we'd better see what has everyone so riled up," Xander said. He eased from her body and crossed to the dry sink, where he poured some water and wet a towel. He brought it back and cleaned her up.

She closed her eyes, suddenly too sleepy to respond to anything. James nudged her, and she opened her eyes.

"Come on, sleepyhead. We're not letting you out of our sight." He helped her stand, then straightened her skirts and adjusted her bodice once again. "Next time, we'll take off the dress. We won't be in such a hurry."

She grinned. "I didn't mind at all." At the reminder of the pleasurable moments before, she started to instantly climb the steep slope of need. But she could wait. *Now I have them all to myself whenever I want them.*

Following their broad backs downstairs, she entered the kitchen in time to see Graham swing out the door. She stared through the window at him, alarmed by the length of his strides. Was he okay?

She rushed past the knot of men gathered in the doorway and threw herself into the yard. She squinted into the sun. "Graham!"

He spun at once at the sound of her voice and came back, the smile on

his face calming her worry that he'd been upset.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Where are you going?"

"To hitch up the team. You're taking a trip."

* * * *

Xander cradled Annabelle on his lap as the wagon bounced across the field between their farm and his uncle's. She settled against him, one arm clinging to his neck and her other hand in James's.

"I wonder what the surprise is," she said for the tenth time.

He smiled against her hair, not caring a whit about the surprise but just happy to be with her once again. Curling his fingers around her wrist, he felt her pulse drumming rhythmically. He still wasn't over the shock of seeing her faint earlier. He never wanted to see it again.

James met his gaze, and they shared a grin. The bracket cut around his mouth echoed his joy. They'd spent so much time together over the course of their lives, and now they'd opened a new chapter. This story would have a happily ever after.

"It's so good to have you boys home again," his mother said, leaning forward to pat his arm.

"Thank you for taking good care of Annabelle in my absence. I see you fattened her up." He touched her rounded belly, and she smacked him playfully.

"It's all those biscuits. I don't know if I can live without them when we finally have our own place."

"Our door's always open and a fresh batch of biscuits always in the larder. Xander, you and James have a fabulous bread maker on your hands."

Xander leaned away to peer down at Annabelle snuggled against his chest. "Is that so?"

She nodded shyly. James reached for her, and Xander passed her willingly into his arms. She tucked her head beneath his chin and gazed at Xander unblinkingly. "You believe Father will still be at the ranch when we return?"

"After living rough on the trail to find you? He's probably curled up in the spare room, enjoying the comforts of a bed and soft pillow."

She smiled, but a second later bit her lip. She worried it back and forth.

Xander trailed his fingertip over her lower lip.

“What’s troubling you?”

“I hope he can learn to accept this as your family has.” She raised her hand, which was still laced with James’s and captured Xander’s free hand.

“Will it bother you if he doesn’t?” Above all, he wished for her happiness. But he’d never give her up either.

After a minute, she shook her head. “I don’t know what stance he’ll take, but I’m content, and that’s all that matters. I spent years in a state of discontentment. Now that I’ve found where I truly belong, nothing could tear me away.”

Xander brushed his lips over hers, then raised his head and stamped his mouth over James’s. “I know I’ve got what I want. I couldn’t ask for more.”

Ten minutes later, in the dim recesses of the barn, he was proven wrong. When Graham opened the farthest stall to reveal a knobby-kneed foal with the same markings as its grandmother Pete, his heart soared with elation.

“Annabelle’s gift to you,” Graham said, clapping Xander on the back.

He grasped Graham’s hand and squeezed it hard. “Thank you both. And thank you, Graham, for being there for her during these long months we’ve been gone.”

“It was a pleasure. She’s given me a different outlook on life.”

Xander still saw the grim light in the recesses of his cousin’s eyes—a spark of sadness the man would never truly lose. But when his gaze shifted to Annabelle, his smile was reflected there.

“She’s a treasure. Treat her as such.”

Xander snaked an arm around her and hugged her tight. James wrapped an arm around both, adding his warmth against the chill of the barn. “I’d never dream of less. The foal is beautiful, darlin’.”

“What will you name it?”

Glancing from face to happy face, he only knew one name that would suit. “Why, I’ll name it Pete.”

THE END

TRAIL OF LUST

Hollis Boys 2

Em Petrova

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Chapter One

“Thank the Lord above that you’re here, Hollis. I need a strong pair of arms for this job.” Silas Allen’s voice sounded from the darkened depths of the cow barn.

Graham Hollis squinted into the dimness, pausing in the entrance to let his eyes adjust. The reek of hay and animal filled his senses. A shaft of light broke through the high window, and dust motes swirled hectically in the beam. He stepped into the barn, and his eyes seemed to immediately adjust.

“I’m glad to help.” He extended a hand to his neighbor, and they shook. Silas was an hour’s hard ride from Graham’s family ranch—the Hollis Ranch. A work hand had arrived at the house early that morning, asking for help with pulling a calf.

“How long has she been having difficulty?” Graham asked Silas. He crossed the barn to the stall, from which the sounds of heavy breathing emanated. He zeroed in on the heifer, taking stock of her condition instantly. She was looking drained—not a good sign. The Hollises were known for raising horseflesh, but they raised their share of other livestock to live on. They’d even supplied the Confederacy during the war.

Jerking away from that thought, Graham knelt down in the hay before the reclining cow. Her belly hitched and rolled, her thick brown hide quivering. A long, guttural noise burst from her muzzle.

“She needs attention and quick.”

“Yessir, that calf’s been trying to set eyes on the world for many hours now. As soon as I realized Clarabell wasn’t going to birth it on her own, I sent for you,” Silas said.

Graham cast a sidelong look at the slip of a woman hiding in the shadows. “Why don’t you fetch me that rope on the far wall?” His command was followed by a stunned silence.

“Come on out here, Kathleen, and do the man’s bidding,” Silas said to his daughter.

As a lithe young woman scurried across the hay, her thick auburn hair a tangled braid on her spine, Graham hid his grin. The Allen girl was known as

“Nibby” to her neighbors because as a little girl, she was always skulking around where she wasn’t allowed, listening to important adult conversations. She’d earned the name because her face was usually pressed to the window, her nose mashed into a nib.

Her light footsteps tripped back to him. She thrust a rope over his shoulder. He sat back on his heels and started rolling up his shirtsleeves in preparation for the dirty business of calf pulling.

“Just hold on to it, Nibby,” he said. She grunted, and he smiled outright at her obvious discomposure at being called Nibby. Did she think he wouldn’t remember after all these years? The war had stolen a lot of memories from him and replaced them with bad ones, but he recalled the days before he and his cousin Xander rode off to join up with the Second Cavalry. They’d swung by the Allen place and spent some time putting up hay for them. Nibby had followed him all over the ranch.

She shifted closer at the same moment Graham drew a deep breath. The perfume of lavender and pure female walloped him. Not just female. *Aroused* female.

Unable to stop himself, he cast a glance over his shoulder, finding her inches away. If he turned fully, he’d be directly in front of her sex. Visions ripped through him of pushing her skirts up, the fabric draping over his wrists as he leaned in and inhaled that delicious perfumed spot between her thighs

Fuck. You’re in need of a trip to town. No whorehouse could fulfill the need in him for a tender woman, though. The cats that strutted in those houses were far from naive.

Nibby should be at least eighteen by now, shouldn’t she? He passed a hand over his face, hoping to scramble the lust on his features before her father called him out.

He accepted the rope from her. “Thank you kindly.”

“You’re welcome,” came her soft reply.

The hairs on his nape lifted to the whispery sound, every inch of his cock on fire now. Damn, he was going to have to pull this calf and hightail it out of here before Silas caught sight of his erection.

Hoping she’d move away, he wrapped the rope around the small cloven hooves of the calf that were visibly protruding from its mother. As he looped the rope, he had to reach inside the cow’s slimy womb. Another long moan

sounded.

“Oh, poor Clarabell.” Nibby scooted around him and dropped to her knees at the cow’s head.

“You be careful there, miss. She’s a might unhappy.” Graham tugged on the rope, checking to see if it was secure. “Silas, do you happen to have a lantern? I could use a spot of light.”

“Sure do.” Footsteps crunched behind them as Kathleen’s father went off in search of a lantern. Hopefully he wouldn’t go too damn far. After gulping breath after breath of the woman’s scent, Graham couldn’t be responsible for his actions. His cock was about to burst the confines of his pants.

He cast a sidelong look at her and found her staring at him openly. Without meaning to, he let his gaze roam downward to the lush globes of her breasts pressing against the white linen of her blouse.

Oh Lord.

In recent years, he hadn’t been a praying man, but at this minute, he needed all the help he could get. It might take divine intervention to keep him from closing his hand over one of those round breasts and clamping the other on her waspish waist.

“How old are you?” he asked with too much force.

Her eyes widened, flashing a darker hue. What color were they exactly? Now Graham wanted the lantern light so he could discern their color. Her pouty pink lips opened and then shut abruptly in shock at his ungentlemanly question.

Finally, she seemed to gain her wits as the crunch of hay preceded her father to the stall. “You remember that horrid nickname, Mr. Hollis. I’m surprised you don’t recall my age.”

He tore his gaze from her mouth before he lunged forward and kissed the hell out of her. He gave the rope another tug to distract himself, and the cow released another low. “I was a grown man the last time I saw you, remember. And you were barely knee-high.”

Even through the dim light, he saw her face mottle dark red. Pitching her voice low, she infused it with the wrath he’d ignited.

“I was *not* knee-high, Mr. Hollis. In fact, I was ten years old!”

“Which makes you...?”

“Eighteen.”

“Here you are, Hollis.” Silas moved into the wooden stall with them, the glowing lantern held aloft. Tension crackled in the very air. Nibby tore her gaze from Graham’s but not before he got a good look at her eyes.

Fuck, cornflower blue. I’m a dead man.

Without ceremony, he wrapped the coarse rope around both hands. He locked his muscles and tugged. The calf moved within its warm, wet home, the bony ankles appearing. The cow’s belly undulated. He yanked again, digging in his boot heels to gain some traction. The calf continued to come inch by precious inch.

At Clarabell’s head, Nibby crooned, using quiet, nonsensical words. A barn cat slinked up to her and began to rub itself on her hip.

“Christ,” he said before he could bite off the curse.

Nibby shot him a glance that went straight to his groin. If he didn’t get out of here soon, he’d be unmanned in a dank barn and be forced to ride home in a state of sticky wetness.

He put his back into pulling the calf. He used as much exertion on the rope as he could. The little body gave a few inches at once, and he nearly toppled backward. Nibby loosed a gasp that only served to ignite him further. Lurid thoughts revolved through his mind. Could he make her issue that sound in bed?

With a primal roar, he pulled the body of the calf from its mother. It slid into the hay nose first—a wet and sloppy and solid little form.

Nibby cried out and jumped to her feet. Graham released the rope and clenched his hands into fists to keep from grabbing the woman, tossing her over his shoulder, and making off with her.

A Hollis never dallies, he reminded himself. The men in his family didn’t trifle with women. They married them or they kept their peckers in their pants.

As Graham recovered from his panting desire, Silas pushed past him and quickly unbound the calf’s front legs. The heifer lurched upward to nudge its baby. It began licking it with long, slow laps of its tongue.

Nibby drifted a step backward until she stood at Graham’s side. Heat ebbed off her tight little body and scorched him.

“I thank you mightily for that, Hollis,” Silas was saying. The older

gentleman stood and brushed the loose bits of hay from his pants. “There’s a spring out back where you can clean up.” He swung his bright gaze to his daughter, who was blushing furiously.

What was going on in her pretty little head? Graham didn’t even want to know.

“Kathleen will show you the way.”

Graham wanted nothing more than to turn on his heel and run back to his horse. He needed to get the hell away from Kathleen, not to be left alone with her, copious amounts of water, and a white, lace-trimmed linen shirt that would so easily reveal the color of her skin beneath when wet.

He thwacked a hand against his thigh. Through a tense jaw, he spoke. “Thank you kindly.”

Was that a puff of air leaving her lips? His cock hardened more, if such a thing were possible.

“Uh... Just this way, Mr. Hollis.” She slipped past him without even a brushing of their sleeves. His balls drew up tightly to his body as the air stirred around her, the currents bringing her scent fully into his head once more.

Stiffly, he followed a few paces behind her. Try as he might, he couldn’t keep his gaze from scouring her curves. Her waist was tinier than he’d first thought, her hips swelling out in womanly splendor. She kept her back ramrod straight, but she moved with the loping grace of a woman well accustomed to country living.

He flicked his gaze down to her feet. Her bare heels flashed beneath her churning skirts. How many petticoats did she have on? Surely she was outfitted like a proper lady, being eighteen.

Eighteen and fair game.

He stifled a groan. Sweat had broken out all over his body, and it had very little to do with pulling that calf. Need blazed within him, a wildfire that would not be easily doused.

The ground was rocky and uneven between the barn and the spring. A few hundred yards off, the house stood, a weather-beaten but sturdy structure quite like the owner, Silas. The rest of the farm looked to be in need of some work, though. The barn had some loose boards and there simply wasn’t enough ventilation for the cattle, let alone light. How had Silas managed to raise animals in such a shelter? The Hollis family believed in giving their

animals plenty of sunlight.

Ahead of Graham, Kathleen sashayed through the high grasses. As they neared the spring, she slowed, picking her way more slowly in her bare feet.

He caught up to her. "Thank you for your assistance in the barn."

She sniffed and lifted her chin a notch, bringing his attention to the slender column of her throat. Her skin was as pale as new milk, marred only by a faint spattering of freckles across her nose and forehead.

He looked away. Damn, those freckles were as enticing as the rest of her. She had to have a fault besides being nosy, but it wasn't her appearance.

When she continued to ignore him, he attempted to get a closer look at her. The brim of his hat hung low, and he pushed it back.

She stopped walking and looked at him long and hard, her fingers twitching in the fabric of her skirt. All at once, he realized she was angry.

"Listen, I'm very sorry about calling you that nickname. It came to my mouth before my brain could snag it back."

She narrowed her eyes, but the corner of her full lips twitched.

He doffed his hat, holding it theatrically over his heart. "Please accept my apology, miss."

She went completely still. Her eyes grew rounder, accentuating the dark fringe of lashes surrounding the very blue depths. She was like stone, unmoving. Worry jumped into his chest. Was she going to faint from the heat? Had she been stung by a bee? He'd known a man in the war who had died from bee stings before the Yanks could get him. Maybe she was affected similarly. She wasn't wearing shoes.

He reached out for her automatically. Putting his hands on her was the only way to find out if she was truly all right.

His fingers brushed the underside of her arm and wrapped around her wrist. He stared down at them, wondering how that had happened while reveling in the delicateness of her bones. His fingers were very dark against the ivory of her blouse.

"Nib—I mean, miss? Are you all right?"

Her breath was coming fast, her breasts rising and falling, making the cloth of her shirt strain over them.

"M—" His words were cut off as she bridged the gap between them, stepping right into his arms.

One last thought flitted through his head. *A dead man.*

SHIVERS RIPPLED DOWN Kathleen's spine and took up residence in her lower belly. She gave in to the dark feelings, guided by pure instinct as she threw herself at the handsome and rugged cowboy. She knew nothing about him other than what was rumored. Funny thing was, she'd had no inkling how hungry she was for a male touch until she set eyes on him. He had *those* eyes—his gaze pierced her to the depths of her soul. He looked right into her.

Graham caught her easily, lifting her onto tiptoe and settling his mouth over hers. Shock tore her in two. Disjointed thoughts loomed up and fled as soon as they materialized. *Hot. Musk. Muscles. Lord, save me.*

When she'd agreed to lead him to the spring, she'd had no intention of throwing herself at him. The Hollis men were strong men—men who knew what they wanted. If Graham had wanted a woman, he would have had one before now.

The real shock was her response to him. Her pa had been talking to her for more than a year about finding that "special someone," but until she saw Graham Hollis, the words had been flat. When she'd heard that nickname, Nibby, a wellspring of emotion had risen inside her. Her childish crush had suddenly come to life once more. Now she had a chance with this man who'd been the source of many daydreams in the past.

Graham wrapped his thick arms around her waist and pulled her snugly against his big chest, allowing her no room to breathe even if she could have. The distant sound of the wind ruffling the tall grasses reached her. Time seemed to slow.

Using his thumb, he applied pressure to her jaw until she opened her mouth for him. Heat blossomed in her core as the masculine flavors rushed into her from his lips and—

His tongue. She reeled. He gingerly touched the tip of his tongue to hers. The velvety gesture stroked her intimately—a caress she'd never known before. Her fingertips tingled, and her arms suddenly grew weightless. She snaked them around his neck and drew him to her, angling her head to receive his kiss.

A groan rumbled in his chest, enflaming her. Juices pooled between her thighs, and her sex throbbed heavily as it did sometimes when she awakened

from dreams of a strong man holding her.

Graham Hollis was indeed a strong man. He kissed her with a thoroughness she'd wholeheartedly expected. But when his kiss turned rough, her body tingled to life. He chased her tongue into the depths of her mouth, tasting her deeply, each flick driving her toward some unseen need.

Her knees turned to water, and she sagged. He lashed her to him, scraping her skin with his unshaven jaw as he plundered her mouth.

Beneath her hands, the hair on his nape was soft and thick. The deep brown color had dizzied her with memories the instant he'd removed his hat. Of course she'd remembered from her childhood that he had hair this color, but in the sun it had gleamed like a fur pelt. She threaded her fingers through the mass, and he shuddered.

Suddenly, he tore his mouth away. She followed him, hungry for more of the sensations he raised in her. A growl emanated from his throat. She swung her gaze up and saw the primitive passion in his golden-brown eyes.

A ragged sigh left her.

"Miss..."

"Kathleen." She sounded as if she'd outrun a pack of wolves. Staring at the gleam in his eyes, she wondered if she had. *No, I threw myself into the jaws of the biggest, most dangerous one.*

He released her and took a step back, shaking himself. "I'm sorry for that—"

"It was me." She discovered that bold trait that had put her in his arms.

"Well, yes, that's true, but I'm old enough to know better than to trifle ___"

She prickled with irritation. She was no child. She knew what went on between men and women. "I'm old enough too." Her words sounded childish, though.

"All right," he said slowly, letting his gaze roam all over her as he had in the barn. Then, the touch had been almost a caress and had inspired such longing in her she'd acted the instant she got him alone.

Her father had always had called her impulsive, and this event seemed to prove it. She couldn't even remember what had brought them out here. At the moment, her heart was racing, drumming loudly within her head. Her blood was still singing, and her skin lifted in gooseflesh.

Graham Hollis was known to be a recluse in these parts. He stuck to the family ranch and rarely ventured off. After the war, word was he hadn't come home immediately but stayed away, roving the countryside. Many times Kathleen had puzzled over this. Why would a man have any desire to stay away after being on the march for so many years?

Staring at him, she saw evidence of the hard times he'd endured. Small creases fanned out from his glittering eyes and bracketed his mouth. He didn't wear a mustache as some men she knew, but it didn't look as if he'd shaved in many days either.

A shiver coursed down her spine at the thought of him bent over a washbasin, using a straightedge on his chiseled jaw.

He cleared his throat, bringing her back to the moment. A moment that was now pulsating with energy and attraction. She burned to move into his arms again.

"The, uh...spring?"

"Oh." With some effort, she twisted away and headed down the rocky slope.

The water bubbled up out of the dark earth. He leaned over it and scooped up a handful. A chill ran through her just watching him, because she knew from years of experience that the temperature never warmed up, even in the dead of summer.

Graham splashed the water over his face, letting it run down his neck. She gaped at him, stunned that he hadn't even turned a hair at the cold. Then again, she might not either after the kiss they'd shared. Warmth still infused her.

He washed his hands to the elbows and then splashed his face again. Without turning, he said, "I can find my way back, Miss Allen."

Irritation sliced through the fog of sensual pleasure. She dug her toes into the dirt. "All right, then. I'll just be going." With that, she turned and walked off.

Each footstep carrying her away made her ache to turn around and see if he was watching. He hadn't been immune to her—had kissed her with all the ferocity she'd heard the Hollis boys possessed.

Her nipples were two tight buds inside her blouse. She longed to strip down and sink into the hip bath, letting the water caress them. She continued on, walking back to the house slowly enough that he could catch up to her.

Again, she wanted to look over her shoulder but dared not.

Passing the barn, she heard her father talking to the hired hand about the new calf. Worry infused her. In the past few months, her father's strength had begun to wane. He'd hired a young man to help him with the fields and cattle, but when her pa finally grew too old and worn, who would take over the ranch? Her brothers were all gone—two younger brothers to disease during their childhoods, and her older brother lost to the war. She was the last standing child of Silas and Emma Allen, and there was no way she could run this ranch.

Her father had broached the subject of her marrying soon. She was of age, after all. But she refused to bind herself to someone who didn't care for her. Lately, she'd been receiving correspondence from a distant cousin in Wyoming, and she suspected her father was seeking a match between them.

She also had a niggling feeling that the hired man, Jenkins, was interested in her. The way he looked at her made her hackles rise. She shared three square meals a day with him, but that didn't mean she liked him. And she certainly had no interest in him the way she did Graham Hollis.

Pulled from her thoughts, she caught the footsteps behind her. *Graham*. He wrapped his fingers around her wrist and dragged her to a stop.

She gasped, spinning and finding herself too close to him. She clamped her hands into fists and hid them in her skirts. Obviously she wasn't to be trusted around this man. She'd practically attacked him. He did things to her insides that she couldn't explain. His presence made her think about rumpled sheets and the salty taste of his skin.

She met his forceful gaze and nearly shrank at his thunderous expression. "You have need of something, sir?" Her voice wobbled, all of her boldness suddenly nonexistent.

"Yeah, I do. This." He plucked her off her feet and pinned her against the side of an outbuilding. His broad chest was two of hers at least. He was so tall his head blocked out the sun when he leaned in.

Trailing his lips back and forth over hers, he raised shivers with his gentle touch. Each pass lit another fire inside her until she blazed with need. When she could be teased no more, she jerked his head down at the moment she surged upward. He groaned, slanting his mouth over hers, drinking from her until she was boneless in his hold.

He splayed a hand across her back, applying the perfect pressure. The

knot in her lower belly tightened. He slipped his other hand around her, skimming her ribs.

White heat ripped through her. *This is how it's meant to be.*

Suddenly, male voices broke through to her. Her befuddled mind didn't process them immediately, but apparently Graham's did.

He released her so swiftly her spine and the back of her head struck the wall behind her.

"Damn, I'm sorry." He slid a hand behind her skull, cradling it in one big palm as he glanced around. When he realized what she already suspected—that her father and the hired man weren't standing feet away, witnessing their carnal act—the lines around Graham's eyes eased.

She stared up at him, wondering if he experienced the riotous emotions she did when they kissed. He ran the pad of his thumb over her lower lip, smearing the moisture there. Her breathing hitched.

"In the hour I've been here with you, I've apologized more than I ever have in my life." His tone was half angry, half amused. He leaned in closer. "You don't want to mess with a man like me, Miss Allen. I'm no good for you."

A pang of regret struck her. While she hadn't meant to steal his kisses, she'd reveled in every tongue flick. Perhaps all kisses were this good, but she didn't think so. However, his words told her he had no intention of getting that close again.

He moved back a few steps as if to solidify her thought and gave her one last grim look before twisting on a heel and striding off toward the barn. Kathleen remained where she was, leaning heavily against the wall of the outbuilding, allowing it to support her until her quivering legs decided to.

What was she doing? She hadn't kissed Graham with the thought of ensnaring him as her husband, but now she could think of little else. Climbing into bed with any man besides that rough, rugged Hollis was unacceptable. She'd listened to her body when she'd thrown herself into his embrace. Should she listen to her mind? It was telling her to display her charms and see what came of it. Maybe she could convince him he wasn't bad for her after all.

Gathering her skirts, she set off for the barn. Determination burned inside her, which was good because it tamped down the uncertainty in her soul. She was a maid, unsoiled and inexperienced. And she was young.

Perhaps he was right—playing with a man of Graham Hollis’s experience and strength was dangerous.

He was war-hardened and had performed unspeakable acts during battle. Kathleen had heard reports of soldiers turning into thieves, murderers, and rapists. While she didn’t think Graham was any of these things, he could definitely put the fear of God into a person. He was a Hollis man, after all.

That wasn’t about to stop her.

She strolled past the barn entrance and glanced inside.

“Come, Kathleen. See the new addition to the barn,” her father called out.

She halted in her tracks and started into the structure, blinded for a moment by the dimness. Once her eyes adjusted, she easily made out Graham’s tall form. He moved toward the stall, his fists clenched and his hat pulled low over his eyes.

Was he glaring at her?

She tried to appear indifferent to the touch of his gaze, but her insides quivered. In the short time since she’d set eyes on him, she’d made up her mind she wanted a man exactly like him. Or, more particularly, *him*.

She carefully avoided looking at him, though every inch of her flesh rose to his presence. Instead, she peered into the stall at the newborn calf, which had gained its feet and stood with legs splayed outward.

It was impossible not to smile at the sight of the dear little face, its long lashes bristly over its newly opened eyes. She moved into the stall and stroked Clarabell’s nose. “Well done, my beauty,” she crooned.

Glancing up, she caught Graham’s sharp movement as he tugged his hat lower. Another notch and it would be completely pulled over his nose.

A laugh bubbled up her throat and trickled out. She turned back to the cow, trying to disguise her slip as meant for the beasts. *It is meant for a beast of a different breed.*

She struggled to draw breath as she realized this was exactly the reason she was so drawn to Graham. He was no ordinary man. She knew enough of his past to know pain still clutched him tightly. It was etched around his mouth and in the depths of his golden-brown eyes. Even before the war, Graham had stood out from the happy-go-lucky Hollis bunch. Something about his darkness had always called to her.

He took a hasty step toward her and then drew up short. But not before her father caught the gesture.

“I’m surprised you’re not abed, Kathleen,” Pa said. He shot a glance at Graham out of the corner of his eye. “She enjoys walks in the moonlight and is often up until all hours.”

Her heart thrilled, and she suddenly felt hot and cold, jittery. Her pa was giving Graham important information, providing him an opportunity to return and find her alone. She fought her smile, wanting to run to her father and hug him tight.

“A fine calf, Pa. Thank you for your assistance, Mr. Hollis.” She drifted past him, aware of his scent and the energy rolling off him in waves. “I’ll be inside. I’ve got some baking to do.”

She left the barn. This time, she had no urge to look over her shoulder to see if Graham’s gaze followed her. Because she knew this evening when she was out walking through the high grasses and staring at the stars, she’d have company.

Chapter Two

Graham paced before the stable in the late evening hours, driving his boot heels into the earth and cutting divots. It did nothing to lighten his mood. The insatiable need to sink his fists into something hard rose up in his mind.

As often happened when he was in a passion, images flitted in his mind, rapid-fire scenes that brought more torment than ease. *Yanking a man off his feet and driving his knife into his chest, leaving the blade quivering as Graham ran on into the battle. Blue coats coming at them, marching on and on, the fear sucking at Graham's chest as he stared at the sea of faces—men he was about to kill.*

Bella's dark eyes rolling up in her head...

“Fuck!” He slammed his fist into the side of the stable, causing the board to shake beneath the force. His knuckles split and burned as blood oozed from the cuts. He struck the board again, hoping to crush through it this time and in some way alleviate the painful emotion pounding through his veins.

That woman looked nothing like his deceased wife, Bella, and yet she was in his blood the same way.

Kathleen.

“Damn little temptress.” He muttered it to the darkness, but inside the stables, his horse whickered in answer. The noise inspired images of him flying across the plains, the breeze filling his nostrils, and the horse's hooves drumming in time to his heart.

The sound galvanized him. He had to go see her again.

Cradling his stinging knuckles, he went inside the stable and with only the light of the moon to guide him, saddled his steed. Old Gray had fought with him, seen him through the last few years of war. The speckled gray coat of his horse shivered as he settled the saddle atop the beast's back.

He crooned to the horse while he adjusted the straps. At the end, he'd only had Old Gray to talk to. He and his cousin Xander had been split up and sent to two different cavalry regiments to fill in where they were shorthanded.

By then, Bella had been in the grave over a year.

Don't think of her.

He swung up into the saddle, and Old Gray danced sideways, thumping the wooden feed box with his flank. Graham stroked the horse's neck and leaned over to speak softly to him. "You're as skittish as I am tonight. Let's gallop and get it out of our blood."

He acknowledged the reason for his troubles was one little auburn-haired woman. Dammit, if only she were still a child, he'd have no issues. He wouldn't have laid a hand on her. And he sure as hell wouldn't be traveling an hour across the plains just to see her walking with the moon's glow on her glossy hair.

He gripped the reins more tightly as they galloped across the fields, hoping to eliminate the memory of her warm, silken tresses beneath his fingers. Her braid had felt like a living creature as it slid through his palm. And her lips—

Stop.

He swung his head right and left, searching for dangers. In this part of the country, a man never could be too careful. There were outlaws and bands of thieves roaming the lands, killing and pilfering. Indians and wild animals also supplied their share of the worry pie. Was it even safe for Kathleen to walk outside alone in the dark?

For him, it was never safe. During the war, he'd turned over a traitor named Wabash to his superiors, and the man had been imprisoned ever since. However, it was rumored he'd escaped and was making his way to South Texas. To find Graham. Yet another reason not to get tangled up with Miss Allen. Until Wabash was dead, Graham couldn't bring a woman into his life.

Too late. The voice in the back of his mind spoke with quiet force.

He dug his heels into the horse's sides, and the beast launched forward into the velvety blackness. The sweet tang of crushed grasses lifted with each rolling stride. Graham hated to admit it, but he yearned for something more—the scents of lavender and feminine musk.

Bringing his fingers to his nose, he inhaled. The faint traces of Kathleen's scent still clung to him. His cock throbbed to life. He spurred the horse faster until they galloped wildly toward the Allen ranch.

Graham's mind roved over the events of that day. After a teeth-grinding ride back to his ranch, he'd gone straight to his room and stroked his

cock to completion. The flavors of Kathleen's kisses still lay on his tongue, and the feel of her body pressed tightly to his had sent him over the edge with a swiftness that stole his breath.

His cock pressed hard against his fly, demanding exit. He had to get his body under control before he rode up to the Allen property. He couldn't very well blaze in there with a raging erection and corner Kathleen—

What the hell was he doing? He should turn around immediately.

His shaft oozed precum as if taunting him to try just that. Turn around and see if he could get her out of his system. He hadn't been able to forget Bella. After one night with the lovely camp follower, he'd married her so no one else could touch her. Kathleen had the same type of hold on him.

Pain radiated through his chest. Getting the two women tangled in his mind—in his heart—would only further his misery. Bella had been his everything.

Could Kathleen be that too?

Guilt washed over him. No, there was only one Bella for him.

Again, he saw Kathleen's glowing gaze in his mind's eye. Could he expose his heart again? For a chance with her?

He'd failed Bella, and she'd paid for it with her life. He couldn't bring another woman into his life—failure had branded him permanently. He could never keep Kathleen safe either.

“Goddammit!” he yelled to the black sky. Old Gray continued to roll and shift beneath him, running full tilt in the direction Graham sent him.

By the time he reached the border of the Allen property, he was in a state of torment. Just thinking about finding Kathleen outside alone sent him into shudders of need.

He slowed Old Gray and dismounted. To keep from bringing attention to the sound of a rider, he'd tether the horse and go in on foot.

The moon reflected off the water in the horse trough and the distant pond beside the paddock. In general, the ranch was in good repair. Silas's decision to bring a young cowboy in to help was a solid one. He had no sons—something Graham's family had in abundance.

The four Hollis brothers had settled a massive piece of property, which they'd promptly divided into equal portions. Their families quickly grew—three sons to each. Not a single life lost either, even during the war.

Thankfully, only two of them were old enough to participate in that losing battle. Otherwise, who knew how many Hollis lives would have been lost?

Graham shook himself. The last thing he wanted to think about now was the war. It had a way of sneaking up on him, consuming his life. Right now he wanted to focus on the stunning vision seated cross-legged in the grass, gazing up at the moon.

Deliberately, he made more noise as he approached, not wishing to frighten her. She jerked and pivoted her head toward him, the arch of her neck enticing.

“You came,” she breathed.

“You’re not walking.” He dropped to his knees before her and bore her back on the grass, blanketing her fragile body with his. Lust spiked in him. He pinned her hips to the earth but supported his weight on his elbows so he could stare down into her expressive eyes.

“Graham, I don’t understand the need inside me.”

“I do. Kathleen...” He whispered her name, and her eyes hooded. His heart skipped a beat and then sped out of control. The hard years separating him from his dead wife had made him forget that the wooing was almost as good as the physical touches when it came to women. He could do things with words that would bring her to a state of ecstasy, if only he had a mind to.

Right now, he had to kiss her.

Dipping his head, he captured her mouth. A hitching sigh escaped her as he tasted her sweet lips. Dark need welled in his core. And if he was honest with himself, his heart. The longing he’d once known for a common woman—a camp follower, his Bella—sprang up anew, and this time his heart tripped to the beat of Kathleen’s name.

Guilt rose up, strong and bright. He mashed it hard with a boot heel of passion.

Her flesh was silken against his. He’d washed up in the creek to cool off earlier in the day, but he hadn’t shaved. Was he scraping her with his rough beard? He hoped so. Seeing the reddened state of her ivory skin had never seemed so desirable.

Feathering his tongue along her lower lip, he threaded his fingers into the loose hair at her temples. Holding her prisoner, he kissed her the way he wanted to.

She opened to him instantly. He plunged his tongue deep, drinking

from her hot mouth, grinding his body into hers to ease the ache in his cock.

A gasp burst from her. He swallowed it, feeding her a groan. “I can’t get you out of my head, sweetheart.”

She wriggled beneath him, sending his desire skidding away like a runaway wagon. He chased the fine tendrils of control but lost them, giving himself up to the feel of her hands on his spine.

Before she could speak, he kissed her again, letting his tongue play over the heated walls of her mouth and the smooth planes of her teeth. Sharp, little white teeth that blinded him when she smiled.

He pulled back and nipped her lips roughly even as he nudged her thighs apart with his knee.

“Graham!” Her breathless rasp brought his head up.

He stared down into her tumultuous gaze. Her eyes were hooded with bliss, the pupils blown wide. God, how would she look when he sank into her for the first time? Or when she came apart in his arms?

Rocking his hips against hers, he fought to slow down. *Hell with that. I need to come to a full stop.*

He rolled off her and lay on his back in the grass, glaring at the sky. His breathing was labored. Bella’s face flashed in his mind, her delicate features blurred with Kathleen’s. On the heels of that came an image of Bella as he’d last seen her, eyes frozen in death. A man he’d called comrade had taken her life to get back at him.

And another man lurked out there somewhere—Wabash, free and hunting for Graham to reap revenge.

“Graham...?” She sat up, and his gaze flicked to her.

He bit off a growl. Damn, he shouldn’t have done that. She was entirely too alluring for her own good—auburn waves flowing freely around her shoulders, tousled from his touch. Her lips were swollen and ripe, begging him to attack them again.

“I’m sorry. I can’t go on, miss.”

“There you go apologizing again.”

That brought a crooked smile to his face. The feeling of his lips turning upward shocked him. Smiles so rarely made their way to his face, it felt foreign.

He liked it entirely too much.

He sat up and rested his elbows on his knees, staring at her. “A fine observation, my lady. I don’t know what it is about you that brings out my apologetic side.”

“I see nothing to apologize for.”

He quirked a brow at her. She smiled and dropped her gaze. Studying her features, he found them so different from Bella’s—the tip of her nose perfectly upturned and her lashes long. The silvery glow of the moon trickled over the top of her head and cast shadows on her cheeks. Lavender infused his head as the wind freshened and bore her scent to him.

“Nothing at all? Is it ordinary for a man to ride up and ravage you in the grasses at midnight?”

Her smile widened, but she didn’t look up at him. Instead, she trailed her fingers through the grass. His balls clenched, imagining her fingers working through the hair on his chest and lower.

“Not at all ordinary, sir.”

“Graham.”

She jerked her head up, her gaze locking with his in a slow dance before the real and frenzied loving came about. “Then you must call me Kathleen.”

“In my mind, I’ve called you nothing else in the ten hours since I left you.”

Her eyelids fluttered, and she swallowed hard. His heart sank into his stomach. Yes, the love words could bring her to a fever pitch, and if he was earnest about making her his, he must deliver them.

A shock speared him. Making her his? Had that thought seriously just crossed his mind?

Suddenly, it was as if he were staring down the barrel of a cannon at close range. No, he couldn’t take her without marrying her. And marrying her was out of the question. The institution of marriage had backfired on him once.

The echoes of past events reverberated through his head. He clutched it and tried to force them out, but they continued to come, haunting him as they always would.

“He’s got her, sir! Hurry!”

Graham spun, piercing the young messenger boy in his harsh gaze.

Heart skidding to a stop, he released a roar. Bella. The boy could mean no other.

Leaping the campfires, pumping his leg muscles frantically, he wove through the makeshift village to the place on the edges where he'd set up his tent with his wife. Frantically, his mind worked. Who? Why? In the past two months, he'd offended more than one soldier. The regiment was cracking down on traitors and those who would abandon their posts, and Graham did his job by calling them out before the secrets of the entire Confederacy were leaked or their own were compromised.

One man rose to mind—Wabash.

Gasping for air, he fought his way toward the tent. The white structure loomed ahead, and Graham caught sight of the man's tall form—not Wabash but another from his company who had taken offense to Graham's leadership.

Graham's link to Bella whirled through his mind as he spotted his wife, dress torn off and her curves exposed, blood on her face and thighs. And on her throat. A dark slash of blood welled on the ivory column.

Surging forward, Graham issued a bellow just in time to see Bella's big brown eyes blink one last time before going blank with death.

He stopped breathing, thinking, feeling. Reaching for the cold steel against his hip, he pulled his pistol, took aim, and shot the man in the side of the neck.

The man turned and riveted his gaze on Graham, his mouth working and filled with blood. "I am a man of a family," he said.

"So was I," Graham said.

The man fell in a crumpled heap to the ground and into the flames of hell.

Graham shuddered and hitched his arms tighter around his knees. No, he couldn't take that chance again. He'd sworn he'd never marry. There were too many men out there willing to take away what he loved and cherished. Graham had sent the soldier who'd killed his wife to his grave, but how many more were there? Wabash, for one.

Risking Kathleen was not an option, but deep in his soul, he knew she could come to mean as much to him as Bella.

DESIRE LICKED THROUGH Kathleen's body. Her pulse thrummed hard, and warmth spread low through her belly. She squeezed her thighs together, trying to ease the ache. Graham was inches away from her, had returned to see her, but now he felt a county away.

She'd gone with her gut instincts, allowing him to kiss her. But maybe she'd been wrong. Maybe he truly was too wounded and distant to be the man she thought he was.

Plucking a blade of grass, she began to pick away at it, separating the shaft into long strips. The moon's glow offered little light, but she could see the tightness of Graham's lips and the tense set of his wide shoulders.

Shoulders that had pressed her down so perfectly a minute before.

He'd admitted he'd thought about her in the past ten hours. Perhaps this upset him. He hadn't spoken since making this statement. Long minutes drifted by. The quiet noises of the animals in the barn reached her as well as the low burble of the creek that cut a path through the land. In the house, her father would be doing his ritualistic wheeze, snort, gasping sounds in his sleep.

Finally, the silence threatened to steal her sanity. "While you were away, you didn't think of me as Nibby?"

A soft noise broke from him like a grunt of laughter or a sob. She studied his handsome features. His full lips called to her, urging her to move forward and take what she wanted. If only she had the guts.

"I might have thought of you as Nibby a time or two."

"And did it make you smile, Mr. Hollis?"

"Graham." His tone was harsher, insistent.

She bowed her head, staring at the blade of grass in her fingers. "Graham."

"It did cause me to smile. I remember your face in the window just there." He pointed toward the one small section of glass on the side of the house. "Your nose was squashed, and I think your tongue was sticking out."

She burst out laughing despite herself. "How perfectly horrid."

He nodded. "I thought so."

Tossing the grass aside, she surged to her knees and threw herself at him. They tumbled backward. He caught her waist between his hands, hitching her fully atop him. Shocked by her courage, she sprawled over his

length, feeling his arousal.

Lord. He's huge.

Moisture pooled in her sex, slicking her folds.

“Kathleen, I can’t be held accountable for my actions if you don’t move off me.” His voice was gritty, dark with something she wanted to move closer to.

Lowering her mouth to his, she hovered a breath away. “Graham, no one is asking you to restrain yourself.”

He groaned. The rumble in his chest sent pangs of want straight to her pussy. She shifted.

Clamping his hands around her middle, he held her absolutely still. “Don’t. Move,” he said in a harsh tone.

They stared into each other’s eyes for several heartbeats. Unable to control her urges a minute longer, she dropped her lips to his. Suddenly, she was being flipped, thrown into the bed of grasses, and with a very big man resting between her legs.

He gripped her thighs and wrapped them around his hips, bringing her neediest spot in contact with his shaft. The cotton of her skirts did not act as a barrier. She still felt his heat as if they were flesh to flesh.

He took her mouth, kissing her with rough passion as he slid his hands up her hips. When they continued past her waist, she gasped. Her nipples pinched into two tight buds, the skin prickling. He inched his fingers upward, brushing the undersides of her aching breasts.

Panting with want, she arched, bringing her breast fully into his palm. A growl sounded in his throat. He tore his mouth away and nuzzled the length of her throat. The rough hair of his jaw scraped her skin deliciously, raising gooseflesh all over her body.

“Please, Graham.”

His breath warmed her throat. “You don’t even know what you’re asking for.”

“Don’t I?” She threaded her fingers into his soft mass of hair.

“No. I can’t simply take a maid, Kathleen. Not without promising you a union.”

Her heart tripped. Her mind screamed that it was wrong to give him her body when they weren’t married—her parents had raised her to believe this.

But at the moment, the needs of her flesh outweighed her morals.

He swirled his tongue over the sensitive spot behind her ear, completely tipping the scales in favor of a midnight tryst with Graham Hollis, and to hell with the consequences.

“Damn,” he muttered. Lifting his head, he stared at her hard. She squirmed beneath the weight of that gaze, unable to look away. He cupped her breast, and her nipple tightened to a little stone beneath his hot palm.

“Kathleen, you’re so young—”

“Old enough to know what I want.”

“I’m older, set in my ways. I have a lot of demons.”

She swallowed hard. “I think I know some of them.”

He jerked, searching her gaze. “Do you?” Before she could answer, he went on. “God, I haven’t wanted anyone like this in so long. But I can’t simply take you.”

Regret flooded her. He was going to send her away. She longed for him with every ounce of her being, but he was going to send her back inside the home she shared with her pa. Back to the dull correspondence with her distant cousin from Wyoming, and no prospects for a passionate marriage.

One like she’d have with Graham.

She knew a bit about what soldiers went through after they returned from the war. It couldn’t have been easy for him to readjust to a normal life. Was it possible that he had left behind a love?

Tears formed in her eyes. One broke free, and he caught it with his big thumb. “Hell, Kathleen—”

“You don’t know me either.” She lifted her jaw, erecting the walls she’d need to walk away with grace.

“I know enough. You’re the daughter of Silas Allen, and that means you’re a good gir—woman—and a hard worker. I know you’re soft in all the right places.” He caressed the curve of her hip, making her sex throb heavily. “You’re one hell of a kisser, and I think you’d be amazing in my bed.”

Her breath quickened at his heated words.

His eyes glittered, but his mouth twisted with some internal struggle. A heartbeat stretched between them, lengthening until she started to doubt he really wanted to touch her.

When she parted her lips to put an end to this insane silence, he spoke.

“Kathleen, I want you. It’s a mighty quick courtship, but I’m asking ya, darlin’. As soon as I can make arrangements, will you steal away to the preacher with me?”

A low cry burst from her. Her belly bottomed out as if she’d just missed the top step in an entire flight of stairs.

Graham’s mouth quirked up at the corner. Tiny creases appeared around his eyes, and she couldn’t restrain herself another minute. She drew his head down and kissed each eye, first one then the other, trailing her lips down his cheek to his chiseled jaw.

“What does that mean, sweetheart? Talk to me. Give me the words.” His demand was low, and his voice wavered with uncertainty.

Her heart went out to him. Could this rugged cowboy actually have insecurities?

Turning her mouth into his, she whispered against his lips, “Yes, Graham. I’ll be your wife.”

His expression turned possessive, carnal. He slid his hands beneath her and gathered her roughly to his chest. Crushing his lips over hers, he kissed her, thoroughly exploring her mouth until she was whimpering with need.

“This is our wedding night,” he murmured between fiery kisses. “I’d give you the finest down mattress, but I can’t help but feel you truly belong here beneath the moon.”

Kneeling up, he reached for the top button of her blouse. Shivers of anticipation ran down her spine. Her pulse tripped out of control, and her mind reeled. This man had just asked her to be his wife. Now he was going to claim her body.

The stolen kisses of earlier in the day suddenly seemed tame by comparison. She’d played with fire, and now she was about to be consumed by the flames.

He flicked the first button open. Cooler air rushed over the small inch of skin. Tremors racked her.

“Don’t be frightened, Kathleen.” His voice was a caress, as velvety as the dark night. His musk infused her senses, and the tips of his rough fingers as he worked the remaining pearl buttons of her blouse heightened the experience.

He skimmed her flesh, dipping his fingers into her chemise. Bowing upward, she sought more of his touch. His eyes were two candles in the night.

Was this really happening? Had a Hollis man as handsome and dangerous as Graham really just asked her to be his?

He opened the final button of her blouse. He slid his hands into the opening, letting them travel over her cotton chemise. She wished she'd worn her good one she reserved for special occasions and church. But she'd never expected more than a few stolen kisses from this man.

"Beautiful," he said hoarsely.

He ran his thumbs down the V of her ribs to her waist. When he kneaded the slender curve, she writhed as shocks of want blazed through her. Her sex clenched, and moisture escaped the folds. Being raised on a ranch, she knew enough about mating, but this restlessness inside her was new. She couldn't explain it. The warm knot in her belly was too much to bear. She needed relief, and soon.

She reached for the buttons on his soft leather vest. He smiled encouragingly. She worked the buttons through the holes and then slid the garment from his broad shoulders. Abandoning it in the grass with a rustle, she reached for the hem of his cotton shirt.

"Not yet. I need as much control as possible to bed a virgin." His desire roughened his voice and made her heart blossom with emotion.

Out here in the rough country where they lived, men and women rarely married for love. Convenience usually brought about unions. Her parents had been lucky to grow into a comfortable love for each other. She had only hoped for that herself, but now that Graham was within reach, she wondered if there was more to be had.

He dipped his head to the valley between her breasts. Gasping, she gripped his head as he kissed her in a place no man had ever laid eyes on before. He pressed a trail of kisses down the sides of each breast, tugging down the cloth of her chemise as he went. More than anything, she ached for him to remove the rest of her clothes and touch her all over.

Tingles spread through her belly. A frenzied need rushed up, and she found herself gasping. "Please, Graham."

"There's time, baby. We have all night. I'll keep you out here till dawn, loving you. Then I'll go off to find that preacher. I never thought I'd hear myself say that again."

Shock broke through her haze of passion.

He stared at her hard as she struggled to make sense of what he'd said.

The wind trickled through the grasses and washed over her skin. The dampness on her skin cooled, and goose bumps broke out from scalp to toe.

“Kathleen. Don’t be afraid to say what’s on your mind.”

She gulped and fortified herself. “Again?”

He lifted his head slowly, still licking his lips after tasting her skin. “Only a very few people know that I took a wife during the war. She was ripped from me.”

Worry settled in her chest, mingled with a pang at the hurt in his voice. “R-ripped?”

“Killed.” He sounded as if he’d gargled gravel.

She quivered with longing. Suddenly, she couldn’t bear the idea of him knowing that pain. Her pa had shattered after losing her mother. Very slowly, he had put his life back together, but it still pained her to think of his distress during that time.

Wrapping her arms tightly around Graham, she brought him down atop her. His weight felt good, pressing her into the ground. She held him for long minutes, stroking his hair and spine.

“I’m truly sorry to hear it, Graham. I only hope to fill a portion of the hole she left behind.”

He made a sound like a sob. But when he looked at her, she found his eyes dry. With startling suddenness, he claimed her mouth. Gone were the playful caresses. This kiss was smoldering. Consuming. Soul-binding. She felt part of herself trickle away, already belonging to him.

“Take me, husband. Bind us.”

With savage lust, he tore open the hooks holding her skirt at the waist. The cloth loosened. In one swift tug, he pulled it off, exposing her calves and ankles to the night air—and to his gaze.

More vulnerable than ever, she was in a state of arousal she’d never known existed. She pinched her eyes shut, then opened them immediately, not wanting to miss the expression in his as he looked her over for the first time.

“Christ... These curves. Here. And here.” He touched her breasts again, sending them bouncing. “Tender-eyed woman. I needed you for a very long time and never realized it.”

With a cry, she locked her arms around his broad shoulders, scraping

her nails over his shirt, eager to feel the warm swells of muscle beneath. How would he taste? Would he let her kiss his skin as he did hers?

He gripped the fabric of her chemise and tore it down the front. The fragile cloth shredded, the fine threads of her stitches popping. Excitement gathered in her core at this primal gesture.

“Fuck, yeah.” He spread the cloth, baring her to him.

Before she could react, he was drawing her straining nipple onto his tongue, sucking the peak until she thought she’d burst. Low moans escaped her unheeded. She lashed his head to her, forcing him harder. The silken swirl of his tongue over her bud maddened her. A throbbing began in her pussy. He pushed her higher and higher. The need was so great, and she had no idea if there was an end to it.

He released her nipple with a *pop* and moved to the other, grinding his jaw into her sensitive flesh. He palmed her breast, pulling her bud to his mouth. It disappeared fraction by fraction. The sight of his wet tongue probing her intimately made her quake.

Dropping his weight to her naked frame, he brought out her gasp. Uncontrollable shivers claimed her. He nudged her thighs apart as he kissed a trail down the slope of her belly to her mound of red curls.

A shudder racked him. “God, Kathleen. I can smell your arousal.” Without warning, he dropped a kiss to her moist seam.

Shock stole her senses. Did men and women do this? Kiss each other in this way?

He probed her with his tongue, sliding it down her slick outer folds and gathering her juices. He moaned, vibrating her flesh. White-hot ecstasy claimed her. She bucked upward, desperate for him to ease this ache inside her, wanting him in a way she didn’t understand. She clung to his shoulders, trusting him to guide her down this unknown path.

“Yes, Graham. Please!”

“Mmm.” He tasted her deeper, sinking his tongue into her channel. Fire spread through her. She twisted her fingers in his shirt, closing her eyes against the pleasure-pain of need he was creating in her. Swiftly, she opened them again, unable to stop watching his mouth moving over her sex.

Juices soaked his lips and tongue. He pressed the tip of his tongue deeper. Then suddenly, he licked upward and located the hard pearl at the top of her seam.

“Ohhhh!” She rocked wildly, urging him to do that again. He obeyed, strumming the bundle of nerves.

Rocketing upward, her fear and pleasure intertwined. “Graham!” Her voice was breathless and scared at once.

He dug his fingers into her hips, locking her to the earth. “Give yourself over to it, baby. I’ll always keep you safe.” He drove his tongue into her pussy again, licking her pearl until an unbearable burn filled her.

With a cry, she splintered. Pulsations struck her like a wave. Her world narrowed. The song of the wind in the grasses vanished along with the lowing of the cattle. She knew only the movement of his tongue.

He eased a finger into her entrance, and she was slammed by another wave of sensation. Rough cries echoed through the night. Was it her? She had no idea. She was out of her head with bliss.

His finger stretched her, filled her. The slippery juices she squeezed out slicked his path. He continued to lap at her nubbin as he curled his finger.

Suddenly, he left her. Her pussy clenched around the emptiness, yearning for his finger once again. He leaned over her, wetness in his beard and coating his lips. “Take off my shirt, Kathleen.”

Mewling, she did his bidding. Little pangs still shocked her. But when she set eyes on his massive body, she thought she’d faint dead away. Muscle bulged on his chest and down to his midsection. Bands of muscle ran horizontally across his body, carved as if from stone.

She ran her hand over his skin, learning his body the way he’d explored hers. His groan spurred her on and let her know what she was doing was all right. When she reached his waistband, he took over, yanking open the fly with one swift movement.

In seconds, he’d shed his pants and covered her bare body with his. If she’d thought him warm through his clothes, he was positively scorching without. She stifled a gasp.

He swallowed the noise as he plunged his tongue into her mouth. For long minutes, he brought her back to a heightened state of need by tangling his tongue with hers. When her restlessness flared to life once more, he brought his erection to the quick of her.

“You’re mine, Kathleen. My darling, sweet woman.” With one solid thrust, he joined them.

Pain ripped through her, pulling the rug of pleasure out from under her.

She pushed against his chest, but he was unmovable. Holding perfectly still, he stared into her eyes.

“I’m sorry, baby. The pain will pass, and it’s only this one time.”

“Y-you could have warned me!”

He stroked the hair off her face. His warm fingers comforted her as did his gentle words. “Remember that heat and the need you felt minutes ago? It will build again if I move.”

She searched his gaze, practically pleading with him to make the painful ache go away and to bring the splendid one back.

“Touch me. Feel my skin.”

Running her hands along his spine, she learned that he was like steel covered in velvet. Her breathing hitched as he shifted, moving slightly within her. Rather than the blinding pain she’d felt before, the slippery movement felt good.

She pushed air between her pursed lips.

“See, baby? It feels better, right?”

“Mmm.” She slid her hands down his back to his buttocks. He surged suddenly within her, and she cried out, scoring his flesh with her nails. Her cream flooded his thick shaft.

Above him, the moon had climbed the sky and hung over his right shoulder. She gazed up at him in wonder. How had she come to this place in her life? This morning, she’d awoken in the same way she always had. She’d had no inkling that within hours she’d find herself betrothed and thoroughly loved by this strong man.

He nuzzled her throat as he withdrew to the tip of his cock, then glided back into her slowly. Her pussy contracted around him, hugging him tight.

“Kathleen, I can’t last long. You’re so tight. So fucking hot!”

His heated words sent her sailing, reeling out of control. The release he’d given her with his tongue had been a sharp and blistering pleasure. This one was deeper and filled her with emotion such as she’d never known. She held her breath and let the waves pummel her, clinging to her rock in this unknown sea—Graham.

He stiffened, and exquisitely hot spurts bathed her walls. A long, low moan reverberated from him. She turned her mouth against his, capturing the sound as he pumped into her.

The tendrils of sensation continued to rise. Wrapping her arms and legs around him, she held him as together they came down from their high.

His breathing stirred the hair on her temple. She opened her mouth against his shoulder and tasted the salt of his sweat and musk. Under her roving hands, his skin rippled.

After a long minute, he settled against her, bracing his weight on his arms but trapping her with his hips. He nudged her chin up so she could meet his gaze. "Welcome to my world, baby."

Chapter Three

Goddammit, he'd made a grave error. Graham dropped his face into his hands and let the terror roll through him. How could he have done such a thing? Bound himself to another woman who was sure to be taken from him? Self-disgust followed on the heels of his fear. He'd dragged the innocent Kathleen into his arms and made promises with his body when he wasn't suitable for her.

The chance of losing her to a murderous enemy wasn't slim with Wabash on the loose. Even if that traitorous bastard wasn't out there lurking, ready to steal any peace Graham had managed to gain, women didn't last long in this part of the country. Illnesses and hard work wore females thin, and childbirth took them out more often than not.

He stared down at the woman slumbering in the tall, fragrant grasses—his woman—and assessed her. Was she hardy enough to withstand the rigors of life as a cowboy's wife? Cooking and cleaning for her father was less of a trial than running a ranch with a string of babies clinging to her skirts while Graham rode off for weeks at a time to sell horses.

She lay on her side, her cheek pillowed on his wadded-up shirt and her long auburn tresses spilled into one eye. Her chest rose and fell rhythmically beneath her skirt, which he'd used to cover her. The sun was just rising over the lip of the land, spreading its glowing fingers through the sky.

Kathleen was too pale. Hell, he could see several networks of veins beneath her fair skin. Though she possessed womanly curves, she was surely too thin. She wouldn't last a week as his wife.

But it was too damn late. He'd claimed her, and that meant he had to get her to the preacher with all haste. If his family discovered he'd bedded a good woman without marrying her first, he'd find himself facedown in the barn, spitting hay and teeth. He could even expect a broken bone or two from his vigilant cousins. The Hollis boys simply did not carouse.

Fuck. He continued to stare at the little vixen who had weaseled her way under his skin. As with Bella, he'd gone with his gut instincts and the primal drive to possess her. The parallels were too alike, and that was what

scared the hell out of him. That kernel of guilt had firmly lodged in his gut too. Was he marring Bella's memory by taking up with another woman? He'd sworn to himself he'd never take another woman, yet here she was, spread out before him like a feast for a starving man.

Keeping her safe from the threat of Wabash and any other ghost from his past would be the real challenge. One he was up for?

Too late.

An impulsive ass, that was what he was. He deserved to be beaten to a pulp by his brothers and cousins. He had half a mind to ride straight home and confess to his brothers, Nolan and Clay. Though they were younger, they'd deliver the punishment he deserved. Maybe the pain would help him curb the feelings of guilt and absolute fear that engulfed him.

Kathleen's breathing deepened. Her full lips popped open, and he was granted a glimpse of her wet pink mouth. His cock hardened instantly, bobbing against his belly. He'd loved her all night but had joined with her only twice due to her sore state.

He'd brought her climax after climax, using his fingers and mouth. The memories filled him with joy. She was indeed a good match in bed, eager to please and hungry. He suspected it wouldn't be long before she began to make demands.

His balls clenched tightly to his body at the thought.

She flung out an arm, her fingers twitching open as if seeking something. The sight made his heart jerk hard, and he placed his palm against hers.

No, he couldn't leave her now. But that didn't mean he had to take risks with her. He'd let his guard down with Bella, never believing anyone would harm a woman. He wasn't about to take that chance with Kathleen.

As he stared at her peaceful countenance, he formulated a plan. He had a family big enough to help protect her, but asking them was the rough part. He hadn't been exactly friendly with his brothers or cousins since he'd returned from the war, but had kept to himself. Would they be willing to help someone who'd shown so little interest in their affairs?

But he couldn't claim her body and then run away either. Driven by his passions, he'd sunk himself deep—too deep. Now it was time to own up to his actions. She wasn't going to be happy about it, but he didn't see a way around it. If he explained his reasoning, she'd understand, wouldn't she?

In a few minutes, he'd have to wake her so she could dress and slip back into the house before her father awakened. The animals in the barn were already getting restless, and it was only a matter of time before Silas was up. *Probably with a gun in hand, ready to blow my balls off for cavorting with his daughter.*

He scooped up his pants from the ground and gained his feet to put them on. His gaze returned to Kathleen again and again, drawn to her hip jutting into the air, to the delicate turn of her bare ankles...and to the steady pulse in her ivory throat.

Her life could be snuffed out too easily. As far as he could see, there was only one way out of this predicament.

* * * *

Kathleen's belly quivered as thoughts of her night spent in Graham's arms distracted her. She'd stolen a few minutes of sleep between his attentions, and the act of washing his scents from her body and donning a fresh dress robbed her of the last hints of her energy.

Facing the small window of her bedroom, she stared at the purplish-gray light of dawn. Her father would be up any minute, and she could only hope to hide the redness in her cheeks and the marks that surely blotched her skin from the rough hair on Graham's jaw.

She smoothed her fingers over the lines of her throat, feeling the tenderness even now. He'd spent at least an hour kissing her throat, finding a hot spot that had made her writhe and nearly come undone from the probing of his tongue.

A new shiver coursed through her.

He was now riding across the prairie between their ranches, probably smug as hell. Before taking leave of her, he'd bent her over his arm and kissed her breathless. Then he'd stared into her eyes and told her in a husky voice how special she was and how hopeful she'd made his future.

Pretty words that sent pangs of warmth to more places than her pussy.

Finally, he'd sent her toward her house with a pat on her backside. "You look well-loved, Nibby," he'd said in a low drawl.

Even that dreadful nickname sent shocks of pleasure through her. A smile bowed her mouth at the memory.

Suddenly, movement outside the window caught her eye. She pressed

her forehead against the cool glass in time to see a darkened figure steal toward the space between outbuildings where she and Graham had lain.

That hired man, Jenkins.

Twisting from the window, she patted her hair and her clothing, making sure she was presentable when she went out to greet her father. He was aging but still possessed a shrewd eye. Besides, they'd lived alone together, which meant he had no one else to study closely. He'd know from a mere twinkle in her eye that something was amiss.

When she opened the rough wooden door onto the common room, Pa was already there, his chair drawn up to the fire. He craned his neck to see her. "Up a bit late this morning, Kathleen. Feeling well?"

"Yessir."

"All that excitement yesterday with the new addition to the barn stealing over you?" He slid his stockinged foot into his boot.

Or a man stealing away with me...along with my virtue.

She quickly ducked her head to conceal the blush that flamed her face. She crossed the space and began reaching into the larder for supplies to make breakfast. Several brown and speckled eggs rested on a high shelf. She reached up for one at the same moment the front door slammed off the inner wall.

Jerking her hand, she knocked two eggs off. They plummeted to the floor and smashed, oozing into a puddle by her feet.

"Jenkins, you're a might forceful this morning," her father noted.

She didn't turn but found a cloth and began to clean the egg mess.

"Been up since the wee hours of the night," Jenkins said. The strangeness of his voice made her pivot, only to find his gaze piercing her.

Swiftly, she returned to her task. Her mind raced. Had the man seen her with Graham? Discovered his tracks through the high grass that led to his horse, which had been left to graze?

She straightened her back. That was the inexperienced woman in her worrying. She'd promised herself to Graham Hollis, and she was going to marry him. It didn't matter if the whole county had witnessed her act of passion last night. Within hours, she'd be Graham's wife.

Dropping the soiled cloth into the washbasin, she strode for the door. "I'll just fetch more eggs."

“I’ll see to the horses,” Jenkins said, following her outside.

She increased her pace, aware of him on her heels.

“Miss Allen, if I might have a word.”

“Whatever it is you need to say can be said as I walk to the henhouse.” Her lungs burned with the urge to scream. All of a sudden, his overbearing presence weighed her down, frightened her when it never had before. Jenkins had been working for her father for months, had taken three square meals a day with the Allens, and never been anything but respectful.

But the tone of his voice set off bells in her head. The cold dew wet the hem of her dress and chilled her feet, but the frigid block of ice in her belly was her true concern.

Jenkins lashed his fingers around her forearm as she reached to open the door of the henhouse. Whipping her around to him, he thrust his face close to hers.

“Release me at once before I call my father!”

His eyes glittered, dark with the blood of his Mexican relatives. “Tell him what? That you’ve been out all night with a man?”

The ice in her belly melted and flowed away into her veins. She locked her muscles. “Your accusations are unfounded.”

His breath fanned her face, and she twisted from its sour smell. “You call a bed tamped down in the grass and virgin blood spilled unfounded?”

Tremors took up residence in her core. But anger flared to life. “What right do you have to speak to me this way? You’re nothing more than a hired hand. Not my father!”

“No, but I knew your brother, and he wouldn’t want to see his sister prancing around some man like a mare in heat!”

She lifted her hand and slapped him full in the face. The crack resounded in the still morning air, and a chicken squawked in answer. Kathleen’s breath plumed outward like a poison. “Do not speak to me that way. I will have your position terminated, Mr. Jenkins. Now mind your own business and tend to the horses. Not to me.”

His glossy, dark hair tumbled into his eye. He released her arm and knuckled the lock away, stretching his jaw around the sting of her slap. “I’ve invested more in this farm than you can know.”

“You are a hired man,” she reminded him. Then, giving him one last

glare, she dodged into the henhouse. She shut the narrow door and leaned against it, gasping for breath. The smell of hay and chicken droppings filled her nose, comforting her slightly.

She swiftly ran through the conversation with Jenkins. In all the time he'd worked for her father, Jenkins had never overstepped the boundaries, never attempted to insinuate himself into the Allen family.

So he had found the spot where she and Graham had lain together. If he told her father, she'd admit it. She could go to her pa and tell him she was marrying Graham, and he'd whoop for joy. He'd been pressing her to take interest in marriage, had even encouraged the correspondence between her and her cousin.

The only thing that stopped her from sharing her joyous news with her pa was Graham's wishes. He'd asked her not to tell yet but to steal away with him and make it a done deal first.

Did he believe her pa wouldn't be thrilled to call the Hollises kin? The Hollis clan was large and influential in these parts. No one would dare mess with a Hollis. Such a link would only make her father happy.

In her mind's eye, she again saw Graham's face as he'd related the tale of his lost wife. Pain had creased his brow, and he'd looked like a man in the pit of a fiery hell with no rope at hand to climb out.

Kathleen was sensible enough to know she couldn't heal his wounds, nor could she replace the woman who had been his wife. But Graham had still chosen Kathleen. He'd called her beautiful, a delight in bed, a good woman who could fill a hole in his life he hadn't known could be filled.

Some of her fear ebbed away, and she was able to draw a deep breath. As she created a basket from the cloth of her skirt and began filling it with eggs, her mind wandered to the night ahead. Graham had instructed her to wear her finest because he was taking her to the preacher for a moonlit wedding.

Chapter Four

The Hollis ranch stretched across miles of lush country. The sun touched the tips of the grasses in the fields and turned them to gold—gold their horses would eat in order to grow into the fine stock the Hollises were known for.

In the valley, Uncle Frederick's house sprawled. The light of a lantern glowed in the barn where Graham's cousins would be tending to the horses. Graham's stock horse turned his head automatically for this homestead, but Graham turned Old Gray and spurred him on up the ridge toward his own home.

The sky above was still white with predawn light, but the crescent of the sun bulged over the horizon, spreading yellow fingers across the turf, right up to the door of the white clapboard house.

He was entering this house for the last time as a bachelor. Tonight he'd be wed, but would he ever bring his bride here? He had no intention of letting anyone know about the wedding until he was positive no one could harm Kathleen.

His plan was to marry her and keep it secret, stealing away nightly to meet her. During his waking hours, he'd comb the countryside and neutralize any threats, including those from Wabash. Word of killings on the county roads was growing more frequent, and some said only a stealthy bastard could have sneaked up on unsuspecting men in this land. If Graham knew anything, it was what Wabash was capable of. He'd made a lot of enemies during the war. Suddenly, every ghost from his soldiering life rose up to haunt him. Paranoia aside, it was entirely possible more men would return with vengeance on their minds.

No, he wasn't going to take any chances.

As Graham rode into the yard, the front door opened, and his brothers spilled onto the porch. Nolan, the taller of the two, stretched his arms overhead, resting his fingertips on the beam of the front porch.

A smile cut across Clay's face. The youngest of the three boys, Clay was a spitting image of Graham ten years ago.

Before the war and hardships had cut out Graham's spirit.

For better or worse, he'd gained a portion of it back, if he could only deal with the repercussions.

"Look what Old Gray's dragged back with him, Nolan. A dirty sack of clothes. Looks like you've been sleeping rough, man." Clay stepped off the porch into the dirt yard as Graham drew his mustang to a halt and dismounted.

He leveled his stare at his youngest brother, daring him to make a guess at where he'd been all night and why he hadn't returned home. Clay was forever running his mouth, getting himself in trouble. He took after their cousin Peter in that respect. Except Peter spent a little too much time at the saloon and stumbling home foxed. Sometimes with lipstick on his face, sometimes sporting a black eye after brawling with a drunk over a saloon girl.

Graham grabbed Old Gray's bridle and led him to the stable. It was no shock that his brothers' footsteps sounded behind him.

"Where were you?" Clay asked.

"Took a ride." He tucked up Old Gray in his stall and worked quickly to remove the tack and rub him down. Then he tipped a bucketful of bran in for him as a treat.

"A midnight ride?"

Graham swung toward his younger brother, surprised he'd add to the barrage of questioning. Nolan was the quietest among them.

"The war isn't eatin' at you again, is it, Graham?" Clay, as usual, dug his words directly into the most wounded part of Graham's soul.

A teeth-jolting growl burst from him. "You two need more work. You obviously have too much time, sitting around thinking about my life. Maybe you need to go get one of your own."

He strode outside. Of all the mornings to bring up the war, this was the worst. Did they sense Graham's heavy thoughts? While he was jubilant about the prospect of joining himself to the bold little woman from the neighboring farm, he was stricken with fear. Had his urges placed him in a bad predicament again? Perhaps he should have never kissed her, never let her wriggle under his skin and into his psyche. It was just lust, after all.

Even as he thought this, he rejected it. Despite his hardened exterior, he'd always had a romantic streak. His brothers, cousins, and entire family

knew it. Hell, the fact that he planned to secretly wed Kathleen wouldn't surprise the Hollises one bit. They'd expect nothing less from him.

"Fuck." His utterance burst from him, and his brothers pounced on it.

They circled him. If he wasn't as roped with muscle as he was, he'd be damn intimidated by these men—broad and thick, with the light every Hollis man carried in his eye shining in theirs. The one that said, *Don't fuck with me. Get out of my way.*

"Talk to us, bro." Clay sent a playful punch into his shoulder.

"We'll find out sooner or later," Nolan added.

Graham tugged his hat lower over his eyes. "That you will. When I'm damn good and ready to share." With that, he employed his long legs, striding to the house before his brothers could wrench his confidences from him. He wasn't ready to share. He had to get his head in order.

Because saying aloud that he was about to marry a stunning creature who had in minutes buried her hooks in his soul was too frightening. And it might call down all the gods of bad luck who loved to personally fuck with him.

* * * *

On silent feet, Kathleen stole from the house. She closed the door as quietly as possible, grimacing as the lock caught with a metallic *click*. The wind was kicking up, and hopefully the baleful sound and the shuddering of the glass in the window frames would drown out the fact that she'd sneaked out.

Her pa rarely awakened during the night—he could sleep through an Irish wake. But if he happened to rouse and find she was missing, the whole county would know about it. Though he'd led Graham right to her, her father would stomp his feet if she flaunted herself right under his nose.

She prayed Jenkins wasn't prowling around, ready to bring attention to her. That bastard had kept his distance the rest of the day. He hadn't even come inside for meals, much to her relief. She hoped he glugged himself on apples and suffered the consequences of that diet.

The figure that loomed out of the darkness stole her breath. She clapped a hand to her mouth to keep from gasping as Graham moved toward her.

Shadows draped his big form, but she knew by the cut of his clothes that he'd dressed for the occasion, as she had. She gripped her boot strings

tighter and skipped across the turf and into his arms.

He caught her up, filling her head with his musky scents. She gulped the air that hung around him like a woman who'd been starved for breath. God, she couldn't get close enough to him.

He curled around her, drawing her onto tiptoe, gripping her in a crushing hug. Her mind whirled and her body reacted instantly, nipples bunching and her sex pooling with moisture.

Too soon, he released her. "Come," he murmured.

They stole across the field. In the distance, she heard the whicker of his horse. She stopped and glanced back at the house. Excitement and joy boiled in her chest. Next time she crossed that threshold, it would be as a married woman with Graham's hand clutched around hers.

A flicker of movement near the windmill stopped her in her tracks.

Graham tossed a look at her. "What is it?"

She stared, narrowing her eyes to try to see through the darkness. Was that good-for-nothing Jenkins out here, watching her? The wind tore at her straw hat, threatening to rip it from her head and ruin her hair if she wasn't quick.

"Nothing." She allowed Graham to pull her forward again. In seconds, the enormous horse came into view. Graham issued a low whistle, and it cantered toward them.

He caught the reins, a smile in his voice. "That's my boy. Here, darlin', let me give you a hand up."

His "hand up" turned out to be lifting her into the saddle without a bit of help from her. As he steadied her, he gripped her waist a little too long. She yearned to see his face, but the moon offered little tonight. He reached upward to cup her cheek. She leaned into him like a barn cat, inhaling the scent of his skin and shuddering at his touch.

"You're sure about this, Kathleen?"

"I've never been so sure about anything in my life."

He went still. Again. Last time he'd turned to stone, she'd learned he had a wife who had been murdered. She held her breath and tried to see his eyes, which were hidden by the brim of his hat.

"There's a current between us," he said at last, voice ragged.

Her breath left her with a whoosh. "Yes."

“I’m glad you gave in to that pull, Kathleen. But there’s something you’ve gotta know before we hitch up.”

A knot clogged her throat. She struggled to swallow around it, her mouth suddenly dry as dust.

He continued to hold on to her waist, fanning his fingers across her rib cage and sending white-hot shivers through her. But his words put the fear of God into her.

“Once we marry tonight, baby, I’ll spend all night loving you. But in the morning, I’m taking you back to your house, safe and sound.”

She shook her head, confusion a shroud around her mind. “With you, of course. We’ll go together to tell my pa.”

He kneaded her waist, moving in so his chest pressed against her knees. “No, sweetheart. We’re going to keep this marriage a secret. Just for a little while.”

She felt her brow crumple and dropped her gaze, staring at the width of his chest until her vision blurred. Fighting to grasp his words, she ran through several reasons why he’d make this request. Was he embarrassed by her? Or was it something entirely different—like he could be in trouble with the law? His cousin Xander had spent a year on the run. Maybe Graham was caught up in that.

His big, warm finger stroked the underside of her chin. Her pussy throbbed in response as she remembered too well the kisses he had delivered to that same spot while he fingered her to completion.

A ragged sigh left her.

“I promise you, Kathleen, that the instant I make sure no one is after me and no harm will come to you, I’ll shout our news to the world. I’ll ride down through the middle of San Antonio, bellowing to everyone willing to listen that you’re my wife.”

His words trickled into her brain. Warmth spread through her like honey, but she had to know more.

“Is someone after you, Graham?”

He cast a look around as if someone might have sneaked up on him. A pang went straight to her soul. She wished with all her heart she could ease the pain he carried on a daily basis.

“I can’t take a risk with you.” His voice was roughened by emotion. He

cupped her face and drew her down to claim her mouth. The soft meeting of their lips pulled a moan from her. He held the kiss until she nipped his lower lip, urging him on.

He pulled back, laughing. He took her boots from her, unknotted the strings, and set about slipping them onto her feet. She watched his quick, economical movements, fighting the rising need his thick fingers inspired.

In one swift motion, he swung into the saddle behind her. Tugging her close, he murmured against her neck. “You look mighty pretty tonight for our wedding, Kathleen.”

Her desire to join herself to him was a fortress around her, and no matter what secrets lay on the other side of the wall, she still wanted him.

With a click, he sent the horse speeding into the night, across the fields and into the valley where the preacher waited to hear their vows.

Chapter Five

Graham could barely tear his gaze from his woman long enough to thank the preacher for getting up in the middle of the night to perform their ceremony. Kathleen was dressed in a prim white lawn blouse with a charcoal-gray vest fitted tightly to her ample curves, and a gray, flaring skirt. Her straw hat sported a black ribbon that made Graham's fingers itch to pull it off.

"The only thing that could be improved upon concerning your appearance would be if your thick auburn waves were free," he whispered into her ear as the preacher took his place before them.

She turned her glowing, cornflower-blue eyes on him, driving all thoughts that he was making a grave error from his mind. He chafed her fingers and edged closer to her. Then, with a rumble of satisfaction, he spun his arm around her waist and anchored her against his side.

To hell with propriety, he thought. They were alone, and the preacher wasn't going to take offense at this familiar touch. He was being paid triple for his efforts.

Kathleen tilted her face up to his, and Graham nearly lost all control then and there. Her lips were entirely too plush for her own good. While ideas worked in his head about how to use that pretty little mouth, the preacher began the ceremony.

Flashes of Graham's first wedding rose up. He and Bella being joined in a canvas tent on the boundary of the camp by a priest who had left his robes behind to fight for the South. This time, Graham could provide a solid wood structure for Kathleen.

But there would be no ringing bells to herald their union, not at midnight. And he'd asked the preacher to keep his lips sealed.

Graham had arranged for a private room for their wedding night. He'd sneak her in and make love to her all night on a real bed, watching her eyes darken with passion by candlelight.

"Mr. Hollis, is there a ring?" The preacher stared at him with wide, owl-like eyes.

Kathleen's smile wavered as if she were about to burst into giggles.

Graham felt his own grin spread over his face. Again, he experienced that burst of joy at not only having the ability to smile but having something to smile about. Despite his haunting memories, happiness was inches away.

He fished into his trouser pocket and located the thin gold band he'd purchased earlier that day. It wasn't the quality he would have liked to have given her, but it would have to do. This small town had just sprung up as a result of the new railroad, and the trading post didn't exactly carry a wide selection of women's trinkets.

Kathleen extended her delicate, white hand. It pulsed up and down in the air, trembling with nervousness. He searched her gaze for reservations. They knew little about each other, but hell, his parents had fallen in love at first sight and been married within hours. For the past forty years, they'd been happy with their decision.

A soft sigh left Kathleen as Graham slipped the warm band over her finger. It was slightly big, and she folded her fingers into a fist to keep it from falling off. The elation on her face made his heart quicken.

His mind continued to reel, and he heard only half of what the preacher had to say. In the end, the words, "man and wife" broke through his haze.

"Thank you, darlin'," he whispered to his new wife. Gathering her to his chest, he slipped a hand beneath her hat and flipped it off.

"Graham!"

He hushed her by covering her mouth with his. The hunger rose in him instantly. His cock grew harder. He wanted to kiss her like a proper husband—all over her silken little body. But he was sensible of the preacher's presence, so he settled for a swift, chaste kiss.

It was over too quickly, and when he pulled back, Kathleen's expression reflected her displeasure. Her *restlessness*.

Don't worry, baby. I plan to love you thoroughly.

Swiftly, he turned to the preacher and shook hands, aware of the man's strong grip. A good, honest man. In this part of the country, Graham tended to size men up this way. Kathleen's father had a good grip too. However, the hired man working for the Allens showed not only weakness but something slimy too.

Shaking off the feeling, he scooped Kathleen up and sped her out into the night. When he towed her past his horse, she faltered.

“Aren’t we taking your horse?”

“Not this time. I have a surprise for you.” Again, that smile etched across his face. Yes, he could learn to like this. A lot.

On the narrow main street running through the fledgling town and rutted by wagon wheels and horse hooves, he slowed his pace so Kathleen could keep up with him on her shorter legs and high-heeled boots. The ache to toss her over his shoulder and rush to the rented room claimed him.

Slow.

They passed the wooden structures—bathhouses, trading post, and hotel. She looked up at the hotel sign as they passed. “Where are we going?”

“Shh. Trust me, darlin’. I’ll always take care of you.”

He led her around the back of the hotel and to a narrow door. Letting them in without a word, he pulled her up a flight of stairs toward the lantern glimmering at the top. Glancing back over his shoulder, he saw her eyes wide and glittering.

At the top of the stairs, he paused, feeling along the wall for the door latch. It clicked open, and he pushed the door inward.

Candles glowed around the space, and the big, inviting bed beckoned to them. Lying at the foot of the bed was the bouquet he’d spent an hour picking for her in the meadow that afternoon. The hotel owner had agreed to light the candles right before they came up.

Kathleen gasped. Her white fingers fluttered to her mouth, and she pressed her plump lips. Over her fingertips, her eyes filled with tears. “Graham...”

“I wanted something special for my bride.”

A soft noise escaped her at that. He couldn’t wait a moment longer. He had to put his hands on her.

Spinning her into his arms, he bent to her mouth. She met him halfway, sharing a soft, seeking kiss filled with emotion. The feeling scared him, but what was he to do? He’d taken this enormous step by making her his. The least he could do was be honest about the sensations she raised in him.

Tenderness, protectiveness, passion.

He slanted his mouth over hers, drinking in her sweet tastes. She laced her fingers behind his neck and demanded more of him by giving him her tongue. Their mingled moan shivered in the still space.

He walked her backward until her thighs bumped the bed. Her smile spread beneath his mouth, and he licked the corners, exploring the shape of her joy. He cupped her face and gazed into her eyes.

“You look beautiful tonight, Kathleen. I’ll remember you this way for the rest of my life.”

Her eyelids fluttered, and her pulse quickened beneath his finger. Dipping his head, he kissed that throbbing spot on the side of her neck. She angled her head and allowed him better access.

He handled her with the softest of touches, stroking the satin of her skin with his lips. Her flesh rose to him in the form of goose bumps, and his cock throbbed heavily in response. Gliding a hand down her shoulder to her collarbone, he traced the lines of her body down to her breast.

The heavy mound filled his palm, and he fought the urge to rock his hips against hers. Fuck, she was all woman. Curves and glowing eyes. With one hand, he pulled the pins out of her loose bun while kneading her breast lightly with the other.

A pink flush climbed her face.

“I’m going to enjoy watching you by candlelight, sweetheart.”

She flattened her palms on his chest. “I can’t wait to see you.” Her bold admission made her voice shake. The sight wrenched his heart, and he realized with a jolt that he’d lost a bit of it to her.

To avoid admitting his love, he spoke the first thing that came into his head. “We left your hat at the church. I’ll fetch it in the morn.”

“I don’t need it tonight.” She plucked at his shirtfront, popping the button in the center and sliding two fingertips into the space. Her fluttery touch ignited him.

With a growl, he bore her back onto the bed. The mattress gave way, cradling them perfectly. He ground his hips into hers, his cock aching for that sweet heat.

She arched beneath him, bringing her breasts against his chest and her hips into his. “I can’t stop thinking about this, Graham. The loving.”

“I love how responsive you are. When I touch you here.” He caressed her nipple, causing her to cry out. “And when I kiss you here.” He sucked the sensitive spot behind her ear until she writhed.

She eased his coat off his shoulders and tossed it aside. Then she tore at

his buttons, staring at him as she stroked his bare chest.

When her maddening fingers pattered over his nipples, he had to put an end to her torment or blow. He eased off her and began stripping her methodically—shoes and stockings, taking time to caress the hollow behind each knee before moving on. He worked every pearl button and tiny hook until the layers were removed. When he reached her lacy underthings, he gave a quiet laugh. New stitches graced her chemise, running in a seam the length of the front where he'd ripped it last night.

“I'm mighty sorry about your chemise.”

She quivered with mirth. “You sound anything but sorry, sir. I wore it as a memento of our night together.”

Dropping his lips to the peak of her breast, he mouthed it through the thin cloth. She convulsed at his touch, twisting the hair on his nape. He wet the cloth, conforming it to the ripe nub. In the glow of the candlelight, it shone dark rose. He moved to the other nipple, sucking it gently through the cotton, then harder until she rose off the bed with a cry.

“Please, Graham!”

He lifted his head and smiled down at her. “Trust me, baby. I'll give you what you need.”

With that, he gripped her chemise and inched it over her body, skimming her skin as he did. When she lay bare beneath him, he set about exploring her every inch with his mouth. His cock strained against his fly, determined to gain release. But he tamped down his desires, wanting first to look at her body in the light.

He turned her this way and that, finding each tiny freckle. The curls covering her sex were dark red and glistening with moisture. He groaned and buried his face between her fragrant breasts.

“How did I find a woman as beautiful as you? I love the look of you, the feel of you...the taste of you.” He claimed her mouth again in a tongue-swirling kiss that stole his control.

He reached between her legs and stoked her fires. Pressing her hard nubbin with his thumb, he sank his fingers into her wet folds.

Heat tore up his arm, traveled down his shoulder, and lodged somewhere around his heart. He bit off a groan. Fuck, she was ready for him. Soaking wet.

He slowly eased his fingers from her, leaving her gasping. Holding her

gaze, he stuck his fingers into his mouth and lapped his digits clean of her juices.

“I-I want to taste you too, Graham.” She placed a hot palm on his groin. Flames licked his insides.

“Christ, woman. You undo me.” He pressed on her wrist, pushing her hand harder against his erection. His balls swelled with impending release.

With a growl, he tore her hand away and dove between her thighs. Gripping her dainty ankles, he pressed her legs upward, spreading her pussy to his mouth. He opened his lips over the slick folds, driving his tongue deep into her channel.

She bucked against his face, humping his tongue. He licked the core of her, stretching his tongue deeper in an effort to reach her neediest spot. Then, lapping upward, he found her pulsating clit. He suckled it gently, applying the scantest pressure.

Twisting her fists into the bedding, she cried out. “Graham, I need you!”

“You need this.” He swirled his tongue over her hardened pearl again and again, feeling her tense with each pass. He slipped two fingers into her pussy and thrust them.

She quivered all over. He gazed up the length of her body, watching the bliss claim her beautiful features. Her pale skin was bathed in a sheen of perspiration, and her auburn hair tumbled into one hooded blue eye.

He curled his fingers.

Waves of release broke over her. Her hips rose and fell to the rhythm of his heart. Her orgasm sent shocks up his arm, and another bit of his heart cracked open and flowed out to her.

Before she completely came down from the high of her release, he was shoving off his pants and had poised himself between her thighs. She wrapped them around his hips. A current of passion hung between their gazes as he slowly entered her.

She pinched her eyes shut, and her face twisted with pleasure. “Fill me, Graham.”

Her bold words drove him on. He sank balls-deep. Covering her with his body, he captured her mouth in a searing kiss. A fog of sensation surrounded her, stealing her senses. She could only think in fragments.

For long minutes, their kiss spiraled out of control as he moved within her depths. The pain of their first encounter was long gone, leaving only a bit of tenderness and a lot of need.

Rocking against him, taking him deeper, she watched his handsome features spasm. Her juices drenched him, and her walls contracted sporadically around him—an aftereffect of the toe-curling release he'd just given her.

His scents dizzied her. Male and leather and a hint of hay. He'd shaved for their wedding day, but the faint shadow of hair was already present on his cheeks and jaw. She outlined the shape of his face with her kisses, tasting, nipping, scraping her teeth against his jaw.

He took her higher and higher, hitching her legs farther up on his waist. After plunging into her this way for a minute, he wrapped his fingers around her ankles and brought her legs up before him.

Instantly, she was at the pinnacle of pleasure. She clung to the edge of the cliff of ecstasy. One more thrust, and she was tipping over the edge.

He poured his hot seed into her pussy at the moment she shattered. Her juices mixed with his, their moans a symphony. Each twitch of his cock sent another pulsation ripping through her body until she gasped for air.

Tears filled her eyes and broke free. They rained down her face and wet his cheeks as they kissed.

Feeling the moisture, he broke the caress and looked at her. “Did I hurt you, baby?”

Unable to speak for the lump in her throat, she shook her head.

He caught a tear on his thumb and licked it off. The gesture touched her heart, a touch more intimate than the one that had sent her sailing a moment ago.

He continued to kiss away her tears. His big body pressed her down so perfectly. This was absolutely right—their union. Their passion.

She wrapped her arms snugly around his body and drew him even closer. Their breathing slowed, and her heartbeat returned to normal.

“You gonna tell me why you were crying, love?”

A brand-new throb took up residence in her chest. Love? Surely it was just an endearment. He couldn't possibly be feeling the fuzzy sensations she was. But it didn't matter at the moment. He'd bound himself to her.

Too bad he insisted upon keeping their union a secret.

She searched his gaze. The golden-brown depths of his eyes sparkled, and his pupils were blown wide. He dropped his forehead to hers and rubbed it back and forth. His soft hair tickled her temples.

“You’ve made me a happy man this night.”

Her heart surged. “I’m filled with joy to be your wife. But...must we really hide it?”

His sigh washed over her face. He tightened his hold on her until she could barely draw breath. “I’m sorry, baby, but it’s something I must do. If I hadn’t been so hasty in making you mine and had courted you in a proper fashion, I would have already made certain no dangers could touch you.”

“You really believe there are any?”

He leaned away to fix her in his level stare once more. “Allow me this, Kathleen. It’s—” He broke off and struggled for words. His tortured expression backed her belief in what he was saying more than anything else. She couldn’t bear to argue with him. “It’s something I must do. I cannot take a risk with you.”

The throaty way he spoke and the way he touched her gave her hope that she meant something to him already. As long as she had that, she could wait to claim her place at his side. She turned her lips to his and felt the first stirrings of his body even as hers quickened, eager for more.

Chapter Six

Kathleen's kisses and the feel of her body against his still lived in Graham's mind as he hurried her across the expanse of ground to her house. He'd barely been able to wrench himself from her arms and force her back home through the early hours before dawn.

He'd stopped at the church and recovered her hat but refused to allow her to cover her auburn waves, which were still mussed from his hands.

He dragged his gaze from her once more. Damn, he was on the verge of hauling her off to the high grass again.

At the corner of the closest outbuilding to the house, they stopped. A shiver rippled through her and threaded through their entwined fingers. She gave him that wide-eyed, innocent stare that nearly unhinged him. Yes, protecting her had become his world.

"Baby." He cradled her cheek with one palm. "I'll be back for you tonight. Maybe sooner. I might have to pay a call to that newborn calf." He smiled, hoping his false sense of lightness would spread to her.

"How long is it going to take you to finish this business, Graham? Before we can live properly as man and wife?"

"Not long. I promise." He scanned the house for any sign of movement. That Silas hadn't noticed his daughter wasn't in her bed two nights in a row was surprising. The old man was still sharp, and Kathleen couldn't be that good of an actress.

"All right, now go on in." He released her reluctantly—first, peeling his hands off her, then setting her back a couple of inches so their bodies no longer touched. In a short time, she'd consumed him just as his first wife had. He prayed things ended better this time around.

He wanted the lifelong connection his parents, aunts, and uncles had. Even his cousin Xander had found a female to settle down with and a man who shared their bed too. Now Graham held the fragile string of a new relationship, but until he knew no one could snap that string, he'd never rest. Never truly be happy.

He sighed. With a nudge on her spine, he sent her away. She carried her

boots again so the thump of the heels didn't sound on the wood floors once she was inside. Tripping barefoot across the turf, she sent a longing look over her shoulder that made his throat clench.

She turned again, her hair fanning in an arc around her narrow shoulders. If he lived to be a hundred, he'd never forget this moment. Or this night.

All the way home, his thoughts were filled with her. Heaviness throbbed in his groin as the memories of their lovemaking tormented him. When would he next hold her in his arms? He longed to get her into his own bed.

By the time he reached the Hollis lands, the sun had risen fully into the sky. He paused on the rocky ridge to stare across the valley. From here, he had a view of the entire ranch. Four curls of smoke from four chimneys crawled into the sky. On the flat of the hill above, a little log cabin nestled, belonging to Xander.

Graham's stomach rumbled. His ma would have a stack of pancakes for him, if he was lucky.

Spurring on Old Gray, he dashed down the steep slope and raced across the valley, imagining how it would feel to ride into the yard with Kathleen in front of him. Introducing her to the family would be harrowing, to say the least. His brothers and cousins could take their teasing too far. He could almost hear them now—the “dark horse” among them, Graham, had taken a wife? And in secret, what else?

He was a dead man. No Hollis could get away with it, and Graham would be battered with questions about his motives for keeping Kathleen a secret. Suddenly, if Graham were hemmed in by Wabash and his family, he'd rather go up against Wabash. Right now, it seemed the easier way out.

As he reached the house, the clatter of wagon wheels echoed through the valley. Drawing up short, he looked up to find a wagon full of Hollises bouncing toward him. He smiled to see the familiar blue hat of Xander's wife, Annabelle—a woman who looked so much like Bella it had nearly put a rift between him and Xander when Graham had insisted on claiming her.

He shook his head, still filled with guilt by his actions. Of course, he'd made amends, but he always approached the woman with a certain amount of caution when Xander or James, her other lover, were around. The men were possessive about their woman.

Graham swallowed hard. What would Kathleen be doing right now? Fixing breakfast for her pa and the hired man, no doubt. A frisson of unease wove through him. Something about that ranch hand unsettled Graham. The man hadn't lifted a finger to help with the calf pulling. In fact, he'd been nonexistent until after the work was done.

"Ho!" Xander's command for the horses to stop boomed out.

Graham dismounted and strode to meet the wagon. James and Annabelle were in the back with the baby. Little Sadie was snuggled in the crook of James's arm, sleeping like an angel, her rosebud lips pursed and dark lashes casting shadows on her baby cheeks.

For the first time ever, Graham's heart turned over at the sight of a child. Visions of an auburn-haired, pink-cheeked baby flitted into his head.

He stuck out his hand for Annabelle to take and pulled her to her feet, but she remained in the wagon. "A mighty cozy family you have here, men."

Xander twisted on the wagon seat and flashed a smile. His hat was pulled low against the glare of the sun, but it didn't hide his happiness.

Soon I'll have that too. "What brings you today?"

James passed the baby to Annabelle before jumping down from the wagon. He helped Annabelle out just as Xander climbed off the seat.

"The big dinner's today, remember?" Xander moved toward his family, snaking an arm around Annabelle and James.

Graham racked his brain, trying to figure out what dinner his cousin was talking about.

"You don't remember, do you?" Xander laughed and shook his head. "It's only the biggest dinner of the year in our family, Graham. The celebration of our Grandfather Hollis's arrival in Texas."

"Damnation, today?" Each year, the Hollis clan flocked together to share a day of relaxation in honor of the man who had brought them all here into this part of the country. While Graham loved listening to stories of his grandfather, who some said he resembled, it was also the last thing he wanted to do today. Thoughts of Kathleen tormented him. He wanted nothing more than to head into the stable and start his work. Maybe later catch a nap before riding across the fields to her house again.

He doffed his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. Would anyone notice if he shot out of here? Being surrounded by family was far from his idea of enjoyment at the moment.

“Hell, why hadn’t I noticed before now that you’re all duded up, Graham?” Xander’s voice annoyed him further. “Where you been, all dressed up like that?” He looked around. “Are you just coming home?”

Graham glared at him. “Mind your mouth.”

“Won’t matter if we do. Here comes Clay.”

“Fuck,” Graham said under his breath. Jamming his hat back on, he put his head down and started toward the house, hoping Clay passed without a word.

“Well, here comes the eldest son of Robert and Felicia Hollis,” Clay drawled. He strutted a circle around Graham, gazing at his attire pointedly. “Why, brother, it looks as if you’ve been courtin’.”

Graham clenched his teeth and gave his brother his best “kick your ass” glare, but Clay just laughed.

“Not courtin’, I see. With your disposition, I don’t know a woman in the county who would accept your attentions.”

“Shame on you, Clay,” Annabelle admonished, jostling the baby against her chest.

Graham shot Annabelle a look of thanks before pushing past his brother. Inside the house, his mother met him. The slender woman wiped her hands on her apron as she hurried from the kitchen.

“Is that a wagon I hear? Oh, Graham! I’m surprised you decided to dress for the festivities.”

“I didn’t.” He ducked his head and practically fled to his room. Hiding Kathleen from his family was going to be harder than he thought. Of course, he wouldn’t dress up every day, and doing so today gave away the secret that something was different, but the people who had loved him all his life would surely see a change in him. Hell, Annabelle had seen it. He could tell by the spark of interest in her eyes. She appeared to be happy for him.

Shutting himself inside his cool room, he started peeling off his clothes. The lavender scents of Kathleen clung to each fiber and every shaft of hair covering his body. He stared at the washbasin, loath to remove her smell from his skin. He wanted to carry her with him all day—keeping her with him during the celebration she should rightfully attend.

He grunted as need infused him. His cock lengthened against his will. Maybe he’d better wash to eliminate all traces of her. He didn’t need to battle an erection all day. Fighting his brothers and cousins would be enough.

* * * *

At hearing the scuffling step, Kathleen whirled to see her father leaning heavily on Jenkins. His head lolled, and his lips were slack.

“Oh, my Lord! What’s happened to him?” She dusted her floury hands on her apron and rushed forward. Fear spread through her limbs. Had he had a spell of some kind? He didn’t seem able to support his own weight or even focus on her.

“Pa! What’s wrong?” She gripped his shoulders and stared into his face. His pallor was greenish-gray.

Then it hit her—the reek of spirits. The bitter stench made her nose wrinkle.

“It’s my fault, miss. I brought some whiskey my family distilled, and we had a little nip.”

“A little?” Her voice raised in pitch like a shrieking hen. She glared at Jenkins, hoping he saw how unhappy this made her. Stepping aside, she gestured toward the small bedroom her father occupied. “Please get him into bed.”

Jenkins gave a curt nod and towed her pa across the common room. He didn’t even seem to be able to lift his feet.

She followed them to the bedroom and watched as her father spilled face-first onto the mattress. The ropes supporting it squeaked in protest. A long, guttural moan rumbled from him, followed by a retch.

“No!” She snagged the chamber pot and lunged forward in time to catch the sickening mess that spewed from him.

Jenkins stood back and hitched his thumbs into his belt while her father emptied the contents of his stomach. She turned her face aside as another stream spattered the pot.

“Why would you believe it a good idea to get my father in his cups, Mr. Jenkins?” She hoped her voice held all the disdain she felt and more.

“I apologize, miss. We just had a nip, but that brew is potent. I didn’t realize—”

“That he isn’t a young man with a cast-iron belly?” She fixed Jenkins with her hard stare, wanting to bean the man with the pot and all its filthy slop. “You’ve done enough here, Mr. Jenkins. Please see to your duties outside the house.”

Her father gave one last shudder, and his eyes rolled back in his head. Kathleen didn't wait to watch Jenkins leave but set aside the pot and bent over her pa. Pressing a hand to his forehead, she found him clammy but not fevered. However, she didn't like the color of his skin or the shallowness of his breathing.

If only her ma were here, she'd know what to do.

If Ma were here, he wouldn't have been fool enough to drink that rotgut.

Kathleen hurried across the room to the small wooden stand that held a pitcher of water and a basin. She poured the lukewarm water into the bowl and swirled a clean cloth in it.

For all of five minutes, she'd managed to bury thoughts of Graham. When she felt the twinge between her thighs now, they returned with a vengeance. It was impossible to forget how well he'd used her last night.

Another moan issued from her father, and she spun back to the bed. Folding the cloth, she placed it over his forehead. "Pa, is there anything I can do?"

She searched her mind for remedies for alcohol overconsumption. Surely her brother had been sotted before he went off to war, but she couldn't recall it. Perhaps she'd been too little—and busy sticking her nose against the window, watching the activities of the men outside.

Again, the warm blossom of passion spread through her belly as she relived her night in Graham's bed. Strong shoulders pressing her down, the velvet of his tongue against hers as he moved within her.

Her father made no reply, only gave a stuttering snore. Kathleen folded her arms over her chest, shaking her head. She watched him for a minute more and then took the pot out to dump.

When she opened the front door, Jenkins was there. She gasped and jerked, nearly sloshing the sick mess out of the pot.

Her ire flowed into her veins, replacing the tingly sensations the memories of Graham brought about. She set her jaw and stared down the hired man. "I thought I told you to see to your duties."

He didn't move but continued to gaze at her with narrowed eyes. Warning bells sounded in her head, and her nerve endings fired with awareness. If he took one step in her direction, she'd hurl the pot of puke at him and run for the shotgun hanging above the fireplace. She eased one bare

foot back and prepared to turn.

“Here, the least I can do is get rid of this for you.” Jenkins strode forward and plucked the pot from her hands, deliberately brushing her fingers as he did.

A shudder racked her, and bile bulged at the back of her throat. She had to get him to move on. But how? Asking her father to turn him out was a better idea than letting her unease slip to Graham. Her new husband was worried enough about harm coming to her without her adding to it. Besides, Jenkins wasn't really a threat, just a nuisance. Wasn't he?

She didn't like the way he held her gaze as he dumped the pot into the bushes. “Wash it out in the spring and put it outside the door. Thank you.” She twisted on her heel and hurried into the house again. This time, she shot the bolt on the door.

A few seconds later, she saw his form pass by the window on the way to the spring. A hard knot took up residence in her belly. She was locked inside with a sick father, and outside was a man who made her skin crawl.

She heaved a sigh and longed for Graham.

Chapter Seven

“What did you get for the horses, son?”

Graham jerked his head up at his father’s question. His pa lounged in a rocker with his ankle crossed over his knee, cleaning his fingernails with the point of his pocketknife.

The wind kicked up, and the windmill’s hectic squeaking resonated in the distance. All the males scattered across the wide veranda perked up to hear Graham’s answer.

He shook his head. “I haven’t made any deals yet. Why?”

His father stared at him hard—too hard. It was that “what trouble have you gotten into” stare Graham had seen so often as a kid. Even as an adult, that look made him want to squirm.

The chatter on the veranda had quieted. Inside the house, the womenfolk were putting the finishing touches on the feast. While Graham’s stomach rumbled, he’d rather go hungry than be the target of the rapid-fire questioning session his cousins, uncles, brothers, and father could aim at him.

“Well, you have a satisfied look about you, son. I figured you’d struck a good bargain for those twelve horses.”

Graham turned his gaze to the sole of his boot, but not before he caught several of his cousins’ smirks. Why couldn’t anyone mind their own damn business in this family? This was precisely the reason he’d refused to return at once after the war. He hadn’t been willing to talk about the sins he’d committed or the things he’d lost—things like his soft heart and his woman.

He sure as hell wasn’t willing now, either.

“I think Graham’s been courtin’.”

Without looking up, he sent mental bullets at Clay. What was it with that kid? Graham hadn’t kicked his ass in a good long while, but the idea was looking more and more enticing.

“Now that we have a proper town, there are a few women to be had,” his cousin piped up.

“You sure you want those ladies in town, Drew?” Graham’s father said,

and several laughs followed.

“If they’re warm and have a pair of lips, that’s all a man needs. Isn’t that right, Graham?” Clay asked.

Graham pierced his little brother with his gaze. Clay was no boy. He knew his way around a woman, from what Graham had heard. In these parts, if a man took his leisure with a female, everyone knew it. But no Hollis would dare marry one of those “ladies,” and if they wanted to keep their teeth, they wouldn’t soil a reputable lady.

Graham hadn’t. He’d married her.

He stood up quickly and shoved his hat low over his eyes. “I’ll make the horse deal soon, Pa.”

“And the deal with the woman?” Clay countered.

Graham caught Annabelle standing in the doorway of the house, attuned to the conversation. As one of the only women he’d ever confided in, she knew enough about Graham. She obviously knew something was up.

He cleared his throat, wishing he could just speak out and tell the whole family that he’d married a sweet and caring woman last night.

Without meaning to, he found himself staring at the rolling fields that separated their ranches. Soon he’d claim her properly. But he couldn’t seem to shake the feeling that Wabash would try to tear her from him. Ripping out part of his soul too.

* * * *

“Pa!” Kathleen shook her father, but he was limp, icy cold. Terror seized her. She stared at his chest for a long minute, trying to detect the rise and fall that indicated he was breathing.

When she saw the faintest movement, a surge of relief struck her. Still, this wasn’t right. No ordinary drunken stupor lasted this long or was this intense. Her father had been poleaxed for an entire day.

The late afternoon sun was beginning its rapid descent. In a few hours, darkness would fall, leaving her alone with him. Truly isolated from help. But if Graham came...

The pulse in her father’s neck fluttered erratically. She couldn’t wait that long. She needed help now.

Striding out of the bedroom, she threw the front door open and hollered. “Jenkins!”

He came at once, skulking around the house as if he'd been doing nothing but sitting there, waiting for her to need him.

She winced at the mere thought. What she needed was Graham. Could she trust this man to ride for Graham? Or should she take matters into her own hands and ask him to go for a doctor?

From the bedroom, her father's faint voice reached her. "Kathleen."

Rushing back to his side, she was more than a little put out to hear Jenkins following. Ignoring him, she dropped to her knees beside her father and took his slack hand between hers.

"What can I do for you, Pa? What ails you?"

"My stomach. I believe I'm going to be sick again." He rolled onto his side, his eyes pinched shut in pain as his stomach obviously cramped.

Kathleen got the basin beneath him just in time. The foul smell made her hold her breath even as her heart went out to him. Maybe this was a simple case of alcohol overuse, but she felt there had to be some remedy for him.

An hour later, with Jenkins firmly told off and kicked out of the house, she left her father sleeping more peacefully, his color slowly returning. She went about cleaning up and told Jenkins to saddle their horses because she wanted to go to town. There had to be a tonic that would purge the bad substance from her father's body and help him recover more quickly. She wanted to hurry, though. Darkness would fall soon, and that meant Graham would come.

Chapter Eight

Slowly, Graham made his way around the Allen house, creeping silently through the grasses. Just stealing through the night with the vision of Kathleen fixed firmly in his mind made his cock throb.

He adjusted the length and continued on, slipping around the barn to the back of the house. He was coming in a different way this time. He didn't want to tramp down the grasses too much in that section of the field. Silas was sure to notice.

The moon was a ripe orb in the sky, lingering halfway down the velvety backdrop while the stars seemed to dance around it. As much as Graham longed to stretch Kathleen out beneath this vast universe and watch her eyes as he made love to her, he yearned for a bed more.

Their bed.

Not for the first time, he wondered if he was being unreasonable about his plan to keep their marriage secret. He was home, after all, not at war. The people in these parts knew not to fuck with a Hollis boy, and the word would spread to any newcomers to the town.

The passions surrounding the war were long dead, at least among those he knew. But that still left Wabash. Nolan had cornered Graham in the barn earlier and told him the rumor was that Wabash had been spotted on Heller's Ridge with a band of men. Graham had questioned how they knew it was Wabash, and while no one could provide a solid answer, Graham was on edge. He simply couldn't take any chances with Kathleen.

Like his first wife, Kathleen was tender-eyed and feminine. She'd attract attention with her beauty, that was certain. Also, women like her were preyed upon if they weren't protected by a strong man.

He reached her window and peered at the square of glass divided into nine smaller panes. Inside, not a flicker of a candle lived. The moon and his face were reflected back at him.

Reaching up, he tapped the glass once with a forefinger.

Instantly, she was at the window, the oval of her face thrust close, beaming more joy than he had a right to view. God, had he put that look on

her face?

His heart took off like a herd of wild horses, galloping wildly. He strode around the house, coming to the door at the same moment she slipped through the opening. A pang of want claimed all his sense, and he drew her close, reaching past her and pulling the door closed quietly as he did.

Her scents struck him, and his head swam. He encircled her with his arms and lost himself, dizzied by her soft body crushed to his and the silken threads of her hair tickling his nose.

She made a soft noise. He stared down at her, tumbling headlong into her soul-searching gaze. Those cornflower-blue eyes could bring a man to his knees. Hell, he was half in love with her already. How had it happened? After Bella, he swore he'd never get caught up in the charms of another woman. In a few short days, he'd found himself breaking every rule he'd set for himself since that tragedy.

His gaze zeroed in on her full lips, which were as sweet as honey. He had to get her away, and now. Before he pinned her to the wall of the house and speared her on his cock.

Sweeping an arm beneath her round little thighs, he plucked her off her feet. As he swiftly made his way to the barn with her, she touched him. *All over*. Her fingers playing in the hair on his nape, fluttering across his shoulders and up around to cup his jaw. She buried her face against his neck and delivered an openmouthed kiss to his flesh.

A hot growl rumbled up without warning, and he swallowed it back before he released it. She flicked his earlobe with her tongue, sending illicit images through his head.

Once he was a safe distance from the house, he chanced a whisper. "Where does that hired man sleep?"

She stiffened in his hold. His step faltered as warnings sounded in his head.

"Why?" Her breath crossed his face, scented with mint and some other tangy herb.

He looked at her hard. Dammit, he was getting good and tired of only seeing her by moonlight. Impossible to read her gaze in the dark. He flexed his arms around her, bringing her closer. "Is the barn safe for us to be alone?"

"Y-yes. Jenkins sleeps in the upper building." She pointed to where a smaller hay barn stood.

When Graham didn't move on but continued to stare at her, she leaned in and ran her tongue over his lower lip.

Spurred on by the absolute need to possess her, he strode across the yard. The wind whipped up again, and a barn cat meowed loudly as they passed her. Kathleen giggled against Graham's neck. The sound infused him with joy.

When the cat yowled again, she hissed at it. "Hush, Pepper."

The side door to the barn had a board latch. Graham shoved it up, and the door swung inward silently. Stepping inside with her, he was swallowed by the blackness. The moon was on the other side of the barn, the single high window offering nothing but a faint gray streak of light.

"There's a lantern on that hook to your right."

He shook his head, but she probably couldn't see him. "We can't risk a light. I'll have to use my sense of touch." Letting her feet fall to the ground, he gathered her against his chest. Finding her mouth was easy—her pull on him was magnetic.

The first brush of his lips against hers raised a quiet moan from her. She coiled her arms around his neck and drew him down as she stretched onto her tiptoes. Her flavors burst inside his head. Before he could ease his tongue between her plump lips, she thrust hers boldly into his mouth.

He bit off a roar of satisfaction. Blood pumping with excitement, he angled his head and deepened the caress. With his fingers, he explored the soft depressions behind her ears and beneath her jaw as their tongues dueled for long, mind-numbing minutes. His cock ached, and his balls were full, ready to blow. She moved restlessly within his embrace so her breasts rubbed his chest.

He skimmed the crests of her cheekbones with his thumbs, learned the soft tickle of her eyelashes at the corners of her eyes. Then, running his fingers through her loose waves, he spun her around and into place, trapping her against the door with his body. He sagged at the knees and ground his cock against her pussy.

The heart-pounding need in him quickly transformed to something else—something he couldn't hold back much longer. Sooner or later, he'd have to tell her he was experiencing emotions that were unreal to him, and that he didn't deserve them.

Her harsh gasp filled his mouth. He swallowed it and continued to

probe her, rubbing her needy sex through her skirts. How many layers did she have on? Had she left off her petticoats and the chemise he'd ripped open days ago?

Her hands were wild on him, traversing the planes of his chest and back. When she reached his waist, he held his breath. Instinct urged him to put a stop to her tormenting touch, but part of him waited to see what she did to him. The warmth of her fingers seeped through his clothing and into his very flesh.

The earthy smell of animals and hay edged into his brain, mixed with Kathleen's light, floral scents. He sank his teeth into her plush lower lip and felt the moist skin swell around his teeth.

"Ohhh." She rubbed against him faster.

He cupped her breasts, weighing them through her bodice, knowing without a doubt she wore nothing beneath the thin cotton. Only a few fibers acted as a barrier between them. A spike of need struck his groin, and his cock grew steelier, if such a thing were possible.

Precum leaked from the tip of his erection. A sudden vision of him painting his juice all over her lower belly and her red curls covering her sex flitted through his head, igniting him fully.

He slammed into her. The door behind her shuddered, and she laughed into his mouth, clawing at his shirt.

Grasping the cloth of her skirt, he bunched it in his fists, lifting it to expose her sex fully. Tearing his mouth away, he dropped to his knees before her. Her arousal struck him full force.

"Fuck, Kathleen. How long have you been waiting for me?"

"Since you released me this morning," she panted. He looked up to see the faint lines of her sagging against the door, her head bowed to look at him, hair trailing around her face. He rubbed a lock between his fingers. Even without light, he knew the hue intimately. Strands of deep red, roan, and strawberry mixed to create the stunning tendrils.

And the curls covering her pussy would be darkening to a near brown from her juices...

He dipped his head and slid his tongue up her tight seam. Rocking her hips forward to meet his sensuous kiss, she knocked his hat off and twisted her hands in his hair. He nudged her thighs apart, breathed her in. Feminine musk and need. Parting her folds with his tongue, he gathered her cream. She

bit off a cry. Now that his eyes had adjusted slightly, he was able to see her hand plastered to her mouth, holding back the noises he longed to hear echoing through the night.

He bit into her clit, scraping it lightly with his teeth as he edged a finger into her tight channel. His head spun, and his world narrowed to include only her flavor, her curvy thighs pressed to him, and the soft moans that escaped her.

Curling his fingers, he pulsed them inside her tight sheath. Wetness slicked his fingers and trickled down his palm. He alternately lapped at her hardened pearl and ground the nubbin into her body.

Small noises escaped her, and she raked her nails over his shoulders. His balls ached heavily, and he wanted nothing more than to plunge his cock deep.

She tensed, her muscles quivering uncontrollably. He continued to drive her higher, up the steep slope of bliss. With a cry, she splintered. Juices coated his tongue. He fucked her faster with his fingers, drawing long, low coos from her. The sounds raised the hairs on his body.

For long minutes, he mouthed her pussy, slower and slower, until she gripped his jaw and drew him up her body. He could now see well enough to make out her glittering eyes.

“I need you, Graham.” Her harsh rasp made his heart turn over.

Leaning over her, he brought his mouth within inches of hers. “You want my cock buried in your sweet body?”

Her soft cry was his answer. “Please, Graham.”

“Not yet.” He kissed her, drawing on her tongue, sucking her delicious flavors into his mouth. When she was squirming again, he tore away. “Now tell me what you did today.”

She fell still and then stuttered her answer. “My father was ill. I cared for him.”

Graham clenched his teeth at the image that popped into his head of her nursing her pa. Emotion welled up in Graham’s chest—warmth and pride. He’d picked one hell of a good woman, someone who would stick by him till the end.

“And your father? How is he feeling?”

She drew her lips against her teeth then relaxed them. “He’s resting

easier.”

“Good news. Now...did you think of me more than a little bit?” He rumbled this next to her ear, making her squirm like a butterfly on a pin.

She wrapped her arms around him, digging her short nails into his spine. He placed his mouth on her throat and found the tender spot that made her writhe, swirling his tongue just below her ear for long moments. He released her before he left a mark, though the need to show the world he owned her burned inside him. After he'd asked her to hide their relationship until he decided it was safe, she wore her ring on a thin string around her throat. It hung between her fragrant breasts.

Trailing his lips down her throat, he flicked his tongue over the small bit of skin that wasn't buttoned into her bodice. He longed to see her undone—mussed up, buttons open to reveal a slash of pale flesh and her round breasts, hair dipping into her smoldering eyes.

Gripping her waist, he lifted her and set her aside. Then he reached for the metal shovel handle he saw gleaming in the faint moonbeams. He wedged this against the crossbar of the door, securing anyone from entering. The big main doors could be opened, but not without enough ruckus to alert Graham so he could hurriedly get Kathleen hidden.

He turned to her again, fists clenched, and panting for control. She flew into his arms, her mouth suddenly against his. *I don't deserve her. Please, God, don't ever let her walk away from me.*

He picked her up and carried her to the high stack of hay bales against one wall. Quickly, he shed his shirt and threw it over one of the lower bales.

“What are you doing?” Her voice was a faint shiver.

His cock stiffened at the dusky tone of it—a tone he'd heard when she was stretched beneath him.

“Bend over it, baby.”

Her breath caught. He tried to see her face, but the window wasn't affording them any light. For what seemed like an eternity, he waited to hear her gasp. Finally, when he was about to shake her, she gasped.

“What are you going to do?”

He snaked an arm around her waist, dragging her close to tongue the sensitive spot on her throat until she grew boneless in his hold. Gently, he eased her over the hay bale. “Trust me, darlin'. I'll never hurt you. This is another way to be loved.”

“Like the...animals?”

“Mmm-hmm. But so much better.” He smoothed his hands over her rounded buttocks, thrilling at the silken feel of her skin beneath the cotton of her skirt. White heat threaded through his groin. He ground his molars against the need to throw up her skirt and plunge balls-deep.

Judging by her voice and the muscles beneath his hands, she was nervous as a colt. He had to soothe her first. Blanketing her back with his body, he nuzzled her throat and ear.

He reached beneath her and cradled one breast, teasing the nub into a hard peak. When her back began to arch, he knew she was ready for more. Pinching the fabric of her skirt, he eased it over her bare legs and ass. He ran a palm over her skin, raising gooseflesh in his wake. And getting a raging erection in the process.

Behind them, the quiet shifting of hooves sounded. Graham ignored it and focused on his wife’s breathing. Each mewl drove him on, growing with intensity. When he felt between her legs, he discovered how slick she was. Wetter than before, when he’d just given her release with his tongue. What he really wanted to hear was her call his name—to know he was the only man in her universe and always would be.

He pushed one finger into her entrance and nibbled her neck. “I’m going to do just this, baby. Except it’s going to be my cock filling you. Do you want that?”

“Ohhh, yes, Graham!” She bucked against his hand, fucking his digit. Her body clenched and released.

“Not yet.” He removed his finger, leaving her with a ragged sigh on her lips. Unbuttoning his fly, he let his cock spring free. Shoving his pants all the way down to his boots, he then reached for her skirt and folded it around her waist, fully exposing her glistening sex. He smiled.

The moon is on my side for once.

Taking his cock in hand, he nuzzled her wet folds. She moaned and pushed back, eager for him. The tip of his shaft oozed his want for her. Pushing, he split her sweet lips and buried himself deep.

She cried out. The sound was muffled by the hay and the thick walls of the barn. He went completely still, fighting back the urge to roar his satisfaction. *Soon. Soon we’ll have our own house and can shake the walls down with our screams.*

He placed a hand on her lower back, arching her to receive more of him. The glorious lines of her ripe buttocks rose up, cupping his groin as he withdrew almost to the tip, then slammed back into her.

She turned her face into profile. If only the moonlight would fall across her features, allowing him to see her ecstasy. Hearing her wasn't enough. He bored into her body once more. His balls slapped her ass, and he growled his need.

“Graham...you're so deep.”

He bit down, struggling to keep from exploding. “It's the angle. Damn, baby, you're so tight!”

She rocked, and he pistoned his hips faster, driven by a primal urge to sink farther, to shoot his seed and have it take root in her belly.

She clamped down on him hard, and he realized with a start that she was coming. Contracting around him. Soaking him.

With an uninhibited moan, he unloaded. Cum spurted from his shaft, bathing her hot walls. Each drop spiraled from his body, joining them.

A shock ripped through him as he realized he was joined by something higher. All the tenderness, protectiveness, and lust had transformed into a warm blossom of love.

He leaned over her, kissing her neck, shoulder, spine. Anything that came into contact with his lips. When the final jolt of orgasm washed over him, he pulled out of her body. She sagged, limp. He rolled her up to face him and claimed her mouth in a long, passionate kiss.

Her mouth was salty-sweet. Was she—

“Baby, why are you crying?” He caught one tear on his tongue.

Her voice wavered. “I'm happy, husband.”

Her choice of words filled him with elation unlike any he'd ever experienced. When he'd married Bella, he'd known happiness, but being in the thick of the war, terror had been his top emotion.

He nipped Kathleen's lower lip. “I'm glad to hear it.”

“I just wish...”

The wind whispered through the cracks in the barn, and a horse stamped repeatedly. Graham waited for Kathleen to go on, but several heartbeats stretched between them.

“Don't ever be afraid to tell me what's on your mind, darlin'.” He

couldn't stop kissing her, trailing a path down her jaw to her throat.

She threaded her fingers into his hair. Her words rang with hesitation. "Are you sure it has to be this way? A secret?"

He sighed heavily and pulled back to stare into her face. A cloud moved in front of the moon, and he couldn't clearly make out her features. "For a little while, sweetheart. I don't want it to be this way."

"Are you afraid of introducing me to your family?"

He wasn't shocked she'd asked this. He'd suspected she'd question it sooner or later. Sure, he was a little worried about bringing her into a clan full of brothers and cousins who couldn't keep their mouths shut. When he did decide to bring her home, he'd have to threaten Clay with a broken rib or two if he didn't curb himself.

Graham shook his head, and his nose brushed hers. "That's not the reason, Kathleen. I'm very honored that you've agreed to be my wife."

"Then you really are afraid someone would try to...harm me?"

"I can't take the chance. It won't be for long. I promise." Even as he said this, he wondered how long it *would* be. After all, no one knew about her. If Wabash happened upon the Allen residence, he could burn the place, shoot Silas, and rape Kathleen, even not knowing she and Graham were linked.

Maybe he needed to send a few rumors out there to draw the evil man in right where he wanted him. Each night, his brothers relayed more facts about Wabash's whereabouts. He was closing the gap, and it was time to do some hunting—Hollis style. A single word would rally his family around him, and the search would be on.

She shivered, and he wrapped her closer. "Will you promise me something else?" she whispered.

"What is it, darlin'?"

"That you'll take me over a hay bale in the future."

His placed his mouth over hers, letting his smile spread over hers. They shared a hiccup of laughter before starting all over again. Touching, stroking, caressing. He couldn't get enough of her, even though she was now firmly implanted in his heart.

* * * *

Kathleen paced the confines of her father's bedroom. She rounded the

bed and stubbed her bare toe on the metal frame. Pain shot up her foot and ankle. She doubled over, grasping her toe and tamping down the howl of agony that bubbled in her throat.

Her father was still sleeping. Still gray. Still breathing shallowly. Yesterday, when she'd gone into town for an elixir, the new doctor had told her to come fetch him if her father didn't improve by the next day.

She stared at Pa's sleeping face. A tuft of white hair stuck up at an odd angle, making him look as if, rather than aging, he'd gone backward to childhood. After she fed him the elixir, he'd stopped throwing up. But he wasn't well either.

She rubbed her hands together. Could she face another ride to town with Jenkins? Alone?

He hadn't exactly crossed any more boundaries with her, but he'd leered at her plenty. A sick knot formed in her belly each time she thought of his gaze on her. She'd wanted to yell that he had no right to take this liberty—she was a married woman!

But she wasn't allowed to divulge the information, and that stung.

Pressing her lips into a fine line, she continued to stare at her father. For him, she must face the trail with Jenkins. She'd insist they ride separately again, and maybe she could outstrip him, reaching town before he did. She was a confident rider. It was possible.

Within minutes, she'd run Jenkins to earth and was seated atop her mare. She'd taken a mere moment to slip on boots, a bonnet, and tidy her hair. At the last moment, she'd realized the string she wore around her throat had worked its way out of her bodice, and the ring was dangling between her breasts. She hastily stuffed it back in before Jenkins noticed.

“Ready, Miss Kathleen?”

She shuddered. What was it about his voice that edged under her skin? Avoiding his gaze, she said, “Yes.” Without waiting for him to take the lead, she set her boot heels into her horse's sides and took off across the field.

Her heart drummed in time to the hoofbeats. After several minutes of galloping, she started to relax. She couldn't shake the memories of last night's encounter with Graham. Each kiss, each release, was emblazoned on her soul. His care for her touched her heart. It had taken all of a day before she realized her emotions for him ran deeper than physical lust. The wisps of love had risen up that first night when he'd come to find her sitting under the

moon.

The cool fingers of the wind tickled the stray hairs on her forehead. She drew her bonnet lower and leaned over her horse as they thundered toward town. Jenkins was close behind her, but she ignored him and turned her thoughts ahead. She'd have to ask the doctor to return with her, but that would cost money. She didn't have any way to pay him.

Perhaps he could use a good laying hen?

How would Graham's family deal with money? They were better settled than the Allens were. It was common knowledge the Hollises were the most prosperous family in this part of the state. They probably had cash on hand to pay the doctor if such a need arose.

Not for the first time, Kathleen's mind drifted to his family members. She knew he had two brothers and nine cousins—all males. Absently, her hand slipped to her belly. Would she bear him a son as well? It seemed these strong, rugged men could produce nothing else. She'd heard tell that his cousin Xander's family had been blessed with a new baby, but Kathleen didn't know the gender.

She didn't know anything about them, and that was the trouble. She wanted to become part of that big group, though meeting them for the first time was a daunting thought. What would happen if she just rode into the yard and announced who she was?

A vision of Graham's eyes flashed into her mind. Too well she imagined that dark, brooding look he got. No smile. Nothing to reveal anything but his displeasure. She didn't want to be on the receiving end of that look—ever.

The town was nestled in a basin between three mountain ranges. The paths leading to the cluster of buildings were well worn, and grass barely poked up through the earth. As she reached one of these trails, the sounds of hammering drifted to her.

New buildings were going up, and those that were erected had shiny coats of colorful paint. She slowed the horse to take in the sight. She rarely got off the farm, and reveled in being part of civilization.

Too bad she was with Jenkins.

He took the lead now, catching her reins and towing her horse behind. They rode onto the main street and were forced to stop as a hundred or so horses were driven down the road before them. As far as she could see,

horses clogged the main thoroughfare.

She scoured the scene and fixed her gaze on the broad backs of the two men who drove them—one at the front, one at the rear. Something about the set of the shoulders of the man nearest her reminded her of Graham.

She longed for him to turn. Though instinct told her it couldn't be her husband, it might be one of the Hollis boys. Horses were their trade. It was likely they'd bring horses in to trade or sell. The town was booming to life, and more tents had been erected on the outskirts since she'd been here yesterday.

Jenkins cursed, and she studied him. What was his problem?

A few minutes later, the men corralled the horses at the opposite end of town, and she and Jenkins made their way toward the small white clapboard building settled between a hotel and a public bath.

Jenkins dismounted and held her horse so she could too. She was thankful he didn't try to give her a hand down. The last thing she wanted was for him to touch her, let alone have a Hollis man see him touching her.

The doctor was seated on a crate on the wooden walk before his place of business, smoking a pipe. He gained his feet when he saw Kathleen.

“Good day, Miss Allen. Elixir didn't work?”

“No, it did,” she said. It rankled to be addressed as “Miss Allen” when she was truly Mrs. Hollis. “He's stopped being violently ill. However, he's sleeping an awful lot. In fact, he hasn't awakened yet. And I don't like his color.”

“Let me get my bag.” He disappeared into his office, leaving Kathleen to look around.

She peered down the street toward the place the horses had been rounded up. A shock ripped through her. She caught her breath as a big male strode up the boardwalk in her direction—a man who wore his hat in the same low fashion as Graham and walked in those same long strides.

He had to be a relative.

Someone stopped him with a call. “Hollis, whatcha asking for that sleek black horse?”

He drew to a stop and hitched a thumb in his belt. “For you? Three hundred.”

The man asking let out a low whistle. “That's no deal!”

“Exactly! I’ve seen how you treat your horse stock, Middleton. I don’t want a Hollis horse falling into your hands.” Without bothering to wait for a reply, he continued right toward Kathleen.

He looked up, and their gazes locked. Her heart flipped to see the familiar shape of the man’s nose and mouth. His jaw was entirely too chiseled to be anything but a Hollis feature.

The corner of his mouth lifted, cutting a swath across his handsome face. He touched his brim. “Howdy, miss.”

Ma’am. Irritation rose up but was quickly stanchd by his smile.

“Hello.”

“You waiting on the doc?”

“Yes, he’ll be right out.” She purposely chose not to say “with us,” having no wish to include Jenkins in any way.

“Sorry to hear something is ailing you. You look mighty fit to me.” He dragged his gaze over her.

A blush scorched her cheeks, but she managed to mutter a thank-you.

“May I ask your name?”

Jenkins took that moment to speak up. “This here is Miss Kathleen Allen, daughter of Silas Allen.” His hard tone indicated that the Hollis gentleman should back off. But Graham’s relative simply stepped closer and took her hand.

“I’m Clay Hollis. I’m glad to make your acquaintance, Miss Allen. It’s not often I set eyes on a lovely lady in these parts.”

Jenkins narrowed his eyes, and for a bone-shattering moment, she thought he might take a swing at Clay Hollis.

Finally, the doctor emerged, saving the day, in her opinion. “I’m ready, miss. Lead the way.”

“Good day, Mr. Hollis,” she said, giving him a nod. She grasped her horse’s reins and swung into the saddle, taking care to arrange her skirts and thankful they were long enough to conceal her legs. Would Clay tell Graham about meeting her?

Minutes later, she was riding away from town, following Jenkins and with the doctor riding alongside her. Relief pulsed in her veins at the thought that her father was about to gain aid. But her heart throbbed despondently as she wondered if she’d ever be properly introduced to Clay Hollis—as

Graham's wife.

Chapter Nine

The wind shifted, and the horse's nostrils flared as it caught Graham's scent. *Dammit*. He needed to get close to this wild mustang, and it was giving him more trouble than the few dollars he'd probably earn from selling it.

Nolan had rounded it up on the back fifty acres, which was as wild as the prairies, since the Hollises had never cultivated it. How he'd managed to put a rope around the horse's neck, haul it home, and corral it, Graham would never know because he couldn't get near the touchy beast.

He made a loop of the rope and thwacked it against his thigh, staring directly into the horse's crazed black eyes. "Come on, you son of a bitch. I always win."

He started toward it, walking slowly but with purpose. If he got within fifteen feet, he could rope it and shut it inside the paddock, where it could be trained to become more civilized.

This horse was exactly the opposite of Kathleen. She'd been tame to start, and now she was growing more insistent and demanding when he loved her. In the early hours before dawn, she'd shoved him down on the hay bale and ridden him like the most competent of lovers.

His cock stiffened at the thought.

The horse snorted and danced away a few more steps.

If he managed to bring this horse to market, he could put the earnings toward the house he wanted to build Kathleen. Or he'd get enough to purchase some beautiful parlor furniture fit for a real lady.

"You gonna waltz with that horse or tell it who's boss?" Clay's irritating drawl chopped off the spires Graham was creating in his mind.

He shot Clay a glare as he edged closer to the horse. A couple more steps and he could throw the rope. "Shut your goddamned mouth, Clay. You'll spook it."

"Oooh, touchy, I see. Not getting enough sleep?"

The lilting way he said this made Graham certain that Clay alluded to his midnight outings.

Graham's muscles coiled, and he flipped the rope a little, ready to make the toss. The black bobbed its head and swished its tail warily. Probably didn't help that Clay was leaning against the fence, gossiping like an old woman.

"You going to own up to the fact you've been leaving every night this week?"

"What's it matter? I'm not twelve years old."

"I don't know where you've been going, but I suspect a woman is the reason for your clandestine jaunts across the fields."

He snapped his gaze to his brother, ready to use the rope for something other than snagging a wild horse. Why did all the Hollis men have to be such damn good trackers? Clay could follow a raccoon to its den in the middle of a spring downpour. He could easily follow Graham across the fields to the Allen house if he wanted. What reason would he have to follow, though, other than to be a pain in Graham's ass?

The horse went still as Graham gained another foot of ground between them.

Of course, Clay went on talking.

"Is there a woman down in the new town who would take interest in a brooding son of a bitch like you, Graham?"

"Prob'ly not."

"So it's a man, then?"

While Graham was not the sort of person to try to fit square pegs into round holes, he prickled a little with irritation that Clay thought he would be spending time with a male. He was married, for Christ's sakes!

Of course, his brother didn't know that.

"All right, so it's not a man."

"Very astute of you, Clay."

"I wouldn't say the town is devoid of pretty young things. I mean, there is that *house*, but I'm talking about honest women. Why, today, I set eyes on a glorious creature while Drew and I were in town making a sale. Auburn hair tucked up in the primmest blue bonnet with eyes that matched—"

Graham's limbs petrified. Forgetting the horse entirely, he swung to face his brother. "Auburn hair?"

"Yessir. And curves like this." Clay cupped his hands around invisible

curves as he outlined an hourglass figure. “A might pretty young thing. She couldn’t have been more than twenty. And she was with a man, fetching the doc.”

Graham’s heart spasmed. Were they talking about the same woman? “Was she with an older gentleman? White hair and grizzled?”

“Nah, one of them Jenkins boys. You know the family from up on the ridge?”

Gulping, Graham closed the distance between them. The horse trotted behind him, giving an excited whinny at having escaped Graham’s rope.

He fixed Clay in his glare. “A Jenkins man? About this tall?” He held up a hand.

“That’s right. Now that I know the woman’s name, I might feel the need to take a midnight ride of my own, right up to the Allen place.”

Red spots burst in front of Graham’s vision like a cannon explosion. He threw down the rope and hurled himself at Clay. Striking his brother full force around the waist, he took them both down into the dirt.

Graham was bigger and heavier than Clay, but his brother was a wiry little shit and able to weasel out from under a body. Before he could do just that, Graham hemmed him in with his arms, pinning him securely with his knee.

“What the fuck, man? Get the hell off!”

“Don’t you talk about her that way. She is...my...wife!” He bit the words off without thought of the consequences, only determined to make his brother understand that Kathleen was off-limits.

Clay’s eyes widened, and he stopped struggling to throw Graham off. “Your what?”

A shiver of shock sidled down Graham’s spine. He rolled off and drew his knees up, dropping his face into his hands.

Clay sat up, dusting his hat and jamming it back on his head. “Your wife?”

“Yeah,” he croaked.

“What the...? Are you serious, brother?”

“Do I look like a man who isn’t serious?” He turned his gaze on Clay, letting him see the full force of his anger.

Clay laughed. The chuckle sent the wild horse into a fit of theatrics. It

reared and bucked, stomping close enough to them now that one of them could have reached up and grabbed its mane if they'd desired. So the black beast wanted to be caught after all, Graham thought.

But Graham hadn't wanted to be caught out with his secret. Not yet. He wasn't ready to share Kathleen with anyone until he was entirely certain she was safe. *Too late now.*

"Fuck, Graham. You'd better start talking."

"I married the Allen woman—Kathleen. I've been spending the nights over there with her."

"But why?" A glint came into Clay's eyes, and he started chuckling again. "Ma is gonna tan your hide for being left out of the wedding plans."

"There were no plans. No one was present but me, Kathleen, and the preacher."

His brother stared at him unwavering, his smile fading. "You're not making this up."

"Hell, no. What reason do I have to lie? Kathleen is my wife. I married her in secret, and I plan to keep it that way for a while." He lowered his brows in warning and urged his thickheaded little brother to take the hint.

Clay shook his head as if trying to understand. "Why would you marry in secret? Does her father hate you?"

"Not that I'm aware of. In fact, I helped him out a few days ago by pulling a calf."

"Then why?"

Graham ran his fingers through his hair. How to put his fears into words? Appearing weak before his brother wasn't an option. He was the oldest—the hard-ass among them.

"I can't really explain why yet. But I want to keep it a secret a while longer. Can you keep your mouth shut?"

"Well," he drawled, resuming his role of taunting little brother, "put like that—"

Graham glared. "All right, if you want to play that way—*keep your mouth shut, Clay. Or else.*" He slammed his fist into Clay's gut.

His brother doubled up, laughing and choking. He leaned to the side, alternately howling with laughter and coughing. Graham watched him for a long minute, wondering how the man could be so carefree. Even when he

was getting beat up, he was good-natured. Graham had never been that way.

As this thought crossed his mind, an image rose up—of him and Kathleen the previous night, rolling in the hay, sharing impassioned and playful kisses.

He fell still, staring at a point in the distance, past the horse he was meant to capture. Kathleen had done that for him—pulled him from his darkness and cast a wreath of light on his life. In just a few short days, she'd become his sun.

And he couldn't even claim her as his in broad daylight.

He jumped to his feet and extended a hand to Clay. His brother looked at it dubiously, severe mistrust in his eyes.

"C'mon, you ass. I'm not going to hit you anymore," Graham said.

Clay gave him his hand, and Graham launched him to his feet. Wrapping an arm around his middle, Clay gave another whine. "Damn, that hurt, brother. It's been a while since we had a tussle. I'd forgotten that you never hold back, even with kin."

Graham leveled his gaze at Clay. "Get your hat. We're going to ride into town."

A dark brow lifted as Clay studied him. "For...?"

"I need your help. We're going to have a conversation that will draw out a certain man who might be a threat to her. And then you're going to stay up late with me and wait for him to strike."

* * * *

Graham didn't come that night.

Kathleen waited up until the sun pushed its rounded head above the horizon, and still there was no sight of him. Disappointment and worry rocked her. She leaned against the side of the barn, arms wrapped around herself. There was a chill in the air. But she wasn't exactly shaking because she was cold.

Where was he? For the fiftieth time, she gazed in the direction he would come, wondering if she should go in search of him. Had something bad befallen him? Indians were known to travel these parts. Perhaps Graham had been set upon—

"Waiting for someone, Kathleen?"

She spun, knowing before she did who stood behind her. Jenkins had

sneaked up on her and stood a few feet away. His breath plumed out in the cool air.

“I was on the way back from the outhouse when it struck me to watch the sunrise.”

“Seems you’ve been doing that a lot lately—sneaking in when the sun comes up, and coming outside when the moon rises.”

She shoved past him, but he caught her arm. Her skin crawled with disgust, each goose bump a reminder of why she must tell Graham about Jenkins being too familiar with her.

She shook off his hand and twisted back toward the house. “Once again, you overstep yourself, sir. I’d ask you to mind your own business.”

As she hurried along, she found to her dismay she could not outstrip him without breaking into a run. Which she might. Instinct was taking over, telling her to escape his company as soon as possible.

With one swift move, he cornered her, using his big body to corral her. Fear gripped her as she found herself pinned between him and the side of the outhouse. Angry tears rose up to clog her throat, and she gulped them down, determined not to look vulnerable. When she was a child, her ma always told her the way to handle bullies was to not back down.

She glared at Jenkins. “Let me pass!”

He thrust his face close. “You hear me, miss. I see tracks coming in from the west. I’ve seen Hollis’s horse hobbled up on yonder pasture. Seems mighty suspicious that now your pa’s taken sick and a new man is suddenly coming ’round.”

Fear was an animal clawing at her chest. What on earth did he mean? That Graham somehow was responsible for her father’s illness? She shook her head, trying to digest his words, to come up with a retort.

“You’re talking nonsense. You must have tippled from that whiskey, and this time it’s addled your brains!” The doctor had arrived yesterday and administered a dose of a new elixir. He had sat by her father’s bedside for a long time, assessing him. In the end, he’d told Kathleen it must be a simple sickness and her pa would recover soon enough. But she couldn’t shake the feeling that Jenkins had caused her father to be sick with his horrid rotgut drink. She hoped he’d guzzle an entire bottle and go straight to hell.

He leaned in closer. She plastered herself to the wooden wall, flames of fury licking her veins. She wasn’t remotely strong enough to push him away,

but she knew someone who could set him straight. Her husband.

“I’m sure your pa would be interested to hear that his daughter is sneaking out of the house and not returning until the wee hours.”

“It’s none of your concern!”

“What do you intend to do with that Hollis, Kathleen? Marry him?”

Ice trickled down her spine. She glared openly at Jenkins. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

He sneered. “Of all the Hollis men you chose to favor, you’ve picked Graham—the war criminal, the murderer.”

She couldn’t stop the shiver that passed over her features. The sight of it increased Jenkins’s snide smirk.

“Why do you think I said your father’s illness might have something to do with that man? He’s no good, Kathleen. If you knew of his crimes—”

“It was the war, sir! Every man committed crimes and sins.”

“I heard tell he had a woman. When she strayed, he killed her.” The singsong way he said this made Kathleen’s blood run cold.

Deep in her heart, she believed Graham. Her trust in him was unbreakable. But Jenkins scared the life from her. Her heart tripped out of control. Staring into his wild eyes, she pondered his sanity.

What was she going to do? She was trapped here with her sick and helpless father and a crazy man. Graham hadn’t shown up—

She froze. Her breath stuttered from her, and her heart seized. Had Jenkins done something to harm Graham? Laid in wait for him, ambushed him?

“Kathleen?” The faint strains of her father’s voice drifted through the wall of the house.

Jenkins jerked, and she narrowed her eyes at him, aware that he didn’t want to be caught terrorizing Silas Allen’s daughter. She took immediate advantage of his weakness, going for the throat.

She pitched her voice low. “Listen here, Jenkins. Don’t you believe for a minute you can continue to harass me. I have men who will stand behind me. And he’s one of them.” She pointed toward the house where her father was calling her name with more force than he’d mustered in days.

Jenkins placed his palms on the wall on either side of her and then pushed away. He scraped a hand through his dirty brown hair, panting

heavily with anger.

“I’ll be watching you, Kathleen.”

“You’ll regret it if you do.”

Her words hung in the air between them. The horses shifted within the barn, and a cow mooed. Her father called for her again.

On legs that were shakier than she cared to admit, she made her way to the house. Inside, she barred the door behind her. She didn’t want to take any chances that Jenkins might sneak up on her while she was tending her father.

Panic was settling firmly into her bones. Where was Graham? Not only did she ache for him, but she needed him to come and give her that sense of safety she always felt in his arms. As if nothing could ever touch her.

Setting eyes on her father’s face, she felt instantly better. His color was improved, and he was sitting up, leaning weakly against the wall. His hair stuck up in disarray.

Without warning, a laugh bubbled up her throat. She clapped a hand over her mouth, but it was too late. The sound erupted and filled the room.

Her father’s lips twitched into a grin. “I must look a sight.”

“Yes.” She giggled. “But, Pa, I’m so happy you’re feeling better!” She dropped to the bed beside him and hugged him. His arm came around her, showing he was still weak. Just seeing him in this state—sitting up, talking, smiling—was enough for her.

“Was the doc here, Kathleen, or was that a dream?”

She nodded and moved back to stare at him. “He was here. He gave you some medicine. How are you feeling now?”

“Like a baby bird fallen from the nest. But I’ll do, daughter.” He rubbed his stomach, which let out a big growl. “What do you have for breakfast?”

A smile spread across her face, and a ray of sunlight filled her being. At least her father was on the mend. Now she just needed to find out where her husband was.

Chapter Ten

As Graham rode into the Allen place, he continually scanned the landscape for danger. He didn't know quite what he was looking for, but he was unsettled all the same. The sun was high in the sky, raising a bead of sweat that snaked from his hairline and ran into his eye. He blinked away the sting and spurred Old Gray on faster, eager to reach Kathleen.

An entire night without her had worn on his nerves. By dawn, he'd been a bear, snapping at everyone within distance, which happened to be his brothers, cousins, and pa. The work on the ranch hadn't gone as quickly as he would have liked, and he was eager to be away. Hell, he'd even bitten off his mother's head when she'd asked him to come in for a hearty breakfast.

He passed a hand over his face. Fatigue was a heavy fist, pounding him between the eyes. He and Clay had spent all night carousing in town, dropping hints that he was looking for Wabash. While no insects had crawled out of the woodwork at this news, Graham had received several pensive looks. So the men in town knew, and they would gossip like old biddies at a church picnic.

He had to settle things with his woman with all haste. He simply couldn't go on this way—spending only the nights with her and not properly claiming her as his. Because every bone in his body was possessive. It went against the grain to pretend she was only a woman he'd taken interest in and not his wife.

As he crested a knoll, he spotted the top blade of the Allens' windmill. There was always a wind in Texas, and that thing whirred constantly. From what he could tell, it was one of the only things in perfect repair.

Old Gray, now accustomed to making his way to this plot of ground where he foraged for the sweetest grasses, surged forward. Graham couldn't help but smile at his horse's eagerness.

Patting his neck, Graham said, "I feel the same, old boy."

This time, there was no need to hobble the horse farther up in the field and go in on foot. Since it was day, he could ride up in plain sight. When he thundered into the yard, Silas appeared in the doorway of the house.

Graham assessed him in a flash. The man clung to the door frame to support himself, and he looked less meaty—as if his illness had stripped away some of his vitality.

Quickly, Graham dismounted, his heart tripping when he glimpsed the auburn head behind Silas.

Coming forward, he extended a hand to Kathleen's father.

"Good to see you, Hollis. What's brought you this way today?"

Graham pumped his hand, aware of the slight tremor that trickled from Silas's hand into his. He looked over the man's head and locked gazes with Kathleen. The breath whooshed from him. Damn, those cornflower-blue eyes could deal a more powerful blow than any man's fist.

"Afternoon, Mr. Allen. Miss Allen." He tipped his hat to her, and a rosy glow spread over her beautiful face.

"Come in, come in. Kathleen will get you a cool drink. After your ride in that heat, you'll need it." Silas moved slowly into the house, his back more hunched than the last time Graham had seen him.

Kathleen stole a look at Graham from beneath her long lashes before turning her back and disappearing into the larder. It was all he could do to keep from staring at the place where she'd emerge, his heart thumping with joy.

And to see her in broad daylight... Well, after the war, he didn't think he could ever again be that man who was all tied up in knots.

Silas sank to a chair before the fireplace and gestured for Graham to have a seat too. He took up the wooden chair, careful about the wobbly leg. The gorgeous blue velvet parlor furniture he'd last seen in a shop window in San Antonio flitted through his mind. Kathleen should have that. He was going to give it to her.

Silas struck up a conversation about the dry weather and how wearing it was on the cattle. Graham was able to navigate the topic without thought—he'd had the same talk with his family often enough. As they talked, he kept one eye on the larder. What was Kathleen doing?

Just then she came out, smiling and flushed. Graham's heart flipped at the sight of her pink cheeks and glittering eyes. A happy woman. Had he made her as happy as she'd made him in the short time she'd been part of his life?

He stood to accept the drink from her. Curling his fingers around her

slender ones, he stared right into her eyes. “Thank you, miss.” He stressed the miss, hoping she didn’t take offense by his use of it. To him, she was his wife—Mrs. Graham Hollis.

Her full pink lips tilted up in a crooked smile, as if she tried to hide it. She quickly dropped her gaze. “Mr. Hollis.”

Silas spoke up. “Kathleen has been cooped up in this house far too long. I’ve been in bed with a sickness, and she’s waited on me hand and foot. A finer daughter I couldn’t have asked for.”

Graham returned to the chair and brought the wooden cup filled with tea to his lips. The sweetness danced on his taste buds, and the cool liquid quenched his thirst.

But not his hunger for Kathleen. He had to get her alone. Soon.

He crossed his ankle over his knee, hoping to distract from the bulge at the front of his pants. Judging from Kathleen’s expression, she’d noticed.

As long as Silas doesn’t. The last thing I need is a fight on my hands with the man I need to win over.

Silas continued to talk about the price of feed and how hard it was to get good leather boots in their parts. At his age, he didn’t want to make a trip to San Antonio even once a year, and did Graham know that the new town had a doc?

Graham listened with half an ear, answering his questions and filling in spaces in the conversation with politeness, but all he wanted was Kathleen. Up against the wall. Bent over a hay bale. Tumbling in the grass.

In the soft down of her mattress.

Speak up now, and it can be your mattress too. Claim her to the old man and settle in as a permanent resident.

Silence descended. Graham looked between father and daughter, noting the same expression of mirth in their bright eyes. Had he been asked a question and missed it?

He cleared his throat and downed the last of his sweet tea. Kathleen came forward at once to take his cup. Graham’s cock burned with need. The touch of her gaze, the brief meeting of their fingers around the smooth wood, were too swift. He needed more. Now.

Kathleen seemed to pick up on this immediately. “Pa, you’re looking a little worn out. Would you like me to help you to bed?”

“Ohh, I couldn’t do that with company here!”

Graham nodded. “You’re just out of your sick bed, sir. Please don’t let me keep you from gaining the rest you need to make a full recovery. I’ll make sure the chores are done and anything else that needs tending to.”

Silas gained his feet, wobbling slightly. “Well, that Jenkins is somewhere around here. But if you don’t mind lending a hand, I could give you an honest day’s wages—”

“Nonsense,” Graham said, using a tone that brooked no argument. “We’re neighbors. I have time to spare, and you could use a hand. Allow me to share my strong back.”

Kathleen’s eyes positively glowed as she gazed up at him. He afforded himself one long look at her, drinking in the sight of the white arch of her throat above the prim blue dress she wore. Her lips parted on what he thought might be a sigh, all her features softening with an expression he didn’t dare to interpret. He couldn’t hope for the things he thought he saw in her eyes.

She ripped her gaze from his, turning her face aside. “Let me help you to bed, Pa.” She wrapped her arm around her father’s drooping shoulders and turned him toward one of the two doors leading from the main room.

When they vanished into what must be the bedroom, Graham clenched his hands into fists, staring at the other door. The door that housed Kathleen’s bed. Primitive urges nestled low in his groin even as a longing rose up—to see her stretched out on her bed, wearing that same look she’d just given him.

Fuck, how was he going to keep himself from attacking her? Last night without her had been one of the longest in his life.

A few moments later, she emerged from the room, closing the door behind her. They faced each other a few paces away.

Warmth spread through him, slow as molasses; sweeter, though.

“He’s tuckered out. I expect he dropped off the minute his head hit the pillow,” she said quietly.

Her voice reverberated in his soul, but her words troubled him. He ran his knuckles over his jaw, making a rasping noise. “Christ, Kathleen, you said he was unwell, but I never guessed he was that bad. He looks worn to the bone.”

She nodded. “I don’t know what ailment took him, but the doc said he’d make a recovery, and he has. Now he’ll just need to gain his strength.”

A lump bobbed in Graham's throat. "I don't want you to deal with things like that on your own anymore."

Hope shot across her features like a blazing sun in the sky. "So you've come to stay?"

Heart plummeting, he pressed his lips into a fine line. "Not yet, darlin'. I promise it won't be long, though."

Clear disappointment tinged her feminine features, but she forced a smile anyway. "Well, I'm glad you're here now."

In one step, he was with her, wrapping her close, bending to her mouth. Molding her lips to his, he held the kiss, trying to pump all the emotions he felt into her. Soon he'd give her more words he knew she craved. Tender words. *Love words.*

He should feel shock that this sudden revelation came over him—that he loved this woman—but he'd known from the start it wasn't only possible but probable. Inevitable. Bella wouldn't want him to suffer for eternity, would she? She'd never ask him to live a lonely day if he could have a full life.

Slanting his mouth over hers, he drank from her, tasting her inner depths and sharing a low moan. She twisted her little fist in the front of his shirt, going onto tiptoe, clinging to him.

The touch of her tongue ignited him. All too well, he imagined that wet tongue on his body...on his cock.

He splayed a hand over her lower back, stretching his fingers to caress the swell of her buttocks. And the blasted woman wiggled. She *wiggled!* Biting off a feral growl, he pulled away.

Distance was imperative. He couldn't be responsible for his actions if he didn't get her out of his arms. No way could he take her in this house under her father's nose. The man would certainly wake in the middle of their ecstatic embrace, and Graham would find a gun muzzle pressed against his head.

Silas Allen was no slacker. If he got it in his head to shoot Graham for toying with his daughter, Graham would be six feet under.

Kathleen looked up at him with a mixture of remorse, guilt, and passion. God, he couldn't stare at her a minute more or he'd throw her over his shoulder and make off with her. Hell, he still might.

"All right," he said, breathing heavily. "Let's take a walk."

“A walk?”

“Yes, care to take a turn with me, Mrs. Hollis?” He kept his voice low and could see his words did things to her—affected her, softened her more.

His cock stiffened further, straining so hard he thought it would strangle within the confines of his pants.

He grabbed up her hand and pressed a hasty kiss to her knuckles, tasting sweet skin, lavender, and a dusting of flour. Her gaze snapped to his as he caressed her in this new way that somehow felt more intimate than all they’d shared before.

She issued a throaty sigh. “I’d love to walk with you, Mr. Hollis.”

He released her hand. “Good. You don’t need a wrapper—it’s a lovely day. But you might want a hat to keep your nose from burning.”

She opened her mouth as if to say something but shut it quickly and went into her bedroom to retrieve her hat. In a blink, she was by his side again. He led her out into the warm day, and though he loved their moonlit interludes, he couldn’t get enough of seeing his flower kissed by the sun.

* * * *

Kathleen tucked her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around her shins. Peering at Graham, she held her breath. For an hour, it seemed he’d been trying to tell her something. He’d alternately kissed her breathless and stared at her with a crinkle in his brow. But he hadn’t said more than two words to her. What was going on beneath that black cowboy hat of his, which was pulled so low she couldn’t see his eyes?

They’d taken their stroll around the ranch in broad daylight. Then Graham had come back home with her and shared the dinner meal, sitting with her and her father as if they were a family.

After that, he’d ridden back to the Hollis ranch with the promise to return after her father fell asleep. True to his word, Graham had appeared by the barn, shadowed by the eave. She’d run outside with a basket filled with fresh peach-custard tarts and a cask of sweet tea.

The basket had been set aside after Graham said the only thing he was hungry for was her—yet, he hadn’t touched her in the way she hoped.

The moon was high and full, shedding light on the man she’d come to feel so much for in a very short time.

She gazed at his thick shoulders and the rounded muscles of his chest

beneath his simple cotton shirt. The dark hair sprouting on his jaw inspired images of his mouth trailing kisses down her belly to her sensitive folds.

Squirming, she tucked her knees up tighter to her chest.

Finally, he spoke. "I'm sorry I wasn't here to help with your father, Kathleen."

She straightened. That was the furthest thing from her mind right now, and his admission startled her.

He pulled his hat off and set it aside, gazing at her with that hard glint in his eyes—the look he'd first come to her with—the one that meant he was battling something deep inside.

Her heart throbbed with love for him. In the few short days they'd been husband and wife, he'd opened up to her, shown her his softer, more playful side. Now the brooding man who still fought his demons had returned.

"Don't be sorry for that, Graham," she said softly. "We got along fine. Pa's on the mend."

He nodded. "Yeah, but I should have been the one to accompany you to town, not some employee!" He thumped his thigh with a fist.

"How did you know Jenkins accompanied me to town?"

"My brother saw you."

She felt her features shift and change as the memory of the Hollis man on the boardwalk flitted through her head. Unfortunately, Graham was watching her closely. And he didn't like what he saw.

In one swift movement, he slammed her back into the turf, cradling her head so she didn't strike it. He hovered over her, his body fully upon hers, showing her just how big and overwhelming he was. Didn't he know it wasn't his body but his personality that blocked the sun? Eclipsed the moon?

"Graham—"

"You're mine, Kathleen. Dammit, I'm sorry I haven't claimed you proper yet, but I swear—" He broke off, the muscle jumping in his jaw. His golden-brown eyes shot sparks. "Soon."

Gliding a hand down her side to her hip, he kneaded the hollow spot above her hipbone that sent shocks of lust through her. Moisture pooled between her thighs.

She tugged on the hair at the back of his neck. "Then show me now where I belong." Her bold words were accompanied by a blush. But he

grinned—that boyish, carefree smile she'd seen in the barn a few nights ago.

“Oh, I plan to.” He dipped his head and caught her lower lip between his teeth.

She moaned, her body suddenly alive and feeling like warm water had been splashed over her. She wrapped her arms around his broad chest and brought his weight down on her, reveling in the feeling of his big body against hers.

Oh, to wake to him every morning. She might indulge his worries of protecting her by staying away now, but she could feel herself bucking this idea with each passing moment. Soon she feared she wouldn't be able to stop the flow of words she longed to say, letting him know she wasn't going to be put aside anymore. She was his wife!

He slid his tongue along her lower lip back and forth until she writhed. She arched her back, bringing her breasts against his chest in hope of gaining relief from the ache.

When he thrust his tongue deep into her mouth, she met it with a groan. Passion flared to life. For long minutes, their tongues tangled. She opened her eyes and found he was looking at her, an expression of utter absorption on his handsome face.

“What did you bring to eat, Kathleen?”

Tripped up by his question, she lay still, panting for more of his kisses. She shook her head. She couldn't remember anything but the flavor of him on her tongue.

He smiled crookedly, obviously amused by her stunned expression. Reaching out, he snagged the basket by the handle and dragged it toward him. He flipped the lid and peered inside. “Ahh, tarts. Apple?”

She found her voice, though it was reedy. “Peach custard.”

“Perfect.” He rolled off her and into a sitting position. She moved to sit up too, but he closed his fingers over her nipple, pinching it deliciously. Spikes of lust struck her. She gasped, rocking upward, seeking more.

“Take off your blouse, woman.”

At his rough command, her gaze flicked to his. Immediately, she started to work the pearl buttons through the small holes until her chemise was visible.

“Damn, just as I thought. You're dressed in layers. When I get you in

my house, you're going to wear nothing."

She giggled. "And if company calls?"

"Then you can throw on a dress, no underthings. I need easy access to this." He tugged up her skirt and walked his fingers up her inner thigh to the pulsating heat of her.

Juices oozed from her, coating his fingers as he swirled them over her needy nubbin. Fire claimed her, and she forgot her own name while he stroked her to a peak that was too close. She wanted to extend the feelings of pleasure racing through her.

Swiftly, he removed his hand, leaving her body clenching where his fingers had been. "Please, Graham!"

"Not yet, my sweet. I plan to make you a bit sweeter. Can you pull your skirt off so I can access your pussy? Your belly? Breasts?" His gaze ticked over these body parts as he spoke, a caress in itself.

The spot they'd chosen to sit was secluded. Trees bracketed them on three sides, and the hill sloped sharply on the fourth side. It was unlikely anyone would see them. And who cared if they did? They were married, after all.

She shimmied out of her blouse, skirt, and boots. When she moved to unroll her stocking, he stayed her with a hand over hers. "Leave them. Now pull up that lovely white chemise and let me see your breasts."

Feeling naughtier than she ever had in her life, she obeyed. He growled his pleasure when he glimpsed her turgid mounds, the tips rosy and needy. She watched his mouth, desperate for his kiss on them.

Instead, he turned to the basket and delved inside, coming out with a tart. His big hand dwarfed the small pastry. Holding her gaze, he bit into the crust, exposing the soft filling.

"Mmm. Damn, my woman can cook!"

She grinned, watching him chew. Then he stuck a big finger into the filling and scooped it up. Before she realized what he was doing, he painted it over her breast, coating her nipple entirely.

"Let's see if the inside is as good as the outside." He leaned in and swallowed her nipple, sucking it into a sharp point and cleaning the sticky custard off her flesh. Her skin rippled in goose bumps. A light breeze played over her, tickling her moist folds and ruffling his dark hair.

She gripped his head, forcing him to suck her harder. When she tried to push him downward, he chuckled and straightened away.

“Not yet, my beauty. I must finish my dessert. Then I promise I’ll get to the main course.” He gazed at her as if he’d eat her up. God, she hoped he would.

Smearing more of the peach custard over her other breast, he set about sucking and licking it off. When she was bucking for more, he smoothed the confection over her belly.

She watched his head move over her, and his tongue tantalized her skin as he lapped up all the dessert.

“Now this is pure honey.” With that, he plunged two fingers deep into her channel.

She cried out, knees falling apart to accept him deeper, aching to be stretched and filled by his cock. She dug into his shoulders as he teased her, withdrawing each digit and sucking them clean.

Shuddering, and on the verge of release, she applied pressure to his shoulders, encouraging him to go down between her thighs and lick her pussy.

“Tell me what you want, Kathleen.”

“Taste me!”

“Where? Here?” He stuck his tongue into her navel and laved it. She squirmed.

“No, here!” She laid her fingers over her clit.

He growled and stared at the juncture of her thighs for a long minute. The bulge in the front of his pants grew until it appeared he’d rip the seams. “Christ, baby... Don’t... Fuck, give me those fingers!” He seized her wrist and stuck her fingers into his mouth, bathing each digit and licking away the traces of her arousal.

She moaned at the heated swirl of his tongue. She needed it lower. Much lower.

He met her gaze and released her fingers. “I’m ready for some honey now.” He lay prone between her legs. With deliberate purpose, he licked her from her wet opening to her throbbing button.

Crying out, she rocked against him, crushing his tongue against her needy sex. “Graham, it won’t take long...”

He grunted, gliding his tongue in a smooth path over her juicy pussy. She turned her face to the side, staring at the tree line, unable to watch his mouth move over her.

“Touch your nipples, baby. Pinch them for me.”

Shock ripped through her. Did people do this? Wasn't it the husband's job to give her pleasure? Could she give herself what she needed? In all her years, she'd never stroked herself, though she'd ached to.

She met his gaze. He delivered one long, lazy lick to her seam, holding his tongue on her nub. A heartbeat floated between them. He'd gotten wildly excited when she touched her pussy. What would happen if she did his bidding and played with her breasts the way he wanted?

Emboldened by the encouragement she saw in his eyes, she clamped her fingers over her tight buds. Her nipples drew up harder, and she moaned as new feelings tore through her body. As she learned the ridges of her tight nipples, he watched her, lapping her at a steady pace. She couldn't tear her gaze from his wet tongue on her folds and the bliss on his face when she squeezed both her nipples.

Seeing his joy, she did it again. Driven by inspiration, she opened her mouth and licked the tip of one, as he'd done so often.

“Goddamn, woman!” His breath was hot on her sex. He drove his fingers into her and began licking her passionately.

She sucked one nipple, then the other as he made love to her with his fingers and tongue. Waves of ecstasy were slamming her, sending her upward into the heavens. Her muscles grew taut, and in a blazing burst, she came.

Chapter Eleven

Kathleen's folds pulsed on Graham's lips and tongue, sending spasms of need straight to his groin. He reached down and gripped his cock hard through his pants, forcing back the need to blow.

Her little squeaking gasps continued to spiral from her, a heady sound that made him wild.

He watched her twist and writhe. When her last contraction ebbed away, she met his gaze.

"Come up here," she rasped.

Fire licked his insides at the rough command—unlike anything she'd issued before. How could he resist? Hell, he was like a wilted flower living in the earthen darkness for so many years, her mere presence blinded him.

He held her gaze as he slid up her body to hover over her. They shared a smile, and he kissed her, taking her mouth with long, languid strokes of his tongue. When she was quivering once more, he reached for his fly, intending to undress.

"Let me," she said. With a coy look, she covered his hand and nudged it aside. "It's my turn to taste the tarts."

His heart sped away like a herd of cattle in a dust storm. Christ, did she mean—

She pressed him back into the high grass and scooped some delicious custard out of the tart. Spreading it down his chest, she followed it with her maddeningly hot tongue, delivering short, quick laps that made him close his eyes to bar the sight. If he watched another moment, he was going to be unmanned.

She stripped off his clothing and continued to smear the tart over his body. Her tongue tormented him as she worked it over his chest to the flat of his stomach.

Shooting him a glittering glance, she liberally coated the tip of his straining erection with the sticky treat.

He curled his hands around her head. "God, Kathleen... I don't know if

I can live through this.”

Her soft laughter floated up to him a split second before she took him in her mouth. His world narrowed to include only the soft tickle of her hair against his thighs and the hot whirl of her tongue. She sucked him deeper into her mouth. The head of his cock hit the back of her throat.

“Fuck!” he roared. He gripped her shoulders and nudged her mouth away.

She stared at him, her lips delightfully rosy and plump but her eyes registering worry. “Didn’t you like it?”

“Hell, no. I *loved* it. But I want to get inside you. If you continue what you were doing with your mouth much longer, I’ll never last, baby.”

He plucked her into his arms, snuggling her close, tumbling her onto the turf. She curled around him, molding her body perfectly to fit his. To angle her to receive him, he hitched her thigh on his hip.

“You’ve changed my world, Kathleen.”

“You *are* my world.”

In one quick thrust, he filled her. A white fog shrouded his mind as her heat permeated his every inch. Her body cradled his balls, which felt heavier and fuller than ever. He was going to bathe her wet walls with his seed, and dammit, it was going to take root in her belly.

A thin thread of guilt wove through him. He could make this right now rather than drag it out. Though it had only been a few short hours since he dropped hints that he was connected with a woman in these parts, no dangers had presented themselves as of yet. He hoped Wabash would take the bait, the son of a bitch.

She shifted restlessly. He pulled out all the way to the spongy tip of his shaft and then plunged back in. Drawing her other leg up, she positioned herself perfectly for him to sink another precious fraction.

“Yes, Graham! I feel you soo...deep.” She shuddered, her body taut, on the verge of release.

“That’s it, baby. Take what you need. Drench me with your juices.”

She tipped over the edge swiftly, crying out as she contracted around him. He narrowed his gaze, watching the moisture of her perspiration glisten on her throat and cheeks, and the flutter of her eyelids as she was bound to him by pleasure.

Her short nails raked over his back, scraping paths of pain that ignited into a fire of ecstasy.

With a primitive grunt, he drove deeper. Once, twice... Her body hugged him tight, and God, he couldn't hold back anymore.

He burst with a cry that split the air. Her voice matched his, both louder than they'd allowed themselves to ever be. Hot ropes of come slicked her insides, and the pressure in his balls grew exquisite. He filled his hands with her breasts, kneading them and drawing the last moans from her swollen lips.

Slowing his pace, he brought them down together. Suddenly, a sob escaped her. He went still and bracketed her face in his hands. "No, baby. What is it?" He pitched his voice low, as he did with a jittery animal.

She turned her face against his shoulder, trying to hide from him. Why? His heart lurched. Still oozing cum, he pulled out of her body and locked her to him, forcing her chin up with his thumb so he could meet her gaze.

"Have I hurt you? I got carried away—"

"No," she said thickly.

"Then what?" His patience, which he'd always struggled with, fled. He couldn't help but feel responsible for her distress. If he hadn't hurt her physically, he had to have done something else. Or maybe she was still worried about her father?

Her chest heaved beneath his.

"Please, Kathleen. Talk to me. You can always talk to me, darlin'."

"It's just...what we said before." Her words erupted in jerky spurts. "I've changed your world, and you are my world. But we're apart. I can't wake up to your kisses or know you're on the ranch working while I'm doing my part inside."

He'd thought her young enough that she'd comply with his wishes for a while longer, but he'd been a fool to even ask it of her. His actions were cowardly, even if they'd begun as noble. Now that he recognized his growing feelings for her, he only wanted to do the right thing.

Still, how could he put her in direct danger by keeping her by him? Especially now, when the seedy soldier he'd put in prison might be plotting against him? If she was with him and he was attacked, he'd never forgive himself. He'd put a bullet through his own head before he lived without another woman he loved.

The choking lump threatened to seal off his throat. *Love*. It wasn't something he'd often contemplated. Even with Bella, he'd never admitted it to her or himself.

As the hope of what he could have with Kathleen slammed him, he once again fixed his resolve to go through with his original plan. He'd post a guard on her property. Clay would surely watch out for her while Graham went into town for one more attempt to draw out the weasel who might try to steal her from him.

Steal his love from him.

Staring down at her beautiful face, he knew he was doing right. She might not believe it now or even understand his need to prevent a repeat of what had happened with Bella, but she had to trust him.

"Sweetheart, give me two more nights. It's all I ask."

She blinked, her mouth contorting as she forced her words past her trembling lips. "Graham, I hate to be away from you."

"I know. But I need a couple more days to make sure everything is all right."

She searched his gaze. "I understand what drives you, but I can't wait forever."

"Can you wait two days?" he pressed her.

A long minute passed while the clouds scudded past the moon and the breeze ruffled the grasses around him. Wisps of hair danced at her temples.

Realistically, he knew if Wabash was coming after him, it might take more than two days for the man to reach him. He imagined many more soldiers he'd wronged—those who had lost limbs from his bullets, men he'd forced to march when they'd only wanted to desert. At that moment, it seemed completely possible that they'd seek revenge too.

But as he gazed upon his wife's face, he realized he could ask her to wait no longer. He'd bring her and her pa to the Hollis ranch if need be, surround them by men who could protect them.

"You'd better walk me home, Graham."

Pain clawed at him. As he dressed and led her back through the fields to the small ranch, he told himself it was for her own good. When he stopped her by the outbuilding and kissed her, her mouth still sweet though she felt distanced from him.

“Two nights, baby. I swear.”

She nodded and went on tiptoe to brush her lips over his before heading toward the house. The moonlight streaked down and caressed the top of her head and the outline of her feminine body. Graham’s heart pulsed heavily. Joy at discovering he loved her mixed with a deep-seated anger that he couldn’t get away from his past long enough to enjoy his happiness. Wabash would hunt Kathleen to get back at Graham. And would Bella forever haunt him?

A figure darted from the side of the house. Before Graham could register what he was seeing, the bulky figure intercepted Kathleen and dragged her away from the door.

No! The word rang within the depths of Graham’s soul as he lunged forward. In a flash, he was running, muscles humming, fear injecting his system.

Kathleen’s low voice reached him, her voice tight with fury, but Graham couldn’t make out the words. He rounded the corner of the house. The two figures loomed into sight—Kathleen’s familiar little form and a larger one hovering over her.

His hands on her. Smacking her across the face, using his fist in her soft belly so she crumpled in half.

Graham was on him in a flash, hands outstretched to wrap around the man’s throat. He shoved the bastard against the wall of the house, lifting the man he now recognized as the hired hand off his feet. Kathleen’s cry further ignited Graham’s fury.

“Don’t you ever put a hand on her again!”

“She ain’t gonna have your baby if I can help it.”

Out of the corner of Graham’s eye, he glimpsed Kathleen gripping her midsection, harsh rasps bursting from her.

Graham shook Jenkins, and his boot heels thumped off the wall. Through the little gap Graham left between his hands and Jenkins’s neck, the hired man managed to speak.

“You’re not...getting her, Hollis. If I have...to take you out...go after your family...I will.”

Graham glared right into Jenkins’s evil eyes and tightened his hold around his greasy throat. “No one threatens a Hollis and lives.”

Jenkins jerked, his held body stiff and straining. He gargled a reply, arms dangling limply as Graham exerted more pressure on his sinewy throat.

A primal instinct to protect himself and his family stole Graham's sense. "Kathleen, go inside," he said through a clenched jaw.

Images of Wabash and the dozens—hell, hundreds—of soldiers Graham had wronged flitted behind his red-tinted vision. He lifted Jenkins higher on the wall. His face had darkened to purple. "You will never touch my woman or threaten my family again, you scum."

Jenkins pissed himself, and his pulse stopped its erratic throb beneath Graham's fingers.

Fuck!

Breathing hard, Graham lowered the body to the ground, then stepped back and wiped his hands on his pants. The burn of disgust that always accompanied a killing settled in his gut. But justice had been served. This man would never lay a hand on Kathleen again, let alone the Hollises.

But Graham couldn't just leave the body for Kathleen and her sick father to deal with. Out here, there was no authority. Folks took care of business, and that was exactly what Graham had to do, no matter how queasy it made him.

With a shaky sigh, Graham went about gathering up the body. He threw it over his shoulder and headed up the incline, grabbing a shovel that was leaning against the barn on his way.

* * * *

Kathleen paced wildly within the confines of her room. Her skirts churned around her legs, and she didn't even try to stop her feet from slapping the floor. There was no use trying to keep her father in the dark.

She couldn't pretend. Couldn't pretend she hadn't stolen away, married a man, and spent several nights beneath him truly as his wife.

Couldn't pretend that same husband hadn't choked the life out of Jenkins.

After he'd ordered her inside, she had no desire to blatantly go against his wishes. She'd spent the remaining hours before dawn pacing.

Jenkins had vanished from the farm and had failed to come in for breakfast. What else could have happened?

Following breakfast, Kathleen had gone outside and checked the place

where she and Graham had encountered Jenkins last night. She'd seen the big boot prints in the dust. One set of boot prints. Indicating Graham had carried the man somewhere.

She threaded her fingers through her hair and tugged ruthlessly, hoping the sting would control her panic. This wouldn't end well.

Her father's familiar rap on the door brought her up short. Her skirts continued their momentum, swinging forward and then rustling into place. Graham's scent was all over her.

And he'd killed a man for her.

"Oh God..." She scrubbed her face with her hands.

Again, her father knocked. "Are you all right, Kathleen?"

She gulped back the emotion that thickened her throat. "I'm fine."

"You seem...restless, honey."

I'm more than that. My chest feels like it's been loaded with twenty-five pounds of dynamite.

She crossed to the door and opened it so her father could see she was all right. At least she hoped she looked all right.

He stood there, appearing a little put out. When he set eyes on her, he rearranged his features. His clothes were rumpled and dusty from doing all the barn work himself—work Jenkins should be doing, especially since her father's health hadn't been fully restored.

But Jenkins was most likely miles away, run off by Graham...or six feet under.

A shiver trickled down her spine.

"You look flustered, Kathleen."

"I'm a bit out of sorts," she admitted.

"Why don't you get out of the house and take a nice ride around the property?" It wasn't prudent for ladies to ride unaccompanied in most parts, but their land was out of the way of the Indian trails, and no wagons came this way since the town had sprung up.

Still, she didn't feel like riding. She wanted Graham—

That was it. If she took the horse, she could slip away and go to him. The Hollis ranch wasn't that far. She could be there and back by suppertime. Maybe Graham would come with her. Hopefully he'd ease her fears about what had happened to Jenkins.

“I’ll do that, Pa, if you agree to rest this afternoon. You’ve worked entirely too hard this morn.”

“That damned hired hand is nowhere to be found.” He shook his head sadly.

She almost swallowed her tongue. “Your idea is a good one, Pa. I’ll saddle up my mare now.”

Within minutes, she was in the saddle and setting her heels into the horse’s thick sides, heading toward the Hollis ranch. To Graham.

Chapter Twelve

Graham heaved a bale of hay over the edge of the loft. It struck the floor twenty feet below, and dust roiled up in a cloud, motes dancing wildly in the blinding sunlight. He was reaching for another bale when he heard a shout.

Then another.

A figure ran through the open barn door and skidded to a stop. Fear bloomed in Graham's belly, and his bowels turned to water. He took two steps and flipped his leg onto the ladder leading from the loft, descended ten rungs, then skipped the rest and hit the floor with a thump.

"What's wrong, Nolan?"

"There's a posse riding. Right for us!"

Clay burst into the barn. Xander, James, and Xander's brothers followed. The four men went everywhere together, and Drew and Adam weren't far behind. They'd been over to butcher a couple of hogs to divide evenly among the family.

Graham strode out into the daylight and scoured the land for signs of riders. All the men gathered and watched as the dust stirred by many horse hooves boiled toward them.

"What the hell is going on? I thought Xander's and James's troubles with the railroad were over!" Clay said.

"It is over," Xander said in a hard tone. "It must be something else."

"Well, what, for Chrissakes? Can't you asses keep out of trouble for a minute?" Adam accused with a glare all around.

"They'd be coming for me." Graham kept his voice even. That feeling of having eaten something rotten settled in his gut again, just as it had after he'd killed Jenkins. When he'd finished shoveling the last scoop of dirt over the man's body high on the hill above the Allen ranch, he'd known it wasn't likely to be over. Even out here in the wilds of Texas, men didn't get away with killing.

Clay swung toward him. "You? Who'd you kill?"

Graham clenched his fists at his sides. Fuck, he hadn't meant to drag his family into this. "A Jenkins man—a workhand at the Allen place."

"Jesus! Why?" Nolan interjected.

"For putting his hands on Kathleen."

"Kathleen?" Xander asked.

"His wife," Clay added.

"Wife?" Nolan took one menacing step toward Graham. "You'd better start fucking talkin'."

Xander and James moved in from the outer ring of the group to hear Graham's hastily spoken words. There wasn't time to tell them about all of it—how he'd been protecting Kathleen from danger while a danger lurked right under her nose and he hadn't even seen it. For now she was safe. At least until Wabash showed his evil face.

Graham had spent most of the morning dwelling on the killing. In the end, he was relieved that Jenkins couldn't lay another hand on her. But it would mean the Allens were shorthanded on their ranch. So he'd planned to hurry through his chores here, then ride out and put in a day's work on the Allen place, making up for Jenkins's loss.

"Better get your guns ready, boys," Xander drawled as the posse approached. Thirty riders were cresting the rise. Where the Hollis lands were situated, no one could sneak up on them.

Nolan took off at a dead run for the house while Adam swung into the saddle. "I'll fetch the rest." Without further explanation, everyone knew he meant the rest of the males in the family. All those who could reasonably take out a band of thirty riders without breaking a sweat.

But Graham couldn't let them do that.

"If you killed a man, who the hell saw you, Graham?" Drew asked.

"No one. I sent Kathleen inside, and her father was asleep."

"Well, someone sure as fuck saw! Dead men don't talk!" Drew barked, his ire flaming in his dark eyes. He had a quick temper.

"Wait—a Jenkins, you say?" James spoke up. He hung close to Xander. As mutual lovers of Annabelle, they were rarely apart.

"That's right." Graham braced himself for what was to come—being taken prisoner by the posse, strung up from the nearest tree. He'd let that happen before he allowed his family to get into more trouble. With any hope,

they'd take care of Kathleen and her pa.

Pain stabbed deep in his chest, but he squelched it like a fragile flower beneath his boot heel before he could change his mind from this course of action. There was no other way. Surrender, or what? Let his family members take out thirty men? That might bring a whole damn army down on them. The womenfolk would be compromised. Unless they could make it look as if Indians ambushed them.

No, his way was best.

"Jesus, bro, don't you realize there are five Jenkins brothers? That means four probably know their brother's dead." Clay thwacked his thigh with a fist, loosing dust.

"How?" Drew asked.

"Maybe they linger near the Allen ranch since their brother works there. Or maybe another one of them is hired on and you don't know it."

"Doesn't matter," Graham said as the riders bore down on them like black devils, their drover coats flapping, rifles glinting in the morning sun. "They're going to take me, and you're not going to put up a fight."

Nolan and their father burst from the house, running full tilt, arms loaded with weapons and guns strapped to their belts. His pa met Graham's gaze, his glare level and letting Graham know who was in charge now.

"Looks like we got a fight on our hands, boys."

"Dam rode for help," Drew spoke up, using his brother's nickname.

Graham's father, Robert, gave a hard nod. "We'll need it."

"No, we won't." Graham stepped to the front of the group, refusing to take arms. "Let them take me for my crime. I don't want to get you involved."

"Like hell!" Clay's passionate baritone roused brotherly feelings in Graham. He'd let his younger brother into his confidence about Kathleen. He didn't expect him to stand by him on so many levels.

Then again, they were Hollises. That was what they did.

From behind, hooves thundered—Adam had arrived with the rest of the men. All Graham's cousins and uncles would be with him, prepared to charge the posse and defend one of their own.

Graham looked right at his father. "Let me do this. I killed the man; I deserve to take the punishment—not all of you."

The gang rode into the yard, the leader coming up feet from Graham. Dirt and small rocks sprayed his front, and Graham squinted to keep his eyes clear.

“We’re here for a Graham Hollis!”

“That’d be me.”

“Cuff him, Jenkins.”

Graham’s gaze shot to the man who was dismounting—a man with an ugly sneer not unlike his brother’s. Before Graham had wiped it off his face, that was.

“What are you arresting him for?” Robert asked. Leave it to his father to force them to give specifics.

“He’s been charged with killing Jeb Jenkins last night.”

“How do you know it was him? Were there witnesses?”

A stocky man who was seated on a tall stallion spoke up. “I witnessed it.”

Graham stared at him, recognizing the family resemblance between this man and the man who’d hurt Kathleen. Had the coward been lurking around when Graham killed the fucker who’d pounded on Kathleen?

A shiver of dread hit him—a blow that left him reeling. If there were more Jenkins brothers and they were in the area of the Allen ranch, then even if Graham gave himself up, Kathleen wasn’t safe. Not at all.

His gaze jumped from one face in the gang to the other, trying to discern whether they were all here—all four brothers of the man he’d wiped off the earth. Hell, for all he knew, the Jenkins family was as big as the Hollises’. Sure, Graham had been raised here, but he’d also spent many years after the war absent, in more ways than in body. Before Kathleen had entered his life, he’d been a sack of clothes, a placeholder in the family. Never truly alive.

Now he was about to be hanged for keeping his wife safe.

“Pa, let them take me. I did—”

Clay struck Graham in the gut with his rifle butt, knocking the breath from him. Graham doubled over, wheezing from the shock of the hit. Stars and fury burst behind his eyes. When he got hold of that brother of his, he was gonna beat the hell out of him, even if he had just saved Graham from confessing his crime.

“What tie do you have to the man who was murdered?” Robert asked, sending Graham a sidelong glance.

“He’s my—*was* my brother. I’ve been helping out around the Allen place with him, doing odd jobs since the old man is getting up in years.”

“And you saw my son lay hands on your brother?” Robert gave him a glare that would twist most men’s balls and make them climb back into their bodies.

“No, sir. I saw the grave. I dug it up and found my brother’s body.” The man’s face contorted with emotion.

The ache in Graham’s stomach worsened. He opened his mouth to speak, but his brother jerked the rifle in a threat to knock the wind out of him again.

“You’re the only one who saw this body?”

“No, I did too,” another man bearing the family resemblance said. “Perry rode straight home and got me and our other two brothers to bring Jeb home.”

“And you’re all here? All four remaining Jenkins?” Robert’s sharp tone stressed the word “remaining,” making the stout one flinch.

The leader of the posse—an older gentleman with a grizzled white beard—spoke up. “No. Two brothers chose not to come see justice done. And justice will be done, don’t get me wrong,” he said slowly. He gestured with his head to another rider. “Get the rope.”

Several guns were cocked behind Graham as his family members trained their weapons on the group of riders. He didn’t glance around but knew without a doubt his father, two brothers, nine cousins, and three uncles would be behind him. But Graham refused to fight this war.

Kathleen’s face rose up in his mind, torturing him. If he let them take him, he’d never set eyes on her beautiful face again. Never put his arms around her. Never get a chance to confess he loved her.

He swallowed hard. And if there were still four Jenkins brothers roaming the countryside... Four too many in Graham’s book. Kathleen wouldn’t be safe as long as they were around. Not to mention Wabash. How many more were there? At the moment, it seemed the whole world was pressing down on Graham, trying to snuff the life from him—not his physical life, but the candle that had been lit inside him when Kathleen became part of him.

He looked around, meeting Clay's gaze. His brother stilled. An unspoken message hung in the air between them. Then Graham looked to his father.

His pa gave an imperceptible nod.

"Graham Hollis, come forward. You're going to be hanged for murder."

Without a word, Graham moved into the rope noose, which the man with the white beard immediately tightened around his throat. Graham stared at the hangman hard, daring him to push him further.

"Goddammit!" one of his cousins burst out. There was a scuffle behind Graham that led him to believe someone was shoved to keep from fighting for him. Emotion welled in him even as the coarse hemp dug into his skin. God, was this how Jenkins had felt when Graham's fingers had tightened around his throat? Like the world had gone black?

Not yet. Kathleen is still my sun.

"Boys." His father's calm and quiet tone trickled into his consciousness as the hangman yanked Graham across the yard. He was jerked by the neck, nearly torn off his feet, but he swiftly righted himself and followed where the white-bearded man holding the rope led him. Without a doubt, he knew the way his pa had said "boys" was a warning for them to hold steady, to bide their time.

None of this was choreographed, yet Graham was certain they could pull it off. What choice did they have? Two minutes ago, he'd been prepared to swing to keep his family from becoming embroiled in this mess. Now, knowing he was the only one who could truly protect Kathleen, he was prepared to fight in any dirty, underhanded method he had within reach.

Right now, that was sixteen pissed-off Hollises.

The hangman jerked the rope relentlessly, and the coarse fibers branded Graham's neck. With every step toward the tree where he was to be hanged, Graham's tension rose.

There was a jerk on Graham's neck as the hangman tossed the rope over a high branch. The gang members had all dismounted and kept him hemmed in, blocking him from escape. A lone wail from the direction of the house indicated his mother had seen.

"Felicia!" his father barked—a warning to get back inside. Her keening broke off abruptly.

Graham met the hangman's gaze. "I'd like a few moments to make my peace with God."

His family gathered around, and he met one pair of eyes after another, uplifted by the love he saw there. They'd go to their graves for him. Die for him. But not today.

"All right, boy. What do you have to say?" The leader hooked his thumbs in his belt and rocked on his heels.

Graham swallowed hard, feeling every drop of saliva make its way past the tight noose. "Lord, I've been a harsh man, a sinnin' man. In the war, I killed hundreds of men, most for no more reason than they were standing there wearing a blue coat. I've also sinned against my family, when I recently took a wife in secret—"

Gasps sounded, and a rustle ran through his uncles, cousins, brothers, and lastly, his pa, who fixed him in his hard glare—a glare Graham knew to be secondhand. He was irate at the situation, not at Graham.

"I took a wife in secret to keep her from possibly being in harm's way, knowing a certain ex-spy for the North was sure to turn up here, prepared to shoot me between the shoulder blades for sending him to prison for treason."

"Who you talkin' about, boy? Wabash?" The leader of the posse's tone was like shards of glass.

"That's right. Lieutenant Wabash served with me, and when I discovered his criminal and treasonous activities, I turned him over to the general of the Confederate army." Graham stared straight into the leader's eyes, wondering how he knew of Wabash and what their connection was, if any.

"So we might be doing you a favor by sending you on your way to the eternal sleep before Wabash does."

"That's right." He let his gaze settle on his father, who was ever so slowly inching his finger toward the trigger of his rifle.

"All right, you've said your piece. Graham Hollis, do you have a final word?"

"Yeah," he drawled. "Go to hell."

Then all hell broke loose.

* * * *

Kathleen's body screamed from the pain of her bonds as she strained

against the ropes. Riding wildly for the Hollis ranch, she'd been set upon by a gang of men wearing black. Two men immediately broke free of the group and raced toward her. They'd caught her up, yanked her off her horse, and trussed her like a hog before she could gather so much as a scream.

Now she lay on her side on the ground, alternately struggling to get free and spitting angry remarks at her captors—Jenkins's brothers. They didn't need to tell her. She'd seen them around, and they'd even all helped out one day last summer, putting up corn and hay for the animals for the winter.

“What do you intend to do with me?”

“We're waiting for you to tell us all about Hollis.” The oldest of the brothers was a greasy-looking man with wide-set eyes and a flat nose.

She shivered as his gaze ticked over her breasts and down to her hips. She wouldn't tell them anything about Graham, even if they tortured her.

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Sure you do, pretty lady. Jeb's kept us informed of your activities. We know you were sneaking off with Graham Hollis. Got under Jeb's skin, that did, especially since he had his sights on getting the ranch.”

Shock made her heart seize. Fear made her freeze. “What do you mean?” she whispered.

The younger of the two gave a hoarse chuckle and spat a stream of tobacco juice into the dirt near her thigh. She longed to squirm away like a bug, but her bindings made it impossible. “Jeb meant to convince your pa you needed to be married straight away. He asked for your hand, and your pa refused, saying you needed to make your own choices, and when that choice was made, you'd come to him.”

She could barely drag air through her lungs. That vile man had asked to marry her? Why hadn't her father told her?

“He wanted the property.”

“Yessum. Your land borders ours on the north side. The Jenkins family has been waiting to get our hands on that land for many a decade. We've bided our time, waiting to join it with ours. Jeb thought he had a direct path, but your pa tripped him up.”

Her fingers were going numb, but her brain was a whorl of activity. Her father had been drinking whiskey with Jenkins before he'd taken ill. Extremely ill. Had the hired man tried to kill him? Poison him?

Her father's visage floated behind her eyes, his face gray and his features too still.

"If you think you can hold me here and not bring down all the wrath of the Hollis family, you're mistaken," she said, tight-lipped.

The older man gave a bark of a laugh. "Where do you think that posse was headed when we snagged you? They're going to string up your man for killin' our brother."

"Nooooo!" She flailed in earnest, thrashing and jerking at the rope around her wrists. Terror was a hot coal inside her. They were going to hang Graham! She'd never see him again, and her dream of truly being his wife would never be realized. She'd be a widow before she was even claimed.

Tears choked her, and the evil men who held her prisoner simply stared at her dispassionately. For long minutes, she sobbed, her mind a white haze of pain she couldn't think around.

As she lay there, the light shifted behind her closed eyes. She lost herself in her misery and fear.

When she finally had released her last cry, she opened her eyes to find the sun was sinking in the sky. She'd lain here—how long? Half a day. Graham might already have been dead that long.

The younger Jenkins man waved a bit ofhardtack in front of her face. "Have a bite, my pretty. Don't want you to waste away. Those curves are too precious."

"What use am I to you if my husband is already dead for killing your brother?"

"Your *husband*? Damn, woman, how did you manage that?" The older one laughed and slapped his knee.

"You play an important role in this game, Miss Kathleen. You see, we still want that land, and you're our last card." He leered at her. "My guess is your father ain't a bettin' man. He'll give us the land in exchange for you."

Chapter Thirteen

The noxious scent of freshly spilled blood hung in the air, and bodies littered the ground. The thunder of hooves sounded as several yellow-bellied members of the posse hightailed it off Hollis land.

But Xander and Graham's father still blocked two men. They trained their rifles on them, and Graham's father spat onto the ground.

"Think you'd like to surrender now, boys? Or join your comrades?" he drawled.

Xander's mouth twitched into a cynical smile. Graham flicked his gaze to the horizon, where four riders were seen in the distance. The Hollises had allowed those men to ride away unharmed. But the hangman and the rest of the posse were dead.

"No." A stout man wearing spurs strutted between the walls of male Hollis flesh. "We came here to do a job." He jerked his head at Graham. "That one should be dead, and the rest of you will be too, if I have anything to say about it."

Another man spoke up. "Those four who escaped will go to the authorities."

Graham's father laughed—a booming sound that brought an instant smile to Graham's face. "You think any sheriff's gonna stand on your side? Besides, there isn't a sheriff within fifty miles. And those riders who *left* were warned by my sons. Ain't that right, boys?"

"Yes."

"Yes, sir."

Graham ground his teeth against the need to issue a battle cry. The instinct had been ingrained in him after years of war. But his muscles were screaming with displeasure at being trapped in this noose for so long.

With one quick slice, Clay cut Graham free of the noose. The rope fell away from his throat, and he immediately drew great gulps of air into his lungs. Though he hadn't been in danger of strangling, he'd hated that constricted feeling.

“Thank you, brother.” His voice was hoarse from anger and terror for Kathleen. She was out there somewhere, and there were two more Jenkins men running free. Not to mention Wabash.

“Choose your path, men. You get an intimate look at the barrel of my rifle, or you start runnin’ thataway.” Graham’s father motioned toward the place where the other riders had fled.

“We’re holding our own.” The stout man spoke for both.

In a rush, the other man, who wore filthy chaps, hurled himself at Graham’s father. Clay raised his weapon as Xander shot the man off his feet.

The stout fighter squeezed off a shot. The bullet zinged past Graham’s thigh.

“Son of a bitch!” Graham’s father fired before the other man swung his gun up.

The report echoed across the hillside. Graham’s chest burned. Too many lives lost. But he wasn’t about to lose one very important one.

For long minutes, Graham stared at a distant point, praying he’d done the right thing here.

His father grasped Graham’s shoulder. “There wasn’t a choice, and we all know it, Graham.”

“Yeah.”

Activity continued around him, but he couldn’t move. It was as if the rope still held him fast to the tree.

When Graham’s family all settled, Graham looked at each face.

“We’re splitting up,” he announced to the group of Hollis men who had just finished stacking the bodies of twenty-six posse members into a pile. Adam and Drew had gone back to the house for wagons to cart the remains away. They’d toss them into a ravine on the remote, north corner of the ranch. One flame and the whole mass would go up in one big funeral pyre—just like during the war. Graham wanted to be well away before the smell of scorching flesh reached him.

Some of his brothers had taken bits of the dead men’s clothing and were going to place them well away from their ranch so it looked as if they’d been set upon by Indians. And their horses would be safe enough here. In the Hollises’ business, they acquired and sold so much stock, no one would notice more or fewer horses on their ranch.

“All the uncles and Pa, you’re staying with the women. There’s no way can we leave them alone. Those four who pleaded for their lives aren’t likely to have the balls to come back here or tell a living soul what went down today. But we can’t be too careful.”

His pa started to protest, but Graham met his stare. If his father had always been in charge before, it was time for Graham to reveal that he could be just as forceful. He was going to get his way in this.

“Clay, Nolan, Calvin, Drew, and Dam, you’re with me. We’re going straight for the Allen place.” His stomach knotted just thinking of the time they were wasting—time he needed to get to Kathleen. He looked at his other cousins. “Xander, James, Kel, Whitfield, Stowe, Newlin, you’re going south. You heard what the leader of that posse said before we killed him. Wabash was last seen near the Mexican border.”

God, between the prospect of that traitor being in the area and his absolute *need* to reach Kathleen, Graham’s gut was gnarled. But Kathleen came first. He’d have to trust his cousins to take care of Wabash. Xander knew what the man looked like since they’d all served in the cavalry together.

“Godspeed, son. And all of you.” Robert took Graham’s hand, looking from face to face. To Graham he said, “Go get your woman. And don’t even think about riding by without introducing her to me and your ma.”

He gave a hard nod. “Let’s ride.” Graham strode away, toward the barn and Old Gray.

A few minutes later, they were riding out, each Hollis on the strong horse stock they bred, rifles in hand and six-shooters on their hips. Graham gave Xander a salute as their groups split off. Then he set the pace toward the Allen Ranch.

As he raced across the countryside to the love of his life, he released a heavy sigh of remorse. How many times had he ridden this path with the longings of his body driving him? Now his heart guided him. The trail of love was being blazed. When he reached his woman, he’d never let her go. There would be no more separations.

When they galloped into the yard, Silas stumbled out of the house, hair sticking up in every direction. The sun had set long ago, and lanterns had been lit all over the yard. The house was aglow with candles.

“Thank the Lord you’re here, Hollis! She’s gone!”

A convulsion ran through Graham, a pain so deep he felt as if his soul had been rent in two. His heart beat wildly, and the reins fell from his slack hands. His face felt suddenly numb, his mind disconnected from his body. When Bella had hit the earth and her eyes blanked with death, he'd known this same sensation.

He put his hand on his pistol grip. "Talk, Silas."

"She rode out after I encouraged her to get some air. She hasn't been back. I've searched the boundaries and didn't find her. I came back here, hoping she'd turn up. When she didn't, I searched again. I just got in and lit all the lanterns in case she might catch a glimpse of the glow and follow it."

"I don't think she's lost, man. I think she's in trouble. Dam, you're staying here with Mr. Allen. Shoot any man who's not a Hollis."

"Gotcha, coz." Dam slipped off his horse.

"Silas, I'll bring her home. That I swear. I vow to find your daughter—my wife." Without waiting to see the man's reaction, Graham spun his horse around and spurred him away, giving the gray his head because he could no longer control his.

* * * *

Kathleen gathered all the spit she could muster in her dry mouth and propelled it directly into the older Jenkins man's face. It splattered his upper cheek and slid down his pocked face to the corner of his mouth. He darted his tongue out and tasted it.

"Ugh!" She twisted away from his disgusting display and leaned her forehead against the rough bark of the tree. The woodsy scent and the texture brought her back to reality, grounding her. She wasn't just some dog for these men to harass and drag from camp to camp.

They'd moved six times since the sun had risen, in order to avoid being discovered by anyone who might be searching for them. She was still tied up, but they'd loosened the knots so she could regain feeling in her limbs. When they were ready to move to another camp, one of them would hurl her over his shoulder and dump her onto a horse's back.

If not for the warm gold wedding ring hanging between her breasts, she would have long ago given up hope that she'd be found. A quiver went through her. With a stab of pain, she reminded herself that her love was dead—her husband of only a few days. It seemed much longer since the day he'd

come to pull the calf.

When he'd called her Nibby.

A sob bubbled up her throat.

"Oy, not again!" The younger Jenkins, who she'd learned was called Dodge, rolled his eyes. "She's a soggy one, this miss."

"She's going to find herself back with Daddy in a few hours," the older Jenkins replied. "Then we'll be rid of her and her annoying tears. The land will be ours, and while she cries buckets because she has no home, it won't matter a bit to us."

Her heart flipped and raced at a breakneck pace. Dizziness was a wreath around her head—a daisy chain woven with confusion rather than pretty white petals. They were going to take her home soon?

With a gulp, she mentally corrected herself. No, back to her pa. They'd have no home. Where would they go?

Could she just show up on the Hollises' doorstep, claiming to be Graham's wife and asking for shelter? The thought of Graham sent fat tears rolling once more, and the Jenkins brothers shared a groan.

Knowing it was futile, she pulled at the rope binding her wrists before her. She could only move them a fraction of an inch, and the coarse rope dug into her flesh, leaving it raw and chafed.

A trickle of warm blood soothed the hurt, but she stopped her struggles, knowing Graham wouldn't want this. She had to gather her wits. Apparently the Jenkins men had no intentions of hurting her further. In fact, they were going to let her go soon. In the meantime, she'd try to suppress the panic that continually surfaced when she thought of the posse going after Graham.

The Hollises are strong. They never would have allowed him to be taken and hanged.

She had to hold on to that hope, however thin the thread. Every moment she and Graham had stolen came rushing back into her mind. Each sensual caress, every lingering look. Their last meeting had exposed him to her in a brand-new way. She'd actually begun to think he felt more for her than attraction and the desire to have a woman.

But the little voice in the back of her head spoke up. *Then why wouldn't he claim me as his wife before our families and all of the world?*

Even with his fears of being pursued and some harm coming to her, it

still made more sense to her to have been kept safely near him. She still couldn't entirely wrap her head around his reasoning. She had to keep reminding herself that the war had made him suspicious. Deep down, she didn't believe he was that person. She'd seen his calmer, sweeter, more carefree soul emerge in the past few days. But she'd had to go along with him—an inherent trust made her follow his wishes.

She rubbed her forehead lightly over the bark again, closing her eyes and trying to drown out the banter of her captors. The sun was setting, and a chill was wrapping around her. The thin fabric of her gown offered little protection against the elements. A bruised sky in the west suggested a violent storm was on its way. The wind was sharpening, coming in shorter blasts.

Dodge noticed this too and tipped his hat back all the way to peer up at the sky. She twisted her gaze away from his ugly features—not truly ugly for themselves, but for their resemblance to his brother. Most likely, Jenkins had poisoned her pa and plotted to gain the land—and her with it.

She shook her head, and the bark scraped her brow.

“Looks like rain.”

She felt like grunting at Dodge's keen observation. These men were so dull-witted she wondered how they'd managed to hatch a plan between all five of them. But she kept her lips clamped against the words that threatened to spill out. If they decided not to take her home, she'd never set eyes on her pa or Graham again. Even knowing that these men were using her to steal the Allen land, she didn't care. She needed to get home.

Tears hung on her lower lashes, but the wind dried them quickly. The wind was coming faster, driving at them now, and bringing with it pinpricks of stinging rain.

Dodge gained his feet and pulled Kathleen up by the rope around her wrists. “We're in for a soaking.” He leered at the bodice of her dress, which would be soon molded to her breasts and transparent with wetness.

She could only hope they threw her facedown over the saddle once again.

She teetered, her ankles bound and making it nearly impossible to keep her balance. They'd let her loose only twice to relieve herself in the privacy of the trees before tying her up again. If she had any way of working that rope free, she would have run long ago—leaped onto the horse's back and galloped off.

The wind pushed harder, gusting at them and sending her hair back from her face as rain struck her like shards of glass.

“We’d best move.” With that, Dodge tossed her over his shoulder and lugged her to the horse. When he dropped her, a grunt of breath burst from her. She sagged over the hard leather, taking comfort in the scent of it and the horse beneath.

The older Jenkins man mounted behind her, and she twisted her head from the stench of unwashed man and sour clothes. She concentrated hard on surviving until they reached the next portion of the journey, which hopefully would mean her release.

In a few more hours, she would be in the hands of her father. While that brought fresh relief, she wanted more. Tears clogged her throat as her fears rose up another notch. She was almost certain these men would have taken Graham out of the picture before kidnapping her.

Moisture trickled down her face, mingling with the raindrops. She wanted her husband.

Chapter Fourteen

Fear was a dark horse riding alongside Graham as he thundered across the countryside. For most of a day, he and his family members had backtracked and followed two sets of horse tracks veering off from the posse's, which had ridden for Hollis land.

A day ago, they'd discovered Kathleen's horse grazing in a valley. Abandoned.

He ground his teeth until he felt his jaw would pop under the pressure. The need to roar into the darkening sky choked him. But he held back if only to keep his brothers and cousins from believing him crazy.

Hell, he was crazy. Mad with terror that those other Jenkins men were raping Kathleen, torturing her. All because Graham had been laboring under the delusion that by keeping her away from him, she was safest, when the opposite was true.

A whistle sounded, and he jerked his head around, seeing Drew and Dam pulling up. The sky was about to let loose, and they'd soon lose their tracks to the slippery mud that flowed all over Texas.

Dam's boots hit the earth, and he bent to stare at something on the ground.

Fuck, I missed something. How much had Graham missed, consumed with his thoughts and riding blindly in hope of finding Kathleen?

He threw himself off Old Gray and sprinted back to where the other men gathered around a print in the dirt. A swirl that indicated the riders had made a turn. But the rest of the prints that should be there weren't. The wind had blasted the loose dirt over them.

Pain wrenched his soul. If he didn't reach her soon, he'd be out of his head. Revenge wouldn't be a thought in his mind so much as killing would be. If he didn't find her, he couldn't be responsible for the number of lives he'd take.

He tore his hat off and jammed his fingers through his hair, staring at the roiling sky. Where was she? Which direction? His mind was suddenly muddled. All wrong. Had all his choices been wrong? He never should have

left her alone to begin with. His actions had only put her in danger.

“Graham! Graham!” Clay’s voice broke through to him, and he spun to meet his brother’s gaze, hoping his didn’t look as desperate as he felt.

Judging from the expression in his little brother’s eyes, Graham did.

Quickly, Graham settled his hat and tugged it low to conceal his eyes as much as possible.

“What do you want to do? I think we should follow this. Head east.” Clay pointed toward the dim horizon.

For a moment, Graham was paralyzed. Unable to think straight, to make a choice. They’d had clear indication they should continue on their original trail, searching from the last place Kathleen had been. They’d been all over the damn countryside, even found two of the places where the Jenkins men and Kathleen had stopped to rest. Then they’d lost the tracks.

Clay stepped up to Graham, getting into his face. Sparks burst behind his vision—fury that had flared to life during the war—irrational anger that didn’t belong to him but to the urge to survive. In this case, it was the urge to make sure his woman survived. She was an extension of him.

He shoved Clay solidly in the chest, propelling him away. “Back the hell off, bro! I need to think.”

“Think quick, man. The rain is coming, and there might be tracks in that direction, farther out. We could still spot them before the rain washes them completely away.”

Graham swallowed hard, burning to go, burning to stay on the current path. “Calvin, Drew, and Dam, you follow this trail. The rest of us will go east. We’ll meet up in two hours’ time near Pitman’s.”

The men were already running for their horses, swinging into saddles. Graham did the same, furious with himself over his moment of weakness.

They spurred their horses toward the east with Graham in the lead. For five hundred yards, he saw no sign of tracks. The thick dust had blown them over completely. Then he spotted it in the shelter of a rock face—two sets of horse tracks. Circling around to a copse of trees.

His heart thrilled with victory. Could they still be there?

Leaning far forward in his saddle, he streaked around the rock. It was already raining here, the droplets falling fast, dousing the parched earth and wiping it clean of any way to tell where his woman might have gone.

He threw his head back and bellowed. “Kathleen!” And again. And again, the primal rage taking over. His scream ricocheted off the rock face and echoed back at him.

Didn’t it?

He strained to hear above the baleful cry of the wind and the drone of rain.

Nolan brought his hand down hard on Graham’s shoulder. “Listen!”

A higher-pitched cry faintly reached him and then was cut off.

They’re hurting her. Goddamn it.

With a roar, he shot into the night, circling the trees and plunging down into a valley at a speed that threatened to kill him and Old Gray if they lost footing. Rain struck his face and throat and soaked his shoulders.

Kathleen, Kathleen, my darling woman. I’m coming.

Through the fading light, he spotted the silhouettes of a group of riders, a bulky lump dangling off the side of one horse. A growl rumbled in his throat. He tangled his fingers into Old Gray’s mane and spoke into his ear.

“Go, boy! I’m relyin’ on you!”

His brothers flanked him. As they neared, the riders realized their presence and split off, one heading up a steep incline and one carrying the figure that must be Kathleen, gliding along the outer rim of the valley.

Trapped. I’ve got you trapped, you fucking bastard!

He pulled his gun and took aim, carefully training the sights on the man’s shoulder, far away from the body riding before him. From here, though, it was dark, and with the rain fogging his vision, Graham could make out slender ankles and an end of rope dangling from them.

Heart riding high in his throat, Graham squeezed the trigger. The blast stung his palm, jolted through his wrist and up his arm...even as the rider took the hit in his shoulder.

He tilted precariously in the saddle, and his horse bucked.

“No!” Graham bellowed as two bodies slipped from the horse—one sprawled flat out, and one an incongruous little bundle that could only be Graham’s wife.

He lived and died in that moment as he fought to reach her. Knowing the fall might have killed her. Broken her neck. Knowing he’d had no choice but to stop the man.

He leaped off his horse, and Old Gray kept on. Graham hit the ground, rolled, and was on his feet. He broke into a dead run.

Clay had reached the rider Graham had shot and had his pistol jabbed into the back of his head. The man was unmoving.

So was Kathleen.

Graham froze once more, swallowing the bile on his tongue. She lay crumpled on her side, her face in the dirt. Her long auburn locks were nearly black from the soaking rain.

“Graham!” Nolan’s bark brought him from his stupor, and he dropped to his knees. Hands trembling violently, he grasped Kathleen’s shoulders and turned her upward, expecting to see her eyes wide and blank with death.

Her head lolled, her lips parted. Eyes closed. “Kathleen!” He dropped his ear to her chest and listened for a heartbeat—that steady patter he’d listened to after making love to her.

The low thump filled his ear, and his stomach flipped. Alive!

“Kathleen!”

A grunt sounded as Clay yanked the Jenkins brother who’d taken her off his horse and hog-tied him. “Stay with her, Graham. Nolan and I will get the other brother.”

Hoofbeats mingled with the downpour as they rode off, leaving Graham and his wife. Scrabbling at the ropes holding her, wishing he could tie them around the necks of the men who had done this and choke the breath from them, he freed her.

He cradled her, drew her so she was lying across his lap. Her limbs were slack, and he prayed she’d regain consciousness soon. Hopefully she’d just fainted from the shock of falling and not suffered a head trauma.

He smoothed the wet hair off her face and stared down at her motionless features. A harsh cry rushed up his throat, and he released it. Then another. He’d never cried for Bella, even after he’d buried her beneath a maple tree in an unmarked grave. Never expressed the blinding pain that had seized him. Now, after nearly losing another wife—one he had truly and completely given his heart to—he couldn’t hold back.

He buried his face against her neck and let the tears pour out of him. If he lost her, he’d be a shell. For years, he’d fought and then worked alongside his family devoid of any emotions. Kathleen had breathed life into him when she’d thrown herself into his arms.

“I’m sorry I didn’t keep you by me. Forgive me, baby. I’ll never let you out of my sight again.”

A soft mewl heated the side of his face. He searched her face and found her eyelids flickering. Her eyes moved behind the lids, and then they cracked open.

“Kathleen, darlin’, are you all right? What hurts?”

He skimmed her body from the nape of her neck to her upper thigh, gently prodding belatedly for broken bones.

Her fingers found his jaw, her featherlight touches bringing him back to reality. She opened her eyes and gazed directly at him. Her features were slack with confusion, and then they cleared.

“Graham.”

“Talk to me. Tell me—can I move you? Does your back hurt? Your legs?”

She shook her head. “My wrists and ankles...”

He drank in the bloody mess of her skin where the rope had bit into her, and rage sprang up in him anew. Flexing his arms, he brought her flush against him, tears still burning his eyes. Hope began to replace the despair he’d known for many hours.

She let her head fall to the side and saw the dead man. A soft sound rattled her chest.

“Don’t look at him,” Graham urged, turning her face back to his. “You’re safe now, baby. But I have to know, to hear it from your lips. Will you forgive me for allowing this to happen to you?”

She opened her mouth to speak, but the tears in her eyes gave him an answer. “You did what you thought best, and I trust you.”

“I was stupid—too stupid. I almost lost you.”

She ran her thumb down his jaw. “Can’t get rid of me, Graham. I have this.” She reached into her bodice and pulled free the string holding the gold band he’d given her in marriage.

He dropped his forehead to hers, squeezing his eyes shut. God, how had he been gifted with such an amazing woman?

He reached for the string and drew it over her head. Unknotting it, he slid the ring off. He held her gaze as he placed it on her finger in plain view. Where it should have been from the start.

Another shot rang out, and Graham yanked his gaze from his wife's, peering into the dimness and through the slanting rain to see his two brothers not far off, leaning over the tied-up body of the fifth Jenkins brother.

Looking back into Kathleen's eyes, he made his vow to her all over again. "I promise to love and care for you, Kathleen. As long as we both shall live."

* * * *

Kathleen drifted in and out of sleep as the horse rolled beneath her. Graham's solid chest and arms protected her from the worst of the rainstorm, and his body provided a warmth that went beyond the skin. It touched her heart and slithered down to a secret spot between her legs.

Wriggling restlessly against him, she raised a groan from his chest. By latching on to her hips, he held her in place against his groin. His erection strained against her, prodding her through their wet clothing.

Over her head, he whistled to one of his brothers. "We've got to stop!" he shouted.

She wrapped her arms around Graham's. Above all, she was relieved to be back with him. She couldn't help but worry about her pa. He must be out of his head since finding her gone.

The horse slowed, and she looked around. Graham commanded Old Gray to stop, and he did, rolling her against her husband's cock once more.

He practically growled in her ear. "Damn, woman, I have to have you. Now."

"What about—"

"I'm going to send them away to meet the others and to ride back and let your pa know you're safe with me." He flicked his tongue over the outside of her ear, raising a shiver that had nothing to do with her drenched clothes.

"Taking cover for the night?" Clay called over the din of the rain.

"We are. You're not," Graham said in a tone that nearly made her burst out in giggles. She dared not steal a look at Clay's face, knowing the expression must be priceless. "You and Nolan go on to meet the others. Stop by the Allen place, check on the farm, and bring Kathleen's pa home with you."

She glanced up to see not one glare trained on Graham, but two. Graham didn't turn a hair.

“Get on now. But give me your bedrolls first.”

“What the—”

“You heard me. I need them to create a shelter from the storm. You’ll be snug as bugs soon enough.”

Twin groans sounded as the brothers untied the oilskins from behind their saddles. They tossed the dripping rolls to the ground.

“Enjoy yourself, brother.”

“Clay!” Graham called as the man wheeled around, set to gallop off.

He twisted back.

“Keep your eyes peeled for Wabash. I’ll meet up with all of you tomorrow at our rally point. Then we hunt.”

A sliver of dread tracked through Kathleen’s body and left a casing of ice around her heart. Hunting for whom? Weren’t they done fighting?

He set her away from him enough that he could dismount. Then he reached up for her. Her bare feet sank into the mud, and the chill crept up through her toes and into her ankles, rapidly squelching the fires of passion she’d felt while in his arms.

A shudder racked her.

He shot her a look. “Hold tight, darlin’. I’m going to make you a toasty bed in no time.”

She watched as he untied the strings holding the bedrolls and unfurled the wet masses. It seemed unlikely he could create anything that could be remotely called dry and toasty out of the supplies at hand.

She leaned against the horse’s side, instinctively seeking heat. Graham tied the ends of one canvas between three small trees, about four feet off the ground. Then he dropped the second one over the taut cloth, so the flaps dangled to the ground. He disappeared inside this for a moment, spreading his own bedroll on the ground inside.

A second later, he reappeared, grabbed his pack off his horse, and then led her into the shelter.

Inside, the noise of the rain cut off instantly, a mere patter on the canvas above and around them. The ground was still cold and wet, but he dug into his pack and brought out his coat. He spread it beneath her, then peeled away each garment as quickly as possible, though he took a moment to warm as much of her with his fingers as he could. Once she was free of her soaking

wet dress, her flesh warmed.

Especially when he shucked his clothes too. The sight of his broad shoulders, ridged abs, and the dark trail of hair leading to his cock ignited her. When she looked upon his thick length, she released a shaky breath.

He covered her with his body, bringing his chest to her chilled nipples. He rubbed against her and tickled her buds with the faint hair on his body. Pressure grew inside her. She issued another moan, and he rocked his hips against hers, bringing his cock across her slippery folds.

Digging her nails into his back, she urged him between her legs. In the close confines, she was surrounded entirely by him—his scent, heat, and his body. He wrapped around her, consumed her. She never wanted to be anywhere else. Even lying in a makeshift shelter in a storm was fascinating—because he was there.

He brushed his lips across hers. The sharp graze of his facial hair cut into her sensitive skin deliciously, making her pussy pulse with need as she imagined him going down between her legs. There was little room here for that even if she could wait. She wanted him inside her. Now.

Surging upward, she bit into his lower lip, demanding more from him. He growled his pleasure. As she searched his warm skin with her fingers, she breathed him in.

Trailing his hands over her sides, splaying his rough fingertips over her breasts, he plundered her mouth. Each twist and turn of his tongue sent her spiraling out of control. The need crested within her. She hung suspended in a state of bliss. One deft stroke of his fingers on her needy folds, and she'd splinter.

He sucked her tongue into his mouth, drawing on it until her pussy flooded with cream. He slid it between her thighs, running maddeningly over her pussy but not entering her.

She pulled her thighs up, arching to give him access, but he refused her and continued to deliver the deepest of kisses. When she could stand the pressure no longer, she gripped his cock and tried to guide him to her.

“Please, Graham. Stretch me. Fill me.”

His eyes glowed down at her, his breath washing over her face and making her hungrier for him than she'd ever been.

You want to feel me stretching you, sweetheart? Like this?” He plunged two fingers into her channel, twisting them wetly, thrusting deep,

then moving shallowly and stroking the spot that drove her wild.

Bucking against his hand, she turned her mouth against his throat. “More. Please.”

“How about this?” He added a third finger, stretching her so her skin burned. The pleasure-pain sent erotic need to her every nerve. Juices spilled over his hand. Rocking upward, she forced him deeper. Clinging to the ledge, she felt herself tipping as he nudged her most intimate spot once...twice.

With a primal cry, she came apart. Each pulsation flooded her with more warmth until she could no longer drag breath into her lungs. He drove her on, thrusting his fingers into her. When she finally gasped for breath, he covered her mouth with his, swallowing her sounds of ecstasy.

He mimicked his touch on her pussy with his tongue. Finally, he slowed his movements. Aftershocks ripped through her.

“God, baby, you’re soaking.” He brought his fingers to his lips and lapped them clean.

A shudder claimed her as her pussy clenched around the emptiness where his fingers had been. She wrapped her arms and legs around him. “More, Graham. Take me.”

He nudged her intimately with the throbbing head of his cock. “Oh, don’t worry, darlin’. I intend to get what I need. First, I’m going to work you.”

Shock widened her eyes as he switched places with her. She was thankful for the dim light when he maneuvered her so she was straddling him backward. Even when he’d bent her over the hay bale in the barn, he’d covered her backside with his body. This way, with the thin moonlight flickering through the crack in the makeshift tent, he was able to see her nether parts clearly.

“Graham...” Uncertainty sounded in her tone, but warmth crept over her.

“Shh. You’re beautiful, Kathleen. Let me just look at you for a moment.” He gripped her hips, holding her immobile atop him. Her slick folds kissed his shaft, and she ached to move against him, to force him inside.

Instead, he shocked her by plunging his fingers in again. Her body convulsed around him immediately, at the peak of sexual satisfaction with one swift motion. A guttural moan broke from her.

Mindless to anything but her pleasure, she rocked against his fingers,

taking what she needed, climbing the steep slope of bliss.

When she was on the verge of release, he removed one of his wet fingers and ran it around the rim of her anus. She fell still, heart thudding wildly. Her body remembered the sensation, and she could nearly feel his touch again.

She longed to turn and see his face. How had it made him feel to touch her there?

“You like that, baby? There’s so much more to explore between us. Let me show you the way.” He skimmed her private opening again. She held her breath, unable to move for fear the spasms would overtake her, embarrassed that they might. Was this really acceptable between lovers?

He pressed on her secret spot until his big fingertip breached the muscular rim. His cock thickened beneath her, and she realized how excited this play was making him. She shifted, and his finger slipped farther inside.

Her moan sounded muffled inside the private cocoon of their shelter. He eased his finger deeper, taking his time. The pressure filled her until she thought she’d explode. When his finger retreated, she found herself thrusting backward, urging him back to the unexplored region. He sank his finger back into her sensitive flesh.

“Mmm.” His rumble told her how satisfied he was with her reaction. He pulled another finger out of her pussy and rimmed her with two fingers. Her muscles clenched, anticipating his maddening invasion, dying for it. When it came, she cried out.

He sank both fingers into her nether hole to the first knuckle, then the second. His cock bobbed upward against her pussy. Without thought, she tensed her thigh muscles, lifting herself, and settled over his length.

“Fuck, baby!” He seated himself balls-deep, shaking all over. When she wantonly rocked against him, he simultaneously withdrew his fingers and cock. Then he slid them inside once more. Deep. Until the hot need in her belly was a fire that consumed all sanity.

Juices pooled on his cock, and she moved with him, forcing him deeper, pulling out and driving harder, taking what she needed. She rode him wildly, her breasts bouncing and her wet hair lashing her torso.

When the first spasms struck, her sensations reached a seemingly insurmountable level, stealing her breath.

He plunged his fingers into her anus and his cock into her pussy again

and again, sending tremors of ecstasy through her.

With a feral grunt, he came. The warm gush heated her walls, and she clamped down on his body, milking him. He continued to spurt inside her.

As the last jolts of need washed away, the only thing she could think was that she might be carrying his child.

Chapter Fifteen

Graham tightened his hold around Kathleen's waist as he drew up Old Gray before the group of family members waiting in the yard of the Hollis ranch. Kathleen quivered, and he silently cursed anyone who dared to make her feel uncomfortable.

His father reached for the reins and held Old Gray still while Graham dismounted, then swung Kathleen down beside him. She'd worried on the way here about her appearance. Her gown was wrinkled and dirty from her trials with the Jenkins brothers, and she didn't have a proper bonnet.

He'd run his fingers through her long auburn waves, watching each strand of hair glint gold and red in the rising sun. Once he worked the tangles free, he announced that she was ready—and perfect.

Looking around at his mother and father and all his extended family, he found grins on their faces. Kathleen's father was there too, per Graham's command, and the man was positively beaming, if a bit frail-looking.

Graham raised his voice. "Everyone, this is my wife, Kathleen. In case you haven't heard the rumor, and that's mighty unlikely in this family full of big-mouths"—Kathleen gasped and several snickers followed—"we married in secret so I could protect her from any danger that continues to trail me from my war years."

"We're going after him, Graham!" Xander piped up. His little family huddled around him, including his wife holding the baby and their lover James.

A ripple of talk ran through his cousins, and his father stepped forward. "Graham, I know you've gotta take care of this son of a bitch." He glanced at Kathleen. "Pardon me, ma'am, for my speech." He continued. "You cannot live under the thumb of a man who would turn on his brothers, who had provided the enemy with information to kill those he had sworn to protect."

Graham met his father's gaze and read the fury there. If his pa had been able to fight in the war, he would have rallied the men with that look alone. Graham gave a nod.

"Take as much ammo as you need, your brothers, and your cousins, and

end this war once and for all, son. But leave Kathleen to our care.”

He flexed his arm around her waist, sealing his chest to her spine. “Can’t do that, Pa. She stays with me. Bad things happen when I’m separated from my women.”

It was the first time he’d openly spoken of his first wife and the fate that had befallen her. Now everyone knew it, but no one talked about it, and all averted their eyes from the reality of Graham’s pain. Their former lighthearted attempts to communicate with him were well meant. But it was time to air his dusty past.

Because Kathleen was his future, and the only way a flower such as she could thrive was in the light.

“She rides with me. We’re heading for the border in a quarter hour, boys. Gather your supplies.”

About half the family dispersed, but his ma came right up to Kathleen, grabbed her hands, and towed her off to the house. His wife glanced over her shoulder, and Graham gave her a crooked smile. She was going to fit in here like the prettiest bloom in a bouquet.

“You can’t fool me, Graham. You’re concerned.” His father hitched a thumb into his watch pocket and stared Graham down.

He ducked his head. “That’s true. But I won’t change my mind.”

“Things could get ugly. Your cousins spotted Wabash on the border but with an army. Who knows what you’ll be walking into. Having a woman in the midst of that could spell disaster.”

Though the prospect sent a spike of dread straight through Graham and turned his bowels to water, he couldn’t make the same mistake a third time. “I won’t lose sight of Kathleen.”

“You love her.” It wasn’t a question.

“I do. Lord knows how I came to be blessed with such a woman.”

“Don’t you know, Graham?” His pa’s eyes held a smile and a touch of sadness. “You’re a good man. Deserving of love and a good woman to love you back.”

For the first time in a long time, some of Graham’s guilt over his sins and the atrocities he’d committed during the war fell away. He believed his father.

* * * *

Kathleen's head spun with a whirlwind of names and faces as she was stripped and prodded into a hip bath by her mother-in-law, her new aunts, and the only other female her age, Annabelle.

The women hastily scrubbed her, brushed her hair, and plaited it into a big braid on her back. Then one aunt pulled Kathleen out of the bath and dried her with soft cotton before asking her to step into a clean white chemise.

"However did you rip this down the front?" Annabelle cradled a plump cherub of a baby on her lap while plucking at the stitches Kathleen had used to fix her torn chemise.

A scorching blush climbed Kathleen's throat and claimed her face. How to tell her that Graham had torn it off her in a fit of passion?

Annabelle caught her eye and smiled. Kathleen would bet her life Annabelle already knew.

"Here, slip your arms into this bodice." Graham's mother, Felicia, was a feminine version of him with wide-set eyes and a solemnity of the lips that echoed her son's.

Someone jabbed Kathleen with a pin. She squeaked, and a nervous laugh sounded from her mother-in-law. "Sorry, dear. My hands are shaking. Here, Margaret. You nip this bodice in. She's smaller than me."

Kathleen held completely still while Graham's Aunt Margaret fixed a couple of pins. Then the final lace was tied, and Felicia spun Kathleen to face her.

Her eyes—the same golden brown as Graham's—glowed with appreciation. "That will do for traveling, and who knows what other trouble those ruffian Hollises find for you. When you return, Kathleen, we'll fix you up proper with a gorgeous violet dress. I just picked up the cloth in San Antonio, but the color will suit you much better. I daresay, it will turn your eyes to match."

Kathleen's throat clogged at the warm feeling that spread through her. How she'd missed this motherly, female support in the years since her mother had died. As she looked around at the women who were now her family, a smile jumped to her lips.

"Thank you. I'd best get out there. I can hear the horses, and the men are restless, waiting for me."

Felicia reached out and snagged her into her arms. Kathleen found

herself embracing her back, sad to be going so soon, yet knowing deep down she'd return.

“You keep your eyes peeled for trouble, and don't let that man take any stupid chances with you.” A tear hung in the corner of Felicia's eye.

Kathleen shook her head. “If there's anything I know in this world, it's that Graham will take care of me.”

As the ladies led Kathleen back through the beautiful and comfortable rooms of the big ranch house, Felicia squeezed her hand. “Come back safe, daughter.”

Kathleen stepped onto the porch, and her father immediately hugged her, and then handed her off to her husband. A warmth and joy suffused her unlike any she'd ever known.

Chapter Sixteen

Xander brought his horse right up beside Graham's. His hat was pulled low over his eyes, his expression unreadable. But Graham knew that look well enough from the years they'd served in the war. Xander was tense. His lover, James, felt it as well, and he fairly twitched.

"Speak up, man. There's too much between us to hold your tongue," Graham said.

Xander shot a look at Kathleen, who rode before Graham.

"No holding back," Graham said.

Nodding, Xander spoke. "That border is crawling with gray coats. We didn't get close enough yesterday to see that."

Graham tried not to let the sickening knot take over his stomach. "It's common enough to see them, even now. Some of the men have no other clothes."

"Yes, but with Wabash among them?"

Graham narrowed his eyes, trying to puzzle it out. Wabash had turned on the South, had fed information to the men who would see their armies wiped out. Yet he dared to wear the colors of the men he'd betrayed?

Xander shook his head. "I don't know what he's plotted, but he's obviously not known among these people for what he is."

Chafing his knuckles over his rough jaw, Graham stared over Kathleen's head at the horizon. They were a couple of minutes' ride from the border. Xander and James had ridden ahead and scouted the scene, but they'd done so stealthily so as not to alert anyone to their presence.

Graham groaned. He wished he could see what the hell was going on up there. "He's pretending he fought solely for the South as a way to gain the men's loyalty," he said with conviction. "How many men are with him?"

"Forty."

Graham clenched his teeth and tried not to growl his displeasure at that number. There were thirteen Hollis men, and they were good shots, but he still didn't like those odds. Not with Kathleen in their midst.

“Give me the layout.”

Xander began to talk, and James interjected with details too. Together they laid out the landscape and the position of buildings and men. James fell silent for a moment while Xander continued.

“We can’t ride right up to them, even one at a time, without them realizing it. James and I hung near the cliff where we had cover. We’ve had a little experience shooting from cliffs, right, James?” The men shared a grin.

Kathleen shifted uneasily. Her posture was stiff. Graham hated the worry he was putting her through. She’d be more comfortable back at the ranch with his parents and her pa. He also knew he was doing right by keeping her by him.

He gestured for his brothers to come forward. Clay and Nolan flanked him on the other side. He quickly relayed the information, and then between them, they cut out a plan of attack. They’d split into groups and circle the encampment.

Drew, who had quite a bit of practice with dynamite, would wire up the stable. When Dam let the horses loose, pandemonium would break out at the same moment the stable blew.

Xander, James, and Graham would steal some gray coats off the backs of three men and run in to find Wabash while the others would have their rifles trained on the entire group from all sides.

“And what about me?” Kathleen’s voice was low but clear.

Graham couldn’t help but nuzzle her ear. “You’ll be with Clay and Nolan. No one will get past them.”

She shifted on the saddle to meet his gaze. “You said I’d be with you!”

“You can’t possibly go in after Wabash.”

“I can go in disguise too.”

Damn, she was pretty when she was arguing with him, but now wasn’t the time. He had a small window of time to make this thing happen, or Wabash would slip out from under his nose again. Graham couldn’t take a deep breath until the man was six feet under.

He smoothed a hand down her side, fighting the rising need to whip up her skirt and settle her over his aching cock. “Sweetheart, you’ll be safe. Clay and Nolan will be right there with you up on the ridge where no one can touch you. I’ll run in, take out Wabash, then be back by your side in half an

hour.”

“You’re going to just go in and kill some men, blow up the stable, and the ants aren’t going to swarm out of the anthill?”

“She has a point—”

Graham glared at Clay until his words died. Clay did smile, though, the cocky bastard. Returning his attention to Kathleen, Graham sought to soothe her fears. “That’s why the others will be set on the perimeter of camp. To keep the ‘ants’ from escaping. Once you said you trusted me, Kathleen. I hope that’s still the case.”

Her eyes deepened to dark blue with anger but also with something he recognized well—lust. She bit down on her lower lip, drawing his gaze to it. His cock stirred, begging to get at those lush lips.

Clamping down on his urges, he drew her against his chest. “I promise you this will work out. I’ve been on a few missions like this during the war.”

A shivery sigh left her. “I don’t really have a choice but to trust you, do I?”

He gave her another squeeze and then passed her over into Clay’s saddle. “Go now. Take care of her, brothers. I’m relyin’ on you.”

As he watched the two horses make their way toward the cliff, he gathered his family members and spelled out their roles. Drew and Dam would carry in the fuse and enough dynamite to wire the stable, while his cousins waited with him, James, and Xander for a sign that the stable was about to go sky high. First, the horses would be set free so none came to any harm.

Graham’s heart thudded hard, but his mind calmed just as it always did before a battle. Suddenly, he was back in his shell, his mask in place. His passion and happiness had ridden away with Kathleen. Soon he’d be reunited with those emotions. But he had to take out Wabash. The evil motherfucker had plagued him long enough. It was time to settle up.

He waited, jaw clenched and fingers in tight fists around his reins. When the first horse broke free of the stable and galloped in a looping arc through the middle of the camp, he put the spurs to Old Gray and shot into battle.

Xander and James kept pace easily. The wind rushed at them. The sun baked through Graham’s hat and scorched the top of his head. He squinted against the glare and the dust. By the time they reached the camp, all the

horses were loose. With a concussion that shoved him back in the saddle, the stable blew.

His ears rang and his chest hurt from the wallop, but he kept on. The battle-trained horses held their ground. When they reached the perimeter, he jumped off his horse and delivered a smack to Old Gray's rump, sending him away.

In a crouch, he made his way into the heart of the camp. Xander was right—the men wore gray coats. Some still had the military-issue boots. After all these years, how did they keep them on their feet, even tied up with string to keep the soles from flapping? Hell, his own boots had been replaced twice since the war.

A hollow ache grew in his stomach as he slipped into their ranks. He'd always be one of them, but he was going to take down one who wasn't.

He shot Xander a sharp look as they approached a group of four men. They needed only three coats, and so the fourth would need to be knocked unconscious too. Bad luck for him.

As one, Xander, James, and Graham rushed forward. Graham struck one man in a precise point on the side of his neck, putting him down instantly. Raising his pistol, he thumped a second in the head. The man collapsed in a heap of gray.

Shouts reverberated from all around them. Fire roared and flames shot into the sky. The horses stampeded, running in circles, narrowly missing men as they tried to get away from the fire they feared.

Two more bodies fell beside them as Xander and James took the men down. Again, using a pressure point on one man's neck, Graham rendered him unconscious. In another minute, all four men were unconscious. Graham hurriedly stripped a gray coat off the bigger of the two men.

"Fuck, this coat is tight." James flexed his shoulders, and a seam popped.

Xander folded in silent laughter. He jammed his arms into his own coat just as hell broke loose "Let's move." Graham went right for the middle of the group. The knot of men in the center was surely where he'd find Wabash.

Men around them gestured wildly and hollered back and forth.

"What the hell caused the explosion?"

"Horses are safe."

“Quick, get them rounded up.”

“We might be under siege!”

Graham didn't like that last statement. No, he did not. He exchanged a solemn look with Xander and rushed into the midst of the chaos. No one gave him a second glance—his disguise worked, and his identity wasn't questioned. Staring at each face, searching for the telltale green eyes—eyes like watery grapes. He'd know the look of Wabash anywhere.

His heart thumped wildly. Sweat trickled down his spine and poured from his hairline, only to be soaked up by his hatband. Part of his mind was back with Kathleen while he zeroed in on his target.

“There?” Xander was at his ear. The word stabbed Graham like a bayonet.

He jerked as his gaze settled on the loose coat and the wiry form of the man who had vowed to kill him after he was released from prison. For the hundredth time, Graham wondered how he'd managed to survive prison. The conditions were deplorable, but being a traitor would have earned Wabash a death sentence, whether he'd fought for the Blue or Gray. No one who'd fought in that war tolerated a turncoat.

Graham found himself striding forward—realized his hand was a vise around Wabash's upper arm. Xander and James surrounded him, hemming him in.

Wabash had lost weight and was now missing a few fingers on his right hand. He still reached for the gun on his left hip, but not before Graham dealt him a blow to the wrist that stopped him dead.

His hand hung limply at his side. He opened his mouth to draw attention to them, but Graham pressed his pistol into the enemy's stomach. “You can come with us quietly and opt for a swift death, or I can shoot you in the guts now. The bullet will lodge in your tissues and fester. You'll get gangrene. Your insides will be on fire. And then you will scream for death to come for you.”

Wabash's eyes narrowed. “Hollis, it was only a matter of time before we met again.” His voice was raspier with an edge of cruelty that made those around him skitter away. Prison and the hard years after the war had worn on this man, while Graham had had his family's love and support and the prosperity the Hollis ranch offered. Now his soul had been healed with the love of a good woman.

“It’s time for you to die. I should have done it years ago rather than turn you in. You deserved the death of a traitor. Any other soldier would have beaten you senseless before blowing your face off.” Graham fought to keep his voice even—not from fear but from fury. He’d made a lot of mistakes in his life, but he was through making them. He’d killed the Jenkins men and damned the consequences, and it had been the right decision. He’d taken Kathleen though his raw and bleeding heart had screamed for him not to. It had been the best choice of his life.

Now he was going to kill this motherfucker to keep Kathleen safe.

“Which is it, Wabash? Swift or painful?”

Wabash’s eyes seemed to float in the centers of the whites. His breath was stale when he spoke. “Swift. But take me away from my men.” He gestured to the chaos around them. Clay was setting off smaller, intermittent explosions, and his cousins were shooting over the camp to give Graham time to enact his plan.

“Not *your men*, you filthy slime,” Graham growled, discreetly bashing him across the cheekbone with his pistol. Blood bloomed from a gash on Wabash’s face.

“Walk.” Graham gripped his arm and propelled him by way of a gun in the back, low to remind Wabash where he could shoot him.

James led the way through the crowd, and because of the chaos, no one noticed the departure of their leader or the men leading him to his fate.

Opening a tent flap, James ushered them inside. The canvas swished into place over the door, cutting off the sharp scents of burning wood.

“This might seem easy to take me out, Hollis. Don’t be so sure of yourself. I’ve been planning your death for a long time. I know where your family is, and I’m going to pick them off one at a time. And then I’ll find that little lady of yours and kill her very slowly.” Wabash’s words sank deep into Graham. That all-consuming terror rose up in him and threatened to steal his control. The gun wavered in his hand.

“Graham.” Xander’s rough tone penetrated the haze of fear that had always rendered Graham frozen in the past and most likely always would.

I’ve overcome everything else. Time to shoot that down too.

He pulled the trigger. The bullet gave a loud *thwack* as it burrowed through Wabash’s tissues, low into his bowels.

His watery green eyes were round with shock and pain. “You said...

swift.”

“You voided that deal when you threatened my wife again.” Graham released the man, and he collapsed to the earth. He twitched onto his side, releasing a hollow moan of pain like a wounded animal.

“C’mon, boys,” Graham said, putting a hand on the tent flap. James passed through, followed by Xander. Wabash made a subtle movement—reaching for a weapon—and Xander shared a knowing glance with Graham.

“Wabash!”

The green eyes ticked upward to Graham’s. A glare passed between them. Then Graham raised his arm and shot him through the head, putting him out of his misery.

Walking away from the camp, he shed his coat and tossed the gray cloth into the flames engulfing the stable.

“The war is over,” he said. And hurried on to retrieve Old Gray, his woman, and his life.

* * * *

Kathleen twisted her fingers together, fighting her jitters. Finally, she was to be presented to the family as Graham’s bride. They waited on the lawn for her to make her entrance.

She spun toward the mirror again and met her husband’s gaze in the reflection.

“They already love you, Kathleen.”

She let her gaze roam all over him, from the bulk of his shoulders to the way his pants hung low on his hips. He wore a string tie at his throat, and his hair had been neatly combed. One thick lock tumbled into his blazing eyes.

After he’d retrieved her from the ridge, she’d given him the sharp edge of her tongue, letting him know she was less than ecstatic about being made to wait for him. The fear had consumed her, especially when she saw a couple of his cousins shoot the men attacking them and drag them into the burning stable.

She’d felt wild, out of control. Now she recognized that same clawing sensation. Though this was a much different circumstance.

His family was huge. Could she really be made to face them all, and at a party in her and Graham’s honor?

Graham brought his big hands down upon her shoulders. He rested his

chin on her head, and together they looked into the mirror.

“You’re gorgeous. This color suits you.” He fingered the satin ribbons at her waist. The country girl had been stripped away.

Now she was nervous as hell that the Hollises would find some fault with her. “What if—” She dropped her gaze and fiddled with a bow on her skirt pocket, where a wedding handkerchief had been folded. Annabelle had stitched it for her as a gift.

Graham spun her to face him. She met with his hard body and the overwhelming scent of male—musk, leather, and hay. He used a rough thumb beneath her jaw to lift her face to his.

“Look at me, Kathleen. What has you more nervous than a bride on her wedding day?” The teasing in his eyes made her knees weak and her pulse quicken.

“What if...they think there’s another reason why we didn’t marry in the open?”

Something flickered behind his gaze, dark and turned inward. He blew out a sigh. Leading her to the bed they’d been sharing, he sat and pulled her across his knees. Her violet skirts rippled over them. She refused to meet his gaze but stared at the tiny pleats her mother-in-law had worked into the fabric. They’d only stay here on the ranch a few more nights, and then they’d take her father back to the Allen farm, which Graham would take over.

“Kathleen, remember when I said you sure bring the apologies out of me? I have another apology to make.”

She waited, quivering, enthralled by her body’s reaction to his nearness. Her pussy was growing wet at the thought of what pleasure could be had in this position. But she also was captivated by the honest love in his eyes.

“Nibby, I never should have hidden our love from the eyes of the world. It was my dark past that drove me to do it, but it was wrong. You can’t be kept in the dark. From now on, we live in the sunlight and make love by the moon’s glow. But you’ll always be with me, claimed as my wife.”

A smile spread across her soul at his former nickname for her. It reminded her of their roots and how far they’d come. She curled a hand around his nape and drew him down to brush her lips against his. Very quickly. The tender kiss wasn’t enough. She angled her head and sent her tongue into his mouth.

He groaned and locked her to him, his cock lengthening beneath her. She wiggled seductively. That was all it took.

With a growl, he had her skirts up and his cock positioned at the quick of her. She faced him, arms around him as she sank over his shaft. She felt each ridge and vein in the pit of her belly. Heat climbed her core. Her button pulsated, and she slipped forward, grinding it against his body even as she took him deeper.

He swallowed her moan with his kiss, tongue stroking the walls of her mouth. He lifted her and let her fall, driving her toward the end she'd once never suspected could exist. She'd been that naïve girl, and now she was the wife of a Hollis man.

Little squeaks erupted from her throat, and he rumbled his answer, plunging into her body again and again. When he reached between their bodies and pressed on her neediest spot with his big forefinger, she cried out.

He pressed on her core, stroking expertly as he plunged into her body, splitting her. She hungered for his liquid heat filling her. He opened his eyes, and she got a glimpse of the smoldering passion he held for her. Suddenly, she pulsated, contracting around him, milking his length. The flames spread through her, and she launched upward once more.

Sliding into her with hard and precise movements, he expertly located the spot on her inner wall she hadn't known she had until he came along.

"God, baby, I can't hold back!" He pumped hard and then stiffened. She tipped over the edge of the world once more, riding on his sea of release and her own love for him. Her juices mixed with his. Each plunge drew them closer until she felt their souls could no longer be separate.

He cradled her against him as the last sensations ripped through her. She collapsed in his arms, sleepy and energized all at once.

With long, sweeping passes of his hand, he stroked her back. She leaned her head against his shoulder and let her breathing slow. When she felt his lips on the soft skin behind her ear, she roused.

"Ready to go outside and join the revelry, Mrs. Hollis?"

She smiled against his shoulder. "Only if you'll take me for a spin to that music playing."

"You're in luck. I might remember how to dance, though it's been a long time since I tried." He stared into her eyes, the depths glittering with love. "You make me want to be the man I forgot I was, Kathleen."

She pressed her lips to his, letting the complete joy hang inside her like smoke in a bottle. “It all started with a moonlit walk.”

“Now it’s time to start our life, my love.”

THE END

WILD, WILD HEARTS

Hollis Boys book 3

Em Petrova

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establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Chapter One

“Your action, sir.” Sofia hung over the railroad executive’s shoulder, making sure her bodice dipped low. The movement left nothing to the man’s imagination as she pointed to his poker hand.

His gray mustache twitched. He followed the seam of her cleavage, able to see quite a bit considering the top of her dress dipped dangerously close to her nipples. One wrong move and she’d be exposed to everyone in the saloon.

Including the Hollis boy across the room.

Sofia flicked her gaze up, stopping just short of meeting his. He was looking at her—that was enough for now. She wasn’t certain she should be carousing with a man like him anyway.

He’d been nursing the same whiskey all night but continued to watch her, his dark hat tugged lower with every hour that passed.

Just like her bodice.

She didn’t know why she was purposely tempting him. For a price, she’d go upstairs with any man, together with her lover, Isaac.

They were a team known as the Jade Pair for the color of their eyes. Hers were a deeper, more emerald green, while Isaac’s were a bright jade. But their boss believed the term to be exotic and enticing, drumming up more business.

With Hollis’s warm gaze on her, she almost wished she wasn’t in this profession of entertaining men. Hollis had “morality” written all over him. Yes, he was definitely the come-courting kind. Well, she wasn’t in that market—her train had pulled out long ago.

The railroad executive, his name still unknown to her, spread some cards out on the table, and a gasp ran from one player to the next when they spotted his four-of-a-kind.

“I’m out.” One man tossed his cards into the center of the table with a growl of disgust. Another withdrew a wad of cash from his vest pocket and peeled off some bills, which he handed to the railroad man to cover his

losses.

Isaac made a sharp movement, and Sofia looked up. Their gazes met. No words were needed. He glanced to the side and caught the boss, Hiram Marshall, watching. Hiram was waiting for Sofia to make her move.

Damn.

Her unladylike thought was tamer than it might have been. How she hated being under Hiram's thumb and pinned down by his ever-watchful gaze. That he was waiting for her to gain the tycoon's cooperation so that wad of cash could cross into Hiram's hands was evident.

If the railroad man took her and Isaac to bed, they'd line Hiram's pocket and provide enough cash for them to eat and bathe for a week.

Carefully, she lifted her gaze to the far wall again. A slice of want ripped through her as she met Hollis's intense stare. She didn't even know which Hollis he was—there were so many.

The man was pure, walking lust. Dark denims that were stiff on every other cowboy actually molded to his chiseled thighs, and his quality leather boots gleamed in the lantern lights. Nothing compared to his face. If angels truly fell, she could say she saw one in the flesh.

His dark gaze burned from beneath the brim of his hat and caused a throb deep in her core.

A jolt of surprise captured her. When had she last felt that desire? Though she slept with many men every week, she'd only ever experienced this wanting once before—with Isaac.

Her sex ached, pooling with moisture. She shifted, and her skirts rustled. Beneath her lacy petticoats, she was slick and bare—every bit of hair bladed from her pussy.

Was Hollis a hungry man? From the way his hard lips pulled tight over his teeth in a snarl when the railroad man skimmed her jaw with his forefinger, she thought so. Hollis set his glass down with a *clink* that sounded all the way across the noisy saloon.

“Careful, Sofia,” Isaac murmured in her ear.

The threads of the web tightened. Suddenly, she was caught between Hiram, the railroad man, Isaac, and Hollis. Yessir, she was throwing Hollis into the mix. If he was a hungry man, she was a betting woman.

“Would you like to follow my man and me upstairs?” she asked the

tycoon but kept her gaze fixed on Hollis.

The cowboy brought his boot off its resting place across his knee, and the heel hit the floor.

“Why yes, ma’am, that sounds right nice.” The railroad man clutched the bills he’d just won and turned to her with a fevered light in his eyes. When he reached for her, Hiram plucked the money from his hand. At the same moment, Hollis shoved his chair back with such swiftness, it tipped over, sounding like a shot.

At the sound of the crash, the piano music came to an abrupt stop. Isaac clamped his hand on Sofia’s shoulder, almost bruising her. But she knew if events escalated into a fight and guns were drawn, he would have her out of here and to safety within moments.

“I’ll raise you.” Hollis’s voice was deep and rough, like he chewed nails and swallowed them for breakfast. It also sent a dark heat threading low through Sofia’s belly. The fire took up residence between her thighs, and she squeezed them together to ease it.

Hiram stepped up to Hollis. He was a full head shorter than the cowboy and lacking in muscle. But he was used to dealing with hard men and knew how to get what he wanted. At that moment, he wanted more money.

Isaac’s grip on her shoulder tightened painfully. She swung her gaze to him and spotted the glint in his eyes. Yes, it said. He wanted this—wanted Hollis.

Lust pounded through her core. In the two years she and Isaac had been together and loved each other, she’d never seen the flames of need in him for another man. Sure, he gave his body to them willingly enough, but Hollis was different.

For them both. Before she had a chance to wonder why, Hollis crowded close.

“This is a rather large chunk of money, sir. I’m not certain you would have—” Hiram bit off his words as Hollis laid a thick stack of cash on the table.

A shiver that was almost pride coursed down Sofia’s spine. Isaac blew out a breath.

Rotating, Hiram faced the railroad man. “Will you counteroffer?”

The man stared for a long moment at Hollis. The cowboy braced his legs wide and hooked a thumb in his front pocket, appearing nonchalant and

menacing at once. The pose said he had money to up the stakes, but he wasn't going to need it.

Sofia sank her teeth into her lower lip. Hollis's gaze latched on to her mouth and held.

Finally, the tycoon shook his head. "Nope. Other women in these parts to be had. I won't separate myself from more money." He held out his hand, and Hiram placed his winnings in his palm.

"Sofia, Isaac, you've got yourself a gentleman for the evening. Take good care of him." Hiram greedily stuffed the wad of money into his vest pocket and hightailed it out of the saloon. His work was done, and now he'd be off to his bed like the lazy sloth he truly was. A man who worked not at all but lived off other people's "talents."

"I thank you, sir, for such a gracious offer," Sofia whispered, the words not laced with her usual syrupy sweetness. Isaac heard her breathlessness and inched closer, putting one arm around her waist.

Hollis nodded, then glanced upward. "Shall we go upstairs?"

White heat scorched her sex. Her nipples pebbled. "By all means."

As she followed Hollis's thickly muscled body up the short flight of wooden stairs, Sofia's heart galloped out of control. Certainly a man like him would know his way around a woman's body as well as he knew how to rope a stallion.

* * * *

Nolan Hollis was not a weak-hearted man, yet his knees were shaking like a little girl's. What the hell was he thinking to offer for that couple? He'd just given up his share of the profits from the last horse sale of the season, which meant he'd have to pinch his wallet shut until the end of summer, when there would be more horses to sell.

And for what?

A few moments of ecstasy with a ripe, beautiful woman...and her man.

That the couple came as a package was no surprise to him. He'd heard about the Jade Pair, fantasized about what he might do with a woman *and* a man.

As he reached for the door handle, the man named Isaac beat him to it. His long arm extended around Nolan—so close that their sleeves brushed. That single whisper of cloth did things to Nolan's body he'd never expected.

His cock had been hard as stone for hours. Hell, how could it not be when the Lady Sofia's supple breasts were spilling out of her dark green gown?

The three of them entered the room, and Isaac pulled the door shut, twisting the lock.

"Which Hollis boy are you?" Sofia's musical voice had a lilt that pointed to her foreign roots. With her bronze skin and dark, glossy hair, she might be Italian. Texas was a melting pot now that the railroad had merged the country. A new town sprang from the means of transportation, and more people poured in every day.

"Nolan," he managed to say around his suddenly dry throat. He'd drunk very little whiskey, having been too distracted by each subtle move Sofia displayed.

She circled around him and Isaac, who still stood too close. Her brocaded gown swished as she moved. The simple sound raised the hairs on Nolan's body. Lust pounded through his veins and pulsed heavily in his groin. He hadn't been with a woman in years.

At the age of seventeen, he'd enjoyed his first encounter with an older widow woman. Clare had lived alone on the neighboring farm, her children grown, and with no man to care for her. Nolan had spent his summer working for her, planting and hauling and tending to the animals. Seducing her had been no trouble. The lonesome woman had fallen easily into his arms.

He would have married her, but mere weeks after their love affair began, Clare got the call to come to the city to nurse her sick mother. Nolan had never seen her again.

After that, he'd had one other encounter with a prostitute in San Antonio. But Hollis men did not carouse.

Except for tonight. He pierced Sofia with his gaze, and she froze. Her dress stopped swaying, her breasts ceased to jiggle within the tight, corseted bodice. Even her dark curls lay on her shoulders and spine, unmoving.

Was she breathing? One thing was certain—her eyes were burning with the light of desire.

Did she look upon every paying customer this way? Nolan pushed the notion from his head, fighting his rising disgust with what he was doing. Pay to have sex with her and Isaac? If his pa, brothers, or cousins found out, they'd whoop his ass. His mother and aunts would wail and then nag at him

for associating with the dregs of humanity. Still, her roots wouldn't put his family off—the fact that she was a whore would.

But looking upon Sofia's expensive gown and breathtaking beauty, Nolan only saw a woman he desired above all else.

"This is Sofia, and I'm Isaac."

"I know who you are." Nolan's heart battered the walls of his chest. What had he gotten himself into? *A night of passion and ecstasy*. Surely those two things were worth the sum he'd paid as well as the jab to his conscience.

"Well, Nolan Hollis," Sofia murmured, "tell us about yourself."

He moved into the room. The space was sparsely furnished—bed, dresser with washbasin, and some fresh towels. A few candles stood atop the dresser, their yellow flames flickering in the air currents.

There was nowhere to sit except the bed. He swept his arm toward it. "Please be comfortable, miss."

She stared at him a beat too long, her fine dark brows knitted for a brief second before she lifted her skirts and drifted to the bed. Every curvy inch of her inflamed Nolan, from the column of her throat to the swell of her hips. And God, to see her body beneath her skirt—dainty ankles, round thighs, moist sex.

He fought down a shudder of want. No, he'd paid dearly for this night, and he wasn't about to rut like a wild bull, ending his pleasure within seconds. Besides, he wanted to hear more of Sofia's voice.

Isaac withdrew a shiny silver flask from his jacket pocket. Uncorking it, he offered it to Nolan.

"Thank you." He accepted it and took a few swallows. The liquid burned a path all the way to his cock. While holding Isaac's unusually bright stare, lurid images flipped through Nolan's mind. What would they do together? Nolan's cousin, Xander, shared a male lover with his wife. But Nolan had never lingered over the particulars when talking with his brothers and cousins about the strange arrangement. Of course, Xander wasn't dallying with whores.

Sofia sank to the edge of the bed, her weight barely bowing the mattress. A tendril of dark hair slithered over her collarbone, drawing Nolan's gaze.

"You're one of the horse rancher Hollises?" Isaac asked.

“Yes.” Nolan passed the flask back to him, and Isaac skimmed his knuckles with his fingertips as he did. The touch branded Nolan’s skin. Biting off a groan, he struggled for control. If he didn’t dampen his desires a small bit, in seconds he’d land them all on the bed and not come up for air until they were screaming with release.

“Not a man who likes to talk about himself, are you, Nolan?”

He jerked at the sound of his name falling from Sofia’s lips. She leaned forward, and her breasts threatened to escape her bodice. But everything about her was relaxed, not affected. She wasn’t pouring on her charms as she had with the railroad executive.

“Here, darlin’.” Isaac crossed the room and handed her the flask. Nolan shivered as he watched her throat work with each swallow. Visions of her lips wrapped around his length danced through his head.

She gave Isaac the flask and sighed, leaning back on her palms. “Well, cowboy?”

“You interested in horses?” Nolan’s mouth twitched up at the corner. If she wanted to slow the pace and not tumble right into bed, that was fine by him. He was a trifle jittery, and maybe the conversation would ease him. Her soothing voice sure did.

She smiled too, her full lips stealing his heart—and his sense of control. He moved forward, his boots scuffing the hardwood floor, pulse erratic.

“Not a bit interested in them.” Her breath came fast as he braced his hands on either side of her hips and leaned over her.

Isaac crowded so close Nolan felt the man’s erection nudging his thigh.

“What are you interested in, Lady Sofia?” He hovered inches from her lips, almost tasting her. The faint perfume of her skin dizzied him. No strong toilet water or powder from France, which he’d expected. Just pure, soft female.

Something shifted within the emerald depths of her eyes, the golden flecks searing Nolan straight to the heart. If he was going to hell and soiling the Hollis name in the same evening, he was damn well going to do it right.

Sofia raised her chin a notch, bringing her lips within a fraction of Nolan’s. Isaac wound his arm around Nolan’s waist, drawing him firmly against his hard body.

Unbidden, a growl erupted from Nolan. Leaning in, he claimed Sofia’s mouth.

Her flavor burst on his tongue, the feminine musk headier than any liquor. Spiraling out of control at the soft crush of her lips, he held the kiss, letting it ignite him fully. He intended to make the most of it. One night was all he had money for. Even if he had enough cash, his common sense wouldn't allow him to cross this threshold again.

Pressing on her lips with his tongue, he begged entrance.

She opened to him at once, and he swept the scalding interior of her mouth. Isaac plucked at Nolan's shirt buttons one-handedly. As he unfastened each, he caressed the skin beneath. He slid his entire hand inside Nolan's parted shirt and cupped his pectoral muscle.

Need licked Nolan's insides. Bearing Sofia back on the bed, he angled his mouth over hers, gathering her tastes, feeding his flavors to her.

She clutched his shoulders, clinging as she kissed him with abandon. Isaac moved behind Nolan and cloaked his back with his body. The probe of Isaac's arousal against Nolan's ass made him groan.

Isaac responded by pressing his hips harder against Nolan. He reached around him and pushed his shirt back to expose his chest fully.

As Nolan lapped, licked, and devoured Sofia's mouth, Isaac nuzzled his nape. The faint brush of his lips on Nolan's skin sent need tingling to the tips of his toes. Tearing his mouth from Sofia, he stared into her lust-filled gaze for a minute.

Then, twisting, Nolan cupped the back of Isaac's neck and drew him in. Their lips slammed together with a force that vibrated the bed.

"Ohh," Sofia murmured.

Nolan took immediate control, shoving his tongue deep, kissing Isaac with a roughness he hadn't shown Sofia. Isaac succumbed to him, sagging into his one-armed embrace.

Drawing back and stealing a peek at the man's features, Nolan committed this moment to memory. The first and last encounter he'd ever experience with a man. Isaac's dark auburn hair fell across his brow, and his lashes lay against his pale cheeks, casting shadows.

At that moment, he opened his eyes and met Nolan's gaze. Hot want rushed through Nolan's system once again.

"Cowboy... Come back to me." Sofia twisted his shirt in her tiny fist and drew him down with surprising strength. He hovered over her a moment, gaze locked with hers before he straightened.

Cock oozing precum, he nudged the length to ease the throb. His denims trapped him firmly, but his shaft demanded exit.

Isaac released his hold on Nolan and fell to Sofia, claiming her mouth as Nolan began stripping her. Their movements were in perfect harmony, as if the three of them had done this a thousand times.

She ran her hand down the ridges of Nolan's stomach, sucking in a breath beneath Isaac's mouth.

"You like that?" Nolan gripped her wrist and guided her hand over his skin, needing her touch like he needed air. With the light caress driving him farther up the steep slope of desire every second, he reveled in the way she stroked him. Her fingers slipped over his throat and the swells of his chest. She thumbed his nipples one at a time. He braced his legs to keep himself from tumbling into bed with her. He continued to lean over her, wanting to extend the moment.

Isaac rolled onto the mattress beside her. Nolan squeezed his eyes shut as four hands moved over his flesh. Pinching his nipples with delightful pressure, skimming the planes of his stomach, and lower, dipping into his waistband.

"Sweet Jesus," he groaned.

A bubble of laughter escaped Sofia. "We've got a praying man here, Isaac."

"Let's see if we can make him speak in tongues." Isaac deftly unbuttoned Nolan's denims. When Isaac drew the length of Nolan's throbbing shaft onto his palm, Nolan thought he'd come there and then.

Grinding his teeth, he battled for control. As Isaac cupped his balls tightly to his body, Sofia traced the flared head of his cock with her nimble fingers.

"So big. All over." Sofia used one hand to shove his shirt off his shoulders.

Nolan supported his weight on one arm to free his other. She tugged at the opposite sleeve until he removed that arm from the cloth as well.

Half his body was bared to them, but they were fully clothed. He pushed to his feet and kicked his boots off, followed by his denims. "Your turn to strip."

A devilish smile stretched Isaac's handsome features. The bow of his mouth drew Nolan's attention again and again. Too well he recalled the

rough feel of his mouth and facial hair. Guilt mingled with arousal, but he kicked his worries aside, determined to live in the present. Tomorrow he'd worry about the ramifications of taking this pair to bed.

Sofia lifted her hands to the lacings of her bodice. She unknotted the strings, and her ample breasts tumbled out. With a moan, Nolan caught them. She shook as he kneaded each round orb, learning every inch before he lowered his mouth to the straining buds.

A soft noise of bliss burst from her throat, and she lashed Nolan to her, forcing him harder. Nearly unmanned by the tight feel of her nipples on his tongue, he tugged at her dress, shifting it down to expose the soft flesh of her belly.

“You’re in for a surprise,” Isaac said, running his hands over Nolan’s body.

When Nolan drew the gown over her hips, he locked his gaze to the junction of her thighs.

And found her completely bare.

“Fffuck!” His mouth watered for a taste of that smooth flesh. Juices glistened between her legs.

With Isaac’s help, he managed to free her from the fabric. They abandoned the dress on the floor with a rustle.

God help him, she wore stockings and a beribboned belt. Isaac shared Nolan’s groan at the vision of her round thighs bulging over the stockings.

Senseless with passion now, Nolan reached for Isaac’s shirt. Roughly, he ripped it open. The ginger spattering of hair on Isaac’s sculpted chest inspired a new flood of want. Damn, he was going to die in this room—combust and be turned to ash between the Jade Pair.

* * * *

Isaac locked his gaze on Nolan’s face. A more striking man he’d never seen, let alone taken to bed. In all the encounters before this, Isaac’s movements had been automatic—part of his job.

Except tonight. From the instant he spotted Hollis in the corner of the saloon, he’d ached to touch the man.

Strong shoulders inspired images of Nolan working over Isaac, his thick shaft moving within him.

Isaac’s private entrance flexed at the thought of letting Nolan slip into

his body.

The earthy scents of Sofia's arousal filled the air, mingling with Nolan's leather and musk. Isaac stood at the side of the bed, practically trembling with want but determined to go slow. If he had one chance at this, he wanted it to be perfect. Then he could revisit the memory again and again.

Sofia's skin glowed beneath the warm candlelight. Two rosy nipples jutted into the air, begging for a kiss.

Leaning down, Isaac opened his mouth wide and swallowed one.

She cried out, twisting under his touch. For a long moment, Isaac tormented her, nibbling the areolae of her hardened pearls just the way she liked.

"Come," she beckoned Nolan. The man's gaze swept over her body, his stare intense. Lowering himself, he claimed her other nipple.

The men's heads moved side by side. Nolan's shoulder-length, dark hair fell across Sofia's expanse of belly, and Isaac resisted the urge to pillow his cheek on both Nolan's hair and her flesh.

If his cock got any harder, he'd bellow with need.

Sensing his distress, Sofia lifted their chins and drew them up together. "Kiss me," she murmured.

Isaac jerked forward and tangled his tongue with Nolan's. Then they slowly sank them into her mouth. She moaned. As they writhed in a mass of limbs, the bed ropes squeaked.

Nolan's big body scorched Isaac's side. His cock lengthened further. Would the cowboy allow him to taste him? To suck his long erection into Isaac's throat and draw on him as only a man could?

Pushing away from the kiss, Isaac grasped Nolan's shoulders and guided him onto his back. In perfect synchronization as always, he and Sofia began to love Nolan's body.

To truly love him.

There was no other word for their tender yet passionate kisses and insistent caresses. If he lived to be a hundred, Isaac would never get enough of feeling the ridges of Nolan's body. Just as he would never tire of Sofia's sumptuous curves.

As Sofia sucked Nolan's cock between her pretty lips, Isaac held her heavy hair back. Seeing her mouth slip up and down over the cowboy's

veined length did things to Isaac that he almost couldn't handle. His stomach hollowed, and his balls clenched tight to his body, ready to burst. A dizzying sense of the power within Nolan infused Isaac with a longing so strong he fought to get closer even as he wanted to turn away from it.

Squeezing his cock hard to stave off his orgasm, he watched her expertly swirl her tongue over Nolan. The man's stomach muscles tightened, and he covered Isaac's fist with his, pulling at Sofia's hair.

She cooed at the tug. Accustomed to rough men, she always took what men offered up, which Isaac knew well. But no tears glittered in her eyes tonight. Only raw passion.

She's fucking enjoying the sting on her scalp.

Together, Isaac and Nolan drew her head down to accept Nolan's shaft all the way to the root. She stopped breathing as her lips touched the cowboy's dark cushion of pubic hair—a sight that nearly made Isaac come prematurely.

Isaac rocked his hips, bringing his erection against Nolan's thigh. All too well, he knew the way it felt to be completely hugged by Sofia's wet mouth and the mind-blowing dance of her tongue.

“Enough.” Nolan shoved her tenderly away.

“Not yet. My turn.” Before Nolan could protest, Isaac took Sofia's place. Holding Nolan's gaze, Isaac opened his mouth over the thick head.

Nolan bucked wildly, nudging his cock against the back of Isaac's throat. The hot droplets of precum were utter decadence on his taste buds. Digging his fingers into the steely flesh of Nolan's hips, Isaac drew on him, groaning around his length.

“Goddamn—I can't take anymore. Shit!” Nolan collapsed back as Isaac released him.

“Sofia.” Isaac slanted his gaze toward the mattress, and she stretched out gracefully, all bronzed skin and shiny hair. “Get inside her, Nolan. She needs you to stretch that sweet pussy. See how tight she is? Like a trip to heaven.”

Nolan groaned. Trailing his fingers over the slick seam of her pussy, he gathered her cream and painted it over her folds. When he thrust two fingers into her body, she shuddered as an orgasm rolled over her.

“That's it, baby. He feels so good, doesn't he? Let it go. Come for him.” Isaac's words leaped off his tongue without thought. Nothing about this

moment was practiced or affected. He and Sofia were connected by a deep love, and that emotion was elevated now.

Because they were both feeling things for Nolan. Isaac recognized Sofia's love-struck expression and felt the same deep in his bones.

She slammed her pussy into the cowboy's calloused hand, and Isaac could nearly feel the way her inner walls gripped a man.

"Kiss her." Hollis's command raised the hair on Isaac's body. Their gazes collided, and then Isaac took her mouth. Drinking from her long and deep, Isaac fisted his cock, unable to hold back another second.

Nolan spread Sofia's legs wide. He hooked them over his forearms, cupped her luscious ass in his big hands, and drove into her.

She cried out, "I'm coming again!"

Nolan fell completely still, muscles straining and jaw clamped down hard. Sofia reached for Isaac's shaft. Wrapping her silky fingers around the base, she drew his glistening cock to her mouth.

As if by agreement, they all began to move.

Isaac watched Nolan's face as he thrust into the woman they shared. Linked by her body, Isaac had never known such elation. The joy of the union transcended every event in his life. The walls of the tavern fell away, and he felt only the strong bond between the three of them.

Dark heat clawed at his insides as his orgasm rushed up from his balls. Sofia wrapped her lips around him perfectly, anticipating it, ready to gulp down his juices.

A faint dew of perspiration stood out on her high cheekbones and throat.

"Beautiful. So beautiful." Nolan lifted her higher to accept him.

She cried out as he obviously sank deeper than ever before.

With a shudder, Isaac's release claimed him. Waves of pleasure pounded through him as he spurted thick jets of cum into his lover's throat.

Nolan followed with a roar, thrusting Sofia over the edge.

She quivered, suspended between them. Isaac grew aware of Nolan's gaze on him, heavy and wanting.

Reaching across Sofia's body, they clasped hands. United as one with Sofia. But what would happen when they left this room?

Chapter Two

Ribbons of light trickled through the sheer draperies of the room over the saloon. Sofia and Isaac had occupied this room many, many times. But the space had never held such enchantment before.

She smoothed a hand over Nolan's broad chest, down to the thin love trail leading to his groin. Threading her fingers into the hair, she met his gaze.

He stilled her hand, his stomach muscles roiling.

"You're ticklish."

His mouth stiffened, and he nodded. When she moved her fingers again, he burst out laughing. The sound boomed through the room, a low note that reverberated in her soul. Only once had she known this kind of connection. With Isaac.

Smiling responsively, she tucked her head into the crook of Nolan's neck and inhaled his musky scent. She reached for his hand. His hands had worked over her with the precision of a fine artist yet the demand of a horseman.

And with the knowing of a man who loved her.

"Tell me more about you." She whispered to keep from waking Isaac, who was canted toward them on his side, his auburn hair bright in the light of dawn.

Nolan's chest rumbled with a quiet laugh. "What do you want to know?"

She grinned against his skin, then stuck out her tongue and tasted his salty essence. "Anything. Horse's name?"

"Bullseye. Unoriginal, I know."

"Is it? I know little of horses."

"My brothers seem to think so. It's the name of every horse we've bred from one particular stallion on the ranch. The stallion has a marking here." He traced a circle on Sofia's forehead, the warmth of his touch spreading through her.

Heart contracting, she stared into his eyes. "And you name all horses

with that marking Bullseye?”

“That’s right. I think we must have fourteen or fifteen Bullseyes by now.”

She giggled. She needed to know so much about him. What color did he prefer, had he ever left home and struck out on his own, and had he ever loved someone? “More. Tell me more, Nolan Hollis.”

He shook his head, the dark strands of his hair clinging to the white pillow slip. Isaac shifted, bringing his arm more firmly around Nolan’s chest. When Sofia stroked Isaac’s slack fingers briefly, her lover settled.

Hold him here. Bind him to us, Isaac.

As soon as the thought popped into her head, pain ricocheted into her heart. They could never have a man like Nolan. He was good and strong, everything she and Isaac weren’t. He had things they couldn’t have—money and freedom.

The fact that they worked for Hiram had never weighed so heavily on her. Later, she and Isaac would walk away from Nolan, unable to be part of his clean and bright world.

The Jade Pair was doomed to walk at night and hide their clandestine affairs, not live in the open plains like Nolan. But Hiram had told them to seduce the man, and so they had.

She gave a heavy sigh.

Nolan trailed his fingers down her shoulder to her upper arm. “Is it that bad?”

Tears clogged her throat immediately. What was he asking?

“Our night with you has been amazing,” she said, refusing to answer his question.

“Mmm.”

“Will I see you again?” She hated the whiny, nasal sound of her voice. Unaccustomed to being a simpering female or falling for her clients, she battled these rising feelings of despair.

He rubbed his jaw over her cheek, scraping her sensitive skin deliciously. During the night, he’d employed that rough beard on her inner thighs and then her pussy as he’d licked her to completion.

A fresh warmth bathed her insides.

“I would love to see you again—you and that amazing man of yours.”

He swallowed hard. “But Sofia... I’m not sure I can.”

The bitter tears she’d barely been holding in check threatened to fall. Born into poverty, orphaned at a young age and made to sell her body to keep herself alive, she’d never harbored dreams of having a normal life—husband, home, family. No, those luxuries were not accessible to one such as she.

She forced herself to lift one shoulder in a casual shrug. “It was a nice evening, and I shall cherish the memory.”

He stared at her hard, dark eyes boring into hers as if trying to see her soul. Could he read through her deception? She was good at acting, at toying with men and making them believe the things they wanted to hear.

But she wasn’t doing that with Nolan, and dammit, he knew.

Outside, a thunder of hooves sounded. Cattlemen drove their wares into town to put aboard the train and ship off to other cities in Texas and beyond. Were the other Hollis men out there while their relation lay in bed with two good-for-nothings?

The noise roused Isaac. His green gaze found hers instantly and held. Unspoken words passed between them.

Get out of here before we lose our hearts as well as our sense.

She could nearly read his response. *Too damn late.*

* * * *

“Look what’s swaggerin’ in!” Clay hollered as Nolan entered the barn.

Dust motes raced on the air current, outlined by the beam of light pouring through an upper vent. The reek of horses and leather should have filled Nolan’s head with peace, but it didn’t.

Far from it.

He longed for Sofia’s feminine soap-and-water scent and Isaac’s personal musk. Their smells still clung to him, though he’d stopped off at the pond and thrown himself in to wash them away.

His purpose for taking the impromptu bath was twofold. To rid himself of the residue of their long hours of lovemaking and to shove down his rising need. Hell, his cock was hard just at the thought of the Jade Pair and what they’d done.

“Looks as if you’ve had a rough night, brother.”

Okay, threefold. Nolan had known Clay would comment on his disheveled state.

“Had some money in your pocket after a good horse sale, I hear.” Clay thwacked the dust from his gloved hands before digging them into the horse feed and scooping up two massive handfuls.

Grain seeped from between his fingers, but he managed to fill the pony trough after a couple of trips. Several sturdy little ponies nosed forward, nudging each other out of the way to get at the food.

At the familiar conversation with his brother, Nolan eased. But he hoped to avoid the money talk. “Yeah, we sold the horses for top dollar. With people coming off the trains in floods, and all needing a horse, we’ll be tapped out of stock in a couple years.” Nolan grabbed a shovel and began to muck out a stall. The work created a warmth in his muscles that reminded him too much of his previous night.

“That’s why I intend to spread out soon,” Clay said.

Nolan stopped shoveling and stared at his brother hard. “You mean leaving the Hollis Ranch?”

Clay scuffed his knuckles over his jaw. “Graham did, and now he has his own horse farm. Seems a good idea to snatch up as much ground as we can and merge all our farms as we leave home.”

Graham was their older brother, recently married and now the owner of his new wife’s family farm. He clamped down on the rising hope inside him. This life wouldn’t do for him with the Jade Pair—wasn’t possible. But oh, to settle down with them and enjoy a loving existence...

“You talk to Ma yet?” Nolan didn’t need to ask. He knew Clay too well. His brother wouldn’t be able to cut the apron strings easily. He was the most spoiled of all the Hollis boys in this branch of the family tree. Their ma had babied Clay until he’d finally begged Nolan to ask her for more rope, not having the guts to exert his independence.

Clay kicked at a hay bale. “Don’t need to. Need the woman first, don’t I?”

Nolan jerked. His sow-my-wild-oats brother was shopping for a wife? After their last trip into San Antonio, when Clay had gotten ripping drunk and hopped from one lady’s bed to the next, Nolan had never expected to witness this moment. As the youngest, Clay was given freer rein than the rest of the Hollis boys.

“I thought you were too young to get dragged down by a woman and family?” Nolan mimicked Clay’s drunken slur from that night.

A begrudging smile twitched at the corner of Clay's mouth, but he turned his mirth into a damn good Hollis glare. "I want to expand the family farm. We're set to be millionaires here, Nolan. Don't you see that? But we need more land."

"And you're going to what? Find a woman whose family has land?"

Clay dug his knife out of his pocket, took aim, and threw it at the far wall. Long ago, the three Hollis boys drew the target, and they all set to practicing. On rainy days, they'd take turns cleaning the barn and caring for the animals, as well as practicing knife-throwing skills.

The point of Clay's knife quivered in the very center of the bull's-eye. He cocked his head at Nolan. "Exactly my plan. Lots of pretty women to be had in these parts."

At this, Nolan felt heat climb his throat and face. Perspiration broke out beneath his hat. *Only one pretty woman for me—and a man.*

The first stirrings of want fluttered through his body.

"So tell me, big bro." Clay jerked his knife from the wood and spun to face Nolan. "You spend all that cash on a woman last night?"

His throat clamped off. "What?" He fought for a tone of outrage. "You know otherwise."

"Do I? Not like you to be out of the house all night."

"Too much whiskey. I passed out in the field outside of town," he lied.

Clay drew a deep sniff of the air. Nolan knew it smelled of animals, hay, and home but didn't reek of whiskey, since he hadn't even finished one glass—let alone gotten soaked.

Circling nearer, Clay eyed him too closely. "Who is she, Nolan? One of the ladies from town?"

Forking some hay quickly into the stall he'd just cleaned, Nolan avoided his stare. He'd never been a good liar. When they were kids, their parents had always pulled him into their father's office to get the "real" story from him. Graham was as close-lipped as they came, and Clay couldn't tell the truth if it jumped out of the sagebrush at him.

"Who is she, Nolan?"

And he.

"The Hollises don't have affairs with those they don't intend to marry." Even as he said this, his gut burned with remorse. If word got out that he'd

consorted with a rougher woman, he was in for a set-down from his family. With two brothers, nine cousins, three uncles, and a father to answer to, Nolan would be in for the talking-to of a lifetime.

This wasn't just about Nolan paying for sex with a painted dove. Isaac had been thrown into the mix, and damn if Nolan would ever regret it. Thoughts of the man's bright gaze on him as he'd sucked Nolan's cock inflamed him.

His family might not have trouble with Nolan being intimate with a man, though. His cousin, Xander, had never been judged for his love of his best friend, James. But James was a war vet, an upstanding citizen, and Isaac was paid for sex.

"So you intend to marry?" Clay twisted Nolan's words.

"Fuck off, Clay. You're the one who just said you plan to marry. Go tell Ma, why don't you?" He was damn sick of talking, especially to his brother.

Clay pointed one long, gloved finger at him. "What's said in this barn is between us."

Straightening, Nolan glared at him. "Exactly."

"Except you didn't say anything. You never do, bro." Clay's gaze held a hint of admiration—the same look he'd worn when Nolan was eight and Clay five, and Nolan was able to climb into a tree to escape his pesky little sibling.

"You might learn a lesson or two in the power of silence, Clay. Now get your ass into the corral. I hear the horses whinnying for their breakfast."

Returning to his work, Nolan threw himself into the mindless actions of caring for the animals and cleaning their space. Everything about his life felt out of balance today. Who knew that laying hands on Sofia and Isaac would cause such upheaval in his soul? Maybe this was the reason why his family preached about staying away from those walks of life.

One night wasn't enough. Would it be possible to get the Jade Pair out of his blood? They were like a stain, tainting him—or maybe they finally colored his life at long last.

* * * *

"See that man in the green vest? He's yours tonight. If you and Isaac secure him, I'll give you ten percent more of the cut." Hiram put his thick,

wet lips to Sofia's ear. His hot breath disgusted her, and she fought the urge to slap him away.

Sofia stiffened, holding her back so rigid the muscles screamed in protest. Tonight, Isaac had squeezed her into the whalebone corset at Hiram's command. The previous evening, she'd gone *au naturel*, and Nolan had certainly appreciated it. Apparently, her boss believed a good prostitute should have the breath crushed from her, though.

She followed Hiram's finger to the man seated at the bar. A dandy dressed in city clothes and with a handlebar moustache that would make her skin crawl as he kissed her.

Which he was sure to do. And for a good price. If she could get an extra cut, she could eventually save enough to get out of here.

Then what? the tiny voice of reason nagged her. *You're a whore and nothing more. Especially nothing to big, handsome cowboys.*

Nolan hadn't returned tonight as she'd hoped he would. The piano music and whiskey had been flowing for an hour, and Nolan hadn't come into the saloon.

Hiram squeezed Sofia's shoulder in a way that brought her crashing back to the present. No rugged Hollis boy was going to ride in with a thick wad of cash and buy her and Isaac tonight.

Gnawing on her lower lip, she nodded. "Don't you worry, boss. I know how to handle that man."

Gracefully, she swept off her chair and sashayed across the saloon. As she passed the game tables, hands reached out, kneading and prodding her. She gave affected giggles and slapped them playfully away. All the while, her stomach was one massive, tangled knot.

When she reached the man at the bar, he twisted on his stool and looked right at her. Light gray eyes pierced her, assessing her in a second. Intelligence lived behind those eyes, and his slight form was perfectly clothed in the most expensive garments money could buy.

Perhaps that meant he would understand her need to get top dollar tonight.

Smoke spiraled from the man's fat cigar. Without permission, Sofia wrapped her fingers around his hand and brought the end of the cigar to her lips. She took a shallow pull, aware of the man's saliva wetting the end.

His gray eyes shimmered like a dozen lanterns had just been lit inside

him. He trailed his free hand over her buttocks, under the curve that Nolan had personally worshipped last night with his kisses until she'd nearly come undone.

Breathless, but not on account of her new client, she released the smoke she was holding, letting it curl from her lips in a seductive manner.

“You look as if you could use some company, sir.”

“Why, yes.” He looked over her shoulder at Isaac, who was never far away.

Thank God.

The client's gaze ticked over Isaac's well-muscled form—hard chest, trim waist, hips that begged to be gripped. His lean hardness spoke to her in a different way than Nolan's broad form. The client's eyes positively glowed with want.

“Sir, your drink.” The bartender set a full glass of whiskey at the man's elbow.

“I didn't order another drink.”

“Compliments of that gentleman.” He pointed.

Heart throbbing wildly, Sofia looked to where Nolan sat against the far wall in the exact place he'd been last night.

She tumbled headlong into his gaze, blood humming, body on fire. Behind her, she felt Isaac shudder. Isaac's response twitched through her skirt and seemed to travel like lightning up each bone of her corset. Nipples pinching into two tight buds, she fought to keep from stroking them in show for Nolan.

The client lifted the glass in thanks to the cowboy, who nodded and lowered his hat over his eyes until Sofia was unable to make out the dark depths.

Isaac's hand on her back prompted her to speak to the man she was meant to seduce.

“I don't believe we've been introduced.”

“This is Miss Sofia,” Isaac spoke up.

“Teryl Bonner. Pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Sofia and...?” He stared at Isaac, bare-boned with want.

“Isaac.” He warmed his voice as if he couldn't get enough of speaking with Mr. Bonner. But Sofia knew different. The tone was markedly different

from the one he used with her alone—or with Nolan.

Damn, she was in so deep she was liable to be sucked under and washed away in the current of her desire for Nolan Hollis.

Stealing another peek at him, she found his hard mouth quirked up in a crooked grin. A smile spread through her heart. What was he up to?

When Mr. Bonner brought his glass to his lips and slugged down half the whiskey, she understood at once.

Stifling a shiver of excitement, she inched closer to the man, Mr. Bonner. Hiram's gaze was a noose around her neck. She could almost feel the prickles of hemp cutting into her skin.

Isaac removed the glass from Mr. Bonner's hand and set it back onto the bar top. From the corner, Nolan gave another nod, and the bartender filled the glass to the brim.

"What would it take to get a sweetheart like you upstairs?" Mr. Bonner's words were already starting to slur, the light in his eyes dimming.

She wrapped an arm around his neck and whispered a sum into his ear that was several times more than what a laborer would earn in a month. He gave a short nod and then reached into his vest pocket. Before Hiram spotted Mr. Bonner going for his money, she placed a hand over his.

At the same moment, Isaac flicked his tongue over the man's earlobe.

Drawing Sofia to stand between his thighs, Mr. Bonner sucked in a sharp breath. Isaac nibbled his neck a little while Sofia leaned into the man, hating every fiber of her being for it. If Nolan thought for a minute that she'd played him the way she was playing Bonner, she'd never forgive herself.

Isaac poured more whiskey into their client's mouth. He eagerly gulped, hands roving over Sofia's backside.

She skittered just out of reach, carefully avoiding Nolan's stare. If she looked at him, she was afraid her expression would give away everything she was feeling. How many times while she and Isaac had loved each other had he told her that her emotions were written across her features?

In her heart of hearts, she knew it was no different with Nolan.

The piano player started a fast-paced rag. Mr. Bonner drank off his third glass of whiskey. Or was it his fourth? He'd been drinking before Nolan started buying.

If Nolan couldn't spend money on another night with the Jade Pair, it

was obvious he was going to keep Mr. Bonner from doing so too. Whiskey was cheaper than a night with a saloon couple, after all.

Isaac leaned in close and whispered to her, “We can’t let him pass out before we get his money.”

With a practiced hand, Sofia traced the lines of Mr. Bonner’s chest. His muscles were weak compared to her men’s.

A shock ripped her in two. *Her men.*

Mr. Bonner swayed a bit on his stool, and Isaac supported him, angling his body in such a way that it appeared he was embracing the drunken dandy.

Trailing two fingers down Mr. Bonner’s chest, she delved them into his vest pocket, where a wad of cash distended the cloth.

“You’re feeling mighty fine,” he said, eyes dull and cheeks ruddy from drink.

“Why, thank you, sweet-talking man,” she cooed. He smelled all wrong—not at all like Isaac or Nolan. Still, she had a performance to play to perfection if she wanted to keep food in their bellies and a pillow beneath her head.

Nolan stood and sauntered toward the bar. Sofia’s system pulsed with awareness. Damn, he was tall. Had he been that tall yesterday? He moved with slow purpose, so all eyes were on him, including Hiram’s.

Coming within inches of her and Isaac, Nolan leaned over the bar and spoke quietly with the bartender. He slid a gold coin across the well-worn top.

The bartender covered it with a palm. Without sparing Sofia a glance, Nolan walked out. Left.

Feeling more bereft than she had in her life, she watched his backside retreat through the saloon doors. What had she done? Had he been horrified by her behavior? Now that he’d seen her in action, he’d probably realized his error in sleeping with a lowly person such as her.

Isaac cleared his throat, and her gaze snapped to his. But for once, she couldn’t read what he was trying to tell her in that look. All she knew was the pain radiating through her limbs and the nausea in her core.

Not to mention the self-loathing.

Mr. Bonner leaned into Isaac as he wrapped his arm around him. Taking Isaac’s lead, Sofia did the same, practically supporting Bonner’s

heavy weight. Another sip of liquid gold and he'd fall flat on his face. But Sofia had the cash in her hand.

"One more drink for the trip upstairs," Isaac encouraged, tipping the fluid between the man's lips. His handlebar moustache squirmed like a caterpillar as he attempted to swallow but dribbled some down his clothing.

His eyes started to roll up in his head, and Sofia quickly took the glass from Isaac. Setting it down with a loud *clink* that would attract Hiram's attention from the poker game, she tightened her hold on Mr. Bonner.

Together, she and Isaac guided Bonner to his feet and across the floor. As she passed Hiram, she slipped him the money. He winked at her and slid a chair out of her way so they could move unheeded to the staircase.

"Jesus, this man is heavier than he looks," Isaac groaned when they'd reached the base of the stairs.

"I can't possibly carry his weight," she said.

"I'll do all the work. You just look beautiful, like you always do." But Isaac wasn't as large as Nolan and would have more trouble getting the dead-drunk man up the stairs even with her help.

His compliment didn't warm her as it once had. Her heart was too heavy at the idea that Nolan had gone off into the night, alone and possibly angry or hurting.

She opened her mouth to say as much, but Isaac stopped her with a look. "I know, love. Let's just get Mr. Bonner comfortable."

The long corridor was dimly lit, but the room was prepared for them as always. Candles glowed, and the sight of the big bed slammed Sofia with memories of lying across it the previous evening, three abreast.

Her pussy spasmed, and juices wet her inner thighs.

"Let's get him to the bed." Isaac hitched his arm around the man to get enough leverage to roll him onto the mattress.

Despite herself, mirth bubbled up her throat, and she released a giggle. "Never saw a man get drunk so fast."

"He'd been drinking before our cowboy started refilling his glass." Isaac shot her a look that let her know he was far from immune to "their cowboy." His auburn hair tumbled into one eye, and he shook it free.

Suddenly the door opened quietly behind them. Spinning on her high-heeled Moroccan leather boots, she expected to find Hiram.

Instead, she met Nolan. His big form seemed to swallow the room, sucking all air from her lungs in the process. Her knees weakened, and black spots leaped before her eyes.

Isaac's harsh intake of breath filled her hearing. But she couldn't tear her gaze off the rugged cowboy in front of her.

In two steps, he was beside her. Plucking her off her feet, he angled his mouth over hers. The heady scents of male and leather replaced the smoke and whiskey from the saloon.

Isaac crowded close, encircling them in his embrace as Nolan kissed Sofia senseless. He angled his head, tongue flipping against hers in a velvety promise of what his body would soon do to hers.

Her nipples bunched into sharp peaks and ached for his touch—Isaac's touch. Sofia bowed her back, bringing her breasts into contact with Nolan's chest. But she wanted more. Needed to feel his heated flesh and his soft hair against her nipples.

With quick flicks, she worked his shirt buttons open. Isaac slid his hands into the opening and nudged the cloth off Nolan's shoulders.

Not sparing a glance at the unconscious man on the bed, Nolan walked them backward until they were pressed against the wall. Nolan tore his mouth from Sofia's kiss and clamped a hand around Isaac's nape, drawing him in.

Trembling, she stared at their joined mouths, watching the masculine lines of their lips moving in tandem bliss. Somehow, she managed to employ her trembling fingers on the hooks and buttons of her gown. By the time the men finished their reunion kiss, Sofia had stepped out of the fabric.

It puddled at their feet, obscuring Nolan's boots. She met his dark gaze, and desire slid into her belly.

"I couldn't sit by and watch Bonner bring you both upstairs," he said, his voice rough.

Isaac gripped her waist from behind, sliding his palms up her torso until he cupped each heavy breast.

"I thought you'd left." Sofia's voice shook with the worry that she and Isaac had lost Nolan.

A small smile formed on Nolan's face. He noted her rosy nipples, which Isaac plucked at with maddening skill. Then Nolan dragged his gaze back to hers. Lights that had nothing to do with the candles played in his eyes.

Leaning so close she could almost taste him, Nolan murmured against the corner of her mouth. “I couldn’t stay away.”

Isaac circled her nipples with his fingers, then pinched them slow and hard. He dropped his warm mouth to the crook of her neck, sucking the skin lightly until she writhed.

Still, Nolan didn’t move to touch her, only pressed closer, hugging her perfectly between his body and Isaac’s. Her fingers twitched to touch the steel of his muscles, but when she lifted her hands, he caught her wrists between thumb and forefinger.

Pressing them over her head, he held her gaze. And the loving began.

She couldn’t look away, couldn’t even beg for his kiss. In his dark eyes, she read so much emotion—emotion that had lingered long after they’d parted ways in the hours of dawn.

“I thought about you two all day.”

His words seduced her.

Pussy slick with want, she gasped as Isaac cupped one breast and brought it up to Nolan’s lips. He teased it with his tongue gently, the tip barely skimming her flesh. Her breathing was so loud she wondered if she’d rouse Mr. Bonner from his stupor. But there was no chance to think on it further because Nolan released her, and Isaac eased her other nipple into the cowboy’s scorching mouth.

He pulled on it hard, drawing her to her tiptoes. She cried out and fought against the manacle of his hand.

“Please, I have to touch you. Touch Isaac.”

He shook his head, still sucking. The soft tickle of his hair on her flesh ignited her, and she bucked.

After a long, dizzying minute, Nolan released her. She barely had time to catch her breath before he stole it again.

“Open her pussy for me so I can taste her.”

Isaac smoothed his hands down her belly to the junction of her thighs. The feel of his long fingers pressing her lips open threatened to undo her. Biting off a cry that would surely wake the drunk on the bed, Sofia squirmed. Isaac’s erection against her ass felt so good. She wanted him pushing inside her while Nolan claimed her pussy with his tongue.

Nolan let go of her hands. In one fluid movement, he dropped to his

knees.

“Ohh.” The vision of his dark head bent to her sex caused gooseflesh to break out all over.

“Wider,” he commanded.

Isaac spread her farther. The cool air touching her inner folds mingled with the warmth of Nolan’s breath. Able to smell her own arousal, she longed for a chance at her men. To bury her nose in the auburn love trail leading to Isaac’s shaft, or inhale deeply and hold her breath as Nolan pushed his cock into the back of her throat.

She shivered.

“She’s fucking primed. I’ve gotta taste her.” In one big, openmouthed kiss, Nolan claimed her pussy. He drove his tongue into her as he used his upper lip on her hard pearl.

A massive wave towed her under as her inner walls contracted. Feeling her impending release, Nolan withdrew, allowing only his breath to kiss her skin.

Isaac groaned. Still holding her nether lips apart, he extended one finger, which Nolan sucked. The erotic view of the rugged man licking Isaac’s long digit nearly made Sofia come.

She sagged in Isaac’s hold, trapped by his hard arms. Nolan lashed an arm around her knees, steadying her further.

“Dip a finger inside her,” Nolan whispered.

Head spinning, she waited as Isaac obeyed. He tormented her wet folds, barely skimming her neediest spot before sinking his finger into her body.

Convulsing, she fought to fuck his finger, but her men restrained her.

Nolan flashed a look up at her. In that burning glance, she lost herself—mind, body, and soul. Her heart followed, jerked into the depths of his gaze with the rest of her. What was it about him that broke down her barricade and demanded entrance?

It was the same with Isaac.

As Isaac slowly slid his finger out, she quivered. Nolan took over once again, thrusting his tongue into her cavern. While he pulsed his tongue deep, then shallow, he continued to hold her gaze.

Just when she hit the brink of ecstasy, he flicked her bud with his tongue with quick strokes that drove her over the edge. Cream soaked his lips

and jaw, the fire in her pussy stealing her sense.

Crying out, she came. Isaac clapped a hand over her mouth, feeding her his fingers and the flavors of her own body. She opened her mouth to gain more as Nolan drew the last contractions from her.

Isaac held her tight while Nolan brought her down, using gentle licks. She cradled Nolan's head and met his gaze. Desire flamed there, raged out of control.

She guided him to his feet, and she and Isaac finished stripping him. She slid out of their embrace to gain better access to the male bodies she wanted—needed—so much. Isaac peeled the tight black pants down Nolan's hips while Nolan toed off his boots and kicked the mass of clothing aside.

A stuttering snore sounded from the bed, and Sofia stifled a hysterical laugh. Joy bloomed inside her heart. She was here with the men she wanted more than anything in the world.

“Help me undress him,” Nolan said to her.

Smiling, she worked to free Isaac from his jacket and shirt. Nolan jerkily tugged at Isaac's pants. In seconds, her other delicious lover stood bare.

Isaac nibbled at her lips while Nolan sucked a spot behind her ear that made her writhe. She scraped her fingers over their jaws—one's auburn growth smoothly shaven away and one prickly beneath her fingertips. She guided their heads together but didn't need to encourage their kiss.

The meeting of their mouths resounded in her soul. Nolan squeezed his eyes shut, kissing Isaac with a passion that sparked her need once more.

Moving their hips in tandem, they ground their thick lengths against each other. Sofia reached between their bodies and wrapped her fingers around both cocks, letting them slide through her palms.

Their chests rose and fell, kisses becoming more urgent. She thumbed one swollen head, then the other, smearing the drops of need over each shaft. Nolan stiffened and suddenly jerked away.

Grabbing Sofia around the waist, he spread her out on the bed of their abandoned clothes. He poised between her thighs, barely contained. A muscle jumped in his jaw, and his eyes were fever-bright. He rubbed his cock against her slick pussy.

Before entering her, Nolan reached for Isaac, drawing his lover behind him onto his knees.

Lust spiked through her core. Nolan was going to drive deep into her while Isaac explored his body. There was a rustle of clothing, and Sofia recognized the sound of the tin of lubricant that Isaac always carried opening. Nolan moaned as Isaac readied him for his invasion.

Bending to kiss her mouth, Nolan drove into her. Her body stretched around his engorged cock, making her cry out. She hitched her legs around him, trapping him tightly while Isaac eased into his body.

Nolan stopped breathing.

“First time,” Isaac said raggedly, his eyes pinched shut with bliss.

Nolan grunted his agreement.

“I don’t know how long I can hold off,” Isaac whispered.

With a hesitant motion, Nolan moved his cock within Sofia’s depths. Her body clamped down on his length, and he moaned.

“All right?” Isaac’s tone was rough.

“Fuck, yeah.” Nolan moved between their bodies, taking Isaac’s shaft to the root while plunging deep into Sofia. The three of them seemed to vibrate with energy as they rocked together.

Sofia’s slope of need canted upward sharply, and suddenly she was riding a current of sensation, hovering on the brink of release. The sound of Isaac’s hips slapping Nolan’s stole all self-control, and she could hold back no longer.

“I’m coming!” She clung to Nolan, the barriers of her inner self crumbling at the sound of Isaac’s roar and the feel of Nolan’s hot seed bathing her walls.

Drifting, she found herself warmed by Nolan’s kisses while Isaac caressed her. Deep inside, she embraced the hope that they could remain this way—three persons able to care for and love each other for the rest of their days.

But the saloon girl in her realized it could never happen. It was bad enough she’d dragged Isaac into her doomed existence. She couldn’t live with herself if she ensnared Nolan too.

* * * *

The first whiffs of cigar smoke drifted through the floorboards and into Isaac’s conscious mind. Groaning, he turned over, automatically feeling along the mattress for Sofia.

He located her soft body and pulled her against him. Giving a sigh, she continued to slumber.

In the wee hours, they'd seen Nolan off. After that, they'd stripped Mr. Bonner and tied his ankles to the bed to make it look as if he'd enjoyed the wildest night of pleasure imaginable.

Isaac had found this tremendously funny, but Sofia was worried their treachery would be discovered. A fear of Hiram always lived in the back of her mind, and Isaac believed it was because her first boss had hurt her and threatened her with worse.

Although Hiram often inspired fear in Isaac, he tried to put on a mask for Sofia. He wasn't much smaller than Hiram, but though his boss lacked Isaac's bulk, he could cut Isaac's throat in his sleep. Isaac had seen more than one person disappear from the saloon. When Hiram turned his attention to Sofia and threatened her, Isaac often eased everyone's tempers with his jokes.

He didn't countenance males who terrorized women. His own mother had been one of those victims of a man's heavy hand. Though Isaac could have done nothing to stop his father from beating his mother, he damn well would do something to protect Sofia, especially now that Nolan was in the picture.

Nolan could protect us both.

The thought jumped into his head, waking him fully. Yes, that big, rough cowboy could wipe Hiram off the earth with one blow. Isaac was sure of it. And Nolan obviously wanted Sofia and Isaac with him. Why else would he have purposely helped Mr. Bonner get deep in his cups?

The low light of evening drifted into the room and cast Sofia's body in a golden glow. In this personal space they shared, she'd confessed her worries to Isaac about Nolan. She didn't believe them good enough for the man and thought it best to send him on his way after last night.

But her heart was already gone—Isaac saw it in her eyes. The way she gazed at Nolan was the same way she looked at him. She might be a good actress when it came to the men who paid for their entertainment, but her heart was bared to those she truly cared for.

Damn. Walking away from Nolan would cause her more pain.

As Isaac gazed at the bead of light on her lovely, upturned nose, he pondered a dozen scenarios. Nolan was a real man with satisfying work and a family who stood behind him. Even if Isaac could get Sofia and himself

released from Hiram's grip, the likelihood of Nolan wanting them other than for an occasional romp was slim.

The scuffling step outside the door alerted Isaac immediately. He'd know that rat Hiram's step anywhere.

Easing away from Sofia, Isaac climbed out of bed and quietly strode to the door. She didn't rouse when he opened it.

"Isaac." Hiram looked past him to the sleeping Sofia, his gaze lingering on her bare form.

Grinding his teeth, Isaac wished he'd thought to pull the covers over her before answering Hiram's knock. The slimy turd had no business ogling Sofia. He might own her in a sense, but he had no right to stare at her. As far as Isaac knew, he'd never touched her intimately, and for that he was grateful.

Isaac snagged a long jacket from a hook behind the door and shoved his arms into it to cover his nudity. He nudged past Hiram onto the landing overlooking the saloon and shut the door quietly.

"We'll be down soon. It's early yet, is it not?"

"Yes, it is. But I have a matter to discuss with you."

Heart tripping out of control, Isaac waited, unable to respond. Hiram had found out about Nolan. Maybe the saloon crowd, loyal as ever to Hiram, had ratted Nolan out when he left.

Hiram fiddled with his suit as usual. Brushing stray hairs from the fine cloth. He withdrew his gold pocket watch and replaced it without even looking at the face. Isaac always thought Hiram took stock of his clothing because it was a status symbol in these parts. Every man who entered the saloon knew Hiram was in charge.

"I couldn't help but notice the Hollis boy was here last night."

Relief flooded to Isaac's fingertips, making them tingle. He clenched his hands into fists, trying to gain control of the spinning feeling he was experiencing. "I saw too."

"I believe he was returning for another taste of the Jade Pair," Hiram went on, smoothing his waistcoat.

"Oh?" *He had more than a taste last night.*

"That's right. He couldn't outbid Mr. Bonner last night, but I think Hollis may return to try again tonight. I'd like for you to play him against

another client who takes interest—get top dollar. Then I want you to go with Hollis.”

Rage spiked through Isaac. He didn’t want to play Nolan that way. “Why do you want us to take Hollis on again?” The anger was barely leashed in his voice.

“Well, he’s a wealthy man in these parts. At least his family is.”

“And?” What did this son of a bitch want from Hollis? Not more money. He could have that any night of the week without speaking to Isaac this way. Perhaps Hiram sensed the Hollises were worth more—could they have silver? Or gold?

Hiram plucked at the embossed buttons on his jacket. “It is rumored,” he stretched the last word out, “that the Hollises own a certain strand of pearls I am interested in procuring.”

“Why don’t you just ask them to sell to you?”

“That’s the thing—they aren’t for sale. That particular Hollis boy you bedded is the son of Felicia and Robert. His pa bought a priceless strand of opera pearls last time he went to San Antonio. Bought them off a merchant who’d just come from Paris. That necklace is worth more than any of our lives are worth.”

Isaac’s throat clamped shut. Somehow, he managed to force words through it. “And you want Sofia and me to steal them?”

Hiram shook his head, and a greasy tendril of hair fell into his eye. “I would never ask such a thing. Why, you shock me, Isaac.”

“Of course.” Isaac humored his boss. “What do you suggest we do? Break into Hollis’s ranch home and spill the contents of every drawer until we find this necklace?”

“A more subtle strategy might be in order. Befriend him. Perhaps he will take you home to meet his family.”

Isaac stared at Hiram, his heart dead. “You think a man of Hollis’s worth is going to bring home a pair of whores to meet the folks?”

“I don’t care how you go about getting those pearls, Isaac. You get them.” Hiram’s voice rose along with the color in his face.

“What’s in it for me and Sofia?” He barely was able to keep his gaze from darting to the rail. If he shoved Hiram over, the man would die from the fifteen-foot fall. He wanted him out of their lives once and for all. How

would it feel not to be pinned down by this man?

But he didn't have the guts to do it in front of witnesses. The law would bear down on him, and he'd find himself strung from a tree within the hour. If he was dead, he couldn't take care of Sofia even in the small ways he was able to now. Without him, she might not even have a roof over her head anymore.

Then Hiram gave him the answer he'd always dreamed of hearing. "You give me those pearls, and I'll give you freedom."

Heart pounding wildly, Isaac stared at his boss blankly. "Freedom? As in we work for ourselves?"

"That's right."

"Those pearls must be worth a lot."

"More than your lives, that's for certain."

At that moment, the door cracked open, and Sofia stuck her head out. Her luxurious locks were tousled in sleep, and her skin was rosy. "I thought I heard voices. What's going on?"

"I'll tell her myself. In the meantime, we need to prepare for the evening." Dismissing his boss, Isaac pushed back into their chamber.

Sofia stared at him, clutching the thin sheet to her bare form. Those dark eyes of hers knew too much already. "What does he want from us?"

Isaac released a sigh so strong it could have knocked over the curvy woman if she'd been standing right before him. Cutting the air with his hand, he said, "Not here. Get dressed. We're taking a walk."

Ten minutes later, with Sofia laced into her flowing spring green gown and her hair piled high on her head, the two of them set out into the evening. Isaac drew a deep breath, reveling in the scents of cooking food, wildflowers, and even the tang of the railroad workers as they quit after a long day.

"I can't remember the last time we took a walk," Sofia said. "I'd forgotten what it's like to not smell smoke and whiskey."

"Even cards have their own smell, especially when guns are fired during the playing." *If I can get that necklace, we wouldn't need to smell any of it.* He drew Sofia's arm over his as they navigated the boardwalk.

Men milled the street in droves. More than a few eyed the Jade Pair as they passed, but Sofia seemed unaware of it, so caught up in her walk was she.

How to tell her about Hiram's bargain? Get the necklace from Hollis, receive freedom. Stealing seemed a small price to pay. It was only an object, after all. No lives would be lost, and if Isaac was able to swipe the pearls without anyone knowing, it might look like a common theft. He and Sofia wouldn't be suspected. He couldn't stop Hiram with force as Nolan could, but he could prove his worth in this fashion. His one chance to save her—by using his wits and his crafty fingers.

She stopped walking and peered through a shop window at the tall, feathery hat there. With a sigh, she tilted her head.

"It would look lovely against your hair." The ivory hue was perfect for her.

She shook her head. "I can't wear white; you know that."

"Why not?"

"You know what I am better than anyone, Isaac. That color is for the pure."

He stared deeply into her green eyes. "You're pure of heart, Sofia. And that's all that matters."

"Not really." Tearing her gaze from his, she started walking again, her little boot heels barely making a sound on the rough wooden planks.

Isaac jumped on the opening. "What if I told you that you could wear white, Sofia? That you can be a respectable lady?"

Her chuckle was musical, lilting. She squeezed his arm. "I'd say you must be drinking."

Stopping dead in his tracks, he turned her to face him. He wrapped his fingers around her plump upper arms and met her gaze. "I'm entirely serious, love. But there's a hitch you may not agree to."

He bent to whisper the details of Hiram's deal into her ear. She stiffened with every word. When he told her that Hiram expected them to find a way into the Hollis home and steal the pearls, she tore from his grasp.

"No! Stop! Why would you go along with this? Hiram owning us is bad enough. Telling us who to sleep with is worse. But sending us after Nolan to steal from him? I can't even think about it!"

"I haven't said I will yet, but love... Imagine. We'd be able to walk away. We have enough money to get as far as California or go east. From there, I can find work. Before I met up with you, I worked in service for a

family. But we have enough of our own money to live on for a while.”

Disgust curled her lips, and her eyes darkened. “Money that sickens me to make!” She delved two fingers into her bodice and flashed a wad of cash. “I hate this money we received from our night with Nolan. It makes my stomach hurt.”

Two men standing with their backs to the building down the boardwalk pulled away, their stares boring into Isaac. A husband hurried his woman into a wagon and hurriedly flicked the reins to speed the horses away.

“I know, love. Please put it away, though. People are staring.” He crowded close to her, shielding her body with his. In these parts, it wasn’t uncommon to find a woman dead, let alone a soiled dove. Men would kill her for the cash she carried. It was common knowledge that females like Sofia pulled in more income in one night than most men earned in a month.

Her eyes flashed, but she did as Isaac requested. “It feels like stealing to have this money on me. I’ve been carrying it for days in hopes I find a way to get rid of it. How could you believe I’d go along with the idea of stealing pearls from him?”

“Actually, they aren’t his pearls.”

She groaned and started walking away from him. “You know what I mean,” she said, knowing he’d follow as he always did.

He caught up to her at the end of the boardwalk, grabbing her arm and spinning her to face him. “Think about it, Sofia. We’d be free to go where we choose, be the people we want to be. Love who we want to love.”

A long breath spiraled from her lush lips. He stared at her ruby mouth, desire driving him to push her into this impossible choice. What choice did they have? Live forever as Hiram’s pawns or reach for a better life.

Her eyes glittered with unshed tears. “You think it will work? That we won’t get caught?”

“If we do it right, we can get away with it and gain our freedom.”

She stopped at a yard-goods storefront. The door was open to the evening air, and the sobs of a woman drifted from the depths.

“Can’t pay now, ma’am. But I need the cloth for mourning clothes for me and my young’uns. My man’s to be buried in the morn!”

Sofia inched toward the door, her muscles rigid.

“I can’t allow you to take good cloth without cash in my hand. Now,

I'm sorry, lady."

In a blink, Sofia was sailing into the shop. Isaac followed on her heels, his stomach clenched.

"How much is the fabric?" she asked.

Both the grieving woman and the shopkeeper gaped at Sofia as if she were a two-headed snail.

"Excuse me?" The shop owner's nostrils flared as she looked Sofia over from head to toe.

"I wish to know the cost of the fabric this woman requires. I have cash." Withdrawing the funds from her bodice, Sofia held the bills aloft.

The tease was too much for the businesswoman, and she grabbed the scissors off the cutting table. "Very well. Two dollars."

Sofia peeled the bills off and slapped them on the table. Then she grasped the widow's wrist and pressed the rest of the money into her hand. "To keep you and your children."

"I can't—"

"There's plenty where that comes from, ma'am," Sofia said with a wobble in her voice. "I give it to you so that you may stay out of my shoes."

Backing away, Sofia bumped into Isaac. He wrapped his arms around her waist and hauled her back through the door. On the boardwalk, she turned to him, gaze burning. "All right, we'll get the pearls. Tonight, if Nolan comes in, we'll start working toward that."

Isaac dropped his lips to the crinkle between her dark brows. "And toward freedom."

Chapter Three

He wasn't going to show. After only two nights, Sofia expected to see Nolan seated against the wall in his usual chair as if he'd been there always.

While men played poker and danced with the other saloon girls, Sofia sat between Isaac and Rip, a man who was known as a troublemaker in these parts. But Hiram had heard through the railroad tracks that the gentleman had just come into some money.

In Sofia's opinion, they didn't need to leech off Rip's fortune. They already earned enough. That was where Hiram helped—he forced men to pay more for the services of the Jade Pair while other saloon girls took whatever bits a customer would throw in her direction. Yes, Hiram was a strong negotiator.

If he wasn't, Sofia never would have been tempted to steal in return for her freedom.

Sliding a hand down Rip's spine, she forced herself not to shudder with disgust. Everything in her longed for Nolan. Even if she never took him to bed again, she needed to lay eyes on him.

For his own good, I hope he doesn't show up.

Rip nuzzled her throat, and she angled her head to give the appearance that she was allowing him better access. In actuality, she was trying to get away from him.

No leather and musk filled her nose. Instead, she was forced to smell his pungent breath and unwashed body.

For the tenth time since she'd given herself to Nolan, she realized she wasn't good enough for him. A woman who slept with drunkards just because they had enough money didn't deserve a man like Nolan. For a brief moment, the edges of their lives had touched, but in the end, she'd have to stop lying to herself. She would never be more to Nolan than a warm body.

Did she wish to add "thief" to that?

She met Isaac's gaze and saw her disgust mirrored there.

Have we been so altered so quickly? After two nights with their

cowboy, she and Isaac couldn't seem to muster the energy to even act as if they wanted another man.

As Rip delivered sloppy kisses to her throat, Sofia cast a desperate glance around the saloon, hoping to see Nolan. A single glimpse of that dark cowboy hat was all she needed to continue with her life. At this point, she just had to know he was in the vicinity, even if she didn't get to touch him.

"Shall we go upstairs?" Rip breathed in her ear, raising a shiver that had nothing to do with desire.

She placed her palms on his chest and pushed him back a fraction. Playing hard to get was one of her specialties. In this case, it would keep her from gagging.

"Sweet woman, I believe our client is ready." Isaac slipped from his chair and reached for her. She let her boots hit the floor, unable to keep from scouring the saloon again for Nolan.

At that moment, she spied a tall figure in the shadows near the staircase. The many candlesticks on the chandelier were burned down to stubs, and the light was low at this time of night. She squinted, fighting to make out the figure.

Suddenly, Isaac's fingers convulsed on her arm as he spotted the man too.

She went on tiptoe and breathed her words into Isaac's ear, "It's not him."

"Has to be. No one else is that big."

"Something is off about him. I'd know."

The man wasn't watching them either, which was another indication that he wasn't Nolan.

"There's only one way to find out." Isaac started towing her toward the stairs. Rip jumped off his chair and followed closely.

As they neared the staircase, Sofia trembled. Her dress felt impossibly tight, her corset constricting. Even her new boots pinched her toes. While her body screamed to be released from the confines of her clothing, her mind rebelled.

I don't want to go to bed with Rip. May he rot in hell. He smells like he is, anyway.

The man leaned casually against the wall, ankles crossed and arms

folded lazily over his chest. A spear of want struck Sofia. Though she instinctively knew this wasn't Nolan, he was a Hollis. Had to be. Her body recognized the similarities in their forms.

The Hollis boy swung his head their direction as they started up the stairs. In the dimness and with the brim of his hat so low, she was unable to figure out what his eye color was. Just how closely did he resemble the Hollis boy of her heart?

"You're right," Isaac said over his shoulder.

"Of course I am." Glancing back, she found the Hollis man was looking in another direction, uncaring whether two whores went upstairs with a paying customer.

A thought followed on the heels of that one—thank goodness that Hollis boy hadn't vied for their attention. It was bad enough they were going off with Rip. To bed another Hollis would feel wrong to the marrow of her bones.

Rip skimmed the curves of her ass as she ascended before him. She swallowed the bile that bobbed in her throat, resisting the urge to smack his hands away.

Money in our pockets we can use when we escape this life. Her mental reminder did little to enhance her mood.

At the top of the stairs, Isaac turned left and followed the railing to the first unoccupied room. He tugged Sofia along as if eager to have her and Rip between the sheets, but Isaac's fingers had grown cold and slick.

He didn't want to do this any more than she did.

Once inside the room, Rip grabbed Sofia and threw her against the wall. Her head struck hard. Pain exploded in her skull. Head spinning, she slumped in his hold as he slammed his mouth over hers.

Isaac cupped her head, rubbing it. He could protect her from the rough men easily enough, but it would mean they'd lose their jobs. Right now, they had enough money to hop a train, but setting up as a respectable couple was out of the question with their savings. They needed Rip's money and probably a dozen more men's cash.

Then they needed the opera pearls.

Sofia let her mind go blank as Rip pawed at her breasts and sucked at her throat until she felt the blood mark her skin. The pain in her head dulled to a throb, but nausea was a hot ball in her stomach.

Isaac supported her with one strong arm as he began to undress Rip. Taking Rip's focus off her for a few precious moments helped her regain some semblance of control.

This is my job. Do it and do it well, as I always have.

Rip fondled her breast, squeezing painfully. Damn, she was in no state of mind to handle a rough player tonight. Most men like Rip wanted her to submit. But tonight she wished she could pull out a pearl-handled pistol and at the very least, whack him across the temple with it.

Suppressing her rising cries, she stared at Isaac. Soothed by his gaze, she allowed Rip to remove her gown and plunge his fingers into her dry pussy.

Isaac stroked her hair, consoling her in his own fashion before he dropped to his knees and worked at the front of Rip's breeches. If Isaac got him off, he wouldn't be able to pound into Sofia's body and hurt her further.

Tears pooled in the corners of her eyes, and she held them wide to keep the drops from falling.

Outside the window, a step sounded. Though they were on the second floor, an outside staircase ran up the side of the building. Hiram had the outdoor staircase built—quite handy for some of their clients who, for familial reasons, didn't wish to be seen going off with the saloon girls.

Sofia and Isaac had met with more than one man who'd entered by way of the window.

She fixed her gaze on the open window. Heart drumming, she spotted the thick thigh muscle as it came into view.

Heat wove through her lower belly.

With a shuddering breath, she watched as Nolan threw open the window and dropped one boot through it.

* * * *

Fuck, he was too late. Sofia stood trembling in nothing but her corset, stockings, and sexy little boots. The fine turn of her ankles ignited him instantly, but this wasn't the time.

Hearing the ruckus Nolan created by launching himself through the window, their client whipped around. With the motion, his hard sex pulled free of Isaac's mouth. The glint of Isaac's saliva on the man brought a growl to Nolan's lips.

Fury pumped through his veins. Stomping across the room, he grabbed a candlestick and bashed it over the man's head. Rip crumpled into a boneless heap as unconscious as Bonner ever had been from drink the previous night.

"Shhhit," Isaac hissed. He clambered off his knees, and Nolan snagged him around the middle with one arm even as he caught Sofia with the other.

Dark splotches dotted the bronze skin of her throat, and he bit off a roar of rage. He'd marked her—that scum had drawn her blood and put that pained light in her eyes.

A quiet sob sounded, and she collapsed against Nolan. When he cradled her head, she cried out.

"He hurt you." He ground the words out, wishing he were able to do more with that candlestick than render Rip unconscious. Perhaps he could shove it up his ass. Or down his throat.

Nolan trailed his mouth over Sofia's temple, caressing the back of her head but avoiding the knot that had risen. From what? Had he struck her? Bounced her head off the wall?

"Goddammit!" he finally burst, though the curse did nothing to alleviate his anger.

Protective instincts rose in him. He just wanted to enfold this tender woman in his arms, along with the passionate man who cared for her, and whisk them out the window. Out of this room and far away from the saloon and their lives as they knew them.

He had a mind to storm downstairs and knock Hiram's teeth out. Allowing a man to abuse one of the saloon girls was inexcusable.

His spine stiffened. That was exactly what he was going to do.

Pressing Sofia into Isaac's arms, Nolan strode to the door. He whipped it open to her worried cries, but Isaac hushed her quickly.

As Nolan thundered down the stairs, he caught sight of his cousin, Drew, straightening away from the wall.

"What the...?"

"Not now." Nolan rushed past him, grasped Hiram around the throat, and threw him against a wall.

A strangled gurgle issued from his greasy lips; his eyes bulged. Across the room, several men tossed down their cards and stormed out, leaving the

double doors swinging. And a saloon girl watched, eyes round.

“You sent her upstairs with a man who hurt her. Why would you allow that?” Nolan pushed his face close, speaking low so he couldn’t be overheard by the dozens of onlookers.

Suddenly, he felt Drew’s presence at his side. “Need help, cos?”

“No,” Nolan practically growled. What the hell was his cousin doing here? This was all he needed—to be seen standing up for a saloon girl in front of Drew. Word would reach his family as fast as hooves could fly across the fields.

But Drew wasn’t Clay, he reminded himself. While his little brother couldn’t keep a confidence to save his life, Drew could. At eleven, Nolan had sneaked out of his house, taken a horse to the parish picnic, and danced all night. Drew hadn’t said a word to this day.

Hell, Drew probably knew about Clare too. After all, Drew had helped bale hay for the widow that summer she and Nolan were in each other’s arms.

Loosening his hold on Hiram’s throat, Nolan set the weasel down on his feet. Hiram sagged against the wall, breathing hard. “Don’t ever lay a hand on me again.”

“Or what?” Nolan crowded close, bringing his big chest against the man.

“I’ll have your little friends sent away. There are lots of places to sell and buyers galore. Don’t believe for a minute I can’t make this happen.” He glared at Nolan.

Though Nolan’s stomach burned with worry, he wasn’t about to back down. A man like Hiram was powerful, and he controlled Sofia and Isaac too completely. Nolan could reach over and snuff out that power with a flick of his wrist. But everyone knew the saloon owners had the sheriff in their pockets—they tipped him under the table and supplied him with free booze and women. Nolan wouldn’t be able to run too far from the law if he killed Hiram.

He jabbed a finger into Hiram’s chest. “Threaten them, you threaten me, you useless turd. Now leave them be for the night. No more business.”

A strange gleam crept into Hiram’s eyes. “I don’t expect I’ll need much more,” he said and smiled a broken-toothed grin that made Nolan’s skin crawl.

Jerking away, Nolan pushed his way through the press of bodies to the exit. He threw himself into the night, drawing deep breaths of the cooler air. The air wasn't as fresh as it was on the Hollis Ranch with its wide-open fields, but it was better than the stale reek of men, lust, and money.

Boot thuds sounded behind him. He didn't need to turn to know Drew had followed him.

"What the hell was that, Nolan?"

Stopping, he waited for his cousin to catch up. Together they strode across the cracked mud street and to the hitching post where they'd tethered their horses.

"Trouble," he answered.

Drew released a low laugh. "When the hell isn't a Hollis boy up to his ass crack in trouble? You gonna fill me in so next time I can come prepared?"

Nolan whirled on him. "What the hell are you doin' in a place like that anyhow?"

Drew tugged his hat brim. "What are you?"

"I'm older."

"By fourteen days."

"All right, neither of us ought to be in that saloon. Our family values say otherwise."

"But you were, and you had some issue with the man who sells—"

"Jesus! Shut the hell up before the whole town hears you. Who knows what other Hollis men lurk in the darkness." Nolan barely controlled the volume of his voice as panic set in.

Drew fell silent as he jerked the rope free and led his horse away from the others. Without another word, he slipped into the saddle and pointed his horse toward home.

Nolan watched his retreating back for a moment. "Fuck." He hurled his leg over his mount and spurred Bullseye after Drew.

Trotting beside him, Nolan fought to keep calm. He'd just assaulted a man in broad view, and that wouldn't go unnoticed. The weasel wouldn't fight fair, especially with the Jade Pair to lose. That meant they'd have to watch their backs—and those of their family members.

Eventually the family would hear about it. And he was still shaken over what he'd seen—was Sofia injured more than he'd guessed? Sometimes

blows to the head meant the person wouldn't live.

No, she was fine. Just a goose egg.

He battled to remain on the trail home with Drew, because his heart was back in that saloon with Sofia and Isaac.

Damn, he was in deeper than he thought. When a Hollis's possessive nature burst forth, he was pretty much doomed to a church wedding.

Except, that could never happen for Nolan. His involvement with the Jade Pair was a dead end—a railroad track that came to an abrupt stop in the middle of the wilderness. But Nolan had no ability to turn around, did he? When he'd climbed into bed with Sofia and Isaac, he'd sent his heart barreling down the track, and there was no way to stop it.

How had it happened? Many times he'd heard about his parents falling in love at first sight, but that seemed farfetched to a young man.

It's lust. Nothing more.

He needed to be the one to speak to his parents about this event. If they learned of it through another family member, Nolan would find himself knee-deep in manure for the rest of his life. He wasn't about to be put on shit duty.

"Drew, will you listen to a story?"

The quiet rustle of horseflesh and leather was his only answer. After a long minute, Drew replied, "You know I will, cos."

"That man I assaulted—"

"Tried to choke."

A begrudging smile tilted the corner of Nolan's lips. "Yeah. He has a couple working for him—"

"The Jade Pair? Holy harness, Nolan. You're fooling around with *them*?"

Grinding his teeth, Nolan had to renew his personal vow never to strike another Hollis. He'd gotten into more than one tussle with his brothers and cousins, and his father had taken him to task about it a few years ago. Since then, Nolan had gotten a handle on his hot head. In fact, he was known as the quiet one.

In the past few days, he'd tossed away his promise to stay far from drink and women, as well as to keep his hands to himself. How quickly his dangerous, aggressive side had ripped through the fabric of his personal oath.

This is why Pa wished to ingrain these values in us.

But was it so wrong? His heart didn't think so.

Pressing his lips into a fine line, he tried to find words to answer his cousin. Maybe the flat-out truth was best.

"No one knows this," he began.

"They never do. Look at Graham—married in secret for weeks before he came forward with his bride." Drew's teeth flashed white in the moonlight with his grin.

Nolan snorted. "Well, that was a might different from this. I *am* fooling around with the Jade Pair—Sofia and Isaac. But it's not what you think."

"How can that be? You've been paying, right?"

"Just that once—"

"And you think you're special because you were let into their bed without shelling out the coin the other times?"

Nolan swallowed, his throat tight. Actually, there had only been those two times. Could Drew be horribly, painfully right?

Silent, Nolan rode on, his horse drifting farther away from Drew's. They crested a short ridge and hit a flat spot that would stretch for miles before they'd reach Hollis land.

Drew guided his horse alongside Nolan's. "I'm sorry. Your news surprised me, is all."

"With all honesty, it surprised me too."

"You really have feelings for them?"

His stomach flipped. "Lord help me, I do."

"What will come of it, cos?" Drew's question held no trace of sarcasm. The sincerity of his tone made Nolan's heart constrict with sadness.

"I don't know. I'm afraid my heart is in it for the long haul, but circumstances are beyond my control."

With that, he sank his spurs into Bullseye's flanks and sent him racing toward the shadow of the ranch he called home. The family that he loved filled this valley—homesteads speckled the land. But an emptiness lived inside him at the realization that he had more to live for—and lose—in a dingy saloon.

Loneliness is a bitter tonic.

* * * *

With his eyes, Isaac followed the sumptuous lines of Sofia's body as she draped herself over the piano. She leaned close to the pianist and whispered her choice of songs. The first tinkling notes of the song she preferred—a love ballad—resounded through the room. Men stopped playing cards, put down their cigars and whiskeys, and gave her their full attention.

Because Sofia was about to sing.

She threw back her head and loosed her soft, feminine voice on the patrons of the saloon. A collective sigh sounded from the horse wranglers, railroad workers, rough Texans—and Isaac. He was none of those things.

I'm good for nothing but pleasure. And pain.

Swallowing hard, he stared at Sofia. If she were in a big city, she might make it as an entertainer. Maybe he could work as a bartender or clean up the saloon. Together they could surely earn enough to make their way—without Hiram and without selling their bodies.

Remorse was a hot coal in his gut. After Nolan had burst into the room and seen what Isaac and Sofia were doing with Rip, an expression of sheer disgust had crawled over his handsome features.

Isaac shook his head but couldn't dispel that look from his mind.

They might never get close enough to him now to get their hands on those pearls, but that was probably for the best. What right did Isaac have to be free to lead a wholesome life? Besides, once he stole the pearls, he'd be a thief and even less deserving.

Through Sofia's song, her pain reverberated. She'd shed many tears after Nolan had stopped Rip from hurting her further. Isaac had tucked her into bed with a heavy heart, making sure she wasn't suffering from a headache or other effects of being roughed up.

"Dammit." He stood abruptly and stalked toward the bar to get a drink. What kind of lover was he that he didn't stop a man like Rip? Didn't stop all the men like him?

A weak one, that's what.

Sofia's voice pitched upward, gaining strength as she sang the mournful tune. Isaac knew well enough that she'd throw herself into a bawdy song after this to get the patrons into feisty moods so they'd buy more whiskey and spend more on gambling and saloon girls.

One of the other girls passed Isaac, and he glanced at her slender form. She was nothing like Sofia—could never be a Sofia to him or this town. The

Jade Pair was famous, but Isaac didn't want to be known anymore. He just wanted out of here on the first train and to hopefully have Nolan with them.

Automatically, he scanned the room, searching for the cowboy. Nolan hadn't returned in two nights, and a frantic light had appeared in Sofia's green eyes. Isaac would do anything to eliminate that strained expression from her striking face.

"There had better be a set of pearls beneath that gown Sofia wears so prettily, because Rip is going to alert the sheriff that Hollis brained him with a candlestick." Hiram's voice from behind made Isaac stiffen.

Without turning, he accepted a drink from the bartender and drew a burning swallow into his mouth. "How would we have an opportunity to get the pearls? We don't have nights off."

"The way I see it, you have days to venture out. What's a little lost sleep in the face of freedom?" Hiram ran a finger over Isaac's jacket sleeve, and Isaac's skin crawled beneath. Hiram had used him once as a "test," and thank God it had never happened again.

Drawing another sip of sherry into his mouth, he fought the urge to spit it into the boss's face. Sofia's final trilling note rang out, followed by a hearty round of applause and some whistles.

Just as Isaac expected, the pianist pounded out the first notes of a fast-paced, rousing song. The saloon girls milling through the crowd gathered up some men and drew them into the center of the floor to dance. Sofia slithered up the piano until she sat on the top with legs crossed, dainty heels just out of the way of the pianist's hands.

Even after years with her, it was impossible for Isaac to ignore the flash of her luscious, round thigh and the satin garter that rode high on it. His cock stirred within the confines of his best trousers.

Hiram continued to slide his hand up and down Isaac's arm. "That man of yours is hooked, Isaac. I suggest you strike while the steel is heated and go after those pearls. Hollis is possessive of the two of you. He doesn't want anyone else laying a hand on you, and you must use that to your advantage. Meet him outside of the saloon in the daylight. Get those pearls, and then you're on your way."

On our way where? Where could they possibly go that happiness could follow—especially when happiness was where Nolan was? Too many questions invaded Isaac's mind. If he and Sofia managed to get the pearls and

escape, would Nolan come with them? Would they be caught and Nolan despise them forever? Could they move on, knowing they hungered for the rough cowboy?

Maybe Hiram was right. They needed to meet with Nolan during the day. There was plenty to learn about the man who interested them besides how to get to the pearls his family possessed.

Sofia stood on top of the piano, sweeping her arms out in a fine display of her womanly wares. Isaac stared at her, a half smile on his face. Drifting away from Hiram, he wove through the crowd and gaming tables. One man patted his ass on the way by, but Isaac ignored him.

By the time he reached Sofia, he was able to see the tears standing in her eyes. She held his gaze. Rushing forward, Isaac reached up, and she fell into his arms.

She buried her face against his neck for a second, releasing a quiet sob. Then she straightened with her mask back in place.

“You must be thirsty after that,” he murmured, pulling her gently to a table, where he seated her.

Across the room, Hiram was in negotiation with a man. By the way the slim man was looking their way, Isaac guessed he wanted some time with them. His soul deadened a little more.

He caressed Sofia’s hand and went to fetch her a drink. When he returned, she was a little more composed. Her skin glowed beneath the light, the tops of her breasts a most enticing treat. A glossy tendril of hair snaked over her fine collarbone, and she wore the soft smile for Isaac that he’d fallen in love with.

Pulling out a chair and straddling it, Isaac handed her the sherry. She took dainty sips. Her throat still sported the bruises of Rip’s lust, but the marks were fading.

What would Nolan do if he saw those again? Would he grow as incensed as he had when bursting through the window?

A pang went through Isaac. Nolan gave them his unconditional devotion and protection, but what did Isaac give in return?

He was about to betray Nolan and steal from his family.

Sofia gave a delicate sigh that revealed more than any tantrum could.

Reaching across the polished tabletop, Isaac rubbed her fingers. “I

know your frustrations, love.”

“He hasn’t come for two days. Do you think...he was abhorred by what he saw us doing? By the realization that we are really a pair of lowly people?”

Her words cut him, but she was right—so right. “I’m not sure what’s going on in his mind. That’s something I’d like to ask him. We need more time—”

She broke in, her words rushing over his. “I want more, Isaac. I’m so tired of being someone’s whore.”

For a long minute, he stared at her. Heart throbbing, he battled the urge to grab her and shake her and make her see that she wasn’t a whore to everyone. Not to him. Ever. Didn’t he count in her life? Or did she only see Nolan now?

Would Isaac reel her closer if he were able to free her?

With jerky movements, Isaac shoved away from the table and stood. Smoke clogged the air, and he couldn’t even draw a deep breath.

Sofia’s eyes burned with regret. Tears appeared in the corners and began cutting paths down her soft cheek. Isaac tore his gaze from hers, unable to look. Wrapping her fingers around his arm, she begged, “Isaac, I didn’t mean—”

At that moment, Isaac saw him. Nolan.

Sofia gained her feet, sending the table wobbling on uneven legs. Isaac steadied her with a hand on her waist but didn’t remove his gaze from the tall bulk of muscle pushing through the throng.

Men parted for him, and those who didn’t were pushed aside as Nolan strode right up to Hiram. His deep voice carried easily. “How much to take them out of here for the night and day?”

Isaac glanced down and met Sofia’s gaze. In that moment, Isaac believed everything might work out between them. Reeling her in, he pressed a kiss to the crown of curls on her head. Sweet flowers filled his nose. If he was lucky and Hiram agreed, Isaac would revel in the mingling of her scent with Nolan’s dark musk.

Isaac was unable to make out what they said, but when Nolan slashed a hand through the air, Hiram stumbled back a step.

Pride infused Isaac. Nolan was fighting for them. Maybe they had some

worth after all.

Over Hiram's head, Nolan looked straight at Isaac. A spear of lust tore through his body and settled low. A sharp ache began in his groin that could only be sated by that man.

"What's happening? I can't see." Sofia stood on the toes of her boots.

"Not sure, darlin'." But a second later, Isaac was certain money was exchanged, because Hiram stepped aside and Nolan crossed the saloon to them.

"You need a wrapper, Sofia?" He stood inches away, his presence overwhelming. Isaac clenched his hands into fists to keep from grabbing the cowboy's shirtfront and hauling him in. Wanting to feel Nolan's hard lips moving with his, velvety hot tongue probing the depths of Isaac's mouth.

"N-no," she said.

"Good. We're leaving. Now." Without another word, Nolan clutched Sofia's hand and towed her through the crowd of men waiting for a chance to taste her charms, past Hiram and his goddamned wide grin, and right out of the saloon.

The night air struck Isaac's hot face, and he gulped. When was the last time he'd strolled at night? Hell, from dusk to dawn, he was trapped in the confines of those four walls, being made to pleasure men because Hiram owned him.

Nolan barely took two steps, and he was pressing Isaac and Sofia against the outside of the saloon. Wrapping them both in his hold, he crushed them briefly.

"Thank God you're all right. I've been out of my head with worry," he said gruffly.

"You? We haven't seen or heard from you in two days. After that fight with Hiram, anything might have happened to you," Sofia said.

Nolan gave a huff of laughter and stepped back enough for them to see his face in the thin beam of moonlight. "You think that slimy snake could harm me? He can do as he wishes—call down the authorities or hell, get a posse after me. No matter. He can't take down a Hollis."

Leaning close once more, he pressed his mouth hard over Sofia's, then Isaac's. "I hope you can ride, because I have two horses waiting at the end of the street."

Chapter Four

Nolan shifted against the excruciating ache in his balls. Sofia's soft body was snuggled against him, her round ass pressing against his cock with every roll of the horse. Ahead, Isaac rode with the ease of a Hollis man—body taking the jars and bumps as if he rode every day.

Hell, maybe he did. Nolan knew little about their lives outside of the room upstairs in the saloon.

One thing Nolan did know was that if he didn't get off this horse and find some ease soon, he was going to bellow his frustration to the sky.

"You doing all right, sweetheart?" he whispered into Sofia's ear.

She shivered and leaned back farther against his chest. His heart squeezed with affection. *Or more.*

"Yes, thank you, I'm fine."

She did have pretty manners and enough grace to woo anyone into thinking she was straight out of a parlor. On the heels of this thought came an outraged one. *Of course she's a proper lady!* He'd challenge anyone who didn't agree to pistols at dawn.

He locked his arm around her and hitched her ass up onto his lap to increase the delicious pressure of her ass against his groin. They shared a quiet moan. "Moon's mighty pretty tonight. Your hair looks like silver floss."

Presenting him with her profile, she flashed a look at him. The corner of her mouth tilted upward. "I didn't know you were so poetic."

He snorted. "Nah, just stating a fact."

Another moment passed with only the noise of the horses and the wind. They were a short distance out of town, but he wanted to get them to a safe and secluded area before they stopped. Where they went, he didn't want any interruptions, and that included those from his nosy family.

Having no money to pay for another night with the Jade Pair, Nolan had taken a risk and asked his pa for an advance on their next horse sale. His father had given him the sharp stare-down Nolan recalled getting as a youngster, but it was ten times worse as an adult.

Struggling to keep from squirming like a tot or taking back the request, he'd plowed on. "I need it, or I wouldn't ask."

"Yes, I know, Nolan. You've never been a frivolous man. Question is, though, what did you do with your earnings from earlier this week?"

Carefully avoiding his pa's suspicious gaze, Nolan continued to dig his pitchfork into the hay and lift it into the barn stall. "I made an investment."

"Overextended yourself."

"You could say." *In more ways than one, and with two lovers, no less.*

"All right, but remember I don't sit right with certain behaviors, son."

It had been on the tip of Nolan's tongue to ask if falling for the couple from the saloon counted as "certain behaviors." For a breathless moment, Nolan also wondered if Drew had betrayed his confidence.

Nolan skimmed his lips over Sofia's silky hair. Pushing down his guilt about lying to his pa, he focused on what he had right before him. He whistled, and Isaac's horse slowed to a stop. Isaac turned in the saddle as they pulled abreast.

"We're going to stop here for the night, if that's all right. There's a place between the trees just there, where a bed of moss grows."

Nolan's words were charged with tension and want. They hung in the air between the three. He met Isaac's gaze with no barriers between them. Letting the man see his emotion was best.

Isaac gave a nod, his hard lips quirking upward with promise. "Where to?"

"There." Nolan pointed, and they took off toward the small rise.

At the top, Nolan dismounted and reached up for Sofia. She fell against him willingly, slipping her arms around his neck. He held her for a long minute, listening to her raspy breathing and the sough of the wind through the branches.

Isaac's horse whickered, and Nolan looked up to see the man sliding off too. He took a moment to hobble the mare, then started toward Isaac and Sofia.

Isaac's steps hastened as he drew near, and pretty soon he was throwing himself at them. With a laugh, Nolan caught him, bracing his legs to keep from toppling backward.

Isaac tilted his face up, and Nolan took his mouth. They scraped their

lips and teeth over each other frantically. When Sofia ran her tongue over each of their lips, a harsh groan broke from Nolan.

He wanted nothing more than to taste their flesh, lick their juices, and then seat himself deeply in her body and then Isaac's.

But he tore away from the kiss, putting distance between them. He hadn't taken them out of the saloon only to share his body with them. He wanted to talk to them, to hear their dreams and spin new ones with them.

"I'm going to make a fire."

Isaac led Sofia to the small clearing, where Nolan began to heap brush and fallen branches. When he removed his tinderbox from his pocket, he nudged the swollen head of his erection. What did this night have in store for them?

He struck a spark, and, sheltering the fragile flame with a cupped hand, he held the flickering heat to the kindling. Sofia had drifted forward and sank to her knees.

"Wait! I have a blanket in the saddlebag. No need to soil your gown." Nolan jumped to his feet and strode toward the horses. When he returned, she was grinning, her teeth gleaming in the dim glow of the fire.

"You don't need to treat me as if I'm made of spun glass. I was raised a farm girl."

Isaac's gaze snapped to her, and Nolan stared at her hard. He whipped out the woolen blanket and let it float to the ground, perfectly spread out. Sofia crawled onto it and drew her knees up to her chest, looking like that young girl she mentioned.

"Are you surprised, Nolan?"

"A little." He sat beside her, and Isaac sprawled out with his head near her thigh, gazing up at her as if she was the brightest star in the sky. Which she was.

Deep affection for these two warmed Nolan's insides. Watching them interact in a setting completely devoid of the trappings of man was exactly what he'd paid good money for. Without the sins around them—gambling, greed, alcohol, and lust—the Jade Pair was just human.

Sofia stroked the auburn hair off Isaac's forehead. The tender action strummed a chord deep within Nolan's soul. Could she ever feel for him the way she felt for Isaac?

She tipped her head back and stared at the velvety sky. “I was the last living child, and when my parents died, I was orphaned. A neighbor took me to town, where I was put into a home for girls. But I ran away pretty quickly. The headmistress hated me, beating me until I was laid up in bed for weeks.”

Isaac made a soft noise, which Nolan echoed in a more forceful way.

Sofia reached up and pulled a few pins from her hair. The long coil tumbled across her shoulders and hung to her waist. Nolan rubbed his thumb over his knuckles, itching to thread his fingers into the weighty mass and lift it off her neck so he could lower his lips to that sweet column.

“What did you do after the beating, sweetheart?” Nolan asked.

“I ran. That’s how I ended up... Well, you know.” A blush tinged her voice, even if he couldn’t see it.

Scooting closer, he captured her in his arms. She squeezed him with more strength than he expected, and his heart sang with the joy of being out here with them.

Isaac ran a hand down Nolan’s spine. “Why did you bring us out here?”

He blinked at the handsome man’s question, his mind going five different directions. Was Isaac in the same emotional place as Nolan? It was time to bare himself and find out. If he was an idiot and the Jade Pair was simply pulling the hay over his eyes, making him believe they cared when they were only playacting, he needed to know.

Pressing Sofia back so he could see both their faces, Nolan drew a deep breath and tried to organize his words. With all those rowdy cousins and brothers, he rarely got a word in sideways. As a result, he had difficulty expressing what he wanted to say now. In his mind, he only saw the outcome, and that was the three of them living in harmonious bliss. But that might be a delusion, and so the words stuck in his throat.

He opened his mouth and then closed it. His gaze skimmed Sofia’s lush curves and Isaac’s hard body. Desire bloomed like a verdant pasture.

Finally the words came to him. He was a man of action, and showing them seemed to be the best course. “Undress me.”

Shock flitted across Sofia’s features, mirrored in Isaac’s. With a soft coo, Sofia reached for Nolan’s jacket. She peeled the cloth off his shoulders as Isaac worked the buttons on his trousers.

Hunger burned in Nolan’s gut as their four hands caressed his body, running over fabric and then flesh. When Sofia lowered her scorching little

mouth to his nipple, he sucked in a harsh breath.

She flicked it with her tongue in short strokes, gazing up at him. Isaac removed Nolan's boots and pushed his pants down, leaving him entirely bare. The warm breeze teased the hairs cushioning his cock, which stood at attention, the head swollen and weeping.

"You want that between your lips, Isaac? Filling your mouth?" He caressed Isaac's thick hair, pressing the longer strands back so he could see his lover's mouth. The lips were perfectly bowed and hard enough to take a pounding from Nolan.

"Fuck, do I." Isaac swiftly undressed and stretched out on his side on the blanket with his head positioned at Nolan's groin.

Heat shot through him as his lover's breath kissed his skin. Sofia sank her fingers into the muscle of Nolan's ass and drew him forward until the head of his arousal brushed Isaac's lips.

"Kiss me." Nolan tore her mouth from his nipple and claimed it. He bit her lower lip, tugging until she hissed and arched her back in pleasure.

Isaac cupped his balls, and though Nolan thought he'd lose his mind at the feel, he put a stop to it. "Not yet. I brought you here, and we do this my way."

In their room above the saloon, Sofia and Isaac had taken over, loving him the way they wanted. But this was his territory. Hell, they were even on Hollis land. He was damn well going to get what he wanted.

Nolan pressed Isaac onto his back. Then he straddled his chest, bringing his erection in line with his mouth. "Now take me nice and slow."

Isaac parted his lips. Nolan groaned as his cock disappeared into that warm, wet opening. Squeezing his eyes shut at the burning feel of his lover's warm, wet lips hugging him, he fought for control.

For a long minute, he held his breath. When he finally released it, he gave his next order. "Sofia, stand for me, darlin'. I'm going to bury my face in your pussy."

"Nolan..." She did his bidding, stripped, and stood before him, quaking slightly. The scents of her desire filled his head. Lashing an arm around her hips, he brought her to his mouth. He only had to duck slightly to reach her moist folds.

Before he drank from her, he nudged his cock deeper into Isaac's mouth. "Harder, and stroke my balls."

Isaac's long fingers worked over Nolan's body as he hollowed his cheeks and took him the way Nolan wanted above all else.

A full-body tremor racked him. God, when he'd seen Isaac with that other man's cock in his mouth, Nolan had almost gone mad with fury. Possessiveness was a hardy seed in his soul, taking root and spreading through his heart.

Mine. Both mine. All mine.

Bucking his hips, he sank his cock to the back of Isaac's throat. At that moment, he plunged his tongue into Sofia's moist pussy. Cream oozed over his lips and tongue, coating the hair on his jaw.

She moaned, writhed against him. Using his fingers, he parted her lips to locate her hardened pearl. With tender swirls of his tongue, he lapped her until the first spasms of her body began.

Driving two fingers into her channel, he continued his torment, more undone by Isaac's mouth by the minute. Waves of delight slammed him. But first, he wanted to hear Sofia's screams, to feel her juices flooding his hand and tongue.

Curling his fingers, he pressed against the soft inner wall of her pussy, holding, applying more pressure as he sucked her hooded clit into his mouth.

With a raucous cry, she came. She twisted her fingers in his hair, yanking his head closer as her body swelled and pulsed against him. The shocks traveled up his arm and sparked in his heart.

Before Isaac could draw another torturous suck on his cock, Nolan pulled back. In the dim light, Isaac looked crestfallen.

Nolan gathered Sofia in his arms and spread her out on the blanket. "I want you to make love to her, Isaac. Stretch her pussy and fill her with your juices."

"Oh my..." Sofia trembled, still twitching from her release.

Nolan took a moment to kiss each lover, sucking on Sofia's tongue and sharing her flavors with Isaac. The moss was a perfect cushion beneath the blanket, and the breeze the perfect temperature. Winking at them from above, the stars cast a warm glow over the lines of their bodies.

If Nolan lived out the rest of his days alone, he'd have this memory to keep him going. The pleasure-pain of want coiled inside him as Isaac thrust his cock balls-deep in Sofia's body.

“Ahhh, she’s so...damn...tight.” He locked his jaw around every word.

With his heart in his throat, Nolan studied their movements—the way Sofia caressed Isaac’s hair, his kisses spattered over her bronzed throat. They locked gazes and made love with their eyes and expressions. While Nolan wasn’t part of it, he felt as if they were doing this for him.

“Come on, baby. His cock feels so good, so hard. Let him bring you to the pinnacle.” Nolan’s voice was rough. His cock lengthened another fraction, and he stroked it, rolling the skin over the head and smearing the leaking drops. Another minute of watching his lovers and he’d burst.

He strained, tightened his fingers around his shaft. Sofia wrapped her legs around Isaac’s hips, tilting her body to receive him more fully.

Frantically, she met Nolan’s gaze. “I can’t stop myself.”

“Don’t, darlin’. Give him everything...and you’ll give it to me too.” He stroked his length faster, unable to keep his hips from rocking into the movement.

As Sofia’s face changed from desperate to overcome with sensation, Nolan let go. Hot cum spurted onto the lovers’ writhing bodies. The droplets glistened on Isaac’s hard ass and dripped down Sofia’s thigh.

Isaac stiffened, and, with a roar, he poured his cum into her body.

Heart thrumming, blood pumping, Nolan continued to stroke his shaft. When the final moisture leaked from the tip, he smoothed it over the hard plane of Isaac’s hip.

Supporting himself on one arm, Isaac hooked Nolan around the torso and drew him close. Clinging to the pair, Nolan let his mind drift on the sexual haze.

Sofia’s light touch on his shoulders calmed him. As their breathing returned to normal, Sofia broke the silence.

“I didn’t know it could be that way.”

“What way, sweetheart?” Nolan asked, nuzzling her throat.

“Making love should have felt as if it was just me and Isaac, but it didn’t. Far from it. You gave us something just now, Nolan.”

“What’s that, love?”

“The freedom to truly give and live for each other—not for what we are in the saloon.”

Nolan’s heart tripped with excitement. “That’s exactly why I brought

you here. To show you how life can be.”

It was a lie. He’d brought them here hoping his desire would sizzle out once he saw them in a different light. But the moon cast them in a warmer glow, and he was certain the daylight hours would be even worse for him.

If he could, in fact, get the Jade Pair away from their controlling boss, his family would never allow this union.

I’ve got to try, though. I can’t continue to fight it.

* * * *

Dawn was a warm orange band of light banked on the horizon, stretching its fingers across the rich earth. Sofia gave a soft sigh at the beautiful sight. This day didn’t bring the scent of a strange male that needed to be washed away or the pain of a partner who was too rough.

Instead, her heart was buoyant with joy and her body singing from the ecstasy her two men had brought her.

A footstep roused her from where she lay staring at the beauty of a land awakening—and from the warmth she experienced as her body awakened to happiness.

Nolan’s low voice sounded from behind her, inches from her ear. “Sorry to wake you, Sofia. I’m just going to start a fire so we can have food.”

It didn’t surprise her that he’d have food with him. What good cowboy didn’t? This was exactly the kind of thing that also gave her pause about her and Isaac making their solitary way. Before Hiram started taking care of her, she had worked in a bordello where the older girls prepared food and cleaned up. Sofia had little inkling of how to go about these tasks.

Isaac was the same.

But if they managed to get the pearl necklace and not get caught, they might not need to slip away and fend for themselves. They could stick around, free to be with Nolan—if the man wanted them—and to learn the proper ways of the world.

As Nolan moved about the small camp, shaving curls off a branch to start a fire, unpacking a bundle from his saddlebag, Sofia’s thoughts took a dark turn.

On this path, there were only shadows and pain. No good could come of tricking Nolan so they could secure the pearls Hiram coveted.

Sofia had plenty of baubles that men had given her over the years, and

she couldn't imagine how special this particular necklace must be for Hiram to give up the Jade Pair in exchange for it.

Hiram was making money hand over fist on Nolan. What had the man paid last night to take them out of the saloon?

Isaac shifted as the first whiffs of campfire smoke wafted on the breeze. The sweet smell of burning wood made Sofia's stomach cramp, and Isaac's even growled. He opened his eyes and met hers, the bright depths expressing his utter contentment.

"Nice to wake up out of doors," he murmured.

Sofia shot a glance toward Nolan crouched a few feet away, building a small rock perimeter around the flames. The corner of his mouth quirked, but he didn't look up.

Dropping her mouth to Isaac's temple, she drew in a deep breath of his personal musk. Love welled inside her. Maybe they could enjoy this day away and not dwell on their mission involving the pearls or what the outcome might be.

Nolan hadn't donned his hat, and without it, he looked more exposed—vulnerable. It seemed the man had no demons but wore his existence with ease. No layers to wear, nothing to hide.

She disentangled herself from Isaac's hold and gathered her abandoned chemise from the ground. As she slipped it on, she felt two sets of eyes on her nude form. Her nipples protruded in invitation, and a dark heat wove through her core.

Nolan returned to the horse for more supplies, and Isaac grasped her hand to keep her from following.

She stared down at him. "What is it?"

"We need to get those pearls," he whispered.

Pressing her lips into a line, she shook her head. "Later."

"There may not be a later, Sofia. Ask him to take us home for a visit."

"I can't just invite us!"

"Why not? He can't deny you anything. And it's the only way." Isaac's jade gaze was steady with purpose, though she saw the worry in the depths.

Nolan returned to the fire, armed with a package that appeared to be smoked-and-salted bacon. She nearly leaped through the coals to get to that food, she was so hungry.

A good distraction from the task Isaac requested she take on.

“Hope this is all right for breakfast. What do you normally have?” Nolan asked.

She gave a small laugh. “We don’t go to bed until breakfast, so our first meal of the day is an early supper.”

Nolan clenched his jaw hard. A muscle jumped in the corner, and he avoided her gaze as he opened the package and fitted a few strips of meat between a Y-branch. He passed it to her to hold over the flames, which she did gladly to avoid the topic.

During a time in which she heard only the sizzle of bacon and the rustle of Isaac’s clothing as he dressed, she said, “Why do you continue with us when you know it’s hopeless, Nolan?”

He jerked his head up. His face was pale—a result of spending too many sleepless nights with them when he was also working days on his family’s ranch. But the twinkle in his eyes was the most striking thing she’d ever seen—along with the first time she’d ever caught sight of Isaac.

“Is it hopeless?” Nolan asked.

Isaac joined them, his quiet movements calming her racing heart a little. Squatting before the fire, he picked up another Y-branch Nolan had cut and added a few strips of meat to it.

“Nothing’s hopeless,” Isaac said.

She gazed at her lover of two years. What was going on in that head of his? From his expression, she could gain no information.

Nolan sat back on his heels, though his body was tense. “What is it that the Jade Pair wants in life?”

Instant emotion rushed to the fore. Sofia shoved it down. There was little room in her life for expressing her true feelings.

But isn’t that what he’s asking me to do? Tell him as I’ve told Isaac?

Isaac’s low words drifted to her. “I’d like the dream we all have as kids—good home, wholesome life, family, work I enjoy.”

“Why don’t you go after that, Isaac?” Nolan turned over his stick of bacon to evenly warm the other side.

“I go where Sofia goes.”

“And I’m trapped,” she added.

Nolan’s eyes took on a dead flatness. “Trapped by Hiram.”

“Yes,” Sofia whispered.

“I’ll pay him off.”

“You can’t afford—”

“He won’t accept money, Nolan,” Isaac said.

She narrowed her gaze at Isaac. If she could shut his mouth with her look, she would. Did the man think he could come right out and ask Nolan for the pearls as payment? She feared so.

“What does he want? Will he never let you go?”

She cut across Isaac. “It’s unlikely. But tell us what you wish for? To us, it seems your life is perfect.”

Isaac gave her a glance that said he didn’t like her interrupting him, but he let the argument fade. Thank God he was so easygoing.

Nolan removed his bacon from the fire and sat back to let it cool. She did the same, watching him closely, her appetite dampened after the discussion. The lines of his body were relaxed, his knees drawn up. “I want someone to settle down with.”

“A nice girl from the parish,” Isaac said a little acidly.

“No. You and Sofia. I knew from the start. There’s something about you that calls to me on a primal level. That first night, I couldn’t take my eyes off you. Didn’t want to. I still don’t. I could gaze at the pair of you all day and night. That’s what I want to do, in fact.”

For a moment, Sofia couldn’t respond. Nolan’s gaze burned with sincerity. He actually believed he could pull her and Isaac from Hiram’s clutches and live this dream.

If only...

Before her bacon had cooled enough, Sofia bit into it. Her stomach cramped at the delicious taste. Hiram might have some of the finest food delivered to them in their room daily, but it tasted nothing like this. Real food, cooked with love.

He was smiling at her, his teeth as square and white and perfect as the rest of him. “There’s plenty where that came from. You don’t have to scorch your mouth.”

Around the bite, she said, “It’s nice to choose what I’d like to eat.”

“What?” Confusion flitted across his rugged features. He looked to Isaac, who explained.

“Hiram has our food sent to us. We get no word in it.”

Releasing a long breath, Nolan leaned back on his palms, stick of bacon abandoned on the ground. “Never to have a choice in what you eat? Entertaining men because Hiram tells you to? No freedom to leave the saloon at will? It’s no life, and I intend to free you from it.”

His use of the word “free” brought Isaac’s gaze to hers. Yes, Nolan could free them, but not in the way he thought.

“What would you eat if you could choose, Sofia?” Nolan asked.

She swallowed the last bite of her bacon and accepted Nolan’s when he handed it to her. “Well, I don’t rightly know. When I was young, my mother made biscuits that were so flaky and light, they were like eating clouds. We’d drizzle them with honey... What a treat.”

Pinching a slice of bacon between two fingers, she stuffed it into her mouth.

“My ma makes a mighty good biscuit,” Nolan said.

Isaac flashed Sofia a look that made her stomach drop to the tips of her toes. Her blood ran cold.

Please don’t ask for him to take us home. If they got anywhere near that pearl necklace, they’d do it—steal the strand for Hiram—and she didn’t want to.

“What would you eat, Isaac?” she asked to stop him from looking at her that way.

He gnawed at his lower lip a moment. The auburn hair on his jaw glinted brilliant red in the morning sun. “I imagine I’d like to have some fresh catfish rolled in breading and fried along with those biscuits.”

A smile spread over Nolan’s face, freezing her with fear. Without a doubt, she knew he was going to try to give these things to them. And to do that, he’d take them home with him.

* * * *

Nolan vanished into the tree line to gather more wood for the fire, and Isaac pounced on Sofia immediately.

“Now’s the time, darlin’. You know I’m right.” He grasped her upper arms and forced her to meet his gaze.

She shook her head, and her long hair slipped over his fingers like a silken sheet. “No. I won’t have a part in it, Isaac. And neither will you.”

He threw a glance at the place where Nolan had disappeared. Seeing that they were still safe to speak freely, he continued. “We get the pearls and end this game—end the misery of our lives. We can have this all the time, Sofia.” He swept the crisp air with his hand. “Open land without a single poker table or shot of whiskey in sight. I know you want that above all.”

“I can’t. We can’t. I’d rather run without a single penny in my pocket than betray Nolan’s trust. What if we were caught? We’d have less than we do now!” Her eyes glittered with anger and something else that Isaac hoped was agreement. If he could just tamp down that fury and gain her compliance.

She wrapped her arms around him. “Please, Isaac! Let’s just escape—jump on a train and make off for California. We’ve got a little savings, and we can work our trade until we can find other work if need be.”

“So we sell ourselves even when we’re free? What’s the point in that? I say this is a small matter. We do Hiram’s bidding, give him what he wants, and earn our freedom fair and square.” The prospect excited him, but Sofia’s stalling spoke of her lack of confidence in him—her reluctance to trust him. Would she feel differently if his and Nolan’s positions were reversed?

“Fair and square is weaseling our way into the Hollis home—into Nolan’s heart—so we can steal from his family? I’m not following you. I refuse to be part of this.”

He released her, fingertips tingling with desperation. Taking two steps away, he fought to control his emotions. The grass was soft and ticklish on his bare feet. The wind brushed his hair off his face—a lover’s caress he knew little of these past years spent under Hiram’s rule.

Desire burned in his gut, and it had nothing to do with appetites of the body. He was going to get that necklace with or without Sofia. She deserved to eat bacon and biscuits and walk in the sunlight, and he was damn well going to get those things for her.

“Isaac—”

“No, it’s a small price to pay!” He jammed his fingers through his hair. Her chemise fluttered in the breeze. “I can’t let you do it. I won’t help you.”

“What choice do we have?”

At that moment, Nolan appeared. Isaac gave her a look to silence her, but it was too late. Their cowboy had caught them arguing.

Looking between them, he dropped the armful of wood on the ground.

“What’s the trouble?”

“No trouble,” she said immediately.

“A small quarrel is all,” Isaac said at the same time.

A half smile appeared on Nolan’s face. Amusement creased his eyes at the corners. “Perhaps I can distract you with a thought I had while gathering wood.”

Isaac stared at his lover. Every muscle and line of Nolan’s body called to Isaac on a primal level—opened his heart and demanded love. But to freely give himself, Isaac could not belong to Hiram. He must get that necklace from the Hollis family.

“What’s that?” he asked.

Nolan hitched a thumb into his pants pocket, relaxed and easy where Isaac felt ready to snap. “I’d like to take you home with me.”

Sofia gasped but not in delight. Isaac prayed she’d keep her beautiful lips sealed and not blow this opportunity.

“To meet my family and share a meal with us. Hollises are known for our hospitality, and a party always seems to take place when company comes to visit.”

Sofia started. “We’re expected back—”

Nolan drifted toward her, catching her up in his arms. “I know that you must return today, but I promise to come for you again tonight. Tomorrow you’ll be at the Hollis ranch, reveling in fluffy biscuits and fried catfish, if I have anything to say about it.”

He sent Isaac a long look that spoke to his soul. Swallowing hard, he tried to imagine himself living with Nolan always—letting the man care for them the way he obviously wanted to—the way Isaac and Sofia needed.

“We’d be glad to accept, Nolan.” Isaac encircled him and Sofia in his arms, ignoring Sofia’s tremors and latching on to the prospect that this time tomorrow, they’d have that strand of pearls in hand.

But when they returned to the saloon empty-handed a few hours later, Hiram wasn’t so optimistic.

“Where are them pearls?” he demanded.

Isaac shoved Sofia behind his back and faced the man. “We don’t have them yet. Hollis—”

Hiram’s fist smashed into Isaac’s teeth before he could finish the

sentence. Hot blood welled in his mouth. Falling back, he raised his hands to ward off more of Hiram's blows. He swallowed so Sofia didn't see the blood and took a hit to the gut that doubled him over. Before he could draw air, Hiram struck him across the face. His head rocked. Sofia screamed, but it would do little good and might draw Hiram's wrath toward her.

"Stop, Sofia!" Isaac managed to grunt as Hiram kned him in the thigh. The muscle cramped, and he dropped just as Hiram raised his foot again. Isaac felt the jarring blow in his head but could think no more.

Chapter Five

As Nolan reined up in front of his Uncle Frederick and Aunt Margaret's home, he released a low whistle to alert them that they had a visitor. No riders would ever sneak up on a Hollis without major consequences. Nolan had no wish to meet with the barrel of his uncle's rifle.

The front door opened, and a big form was silhouetted by the golden glow of the interior.

"State your name and purpose," Drew said in a high falsetto voice they'd used as kids.

Laughter rumbled in Nolan's chest, and he slipped off Bullseye. "Drew, what the hell have you been drinkin'?"

"What the hell are you doing out so late? Or do I need to ask?" He jumped down the porch steps and landed with a thud beside Nolan.

Rubbing his knuckles beneath his nose, Nolan tried to recall the words he'd practiced on the ride from his house. All at once, his mind was blank, the words no more.

"I'd appreciate your confidence, cousin."

Drew nodded. "'Course. We're blood."

Nolan glanced at the house. Inside were some of the people he loved most in this world, and he was about to go against their morals as well as ask their son to help him do it.

Scuffing a boot on the dry dust of the yard, he thought of all the reasons why he shouldn't be going off into the night to pay for two whores. And he thought of one very good reason why he must.

Sofia and Isaac simply couldn't live this way anymore. On the surface, they appeared to be two very well-kept people. But under their layers of fine clothes and gold coins, they were in pain. Wounded souls that needed nurturing.

"I've come to ask to borrow some money, Drew." His words fell into the space between him and his cousin, seeming to swell like a cloud of locusts on the crops.

Finally, Drew sighed. “I don’t need to ask what it’s for. You sure you want to do this, Nolan? When will it end? You can’t continue to spend all your hard-earned cash—to borrow against your future earnings—in order to spend another night with them.”

“I know. I won’t need to. I intend to get them out of there.”

“How do you plan to do that?”

“I don’t have it all figured out yet, but you’ll be the first to know when I do. You’re the only one who knows, and I thank you heartily for not leaking my secret.”

“All right. I trust you know what you’re doing. You *are* fourteen days older than me. I look up to ya.” He reached into his pocket and peeled some bills off a small wad.

When Nolan accepted them, he wrapped his fingers around his cousin’s and squeezed. In the moonlight, he tried to make out Drew’s eyes and impress thanks upon him.

“Go on. Get out of here. Moon’s high, and dawn won’t be far away. Go get your money’s worth.”

With that, Drew turned and mounted the stairs. Heart surging with love for his family, Nolan leaped onto Bullseye’s back and spurred him into action.

As he tore across the land separating him from his lovers, Nolan let his mind wander to a time when they might all be together. Tonight he’d spend loving them. Tomorrow he’d bring them to the ranch for a home-cooked meal and a taste of what life should be like.

Then, with any hope, he’d get his family to rally and help him find a way to free them.

The music of crickets amplified as he raced through the tall grasses toward town. The closer he got, the more he could almost feel Isaac’s hard mouth, Sofia’s warm touch. By the time he reached the main street, he was aching.

Through the double doors leading into the saloon, the faint strains of piano music drifted on the night. It took everything in Nolan to ride on past the saloon to where he hitched his horse at the end of the street.

Giving Bullseye a cursory pat and a feedbag full of grain, Nolan practically ran up the boardwalk to the saloon. Had that light from inside ever tantalized anyone as much as it did him? Surely, another man in the world

had never felt such belonging as he did at that minute.

Walking in, he caught immediate sight of Isaac. His auburn hair beckoned to Nolan, as did the lines of his strong back. Nolan let his gaze wander over Isaac's spine, down to the man's hard buttocks in the fitted dove-gray trousers. Scanning the room, he located the glossy cluster of dark curls that belonged to Sofia.

A lump in his throat and excitement pulsing in his veins, he rushed forward. On the far side of the room, Hiram was speaking with a gentleman. When he spotted Nolan, he made a hand signal that alerted Isaac.

Twisting around, Isaac sought Nolan.

Nolan stopped dead, suddenly cold with fury.

His lover's handsome face had been badly beaten. His eye was a dark smear of bruising, his lips ragged. He wore a mark on his jaw that looked suspiciously like a boot heel.

Snapping his hands into fists, Nolan stormed across the room. He passed by Isaac, who clutched at his clothing.

"Nolan, stop. It's all right."

It was all right? To whom? Certainly not to Nolan.

His heart throbbed in his temples, and a red stain clouded his vision as he met Hiram Marshall's gaze. In one swift motion, he rammed his forearm against the boss's throat and pinned him to the wall like a bug.

Eyes bulging, Hiram squirmed just like one.

Sofia released a startled cry and shoved through the crowd. Nolan felt her tug on his sleeve but did not remove his arm from his enemy's throat.

"You do that to Isaac? You beat him?"

"None of your...damn business." Hiram spat, but Nolan had cut off some of his wind, and he was unable to do more than launch his spittle down his own chin.

Nolan fought to keep from flinching when the saliva wet his shirtsleeve. "Sofia, reach inside my vest and fetch my pistol."

She issued a huff of breath. "Nolan—"

Isaac's voice rang out, low but true. "Come now, Hollis. A man like you must know what people such as I deserve."

Jerking his head to the side, Nolan pierced him with his gaze. "That what you think? That you deserved to be treated this way?"

“Please let him go, Nolan.” Sofia wrapped her dainty hands around his bicep and pulled but couldn’t dislodge him from his purpose. And if Hiram pissed himself in terror, Nolan wouldn’t be too put off.

“Not until he gives his oath that neither of you will ever come to harm again.” He stared into the man’s eyes. “Do you swear?”

“Can’t promise when they deserves to be put in their places.”

Nolan brought a knee up hard between Hiram’s legs, smashing his balls between bone and the wall. Hiram’s eyes rolled up in his head, and he slumped forward, gasping for air.

“Swear?” Nolan demanded again, leaning into the man.

Isaac ran a hand down Nolan’s spine, turning his attention. “Let him go. He can’t swear because he has no soul.” He leaned in close, whispering, “The sheriff is on his payroll. If you continue, we’ll be in a world of trouble.”

Sofia let out a sound so like a sob, Nolan’s heart squeezed. With one final grunt, he pressed hard on Hiram’s throat, then stepped back abruptly.

Dropping to the floor, Hiram doubled up, choking and wheezing.

“I am taking these good people for the night and all day tomorrow. While we’re gone, you think long and hard about doing the right thing. Clear?”

Hiram peered at him from the floor through one slitted eye. “That’ll cost you twenty-five dollars.”

Giving a snort, Nolan tossed a handful of money onto the man. The bills cascaded over his good suit and piled on the floor.

“Let’s go.” Nolan pivoted, clutching Isaac’s shoulder and Sofia’s waist. Leading the pair into the cooling night, he hoped he’d never again lay eyes on that maggot of a man. With any luck, he and his family would find a way to peel the slimy boss’s fingers off Isaac and Sofia, releasing them forever into Nolan’s care. And heart.

* * * *

Halfway to the Hollis ranch, Sofia asked the men to stop so she could change into something more suitable for meeting Nolan’s family. As she was, her gown was too fine, too gaudy, trimmed in too many ribbons, and the color too vibrant. Regular women in these parts didn’t wear gowns like hers.

Under cover of some tree branches, she stripped off her outer gown. Beneath, she wore a simple white muslin frock with blue ribbons woven

through the bodice. To a farm lady, it was a dress one might wear to Sunday service or a festivity of some kind. To Sofia, it was an underthing.

Hiram had had it shipped in all the way from France for her. Some of the men she did business with liked to strip away the layers and find one pretty garment after another.

This frock would do perfectly for a trip to the Hollis ranch, but she wished she had less expensive boots. The dark blue suede and rich embroidery on the sides screamed she was a saloon girl. Perhaps she could take them off. Or tug her gown down so the hem concealed her footwear.

Jittery at meeting those Nolan loved, she bundled her discarded gown into her arms and headed back toward the place where her men waited.

Her men.

Above all else, this was what she wanted. For a dizzying moment, she drowned in a vision of the three of them working alongside each other during the waking hours, stealing heated glances or teasing touches until they could sneak away to their big bed at night.

As she cleared the trees, she met Isaac's stare. The worried light in his eyes wasn't lost on her. She wanted to shake him until she rattled some sense into that brain of his. Didn't he realize that if they were caught stealing those pearls, everything they'd gained in the past few days since meeting Nolan—familial support, acceptance, belonging—would be lost?

In her heart, she'd be dead.

She adored Isaac and loved him as deeply as a woman could love a man, but they both knew Nolan completed them.

Nolan came forward to take the dress from her. Trailing his fingers over the backs of her hands, up her wrists, to her elbows, and brushing the outer curves of her breasts, he removed the cloth.

Her nipples peaked into two sharp points. Without her outer layer to conceal her want, it was evident to both men.

"Isaac, she's needy."

"I see that."

"You know what to do." Nolan tossed her dress over the saddle and cradled one heavy breast in his palm. Tilting it up, he mouthed her through the white fabric, tormenting her bud until small gasps escaped her.

Isaac took the other, and damn, his scorching tongue could make the

sun rise if he put it to such a use. Dark need took root in Sofia's belly, the pressure climbing higher and higher.

Nolan nuzzled her throat. "Darlin', I think you need my fingers, cock, or tongue buried in your pussy. You want all three?"

Her knees sagged, and their arms tightened around her. "Oh my God, yes."

"While Isaac has his way with this tight little ass?" Nolan skimmed his fingers over her ass cheeks, low in the crease.

Squirming, she clung to her men. Isaac locked her in his embrace and claimed her mouth as Nolan began to pluck at her nipples. He pulled on them, twisting delightfully. Back arching, she sought more of his rough touch. She'd follow him anywhere.

Isaac flicked his tongue against hers in the same way Nolan toyed with her nipples. The knot in her core tightened. She'd never gained release from such play, but her men strung her out, pulled her taut, until she quivered on the verge of orgasm.

"Please. My pussy."

Nolan issued a growl. "Dirty word coming out of that beautiful mouth, but how can I chide you for it when hearing it makes me want to come?" With a firm hand, he covered his bulging length and stroked it through his pants.

She watched his face shudder as he rubbed his arousal. Grabbing his free hand, she guided it to the V between her legs. "My pussy needs your fingers, Nolan. The tongue you spoke of. And the cock you promised."

"Fuck." He ground out the word before yanking up her skirt and sinking one long finger into her channel. Her body split around him, juicy and ready to receive more. Throbbing for it.

"Isaac, now," Nolan commanded.

Releasing her, Isaac circled behind, the quiet rustle of his clothing setting her aflame. Nolan held her skirts up for Isaac. When his warm hips cradled her ass, the thick girth of his erection probing her secret spot, she cried out.

Nolan dropped to his knees, finger still buried in her pussy. He added his tongue to her slick seam, and she stopped breathing.

Easing gently into her body, Isaac gave a low moan that ruffled her

hair. “God, she’s so tight.”

Nolan hummed his agreement, mouth vibrating her sensitive folds. He added a second finger to her dripping sheath, and she burst with a cry. Wave upon wave of ecstasy tossed her about, but her men held her perfectly.

Continuing his sweet licks, Nolan drove her on past the point of oversensitivity and to the brink of want again. Isaac’s shaft stretched her as he fully rooted himself in her body.

Aching around his erection, she ground her hips against his. Nolan dipped his mouth low, swirling his tongue over the place where his fingers entered her. Then lower. From Isaac’s groan, she assumed their lover was lapping at his heavy balls. What she wouldn’t give for a mirror.

“Damn, man, between her tight hold and your mouth on me, I can’t last,” Isaac panted.

Nolan slicked his fingers through her folds once more. Bucking, she took Isaac back into her body. The air cooled her hot skin, but her dress felt so tight and confining. Behind her, Isaac’s breath rasped in her ear. Between her legs, Nolan’s moans grew harsher.

Two fingers became three, and his tongue worked her clit perfectly while Isaac pounded her ass.

Sinking his fingers deep, Nolan located the spot that made her scream with delight. Again and again, he curled his finger, lightly stroking the bundle of nerves in her core. Tangling her fingers in his hair, she held him tight to her pussy, forcing him to lick her harder, faster.

“More, Isaac,” she pleaded.

As he slammed into her body, she shook with release. Cum flooded over Nolan’s mouth and fingers, and he gave a guttural groan. She felt Isaac’s shaft stiffen further and his muscles strain. Heated spurts pumped into her body.

Coming down from her high plateau, she eased Nolan’s face away. He dropped his mouth to Isaac once more. As Sofia gazed down at the top of his dark head, emotion filled her. In a short time, they’d be at the Hollis homestead and forced to steal the pearls. Would this be the last time they shared such bliss?

* * * *

For the last mile, Nolan’s brother Clay trailed them, along with two

cousins. All the Hollis boys looked unnervingly like the man Isaac had just made love to before riding into the valley. Each one was as rugged and broad as the next. But only Nolan had that spark in his eyes that Isaac adored.

Sofia rode before their cowboy, loose and happier than Isaac had ever seen her. Of course, she was satiated after three releases. But she exuded joy.

With any hope, Isaac could keep that expression on her beautiful face by securing those pearls and granting her freedom.

“Ma’s got the boards floured and the biscuits ready to cut,” Clay said, body rolling atop his horse as he rode alongside Nolan.

“Mmm, I could use a biscuit or three. You have a good run last night?” Nolan asked.

“Hell, yes. I mean—beg your pardon, ma’am.” Clay tipped his hat to Sofia, who struggled to suppress a grin, probably having a dirtier mouth than this young Hollis boy. “We did right good, didn’t we, Drew?”

The man named Drew seemed distracted, and Isaac wondered just how much he knew about the Jade Pair. Isaac wasn’t so sure Drew hadn’t been in the saloon before. The only thing he did know was that he’d never laid his hand, mouth, or other body part on a Hollis besides Nolan.

And damn, he burned to do that right now—taste Nolan’s lips again, which usually tasted like Sofia’s sweet pussy. Then slide down his body and rub his cock up on the cowboy’s until both swollen heads erupted with cum.

A shudder ripped through him.

Casting a glance Drew’s way, Isaac was certain the Hollis boy knew what he was—hell, he was bruised and battered, which was a dead giveaway that he lived a rough lifestyle.

Drew’s voice came at last, deep and quiet. “We each brought home no less than twenty-five.”

Isaac tried to discern what they were talking about. Horses? They’d passed several big groups grazing in the top pastures. More beautiful horseflesh Isaac had never seen. What would it be like to work with them day in and out, to throw himself into wholesome work instead of lying with men he didn’t want?

As if Sofia were thinking the same, her heavy gaze met his. Her smile slipped, but she pasted it back into place.

“Whoop, that’s some good fishin’,” Nolan said, yanking Isaac from his

dark corner.

Fish? A lump bobbed into his throat at the realization that his lover had sent his family members out for Isaac's preferred food. And Sofia had her biscuits.

With a painful lurch in his stomach, he recalled his reason for wanting to come home with Nolan in the first place.

Could he even manage to find the pearls? What if there were more than one set in Mrs. Hollis's possession?

What if they were caught?

Minutes later, Isaac's fears escalated when they rode into the yard and were surrounded immediately by dozens of people. Dogs danced around them as they dismounted, and women drifted forward to shyly welcome Sofia.

Nolan clamped a hand on Isaac's nape. The warm touch set his hair on end while heating his heart. "Meet my good friend, Isaac. Isaac, I'd tell you all these good peoples' names, but you'll never remember them. Hell, sometimes I can't."

Several men laughed at that. Isaac fought the urge to lean back against Nolan's strong chest and accept his comfort and support. Looking from one face to another, Isaac tried to recall if he'd seen any of them in the saloon besides the one called Drew.

"Well, Dam Hollis, where ya been hiding yourself?" Nolan released Isaac to clap a hand on another man's shoulder.

Confusion wormed through Isaac's mind. Wait—wasn't that Drew? Then the Hollis boy in question drifted toward the knot of men, and Isaac saw they were twins.

"I take back what I said, Isaac. This is my cousin Adam, or Dam, as we know him. He's been off in the east negotiating for more land."

The man's hazel eyes twinkled, and he scuffed his knuckles over his jaw. "Been successful too. I'll tell you about it at the meal. I can smell me some biscuits now. Ma, you burnin' those biscuits?"

A petite, older woman smacked her son's shoulder. "Will be if you keep me out here gabbing, insolent boy." She went onto tiptoe to plant a kiss on his cheek. "Glad you're home safe and sound though." Looking at Isaac, she said, "Welcome to our home, Mr. Isaac. I hope you'll make yourself comfortable."

The sincerity with which she spoke made Isaac relax another degree. By the time Nolan had circulated through the group with him, Isaac felt as if this day might not be as bad as he expected.

And then he set eyes on the gentleman sauntering their way. As tall as Nolan, with the same bright look of intelligence in his eyes, the man had to be his father.

Glancing up, Nolan tightened a hand on Isaac's shoulder. A piercing look passed between father and son, singeing Isaac's fragile tethers to Nolan. Isaac eased away from his lover, desperate to put distance between them. Because in that single look, he saw that Nolan's father knew what his son was up to.

And he knew Isaac and Sofia for what they were.

Turning away without a word, his pa moved off toward the front porch, where he took up a rocker.

The tang of leather and man filled Isaac's head as another relation leaned close to speak to him and Nolan. "Nice to meet you. I'm Xander. A right handsome couple you have there, Nolan." Then Xander reached for the hand of the blond man at his side. They entwined fingers and headed toward the house too.

Nolan released a long, low breath that spoke more loudly than any words could.

Isaac prayed the women were being kind to Sofia.

Half an hour later, after the males had worked to set up wooden tables and hauled chairs from every house in the valley, the crew sat down to a massive dinner. The tables groaned under the weight of so many pan-fried catfish. Biscuits and honey dotted the vast spread in several places. Other fixings promised delights Isaac rarely knew in the upstairs room at the saloon.

Seated across from Nolan and Sofia, Isaac caught her gaze. Happiness radiated from her glowing skin to her dancing eyes. Warmth blossomed in Isaac's chest. So the women had welcomed her into their fold and made her feel at home.

Suddenly, he again found the gaze of Nolan's father on him. The man raised his voice, and all fell quiet at once.

"I'd like to say a prayer of thanks. Oh Lord, thank you for the family who has come together this day in celebration of new friends." His dark eyes

seemed to drill into Isaac, then Sofia and Nolan. “We appreciate our men who have hunted and gathered this food for our women to put on the table. And for all the love we share today. Amen.”

A chorus of “amens” echoed down the table. The word felt foreign on Isaac’s tongue. When was the last time he’d given thanks for anything? Last time he checked, he was pretty damn undeserving of anything. Still was. And his soul was about to get a lot blacker.

“Excuse me.” Isaac pushed his chair back and stood. He carefully avoided Sofia’s stare, knowing she would be shooting shards at him. But he caught Nolan’s eye and gestured with a flick of his head toward the house. Out back, they must have a privy. With any luck, a homestead this size would have a back door.

As Isaac strode away from the gathering and around the house, he felt isolated—suspended in a private bubble of purpose. Sofia didn’t need to be part of the stealing—Isaac could do that all by himself. But if there was a chance he could get Sofia out of this situation and into a real family like Nolan’s, he was damn well going to try.

The birds trilled their delightful songs as he walked through the yard and right up to the back door. Fear made his head swim, but he stiffened his jaw and fought it. He grasped the door handle and paused.

What if the Hollises had a servant? He hadn’t seen one assisting in the setup of the outdoor table, or a female carrying platters of food.

Only one way to find out.

He silently pushed the door inward. The house wasn’t as dim as most he’d been inside. Lots of windows in this house, which meant lots of money. Money enough to buy a priceless length of pearls.

Carefully, he placed his feet so his boots made almost no sound on the gleaming hardwood floors. He moved through a living space, past rocking chairs and a comfortable-looking parlor sofa. A broad fireplace stood at one end, trimmed in marble and sporting a mirror above.

Everything about this home reminded Isaac of what he was not.

Heart pounding a steady rhythm, he started down a hall and pushed open doors. Kitchen, library, an office smelling of cigar smoke, and a guest room.

Upstairs.

From outside, a guffaw of laughter made Isaac start. Jerking, he pressed

a palm to his chest. Once he went upstairs, there would be no way to pretend he wasn't up to no good.

Suddenly, Sofia's sweet voice reached him, low and frantic. "Isaac!"

Twisting on a heel, he hurried through the house to the back door, where she stood, face pinched and distress clear in her eyes.

She clutched his forearm and dragged him outside. "I thought you understood my position on this endeavor."

"Yessum, I do, but I take this upon myself."

Her rosy lips firmed, and he anticipated the sharp edge of her tongue. Instead, she sighed. "Let's speak on it more. Please, Isaac."

If not for the expression in her dark eyes, he never would have allowed her to close the door to that house and lead him back into the yard. Every fiber of his being begged him to go inside and find those pearls.

At that moment, Nolan rounded the side of the house, grinning. In five strides, he was with them, hauling both Isaac and Sofia into his embrace. Lowering his mouth, he took their eager kisses. Because of his injured lips, Isaac ran his tongue over Nolan's lower lip, fighting his tremors. Wanting this man and Sofia was uppermost in his mind. The only way he knew to have them was to give Hiram what he wanted first.

Nolan walked them backward until they came up against the wooden siding. The length of Nolan's body trapping him—trapping *them*—ignited Isaac. Instant flames roared to life in his core.

Slipping an arm around Sofia, he anchored her against him and nuzzled her throat. As he swirled his tongue over her sensitive flesh, Nolan used his body to give them pleasure—cock pressed against Isaac's, hands wandering over Sofia's curves.

Isaac slid his hand down the flat planes of Nolan's stomach and wrapped his fingers around his hard length.

"Missing out on some good food," Nolan whispered, though he rocked his hips, bringing his cock more forcefully against Isaac's hand.

Sofia rubbed her palm over Isaac's erection, kissing Nolan. When Nolan cupped her pussy through her dress, she shuddered.

Suddenly, Nolan pulled back. "Not here. Christ knows I want to. I'm sure it hasn't gone unnoticed that we're all missing, though. Come, my lovers. Come back to the feast with me. I promise to end this torment of our

bodies later.” His eyes burned with lust.

Isaac’s heart lurched. He needed one taste of Nolan—one hard kiss that would make him feel safe in a world gone so wrong.

Tilting his face up to his handsome cowboy’s, he gazed into Nolan’s eyes for a long minute. Silently begging. Acceptance wasn’t something he’d come by easily in all his days.

But Nolan gave it willingly. Clasp ing Isaac’s nape, Nolan gently brought their mouths together. The harsh rasp of facial hair on Isaac’s skin centered him, and he was able to look toward his goal once again.

He was going to steal that string of pearls—the last thing he’d do as Hiram’s slave.

Chapter Six

The warm orange flames of the bonfire flickered, casting a glow over Sofia's profile. As she parted her lips, the voice of an angel fell upon them all. Chills washed over Nolan.

Fighting the urge to get up and wrap her in his arms, he simply watched as she cast a spell over his family with the hymn she sang. The farm girl had never been so evident to him before. With the fine gown stripped away and her hair freely floating down her back, no one would ever suspect what her occupation was.

Except maybe Nolan's father. The man sat stiffly across the fire from Nolan, his expression far from enamored as the rest of his family's seemed to be.

His pa knew—knew that Nolan was spending his hard-earned and borrowed cash to love these people.

The sweet notes drifted from Sofia and wrapped around everyone gathered. With full bellies, they were now given the gift of her entertainment. But his pa was far from won over.

Tickling his gaze upward, Nolan found his pa looking at him. The lines of the older Hollis man's face had grown sharper with age, and none of the warmth Nolan sought was present in his eyes.

If Nolan successfully wrenched the Jade Pair from Hiram, would his family accept them as his soul mates? A weight filled Nolan's core. He'd never gone against his family before. The Hollises were a strict bunch, but they stood together no matter what the problem. When Xander had been on the run from the law, no one chided his decision to fight back against the railroad that was stealing the people's land. Later, after he returned home with a bride and a male lover, he wasn't questioned.

They'd all stood strong for Graham, who had struggled to take out a band of men who wanted revenge after some events of the war.

But this was different, wasn't it? Who would stand with Nolan to help free the people he loved from a man who only wanted to earn a living off the bodies of his whores?

As he dropped his gaze from his father's, Nolan's mind worked frantically. How to convince the Hollises that Isaac and Sofia were deserving of a good life, just as this family was?

Sofia's beautiful voice trailed off as the last strums of the guitar fell away. A soft smile graced her face. At her side, Nolan's cousin and the guitar player, Kel, leaned near and spoke low to her.

She gave a nod, and Kel started picking at the guitar strings, the tune a fast one.

Drew sank to the half log Nolan was using as a bench. Without preamble, he asked, "What are you gonna do about them?"

Nolan didn't pretend to misunderstand. "Not sure." He scrubbed a hand over his face, an action that didn't go unnoticed by Isaac. Across the fire, the man's expression fell, bottomed out to the pit of despair where Nolan had existed for days.

Was it all as hopeless as it felt?

"Who beat on the man?" Drew asked.

Bunching his hands into fists, Nolan schooled his expression, as Isaac was looking at him. "Their boss," he answered quietly. "It's one of the reasons I have to get them away from him."

"How you plan to do that, cos?"

"Not sure. Raising money is out of the question, I believe, as there isn't another horse sale planned for some months to come."

"Might be able to take an advance from your pa," Drew suggested.

Shaking his head, Nolan avoided Isaac's gaze, then his pa's. Sofia's voice escalated, and several of the family members joined in by clapping to the beat. "Already borrowed money from Pa. He might already suspect."

"You can't keep paying, even if it keeps your heart full, Nolan."

A rough sigh escaped Nolan, and he ducked his head, staring at his hands, remembering every time he'd ever touched the Jade Pair. "No one knows that better than I do. But I thank you for your counsel."

Drew latched on to Nolan's shoulder and squeezed hard. "I'm here for you."

"Thank you," he murmured.

After Sofia finished her song, Kel continued to play. The Hollis men jumped to their feet, clapping and stomping in time while those who were

lucky enough to have female partners grabbed them and started swinging them around in dance.

Clay turned his attention from the festivities. “Ready for a long day of breaking mustangs tomorrow, Nolan?”

“Always ready for a challenge.” Nolan grinned at his brother. Their branch of the Hollis family was known for locating bands of wild horses and breaking them. After the Hollis boys led the stock home, corralled them, and taught them to bear a saddle and rider, the family was able to sell the horses or breed them with their own good stock. More money in their pockets.

Maybe more money to add to his cause of freeing Isaac and Sofia.

Casting a glance around the fire, he couldn’t spot his lovers. “I’ll be ready at dawn, Clay.” With that, he moved off. First, he would check the back of the house, as Sofia might have had need of the facilities and Isaac had walked her there in the dark.

Nolan’s cock stretched at the thought of finishing what they’d started earlier. Putting his hands all over them, feeling their mouths, fingers, and passions.

The darkness dropped over him like a cloak as he strolled away from the cluster of his family. Their gleeful sounds echoed in the night, but he threw his hearing out, trying to locate his lovers.

A small white outbuilding loomed up amid the kitchen garden and his mother’s prized cutting garden. She had been born a refined woman, and Nolan’s father liked to keep her that way. He indulged her need to visit the city for shopping trips and plays, and he bought her all matter of trinkets.

She rarely used these baubles. Instead, her smile or a posy from her garden was the only accessory she wore. During dinner, she’d engaged Sofia in a discussion about the latest fashions, which had warmed Nolan’s heart.

“Isaac? Sofia?” he called out in a low voice. When no one responded, he continued around the other side of the house. But something called for him to go inside. Perhaps Sofia had required the use of the washbasin.

Backtracking, he reached the door and pushed it inward. Silence greeted him. At some point, either his father or Clay had started a fire in the hearth. It burned low, putting off warmth that would see their family through the cold Texas night. But Nolan had a fire of his own.

“Sofia?” He wandered down the hall to the kitchen. A peek inside revealed she wasn’t there. Checking in the guest room, he came up empty-

handed again.

A quiet scraping noise on the ceiling above his head made him freeze. Who would be upstairs? His parents were dancing around the fire, and Clay was outside as well. Graham had taken his wife home to their farm miles away before darkness fell. No other member of the Hollis family would be upstairs in their home.

Skimming a hand down his hip, he assured himself that his pistol was in place. He gripped the pearl handle, prepared to draw as he navigated the short run of stairs.

His room was at the opposite end of the house, with the room Clay and Graham had once shared in the center. The noise Nolan heard had come from his parents' chamber.

What son of a bitch had sneaked into their home while the family was enjoying an evening together?

A dead one.

Heart tripping, he eased toward his parents' room. The door was a slightly ajar, voices muffled within.

Nudging the door open, he stared at the far side of the room, where two figures hunched over his mother's dresser—where her jewelry box was located.

His breath left him in a rush. He'd recognize these two people if he were half blind.

"What the...?" He shoved the door open wide, and it cracked off the wall.

Sofia clutched her chest in fright, but Isaac turned more slowly, a long rope of pearls trailing from the inside of his vest, where he was apparently stuffing it.

"Nolan..."

He stormed across the room, head spinning, heart in his stomach, and bowels turning to water. "You're stealing? From my own?" His voice rose from low and burning to a bellow.

Sofia's expression shivered, and she burst into tears. "Nolan, it's not our fault!"

"Not. Your. Fault." Without thinking, he pulled his pistol and waved it at the pair—the pair of thieves he'd allowed into his life and his heart. "Isaac,

would you care to tell me how you've come to possess my mother's pearls and it's *not your fault?*"

The man shook his head, mouth tight.

Reaching out, Nolan snagged the pearls from his lover's vest. He gathered them into his fist, fighting the awareness that they were still warm from Isaac's body. "Get your goddamn selves out of my home! I trusted you, and you've betrayed me." He could barely force the words out.

Choking on fury and the utter treachery of these two, he waved the gun at them again. "Didn't you hear me? Get the hell out of here! I never want to set eyes on you from this moment forth!"

With a gasping sob, Sofia whirled toward the door with Isaac on her heels. Through the dimness, Nolan met Isaac's gaze a second before he vanished through the door. Nolan folded at the waist, breathing hard, the metal of his pistol little comfort in his hand.

It's over. Over. And I'll never be the same again.

* * * *

"Sofia." Isaac's concerned tone drifted to where she lay buried under her bedcovers. Loss was a spike in her heart—a steel blade so painful she could barely draw breath around it.

Isaac slid a hand over her shoulder. "Sofia, you haven't moved in hours."

I can't, she wanted to say. But words were far from her.

The bed sagged under Isaac's weight, and he heaved a sigh. "You were right all along, darlin'. We should have just run. Escaped Hiram of our own accord. Being in the poorhouse or dying in the street looks much better than this."

His voice was so despondent she couldn't help but unveil herself and look up at him. His handsome face was ravaged by pain, creases etched around his eyes and mouth.

For a moment, his green eyes scalded hers. Tears trickled down his cheeks. "I'm sorry, Sofia. I ruined everything. Ruined our lives."

She sat up and caught him as the first sob ripped from him. Wrapping him tightly in her arms, she let her hard heart open for him once again. No matter what, she always had Isaac. No matter that she'd wanted Nolan too.

Isaac gripped her like a drowning man. "We shouldn't have gone with

him that first night. The first time I looked at him, I knew it—that he'd devour us, consume us with his passion.”

She nodded, tears slipping unheeded down her cheeks. “I knew too. But we went wrong by letting him in. We are undeserving, Isaac.”

He pressed a kiss to her temple, lips quivering against her skin. “I know all too well, love. I only regret drawing you into it too.”

She drew back enough to see his tear-streaked face. “Do you believe you could have stopped it? We're a pair, you and I. What I feel, you do, and the other way around. We didn't stand a chance against that Hollis boy.”

Isaac shuddered and burrowed his face against her neck again. “No,” he breathed.

The saloon was dead at this time of day. Dawn was a glow on the stained horizon. As the light grew stronger, Sofia cringed more and more. Facing another day without Nolan wasn't possible. And the thought of going downstairs and entertaining men—taking anyone other than Nolan to bed—was out of the question.

The longer she sat holding Isaac, the more she realized she couldn't go on here in this place. “We have to get away. Hop a train. Make for California.”

He fell so still that after a minute, she thought she might have to shake him to make him breathe. Cupping his face, she stared at him. “Please, Isaac. You know it's the only way.”

A ragged breath left him. Nodding, he said, “Shoulda done it long ago.”

“Yes.” She snuggled back into his embrace, drinking in his scent. Though it gave her comfort, the memories of his smell mingled with Nolan's haunted her.

“We'll wait a bit longer. I can still hear the workers cleaning up downstairs,” Isaac said.

“We'll take no more than we can carry. I believe we have enough money to rent a room for a month or two and to live until we get work.”

“But we'll have to stow away on the train. We can't spend all our money on the fare.”

“I know.” She searched his gaze and saw her own pain mirrored in his green eyes. Would they ever survive this parting? Pulling themselves from everything they knew—a life as whores—was going to be a big transition.

But leaving Nolan? Misery.

“It’s all right. We’ll make our way,” Isaac said with false optimism.

“Yes, we’ll be just fine.” She climbed off the bed and started folding a few garments into a carpetbag. But when she added a handkerchief that Nolan had left behind, she broke down utterly.

Sobbing, she continued to pack her belongings while Isaac did the same. “There’s one more thing I need to ask of you, Isaac.”

He turned to her, expression fierce, cheekbones standing out against the stark paleness of his face. “Anything. I’ve failed to heed your words twice now, and it’s brought us nothing but pain. First, when you said we should run rather than steal that necklace. And again when you told me not to steal it at all. I’ll do anything you ask now, Sofia.”

She bolstered herself to speak the words. “I can’t bear to leave without seeing him one last time. To just set eyes on him will be a balm to my wounded soul.”

He pressed his lips into a line and gazed at his hands. Silence stretched between them.

“Isaac?”

“I said anything. But I wish it wasn’t that.”

* * * *

The moon rode high in the sky, shedding too much damn light on the railroad tracks. Stealing across them and stowing away in a car would be no easy task under these conditions. As of late, the railroad had assigned armed guards at intervals on the line just to ensure people like Isaac and Sofia didn’t take advantage of them.

Gripping their bags firmly in one hand, Isaac wrapped his fingers around Sofia’s arm and guided her toward the shadows.

Her breathing was audible—fear that Nolan wouldn’t come was consuming her as well.

Earlier that afternoon, Isaac had wandered out into the street and spotted Drew Hollis. Sending word with him had taken some persuasion on Isaac’s part, but in the end, the cowboy had reluctantly agreed to let Nolan know the Jade Pair would like to meet him here at moonrise.

The crunch of boots on gravel sounded as the nearby guard walked in their direction, rifle resting over his shoulder.

Sofia stopped in her tracks, and her eyes gleamed in the darkness.

Patting her arm, Isaac tried to reassure her that they'd make this work. Somehow. Worst case, if they were caught, they'd use their money on tickets on the railroad and pull out within hours. Best case... Well, Isaac couldn't allow himself to think of that right now. Disappointment would be his ultimate undoing.

The guard did an about-face and continued to pace away from them. Sofia started breathing again.

"Let's go," Isaac whispered.

The train car closest to them was slightly ajar. Easy to push it open far enough to pass through. With any luck, there would be little noise to alert the guards.

Sofia tensed and dug in her heels when Isaac attempted to draw her toward the train car.

"What is it?" he hissed. Then he saw.

The figure loomed out of the darkness. That outline could belong to only one person.

A low cry burst from Sofia. The guard whirled, rifle trained on them in a blink.

"Halt!" Nolan's voice boomed into the night. Spinning, the guard pointed his barrel at Nolan.

"No!" Sofia's scream split the air. Several other guards came running from their places down the track, the rustle of leather, weapons, and footsteps breaking the calm.

Isaac wrapped Sofia tightly against his side, prepared to throw her down if shots rang out.

"State your purpose!" the guard bellowed, holding his fire when he saw a Hollis. Around these parts, men knew that to mess with one Hollis boy was to mess with a whole family.

Nolan drew both pistols riding on his hips and aimed at two guards. "I mean no harm, but if you don't lower those weapons, I might change my mind." The sound of his voice sent shivers of want through Isaac. The fine hairs on his body stood up, and his cock throbbed to life.

"The sheriff's office is only a few steps in that direction. A shot sounds, and he'll be here faster than you can flee."

Nolan shook his head. "I have no intention of fleeing, and I don't obey a corrupt law."

Isaac shivered. If Nolan would go up against the law for him and Sofia, what else would he do? Forgive?

We weren't exactly open books either.

Nolan swung his head toward where Isaac and Sofia stood. Isaac was aware of the cowboy's gaze but didn't dare look at him for fear he'd run to him. What would pass between them tonight? Would Nolan listen to their tale and accept their pleas for forgiveness?

"Now, I am here to talk to these two persons. We mean you no harm and expect none from you." Nolan lowered his pistols slightly, but one misstep from the guards and Isaac knew a Hollis boy would have the guts to protect himself.

But Isaac didn't have that same gumption. He'd never really stuck up for what he wanted or deserved in life. Even when it came to Sofia, he lay down and allowed events to take place but didn't take control of his destiny. If he had, they wouldn't be in this situation right now.

"Take it on outta here," the guard said roughly. With that, he placed his rifle over his shoulder and headed away, walking down the tracks again at a clipped pace.

Nolan stared after the other guard, who did the same. When it was determined that the Jade Pair were safe, Nolan replaced his pistols in their holsters. But he made no move to cross the tracks to Isaac and Sofia.

Sofia broke free of Isaac's hold, springing forward. She hurled herself over the tracks and into Nolan's arms. He caught her easily, but rather than draw her tenderly into his embrace as he would have two days ago, he held her at arm's length.

Still gripping their bags, Isaac slowly moved across the tracks. Everything in his being yearned toward Nolan. Why had he given in to Sofia's wishes and agreed to see the cowboy one more time? If Nolan rejected them—which he was sure to do—Isaac's heart would shatter.

Nolan stared at them, his face a blank mask, not the passion-filled face of the man they knew. Sofia released a rasping sob.

"We can't talk here. Come with me." The words materialized on Isaac's lips before he could think. Nolan's eyes flared wide, but he gave a nod of agreement.

Isaac moved past him, away from the train he didn't want to board. He started walking in the opposite direction of town, away from the life he no longer wanted to lead.

When he'd reached the outer limits of a fenced-in corral, he dropped their luggage and leaned his elbows on the wooden structure. As he waited for Nolan and Sofia to catch up, he fought to gather his thoughts. How to explain? Would it be better to beg? Or just to stand tall and admit he was a weakling who'd made a muddle of their situation?

Sofia's scents wafted to him as she leaned close. Nolan stood a few paces away, breathing hard. In anger or want?

Dropping his face into his hands, Isaac tried not to look at their lover. One glimpse of his displeasure, and his controlled facade would crumble.

"I came," Nolan said simply.

Sofia opened her mouth to speak, but Isaac stopped her with a hand on her arm. He gazed into her teary eyes for a moment and then gave a nod. Yes, he could handle this. Was absolutely going to do it, and do it right.

"Nolan, first let me say that Sofia had nothing to do with what you found me doing the other night."

Nolan didn't move. "All right."

"Hiram approached us to steal the pearls shortly after we met you."

Sucking in a breath, Nolan doffed his hat and jabbed a hand through his hair. Isaac longed to step close and smooth those spikes of hair, to kiss his lover. His love.

"Goddammit, I should have known," Nolan said.

"I had no right to heed that command. I take it all upon myself." Finally, he'd done the right thing. With any hope, it wasn't too late.

"Not all you, Isaac..." Sofia murmured.

"Yes, it was all me. Sofia wanted to run away rather than accept Hiram's bargain."

"Bargain?" Nolan's voice sounded as if he'd swallowed half of a bottle of moonshine in a few gulps.

Isaac rubbed a hand through his hair, wishing with all his heart he could start his life again back where he'd met Sofia. If he'd just had the guts to yank her out of that life instead of becoming embroiled in it himself, they'd be free now. But they never would have met Nolan either.

“Hiram told us that if we got him those pearls of your mother’s, he’d set us free.”

All of a sudden, Nolan slammed both palms against the fence. A crack sounded, and the wood quivered from the brute force. A few paces away, a group of horses within the corral took off running, circling the grassy yard. One of those horses was Bullseye.

“Fuck!” Nolan struck the fence again. “Should have done something before—”

“No, it’s not your fault,” Sofia begged, clinging to his arm.

“It is! Don’t you see? I was only contributing to the problem by paying for...” He broke off and fought for the words, though Isaac knew he only wanted to avoid saying the ones that were real. “Paying for...you.”

A tic appeared in the corner of the cowboy’s jaw, and he clenched his hands as if ready to punch the fence.

“Nolan, please forgive us. We never meant to betray you,” Sofia whispered.

“I take the blame, as I said,” Isaac added. “I would have sold my soul to Satan to free Sofia.”

Nolan’s gaze leaped to Isaac’s and held...held. When he tore it away, Isaac’s heart thrilled. Was it possible that he would believe them—forgive them?

“If I could go back, I would. I’d never allow you to give Hiram one penny. Your money was worth so much more than my attentions.”

“Enough!” Nolan grasped Isaac’s shoulders and shook him hard. “Don’t you see I would have given everything I have to be with you? I borrowed from my family, used my last resources to be in your bed—in your arms. But I was wrong to do so without first freeing you.” He released Isaac. “And that is exactly what I intend to do.”

With that, he vaulted over the fence and gave a shrill whistle that called Bullseye to his side. He fisted the horse’s mane and launched himself into the saddle.

Sofia cried out as Nolan spurred the horse right at the fence. He kicked it in the sides and sent it sailing over and racing into the night.

From a few hundred yards away, his voice sounded. “Stay safe! I’ll be back!”

Chapter Seven

Nolan's cock had never been so damn hard in his life. He wanted those two people he'd left back at the corral more than he'd ever wanted anything. He wanted nothing more than to turn Bullseye around and return to them, to press them against that fence and kiss them until they couldn't stand. And then he'd strip them slowly, plucking at taut nipples and small pebbled ones, go down on his knees and lap Sofia's soaking folds before drawing Isaac's length into his throat.

Loving them all night was the only thing he wanted—not to ride hell-bent for home to rally his family to his cause.

But hell yes, this was going to go down. He was going to teach Hiram a lesson. No one fucked with a Hollis, and Hiram had done it threefold—first with Sofia, then Isaac, and finally by premeditating to steal from Nolan's mother.

Pearls in exchange for freedom. No wonder Isaac had jumped at the promise. If Nolan had been in his place, he might have too. Sofia was that precious to him, and only too well could he imagine how helpless Isaac must feel each day.

But no more. Nolan was going to take care of Hiram once and for all. He'd never lay another hand on them, force them into bed with people like Rip, or even dictate what they ate again. The Jade Pair was going to be freed forever.

And then they're just going to be mine.

Racing across the fields toward home, he racked his mind for answers to this dilemma. How to get Hiram out of town if the sheriff had his back? Using excessive force went against Nolan's beliefs, but damn if he was going to live in this section of the country with the man. And getting in trouble with the law meant dragging the Hollises into the mess.

He couldn't reach the Hollis lands fast enough. By the time he whipped into the yard, Bullseye was puffing and blowing. Jumping to the ground from the still-trotting mount, Nolan took off directly for his front door.

His pa met him. "What is it?"

“Trouble. I need help, Pa.”

His pa delivered that piercing look that meant he knew exactly what Nolan was up to.

“Please, Pa. I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t need it.”

Reaching above the door frame, his father grabbed his rifle off the hook holding it in place. “All right, I’m here for you. Clay! Get your gun, boy! Felicia, we’ll be back soon enough.”

The door slammed, and the three Hollis men headed to the barn.

“What’s going on, bro?” Clay asked.

“My friends are in trouble. Isaac and Sofia...”

“The whores?” His pa’s calm words sliced through Nolan.

Balling his hands into fists, he struggled with his anger. “Don’t call them that! I love them! And they love me back! Can’t you see that they’re trapped by a man who owns them? They’re like common slaves, but rather than scrub and toil in the fields, they’re made to lie down for men they don’t want.”

Nolan’s father met his gaze steadily, and he gave a nod. Feeling angrier than he ever had before, Nolan stormed past his father.

A big hand clamped down on his shoulder, and his pa drew him to a stop. “Nolan, I’ve always been proud of you boys for knowing your course. But do you think that drawing the entire Hollis family into a disagreement with Hiram—and the sheriff who benefits from his money—is best?”

Nolan snapped his mouth shut on all the things he wanted to say. Raging at his pa was no way to gain his assistance. “I...do need the family’s help. Hiram has the sheriff and probably some fool deputies who are ready to raise hell after Hiram put ideas about us into their heads. I can’t do it alone.”

His pa tightened his hold on Nolan’s shoulder. “We’re always here for you. I just want you to be certain of this path. Once you’ve freed these people, what will you do with them? You have no home for them. No way to support them.”

“I’ll work. Sign on with the railroad if I have to.”

Clay spoke up. “You can have my portion of the Hollis land. I’ll also give my share of the last horse sale to assist with supplies for a home.”

Nolan’s heart pitched and heaved. Affection washed through him for his selfless little brother. “I have no need of your land, Clay. I’ve my own.”

He stared at his father. "Or do I?"

"Of course you do. I'd never take back my gift to you. But I want you to think about this sensibly. What if these people are just using you to help them get free, then you put them up for a spell, and they take off later?"

"They won't."

"How do you know?"

Turning his face away from his pa's, he firmed his lips. How *did* he know? Isaac and Sofia had lied to him, tried to steal from him for their own ends when all they'd had to do was ask for his help.

But they'd made an error in not trusting him, and he couldn't make the same mistake. He looked into his father's eyes again. "I know them. I trust them. I'm sorry I asked for your help, Pa. I'll do this myself."

"No, you won't. Clay, you ride for the cousins while I saddle up my mare."

For a long moment after Clay took off for the rest of the Hollis boys, Nolan waited for his pa to say more. But there didn't seem to be anything else to say.

* * * *

As the first rustle of harness and horse echoed across the land, Sofia shuddered. "They're coming. They really are, Isaac!" She flung her arms around her love and held on tight.

Despite all their misgivings during their torturously long wait, she'd been right when she told Isaac that Nolan wouldn't fail them.

Though they'd failed him in a large way.

Excitement raced down her spine, and warmth blossomed low in her belly. Just the thought of Nolan's nearness set her afire. It had been too many hours since she'd felt him moving over her, within her. After their bad business with Hiram was put behind them, Sofia wasn't going to waste a moment getting Nolan and Isaac into bed.

Isaac traced a path on her back and over the crest of her buttocks. Her body clenched, ready and eager for her men's fingers, tongues, and cocks filling every part of her.

"Oh my God, Sofia. He's brought the whole family."

As the shadows of riders bobbed out of the darkness, gooseflesh lifted all over her body. Several riders moved past where she and Isaac stood

frozen, but one familiar figure drew up. His horse danced around them.

“Get her to a safe place, Isaac. There, by those trees. No matter what you hear or see, stay put until I come for you,” Nolan commanded in a quiet voice.

“No, I’m coming. It’s my fight too,” Isaac argued.

Nolan stiffened. “I need you to stay with Sofia and watch over her.”

Tension crackled in the air between them. Nolan exerted his power, but Isaac—at last—was drawing up to his full height, no longer Hiram’s rug or anyone else’s.

“I’m coming. I belong in that fight, Nolan.”

Nolan waved a hand at the group of men surrounding them. “I’ve got plenty to watch my back, as you can see, and these bastards are no match—”

“But they’re sneaky. You’ve gotta watch all of them, or you’ll land in a pit of vipers.”

Nolan shook his head hard. “I can’t let you go. You stay and protect the woman we cherish most.”

Putting Sofia aside, Isaac dug in his heels for the fight. “I’d give my life for Sofia. And for you too. Which is why I’m going.”

“I’ll stay.” The low voice of a Hollis boy sounded. Boots thudded on the earth as he dismounted. He passed the reins on to Isaac before turning to Sofia. “I’ll keep her safe, cos.”

With a flame of warmth in her heart, she realized Drew had offered to stay behind with her.

Sofia looked to Nolan, who gave a jerky nod. Isaac grabbed the reins and hurled himself into the saddle. In seconds, they were off, pounding the earth, thundering toward town and the man who would probably pull out every nasty trick he could think of.

“Are you chilled, ma’am?” Drew asked. “You’re welcome to my coat.”

She leaned heavily against the fence, hysterical laughter clogging her throat along with a salty lump of tears. There were men in the saloon who were loyal to Hiram and would stand behind him in a fight. Weapons would surely be drawn, and she’d seen her boss shoot a fly off the wall at twenty paces. If the Hollises thought Hiram was weak, they were in for a rude awakening.

But the Hollises were renowned for their shooting abilities too.

“I thank you for the offer of your coat, sir.”

“Please call me Drew.” He eased the oilskin off his shoulders and draped it over hers. His warmth still permeated the fibers, and she gave a sigh of contentment, having had no idea how uncomfortable she’d been.

In the future, if she was freed, she’d find herself in a whole new world. Learning to cook and clean for Nolan and Isaac wouldn’t be much trouble, but what about gardening and tending animals?

That is if he wants me and Isaac on a permanent basis.

He may put them onto a train and send them far away from him and his family.

“Do you mind if I sit, Drew?”

“Of course. Your gown may become damp with dew, though.”

“It’s fine.” She sank to the earth and leaned against the fence stile. Drawing her knees up, she snuggled into the warm coat Drew had provided. As much of a gentleman as Nolan was, Drew seated himself beside her.

After a long minute, she spoke. “What do you suppose Nolan has in mind?”

Drew didn’t pretend not to understand. “Let me just say that he knows what he’s doing.”

“I have the highest confidence in his abilities. I’ve seen him in action many times. I just wonder...if Isaac will be able to hold his own.” The admission felt like betrayal. Isaac was her first love and would always remain so. But he didn’t have the authority, power, or strength a Hollis boy had. Did he?

“Nolan will keep him safe.” Drew swallowed audibly. “He has feelings for Isaac, and that carries a lot of weight in our family.”

Her heart surged. Nolan hadn’t spoken any words of love or commitment to them, but he’d gone after Hiram, and that said so much.

“His feelings extend to you, Miss Sofia. I hope you know that, because of my relationship with Nolan, I consider you a friend. I wish to help you in any way.”

“I appreciate it.” Tears stuffed her nose. The breeze tickled the fine hairs around her face, and she brushed them away. “Do you know what I wish for, Drew?”

His face was shadowed, but she heard the smile in his voice. “I can’t

say as I do, but I expect Nolan will fulfill your every desire.”

She gave a wistful sigh. “Since that day we spent at your family’s ranch, I’ve longed for one thing—to be part of you. I’ve never known such belonging in my life. The way everyone welcomed us...” She twisted her fingers together. “Well, it seems as if I might not deserve a chance to know that again.”

Drew placed a hand over hers, stilling her movement. She looked up into his face, so similar yet so different from Nolan’s. “If Nolan didn’t believe you deserve that chance, he wouldn’t be out there right now, fighting for that very thing. Now the best way to show him you deserve this dream is to trust in him.”

As time ticked by, she considered Drew’s words. The more she thought about them, the more they made sense. If she’d trusted in Nolan from the beginning, she and Isaac never would have betrayed him by attempting to steal his mother’s pearls. Instead, they would have talked to him and let him know what Hiram had proposed. Nolan would have come up with a solution.

She wrapped her arms around her middle as true warmth settled within her. To give herself wholeheartedly, she needed to give more than her body. And she was ready.

* * * *

The Hollis boys surrounded Isaac on all sides as if by some tacit agreement to protect him. But if it came down to it, he could fight as hard as any other man. He might not possess the roped muscles of these horse wranglers, but he’d been in more than one saloon fight in his days. More than ever, he was ready to prove his worth.

As long as he kept Nolan in his sights, he felt empowered to do anything. As if sensing Isaac’s gaze on him, Nolan swung his head to the side. Even in the darkness, his look scorched Isaac.

Instant heat clawed at Isaac’s insides. If he didn’t get hold of this big cowboy soon, he was going to burst into flame. Too many days had passed since he’d tasted Nolan, smelled his musk and leather.

But the saloon was in view. A few more seconds and they’d be trotting up to the front, leaping off their horses, and bursting into the saloon with the intent to take Hiram prisoner.

At least this was what Isaac had gathered from the hushed

conversations between the Hollis men.

Nolan shifted his horse closer to Isaac's until their thighs pressed together. The ache in Isaac's cock grew.

"When we get there, I want you to stay outside."

"Not a chance," he said at once.

"Isaac—"

"No. You can't ask me not to be part of this fight or to stand back and wait for you to handle the situation for me. Not when I should have done something a long time ago."

"It might come to a shootout."

Isaac nodded hard. "I know. I'm prepared to stand with you. To stand up for what I believe in, which is my freedom to have you—to love you."

Nolan reined up sharply, and Isaac passed him by. Twisting his horse around, he backtracked to where Nolan sat dead in the middle of the wide dirt street.

Isaac faced him.

"You mean what you say? That you love me?" Nolan choked out the words.

Emotion washed through Isaac, bringing tears close to the surface. But he bit them back. "I do. Lord help me, I don't deserve to." He dropped his gaze to his hands.

Nolan clapped a hand over his, making him look up quickly. The cowboy's mouth was firmly set, that muscle flickering in the corner of his jaw again. Isaac wanted to lean close and put his mouth over it, to feel its flutter and the rough hair of Nolan's jaw.

"Whatever you were makes no difference now. From this day on, you belong with me. Not *to* me. But with me." As Nolan finished speaking, he lowered his voice. The quiet rumble ignited Isaac.

Leaning to the side, he captured Nolan's hard lips. A shock of desire claimed him, dizzied him. Losing himself in the feel of his lover, Isaac was roused only by the restless horse beneath him.

A low whistle sounded, making Nolan jerk away.

He wrapped a hand around Isaac's nape and squeezed lightly. "Until later. Right now we have a rat to flush out of the saloon." Drawing his pistol, he galloped forward, taking the lead of the group of Hollises.

Harnesses jingled and leather creaked as they made their way to the front of the establishment. The familiar strains of piano music drifted through the doors, and a shrill, playful scream from a saloon girl sounded.

Suppressing a shudder, Isaac dismounted with the rest of the men. Never had he felt so far from his old life. Though his stomach boiled at the idea of seeing Hiram after he and Sofia had failed to come to work, Isaac was far removed from the music, laughter, cigar smoke, and gambling taking place inside.

He pushed his way through the Hollis men until he pressed himself against Nolan's back. Suddenly realizing he wanted to stand beside him as an equal and fight, he slid to the cowboy's side.

"Okay, boys. Hold your fire until I give a signal. Stay alert."

Nolan passed Isaac his weapon and retrieved his other pistol from its holster on his hip. Then, cocking it with a big thumb, he shoved the saloon doors open.

Casually, Nolan picked up the nearest chair and smashed it against the wall. The noise brought silence, and a collective gasp echoed throughout the saloon. Faces turned to the doors, and at the sight of the Hollises, several men jumped up and ran toward the back. They disappeared into the kitchen and most likely out the back door.

How many of them had had run-ins with the Hollises before?

"Now what's going on here?" The bartender reached behind the counter and produced his rifle, as Isaac knew he would.

Bellying up to the bar, Isaac stared him down. "Put it away, Regis. Our business isn't with you."

"Yeah? Who's it with?"

"Hiram Marshall," Nolan said in a guttural tone.

As much of an ally as always, Regis jerked his hand, cocking the rifle.

Suddenly, eleven pistols were raised. The noise caused a ripple of excitement coursing down Isaac's spine.

"Give the man up, and you'll be spared," Nolan said tightly.

Regis glared at them. "Hiram's gone off to look for him." He twitched his head toward Isaac. "Haven't seen him all night."

Nolan didn't remove his gaze from the man. "Search the place," he ordered his family.

In the reflection of the mirror behind the bar, Isaac watched several Hollis men stomp off through the place. One man stopped, removed a glass of whiskey from a customer's hand, and tossed it back as if it were water. Then he slammed the glass down on the table and continued on his mission.

Nolan and Isaac stormed forward, moving through the saloon, circling tables and staring at each face. If Hiram tried to conceal himself, it wouldn't work.

Isaac watched the rolling motion of Nolan's muscles. Dark heat clawed at his stomach. His cock was a relentless throb. He wanted this man with a need that was almost desperation. But if Nolan chose to keep only Sofia, Isaac would walk away from both of them and wish them all the happiness two people could ask for.

A shout from an upstairs room rattled Isaac. "Here!" Nolan stormed the staircase. Mounting the steps two at a time, he reached the top in a flash. Isaac gripped his pistol tightly and ran the flight behind him, prepared to shoot down Hiram or anyone who dared to point a weapon at the man he loved.

The scents of drink and sex filled his head as he burst into a room behind Nolan. Two Hollis men stood around the bed—a bed Isaac had used plenty of times—guns trained on the inhabitants.

But not one of them was Hiram.

"Stop! It's not him," Isaac cried. Four terror-filled eyes stared back at him.

"Let's move." Nolan led the way out of the room. They traipsed downstairs where the rest of the Hollises were gathered.

"Don't see him anywhere." Dam Hollis shifted from boot to boot.

"He probably slipped out when we burst into the saloon," another cousin said.

When Nolan's father spoke up, everyone stopped and listened. Being the oldest of the group, he held the most authority, it seemed.

"Harold and Dorothy's boys, you head right. Search every shop from here to the end of town. Frederick and Margaret's sons, you go left. The rest of you are with us." He looked to Nolan. "Son? You're leading this parade. Let's nail the bastard we're hunting and make it a homecoming parade, shall we?"

With that, he pierced Isaac with his stare. In that instant, Isaac read

much in the face that looked so like Nolan's would in several decades. Gone was the suspicion Nolan's father had shown him at the family dinner. In its place was acceptance.

Nolan gripped Isaac's shoulder and swung him around. "Come on."

Once outside, he wrapped an arm around Isaac's torso and gave him a brief squeeze. "Where is that son of a bitch? He knows we're coming for him."

"Regis said he's searching for us. I'm sure he's irate that we didn't show up for work tonight."

"Well, he's just going to have to get over it." Nolan released him, and his bootheels rang out on the wooden boardwalk.

At the end of the street, the group of Hollis men milled, sticking their heads into eateries and haberdasheries.

From the vicinity of the corral on the opposite side of town, a shot exploded.

Nolan whipped around. Isaac followed, his motion seeming too slow, the air in his lungs trapped.

Gasping, he managed to get one word out. "Sofia!"

Nolan bolted in the direction of the corral, legs pumping as he screamed orders. "Identify your targets first! And protect our own at all costs!"

Isaac watched his lover's form fade away before he jolted into action. Drawing a deep gulp of air, he took off running. The steel in his hand felt icy, and the breath sobbed in his lungs.

Sofia. My love. I'm coming.

Pain ricocheted through him as a second shot sounded. A roar of rage followed—belonging to Nolan.

"Son of a bitch hit me! Sofiaaaaa!" Nolan bellowed.

"I've got her safe!" Drew hollered in return. The call came from the corner of the corral. Isaac shot a glance that direction, ensuring that Sofia was indeed out of the way of the fight.

Some of the Hollis boys crowded around the place where Nolan had dropped and lay spasming in pain. Isaac smelled the blood, hot and sickening on the night air. But he also heard Nolan's strong voice and knew he would continue to fight for his life.

“Passed clean through my side. Jesus, that son of a bitch better not close his eyes!” Nolan cursed in outrage.

Isaac sprinted past the man he loved, with his sight set on one thing—the figure crouched by one of the farthest fence posts.

Drawing up short, Isaac pointed his pistol at the man. “Hiram Marshall, you shot a man and will be made to pay!”

Hiram popped up and squeezed off a shot. Sofia shrieked, and Nolan yelled just as a dozen or more men raced at them.

“Get on ’em, boys!” Nolan bellowed.

The clash of bodies reverberated in the night as the Hollises engaged the men Hiram had rounded up to fight for his ugly cause. Isaac’s guts churned. If one Hollis lost his life on account of him, he’d never forgive himself. And wouldn’t expect Nolan to forgive him either.

To the right, someone grunted, and blood sprayed across Isaac’s forearm. Sickened but more determined than ever, he plotted his move.

Sinking low, Isaac advanced on the man, hoping the shadows from the buildings and corrals concealed his movements. From his position, the moon granted enough light to make out a silhouette. He shifted, and a slash of moonlight fell across his face. Too late, he realized he was in broad view of Hiram.

“You failed to get the object I requested, Isaac. You’ll never free yourself. Shooting at me will only result in pain for you in the end,” Hiram called.

Memories of the man’s fists coming down on him, his boots raised to kick, slammed through Isaac. Righteous fury began as a low tremor and swelled until he didn’t know if he could put a bullet in his target if given the chance.

“It’s over! I’m taking Sofia, and you will leave us alone!”

A maniacal laugh tittered on the night air. “We’ll see how long a man like Hollis wants two tainted whores!”

“Help me up. I’m going to fucking shoot him!” Nolan raged.

“Allow me.” Nolan’s father suddenly appeared beside Isaac. Steel flashed.

Several sharp shots sounded from nearby where the Hollises fought Hiram’s men. A whoop of victory sounded—the voice so like Nolan’s that

Isaac knew the family member hadn't been on the wrong end of that bullet.

Isaac knocked Nolan's father's gun aside, took aim at the shadowy form of his former boss, and fired.

A howl split the night. And then Isaac was running, bearing down on the man he'd just shot. Two Hollis men flanked him, including Nolan's father. Dark figures struggled around them, fighting with their fists, knives, and rifles as necessary.

"Isaac, be careful!" Sofia's mournful wail broke through his focus.

His step faltered, but he picked up speed again when he caught Nolan's words. "He did right. Avenged me."

And I will till the day I die.

Hiram's crumpled form writhed on the ground, blood seeping from his leg. Isaac towered over him, pistol aimed right between his eyes. "You look at me and tell me that we're free."

"You're...worthless for everything but...working on your backs!"

Isaac kicked him in the hip, sending him rolling onto his other side. He jackknifed like a worm fed onto a hook. "Owww, stop!"

"You tell me, Hiram!"

When the man didn't respond, Isaac shoved a few more rounds into the chamber and spun the cylinder. Hiram rolled onto his back, gasping and choking. A dark stain spread on his leg.

Isaac stared into his gleaming eyes. "The Jade Pair is no more. You leave us be. And you will get far away from this town."

"Can't...make me."

"Like hell we can't." Nolan was suddenly there, bent in half around the wound in his side and staggering between the supporting arms of his brother and cousin, but moving nonetheless.

He stopped beside Hiram, and his father passed him a length of rope. "Bet you didn't know that we Hollises are pretty damn good at tying knots."

Hiram squirmed beneath Nolan's furious gaze.

"You picked the wrong family to mess with. And our family now includes Isaac and Sofia."

With a grunt, Nolan sank to one knee, and, with a few quick flicks, he bound Hiram's wrists. Then he looped the rope between the man's legs and fastened it so he was unable to move from a sitting position.

Around them, the noises of the fight quieted. Two Hollis boys came forward, dragging a couple men who were trussed up like hogs. Several others were thrown over the Hollises' horses.

"Lockin' these deputies up, Nolan. See how they like being on the other side of those steel bars they're so fond of throwing decent people behind," Xander drawled.

Nolan gave him a harsh nod. "Good. Where's the sheriff?"

"Son of a bitch took off into the night when we were busy with his cronies."

Grunting, Nolan turned his attention back to Hiram.

The wound on Hiram's leg didn't appear to be that severe. Otherwise, he would have bled out by now. Given time, it would heal. If only Isaac had made a better shot, Hiram would never have the chance to control anyone else the way he ruled him and Sofia.

"Disgusting maggot," Isaac spat. "You refuse to leave on your own, we'll find a train outta here for you."

"Bring that horse," Nolan instructed his cousin.

Drew came forward with a horse. Dam gripped Hiram around the torso and heaved him over it. A scream of pain sounded, but Dam ignored it, grabbed the lead rope, and set the horse to running with a swat on the hip. He ran alongside the mount, holding Hiram steady on its back.

Sofia sprinted toward Isaac. He caught her up, clinging to her smell and the ripe feel of her curves against him. He pressed a hasty kiss on her temple before she dropped to the earth and wrapped her arms around Nolan.

"It's over, darlin'. All right now." Nolan soothed her with soft words and kisses.

"Isaac." Nolan's father gave a jerk of his head toward the train tracks where Dam had gone with the horse.

Meeting the man's eyes, Isaac nodded. "Let's finish this."

Together they strode toward the tracks. A guard moved near to tell them to go away, but Isaac gave him a look that made him turn around and turn a blind eye to the happenings.

"Dam, I'd appreciate it if you opened that door a bit farther."

Dam slid the door of the train car wider. Isaac found it hard to believe that a few hours before, he and Sofia had stood in this very spot,

contemplating jumping on that train and leaving their lives—and Nolan—behind.

With the help of Nolan's father, Isaac loaded a cussing Hiram onto the train. The door groaned as they rolled it closed.

"That should get our point across," Nolan's father said.

A laugh rumbled out of Isaac's throat. He loosed it to the dark, velvety sky. He couldn't have restrained it if someone had gagged him. The joy and exuberance were too much to hold in.

Nolan's father joined him in laughter. Clapping him on the back, he said, "I'm proud to call you family, Isaac. I hope you'll stay with us at the house until Nolan's healed enough to build a proper home for you all. And I hope that you'll call me Robert."

Isaac met Robert's gaze. Reaching out, he shook Robert's hand, closing his fingers around the rough, well-worked fingers of his new ally.

At the touch, warmth spread through Isaac's system. But when he spotted Nolan and Sofia making their slow way forward on horseback, Isaac's heart simmered to life. Finally, he was able to truly open his heart and allow all those around him to tip inside. And Nolan and Sofia were firmly rooted there already.

Chapter Eight

Nolan ached to get up and pace. Anger still scorched him at what Hiram had done. Shooting him was one thing, but he'd actually tried to kill Sofia. The first shot that had broken the night had been meant for her.

In a tight voice, Drew related the events to Nolan while the doc stitched him up. Hiram had sneaked up behind them and chanced a shot at Sofia's back. Thank God the fence post had saved her, the shot deflected.

Drew had gotten her to safety, and for that, Nolan could never thank him enough.

"Looks like this will heal if you can stay off your feet, Hollis," Doc said around a cigar.

Beside him, Drew gave a bark of laughter. "Little chance at that, Doc."

The eagle-eyed doctor gave Nolan a piercing stare similar to those he'd often received from his parents. "Give it your best shot, Hollis. I want to see this wound closed by the end of the week when I swing by the ranch to check on you."

"I'll do my best," Nolan answered. Hot pain stung his side, but the wound was in the fleshy part of his torso just under his ribs, and had missed the organs. Still, it burned Nolan to no end that Hiram had gotten a piece of him. But in the end, he'd helped Hiram right out of the territory when they put him aboard that train.

It had pulled out an hour before dawn, and then he'd heard the Hollises celebrating in the street with whistles and crows of victory.

He'd been stuck inside with a metal instrument probing his bullet wound until he thought he'd scream. Sofia had begged to be allowed in, but Isaac had refused. Drew said the Jade Pair stood just outside the door, waiting for news on his condition—a condition he'd rate as "damn annoyed." He finally had freed his lovers and couldn't even take them to bed. Though his pecker worked well enough. It had stood at attention off and on since he'd been forced to lie down in the patient room.

The doc pointedly looked at the sheet rising between Nolan's legs, then back at him. "Don't disrupt this wound, Hollis. You hear me?"

The quiet tones of Sofia's voice reached Nolan through the door, and his cock stiffened painfully. "Sure do." He couldn't stop the smile that tugged the corner of his mouth.

Shaking his head, Doc placed all his instruments on a high shelf and washed his hands in the basin. "I'll allow your family to take you home but only in a wagon. Then I expect them to put you to bed...alone."

Drew sniggered from his perch near the bed. "You're asking a mighty lot from us, Doc. We're no nurses. We're cowboys."

Doc nodded, a smile showing through the creases around his eyes. "I see well enough what you Hollises are. I wonder why I haven't patched up more gunshot wounds in you. Let's keep it that way."

With that, he exited the room, closing the door before Nolan could get a glimpse of Sofia or Isaac.

"I'll have someone get a wagon for us to haul your sorry ass back home in," Drew drawled. "I'll be back for you in a while."

"Sounds good."

Drew moved to the door, but Nolan stopped him. "And Drew?"

He turned with a smile. "No thanks necessary. Someday I hope you can help me as I've helped you."

Nolan started to laugh, but the pain made him gasp and snort instead. "Let's hope you find love in a much easier fashion than the rest of us Hollises have."

"That's for damn sure. You all can keep your fights and intrigue. I'll stick to a farm girl with no worrisome past or meddling folks." Turning back to the door, he left the room.

The tonic the doc had administered began to take effect, and Nolan drifted. He faintly recalled being carried outside and laid in a wagon of hay and quilts. He knew the warmth of Isaac's body and Sofia's feminine scent.

When he finally awakened, he was stretched out on his own bed, completely nude. The sheet dipped off his body, and his cock bobbed in the air from the dream he'd just had—a dream where he and Isaac had Sofia on her hands and knees, penetrating her from front and back, their cocks slipping easily against the thin barrier inside her body.

A quiet moan sounded, and he snapped his head to the side. On the floor at the far side of the room, a makeshift bed had been created. Here,

Isaac was sprawled between Sofia's thighs, licking her wet pussy.

Nolan groaned in response to the sight. They both looked at him, lust in their gazes.

Turning onto his good side, Nolan stared at them. The pain in his torso was considerably less already. Doc had said it would take some time for the muscle damage to heal, but Nolan wouldn't be down that long.

But the need in his balls was so great he felt he might explode from simply watching his lovers.

Isaac's auburn hair fell across Sofia's bronzed thighs, but he angled his head so Nolan could see his mouth moving over her folds. Juices glistened on his jaw. As he pulled his head back, a thread of cream connected his tongue to her body.

A full-body shudder claimed Nolan even as Sofia cooed with ecstasy. Her breasts pitched high into the air, the tips rosy and inviting. Her face was flushed, lips parted on a gasp. A long lock of hair tumbled into one blazing eye.

"Nolan..." She skimmed her breasts with her palms, pressing harder on her nipples.

"Touch them for me, baby. Imagine my fingers on them, swirling, pinching."

Arching her back off the floor, she plucked at her hard buds. Isaac dove back into her pussy, lapping at her clit.

Nolan could nearly taste her just by watching. The scent of her arousal permeated the air, making his cock throb harder. Precum oozed from it, leaving a wet ring on the sheet.

Pulling back the fabric, he wrapped his hand around his cock and fisted it once. Twice. Need surged up from his balls, and the urge to orgasm stole his control. Gazing at his lovers on the floor, he stroked his length, running the veined shaft through his digits.

Sofia twisted her nipples and released a harsh cry. Isaac plunged two fingers deep into her pussy, eyes half-lidded as he delivered his intimate kiss on her pearl.

Her soft belly dipped, and her breathing became erratic. Nolan let his gaze lick over their nude forms. Isaac's muscles strained, the light spattering of reddish hair on the backs of his thighs inviting Nolan's body. To sink over him, cushioned against that soft hair, would be the ultimate satisfaction at this

moment.

As he thought of his swollen head passing through the muscular rim of Isaac's anus, the ache in his groin grew.

Splaying her legs wide, Sofia gave him the glimpse he needed to send him over the edge. Isaac's fingers moving in and out of her, wet with her juices, the velvety flat of his tongue pressing on her neediest spot.

With a raucous groan, Nolan burst. Hot cum spurted over his fingers and onto his stomach. Sofia held his gaze as she tipped over the edge into her own release. Shudders of bliss shook her body. A blush stole over her skin and took up residence in her cheeks. She bucked against Isaac's mouth, seeking more.

Continuing to pump his cock, Nolan seemed to experience everything his lovers were. Isaac slanted his tongue over her pussy, gathering every drop of her cum. Beard stubble glistening with it, he lifted his head and met Nolan's gaze.

That heated green stare ignited Nolan all over again. He stroked his length one more time.

"Take her, Isaac. Let me see you slide your cock into her soaking pussy."

Gaining his knees, Isaac straightened, allowing Nolan a long look at his body. The ridge of muscle above his hips begged Nolan to sink his teeth into it or to grip it as he pounded Isaac's tight ass.

But the long shaft rising from the nest of pubic curls made Nolan's mouth water. "Fuck her, Isaac. Then I want you to slip your cock into my mouth and feed me both of your flavors. After that, Sofia can straddle my face."

"Ohhh," Sofia moaned.

Isaac gripped his cock at the base and guided it toward her entrance. The bare lips parted around his length, hugging him deliciously.

White-hot need flared to life in Nolan's body. Instantly, he was ready to go again.

"We'll take care of you too, Nolan. Don't spill any more of your cum unless it's in one of our mouths or bodies." Isaac withdrew from Sofia's pussy almost to the tip. Then he slammed his swollen cock back inside.

As they moved together, Nolan devoured the sight. They gazed into

each other's eyes as they moved in tandem. Yes, the Jade Pair moved as one, and in Nolan's heart, they held equal space. One couldn't exist without the other.

He smeared the first droplets of precum over the head of his arousal, holding Sofia's gaze as he did. She ran her little pink tongue over her lower lip, enticing him further.

"Tell me how she feels, Isaac. How it feels to sink into her body."

"She's tight," Isaac bit off. "Hotter than the flames of hell. I can still feel her pulsing from her last release."

She dug her fingers into the hard muscles of Isaac's ass. His cock appeared and disappeared between her thighs in frenzied rhythm. Nolan's balls drew up against his body, the first twitches of impending release upon him.

Squeezing his needy head, he stopped himself from erupting. Isaac was in charge this time. He'd saved Nolan, stood up against Hiram in a fair fight for their freedom. He deserved to call the shots.

Suddenly, Isaac stiffened. "She's squeezing me, Nolan. I can't hold back."

"Don't. Come with him, Sofia. Come, baby. All over his cock. Do it for me—for us." Nolan's voice came out strangled. He lashed his balls to his body with his other hand and forced back his orgasm.

The hard slap of Isaac's body against Sofia's soft curves echoed in the room.

Sofia's nipples darkened. Her breathing stopped. And then she was crying out, writhing in Isaac's hold. Their lips met in a violent kiss of passion. Tongues mating, lips hungry as they rode out their wild release.

Isaac collapsed forward, slowing their kiss, still rocking within her body. He watched their tender caresses and their exchange of love.

Dropping his forehead to hers, Isaac whispered, "I can't imagine my life without you."

"Nor I," she murmured breathlessly.

Then they both looked to Nolan.

"Time to show our cowboy just how much he owns our hearts," Isaac said. He pulled his slackening shaft free of her body. Nolan locked his gaze to the length, his mouth watering for a taste.

Reaching down, Isaac clasped Sofia's hand and helped her to her feet. Together, they drifted across the room to the bed where Nolan lay. With each step they took, they burrowed more firmly into his heart.

Sofia's eyes glowed. "I'm so relieved to see you awake, love." She trailed a hand down his cheek—a hand that still carried the musk of Isaac's body.

Growling, Nolan turned his face into her touch, pressing a kiss to her palm. She shivered, a smile of such tender love gracing her lips that Nolan's heart sped up.

"Isaac, come here." Nolan reeled his lover in and wrapped an arm around him. In that embrace, he poured out all his feelings—appreciation that Isaac had stood up to Hiram, that he loved and protected Sofia as much as Nolan did. And that he allowed Nolan into their lives and bed when he could have easily kept him out.

Twisting in the embrace, Nolan brushed his mouth over Sofia's lips and jaw, down to her throat. He cupped one heavy breast and felt Isaac's fingers tangle with his. Together, they strummed her hard nipple.

"Yesss, please." She pushed against their touch, begging for more.

Isaac guided Nolan's hand to her other breast, and they delivered another tormenting touch. When she was wiggling like a kitten in need of a good stroking, Nolan took her nipple into his mouth. He sucked the peak hard, drawing until she cried out.

The juicy scents of their lovemaking filled Nolan with a longing to taste more of her—of them. His cock twitched, and Isaac placed a hand over it. Nolan groaned.

He continued to suck Sofia's breasts as Isaac lightly ran his fingers over the lines of Nolan's erection. When he pressed a fingertip into the depression at the tip, he found Nolan's fluids and gave a moan.

Lifting his head, Nolan caught Isaac sticking his wet finger into his mouth and sucking all the precum off.

With a hand on Sofia's spine, he pulled her near the bed. "Come up here, over me and facing away. I want your pussy grinding on my lips, your and Isaac's cum in my mouth."

Rasping with want, she did his bidding. The mattress sank around his ears. Staring up at her round little thighs, he nearly came undone. Wetness streaked them. Turning his mouth against one stream, he licked it off in quick

strokes. The hot, salty cum exploded on his tongue.

Isaac began kissing his lover. He took soft nips from Nolan's calves to the juncture of his thighs. When Isaac's heated breath skimmed over his eager cock, Nolan held his breath. Then Isaac skipped by his erection and continued to kiss down the other thigh, swirling his leg hairs with his tongue.

Automatically, Nolan parted his legs on the bed, and Isaac took immediate advantage. Sliding his hands under Nolan's ass, he lifted him slightly to accept his tongue at the most intimate spot yet.

The feel of his scorching mouth running over Nolan's anus threatened to drive him mad. Rumbling with lust, he thrust his tongue deep into Sofia's channel and gathered the cream lingering in her body.

Isaac pressed the point of his tongue against Nolan's anus, opening him slowly as Nolan stretched Sofia in the same way.

Dark need tore through him. His injury was forgotten, and he knew only the desperate want to give and receive pleasure.

The sounds of their combined heavy breathing mingled—a symphony of love. Nolan's body tightened, pulled by an invisible cord. He traced a pattern over Sofia's sweet pussy, addicted to her musk like a person who craved opium. She rolled her body sensuously against his mouth.

When Isaac speared him on his tongue, Nolan couldn't hold back a rough groan of pleasure. He tried to rock against him, but Isaac held him tightly, keeping him from doing any work that might injure himself.

Slowly, Sofia tipped forward at the waist, lowering her mouth to Nolan's aching cock. She gripped the head between her lips and teased the tip.

"Ahhh!" He was going to burst from a single touch. Isaac's magical tongue drove him out of his head, and adding Sofia's would be his undoing.

Isaac fucked Nolan perfectly with his mouth. Sofia worked his length in perfect timing to Isaac's motion. When Nolan felt the first contractions of Sofia's body on his lips, he licked her clit more insistently. A guttural moan burst from her.

And then she was coming, juices coating his lips. Sensation shot up from his balls, and with a bright burst, he came. Sofia's mouth worked around his length. When Isaac flicked his tongue in Nolan's entrance, more was wrung from him.

Gasping, he let his body go limp. Fatigue washed over him. Though

he'd done little physically, the act had still exhausted him.

Sofia tumbled onto the mattress beside him, gracefully moving so she didn't jar him. Gently, Isaac lowered his hips and climbed off the bed. He crossed the room to the washbasin and quickly cleaned himself, then swished his mouth with wine.

"Bring me some of that." Nolan gestured to the flask of his mother's homemade elderberry wine.

Grinning, Isaac placed the bottle in Nolan's hand, and Sofia helped him to sit up to drink. The sweet yet pungent flavor filled his head and made him sleepier.

"I hate to admit it, but this healing is going to be more difficult than I'd like."

"A big man like you needs to be in charge," Sofia whispered, smoothing a hand down his chest.

He handed her the flask, and she drank the last of the wine. His mother would soon be putting up more, and that meant Sofia would be shadowing her, picking berries and learning how to make the brew. But first, there were a lot of other things Nolan wanted to teach her.

Snagging her around the waist, he pressed her down beside him. Isaac climbed into bed too. Both their bodies conformed to fit around Nolan's. Peace filled him.

"I believe great things are in our future, my loves." He kissed Sofia's mouth, then Isaac's. "My pa promised to front me some money to start building our home."

Sofia gasped. Her eyes glittered. "Really?"

Isaac looked past him out the window. The day was in full force, the sun high and the fields vibrant green. "Where?"

Nolan pointed. "Top corner of that field. I have the perfect spot in mind. Our house won't be fancy, but I'll do the best I can for you, I promise."

Isaac made a noise in his throat. "We know that firsthand, Nolan. You've been here for us from the start. We'll work hard for you too. I want to help with the building of that house and hope to learn enough about the horse trade to work alongside you."

Nolan rubbed his jaw along Isaac's, then over Sofia's soft cheek. "First, I think another celebration is in order for this family. I'd like to reveal my

heart to all the Hollises, let them know we're a team. Just the three of us."

Sighing, Sofia rested her head against his shoulder. She reached across Nolan's chest and placed her hand over Isaac's, binding the three of them in an unconventional but loving union.

"Nothing's ever felt so right. I swear to love my two strong men for the rest of my life."

"I promise to never allow myself to be walked on again," Isaac added.

Nolan tightened his arms around both his lovers, drawing them closer as sleep began to haze his mind. "And I vow to cherish you as long as I shall live."

A collective sigh sounded in response to his words—words spoken without a preacher in sight, but ones that were felt to the fibers of their beings.

"And let no man tear us asunder," he finished, eyes drifting shut and floating on the happiness of his new world.

THE END

Em Petrova

Em Petrova lives in Backwoods, Pennsylvania, where she raises four kids and a Labradoodle named Daisy Hasselhoff. Her dream is to buy an old pickup and travel small-town USA meeting people and hearing their stories. Her heroes are hardworking—in bed and out—and she is known for panty-scorching erotic romance.

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