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# **ADELLA'S ENEMY**

Jacqui Nelson

*Can the pursuit of an old enemy lead to a new love?*

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# Chapter 1



*EMPORIA, KANSAS*

*March 28, 1870*

Standing on the fringe of a courtyard full of women, Adella Willows waited to make a bargain with the Devil. Not that the Devil himself was coming to meet her. He was sending a fat, yellow-bellied Yankee senator dressed in a suit as fine as President Grant's.

Senator Mansfield Moreton finally sauntered out of Emporia's most stately building and through the now disbanding suffrage rally. He passed Adella and her tripod camera without a glance, so close that even out of the corner of her eye she glimpsed the silver in his mutton-chop whiskers.

Adella didn't turn her camera to follow him. She wasn't here for a picture. Her camera was only a ruse to throw off anyone watching, as was her decision to keep her back to the senator. Both she and the senator knew this meeting was best kept clandestine. But her inability to see him made the skin between her shoulder blades itch as if a sniper's rifle were aimed at her back.

Leaving her camera facing the thinning crowd, she draped the cloth hood over her arm and set a spare lens atop the camera to catch the senator's reflection. He'd settled his heavy frame on the bench behind her and to her left. His image was distorted and unearthly, as if she viewed him through Alice's looking-glass.

"You don't really believe in all this equality for the masses, do you?" he asked her, angling his body away from her so he appeared to be watching the women departing the square with their "right to vote" picket signs.

She busied herself packing the rest of her equipment. "I'm a photographer with the *Atlanta Intelligencer*." The lie flowed unbidden from her lips—a force of habit. The truth that followed came more slowly. "I believe only in my next assignment, the one that's in your best interest to support."

The senator snorted a laugh. "My contacts said you could be blunt. You talk like an equal or worse, a superior. The Union may have freed the slaves and one day may grant women the vote, but mankind will never be equal.



We are different. We are individuals. That's what has brought you to Emporia. You hold a grudge against an individual, a very long-standing grudge."

Her hands froze. But her gaze darted to the lens.

The senator's regard remained on the last lingering protesters. "The war's been over for five years," he added.

"The war's over for the dead, not for their families." Her voice sounded only slightly high-pitched, thank Dixie.

Aiming for a nonchalance she did not feel, she lifted the camera hood from the crook of her arm and pretended great interest in smoothing out its wrinkles before folding the cloth in half. "Too many soldiers, on both sides, suffered needlessly to pad the pockets of the wealthy."

"Ah, once again we speak of an individual—a prisoner of war who died a month before Lee's surrender."

Pain sliced her heart like a saber strike, swift and merciless. The war had stolen her home and her youth. She'd been fifteen when the fighting started. All of that was forgivable. The loss in that final month was not. Declan— She must not think of him. She must focus on the task at hand. Concentrating on keeping her hands steady, she finished folding the hood.

"I've been checking up on you, Miss Willows." The senator propped one ankle on his knee and laid his intertwined fingers over his round gut. "Why do you think you're here and not some other agent?"

"I'm here because the law won't prosecute a prominent northern businessman who illegally sold rations meant for Confederate prisoners of war." She knew this well, had witnessed it firsthand. Rich Yankees—even ones supposedly assigned to deal out justice—only took care of each other. For her there hadn't been any justice, which told her that if she didn't look out for herself, no one else would.

And Senator Moreton? She'd thought he was here to increase his already ample wealth. But maybe helping her ruin Levi Parsons was also retaliation for a business deal gone wrong or a political slight. Did Moreton hold a grudge against Parsons as well?

Watching Moreton closely, she asked, "Why did you give me the document incriminating Parsons?"

The senator's image shimmered. The line of his shoulders and the angle of his jaw suddenly radiated tension. "To determine how far you're willing to go—off the books, of course. You've known Parsons was responsible for

your brother's death for a week. But the judge still struts around unscathed."

Anger stiffened Adella's spine. She pushed the emotion into a far corner of her heart and made herself relax. "I won't become a murderer like Parsons, if that's what you're wondering. Death is too quick. I wish to bleed Parsons dry, but only of his precious greenbacks. Tell me, Senator Moreton, why do you think you're here and not some other government bigwig?"

"Me? What the blazes are you talking about? I organized this meeting, not you."

She set the hood on the leather valise that she always kept close at hand. Inside was the document Moreton had given her. The proof she'd searched so long to find. The form named Parsons as the ration contractor for Camp Douglas.

She raised her chin and focused solely on the senator's reflection. "You and Parsons are business partners promoting the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad."

He shrugged. "That's common knowledge."

"But not common knowledge that you own stock in its rival, the Joy Line."

The senator's silence stretched her nerves taut.

"If Parsons fails to reach Indian Territory before the Joy Line," she continued, "he forfeits the land grants. His share prices become worthless. He'll lose a fortune. I can ensure his loss is your gain."

"How?"

"You presume to know everything, you tell me."

"You're merely a rabble rouser, a former Rebel spy turned unofficial government agent. You—" Planting both feet on the ground, he twisted round on the bench to stare at her openly. The whites of his deep-set eyes flashed in the glass. "You can provoke enough dissent to halt a railroad?"

"I need only delay its construction from reaching the border before your favored railroad. But to do so I need you to finance my efforts and keep the other agents out of my way—off the books, of course."

"I underestimated you, Miss Willows. Don't make the same mistake with others. You may scheme above the masses, but you can return to them very quickly." The senator stood and turned to leave. "Get the job done and don't get caught," he said, not looking back. "Or you might end up with a fate equal to your brother's."

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# Chapter 2



*NEW CHICAGO, KANSAS—340 miles north of the Indian Territory border*  
*One day later*

The steam whistle howled. Brakes screeched. Then the cheering of Adella's fellow passengers joined the hullabaloo as the train halted at New Chicago's station. Only a week off a ship from Ireland, the men had talked of nothing but employment and adventure at the end of the railroad line. The simplicity of their ambitions made her feel ancient beyond her twenty-four years.

Sadness squeezed her chest with the force of a thousand gloomy days rolled into one. A new town held the allure of new beginnings. But not for her. Never for her. She was only here to avenge the death of one man by ruining the life of another.

She waited until the last passenger left the train before she followed. Her muscles protested, her body aching after sitting on the hard bench for hours. On the other side of the platform, the station—a rectangular building cobbled together from scrap wood fit only for a bonfire—wasn't any more comforting. Nor were the steps leading down to a narrow path of boards thrown over a sea of mud. Or the towering cloudbank, heavy with the scent of rain.

She might never come face to face with Levi Parsons in this rough and tumble place, but this was where she'd exact her revenge on him.

Behind her, the engine hissed, spewing one final plume of smoke. At the end of the train, a man dressed in the latest fashion of a bowler hat and a dark-blue three-piece suit descended from a private railcar. Reaching back, he helped down a woman with vibrant red hair only slightly more remarkable than her outfit. Her jacket might have been commissioned by some unknown army, but the trouser cuffs—visible under the billowing hem of her ankle-length skirt as she stepped down—could only have been inspired by a free spirit. The man offered her his arm. Then he strode toward the stairs, forcing her to keep up with his swift stride.

Adella recognized the pair from her time skulking around public events while she searched for the Yankee who'd killed Declan. Tears pricked the back of her eyes. She blinked them away. Your mission, she reminded herself, think only of your mission.

Henry Stevens, Levi Parsons' Chief of Operations, was in charge of ensuring the Katy reached the Indian Territory border before the competition. Adella was here to ensure he failed.

But why was Parsons' daughter here?

Adella made a beeline for the stairs, timing her pace so her path crossed the couple's. She knew the instant her amethyst silk dress snared Stevens' attention. His pace slowed. His gaze lowered, taking in her low-cut décolletage, corseted waist and swaying skirt—then traveled up again, pausing just a little too long on her bosom before finally finding her eyes. In her experience, people chose clothing for the wrong reasons or worse no reason at all. She'd assembled her wardrobe to trigger certain reactions.

Stevens halted, forcing Miss Parsons to do the same.

Adella's dress had done its job.

"May I be of service, Miss...?" Stevens gestured to the leather valise in her hand.

The case held her letters, and a glut of photographs and documents she'd painstakingly assembled over the last five years. Those years had been necessary to prepare for this day. So had the years preceding—the years she'd spent dressed as a boy in order to play her part for the Confederacy as a Rebel spy. In every stage of her life, she'd employed whatever tools she could.

Today, her specialty had become using information to provoke unrest. Pictures and words were powerful motivators, but only with people who had a conscience. The contents of her valise would be no help when dealing with a social climber like Stevens.

"My name is Miss Willows," she replied, keeping a firm grasp on her valise. "Thank you for your offer, but I wouldn't want to be a bother. I apologize if I seemed to be racing you to the stairs."

She widened her eyes and talked quickly to make her voice sound breathless. "As a new employee of the *Atlanta Intelligencer*, I'm just eager to record as much as possible about the railroad, and the towns springing up around it. Can you imagine being responsible for something as big as the Missouri, Kansas and...Texas Railroad?" She forced herself to stumble over the name, as if it were unfamiliar.

Stevens chuckled. "In fact I can. I'm Henry Stevens. We call this line the Katy, and I'm in charge of building her." His chest swelled with the proclamation. "And this is Miss Parsons."

Miss Parsons tilted her head, but the acknowledgment, although polite, was a tad stiff. Was Miss Parsons jealous of Stevens' interest? Adella

racked her brain for a way to soothe any ruffled feathers. If Miss Parsons were annoyed with her, it would serve no purpose.

“There are so few women on the frontier. I hope you won’t think it forward of me, but will you consent to calling me Adella?”

Miss Parsons’ eyebrows shot up, but just for an instant. “I’ll only agree,” she replied, “if you call me Kate in return.”

Adella admired Kate’s gracious acceptance of her offer. But the surprise Kate had shown gave her pause. What kind of life had this well-to-do woman led that she expected Adella to be unfriendly?

Adella couldn’t afford to be impressed or concerned about Parsons’ daughter. She’s your enemy’s flesh and blood, she reminded herself. During the war, Parsons had been awarded the government contract to supply food to Confederate prisoners detained at Camp Douglas. The soldiers hadn’t been fed. Parsons had gotten richer. Thousands of men had starved to death, including Declan. The pain and suffering her twin brother must have endured—

She quickly bottled up the grief that threatened to engulf her again. She couldn’t afford to be weak. Not now. Not ever.

“You’re here to photograph the railroad, aren’t you?” Kate asked. “I saw you taking pictures at the suffrage rally in Emporia.”

Alarm hit Adella like a mule kick to the forehead. What else had Kate seen? Shoving down her panic with her grief, she recalled her activities yesterday in Emporia. She’d insisted on meeting Senator Moreton after the rally. She’d chosen the bench on the edge of the square, so they’d be less noticeable. She’d been careful. *Liar*, she reproached herself. She’d agreed to the meeting with less than her usual forethought, because she wanted the senator to support her mission.

Had Kate seen them? Best to find out immediately. Best to be bold. Best to bluff.

She plastered a smile on her face and dredged her mind for a pleasant memory to make it appear genuine. “Were you there at the end of the rally? I could have taken your picture too.”

“I had to leave early to luncheon with my father,” Kate replied.

Then Kate hadn’t seen her with the senator. *Thank Dixie*. Adella’s smile became real.

“It must be rewarding,” Kate continued, “capturing such monumental moments in our nation’s evolution.”



“We race toward change. I can only hope that certain transformations arrive before others, and that I am present when they do.” Adella bowed her head, striving to not only appear humble but to gather her wits.

She was doing more than hoping. She was making sure the changes she wanted happened. But if she wished to shape the future—to revenge Declan’s death and make up for failing him during the war—she must exercise greater caution in the present. It wouldn’t do to have Kate uncover her real purpose for being here. The information gathering should only flow one way. Information like why Parsons’ very observant daughter was in New Chicago.

“Are you in town for a visit?” she asked.

Kate raised her chin. “A business endeavor.”

“We’ll discuss that later,” Stevens muttered.

Pink flared across Kate’s cheeks. It was hard to tell if it came from embarrassment or anger. Kate gestured toward the train. “You’ll want to get a photograph of the new engine.”

Stevens was suddenly all smiles. “Yes. Why don’t you come by my railcar tomorrow? I can show you how best to photograph the Katy. Surely your newspaper, or you, could use the donation I’m willing to bestow for a favorable article.”

Kate’s fingers tightened on his arm. “Buying good will isn’t the same as creating good will.”

Adella held her tongue, waiting for the pair to reveal more insights into their personalities.

Stevens patted Kate’s hand. “I’m neglecting my duties. It’s time I secured you a room at the hotel.” He tipped his bowler to Adella. “Until tomorrow, Miss Willows.”

The formality of calling her by her surname wasn’t lost on her. Stevens knew the power of words and money. But he didn’t seem to know the power in a woman. That could make him an easier nut to crack than the complex creature that was Kate Parsons. Although a frown marred Kate’s brow, she let Stevens steer her down the stairs toward town.

Adella’s thoughts spun with ideas for using the friction between the pair to delay the railroad’s construction. What was their relationship? Whatever it was, it was a bonus she hadn’t expected when she approached them. But that was for tomorrow, as Stevens had rightfully said.

They weren't the only people in New Chicago she could use to stall construction. If the Katy lost the race, Parsons' stock would plummet. He'd lose everything he valued. Parsons had destroyed the one thing she cherished, so she'd do the same to him. Parsons still had family but, judging from her research on him, he only seemed to care about wealth and power. When she was done with his railroad, he'd have little left.

She crossed the now empty platform to the station's solitary window. The porter had left her trunks next to it, but he was nowhere to be seen. Standing under the sagging eave, she cupped her hand against the glass, and leaned close to peer at the shadowy interior.

"Look lively," a deep Irish brogue boomed.

She flattened her spine against the station's wall. Its uneven surface jabbed her in a dozen uncomfortable places. She didn't move.

Footsteps pounded up the stairs, making the boards shudder beneath her feet. Then a lone man bounded up the last step and across the platform, his attention fixed on the train. From his shaggy hair to his massive back to his powerfully built limbs he was a series of shades of brown. She squinted. He was covered in mud.

"Hop to, lads," he hollered. "We're late!"

A dozen men raced up the steps, swarming the platform like ants summoned from the earth to capture a hill. Brown ants. They shared their leader's coloring. Like him, they were caked in mud so thick it covered them like a second skin, like armor on toy soldiers cast from the same mold...except they were the varying size and shape of ordinary men. All save their leader. Nothing ordinary about that one. With the height and muscular breadth of a giant, he towered over everyone.

The men who'd arrived with her on the train returned. They shuffled up the steps at a much slower pace. Startling clean standing next to the mud-covered men, they clustered together and darted glances at the big Irishman.

He crossed his arms and turned to face them. "Supply master usually meets new recruits rather than letting you wander off. Informed me last minute he had another task requiring his attention. Every delay means less track laid at day's end. So we're moving fast to make it up. Some of the McGrady Gang"—he gestured to the dozen mud-caked men—"will show you how to uncouple Stevens' railcar."

Two men leapt between the cars. Metal clanged and scraped.

“Pay attention. You’ll all take a turn eventually. When they’re done, jump aboard the train. It’s time to earn your pay.”

“But we’ve been travelin’ since dawn,” one of the new recruits grumbled.

“And you’ll work every day from dawn till dusk,” the big Irishman replied. “Welcome to the life of railroader, boyo. You’ll get used to it soon enough.”

“It’s not me that needs convincing, it’s me arse.”

All of the workmen broke out in guffaws. Their leader didn’t join them. Then a deafening squeal came from the front of the train. The laughter died as they spun as one to face the sound.

The platform was barely long enough to provide access to the two passenger cars. Between those cars and the engine stood a stockcar piled high with the iron rails used to form the track. A man, wearing loose fitting railroad bibs and a wide-brimmed hat drawn low over his face, crouched on top of the rails. The workmen—both clean and muddy—surged to the edge of the platform, blocking her view.

“It’s one of the Joy Men.” The declaration came from the big Irishman hidden somewhere beyond the wall of bodies between her and the train.

A spy for the rival railroad? If James Joy had sent a rabble rouser from his line, she’d best learn as much about him as possible. Starting with what he looked like.

She pushed through the workmen. Each man spun with a scowl, ready to berate whoever poked him in the ribs or stepped on his toes. When they saw her, they stumbled back, jaws dropping. She reached the platform’s edge just in time to see the man on the stockcar leap to the engine, run across its back and slide down the cattle guard to the ground.

“After him, lads!” The big Irishman roared from somewhere close.

She turned but didn’t see him. The men she did see stood frozen, their gazes locked on her.

Their leader shoved through them with a growl. “Why aren’t you—?” He slammed to a halt in front of her. He hadn’t touched her, but the sight of him looming over her with a combination of anger and disbelief twisting his mud-streaked face, pushed her back. She teetered on the edge of the platform, the weight of her valise throwing her further off balance. Many hands reached for her, including the giant’s.

She refused to let go of her valise and accept them.

She fell with a shriek. Her rear end hit the mud with a bruising wallop. She gritted her teeth to stop any additional embarrassing outbursts then, valise still in hand, staggered to her feet. And promptly sank ankle deep in the muck.

Galloping hoof beats splashed the sodden earth behind her. She could only assume the man had found a horse and was making his retreat. Instinctively, she tried to give chase. The mud held her feet prisoner. *Blast it to Hell*. All she could do was stare over her shoulder and watch the man ride pell-mell out of town, his floppy-brimmed hat waving goodbye.

A colossal groan rent the air. She jerked round to face the train, as did the men on the platform above her. The terrible sound came again, making the stockcar shudder with its force. A crack like gunfire echoed. Chains burst. Iron screeched against iron. And the mountain of rails toppled toward her. Trapped as she was in the muck below, she'd soon be crushed in a muddy grave. Fear devoured all further thought.

A broad hand clamped round her arm and yanked. Her feet popped from the mud, and she sailed through the air before landing on the platform. The hand released her. Shock rendered her legs useless, crumpling her like a rag doll on the boards beside her valise.

With the force of Thor's hammer, the first rail struck the earth. A shower of mud pelted the platform on either side of her. The clanging that followed left her ears ringing.

"Did I hurt you?" the now familiar brogue whispered, so close it raised goose flesh.

Lifting her head, she stared into eyes as silver as newly minted dollars, the only difference in a face as muddy as the rest. The man's massive frame crouched protectively over her. She was bombarded with memories of her mother's stories, tales passed down for generations of legendary Celtic warriors. She had never dreamed of encountering one of those mythical men in human form.

He reached out to touch her.

"She all right, Mac?"

The question halted his hand. He stood, taking his warmth with him.

"Are you daft?" His tone had gone from hushed moorland stream to storm-tossed sea. "Why were you standing so close to the platform edge? What kind of harebrained lass loiters around a rail platform rather than heading straight into town?"

She pushed to her feet, ignoring his out-stretched hand when he bent to assist her. Instead, she clenched her valise with both hands. "I was unaware certain areas of New Chicago were off limits."

His brows slanted at an unforgiving angle. "Maybe they should be. You could've been killed."

She glanced at the dozen muddy men, hovering close behind him. He'd called them the McGrady Gang. They were nodding, their faces etched with concern. Chivalry from a band of dirt-poor and dirt-covered Irish laborers? Once again, the new recruits stood back. Watching and waiting.

Their leader continued frowning, this time in the direction the rider had disappeared. "Should'a stopped him. Now my men will have to work double, loading those rails and unloading them at the worksite."

Ah. Now he revealed his true self. He wasn't as worried about her as he was about his work and his men. This she could understand and use.

"Sorry to be such a bother." She lowered her gaze and tried to appear contrite, which wasn't difficult as she truly regretted seeing anyone involved in such back-breaking labor. But being a bother was her job. Now she must become even more bothersome. She must embrace every opportunity to delay this construction crew from reaching the border.

Her Irish rescuer exhaled a weary breath and said in a much gentler tone, "'Tisn't your fault. Don't worry about us."

"Oh, but I do. And to apologize for seeing your men's lives made more difficult, I promise to buy each and every one of them a drink tonight."

A round of hoorays went up.

"Now, lass, you needn't—"

"I must."

"Miss, it's not necessary—"

"It is."

"Look, lady, I can't let—"

"You can. And you can call me Miss Willows."

"Stubborn English," he muttered.

Annoyance made her squeeze her valise's handle even tighter. "I'm not English. I'm American."

"Isn't Willows an English name?"

She opened her mouth, then snapped it shut. She wondered if she might wrench the handle from her valise, so tight had her grip become.

His eyes narrowed even more. “If you’ve got something to say, Miss Willows, say it.”

“You’re overbearing and opinionated—an Irishman I heard all about in my youth.” Her mother’s tales of her home country hadn’t always been admiring.

Behind him, the McGrady Gang hooted in mirth. “She’s put ye in yer place, Mac.”

She felt no pleasure in the accomplishment. It served no purpose. Unfortunately, she was struggling to recall her purpose. Her befuddlement had arrived with the big Irishman, the one the men called Mac. Her reaction to him was dangerous. He was dangerous.

Refusing to look at him, she stared at the train. She was here to delay construction of the track, so Parsons lost the race and his ill-gotten gains. She was here for Declan. “Mr. Mac, I—”

“Cormac.”

She couldn’t stop her gaze from returning to him.

“That’s my name.” He glanced away as if he suddenly didn’t want to look at her either. “My friends call me Mac.”

A stab of regret robbed her of a reply. She forced herself to welcome the hurt. She wasn’t here to make friends, so she should be happy that he didn’t number her among his. In her line of work, friendships never helped. Too much guilt came with them.

Hurried footsteps rattled the stairs. Cormac installed himself between her and whoever approached.

“What the devil’s going on, McGrady?” Despite the voice being clipped and angry, she recognized its owner as the previously sugar-toned Henry Stevens. “I hired you to save time,” he barked, “not squander it.” Stevens’ footsteps grew louder, heading toward the platform edge.

Cormac’s hands fisted at his sides. He shifted sideways with Stevens. Without a word, the McGrady Gang moved as well. Cormac McGrady and the men named after him formed a tight circle around her, keeping her hidden.

Did they worry what Stevens might say if he saw her among them?

“Everything’s under control.” Cormac’s voice was firm, resuming the tone he’d used when he’d first rallied his workers. “Someone broke the chains and dumped the load.”

“One of the Joy Men?” Stevens asked.

“Who else? You got problems with other folks you haven’t told me about?” A note of challenge had crept into Cormac’s tone. But when he didn’t receive an answer, he merely shrugged. “All I know for certain is the man left us with more work.” His gaze shifted to the new recruits. “Into the mud, lads, and put those rails back where they belong.”

Hesitant footsteps scraped the platform. Voices grumbled. The platform shook. Mud splashed. More of the same followed, intensifying the grumbling. But Cormac and the McGrady Gang remained rooted around her like silent oaks. Only when Stevens’ swift stride stomped off, did they turn and begin jumping into the mud as well.

Cormac paused on the platform’s edge with his back to her. When the last of his men were on the ground and out of earshot, he said, “Don’t come to the saloon tonight. ’Tis a place unfit for a lady. I’ll make sure my men get what you promised. I’ll make up for their pains. I’m responsible for them, not you.”

Before she could argue, he jumped down and helped his men move the rails. The thick muscles along his shoulders and arms bulged with the effort. He would make a powerful adversary.

She’d never backed away from a challenge. Contrary to Cormac’s order, she’d buy her promised round in person, because she wanted to buy several more afterward. She’d set up her first act of disruption. Men who over-indulged in drink during the night suffered the following morning and worked much slower.

She wasn’t so sure about Celtic warriors. A shiver danced across her skin, as she watched Cormac labor with the strength of three men. The only thing to do was use his brawn to aid her mission. The image of his large hands clenching into fists as Stevens tried to march around him, leapt to mind. If she could incite a brawl tonight, then tomorrow’s progress would be even slower.

All she had to do was find the right words while coaxing the right number of drinks into the workmen and their leader.





# Chapter 3



CAREFUL TO KEEP HIS clean clothing—and his even cleaner self—out of the muck, Cormac followed the wooden footpath that led from the bathhouse to Eden's. Ahead, the hushed darkness surrounding the saloon amplified the noise within: coarse language, loud laughter and dreadful music played on an out-of-tune piano by a tone-deaf musician. How he longed for a traditional *céilí* in Ireland. But if a man wanted a drink in New Chicago, he went to Eden's.

That's where the McGrady Gang would be. Since leaving his sister, Meghan, with her new family two months ago, his gang was the closest thing he had to kin. He'd promised to buy them a round of drinks. He'd promised a very pretty lass with eyes like amber gems. A promise he suddenly wished he hadn't made. Her safety was top priority, but he longed to lose himself in those amazing eyes again.

Under some misguided notion of helping, Miss Willows had offered to compensate his men with drink. He had no idea why Americans did half the things they did, so he'd given her a way out. He wouldn't see her tonight. Despite knowing this, he paused in the saloon doorway and scanned the room. The disappointment weighing his shoulders deepened, heavier than the longest workday. No auburn-haired spitfire swathed in purple silk. No lass above him in dress, manners, and prospects.

Now that Meghan no longer needed him, his sole purpose was to see the Katy built to the border with no one killed in the process. Too many in Galway had died because of him. He wouldn't let that happen here.

But if he didn't catch the bloody saboteur who'd been harassing the railroad for weeks with rapidly mounting violence— His heart still seized at the memory of Miss Willows nearly crushed under a ton of cascading steel. Resignation joined the load on his shoulder. It snuffed out the lonely ember of yearning that had arrived with today's train. He'd been right to insist Miss Willows stay away.

His gaze sought out the McGrady Gang. He might refer to all of the Katy's workers as his men, but only one group was his gang. Formed during his five years working on the transcontinental railroad, the McGrady Gang hadn't given him any choice in the matter, not even in their name. Tonight his gang wasn't carousing with the women, or distracting the new recruits with questions about life back in Ireland, or tiring out the other gangs with arm-twisting challenges. They clustered silently around a table in the back.

What were they up to?

Behind the bar, Eden beckoned him with an elegant tilt of her chin, making the glossy dark curls piled atop her head shimmer. While he took a stool opposite her, she poured him a glass from one of the better bottles of rotgut found in the West. Then she raised her coffee mug to him in salute.

He couldn't contain the grimace that followed his first swallow. The memory of good Irish whiskey lingered on his tongue, reminding him of his failures. He couldn't pay back the dead. His trip home to Galway had shown that he couldn't even pay back the living.

"To bitter days and better nights," Eden said, taking a sip of her coffee. "And to sweet dreams."

He grimaced again. He hadn't meant to share his dreams with Eden, but that's what men did. In her mid-twenties, Eden was younger than half of the girls under her charge. But she ran her saloon, and the brothel above it, with a shrewdness that belied her age and hinted of a history heavy enough to double her years.

Whatever her past, Eden seemed to have mastered the present. Instead of taking men to her bed, she stayed downstairs and took their confessions. Eden kept their deepest secrets. Everything else the men told her, or she overheard, was fair game. She enjoyed giving advice but also enjoyed taking her own sweet time. When this happened, her pale-green eyes sparkled. Right now her eyes blazed with fireworks. She had pertinent information that concerned him.

He sent an inquiring glance toward his gang.

"Chess," she replied. "They liberated your board from your tent an hour ago."

"And to think I almost tossed it in the Atlantic coming back. Never expected they'd remember the game so fondly."

Eden shrugged, then picked up a glass and polished it. The corners of her ruby lips curled ever so slightly.

"Eden..." He scrubbed his hand over his jaw. "Cut me some line. My day's been harder than usual."

"You suffered a mishap at the station," said a voice as raspy as an old saw. Floyd, the railroad's telegraph operator, sidled up next to him. Despite his occupation, or maybe because of it, the grizzled man had a propensity for spouting secrets like a leaky rain barrel.

Propping an elbow on the bar, Cormac turned to face him. "Tell me something I don't know."

Floyd waggled his glass at him. Cormac gestured for Eden to fill it.

The old man downed the drink and smacked his lips. “Tonight the stakes of yonder game have grown. Still, whatever the outcome I’m happy.” Contrary to his proclamation he frowned at the once more empty glass in his hand.

Cormac waved impatiently for Eden to top him up.

“Very kind of you. And them,” Floyd added, gesturing to the McGrady Gang. “Whoever loses, buys drinks for everyone, including me.”

A jolt straightened Cormac’s spine. Could it be Miss Willows? No. He’d told her not to— He spat out a curse. Growing up with five sisters hadn’t taught him a thing. “Who’s buying?”

“Not yer men. So far they’ve won three matches. Still, I think they’re pondering their opponent more than their playing. From their silence, their luck’s run out. They’ll be buying the next round. Which is good”—Floyd nudged his glass toward Eden—“’cause I’m empty again.”

Cormac slammed his palm on the counter between them. “Tell me who you’re talking about.”

“Sorry, Mac. The lady’s new to me. Don’t know her name.” Floyd edged away until he disappeared into the crowd.

Shoving Cormac’s hand off the counter, Eden retrieved Floyd’s glass and deposited it in a washbasin. “Good God, these days you’re as grumpy as an old bear.”

Cormac hunched his shoulders. “She shouldn’t be here.”

Eden released a very unladylike snort. “And where should she be, Cormac McGrady? I don’t know much about the woman, having only exchanged names with her, but she’s welcome in my saloon anytime. Adella Willows is dandy for business.”

Anticipation and guilt struck a double blow dead center in his chest. He shouldn’t be happy she was here. If she got hurt—

A whisper-light touch brushed his arm. The tough-as-nails madam’s grasp was so gentle a child could’ve pulled away. But the unexpected flash of compassion that crossed Eden’s beautiful face was what held him in place. He hadn’t even realized he’d jumped to his feet.

“Go easy, Mac,” she murmured. “Allow your men to embrace life even if you can’t.” Then she released him and sauntered off to pour her next customer a drink.

Cormac forced himself to traverse the saloon slowly. How did one *go easy* when one's heart was racing like a runaway train? He stopped behind his gang and raked his fingers through his damp hair, suddenly thankful he'd taken time after scrubbing out the mud to comb the thick tangles.

"This game is delightful." Adella's voice drifted through the knot of men with the unhurried drawl of a southerner. "As is your company."

"Yer just saying that 'cause yer winning now," one of his men replied.

"Serves you right for being such excellent teachers." Her voice flowed like water, softening the sharp tongue she'd used so effectively on him just hours earlier. "My compliments to whoever taught you."

"Mac did. Played every night before..."

He strained to hear more. But the only sound, other than the continuous jabber of the saloon patrons outside the circle of his gang, was the faint click of chess pieces.

"Before?" Adella finally prompted.

"Before leaving us."

"And saying he wouldn't be back. Ever."

More silence followed his gang's gruff replies.

"So," Adella said, drawing out the word until his skin tingled and his clothes felt too tight. "He doesn't play chess with you anymore. And, as can be inferred by his absence, he doesn't socialize with you either. What does he do?"

To have her discuss him so casually, even in an admonishing tone, filled him with unexpected pleasure. It was that damned voice of hers. It made everything she said sound good. Even after five years laying track over a half-a-dozen states, he hadn't heard its match.

"Mac will get here soon as he's put the railroad to bed."

"Never asks a man to work longer than him."

"Or harder. Ye saw him. He wore as much mud as us."

Each time one of his men spoke, their tone grew increasingly earnest, as if trying to make up for their previous surliness.

"Is your work always so laborious?" she asked. "And so...dirty?"

His men laughed, their gravity gone. She'd known just how to take it away.

"This mornin' we introduced a stick of dynamite to the banks of a wee gully, levelin' it out. Not the best way to lay track, but the fastest. They hired us to be quick."

“The cloud of earth thrown into the air rained down on us somethin’ fierce. We got the worst of it.”

“The McGrady Gang always does, ’cause we’re always at the front.”

This time Cormac laughed with his gang. They spun and fell back as if they’d never heard his laugh. Maybe they hadn’t. He couldn’t remember the last time.

Adella sat with her hand hovering over her queen. Ready, with the support of her bishop, to take her opponent’s king. Her dress, this one a vibrant green, drew a man’s attention to the pale swell of her bosom. His gaze continued upward, over the slender curve of her neck, her delicately parted lips and higher. He searched for greater treasure.

In the flickering lantern light, the amber of her eyes glowed like gold at the end of a rainbow, promising untold riches. And many secrets. And one revelation. It wasn’t merely the color of her eyes that mesmerized him. It was the way she looked at him, as if he was the only man in the room.

Eden’s advice rang in his head. *Go Easy*. Not even growing up in a house full of sisters offered a clue to his next move with Adella. His gaze drifted to her hand still hovering over the chessboard. That game he knew. Each move told volumes. As did the moves not taken.

He gestured toward the piece she’d yet to move. “That’s checkmate. I think you play chess better than you let on.”

She jerked back her hand, abandoning her victory, retreating. No. He wouldn’t let her. He shook his head, remembering all of Eden’s counsel. *Allow your men to embrace life even if you can’t*. Suddenly, he wanted to embrace life with nothing held back. Not only did he want the Katy to win the race in order to keep his men employed, he wanted Adella. The realization made him as eager as the greenest recruit in town. It also scared the hell out of him, because he realized something else.

Adella had plans of her own, plans that didn’t include him, plans she was hiding. She hadn’t stood on the edge of the platform because she was daft. She hadn’t ventured into a rowdy saloon to buy drinks under a misguided notion of helping. And she certainly wasn’t playing chess with his men for the fun of it.

Why was she in New Chicago? Most people came for the railroad. A railroad he needed to protect. His conscience demanded he honor that commitment, but his entire being vibrated with an even greater urge to keep Adella safe.

What could a woman like Adella want with the railroad? There was only one way to find out.

“At this point, Miss Willows, retreat isn’t an option,” he said. “For either of us.”



ASTONISHMENT STOLE the air from Adella’s lungs. The deep brogue was familiar. The man standing before her was not. How could Cormac McGrady look so different but still confound her so completely?

“You’ve won,” he said, “but I’m still buying the round. You’ll find I’m stubborn about keeping promises.”

“Your hair,” she blurted. Apparently she had enough air to speak, just not sensibly.

“What about it?” He ran his fingers through the thick waves, doing what her fingers ached to do. Hair, so dark that it rivaled the night, had been hidden under all that dull brown mud. It made his silver eyes all the more intense. He stared at her, unblinking, demanding her answer.

It would serve no purpose to have him catch her staring in return.

She lowered her gaze. “It’s...different.”

Amazingly, he laughed again. The sound was so resonant it vibrated in her bones and sent her thoughts swooping like swallows over a barn. Ah yes, this was the giant who so easily made her forget she had plans beyond him. She lifted her chin and studied him. She was, she told herself, only examining him to better learn how to overcome him.

The square line of his jaw was smooth, freshly shaven. The ample, sun-burnished muscles of his neck led down to a linen shirt. His sleeves were rolled up, revealing more tanned, heavily corded flesh. A waistcoat covered his broad chest and flat stomach, then snug trousers over narrow hips. The brown fabric fit him perfectly as if custom-made. No, not brown but intermingled threads of gold and russet. Homespun tweed from a distant island. Her fingers ached again. This time to learn what lay beneath such foreign fabric.

“Different,” he said, nodding, “is an appropriate word for today. How do you feel?”

She blinked. “Feel?”

“You struck the earth fairly hard when you fell.”

Heat scorched her cheeks. “Oh yes. That. I am quite recovered.”

“Out here, a man can usually count on a bit of rain to wash away his work. That way he doesn’t come to town looking grim enough to startle ladies off train platforms. I’d say it’s been a different, and difficult, day for both of us.”

“You work too hard.” She bit the inside of her cheek, regretting the sentiment behind her words more than the words themselves. She should only want to reduce his workload in order to delay the Katy from reaching the border, not to offer him comfort.

He shrugged. “There’s no shame in an honest day’s work.”

“For dishonest overlords?”

A slight tightening of his brow informed her she’d struck a chord.

“Someone’s told you a story or two about Ireland,” he replied. “Does your informer have a name?”

“They cheat to get even richer, you know.”

He allowed a heavy silence to stretch between them as if he meant to challenge her avoidance of his question. But instead he said, “They?”

“The railroad owners.”

“There’s good and bad in every person.”

“Even in the English?”

He laughed again. The same rumbling sound that kept turning her body and mind to mush.

“I’ve recently been reminded to keep an open mind, even about the English.” A sudden commotion on the other side of the saloon, two men exchanging blows over some unknown grievance, removed his smile.

“You shouldn’t be here,” he said gruffly. “It’s not safe.”

“It’s as good a place as any.” In her line of work, dangers were everywhere. Here they included a saboteur who’d almost killed her. The man had been so reckless he hadn’t seemed to care if his actions hurt others. Adella would rather die than cause someone’s death. The anguish she’d experienced when she’d first learned Declan had died, the relentless grief every day that followed— She couldn’t put other families through what she’d felt, what she was still feeling. She couldn’t live knowing she’d caused that amount of pain. Not even to get revenge on someone she despised as much as Parsons.

“Besides,” she continued, pushing aside her morbid thoughts, “if I hadn’t ventured inside this saloon, I wouldn’t have been reminded of an interest in long-forgotten games.”



“Why venture at all? Why come to New Chicago?” Cormac’s gaze pierced her.

His sudden interest in her motives made her throat constrict. She forced herself not to swallow. He was waiting for a reaction—and an answer. Of course! She hadn’t told him her cover story. “My newspaper sent me to photograph the railroad.”

Silent and as impenetrable as a stone, he continued staring at her.

“You don’t believe a woman can do the job?” She sharpened her tone, aiming to sound offended.

One of his dark brows arched. “I haven’t seen you with a camera.”

Her tension eased, letting her breathe normally again. The conversation was headed in a direction she could work with. “I’ve had little time to unpack, what with falling off platforms and wanting to make up for causing your men more work.”

“Your day hasn’t been all hardships, has it? You mentioned enjoying chess. So, the least I can do is offer you another game.”

“With you?” The prospect of spending more time with him sent a spark of anticipation up her spine.

“Aye, and if I win, you give your word you won’t return to this saloon.”

Disappointment doused her like a cloudburst. He only wanted to be rid of her. She opened her mouth to refuse, but his gang beat her to it with a chorus of no’s.

“She’s in a saloon...” Cormac stared each of his men in the eye until they quieted, “...with a brothel above it.”

Their gazes fell like dominoes.

“Aw, Mac, she ain’t in any danger.”

“We’ve been guardin’ her like hawks.”

“You know she shouldn’t be here,” Cormac said. “Remember who we are and who we work with.”

The rebuke that they didn’t know her—or what she was capable of—hovered on Adella’s lips. She swallowed the foolish words. They once again failed to serve her purpose. She couldn’t let anyone know her strengths, good or bad.

“Del, is that you?”

Her heart slammed against her ribcage. Only two men had called her by that name. One was dead. She scrambled upright and sent her chair toppling. It struck the floor with the crack of a bullwhip.

Fergal Kilroy pushed his way through the McGrady Gang. The handsome lad from her youth—the one who'd teased her unmercifully while defending her as fiercely as her brother—had grown into a man of striking good looks. But a world-weariness that did not match his years clung to him, shadowing his once warm brown eyes and boyish face.

The reason for his pain—and for the pain she wanted to inflict upon Parsons—burst through the walls she'd erected around her past. She took a step back, gasping to draw breath, struggling to control her grief, and failing. *Miserably.*

Fergal reached for her. “Del, wait.”

Cormac inserted himself once more between her and another man. “Why is she scared of you?” His voice was low, his words slow and precise. And all the more deadly for it.

Here was the work-disrupting brawl she'd hoped to instigate. Unfortunately, she no longer wanted it. Not between these two men.

“I'm not frightened,” she blurted out. “I'm—” Stunned. Undone. Destroyed. None of that could happen. She straightened her shoulders. “I'm just surprised.”

Fergal peered around Cormac, his gaze riveted on her, pleading. “I tried to find you after— Dec made me promise that I would. Del, I—”

“Those names are dead.”

He flinched. “Adella, I never meant for Declan to—”

She raised her hands. “I don't want to talk about him. I blame myself more than you.”

“You shouldn't.” His gaze dipped, traveling over her dress, and his eyes widened. “My word, but you've grown into a fine lady.”

“How do you know each other?” The question was casual, but Cormac's back was rigid, his hands once again fisted by his sides.

“We grew up together in Georgia.” Fergal's gaze swept the men surrounding them. The beginnings of a familiar teasing grin twitched his lips. “She's a mick like us. Her people—”

“Fergal!” Adella winced. She hadn't meant to say his name so sharply. But the Fergal she'd known, once he started talking, was difficult to stop. “No one's interested in a poor southern horse trainer and his family.”

“Not poor but miserly. Your father cared about horses at the cost of everything else. Stingy and stubborn, he was. A right sour ol' codger. I'm

not just saying that 'cause he was born in Coventry. The best part of you is Irish. Your mother..." He released a low whistle. "Now she was a corker."

Complications. They were part of her job. But why this job? And why Fergal? She pressed her lips tight to stifle a groan. Fergal was one of the reasons her mother had told so many tales of Ireland. She'd shared them to enlighten Adella about charming young Irishmen, even those born in America and living just over the fence—on the greener side with the rich plantation owner's family.

Fergal's eyes took on a faraway look. It made him appear young again. Like the boy who'd disobeyed his father and ran wild through the fields and forests alongside her and Declan.

"Like sunshine on a dreary day, your mother was," he murmured. "She raised grand children." A shadow from the past suddenly darkened his eyes. He closed them convulsively.

The McGrady Gang were too busy grinning at her to notice.

"Mac was certain Miss Willows was English to the bone," one of them said.

"He even told her so," added another.

Cormac's attention remained on Fergal. "I made a fool of myself based on a name I recognized...in the wrong way."

Fergal opened his eyes, his expression unreadable. "And then?"

"Miss Willows put me in my place. Then"—Cormac's voice turned gruff—"after the saboteur nearly killed her, Stevens arrived and put us all in our places."

Fergal inhaled sharply, his gaze snapping to Adella. "That was you at the train station this afternoon?" He lifted his gaze heavenward. "Sweet Mary and Joseph, I didn't know. I should've met the new recruits like usual, instead of..."

Cormac shook his head. "Wasn't your choice. You said you had to talk with some farmers upset with the railroad. I'm surprised Stevens hasn't told me about them yet."

A clammy unease stole up her spine. "How do you know each other?" she asked, like a parrot repeating Cormac's earlier question.

"I oversaw a cut crew on the transcontinental." Fergal's gaze skimmed the McGrady Gang standing around him. "That's where I met this lot. We parted ways after that railroad held a fancy ceremony where the owners finally lifted a hammer and drove the last spike. I drifted south and

eventually found the Katy and a promotion to supply master. I report to Stevens now.”

Adella pressed her fingertips to her throbbing temples. If Fergal had been employed by a business in town—the hotel, a mercantile, even this saloon—she might’ve been able to confide in him, just a little. But he worked for the Katy. By targeting Parsons via his railroad, Adella threatened Fergal’s livelihood. She was Fergal’s enemy. The same held true for the McGrady Gang and Cormac.

She clutched the table for support and her gaze fell to the chessboard. Every day presented a new game, and she must play all of them alone.

“You look pale.” Cormac stood beside her with her chair in his hand. “You’d best sit down.”

She forced herself to push away from the table and Cormac. He reached for her arm, then stopped and stared at her in silence.

“As a walking boss,” one of the McGrady Gang said, once more jumping in to fill an awkward silence, “Fergal was lousy at walking but first-rate at bossing. His leg helped him find his calling as the Katy’s supply wrangler.”

She spun to face Fergal. Without Cormac standing between them, she now saw him fully.

He drew himself up, forcing his weight off a cane he’d been leaning upon. The movement made him grimace. “The sawbones said I’d die. So he didn’t bother removing the bullet in the bone.” He went very still. “I should have died in Camp Douglas too.”

Adella forced herself to remain still as well. Fergal wouldn’t welcome her pity. That didn’t stop her from silently grieving for the pain he’d suffered. Not just to his leg. Her brother and Fergal had been best friends. Fergal was the reason Declan had joined the army, the reason Declan was dead. Well, one of the reasons.

If she hadn’t told Declan that at fifteen he was too young to join the fighting... If she hadn’t told him he was a fool for enlisting just because his best friend was of age and could... If she hadn’t told him he’d regret his decision one day, and she wouldn’t be there to help him... He might not have given up and stopped writing to her at the very end. He might have sent her a letter during those final months of the war. She might have saved him.

Now, she'd make Parsons pay for the loss Fergal bore as heavily as she. But she couldn't do it through men such as Fergal and the McGrady Gang. She understood that now. Retrieving her valise from under the table, she moved out of the men's sheltering circle. They had a way of doing that, rallying around her, cocooning her.

When she stood alone, she turned to address them. She was careful not to look at Fergal. Or Cormac. "The hour grows late. I must wish you goodnight." With her head held high, she marched toward the door. Outside, a chill breeze gusted in her face. She plowed into it and the darkness, following the walkway toward her hotel.

"Blasted Irish," she muttered, wrapping her free arm around her waist to ward off the cold. Except her back felt warmer than her front, as if something or someone blocked the wind.

She spun round. For once her foolish feet cooperated and found solid purchase on the boards. A pair of hefty hands took ownership of her elbows, jostling her valise out of her hand. It fell with a thud. She thrust her hand into the hidden pocket she'd sewn in her skirt.

Her breath stalled in her throat, then lodged there when her other hand slammed against rough tweed. She locked her elbow, holding the rock-solid wall of muscles behind the cloth at bay. Cormac's height and breadth filled her vision, his stomach muscles jumping beneath her palm. She clenched his waistcoat, then splayed her fingers and shoved hard with the flat of her palm. He sucked in his breath, but didn't budge.

"What were you thinking?" she demanded. "I could've shot you."

He stared down at her hand. Not the one groping him just above the trousers riding low on his hips, but the other one—the one she'd used to extract the double-barreled derringer from her skirt. A derringer she now held between them.

"Why do you own a gun?" he asked.

"I find a weapon useful for these types of situations." Despite her words, she returned the palm pistol to its hiding place and scooped up her valise. With it back in her hand, she breathed a little easier.

He muttered something in Gaelic that she didn't understand, but that rolled off his tongue as easily as only a favorite oath can.

"There's no need for foul language," she said primly.

"There's every need." His grip on her arms tightened before he released her. "It doesn't please me to learn your life is so dangerous you require a

gun.”

She busied herself straightening her sleeves, so she wouldn't have to meet his gaze. “And I don't like large men creeping up on me from behind and manhandling me.”

“Neither do I. That's why I'm here.”

There was tenseness in him that should've eased now that her gun no longer poked him in the gut. She leaned sideways just enough to peer around him. Three slovenly dressed men slouched on the steps of the saloon, watching them. They weren't from the McGrady Gang.

Cormac made a great show of offering her his arm and said more loudly than necessary, “May I escort you to your hotel, Miss Willows?”

“How very kind of you to finally ask, Mr. McGrady,” she replied, accepting his arm.

The tightly leashed strength under her palm made her unduly aware of his every move. Each stride, shortened to match hers. Each breath she hoped would precede a comment that would help her regain her usual gift for idle banter. But he said nothing and the resulting silence made her incapable of any thought except how warm and safe she felt walking beside him.

The lights of her hotel came into view and his footsteps slowed. “About our chess game...”

Had he changed his mind about spending even that small amount of time with her? Damned if she'd let him reject her first. “There's no need to play that game. You were right about me being in the saloon.” *Albeit for reasons different than you are pondering.* “I won't go back. You've got what you wanted.”

He lowered his head toward hers. “I want...other things.”

Her gullible heart thundered with hope. “Such as?” she asked, striving to sound disinterested.

“I wanted to see you home without any mishap.”

“And here we are.” She tried to remove her palm from his arm, but his callused hand covered hers, anchoring her to him.

“I promised you a game and, as I said before, I keep my promises.”

Her mouth was too dry to answer. She turned the only thing she could, her head, and stared at the hotel. The refuge of the lobby lay within, only three steps and one door away

His breath heated her cheek as he bent even closer and whispered, “Why are you—?” He halted abruptly.

“Why am I what?”

“If I ask the wrong question, I worry you’ll run away.”

“You don’t frighten me.” The tremor running through her wasn’t from fright.

He sighed. “I don’t know what to believe.”

“I don’t return my gun to its hiding place when I’m around men who scare me.” Despite her words she kept her gaze on the hotel and not him.

“Then why won’t you look at me?” His tone had turned teasing.

“You’re too tall,” she quipped back. “It’s awkward continually craning my neck to stare up at you.”

Suddenly, his hands enveloped her waist and lifted her off the boardwalk. She gasped and clutched his shoulder with her free hand. But he merely set her on the top step of the hotel, so they stood eye to eye.

“Mr. McGrady—”

“Cormac.”

She released his shoulder, disgusted that she’d continued holding him when he’d already let go of her. “Ah yes,” she huffed, clasping her valise with both hands so she wouldn’t be tempted to touch him again. “Only your friends call you Mac.”

“My men call me Mac. My family called me Cormac. Or at least my sisters did.” He bowed his head, like a sinner forcing himself to share a difficult confession. “They raised me. They all had names beginning with an M. They said a boy with five girls bossing him about needed something of his own, even if it was only his name.”

He raised his gaze to meet hers again. “Our families shape us. Our names as well.”

Nerves stretched taut, she forced herself to hold her ground. “Fergal talks too much.”

“Aye, but oddly enough he grows quieter with drink...until he reaches the point where he needs to be carried home. Twice, I’ve been summoned for that task. Both times he’s cursed an Englishman named Willows and apologized with equal fervor to a Dec and a Del. Who I’d assumed, until now, were brothers.”

A chill stronger than any change of weather stole over her. She couldn’t move or speak or think.

His brow furrowed. “I’ve spoken out of turn. As I said, Fergal only mentioned your family twice, and he wasn’t in his right mind when he did. He’s a good man with more demons than most. He deserves help. Maybe you do as well.”

“What do you want?” she whispered.

His frown intensified. “Tonight? Nothing.” He strode down the pathway, away from her.

“Mr. McGrady,” she called after him. He didn’t stop. “Cormac!”

He halted and graced her with a lopsided smile that made her heart flutter in her chest. “Yes, Adella?”

“Everyone wants something.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing you again, to playing our chess game.”

“And what will you demand if you win?”

“That’s not the game I wish to play with you, lass.”

A rush of pleasure heated her. He was indeed a dangerous opponent. “You talk in riddles.”

“I want to know you better. Spending time with you will be reward enough.” He stared at her as if daring her to say otherwise, which was absurd. He couldn’t want her intruding into his life any more than she already had. It was merely her mind, craving things that did not exist. And if they did, they would vanish soon enough. He would spurn her if he discovered why she was in New Chicago.

Her life felt very empty. For the second time today, tears stung her eyes.

She turned her back on Cormac, before he could do the same to her, and marched into the hotel. Challenges and complications. They were everywhere. Inside her heart and out.





# Chapter 4



WITH HER CAMERA AND tripod on her shoulder and her valise in her hand, Adella picked her way along the wooden walkway in front of the clapboard and canvas buildings crowding New Chicago's streets. The morning sun peeked through clouds as gray as a blacksmith's anvil, then retreated. Another day with the threat of rain and with work to do while hemmed in by mud.

She glared at the earth surrounding her, churned up by the multitude of wagons, horses and men who slogged straight through the muck until the ground was the consistency of butter. No. More like molasses. The memory of its tenacious grip filled her thoughts, along with Cormac.

Overbearing and opinionated...and protective. If he hadn't been at the train station, she'd have—

Her foot slipped on some unseen bit of mud transferred from sea to path. The weight of her camera threatened to topple her. She caught her balance a whisper from disgrace. Fortunately, no cracking sounds heralded a broken camera or worse a broken limb. If she fell again, Cormac wouldn't be here to pull her to safety.

Not that she needed, or wanted, his help. He just wasn't in town to do so. From her hotel room, she'd observed Cormac and his men depart before dawn on the train. She hadn't seen Stevens, but his private railcar had gone with the workers.

The town was hers to explore without any railroad men hampering her efforts to derail their project and cast Parsons into the poorhouse...if she could only keep from tumbling into the mud and having to return to the hotel. Tomorrow, it would be time to delve into her wardrobe and modify her attire. Today, she wasn't retreating. Before day's end, her champagne-colored dress would probably be spattered with mud stains. She did not care. She squared her shoulders and set forth at a steady but more cautious pace.

Not that one had to go far to hear what the townsfolk had to say. The air buzzed with stories. One man suspected a business partner of stealing. Another had trouble with trench foot. A third had written his sweetheart asking for her to wait for him. Murmured hopes. Gruff complaints. She knew them well.

If Cormac knew only a quarter of the hellholes she'd been in, he'd look at her differently. The gun in her pocket was his first glimpse into the depths of her less-than-ladylike character. Her descent had started long ago

during the war. Despite warning Declan not to join the war effort too young, she'd swiftly followed suit. Back then, she'd wanted to be invisible. And she had. No one had paid attention to her dressed in the rags of a teenage boy. But she'd paid attention to everyone and everything around her. She'd always been good at listening. Knowing what to do with what she'd heard had followed naturally.

"They're stealing our farms." The statement came from inside a tall tent.

Adella halted, senses on full alert. Cormac had mentioned troubles with farmers. Could the person in the tent be one of them?

She didn't recognize the woman's voice, but she recognized the sentiment in it. Words uttered halting, thick with tears, its owner struggling to deal with a seemingly irresolvable calamity. The voice was also thick with an accent from the old world. The r's rolled, the t's pronounced like d's, suggesting not England or even Scotland, but a land further north. Sweden or possibly Norway.

"Stealing? The railroad's paying you, surely? There must be a misunderstanding." This voice Adella knew. Kate Parsons.

Keeping her footsteps soft, Adella hastened to the tent's opening, a flap tied back to form an inverted V large enough to peek through but still keep oneself hidden. Inside, the light was dim, but Kate's vibrant red hair was unmistakable. She sat on a bench facing a raised stage. Two clusters of women—dressed in crisp, Sunday-best bonnets and frayed, everyday jackets of homespun wool—huddled on either side of her. Like hens round a fox, they darted glances at Kate.

On the stage, a pair of black-garbed missionaries, somber and silent as gravestones, flanked a life-size cross. Before them paced a woman with hair so blonde it appeared white. She had a long, rolling stride—heavy and noisy as a man's—and the robust frame of an Amazon matriarch. She could probably drive a plow team all morning, plant the field that afternoon, and tackle a dozen other laborious chores before bedtime.

"If there's a misunderstanding," the blonde woman replied in the accent that had first snagged Adella's attention, "it's yours and your father's."

"Helga!" gasped a woman seated near Kate. "Shouldn't we give our guest the benefit of the doubt? With our husbands killed in the war and our farms failing—" She turned to Kate and bowing her head murmured, "We have so very little, Miss Parsons, and you and your father have so much."

Surely, as your father, he holds your opinion in great regard. You will help us, won't you?"

"I will talk to my father." With her head held high, Kate stood to leave.

Adella ducked out of sight behind the tent. Kate's footsteps tapped a determined beat on the wooden path before fading away.

"We need more than talk," Helga grumbled inside the tent. "I've asked the Lord a hundred times for help. But He let the war take my Wilhelm. Now He's letting the railroad take the one thing Wilhelm left me."

The silence that followed allowed even a horse, whining faintly in the distance, to be heard. The sun's warmth brushed Adella's back. God helped those who helped themselves, and this opportunity was ripe with possibilities—for both her and the farm widows.

Lifting the flap, she let the light spill around her. It illuminated the base of the cross. She pushed the opening wider, so the beam traveled up to fully gild God's reminder of his son's victory over sin and death. Everyone twisted round to stare in her direction, just as she'd hoped.

"Who's there?" Helga asked, squinting.

Strolling up the aisle, so they'd now see more than her dark silhouette, Adella smiled at each woman she passed as if she were greeting old friends at a church social. "My name is Adella Willows. I work for a newspaper out East."

Helga folded her arms. "Never had use for reading outside the Bible."

Adella sat in Kate's vacated seat, propping her camera before her to draw attention to the device. "I was exploring the town for a story to photograph when"—she forced the frown that came naturally to her brow to deepen for effect—"I overheard your plight. I sympathize with your struggle, as I've seen many suffer similarly during my work."

Helga snorted. "You and your fancy pictures can't do us a lick of good."

Adella met Helga's glare without blinking. "If a subject is powerful, then so is the photograph."

"Can pictures stop the railroad from taking our land?"

"They've helped similar causes." Adella gestured to her valise. "If you have time, I could show you." Without waiting for an answer, she set her bag on the stage and opened it.

Her fingers skimmed the top of a closed compartment. Drawing determination from the letters concealed there, she leafed through the photographs and newspaper clippings in plain sight. Behind her, the

benches squeaked as her audience rose and edged closer. She spread several items in front of the cross.

“Here are the women-led labor strikes.” She pointed to each story as she spoke. “Lowell Mills in the 30s and 40s, the New England Shoemakers in 1860, and the Collar Laundry Union just last year. All protests organized by women seeking social justice like improved wages and working conditions.”

The women stared at the pictures in silence. Weavers and cobblers and laundresses were all fine and dandy, but this audience needed something a little closer to home. Adella extracted an engraved poster from her valise.

“What’s that?” Helga asked.

“A promotional poster for the Grange Movement. They encourage farm families to band together for the well-being of their community, including uniting against unfair practices by railroads.”

Helga finally drew near and bent to scan the poster. “They’re taking on the railroads?”

“Protest rallies have proved effective. Peacefully obstructing a worksite can not only create disruptions, but great pictures that sell newspapers and sway public opinion. The Katy’s in a race with a rival railroad to win thousands of acres of land. Time is worth more to them than the few acres that make up your farms. They just need to be reminded of that fact.”

“Then what’re we waiting for? When the sun’s shining and the snow’s melting, you don’t sit by the window and contemplate the view.” Helga may not have been an avid reader outside of the Bible but, as every farmer worth her salt, she grasped the importance of time. She also grasped Adella by the elbow and said, “We’re going to the worksite and making the railroad feel our loss right now.”

The suddenness of Helga’s grasp combined with the fact that the woman deemed it necessary to grab hold of her at all, made Adella’s stomach lurch. She squelched her unease. Helga was just...enthusiastic. She wasn’t Adella’s enemy. They shared similar goals. And standing in a missionary tent surrounded by women—especially one who championed your cause with Viking determination and swiftness—hardly classified as a dangerous situation.

“My buckboard’s outside.” Helga lifted Adella’s camera with one hand and propelled her forward with the other.

She barely had time to grab her valise and her pictures. With the women close behind, they exited the tent only stopping beside a wagon harnessed to a pair of swayback nags.

“Get in,” Helga instructed, releasing Adella. Then she climbed onto the driver’s seat and set the camera beside her.

Adella offered each woman encouragement and a helping hand as they clambered aboard. When everyone was settled, she hopped up to perch on the open tailgate with her valise on her lap and her feet dangling over the mud. Helga snapped the lines and the wagon rolled forward.

The women started singing. “*Ye Christian Heroes, Wake to Glory. Hark, hark! What millions bid you rise!*” When the hymn ended, they promptly began another. They’d just completed a poignant rendition of the old favorite *Onward Christian Soldiers* when the horses slowed to pick their way over a swath of freshly overturned earth slanting down to a mangled gully.

Was this the ravine that the McGrady Gang had mentioned dynamiting into submission?

Adella’s heart beat faster. Hopefully they wouldn’t be putting themselves in further danger today. She shook her head. She shouldn’t be thinking about Cormac and his men’s safety. She should be thinking about Declan and her mission. The worksite couldn’t be far ahead. What would Cormac do when she and the women arrived? Whatever he did, she must soldier on and outwit him.

The women kept singing, only stopping when Helga said, “There’s the camp.”

Directly ahead, stood a tent with empty tables and benches at one end and steaming pots tended by a handful of men at the other. None of the men came close to rivaling Cormac’s giant form. Adella’s gaze kept moving, searching.

Not far beyond the chow tent, Stevens’ railcar slumbered silently on freshly laid track. Farther ahead, the rest of the train vibrated under half steam with a flurry of men milling around its front. Several workers stood on its freight car, carefully sliding down a ramp one of the hefty rails that had nearly crushed her yesterday. On the ground, a row of men lifted the rail using oversized tongs and lugged it the short distance ahead of the engine. Releasing their burden, they retraced their steps to the stockcar, leaving room for a third group who swung their hammers and nailed the rail

into its final resting place. Meanwhile the rail's partner had already coasted down the ramp and was being carried forward.

The men labored without their leader. That didn't surprise her. They were so well organized they didn't need Cormac. The rare combination of an assembly line designed for speed while still striving to make the labor as easy as possible for each worker suggested Cormac's handiwork. She'd only known him a day, but she was already attuned to his concerned pragmatism. A trait that pleased then irked her. She had no desire to like anything about him. And she was only hunting for him so he would not sneak up on her unnoticed again.

The only other men in sight were those who groomed a band of earth that became increasingly disheveled until it disappeared over a rise. That presumably was where the cut crew would be. The McGrady Gang and possibly Cormac as well. All working. Swiftly. Productively. Without delay.

How could men function so well after consuming so much alcohol the night before?

Despite all her scheming, she felt slow-witted to imagine she could've laid them low with that old trick. *Blasted Irish.*

The wagon had drawn even with the chow tent. The scent of the noon meal, boiling potatoes and pork roasting on spits, curled around her. Pausing their preparations, the cooks returned the women's stares.

"What do we do now?" one of the farm widows whispered.

"We assemble on the track and stop construction."

A smile tugged at Adella's lips. Helga had things well in hand.

"Then we get our picture taken and go home," Helga added.

Adella's contentment vanished along with her smile. She needed them to delay construction as long as possible. If a picture would make them leave, then she couldn't take it. She needed to disappear without the women noticing. For that she needed a distraction.

"Why not educate these lost souls using the gift God gave you—your voices raised together in song?" she asked.

Once more the women launched into a hymn. The chow gang dropped their ladles and cleavers and followed the wagon. Up ahead, the clanging and scraping stopped, replaced by the thump of approaching footsteps. Soon the wagon was swarmed by a ring of gawking men. With a tight grip on the lines, Helga forged a path through them while the other women stared stoically forward and continued singing.



Adella scanned the rise again. It remained blessedly empty. It wouldn't for long. Resigned to the fact that she must temporarily abandon her camera, she tightened her grip on her valise and slipped off the wagon into the crowd. The women didn't notice, but the men did. Luckily, they didn't comment and only gaped at her as she pushed by them. Their attention soon returned to the noisy wagon.

"The chief ain't gonna have nothin' good to say about this." This observation came from her left. Weaving her way through the crowd in that direction, she spied two youths slouching against Stevens' private railcar while they observed the passing parade.

She ducked behind the rear of the car and held her breath.

"But he won't be sayin' it till he returns with the surveyors. Plenty of time fer a closer look."

"The chief said we couldn't leave our post."

"You worry too much about what ol' prissy pants Stevens says. He ain't gonna know we left."

"But he said—"

"Fine. You stay behind."

Peeking around the railcar, Adella watched the pair—one leading, the other following—jog after the wagon. She climbed the steps at the rear of Stevens' railcar. What a shame he wouldn't be in to receive her.

The door opened easily under her hand. She crept down a narrow oak-paneled hall past a door fitted into the inner wall. It most likely led to Stevens' bedchamber. The velvet curtain at the end of the hall intrigued her more. Slipping through it, she found his office.

The same oak from the hall circled the room, not only muffling the sound of travel but the voices outside. Interspersed with the thick brocade shades, conveniently pulled down to conceal her, the snug room felt like a hushed forest. It made the click of her boots overly loud as she took the two steps required to stand beside a desk grand enough for a king.

She set her valise on the floor and got to work. Out of habit, she kept her search tidy, returning items to their place so no one would know she'd been there. She counseled herself against expecting to find anything. Stevens wasn't a fool. He wouldn't leave anything he deemed incriminating lying about. Nevertheless, she scanned the mundane with the same vigor as she'd give a signed confession of guilt.

The telegram paper was parchment thin, the writing on it just as sparse. But the information it contained was weighty and made her heart race.

*Men grumbling.*

*Wage increased to 3 dollars and 50 cents.*

*Laid more track than any day last week.*

*Arrival moved up.*

She retrieved the account book she'd discovered earlier in a drawer. Flipping to the last page with writing, she traced her index finger down the rows. The thrill of discovery shot through her, halting her hand.

*Laborers' wages...\$3.00 a day.*

The telegram wasn't a report on the Katy's progress but the Joy Line's. Stevens had his spies as well. She'd have to keep a careful lookout for them...and Joy's man who dumped the load yesterday and nearly crushed her. Dangers abounded, but after the war she'd grown used to most of them. What frightened her most was failing Declan. Again.

She forced herself to exhale a deep, calming breath. Right now the important thing was the difference of half a dollar. In her hands rested the beginnings of a wage war. She folded the paper twice and tucked it in her cleavage.

Across the office, footfalls scraped the steps behind the second door, accompanied by a muffled voice growing louder. She thrust the account book back in its drawer and ducked through the thick fall of drapery into the hall.

Her adrenaline deserted her in a whoosh, making her sag against the wall. She pressed her palms over her stomach to steady herself—then raised her hands before her eyes in horror. They were both empty! Spinning round, she glimpsed through the crack in the curtain her valise on the floor beside Stevens' desk. Behind it, the door banged open to reveal Stevens himself.

She jerked back.

"Inside," Stevens barked. "I refuse to have this conversation out where everyone can hear." Swift footsteps stomped across the room, making Adella's pulse roar in her ears like a freight train was approaching. The chair behind Stevens' desk squeaked, and the pounding in her head vanished.

"I want those goddamn women off my track."

The only response to Stevens' demand was the door clicking softly shut.

Edging forward, she peeked through the curtain. Stevens sat with his back to her, facing a man standing on the other side of his desk. She wasn't surprised to see it was Cormac. His quietness had given him away.

Her valise wasn't in Stevens' line of sight, but it was within Cormac's. He just needed to turn his head a little to the left. Fortunately, his gaze was locked on Stevens. Unfortunately, her escape hung on his attention staying there.

Perspiration trickled down between her breasts, jerking her attention back to the need to escape with the telegram. Retrieving her valise was more important. Its contents were her only link to the past, to all those who'd struggled and suffered—including Declan. Abandoning his letters would be like abandoning him.

"Give those widows a reason and they'll go willingly," Cormac said. "Give them back their farms."

She felt her jaw drop. Why was she surprised? Cormac had championed his men and her. Why not others? But how did he think he could build a railroad for men like Parsons and Stevens, and still treat people fairly?

Stevens flicked his hand. "Not an option."

"Is that why you didn't tell me about them earlier?" The challenging note, the one Cormac used with Stevens yesterday at the station, had returned. "Everything along this railroad is yours to give. Or take."

"Careful, McGrady." Stevens' voice was as chilled as frozen ditchwater. "If you don't order the men to remove those women, I can take your job."

"I won't hurt innocent women."

"They aren't innocent." Stevens' fist slammed the desktop. "They're on my track illegally. And if track isn't laid, you don't get paid."

Cormac folded his arms over his chest. "Better that than manhandling a woman."

"You realize the men won't be paid either." Stevens' voice had gone deceptively calm. She knew the tone. She'd heard it during the war whenever an ambitious captain believed he'd found the key to squeezing one more cavalry charge out of his men.

The muscles across Cormac's shoulders tensed. He spun away from Stevens, as if he couldn't stand the sight of him. He ended up staring straight at her valise.

Her stomach did a slow, sickly roll.

Cormac remained stiff and silent for a long time. Then he snarled something in Gaelic.

Stevens huffed out a breath. “What the hell does that mean? Speak English, man.”

“I’ve been blind to too many things.”

“I don’t care if you’re blind, deaf and dumb, as long as you do your job.”

Cormac headed toward the door. “You should try talking to the widows one more time while I fetch the photographer.”

Stevens leapt to his feet. “For Chrissake! A picture of this debacle is the last thing we need.”

“The farmers’ leader, the blonde woman, said they weren’t leaving until they had their photograph taken.” Cormac halted by the door. “What’s more important continuing construction or one photograph that might never see the light of day?”

Stevens lowered his chin. He glared at the papers on his desk for a long moment. “You guarantee the picture will disappear?”

“I do.”

“No need for an audience, the widows, or the men. Destroy the picture while escorting Miss Willows and her camera back to town. Make sure she gets there. I’ve had enough of women pestering me.”

Cormac nodded slowly. “Miss Willows will do what’s best for the safety of all those concerned.”

“What happens if these widows return tomorrow and pull the same stunt?” Stevens grumbled, retracing his steps to the door.

Cormac opened it for him. The faint strains of a hymn drifted in. “Give them back their homes or pay them fairly. Can’t see any other choices.” He dipped his head in a mock bow, waiting for Stevens to precede him outside. “But I’m just the foreman. You’re the chief.”

As soon as the door clicked shut, Adella leapt through the curtain and grabbed her valise. Then she darted back to her hiding place. She didn’t go any further though. And she wasn’t surprised when, after the count of twenty, the door opened and closed softly again.

“Now that you’ve retrieved your case,” Cormac said, “we can fetch your camera.”

She stepped out from behind the curtain, scouring her mind for another delay. Her wits failed her under his piercing silver gaze, until she blurted,

“We’ll have to go to town. I left my camera in my hotel room.”

“Your camera’s in the widows’ wagon. Luckily Stevens hasn’t seen it. Yet.” He squeezed shut his eyes and pressed his fingertips to his eyelids.

“Do you even know how to operate the device or is that a sham as well?”

“Of course I know how,” Adella said, forcing outrage into her voice. “I’m a photographer sent by the *Atlanta Intelligencer*.”

Cormac snorted. “If that were true, you’d be with the widows instead of in here. There’s only one reason for being in Stevens’ railcar—you’re a spy for the Joy Line.” He grasped her elbow, making her skin tingle as he pushed her in front of him toward the door. He tucked her behind him, though, when he stuck his head outside.

Pressed against the warm strength of his back, she tried to block out the anger vibrating in him. But the singing reminded her that her next move would probably make him even angrier.

He pulled her down the stairs toward the women. “I wondered why you’d come to New Chicago. I could never have guessed this.”

“Then be prepared for even greater disappointments.” She dug her heels into the soft dirt. “What if I refuse to act out this useless charade of taking a picture that will—how did you put it?—*never see the light of day*?”

Swinging round, he bent over her. “Adella, if you don’t cooperate, I can’t protect those women or you.”

A peculiar ache invaded her heart. What would it feel like to share her burdens with someone like Cormac instead of shouldering them alone? She wouldn’t be sharing; she’d be giving up. Declan deserved more than that. She yearned to wrap her arms around Cormac and pull him even closer. So she drew back instead. “By all means save the widows. But I don’t need help.”

His arm snaked around her waist, halting her retreat. “Judging how you end up in places you shouldn’t, I don’t think you give a tinker’s damn about your own well-being.”

Keeping a firm grip on her valise, she wedged her other hand between them. Against her palm, his heart raced in time with her own.

“You’re taking those women’s picture so everyone can go safely home.”

“Soon they won’t have a home to go to,” she shot back.

“But they’ll be alive. I haven’t time to argue with you. Those women —”

“Have every right to—”

“They’re in danger the moment the men realize who’s responsible for them not getting paid.”

Unease prickled the nerves along her neck. “The men? Surely the McGrady Gang wouldn’t—”

“Not them. The others.”

The draft of a memory stole over her, transporting her back to last night. She shivered. “The three men outside Eden’s.”

He nodded. “Them and others like them.”

“You employ thugs?” she said, trying to sound shocked. But she was already well acquainted with men of the sort. Men who justified their actions, committed unthinkable atrocities, and destroyed their own souls in the process. She’d learned too much about them during Sherman’s sacking of the south.

“I hired anyone who came looking for work. The only ones I’ll vouch for are the McGrady Gang.” His hold on her waist tightened and his eyes narrowed, pinning her with a sudden intensity. “You keep that in mind wherever you are. If you’re in danger, come get me. If you can’t find me, go to the McGrady Gang. Never any of the others.”

“I don’t need—”

He gave her a tiny shake. “*Never* trust any of the others. You hear me?”

“I’m just a newspaper photographer. Little danger in that.” That argument sounded weak, even to her ears. So did her voice.

“Adella...stop playing games. Promise. Swear on whatever you hold dear. I don’t care about the rest. I won’t let anyone else die because of me.”

The utter pain etched on his face made her gasp. “Who—?”

He released her, his expression turning blank and distant. “Just do this one thing. Promise you’ll come to me if you’re in danger.”

She swallowed the urge to do as he requested, if only to ease whatever burdened him. “I can’t promise you anything,” she whispered. “You work for my enemy.”



STANDING BESIDE CORMAC, Adella watched the women climb back onto Helga’s wagon. The farm widows chattered happily. Even the missionaries couldn’t suppress their smiles. Worry and guilt sat heavily on Adella’s shoulders. She shouldn’t have revealed that Cormac worked for her enemy, and she shouldn’t have promised the widows a photograph she

now couldn't deliver. She'd taken their picture posing in front of the train, but soon Cormac would destroy the photographic plate and there'd be no story for any newspaper.

She glanced at Cormac. With her camera under one arm, he stared at the women, his shoulders hunched as if the weight of the present and past bothered him as well. Who had died to cause him such pain and...remorse? She struggled to suppress her concern for him. He might not be pondering what he'd let slip. He might be calculating where on the trail to town to turn his attention to her camera and smash the plate.

He works for your enemy, she reminded herself, and he takes his work as seriously as you do.

She thrust her hand in the air. "Helga, wait! I want..."

Helga and the women fell silent, waiting with raised eyebrows for her to continue.

She stepped forward. "I want to ride back with—"

Cormac's hand clamped down on her shoulder. "What Miss Willows wants to say is that she'd *like* to ride with you, but she's promised to ride with me."

Adella tried to twist free of his grasp. "I promised you nothing," she hissed under her breath. "They need this photograph."

He turned her away from the women. "If Miss Willows wishes, she can visit your farms tomorrow. More photographs can be taken then." He nudged her toward the chow tent. As soon as they were out of earshot, he muttered, "Why must you be so stubborn? You know you can't go with them. You heard me promise Stevens I'd escort you back to town."

"I heard you argue with him too." She squirmed under his hand. This time he let her go. "You told him to give the widows their due." She studied Cormac from the corner of her eye. "Why didn't you tell Stevens I was in his railcar?"

Cormac lengthened his stride, leaving her to follow. Behind the chow tent, a row of horses stood tied to a line. They lifted their dozing heads, snorting in surprise and pricking their ears forward.

"Can you ride?" he asked.

"Of course." She bit back the reminder that her father had been a horse trainer. Irritated that Cormac had so easily avoided her question with one of his own, she scowled at him and made a sweeping gesture along her dress. "But I couldn't possibly ride astride in a dress this fitted."

“Then why wear it?”

*Because the dress is doing its job. Again.* If she couldn't ride into town—for whatever reason, then Cormac couldn't resume his work. Every minute she spent delaying his efforts to escort her back to New Chicago could coincide with a breakdown in construction that he'd be too busy to fix. She must keep him with her as long as possible. She straightened her shoulders, gathering her resolve. There was a silver lining to this setback.

So why hadn't she thought to stay by his side sooner rather than trying to leave with the women? Because she was a spy, a deceiver, and a thief—although he hadn't discovered this last part yet—and she didn't want to hear how much of a disappointment she was to him. Unfortunately, that was sure to happen if he hung around her long enough. But so far he'd said little on the subject. Instead, he'd talked of her safety and the women's. And right now he continued staring at her, demanding answers to questions she couldn't answer truthfully.

“I wear the dress because it's pretty.”

He cupped her cheek, making her skin flame under his hand. “You'd make my oldest shirt look breathtaking.”

The prospect of standing before him wearing one of his linen shirts, and only that, made her face burn even hotter. His gaze searched hers, while his thumb caressed her cheekbone. Her heart raced in her chest. He tugged her closer. She didn't stop him.

Maybe her dress was doing its job a little too well. Could she use seduction to keep Cormac from his work? She'd never gone that far in all her years as a spy. But then she'd never been this attracted to a man before.

“I'm not your enemy,” he whispered. “I want to know you better. There are a hundred things I want to ask...starting with why you consider Stevens to be yours.”

Her lips parted in surprise. “Stevens?”

“You said I worked for your enemy.”

An unfortunate slip, that. But while Cormac was busy concentrating on Stevens, he wouldn't be rooting out her real target. Besides, all of Parsons' employees were by default her enemies. Their livelihoods would suffer significant setbacks when she financially ruined Parsons. Cormac and the McGrady Gang didn't deserve that. Remorse made her bow her head.

“What happened to your brother?” Cormac asked.



His question hit her like a slap to the face. It took all of her resolve not to flinch. She wasn't sure she succeeded. So she summoned a lie in the hopes of distracting him. "He died, and I hadn't thought of him for years, not until I saw Fergal."

"You can tell me the truth."

"I am," she snapped.

"I won't tell Stevens that you were in his railcar. I won't tell him any of your secrets."

She pulled away from him and clutched her valise against her stomach. "Don't say things you'll regret later. Like promises you can't keep."

"I'll protect you. I won't see you hurt." His voice was firm and resolute.

"Why? Because of *your* past? Who died because of you?"

He stared at her with wide eyes.

She immediately regretted her bluntness. She'd allowed her unsettling attraction to Cormac to not only make her foolish but shrewish. "I shouldn't have asked that. I'm sorry."

His gaze slid away from her, unfocused and distant. Then he shook his head as if dispelling ghosts. "You're the most confusing woman I ever met." He raked his free hand through his hair.

She wished she could do the same, but in a more soothing gesture.

"But I've promised to protect you and I will," he said. "I've also promised to return you to town, which aids my first promise." He handed back her camera, then unlashed a barrel from a small table that turned out to have wheels instead of legs.

"What's that?" she asked.

"A wagon." He rolled the barrel onto the ground.

She blinked, trying to reconcile the word with the object before her. All she saw was a three-foot square of wood supported between two wheels. "Looks more like a dog cart."

"We use it to transport water to the men." Cormac tied her camera where the barrel had been, leaving room in front. Then he chose a horse from the line and backed it into the traces of his so-called wagon. Speaking softly in Gaelic, he harnessed the fidgety mare with swift movements that spoke of a familiarity with such tasks.

He was a little more abrupt with her when he grabbed her round the waist and plopped her before her camera on the cart. The contraption

wobbled horribly, the weathered wood creaking. It reminded her of New Chicago's ramshackle train station.

"I wager we'll part company with a wheel before we're even halfway to town." She suppressed a smile.

Cormac stared at her for a long moment. Then he climbed up beside her. His thigh settled against hers, solid and unmovable, and inappropriately intimate. He didn't move away and give her space, although if he'd tried, their narrow seat might not have allowed it. He didn't try.

Her heart was now pounding so fast she thought it might leap out her throat. Setting her valise on her lap, she busied herself smoothing her skirt around her ankles.

He clicked his tongue and the cart rocked into motion. "I can handle a lost wheel. But if you slip off this wagon and try to disappear like you did with the farm widows, I'll carry you into town over my shoulder and ask the authorities to toss you in jail for... For disturbing the peace. God knows, you've certainly disturbed mine."

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# Chapter 5



CORMAC HOPED ADELLA wouldn't see through his bluff. He couldn't throw her in jail. If someone questioned her and discovered why she'd come to town, she might not make it out alive. He'd heard too many times about frontier justice acting swift and burying their mistakes in the dark of the night.

Adella was playing a dangerous game, but she hadn't hurt anyone. He frowned. At least not anyone he knew of. He shook his head to cast out his doubts. Adella wasn't like the man who'd been sabotaging the railroad. That man had almost killed her.

But she was still a spy. He had two spies to deal with now. And if two, then why not three? Or four? Or more? The thought was daunting. Not as daunting as knowing what to do with the woman sitting next to him though.

He allowed himself a slow soft curse, in Gaelic so she wouldn't know what he said. Building a railroad was challenging enough without half-wild workers, protesting farm widows, and a spy who he was more attracted to than any woman he'd ever met. He must use the half-hour it would take to travel to town wisely. He must figure out the conundrum Adella Willows represented.

Unfortunately, the woman sitting next to him was damnably distracting. She perched beside him with her thigh rubbing his. She kept readjusting her skirt, her movements amplifying his already heightened awareness of her. He'd never met anyone more alive. Why did a bright young woman like this choose such a dangerous profession?

"How much is the Joy Line paying you?" he asked.

Her jaw tightened. "I'm getting what I need."

The cart lurched and he tore his gaze from her. They'd reached the ravine his men had filled yesterday. The ground on either side of the track was a slick slope. He angled the cart for the track. The rickety thing would be better off traveling over the rails than through the mud. He decided this too late, and when the mare was on the track, the cart remained stuck in the mud.

"Whoa, now. Steady, girl." The mare ignored him and continued pulling. Keeping a firm hand on the lines, he jumped to the ground, putting himself between Adella and the closest slope. "Best get down, lass. Hop off the other side of the wagon and onto the tracks. Then I'll push the cart out." He widened his stance, bracing his toe against the wheel and his palm against the seat. "I've plenty of experience from the bogs 'round Galway."

“I’m even more familiar. An Irish bog is no match for a Georgia swamp.” With her valise clutched on her lap, Adella shimmied across the wagon seat toward him. She held out her free hand. “Give me the reins.”

He drew them out of her reach. The mare tossed her head, rattling her bridle. Then she lunged. The cart emitted a startling crack and tipped, sliding Adella even closer to him.

Releasing the cart, he raised a cautionary hand between them. “Keep still. The wheel’s coming loose. If it does, I can’t stop you from falling in the mud. Whatever you are, you’re still a lady. I don’t think you want to get dirty again or walk all the way to town.”

“And I don’t think you know me very well, Mr. McGrady.” She lifted her skirt giving him a tantalizing view of her legs from trim ankle to shapely knee, making his heart race. She lifted one dainty foot.

His heart skipped a beat. “Adella, don’t—”

She stomped her heel on top of the wheel. Pain exploded in his shin as the wheel came free. Without its support the cart collapsed, sending Adella crashing into his chest, toppling him backward.

He released the lines. He wouldn’t drag the horse down with them and cause it injury. Instead, his hands instinctively wrapped around Adella’s waist. They fell together—her on top, his back taking the brunt of the impact—and slid down the ravine. The horse whinnied and whatever was left of the cart rattled off along the track.

Their descent halted as abruptly as it began. Cormac lay motionless with his eyes squeezed shut, laboring to draw in a full breath. When he did, his discomfort vanished. He became intensely aware of Adella’s legs against his. Under his palms, her torso was silky smooth, but something hard poked him in the chest. Something *between* him and Adella. He cracked one eye open.

She’d managed to keep that damnable bag with her. The one she’d rather hold onto than accept his hand at the train station. The one she’d rather risk capture than leave in Stevens’ railcar.

“Are you all right?” She stared down at him with wide amber eyes. So close. Not close enough.

He could only grunt a yes.

She released a breath, almost like she’d been holding it. “I suspect otherwise. No doubt, you feel you must act all stoic and manly. I’m sorry if I caused you injury and I regret my...enthusiasm. Perhaps I should not have

kicked the wheel quite so hard.” She folded her hands on top of the bag and rested her chin on them, her expression unreadable—as if she regretted nothing, as if she weren’t affected by their sudden intimacy.

Frustration rolled through him like thunder after a flash of lightning. She did not blink as she watched him. Nor did she have the good grace to meet his gaze again. Instead, she stared at a point somewhere between his nose and chin. The delicate flick of her tongue across her lips sent him over the edge.

He wrenched the bag out from between them and flung it as far as he could. Pushing up on her elbows, she tracked it with wide eyes as it bounced out of reach.

“Go on,” he growled. “Go after you precious bag.” His traitorous hands returned to her waist, countermanding his order. “At the worksite you abandoned your camera. Now you don’t even look where it might have gone. But that bag? You care more about it than your own safety.”

Her gaze returned to him, narrowing. “You become testy over the oddest things. Are you sure you are uninjured?”

“I’m fine. But you need to get up. I’m taking you to town.”

“Why not toss me after my valise and return to your precious railroad?”

“Because I don’t manhandle women, no matter how...” he ground his teeth, “...frustrating they are. Nor do I abandon them on the prairie where anything could happen to them. Not even when they are foolhardy and duplicitous. Now get up. We’re going to town.”

She didn’t move, just continued staring at him. “You didn’t think it could get any worse than me being English. Well, I’m a lot worse. Sorry to disappoint.”

“My only disappointment is that you kicked the wheel off our cart.”

“It was bound to come off sooner or later. I just hurried along the inevitable.”

“This day couldn’t get any poorer.” He pressed his lips tight to control another petty outburst.

Her shoulders sagged and she slumped against him as if wounded by his words. Her bosom settled soft against his chest, her pelvis snug over his. She drew back her head. But the rest of her stayed where it was. “Mr. McGrady...Cormac.” Her voice was a throaty purr. His name swirled like a lover’s caress around his ear.

If he thought having her legs touching his was distracting, it was nothing to having her entire body—minus her bag—stretched out full length on top of him.

He immediately released her waist. “You’re—” His throat closed up and he cleared it roughly. “You’re in a very compromising situation. I suggest you move for that reason alone. Or do you always seduce men to get what you want?”

“Right now, I don’t know what I want.”

He swallowed hard. “Adella, don’t play games with me.”

“I’m not playing at anything.” Gaze locked on his mouth, she lowered her head. “I’m...”

She kept leaning closer. All he could do was stare at her. At her lips. Plump and pink and parted. Damn the consequences. He was going to kiss her.

A soft nicker sounded nearby. Adella glanced toward the noise. The mare had wandered down the slope and stood a handful of strides away.

Adella’s gaze found his again. “I’m an idiot to let you distract me so completely. I hadn’t even noticed that blasted cart was still around.”

Adella’s muscles tensed, preparing for action.

“Adella, don’t,” he said, reaching for her again.

Her knees and elbows suddenly poked him in too many sensitive places. As slippery as a bar of soap, she escaped him and crawled through the mud. So much for assuming she cared about getting dirty.

He scrambled after her. His fingers snared her skirt. Too late. She waved her hands in the horse’s face, shooing it away. The cart cracked in two. The camera, rope still tangled around it, fell toward the mud. With a gasp, she dove to catch it.

His hold on her skirt brought her up short. The camera hit the mud with a splash and the mare galloped toward town, probably heading for an oat bucket in the livery.

Adella glared over her shoulder at him.

“I hope your camera isn’t broken.” He released her skirt, raising his hand to rake it through his hair. He stopped when he saw the mud covering his fingers. “But if it is, it’s your own doing. And what for? All you’ve accomplished is that rather than riding into town, we’re walking.”

She turned her profile to him. The furrow lines on her brow slowly smoothed out, retreating behind an impenetrable mask. She retrieved her



camera and valise, and sat down crossed legged with them on her lap.

“What are you doing?” Climbing to his feet, he moved to stand in front of her. “I’m escorting you back to town.”

Once more, she folded her hands over her bag. But this time fixed her gaze on the empty horizon. “You can’t force me to walk beside you.”

The way she’d phrased her words, made his insides hollow. “Who said anything about you walking?”



AFTER A BARRAGE OF cursing and thumping Cormac’s back with her valise and her free hand, Adella settled into a tight-lipped silence. Hanging over his shoulder, she watched her camera rock in a sling he’d fashioned from rope.

Why hadn’t she thought of a carrier like that? Damn him for being so handy, and her for being so reckless. Her impetuous acts had broken the plate but luckily not her camera. She couldn’t rail at Cormac for the loss of the farm widows’ photograph. She had only herself to blame.

Keeping an arm behind her knees, he held her prisoner and strode toward town at an annoyingly effortless pace. Each step caused her head to bob. His shoulder dug uncomfortably into her belly. The back of her throat burned.

“You must grow tired of carrying me,” she said.

“I’m fine.”

“Why not—” Her voice sounded odd, thready and stifled. She tried again. “Why not put me down and save your back?”

“My back’s fine, too.”

A sickly heat washed over her and her vision blurred. “I’m eager to walk.” The declaration burst from her lips, rising alarmingly on the last word.

“I’m eager to reach town.”

“Cormac, I—”

“No.”

“Please,” she managed on the back of a groan. “Put me down.”

He immediately set her on her feet. She felt like a child’s top with the string yanked free. The sky, and Cormac looming high above her, spun in a blur of grays and browns.

“What’s wrong?” His voice sounded far away.

“I feel—” She drew in a shuddery breath, willing her breakfast to stay in place. “I feel—” She gulped again.

“You look seasick. Lean forward with your hands on your knees.” His hand on her neck, gentle but firm, forced her to comply. “Why didn’t you say something sooner?”

She shook her head. Her gut heaved, freezing her into stillness. “I could not.”

“Stubborn English.”

“Opinionated Irish,” she shot back, then groaned again.

Slowly her stomach settled. She became aware of his work-roughened fingers massaging her neck with infinite tenderness. How long had he been doing that? She raised her head and straightened her back, so she could look him in the face.

He kept his hand around the nape of her neck. “Better now?”

Gaze riveted on his face, she swayed toward him. She only did so, she told herself, because it might aid her mission, not because she wanted him to continue touching her. “I can’t go to jail.”

He released her abruptly and stepped back. “I told you not to play games with me, lass.”

“But—”

“I’m not putting you in jail.”

“But you said if I misbehaved, you’d carry me over your shoulder and —”

“I don’t know what to do with you, but I know a jail cell won’t help.” Muttering the now familiar Gaelic curse, he grasped her hand and tugged her forward. “We still need to get to town and moving will help take your mind off things.”

Laced with hers, his fingers were warm and reassuring. She didn’t want to argue with him. He might let go. But she had to delay his return to the worksite.

As if sensing her thoughts, his grip tightened. “Stop plotting your next move. If your mind, or your stomach, won’t settle, then pick a point on the horizon and concentrate on taking slow, even breaths.”

“Aye, aye. Captain,” she muttered and did as he said.

They walked for several minutes in silence, before he finally chuckled. “I can’t believe you chased off our horse. Or kicked off that wheel.”

Another long silence passed, filled only with sound of their strides swishing through the grass.

“What made you become a spy?” His voice was quiet, lacking any merriment.

The answer filled her mind but didn’t touch her lips: *Declan*.

Fearless and protective, her brother had insisted she accompany him on all his childhood campaigns. Then he’d abandoned her and signed up with Fergal to fight a war she’d never understood. Since that day, she hadn’t willingly spoken his name. How could she when her other half—her twin, her constant companion, her best friend for fifteen years—was gone? Taken from her, first by his own familiar hand, then forever by the cold, pitiless hands of strangers?

She might not say Declan’s name, but he was never far from invading her thoughts. He was the gaping hole in her soul, the wound that would not heal.

Sudden tears blurred her vision. She turned away from Cormac and rubbed her brow, hiding behind her hand...her empty hand. A sensation ten times more horrible than being sick to her stomach engulfed her. She spun round and searched the path they’d just traveled.

“I’ve lost my valise!” She tried to sprint back down the path.

Cormac held her fast. “Adella, it’s all right. I have your bag.” He held it up for her to see.

Her spine sagged with relief. “How long have you had it?”

“Since I set you on the ground and you dropped it.”

“But...why carry it for me? When we fell in the mud, you cursed it and threw it away.”

“It’s important to you, so I couldn’t leave it behind.” He stared at the ground between them. “I only did so, because I didn’t want you running back for it and further delaying our trip.”

“I can take it now.” She held out her hand.

He put his body between her and her goal. “Why’s it so important to you?”

Best not to tell him about the photographs and newspaper clippings inside. Or Declan’s letters. Cormac already knew too much.

She forced herself to drop her hand to her side. “I’ve owned the valise a long time. It’s merely a sentimental attachment.”

“Then you won’t mind me continuing to carry it for you.” He started walking again and she followed suit.

She didn’t really have a choice, she told herself. He was still holding her hand. She aimed for the lethargic stride of a woman resigned to defeat, which wasn’t hard. He’d won the battle. She couldn’t stop him from reaching town. Like the wheel coming off the cart, she could only control the speed of which the inevitable happened. She considered him out of the corner of her eye. Only, she told herself, to ensure he continued to carry her valise.

Whistling an Irish ditty under his breath, he walked beside her without a word or glance to chastise her slowness. They were both dirty up to the knee, but his entire back was caked in mud. He’d taken the brunt of their fall and his protectiveness continued. When she stumbled over a rock, his hand tightened reassuringly around hers. When she paused to pluck a pebble from her boot, he halted and steadied her arm. He was a man dedicated to his work, but he seemed in no hurry to return to it.

She could’ve been one of the farm wives escorting her husband home from the field. It would be easy to get used to. But Cormac was the one doing the escorting. And not home but back to her rented room.

A stronger spy wouldn’t balk at the chance to seduce him in that room and delay his return to the worksite even further. A stronger woman wouldn’t balk at the chance to explore this opportunity for lovemaking. It had been easy enough to lie on top of him in the mud. More than easy.

When they reached town, Cormac headed directly to her hotel and up to her room. Striding inside, he set her camera and valise on the floor by a chair. Her feet ached from their walk, but she refused to sit. Instead, she hovered by the door, racking her brain for a way to prevent his return to the worksite. He turned to leave.

She had to do something to keep him in this room. One thought rose above the chaos churning in her mind. He wouldn’t leave if she was undressed. She shut the door and unfastened the top button of her dress.

Cormac froze. “Adella—”

“I need clean clothing.” She leaned against the door and lowered her hand to the next button. Her hand trembled, questioning her impetuous decision. She pushed all thought aside save one. She must delay the railroad’s construction. She opened the button.

Cormac sucked in his breath. “I’m not letting you seduce me to get what you want.” Despite his words, he didn’t move to stop her.

Her fingers brushed the piece of paper hidden in her cleavage and she went as still as him. *Blast!* She’d forgotten about the telegram! She needed Cormac to stay in this room, but she couldn’t let him see the telegram.

“How do you know what I want?” she whispered, stalling for time.

“I don’t. But this is what I want.” In two strides, he devoured the gap between them. Then his mouth claimed hers in a hot, heady possession.

Pressed against the door, all she could do was kiss him back. She did so with abandon. Her skin tingled, and her blood raced as if her body had woken from years of sleepwalking. She didn’t want the feeling to stop. She wrapped her arms around Cormac’s neck and pulled him closer.

He suddenly lifted his head. “I want more than one kiss,” he murmured against her lips. “And I don’t mean merely claiming everything that’s under this dress.” His hand slid up her ribcage to cup her breast.

The telegram! With a gasp, she covered her chest with both hands. The corner of the paper poked her palm. *Thank Dixie.* It was still there. But had he seen it? She drew back against the door.

Cormac retreated as well, lifting his hand to rake it through hair that was already disheveled. Had she done that? He reached for the door handle and she jumped aside.

“Stay away from the worksite, Adella.” He opened the door without his customary restraint. It banged against the wall. “And, for God’s sake, stay out of trouble. Don’t provoke a man beyond his patience.”



# Chapter 6



GLANCING REPEATEDLY at the ribbon of orange growing on the eastern horizon, Cormac slogged through the mud, making a beeline for the tent city. When he found the missing men, he'd blister them with a few choice words. Rather than delay the entire crew, he'd been forced to order the train to go to the worksite without him. His belly rumbled, already missing breakfast.

Rounding the corner of the mercantile, the field that held his and his men's homes came into view. In front of a broad swath of tents—crowded together so closely they resembled one gigantic sheet of canvas—rested a pair of wagons filled with men jostling each other for a better position. On the ground before them, someone in a skirt bent under a dark cloth draped over a camera. Parts of his body he had difficulty controlling of late instantly recognized the slim waist and curved bottom.

“Ready?” asked a muffled, but familiar voice from under the cloth.

*Very ready.*

The men assumed stilted poses. Adella pulled her head from the under the cloth. Her auburn hair, tousled and untamed, filled his thoughts with memories of her pressed against the length of him—both in the mud and in her hotel room. If only he didn't have work to do. If only he could forget she was a spy. A spy whose next move he couldn't predict any better than the first saboteur he still needed to catch.

A flash of light and puff of smoke yanked him from his musings.

Dragging his gaze from Adella, he focused on the scene before of him. Adella was a photographer after all. She had an artist's eye for picture taking. She'd positioned the men in front of the tents, the dawn light breaking over their heads, their wagons lined up to leave town. The scene hinted at a provocative story. He needed to learn the caption before he read it, along with everyone else, in the newspapers.

Damnation! If these men had failed to meet the morning train to the Katy worksite, but they were now assembled to leave town, then they might be defecting to the Joy Line. The rival railroad ran parallel to the Katy. The workmen could be there tomorrow. He needed to stop them.

His gaze locked with one of the men on the wagons. The man turned away, whispering to his friends and destroying his chance to catch them unaware and eavesdropping on any conversation. Soon all the men's heads were turned in his direction.

Adella glanced over her shoulder and went from relaxed to stiff as a rail.



Pinning his gaze on his men, his traitorous feet never-the-less brought him to a halt beside her, close enough to feel the warmth of her body and something else vibrating inside her. Was she remembering their kiss? He was.

“Nice morning for a photograph,” he drawled. “Make a fine keepsake or gift to send the folks back home.” People expected a man his size to also be thick in the head, to solve problems with his fists rather than his brains. On occasions like this, better to play dumb and say little of importance. He folded his arms and waited for his men or Adella to make the next move.

Her only response was a brisk rustling as she packed her camera.

“You can’t stop us from leaving, McGrady,” one of the men hollered.

“Stop you?” He raised his eyebrows as if the notion hadn’t even entered his head. “Didn’t realize you were going somewhere.”

“The Joy Line’s paying fifty cents more than the Katy.” The man drew a piece of paper from his pocket and waved it over his head. “This here telegram says so.”

He should’ve known. Another point of contention fueled by money, or the lack of. But he didn’t believe that Adella had become a spy for money. When he’d asked how much the Joy Line was paying her, she’d sidestepped the question and said: *I’m getting what I need.*

What did she need? Why was Stevens her enemy? Did it have something to do with her brother? He still didn’t understand a thing about her. But he understood the men and agreed with them. They deserved fair compensation for their labor. They deserved whatever the competition was getting.

“Today, I’ll use my own pay to cover the wage difference,” he said. “You, and the men already at the worksite, will receive Joy Line wages.” Adella’s rustling stopped. He fought the urge to glance her way and gauge her reaction. “Whatever follows will be up to Stevens. If he won’t pay, you can always leave tomorrow. And you’ll have a pretty picture to impress all the ladies at your new workplace.”

Nerves stretched taut, he waited for Adella’s response. Not even a whisper of sound came from her direction. The men clustered closer together. The hum of their voices grated on his nerves, foreshadowing a counteroffer.

“My offer’s only good for the next ten seconds. Don’t make me split your raise amongst the men already heading to the worksite. Men who deal

openly with me.” He uncrossed his arms, so the men could see his fists. “Men who come to me with their concerns, rather than making me come after them.”

The men sat down in the wagons, urging the horses to make haste. The first wagon paused when it pulled even with him. The man with the telegram thrust out his hand, offering the paper to Cormac.

Another delay diverted, thank the good God. He reached for the telegram but stopped midway. Diverted for how long? He understood workmen not spies. But he’d only gained that knowledge after five years working on the transcontinental. He didn’t have years to learn to think like a spy. All he had was one spy discovered by accident. He had Adella. Could he learn by shadowing her? And in the process keep her out of trouble as well?

He let his hand drop to his side.

“Give the telegram to Stevens when you tell him what we discussed. Tell the McGrady Gang as well.” He drew his watch from his waistcoat. “They’ll let me know if you don’t reach the worksite shortly.”

The wagons rattled off toward the worksite. Feet stomped on the wooden walkway, heading in the opposite direction. He followed the footsteps.

Adella carried her camera wrapped in cloth and hanging from her shoulder in the rope sling he’d fashioned for it yesterday. The thought that he’d done something to make her life easier pleased him.

She also carried the bag he’d never seen her without. The tightness along her shoulders spoke louder than any outburst. Independent woman. Indomitable spy. Inexperienced seductress. None of her parts seemed big enough to define all of her. He wanted to know the woman beneath the façade.

Unfortunately, his first duty was to his work. He must learn what made a spy a spy. Soon he’d be forced to tighten the reins on Adella’s activities. A sudden ache invaded his heart. He had no desire to dull her spirit. But the need to keep her and everyone else safe outweighed even his work obligations. He must learn as much as he could in the hope of corralling the railroad’s unknown number of foes.

Hoping to broach that subject in a roundabout way, he said, “I’d bet money you’re a first-rate photographer. Why not focus on those skills and stop provoking so much unrest?”

“Why not focus on being a foreman and stop following me?” Despite her brusque reply her pace slowed. “You’re the oddest man I ever met. Sending those workers back with the telegram won’t make your boss happy.”

“Stevens’ happiness isn’t high on my list of priorities.”

“Empowering your workmen might halt construction permanently. What kind of foreman wants that? Your gang said you were hired because you had a reputation for fast work.”

“One can be fast and fair.”

“One usually must decide between the two.”

He’d had this conversation before—with himself—and his answer hadn’t changed. “Then I choose fair.”

She snorted. “You’ll go broke giving your wages to others.”

“At least I’ll meet my maker with a clean conscience on that charge.”

Adella’s pace increased, until she was walking faster than when she’d first left the tent city. He cursed himself under his breath. If he’d learned anything from his brief time with Adella, it was that pushing too hard made her as approachable as a prickly hedgehog.

Struggling for a way to soften his unintentional reproach, he ended up following her in silence. She wore a pretty but simple gingham dress. Its plainness didn’t stop him from becoming mesmerized by the sway of her hips. After a while the footpath stopped branching and led to only one destination—the livery. She’d planned to ride somewhere. That was why she was dressed so practically today. She did everything for a reason.

“Where we heading?” he asked.

“We are headed nowhere. I’ve decided to take your advice and be a photographer today. Your railroad is safe from me. Return to it.”

“I don’t like you wandering around alone. Too many rough men who could take advantage.”

“I’ve been wandering through worse places since I was fifteen. Besides, thanks to you, all the rough men are now at the worksite.”

He shrugged. “One can never be too sure.”

“True.” She glanced over her shoulder. “You’re still in town.”

“I shall escort you wherever you like.” He wouldn’t mind escorting her back to her hotel room and continuing where they’d left off. But that would be another game for Adella. When he took her to bed, he wanted her to be there for only one reason. Him.

“You don’t even know where I’m going.”

“You could tell me.”

She turned her gaze forward, dismissing him. “I could, but I don’t have to. More importantly I don’t want to. I can look after myself. Why are you still here?” Although her voice remained neutral, her body tensed with sudden interest. “Are there additional delays beyond a few missing workers? Has construction shut down?”

“That’s another good thing about the McGrady Gang. They can push forward without me for a few hours. I’m free to assist you.”

“I don’t like being followed. You make me feel—” She clamped her mouth shut and bowed her head as if she regretted her words.

*What, Adella? What do I make you feel?*

Spinning to face him head-on, she deposited her camera and bag on the walkway, creating a wall between them. “If I don’t move, you can’t follow me.” She folded her arms and her lips flattened into a determined line. “I can stand here all day.”

“I have a better idea.” He scooped up her belongings. Ignoring her startled gasp, he stepped down into the mud and walked around her. Then he regained the footpath and continued on toward the livery. “Why don’t you follow me for a change?”



AFTER CORMAC PROCURED horses at the livery, Adella followed him east. When their mounts broke free of the mud and found firmer ground outside of town, she urged her mount into a trot.

Despite Cormac’s comment about her following him, he rode only slightly ahead while carrying her camera and valise. He maneuvered his horse close to hers, matching her pace, leading her while still staying next to her—as he’d done yesterday when they’d walked together. She rode astride, her skirt hiked up to her knees, showing an unladylike amount of stocking-clad leg.

His gaze sought her often, but each time he looked away just as quickly...until he caught her contemplating him in return. “’Tis good you finally decided to photograph the farm widows for real.”

She’d seen too many women suffer during the war and had never held the power to help them. Her guilt for failing the widows had hounded her

all night. As had her fascination for Cormac. She couldn't do anything about the later except try to camouflage her ardor with shrewish comments.

"It's good that you're familiar with horses," she replied, "and won't slow me down." Her lack of sleep should've helped sharpen her tone. Instead, her voice sounded unaccountably pleased.

He lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "I come from a family of tenant farmers."

His humble description breached her defenses. She laughed. "You know more than the backside of a plow horse."

A smile curved his mouth, making her feel like a family of grasshoppers danced around her belly. "Back home—when it rained and the landlord's children stayed snug in their home—me and my sister borrowed their ponies and raced across the moors." A frown twisted his brow and the joy vanished from his lips. "There were many rainy days in Galway."

Cormac must miss his family. Even though he'd visited Ireland only a few months ago, it'd be a long time before he could make a return trip. He might never see his family again. A shared sadness tightened her chest.

She tried to infuse her voice with lightness. "You and your sister were a pair of rascallion children." She knew the kind well, but only in memories. Luckily those particular memories were good ones.

"Molly was three years older than me and wise beyond measure." Cormac's tone was subdued. "I did everything she told me to do, until she was twelve."

Unease, chill as a north wind, froze her. "And after that?"

"We had no more time for games." Cormac nudged his horse into a canter.

Adella did the same. His pace left no room for conversations but wasn't so fast it put either her or her camera in danger. Had his sister taught him that?

Land covered in stubble turned brown and brittle from the winter, stretched around them as far as the eye could see. Liberating after the muddy town, the earth here held the promise of new life, of change. But the wind, briskly pushing the ever-present clouds overhead, warned how unsettling change might be.

On the horizon a dot grew larger, turning into several dots: a farmhouse, barn and chicken coop. From the house came a tall figure with white-blonde hair contrasting starkly with the brown earth and the gray sky.

Cormac slowed his horse to a walk. “Your photographs might help Helga.”

Adella’s hands tightened on her reins. She hadn’t come to New Chicago for photographs. Cormac knew that now, but he continued trying to save her and everyone else around him. “Your sister taught you well,” she said. “To ride and to do what’s right.”

“That didn’t stop Molly from dying. I didn’t do anything right then.”

His sister had died? Cormac’s words at the worksite came back to her. *I won’t let anyone else die because of me.* Good God, he believed he’d caused his sister’s death? How?

Before she could ask, Helga called, “Isn’t this a merry surprise, the two of you visiting me together?”

They rode the remaining distance in silence. Cormac greeted Helga politely, then dismounted and unstrapped Adella’s camera from his saddle.

With his back turned, Helga cast Adella a questioning glance.

She busied herself climbing down from her horse.

“Never expected to be in so many pictures,” Helga said. “A body could get famous this way.”

“Or infamous,” Cormac replied. “I’m sure Miss Willows has the ability to make either happen.” With her camera under one arm, he turned to face Adella. “Well, have you made up your mind?”

She blinked in confusion. All she could think about was his sister. “Made up my mind about what?”

He gestured in a broad arc that encompassed the farm buildings. “About what backdrop you’ll choose for your next picture.”

She turned to Helga. “I’d like to keep things as homey as possible. What were you planning to do before we arrived?”

“Got a basket of washing that needs hanging.”

Adella nodded. “A full laundry line with the house behind will do nicely.”

Helga took the camera from Cormac. “We ladies have things in order. I could use some more wood chopped, though.” She thrust her chin in the direction of the house.

Cormac’s brows raised at the stack of wood piled high against one wall. Enough wood to last a year. He hesitated as if he wanted to say something. Then he strode toward his assignment. Had his sister taught him this as

well? Not to argue when a woman requested help? What had happened to her?

That one question filled her mind, leaving room for nothing else. She took a step to follow Cormac.

Helga dumped the camera in her arms, halting her. “Set up wherever you like while I fetch my basket.”

With the whack of Cormac’s axe creating an unbroken rhythm in the background, Adella assembled her camera and joined Helga in hanging laundry as white as the widow’s hair. When Adella reached for the last sheet in the basket, Helga seized her wrist.

Another unexplainable jolt of apprehension, similar to when Helga took hold of her in the missionary tent, rocked Adella. Why did Helga affect her thus? Was it the woman’s swiftness, her determination, her blunt manner? All three made a formidable personality. Still, Adella reminded herself, Helga was not a threat. She was not her enemy.

“Leave that for later.” Helga released Adella and set the basket on her hip.

Exhaling slowly to steady her nerves and hands, Adella returned to her camera. She repositioned the tripod several times, before she was satisfied with what she saw through the viewfinder—a once thriving home now attended by a sole occupant. Without husband or children or even livestock to stand beside Helga, the shot took on a melancholy tone.

“Ready?” she called to Helga. “Remember not to move.”

A sudden surge of uncertainty held her immobile as well. Had everything she’d done since Declan’s death been meaningless? Was she living her life for the wrong reasons? Before her stood a flesh and blood person who needed her help, not a ghost who couldn’t be saved or even avenged. Not properly at least. The dead remained dead. There was no changing that.

She took the picture in a hurry and bundled up the camera even faster.

With her basket still in hand, Helga moved to stand beside her. “Now that that’s done, I want you to see something.” Glancing over her shoulder at Cormac, who continued chopping wood with an untiring stroke, Helga positioned her broad bulk between them. Then she lifted the sheet from the basket. Three sticks of dynamite lay underneath.

Shock paralyzed Adella. “What’re you doing with that?”

“If there’s no track, my farm’s worth nothing to nobody but me.”

An image of a crater torn in the earth—blackened rails and bloodied men lying battered and broken around it—flashed before her eyes. The McGrady Gang would lie among them and Cormac too. Ears ringing and body swaying from a blast that had yet to happen, she latched onto Helga's arm. "Please tell me you don't mean to blow up the worksite."

"Thought about it, but I can't chance hurting my supplier. Might need more of these." Helga caressed the dynamite in her basket with a lover's hand.

Adella felt her jaw drop. "You're working with someone from the Katy? Why would he sabotage his own workplace?"

"He didn't say. Only said he didn't want another incident like yours at the station."

Astonishment robbed her ability to speak, but her thoughts raced like the clouds across the sky. Did Helga know the man who'd dumped the load that nearly killed Adella? Her blood felt like ice and so did the future. She wrapped her arms around herself.

Cormac's axe was suddenly silent.

Helga returned the sheet to the basket and said in rushed whisper, "Just wanted you to know, so you'd be ready with your camera." Then she stepped aside so Adella saw Cormac again, and him her.

He stood, axe in hand, frowning at them. His gaze swept over her, almost as if searching for an injury. When he didn't find anything amiss, his stance lost some of its rigidity. He glanced at Helga, his brow lowering even further. Then he slammed his axe into a log and strode toward them. Behind him, the stack of wood had grown with freshly cut wood piled atop.

Its size had been sufficient when Cormac started. Helga was as strong as a man. She didn't require help splitting wood. The no-nonsense Irishman striding toward them knew this, but he'd still accepted the task. Not just out of habit from a sister's training or out of politeness to a stranger like Helga. He'd done it to give Adella room and trust.

And she'd used that trust to discover something that might not only harm his railroad but him. She held information that might kill him. The clammy hand of fear brushed her skin.

Thunder rumbled on the horizon. "Rain's finally coming," Helga said.

Adella spun to face her. "When will—?"

"Soon. Like we discussed yesterday, it's best to work when the season's ripe."



Cormac had crossed half the distance separating them. Little time remained.

“Tell me who you’re working with,” Adella whispered.

“He told me not to say.”

“Helga, please be careful. You don’t want to hurt anyone, or get hurt. This man you’re dealing with, he might be a spy for the Joy Line.”

“He’s no threat to me. I’m stronger than him, than all of them.” Helga’s lips pressed into a hard line.

Cormac was within hearing distance. His gaze shifted momentarily from them to the sky. “We’d better head for town,” he said.

Adella nodded, grateful for his steady hands as he carried her camera to their horses and secured it on his saddle. Her own hands shook as she mounted her horse. She wanted to turn her horse east and run away from everyone she’d met since coming to New Chicago. Instead, she waved farewell to Helga and kept her horse no faster than a trot as she and Cormac rode west in the direction of town.

When she glanced back and saw Helga disappear inside her house, she gave in to her screaming nerves and urged her horse into a gallop. Seemingly in response, the sky opened up and rain pelted her skin like fierce pinpricks, pushing her to even greater speed.

Cormac was suddenly beside her. Grabbing her reins, he slowed her horse. “We won’t make it to town. Not before the worst of the storm hits. We must take shelter and wait it out.” He jerked his head to the left. “There’s an abandoned farm over that knoll.”

They clattered across a creek rising with the rain and clambered up the slope. The rain now fell thick, obscuring her view. Their horses skidded down the other side, sliding in earth slick with puddles. Lightning lit the horizon, granting her a glimpse of a ramshackle house with its door agape and banging in the wind. Seconds later, thunder boomed. Then the heavens unleashed a bruising deluge.

“The barn’s that way,” Cormac yelled. “Let’s get the horses inside.”

Before the last word had left his lips, she was turning her horse blindly in the direction he’d indicated. The barn held little more than a pile of hay with two stalls opposite. After they’d seen to their mounts, it only took a few strides to stand by the door. The rain had halted, but the clouds circled, preparing for another assault.

The sodden gingham of her dress clung to her, heavy and revealing. She wanted to run, to hide, to disappear. The storm and now the cramped barn, made even smaller by Cormac's size, thwarted her.

She dared not look at him for fear of seeing what his clothing revealed. Wet linen and tweed plastered to a solid, muscular body would torment her. She yearned to run her hands over him, stroke every line and swell. But she also wanted to delve deeper and discover what secrets he harbored as well.

She released a pained sigh. Other than their one all-too-brief kiss inside her hotel room, he'd met her advances with rejection. Or worse concern and questions. And she had told him too much already.

He moved closer. He didn't touch her, but the heat of his body pulled at her just the same. She propped one shoulder against the doorjamb, using it as an anchor.

"We should make a run for the house," he said.

"That would be trespassing."

"Its owner is long gone. When a railroad reaches a town, some folks pack up and hop on the train. Some say they're heading east to a better life."

Adella could've told them there wasn't anything better in the East. Ghosts and regrets followed wherever you went. Same with new troubles. They sprouted like thistles in a vegetable patch. The door across the yard started banging again, driven by the wind, which was rising to its previous howl.

"We'd be better off inside the house," Cormac said. "You're soaked through. You're shivering."

She remembered another time when she'd been drenched and watching a house in the unforgiving rain. "I won't go inside. It's still someone's home. They might come back."

"That's unlikely."

"I came back."

A weighty silence hung between them, amplified by the storm outside the barn, before Cormac asked, "After the war?"

She shook her head, making her sodden hair tumble loose from its pins. "After the war, when the carpetbaggers overran the south, my home was long gone." Thick locks slid down her cheeks. She left them there, using them as a shield as she peered sideways at Cormac. "This was *during* the war when the Yankee troops first started paying house calls."

He reached out to touch her, but stopped. His hand fell in a fist by his side. “The soldiers— Did they— find you inside?”

“No. I hid in the trees like a coward and watched a noble band of Union Blue tear up the walls of my two-room house to fill the fireplaces in the plantation mansion. Squatters and thieves. To them, my home was just kindling. Although the big house didn’t fare any better two years later during Sherman’s march.”

He put his hand on her shoulder then, pulling her out of the past into the present. “What did Helga say to you?”

Desperation to feel something new, rather than wallowing in the past, overwhelmed her. She spun to face him. “I’m tired of talking. Show me what would’ve happened in the hotel if we hadn’t stopped.”

“You don’t really want that, lass.”

“I do.” The intensity of her response made him draw back in surprise. It surprised her too. She was surprised she’d resisted his appeal this long.

“What if you get pregnant?” he demanded. “I refuse to bring a child into this world that won’t be properly cared for by a mother and father united as one, not just on paper but in their hearts. Can you do that, lass?”

The enormity of his proposal made her head spin. She couldn’t have heard him correctly. Only his first question seemed answerable. A long ago snippet of conversation gathered while eavesdropping rose to her rescue. Maybe all her listening and lurking hadn’t been for naught.

“The men in the army talked about pulling out at the last, spilling their seed on the ground...if they had a care for a woman and she asked.”

Swearing again in Gaelic, Cormac pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose. “You shouldn’t have heard that.”

“But I did and I’m asking.”

“You ask too much. It’d be too hard a thing to remember when I’ve got the prettiest lass I’ve ever seen in my arms.”

She moved closer to him. She craved his warmth, his strength, his touch. She didn’t want to run from this. “I’ll remember for both of us.”

“You could do this with any man. Why me?”

She wanted to delay his return to the worksite. No. That was a lie, with them trapped in the barn and his men probably all hunkered down themselves to wait out the storm. Sometimes it was easier to tell oneself lies. And sometimes it was easier to say aloud just a little bit of the truth.

She placed her palm on his chest. “I want you.”

The muscles in his jaw jerked taut as leather. He stomped away. Flopping down on his back on the pile of hay, he threw one arm over his eyes.

She followed and sat beside him. She made sure not to touch him. She didn't want him retreating again. "Is this your way of telling me no?"

"You ask too much. I want more than a quick toss, lass. I want that child I spoke of. I want a family again."

The yearning in his voice made her stomach churn with apprehension. She hugged her knees to her chest and propped her chin on them. "When you went home to Ireland..." She wanted to ask if a sweetheart had been waiting for him. Her courage failed her. "You went back to start a family?"

"No. I returned to help the family I'd left. I went back for my sister, Meghan." He thrust his fingers deep into his hair and left them there. He stared at the roof without blinking. "I told you my sister, Molly, died. She wasn't the only one."

His words chilled her.

Shaking as if cold as well, he continued in a strangled voice, "During the two years following Molly's death, my sisters—Muriel and Maeve and Maureen—died. Meghan only survived by a hairsbreadth."

Tears blurred her eyes. "And your parents?"

"I was told my mother died when I was four. A year later, my father didn't return from the tavern. That was one of my first memories. Not his failure to come home, but my sisters all saying it'd be easier without him. But the McGrady sisters never had things easy." His skin had turned as white as bleached bone.

When he'd said people died because of him, he'd meant his sisters. She didn't believe it. "How did they die?"

"*An Gorta Mór*. The Great Hunger. It took everyone I loved except Meghan."

Despite her sorrow for his loss, she breathed a sigh of relief. He wasn't responsible for anyone's death. He wasn't like Levi Parsons. "You can't blame yourself for surviving a country-wide famine that happened...how long ago?"

"Molly died in '48, a few years after the potato blight hit. She was only twelve. I should've—"

"Wait! That's when you said you stopped riding the landlord's ponies. You said Molly was twelve. Just three years older than you. My God. You

were only a boy when she died!”

“It would’ve been better if I’d never been born. Then they’d have had more to eat. They’d have lived.”

“You don’t know that!” Her voice was sharper than she’d intended.

“Aye, I do. After Molly passed, my eldest sister, Muriel, wouldn’t speak for a fortnight. When she finally did, it was to assemble us around Molly’s grave and pledge that no one younger than she would die. She was looking at me when she said it. Each of my sisters made the same vow when she became the eldest. They died because of me.”

“They made their own decisions.”

“I didn’t fully understand what they were doing at first. Then, later, I didn’t even have the brains to steal a loaf of bread without getting caught.” His voice was flat as if he spoke about someone other than himself. “The parish constable, a kindly sort who could’ve jailed or transported me, blistered my palms with a leather strap. Couldn’t pick up, let alone pinch, anything for weeks. Then, by dumb luck, I found work. Earned enough to buy the bread I was so useless at stealing. I’ve worked every day since.”

He drew in a deep breath as if steeling himself to continue. “But I started too late. By then only Meghan was alive.” He finally looked at her. The silver of his eyes had turned a shade as dark and unforgiving as the clouds holding them prisoner in the barn.

“My sisters’ resolve terrified me. So did my failure to do anything to save them. I feel the same way about you.”

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# Chapter 7



GOD ROT HIS SORRY SOUL. Why had he burdened Adella with all his weaknesses? He'd never bared his soul so completely to anyone. If asked about his trip to Galway, he'd just said he had five sisters and was going home to help the one who still needed him.

Only when he got back, Meghan—true to the McGrady sisters' pluck—hadn't needed him. His five-year absence, finally earning a decent wage on the transcontinental railroad and sending every penny home, had given Meghan space. Space to stop clinging to the past and hovering over a baby brother who now, at age thirty-one, towered over her.

Meghan had found a husband who Cormac grudgingly respected, had given birth to a boy of her own, and had a second child on the way. She'd built a new family. After returning his money, she urged him to do the same.

Uncurling from her sitting position, Adella stretched out on her back beside him. His arms ached to hold her. All of her. Every lithe curve. Even her determined, and often sharp, knees and elbows.

She took a turn at staring at the roof.

"What are you thinking?" he asked, craving the sound of her voice

"That you had a gang long before you came to America and started building railroads."

He didn't know what he'd expected, but not that. He laughed, not a happy laugh but still a laugh. It eased some of the tightness gripping his chest.

She rolled on her side and met his gaze. Even sopping-wet she was damned pretty. She stole his breath and made it hard to think of anything but her, which was a blessing right now.

"I'm also thinking that you learned to take care of those in need from the very best. Yesterday, when you told Stevens to pay the farm widows or leave them alone, you were remembering your sisters."

"I suppose so."

She shimmied closer, her breasts grazing his side. His arm instinctively dropped down around her shoulders. He kept his grip loose, waiting for her retreat, dreading it.

Instead, she slid on top of him. Desire shot through him hard and fast, making his whole frame stiffen.

"You make a nice island," she murmured.

He forced his body to relax. Not all of him would listen.



“An Irish island in a sea of American mud?” He lowered his voice to match hers. “Will you stay with me?” He threaded his fingers in her hair and searched her eyes. “Will you think of the future rather than the past? Whatever happened, whatever turned you into a spy, it’s not too late to do something different.” His hold on her involuntarily tightened. “Build a life with me.”

Shadows danced across her golden eyes. Ghosts tormented her as well. “Like a milkmaid stumbling across a giant sleeping in her barn, I should really run for my life.”

But Adella wasn’t running. She remained in his arms. “You aren’t one of those easily intimidated maidens.”

“In this barn, if I asked again, would my giant become my lover?”

He flinched, nearly toppling her off him. He stared at her, too stunned to even curse. Then a slow certainty stole over him, gentling his grip on her. If he couldn’t have Adella, then he didn’t want a family. And he couldn’t change Adella. He could only accept her, love her, and cherish every moment he was blessed with her in his arms. He uncurled his fingers, releasing her hair, smoothing the auburn locks, arranging the thick mass over her shoulders and down her spine.

She cocked her head, frowning down at him warily, awaiting his answer.

“Have you lain with a man before?”

She shook her head. “Does it matter?”

“Yes.” He pulled a wayward curl of her hair, a teasing gesture he’d seen Meghan’s husband do in Galway. He didn’t want to hurt Adella in any way. He must go slowly with her.

“You still won’t grant my request.” She squeezed shut her eyes and pulled away from him. “I think it’s time to rise and face the reality.”

“I think not.” In one swift movement, he lifted his head and pressed his lips to hers. So much for proceeding slowly.

He swallowed her surprised gasp, then her moan of pleasure. With the gap between them finally removed, he succumbed to the fierce need he’d been holding back. She returned his kiss with equal passion. Scorching him, enticing him, amazing him. Whenever Adella decided to do something, she did it boldly.

Lungs burning, he slid his lips along her cheek. He needed to catch his breath, but he couldn’t stop touching her. He rubbed the curve of his

cheekbone against her soft cheek, delighting in her throaty purr. With his hands cradling her head, he explored the ridge of her jaw, the pulse point at the end, the hollow below her ear. She arched her back, granting him better access.

He slowed his movements, wanting to remember everything about this moment. He inhaled deeply, drawing in the scent of her warm skin mixed with the flower of her perfume. The rain droplets, beading on her skin, were sweet on his tongue.

She trembled against him and arched her back even more. His lips found the swell of her breasts. Unrestrained breasts. She wasn't wearing a corset. Sliding his hands down, he cupped her breasts, one in each palm. They were the perfect size and shape for his thumb to caress her nipples through her wet dress. They pebbled immediately. He unbuttoned her bodice and slipped his hands under her chemise. Flesh against flesh. So soft, so beautiful. His mouth swiftly followed his hands.

His blood pounded in his ears and raced to his groin. She rubbed her pelvis against his, and his hands immediately shot down to cover her bottom and press her firm against his erection. The growl in the back of his throat startled him.

"You know how to test a man's restraint in the best way possible, lass. Rock your hips like this." He guided her in the rhythm he craved. She was a damned quick study. The pleasure she wrenched from him left him struggling to hold onto what little remained of his control. And all with her still clothed. What would it feel like with her naked against him?

"You'll remember to pull out? At the end?" Her voice was breathless and husky, driving him to the precipice.

He didn't want to think about the end. Doing so might send him over the edge right now. He rolled her onto her back and lifted the hem of her skirt. "No. I doubt if I'd remember," he whispered close to her ear. "So I'm going to make love to you another way."

He glided his fingers up the intoxicatingly soft skin of her inner thigh, pausing to trace circles, advancing, retreating but always moving higher. Delicious shivers rippled through her body as she opened to him.

He didn't stop until she cried out his name and arched tight as a bowstring against his hand. Wrapping her in his arms, he concentrated on counting to one hundred. He wasn't ruining this one perfect moment with her. It might be all he ever had.

“I had no idea that was possible,” she murmured.

With Adella in his arms, the world outside was hushed, silent. He lifted his head. No, it wasn't just the peace of being with her. The wind and rain no longer rattled the rafters. The storm had stopped. He was being selfish, continuing to hold Adella while she wore a damp dress in a drafty barn.

He pulled down her skirt and buttoned her bodice. “We should head for town and find you some dry clothes.”

“We're not...continuing?”

“You need time to think, to decide.”

“I do?” She ducked her head, avoiding his gaze. “Or you do?”

He laced his fingers with hers and rose, pulling her to her feet beside him. “I know what I want.”

She still wouldn't meet his gaze. Instead, she stared at their linked hands and said, “You once said I should come find you if I needed help.”

“You still should. No matter what you decide about...” he squeezed her fingers, “...this.” He immediately loosened his grip, so she could pull free if she wanted. “I'll move my tent away from the others so that if you need assistance, you can find me quickly.”

“What if I just need...you?” She lifted her head.

The unblinking intensity in her amber eyes made his chest swell with hope. Maybe, just maybe, he could steal happiness one moment at a time with her. “Then come to me tonight. I'll be waiting.”



RIDING BESIDE ADELLA, Cormac pointed his mount in the direction of New Chicago. He let the horse choose its own pace across a ravine fetlock-deep in water. It would take hours, maybe days, for this much rain to soak into the earth.

Adella's unbound hair spilled down her back, swaying in the wake of the wind that drove the darkest clouds over the horizon. Her beauty stole his breath like his first glimpse of Ireland after five long years away. He'd been hopeful then as well. And it had all come to naught.

A baritone boom shook the earth.

“Another thunderstorm?” She craned her neck, inspecting the sky.

He did the same. The eastern horizon flickered bright orange. Then black smoke billowed, obscuring the light.

He turned his horse sharply, urging it toward this new cloud. Adella's horse splashed close behind him. The hoof beats matched his own mount's stride for stride when he cleared the water and rode as fast as he dared up the soft, slippery slope.

On the other side, in a broad valley, lay the smoke's source—the fractured boiler of a locomotive burrowed in the earth to its running boards. Behind it, a boxcar lay on its side. Then came a car reduced to kindling by a final freight car. Iron rails, identical to those that had nearly crushed Adella, lay scattered like match sticks.

In the middle of the destruction, a section of the track had collapsed underwater. Guilt tore through his gut. His shoddy work, his failure to defy Stevens' continued demands to increase the pace of construction, had done this. Where was the train's crew? Were they dead?

He raced down the hill without a thought for his own well-being. Leaping from his horse, he climbed onto the engine. The cab was empty. From his vantage point, he spun in a circle searching, gasping for air like a drowning man. His gaze halted on Adella kneeling next to a figure stretched on the ground behind the wreck. He stopped breathing all together.

She lifted her head, her gaze meeting his. She smiled and beckoned for him to join her.

"Thank Dixie you're alive," she said to the man on the ground as Cormac skidded to a halt beside them.

"How's my train?" the man asked on groan.

"The storm roughed her up a bit. But it's"—she paused until Cormac met her gaze again—"nothing that can't be fixed."

Was his guilt written that plainly on his face?

"Nature didn't do this all on her own," the conductor said, shaking his head. "Men helped. After we came off the rails, I saw three of them swoop into the first boxcar, quick as buzzards."

"What was inside?" she asked.

"The payroll," Cormac replied.

Without that money half the workmen would jump ship for the Joy Line. Hell, they'd all leave, except for maybe the McGrady Gang. And he couldn't let his gang stay if they weren't getting paid. Things couldn't get any worse.

"Thank Jesus," the conductor said, "we didn't pick up the passenger car at the last town."

Cormac spat out a curse. Things could always get worse. And so far he hadn't done a damned thing to stop them. "When I find these saboteurs, I'll make sure they're locked up with the key buried. They can stay there till they—"

Adella's face had turned ashen. Regret bombarded his heart. Instinctively, he reached for her. She retreated and stared without blinking at the wreckage.

Shoving his outstretched hands in his pockets, he pivoted to face the man on the ground. "Can you tell us what the robbers looked like?"

The conductor shook his head. "Too much smoke and they'd covered their faces with bandanas."

Cormac's thoughts spun, grappling for answers. "Did they say anything?"

"Yeah, but it was mighty strange. I only understood the one phrase."

"Which was?"

"As they rode off, one of them yelled: *To tyrants we'll not yield.*"

Adella sucked in a breath.

Why? The words didn't mean a thing to him. He studied the conductor. "You sure? You were thrown pretty far from the train and—"

"Course I'm bloody sure!" The conductor cast Adella an apologetic glance. "Sorry, miss. I still get riled when I hear the old battle cries. Heard 'em too many times when a wave of Rebel Gray charged and started riddling my troop with bullets."

Cormac frowned. The conductor's comments felt contradictory. "So why call their words strange?"

"Because everything they said before that was gibberish. They were talking in Irish."



ADELLA'S VALISE FELT heavy as a mortar shell, as she crept along the footpath. Could she use the valise's contents to pacify rather than provoke? To heal rather than harm? The night was as black as the conservatively-cut mourning dress she'd chosen to wear. Bulky clouds still hung overhead, preventing the moon and stars from showing her the way. The only light came from the workmen's tents ahead.

Had Cormac placed his tent away from the others, so she could find him? She doubted it. Not after the train wreck and his words there. It didn't

matter. She wasn't searching for him.

The tents' peaked backs glowed from within. The flickering lantern light pulled her forward like a moth to the flame. *Fergal won't hurt me.* He wasn't one of the train robbers. He couldn't be. With his injured leg he couldn't ride with a mob, or clamor onto an overturned boxcar or help carry off a hefty payroll.

But the song... The Confederate *Battle Cry of Freedom* kept playing in her head.

*They have laid down their lives  
On the bloody battle field,  
Shout, shout the battle cry of Freedom!  
Their motto is resistance—  
To tyrants we'll not yield!*

The last line ground her hopes to dust.

One of the outlaws was an Irish speaking Rebel soldier.

There'd been plenty of Irishmen in the war—on the Union side. In New York, the Yankees had recruited them straight off the immigrant ships. If one of these men had found his way to the other side, would he still shout a Rebel battle cry five years later? Would he cling to the song as tenaciously as a soldier born to the land? A son of the south like Fergal who could speak Irish as fluently as English?

Or maybe Fergal had taught the song to the workmen to rile them up. Could Fergal be an instigator, like her? What if she herself had said or done something that provoked those men into committing such a dangerous act? She wasn't concerned with the loss of the payroll, but the loss of the train crew—

Fortunately, after they'd found the conductor, they'd unearthed the brakeman and fireman as well. Battered and shaken, but alive. This time.

She had to find Fergal and reason with him. One of these tents was his, and one was Cormac's. Cormac, who for a day, had overlooked her being a spy. He wouldn't any longer. His words at the train wreck, his outrage and determination, stung her again. She and Cormac were enemies in a new type of war, an underhanded one. Maybe it was better to shout a war cry and charge directly at your opponent. At least then everyone knew where they stood.

Too many lies. Too many secrets. Too many regrets.

She couldn't live this life anymore. Not if it turned her into a murderer, or an accomplice to one. If Fergal was involved, she needed to stop him from harming anyone else, including himself. She had to find him.

Halting at the end of the last street that opened onto the tent city, she began her vigil. The mercantile loomed beside her. If the clouds decided to part, it would create a nice shadow in which to hide. The seconds ticked away in accompaniment to her pounding heart, until she lost track of the time.

"Are you looking for me?" The voice came from behind her.

She whipped around. "Fergal! You startled me."

He grabbed her arm and pulled her toward the tents. The ease with which he moved doubled her surprise, making her stiffen. He wasn't limping. His hold on her arm tightened, as if he sensed the change in her as well. He pulled her inside one of the tents and stood between her and the flap.

"Your leg," she whispered. "It was a lie?" Shock turned to horror as her life, and her resolve to ruin Parsons and avenge Declan, derailed as abruptly as this afternoon's train. "What else about Camp Douglas was a lie?"

"Everything that happened there was true. I was shot. The doctor didn't remove the bullet. Declan died in a cell. I almost did as well. But the war ended too early to grant me that release. When the gates were thrown open, I hobbled out of Camp Douglas with a limp. My body healed as best as it could, but a couple of months ago I injured my leg again and this time gangrene threatened. Once more, I was dying but this time I was alone."

"Alone?" Her usually cooperative brain refused to function. "Where was Cormac?"

"We'd completed the transcontinental and gone our separate ways. He headed to Ireland, and I decided to drink myself into oblivion." Fergal laughed a harsh self-deprecating sound. "Coward that I am, when faced again with my own death—by a festering broken leg—I suddenly wanted to live. Fortunately, this time around I had power. I had enough money to persuade a doctor to dig out the old bullet and set the bone...rather than look the other way and leave me to die. I also had time to heal, and to think. That's when I decided to come work for the Katy."

"But why act injured when you aren't?"

"So I wouldn't be suspected of my other activities."

Her mind blanked again, rejecting his words. “Fergal, no. You can’t want to—”

“I do. And you do too. Otherwise why are you here? We’re here because we both came to the same conclusion about the war, Dec’s death and his killer. We must do everything we can to make that Yankee pay for his sins.”

“I want him to pay as well. Creating delays, making him lose money. I hoped my ill-deeds would end there. But they don’t. Those men on the train could’ve been killed.”

“Causalities are inevitable in war.”

Pain sliced her, sharp as the day she’d received the news of her brother’s death. “Causalities like Declan?”

He jerked as if she’d wounded him as well. “You said you didn’t want to talk about him.”

“I was wrong. By never speaking of Declan I forgot who he was. I’ve spent the last hour rereading his letters.” She extracted the bundle from its special compartment and tossed the valise aside.

“This is all that’s important.” She touched the letters reverently. “I’d forgotten how Declan craved peace. All throughout the war he wrote about it, about his hopes for coming home, about rebuilding rather than destroying.”

She pressed the letters into Fergal’s hands. “He wrote about you reciting the *Battle Cry of Freedom*. He wrote about his worry for you. He wrote how the war had changed you and to him that was the greatest loss of all. Then...he asked me to look after you, and he stopped writing. But I was selfish, wallowing in my grief and revenge. I never even looked for you.”

Fergal frowned at the letters. “He asked me to take care of you as well. But you’ve never needed that. You’re stronger than us all.”

She shook her head. Her strength was an act, like Fergal’s limp. A ruse to keep others at a distance.

“He’s arriving in New Chicago on the next train.” Fergal’s words yanked her from her thoughts.

She blinked. “Who?”

“The rich Yankee responsible for Dec’s death. He won’t be leaving town.”

No! She wouldn’t be responsible for more death. Not even Parsons’. “I can’t let you do this.”



“You can’t stop me.”

“What if others get in the way and you kill them too?”

He frowned at her. “Stay away from the train station, Adella.”

“I don’t mean me. I mean people like the crew on that train.”

“You’re all grown up, Adella, but you remain that little girl from Georgia who went out of her way not to step on flowers. Sometimes you have to crush a few stalks to get where you’re going.” Fergal held Declan’s letters out to her. “You need these more than me.”

She wrapped her hands around his, pressing his fingers tight against the letters. “You’re wrong. You need Declan’s words just as much as I do. Read them. Remember him.”

Behind her, the tent flap jerked open with a snap. Cormac’s giant frame shoved through the narrow gap. The scowl on his face was ten times fiercer than any she’d ever seen.

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# Chapter 8



CORMAC HALTED INSIDE the tent, staring at Adella pressing a packet of letters into Fergal's hands. His fury lessened just a fraction, allowing him to think. She wasn't hurt. He wouldn't have to attend anyone's funeral—namely Fergal's. Adella looked ready for one, though. She wore the black dress of a mourner and the ashen face of the deceased.

“What're you doing here?” Fergal growled. The last time he'd heard that particular tone was when Fergal had been drunk and cursing Adella's father.

“The men reported raised voices. They mentioned a woman's voice.” The McGrady Gang said they'd heard Adella pleading with Fergal. The thought still made his temper spike. Praised be the Saints that his gang had come to him.

“You've interrupted a...” Fergal's gaze slid from him to Adella and back again, “...lover's quarrel.”

She jerked away from Fergal, her face flushing scarlet in the lantern light. “I have no idea who you are anymore. You certainly aren't the friend from my youth.” She squeezed past Cormac and out of the tent.

Turning to follow her, his gaze snagged on her bag lying forgotten on the floor. He paused to grab the handle. The already opened bag released a stream of photographs and papers. Cursing, he knelt and stuffed them back inside.

“Adella, wait! You forgot—” He leapt outside...and lost her. Fingers numb, he dropped the bag and plunged into the night. Eyes straining for a glimpse of her, he followed the footpath—and hopefully Adella—into the center of New Chicago.

Worry seized his heart with the strength of a vulture's talons. How would he find her in this rabbit warren of side streets and back alleys? Should he head straight for her hotel? Muffled piano music sounded up ahead. Then the usual male guffaws that were never far from Eden's establishment. Should he go in and ask if she'd seen Adella?

A curse came from the alley alongside Eden's, followed by a scream, the crack of a slap, and then a man's voice.

“Bite me again and I'll hit you twice as hard. If yer found outside a brothel, especially at night, yer looking for a customer.”

Cormac tore down the alley. A lantern sat on the ground beside three men crouched over a struggling woman. One pressed his hand over her mouth. Another pinned her arms above her head. The last man shoved up

her skirt. The white of Adella's petticoats flashed stark against the black of that dress.

He slammed into the men with a roar. Kicked the first man in the ribs. Punched the second in the jaw. Kneaded the third in the face. The final strike was the most satisfying as he thought he heard bone break and it set Adella free. She scrambled to her feet. A red handprint marred her pale cheek. A cheek already starting to bruise.

Swift as a spark touching gunpowder, his rage exploded. He spun to face her abusers, hands clenched ready to inflict more damage.

The men stood together. Cowards always found bravery in numbers.

"You should have brought more than muscle to this fight," one of them said. "You should've brought a weapon."

"I don't want a weapon. I want to rip you three apart with my bare hands." But he couldn't take such a risk and leave Adella open to another attack. He positioned himself between her and the men. "Still have your gun?" he called over his shoulder.

"You think you can hoodwink us?" One of the men snorted. "That we're blind as well as stupid? She ain't got no gun. And she wanted us to roll her. She was even grabbing her skirt, no doubt to raise it, when we found her."

Adella's footsteps told him she'd moved to stand beside him. He kept his gaze locked on the men.

"Can you hold this for me?" Her hand nudged his fist.

His fingers uncurled immediately at her bidding. She pressed something warm and cylindrical against his palm. He took it and raised his hand between him and the men, wondering what was so bloody important to give him. She'd handed him a knife.

"I'm a trifle shaky and require both hands." The hammer of a tiny gun clicked softly.

The men lurched back, hands raised. "Whoa, now! Don't get excited. We only wanted a little touch."

The blast ricocheted off the alley walls. So did the howling as the man who'd shoved up her skirt hunched over clutching his hand. Blood seeped through his fingers.

"You'll never be *touching* a woman with that hand again. Welcome to southern justice." Another click primed the second shot as she swung the gun toward the next man. "Your turn."

The men spun and dashed down the alley.

The knife she'd passed to him was still warm in his hand. "Where did this come from?"

"My boot." She retrieved the knife and returned it to its hiding place. "Men don't usually pay attention to that area when they're under a woman's skirt."

The knowledge that she'd nearly been raped, despite all his pitiful attempts to guard her, made him light-headed. He dropped his forehead into his hands. "Adella—"

She removed the distance between them, throwing her arms around his neck and pressing close. "Thank you for coming after me. For not giving up on me."

He held her tight. "Why would I give up on you?"

"You found me in Fergal's tent. He said—"

"I found you with a friend. One who, although I want to slug him for his comment, needs as much help as you."

She pulled free of his embrace.

"Don't be cross, lass. I didn't mean—"

"I can't stay out here any longer. It's too dark." Her golden irises were rimmed in white. Her gaze darted left and right, searching the shadows. She pressed the lantern into his hand. Derringer raised and cocked, she pulled him out of the alley.

Only after she'd entered the hotel, did she return her gun to its hidden pocket. When she opened the door to her room, he pulled back. He shouldn't go inside. With his worry for her riding him, he wouldn't be able to leave. And Adella had just been through hell. The last thing she needed was him pawing at her.

"You don't want to stay with me." Her voice cracked on the last word.

Regret flooded him. "Adella, I do. But I—"

"Thank you for coming to my rescue and returning me safely to my hotel." She crossed to stand by the window, moving as far from him as the room allowed. With trembling hands, she gripped the windowpane. "You're a good man."

"I want to be more than that. I want to be more than your guardian or even your lover." He pinched the bridge of his nose, struggling to rally his restraint, his common sense.

*To hell with it.*

He reached for the door. Stepping inside the room, he closed the door behind him. “I want to share everything, and I’m not leaving this room until we do.”



CLUTCHING THE WINDOW, Adella strained to follow the sound of Cormac’s quiet footsteps. He wanted to share— “Everything?” The word came out more squeak than coherent speech.

Cormac’s fingers brushed her arm and she jumped.

The warmth of his hand retreated. “I want you to tell me about your brother. Then I want to undress you and make love to you in this room until the sun rises.”

Longing squeezed her chest and left her lightheaded. “What if I become pregnant?”

“The prospect scares the hell out of me. But if you were happy and healthy, then nothing would give me greater joy than seeing you with my child. Would it...” his warmth returned, hovering near her shoulder, “... make you happy?”

“I think it would.” Releasing the window, she leaned back into his hand. His strength and gentleness allowed her to breathe again. But her heart remained tight with uncertainty.

His hand on her shoulder tightened, then relaxed. “Then I think our sharing will work out well.”

Would it? While she hated to speak of Declan, Cormac might be the only person who could understand her all-consuming guilt. Four of his sisters had died, had starved before his eyes.

“My brother—” Her throat constricted, but she forced herself to go on. “He— He died in a Union prison camp.”

Sturdy, rock-hard arms enveloped her from behind with infinite tenderness. “I’m sorry, lass.”

She welcomed his strength. “What is it like? Is it—painful?”

“Is what painful?”

Imaging Declan’s suffering hurt like a railroad spike to the heart. “Starving to death,” she whispered. “That’s how my brother died as well.”

Every one of his muscles—in his arms, shoulder, chest and abdomen—tensed around her, protecting her. “Adella, you don’t want to know. Stop torturing yourself.”

“Why? I deserve it. You were too young to save your sisters but you tried. And you were with them when they died. I was off spying for the Johnny Rebs.”

“Did you know your brother was starving?”

“No, but—”

“That’s where you learned to be a spy? In the war?”

She nodded.

His lips brushed the top of her head. “Well then, you were doing what you could to win the war and ensure your brother’s release.”

“Yes, but I wasn’t there when he needed me most. I—” Guilt compressed her chest, stalling her breath again. She didn’t want to tell Cormac about her last conversation with Declan, but she must. To repeat what she’d said would be like living it all over again. “I told him that...if he left home and joined the war...I wouldn’t be there to help him when he needed me. I wanted to keep him from the fighting.”

“Sounds like you were being a big sister trying to protect her brother.”

Her breath left her in a harsh whoosh, somewhere between a laugh and a cry. “We were twins. I was only minutes older than Declan. Despite my words, he wrote me a letter every month during the war. But the things I said, that I wouldn’t help him if he got in trouble, hung between us. Then he stopped writing when he was captured. When I heard he was in prison, I should’ve ridden straight north and bribed every Yankee I met into smuggling food into that death camp.”

“He probably knew that wouldn’t work.”

“From the very beginning I should’ve guarded my words with him.”

“I’ve learned that sisters can’t help being bossy where their brothers are concerned.” He gently tugged a lock of her hair.

“Do you still think about them?”

“Every day,” he murmured.

“Will it stop?”

“I hope not. I want to remember them forever.” His reply was swift and strong. Then his muscles rippled against her back as he blew out a breath.

“I’m trying to recall only the good memories though.”

“Like when you rode those stolen ponies with Molly?” She reached back and poked him in the ribs, hoping to brighten his mood.

He captured her hand and turned her to face him. The corners of his lips twitched. “I’m not the only thief in this room. You stole that telegram from



Stevens' railcar." He pressed a kiss against her palm, sending shivers up her spine.

"Thanks to you Stevens got his telegram back the very next day," she teased.

"I also returned the landlord's ponies safe and sound. Did them all a favor. Those horses needed exercise and they enjoyed my attention." He nipped her hand.

Craving more of his attention, she pressed against him, molding her curves to his hard planes. They were so different, yet they fit so well together.

His lips brushed her ear. "I love you, Adella."

Joy pounded in her veins. "I love you, too."

With a growl, he carried her to the bed. Kneeling beside her on the mattress, he made swift work of removing her dress and corset. His fingers traced the neckline of her chemise. Ribbons unfurled. Cotton slid down her shoulders.

She caught its descent. "There's something I've dreamt of doing. Will you allow me a minute to indulge myself?" She made room for him on the narrow mattress.

His brows arched, but he lay down beside her without a word.

The tweed of his waistcoat and trousers were rough under her fingertips, his linen shirt only slightly softer. Beneath his clothing, his muscles were smooth and warm. They flexed and tightened at her lightest touch. She left no terrain unexplored.

"Time's up." His voice was hoarse, his breathing ragged as he reached for her chemise.

They removed the last of each other's garments together. His callused fingertips teased her inner thigh as he introduced her again to the pleasures from the barn. An ache blossomed deep inside her, as if the sun finally found her via his touch. Soon her breathing matched his. Then he sent her over the familiar, but still astounding, precipice.

Guiding her legs around his waist, he pressed his hips to hers, and paused. "Remember what you told me in the barn?"

Confused tightened her brow. She'd told him many things.

He kissed her forehead. "That you'd never lain with a man before? Are you sure you want this?"

His hardness lay nestled between her legs, waiting to press home. She wasn't sure what she wanted. But she knew she didn't want time to reconsider, to retreat, to regret.

"You've never done this," he continued. "And I don't want to hur—"

She thrust herself against him, taking him to the hilt. The stab of pain startled her. She cried out. So did he.

He hovered over her, inside her. Motionless. Then he shuddered as if in pain as well. "I've hurt you. From the moment I saw you, I worried I would. I'm sorry." He gathered her close. His heart raced in time with hers. "But I'm not sorry about what comes next."

"What comes next?"

"When you're ready, you'll see."

"How long will that be?" She shifted against him, trying to get comfortable. Unexpected pleasure streaked through her. A groan rumbled deep in his chest and his hips rocked hers. Another all too fleeting burst of desire left her undulating with need.

Cormac moved with her, setting a pace she eagerly followed. Her need swelled, rising in surges, like waves on an ocean with no end in sight. Then her hunger spiked, sudden and overpowering as Cormac sent her over the edge and followed. She soared in weightless wonder, then drifted free of thought or care.

A lump of bed sheet irritated her spine. She hadn't thought she'd moved, but Cormac released her and rolled onto his side. Reaching beneath her, she pulled free his linen shirt.

A blush heated her cheeks as she recalled his words: *You'd make my oldest shirt look breathtaking.* What must he think of her now?

His fingers brushed her hand. "You want me to leave?"

She clutched the garment to her chest and turned away, employing her body as a shield. "The nights are still chilly. I hoped I might wear your shirt."

"Save it for the morning." He drew the covers over them. His torso and thighs formed a warm arc around her backside. "Tonight, I'm loath to allow anything to come between us." His arm curled around her, pulling her close again. "Thank you for finally deciding to share everything with me."

But she hadn't. Not everything. She hadn't told him about Helga and her dynamite, and Fergal and his plan to kill Parsons.

Fear, like a double-edged sword, prevented her from relaxing into Cormac's embrace. One edge of the blade held the old dread: if she told him everything, he might walk away from her in disappointment. But the other edge promised an even greater terror: if she didn't speak now, she might lose him in the most painful way possible.

Cormac might die. He might die because of her.

She rolled to face him. "This afternoon when you asked what Helga said to me..."

"Aye?" He rubbed her back with a reassuring patience.

"She's decided that blowing up the track will help her keep her farm. She had dynamite in her basket."

A long silence elapsed before he replied. "The closest source of dynamite is the Katy's stockpile."

"Yes, she said her supplier was—"

"Fergal."

Feeling like a traitor, she lowered her gaze. "She wouldn't give me a name."

"But you suspected Fergal. You went straight to him." His embrace tightened, then relaxed. Not completely though. A tenseness, that hadn't been there before, remained. "Why seek him out?"

"I thought he might be one of the Irish outlaws who derailed the train."

Cormac released an extended breath and his stiffness vanished. "*To tyrants we'll not yield.*"

She nodded. "It's from the Confederacy's *Battle Cry of Freedom.*" Her words poured out like stones, once freed, falling fast down a mountain.

"Fergal told me that when Parsons arrives on the next train, he plans to kill him." Pulling out of Cormac's arms, she sat up. "I need to stop him and Helga too. If something happens because I didn't—"

He sat up beside her and hushed her worries with his lips. His kiss stole her breath and filled her heart with only one thing—the promise of love.

"Nothing will happen," he whispered, resting his forehead against hers, "because we're united now. I can't lose with a partner like you on my side."

His lopsided smile tore at her heartstrings. She wasn't sure she felt the same way. With Cormac beside her, she had so much more to lose.



# Chapter 9



ADELLA WOKE, WARM AND sated and content. An unusual feeling. A wonderful feeling. A feeling made possible because Cormac filled her bed and her thoughts.

Rolling over, she reached for him. Her arms found...emptiness. She bolted upright. Her gaze scoured her hotel room. Empty as well. Her happiness died as swiftly as a spring flower in a snowstorm.

Cormac had left her.

A flash of white atop her dresser caught her eye. A piece of paper? A letter! Scrambling free of the bedcovers, she tore across the room. Bold handwriting slanted across the page.

*You are just as beautiful asleep as awake.*

*Could not bear to wake you. Gone to find Fergal and Helga.*

*Stay safe. STAY in this room where I can find you.*

*Will return as soon as I can.*

*Cormac*

Relief made her wilt against the dresser. He hadn't left her. Hard on the heels of her respite, alarm snapped her spine straight. Cormac didn't run from troubles or squander time sleeping in. He'd gone out to face their troubles head-on.

Snatching her dress from the floor, she donned the garment with fumbling fingers. The tiny enamel buttons thwarted her. The black bombazine mocked her. Widow's weeds for a lover she might never marry.

More than a lover. A loved one. If anything happened to Cormac— Her thoughts splintered, their razor-sharp edges left her gasping.

She forced herself to draw in a deep breath. Now more than ever she must not falter. She must find Cormac. She couldn't lose him like Declan. She wouldn't let him die. *To my very last breath, I pledge to keep you safe.*

She jerked on her drawers and boots. Too impatient to do more, she raced out of the room and down the stairs. Her unbound hair bounced on her back with each step. Her footfalls pounded out a drum roll. *Faster. Faster. Hurry. Hurry.*

At the bottom, stock-still behind his counter, the hotel clerk's wide-eyed stare confirmed her crazy appearance. She sprinted across the lobby. Outside, she slammed to a halt on the front porch, wrapping an arm around a post for support.

Where to search first? If she chose wrong, it might mean the difference between life and death. Fergal was intent on killing Parsons. Would he hurt

Cormac if he stood in his way? And Helga, would she care if anyone got in her way when she blew up the track?

The usual wave of people and wagons flowed by, as if nothing were different. Today, everything was different.

Down the far end of the nearest footpath, the uneven gait of a man snagged her attention. The man limped and leaned on a cane. Fergal.

Adella chased after him, side-stepping approaching pedestrians, darting around those heading in the same direction. She bumped elbows, trod on toes, apologized, but continued pushing forward. Three strides—and one pudgy storekeeper—away from reaching Fergal, a butcher in a stained apron halted to address the storekeeper. The two men stood with hands clasped, blocking the entire footpath.

She leapt into the mud. The sticky earth rendered it a monumental task to take a single step let alone hurry. She pinned her gaze on Fergal's back while he limped farther and farther away. Fergal paused at a corner, turned right and disappeared.

Finally clear of the men, she clambered back onto the footpath. With a prayer lodged in her throat, she sprinted forward and around the corner, Fergal stood not twenty paces away talking intently to a big blonde woman. Adella sprang back behind the nearest clapboard wall. Pressing her chest against the rough timbers, she stole a peak at her quarry.

*Thank Dixie.* She'd found both Fergal and Helga. And they hadn't seen her.

Unfortunately, the distance between her and them made it impossible for Adella to hear their conversation. At least Helga didn't have her basket. Relief, followed swiftly by anxiety, crashed over her like rogue waves. If Helga didn't have her dynamite, where was it? And where was Cormac?

Part of her hoped he was far away, at the worksite or even farther away with the survey team. Another part yearned for his stalwart presence and steadfast help. Once again, she was alone. And, although she couldn't hear anything Fergal and Helga said, the tension in their gestures spoke volumes.

Today was the day, the day someone died because of her failure to act. Just like with Declan. She couldn't wait for Cormac or for anyone else. She must do whatever it took. Right now.

Shoving away from her hiding place, she strode toward Fergal and Helga. A rumbling filled her ears. Suddenly, she was being jostled and pushed. A parade of dirty railroad workers and cleaner townsfolk surged

past her, both on the footpath and in the mud. Their noise sharpened into individual chatter and footfalls.

Why weren't the workmen at the worksite? Why were the townsfolk on the street with them? It didn't matter. All that mattered was that their intrusion made it difficult to keep Fergal and Helga in sight. She mustn't lose them. She pushed through the crowd.

Fergal and Helga were moving as well now. Fergal had turned down another street, while Helga continued on with the crowd. Adella halted at the juncture separating the two, her gaze jumping between them. Who should she follow? Her decision might mean the difference between Parsons' life and death, or any number of the people around her.

"Adella," a familiar voice said behind her.

Turning, she found Kate Parsons gazing at her intently.

"I'm so glad I found you." Kate moved closer. "I need your help."

Her help? Adella needed to *get* help not give it. Could she ask Kate to watch Helga or Fergal? No, not Fergal. What if he decided to hurt Kate to get back at her father?

"Can you bring your camera to the station?" Kate glanced at the crowd and smiled. "I'm organizing a—"

"Kate," Adella said, laying her palm on Kate's arm to gain her full attention. "I know this may sound peculiar, but I need you to follow Helga."

Kate shook her head so vigorously that several vibrant curls fell free of her tight coiffure. "I can't. Not now. I'm organizing a welcome reception for my father and an investor. They're arriving on the next train."

"The train?" Dread grayed the corners of Adella's vision. Under her hand, Kate's arm was a blessing, keeping her upright. "When does the train arrive?"

"In a few minutes. Adella... You don't look well. What's wrong?"

"I need you to keep Helga away from the station. She's planning to—" How could she explain without incriminating Fergal? She didn't want anyone hurt, including Fergal. She needed to stop him without getting him jailed. He wouldn't survive another prison. Not after what he'd suffered while incarcerated in Camp Douglas alongside Declan.

Fergal continued limping away, but Helga had halted. Adella hadn't lost track of either one. She still had time. But only minutes. The blasted train—

Helga had drawn a small knot of women around her. She towered over them, her face set in hard lines, her lips moving quickly.



“Dear lord,” Kate breathed out. “Is Helga staging another protest? I can’t let her do that. Not today.” She strode toward the group.

“Kate, wait! I need to tell you—”

With a swift step and a steadfast gaze, Kate bore down on her target. Adella glanced in Fergal’s direction. His silhouette was small and distant. What if he ducked down another pathway and she lost him for good?

She chased after him. Worry for Kate pricked her conscience, but she also felt a sense of relief. If anyone could stop Helga, it would be Parsons’ determined daughter. And Adella had enlisted Kate’s help without incriminating Fergal. Her luck was improving.

With the additional blessing of a footpath and street now vacant of people, she eliminated the gap between her and Fergal. Just behind him, she slowed to a walk and touched his sleeve. “Fergal—”

He spun around, the cane in his hand an arcing blur. She jumped back. Not soon enough. Pain exploded in her shoulder. She fell sideways, landing on her knees in the soft mud.

Fergal’s narrowed eyes and pinched lips instantly opened wide with shock. “Del,” he gasped in hoarse voice. Then he flung away his cane and leapt down to kneel beside her. “I’m sorry.” He bowed his head and lifted her hands to his lips. “You’re the last person I wanted to hurt.”

Hope muted the pain in her arm to a dull ache. This was the Fergal she knew. She could save him. And if she did, she would save Parsons and everyone else.

A forlorn whistle called. Thin and drawn out. An approaching train whistle.

Fergal raised his head, tilting it toward the sound. “Don’t follow me again.” His voice was hard and low. “Stay out of this. Only one of us need sacrifice their future to avenge the past.” He released her abruptly, and none too gently, and stood.

Her hope shriveled.

“Fergal!” The shout, a fierce but still feminine reprimand, had come from the footpath.

Eden stood there, fists on hips, glaring at Fergal. “Why are you abusing Miss Willows in such a fashion? That’s not like you.”

Fergal backed away from them. His cane lay in the mud, forgotten. So was his limp. “Return to your saloon, Eden, and take Adella with you,” he said and then ran toward the station.

Bending down, Eden reached past the shoulder Fergal had struck to grasp Adella's other arm and help her onto the footpath. "How badly are you hurt?"

Adella avoided Eden's searching gaze. "Fergal didn't mean to hit me."

"Miss Willows," Eden replied in a tight voice. "Violent behavior such as that cannot be excused."

The train whistle came again. Shriller. Louder. Closer.

Adella swallowed hard. "You're right. The time for excuses is long gone. Can you find Cormac or the McGrady Gang?"

Eden's brows arched, but she nodded. "There's no time to waste I expect."

"There isn't."

"Where shall I instruct them to find you?"

"The station." Adella made a beeline for that destination.

Kate's welcome reception clogged the station's stairs, rendering it impossible to reach the platform. Adella only gained the second step. The boards vibrated beneath her feet as they'd done that first day in New Chicago when Cormac bounded up to rally his new recruits. Today, Kate, still dressed in her military jacket and trouser skirt, had assembled her own recruits—a group of civilians about to be blown apart by Fergal and Helga.

Suddenly, a handful of the McGrady Gang were behind her, then rallying around her.

"I need to reach the train," she told them.

With silent nods, they pushed through the throng, forging a path for her to follow. Above the heads of the crowd, the engine's stack appeared, belching acrid smoke as it led the train into the station. The McGrady Gang guided her to a prime spot where a private railcar—even more extravagant than Stevens'—halted in front of Fergal. Her mouth went dry and fear choked her.

At least Helga was nowhere in sight. Time remained to stop the violence. But now, rather than minutes, Adella only had seconds. The McGrady Gang withdrew a pace, giving her room while shielding her from the crowd. Stevens strode out of the throng and climbed the railcar's stairs. He reached for the door.

Dread sharpened her thoughts to one word. "Stop!" She took the final step and stood on the platform's edge beside Fergal.

An enthusiastic brass band struck up a tune and drowned her out. Stevens opened the door. A short, small-boned man with gray hair stepped through. Levi Parsons' eyes, as bright blue and determined as his daughter's, surveyed the crowd. Their clapping amplified the din. Parsons raised a hand in acknowledgment. Stevens stood behind him, smiling, his hand still on the door.

"You shouldn't have followed me here." Fergal kept his gaze fixed on the men on the train.

"You don't want to hurt Parsons."

"No, I don't."

Adella blinked, startled to have won his capitulation so easily.

"I want to hurt him." Fergal jabbed his finger at a second man who squeezed his hefty frame through the railcar door. The silver in his mutton-chop whiskers flashed as he straightened.

"Senator Moreton?" Adella shook her head. "He's not the one. He's a middleman. He gave me—" Dismay coiled around her heart. The senator had given her exactly what she'd asked for: knowledge in the form of irrefutable evidence. He'd given her Parsons' name on a Camp Douglas rations supply form. And after five years of searching she'd been too eager to question how easily Senator Moreton had produced the document.

"Tell me, Fergal. Tell me what you know."

Fergal tilted his head toward her and pitched his voice low. "At first, it wasn't uncommon for Camp Douglas' supply wagons to arrive late. But after a while, they stopped arriving at all. Moreton came in their stead and slipped a fat envelope into the warden's eager hand. When the war ended, Moreton began a well-funded life in politics. A life built on the deaths of hundreds of expendable men, including Dec."

"But why frame Parsons?"

"Moreton's betting on both sides. He owns more stock in the Joy Line than in the Katy. With Parsons eliminated, his more profitable railroad is sure to win."

Standing between Stevens and Parsons on the railcar's rear step, Moreton surveyed the crowd. His bland smile remained fixed, until he spotted her and paused. His lips bowed with satisfaction, puffing out his side-whiskers like twin sails catching the wind. Then, as if she and he were strangers, his gaze resumed its leisurely stroll.

Senator Moreton was a chameleon. Just like her. He'd lied to her. He'd used her. She was merely a pawn in his game.

"I don't care about Parsons," Fergal said, his words tumbling out now. "He's a Yank and he's standing beside Moreton. Plus Helga demanded my assistance with Parsons in exchange for her help with Moreton." He blew out a breath, then faced the train again. "It's too late to do anything differently. Our plans are in motion. They cannot be stopped."

*No!* She couldn't accept that. There was still time. Time to set things right. Time to stop the killing. Time to build a better future.

"Fergal, where's Helga?" she demanded.

"She left." Once again Kate stood behind Adella. The barrier of the McGrady Gang had proved no match for such a determined woman, especially one beaming with satisfaction. "Helga instructed the farm widows to proceed to the station without her. After she departed, I promised to arrange a meeting between the widows and my father. They agreed to delay their protest. The disaster has been diverted."

A frown chased away Kate's good humor. "But where's your camera, Adella? I need pictures. I want this welcome reception to be perfect for my father and his guest."

Adella's stomach did a slow, sickly lurch. Today was going to be far from perfect. The other widows may've been placated, but Helga wouldn't be. Adella scanned the crowd, searching for a tall blonde figure. Instead, Cormac's dark head and giant frame came up the stairs and then pushed through the crowd toward her. Eden followed in his wake.

*Thank Dixie. And thank Eden too for finding Cormac.* If anyone could help Adella mend this madness, it was Cormac. She wanted to meet him halfway and throw herself into his capable arms. She didn't want to face her struggles alone anymore.

Cormac's gaze locked on a point high above her. His face went white as chalk.

Adella spun around. Atop the railcar, Helga crouched in a pose, and clothing identical to the saboteur who'd unleashed the rails that first day. The only thing missing was the floppy hat.

Helga jumped down, her coat billowing to reveal a trio of cylindrical sticks strapped to her chest. Their brightly lit fuses dazzled Adella's eyes. Helga landed on the platform between Adella and Kate, her coat dropping to conceal her dynamite.

Shock held Adella immobile. The McGrady Gang stood poised as if ready to attack. Behind them, a few of the nearest townsfolk turned and stared. The rest continued clapping. Adella's heartbeat joined the band music accelerating toward a crescendo.

Fergal grabbed her arm at the same time as Helga seized Kate's.

"You need to leave, Adella." Fergal pulled her away from the two women.

Helga nodded, her gaze following them. "Tell everyone I was holding the railroad bigwig's daughter when the end came. He'll have my farm, but he won't have his daughter. That should make a powerful enough story for one of your photographs."

Like a climber losing her footing, Adella tumbled back to two days ago and the counsel she'd given Helga inside the missionary tent. *If a subject is powerful, then so is the photograph.* She'd started this. Now she must end it.

"I won't take that picture." Adella wrenched her arm out of Fergal's grasp. "And I won't go."

Cormac burst through the crowd and passed the McGrady Gang. He restrained Fergal in a headlock. The tuba and trombone cried their final notes. The cymbals smashed a resounding climax. And the crowd cheered in thunderous appreciation.

She threw herself at Helga. Helga stumbled under the onslaught. Kate slipped free, and Adella yanked open Helga's coat. The fuses had lost half their length.

The crowd's merriment had subsided to the chattering of magpies.

"She has dynamite!" Adella shouted into the lull. "She's going to blow up the train!"

Cormac shoved Fergal behind him and reached for her.

All sound stopped. The silence lasted as long as it took the crowd to inhale a collective breath of astonishment. Then a single scream split the air. And the crowd fled, running and shrieking as one.

"I wanted Parsons' daughter," Helga hissed. "You'll have to take her place."

A rock-hard restraint circled Adella's wrist. Helga's grasp was even more solid than when she'd grabbed Adella in the missionary tent or at the farm. Adella glanced down. Helga's hand didn't imprison her. A band of

iron did. And a chain the length of her arm shackled her to an identical cuff around Helga's wrist.

Cormac's bellow filled her ears. "No!"

Behind him, eyes wide and jaws hanging, stood Kate, Eden, Fergal and the McGrady Gang. Beyond them were the backsides of the fleeing crowd. Only Cormac moved forward to help her. She couldn't let him.

She jerked sideways. Using all of her bodyweight, she yanked Helga with her and leapt off the platform. Her back struck the mud. Her lungs compressed, depriving her of air. Stars danced in her eyes as she stared at the sky high above. So bright. So blue. Where were the ever-present clouds? Was she dead? Was that why she felt so numb?

She turned her head. Helga lay beside her with her coat open. During their fall, two of the sticks of dynamite had been snuffed out. Only one continued to sizzle on a next to nil fuse. One was enough.

Burn faster, she urged. Let it only be the two of us who die.

Mud splashed and sorrow flooded her. Cormac crouched between her and Helga. Shielding her with his body, he strained to pry the shackle from her wrist. The iron squealed in protest, then finally broke in two.

Cormac picked her up and ran.

The explosion roared in her ears, slamming Cormac against her, knocking them both to the ground. He didn't move. His stillness signaled her defeat. She'd come to town to ruin one man's life. Instead, she'd killed the man she loved.

She closed her eyes and prayed for her own death.



# Chapter 10





ADELLA PACED NEW CHICAGO'S train platform waiting for the McGrady Gang to let her board the midday train for Emporia. The blasted Irishmen stood in a row, shoulder to shoulder, barring her way.

The boards vibrated under her feet as a single man bounded up the steps behind her. She halted, but kept her back to him. She couldn't bear to see the disappointment on Cormac's face. She deserved it though. Another death lay heavily on her conscience.

"Going somewhere, Miss Willows?" Cormac's deep brogue enveloped her, heating her chilled skin. She hadn't felt warm since she woken yesterday morning alone in the bed they'd shared. A bed where he'd shown his affection for her. That affection was gone. What other reason could there be for his continued absence following yesterday's barely averted disaster? Why hadn't he come to her hotel room last night?

"I'm going away," she replied. "I came to New Chicago for the wrong reasons. I should have come to save a man's life, not ruin one. Because of me, Fergal's dead."

A four-foot wide crater had gouged out the earth and destroyed the track south of the platform. A platform missing a sizable chunk thanks to the power of a single stick of dynamite. Luckily she was heading north. But where she'd stop she didn't know, because it didn't matter. Nevertheless, she turned her gaze north, unable to face the damage she'd caused in New Chicago or the censure that must surely burn in Cormac's eyes.

Behind her, Cormac exhaled an extended breath. She wrapped her arms around her waist, struggling to hold onto her resolve not to look at him.

"Fergal wasn't your responsibility," he finally said. "He was mine. He may not have been with me and my men the day you arrived in town, but he was always one of us."

Had Fergal felt responsible for Cormac as well? After Cormac had covered her body with his, Fergal had done the same to Helga. But while Cormac had shielded Adella from the blast, Fergal had trapped the explosion between himself and Helga. He'd died saving Adella and Cormac.

Parsons and Stevens had demanded explanations. Neither she nor Cormac had uttered a word about Fergal's involvement in Helga's murderous plan. And Cormac hadn't revealed Adella's role in harassing the Katy either.

She'd shared Fergal's compulsion to avenge Declan's death and, in her grief and single-mindedness, she allowed herself to do the unthinkable. She'd targeted an innocent man. Remorse clenched her chest in an unbreakable vise. But what hurt more was the realization that Fergal's grief had changed him so much, he'd willingly endangered every person on yesterday's train platform to gain his revenge.

Cormac must have sensed her rising turmoil because when he spoke again, his voice was firm. "Fergal was a hero. He saved your life and mine and, as far as the townsfolk need know, he sacrificed himself to save them as well."

She shook her head. "It should've been I who saved him. I should have —" Her thoughts spun as she searched for an answer. None came. "Fergal needed me. Just like Declan. I failed them both." And she'd failed Cormac too. She'd killed what might have been.

"Don't torture yourself, lass." His advice rumbled in her ears, low and soothing. "Let go of the past."

"What if I can't?" Her voice cracked on the last word. She squeezed her eyes shut.

He stroked the lock of hair that had escaped from her pins. He wound the curl around his finger. The warmth of his flesh, a hairsbreadth away from touching hers, made her lean toward him.

"You'll let go," he replied, "when you find something worth holding onto instead."

"Why didn't you come to me last night?" The question burst from her lips before she could stop it. She cringed in mortification.

"Oh, I wanted to. But Parsons is more determined than ever. He kept me and Stevens up half the night discussing his plans to ensure the Katy reaches the border first. Even though we're still running a hundred miles behind the Joy Line, Parson thinks that if we reach Ladore by May we might have a chance to win. All I could think was the only way I'd win was if you were still by my side in May."

By his side? He still wanted to be with her? A surge of hope made her spin to face him.

He towered over her. Her giant, dark-haired, silver-eyed Irishman clad in homespun tweed. He was perfect. Except for one thing. He held her valise in his hand.

She gaped at it, speechless.

“I thought—” He cleared his throat and held out the bag for her to take. “I thought you might need it.”

“Why?” Since they’d first met, her valise had come between them. Now he wanted her to have it back? He was willing to erect another barrier between them? Disappointment compressed her lungs to the point of suffocation. She snatched the valise from his grasp and hurled it as far as she could, which wasn’t far enough.

“I don’t want it anymore.” With her breath lodged in her chest, her voice came out ragged. She started pacing again. Two strides left, then right and left again. “It can stay here, for all I care.”

Cormac’s hands claimed her shoulders, anchoring her in place. Her heart raced with yearning while his brow furrowed. Why did she always hurt the ones she loved?

He leaned closer. “Why not stay as well?”

“Aye, you should stay,” said one of the McGrady Gang.

“Mac will be impossible to be around if you don’t.”

“It wouldn’t feel right with you gone, miss.”

She glanced over her shoulder at Cormac’s gang and the train behind them. Charcoal smoke billowed from its stack. The train was ready to leave.

Cormac’s grip tightened. “You can’t deny what you’ve heard. You’re needed here. Eden could use a friend as well. And Kate too.”

Adella released a shaky laugh. “Kate hates me for what I nearly did to her father.”

“No, she doesn’t.” Cormac’s reply held the same resolute tone she’d heard him use when rallying his men.

His thoughtfulness humbled her. She hung her head. If only there was a chance for friendship between her and Kate. But that was more than she could hope for. More than she deserved.

Cormac crooked a finger under her chin and raised her head until she stared directly into his eyes. “If you won’t stay for friendship, stay for love.”

She blinked in disbelief. “You still love me?”

“More than ever.” His frown deepened. “I’m also increasingly afraid that I can’t keep you safe.”

The tightness gripping her chest vanished. “On that score, I have no fear at all.” She hooked a finger around the top button of his waistcoat and pulled. “Come closer, giant.”

He reached down and swept her off her feet and into his arms. Behind her, the McGrady Gang erupted in whistles and cheers.

“You realize”—she laid her cheek against his chest, luxuriating in the steady beat of his heart—“life with me won’t be a fairytale.”

“I know,” he whispered against her ear, then gently tugged her hair. “It’ll be better.”

She laughed, this time with her entire heart and soul. Visions of enemies faded. Maybe one day they’d disappear entirely. Maybe not. The thought didn’t distress her as it once had.

As long as there was room for her in Cormac’s heart, the future held promise.



THE END

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# EDEN'S SIN



Jennifer Jakes



*She's a sinner, but he's no saint...*

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# Chapter 1



LADORE, KANSAS  
May 15, 1870



*RAIN, RAIN, RAIN.*

Eden Gabrielli stared out the saloon window. The droning downpour seemed never ending.

Odd how one simple sound like rain brought back two distinctly different memories. A rainy spring day spent hiding in the warm kitchen, a stolen cookie in her pocket, waiting for Mama to finish work. A sleety winter night, crouching in an alleyway, Mama crying, trying to keep them from freezing to death.

*“A woman with no money is better off dead.”* Eden let Mama's long-ago warning run through her mind as she cleared dirty plates from the corner table and listened to the drops pelt the tin roof. The words kept her going when she was tired, when her bad leg ached. When she wanted to just lie down and weep.

The memory of sleeping under Mama's threadbare cloak in December always gave her strength. The weight of those who depended on her kept her moving—two young girls she could keep from a life of whoring.

“Whoo-ee!” Hank slammed shut the saloon door against the gusting wind, shocking Eden from her painful thoughts.

“Hank. You scared the hell out of me.”

“Most sorry, Miz Eden.” He shook like a wet dog and limped to the bar. “If'n it rains much more we're gonna need an ark.” He gave a near toothless grin.

“We don't need a damned report, Hank,” Len cursed from the large center table. “We got eyes. And ears.” He nodded to the window where rain streamed down the glass, cocooning the room and holding the railroad men from laying track.



For five days the clouds gave water as if God was squeezing a wet towel, and the men became more edgy each day that passed without work.

Hank scowled. “Just makin’ conversation. Ain’t no need to be so hateful.” He climbed onto a stool. “Miz Eden, can I have some coffee? And add a liberal amount of whiskey. I’m chilled right down to my big toes.”

Eden glanced down to where his sock wiggled through the worn leather. Shaking her head, she pulled the coffee pot from the hot cast iron stove and filled Hank’s cup. “You don’t need whiskey. You need boots without holes in them.” He needed a boss who cared more about people than money. How could Stevens and Parsons sit inside their lavish railcars – Stevens in his new car – and watch men like Hank do without basic necessities?

Not that she expected more from either greedy man. One thing and one thing only mattered to the rich. Getting richer. No matter who they hurt, or starved, or put out in the streets – or into alleyways. More than once, her life had been tossed out the door on a rich man’s whim.

Even now, one rich man controlled her. Damn him. *Damn them all.*

Hatred burned through her, propelling her to act.

“Hank, come with me.” She took his hand and led him back to the kitchen. Once there she reached under the pie cupboard to the loose floorboard, pulled out her money box, and withdrew three dollars. “Here.” She placed the bills into his cold hands. “Go over to the mercantile and get yourself some new boots. You’re going to get sick and die walking around like that. Or else one of the McGrady Gang will drop a rail-tie on your toe.”

Hank blushed. “Miz Eden, I can’t be takin’—”

“Oh, yes you can. I figure you’ve spent plenty of money drinking here. Think of it as the day you get something worthwhile in return.” She pointed him to the main room. “Now go. I’ll save you a bowl of potato soup.” Hank was too skinny to be carrying buckets on the rail line. Too skinny, too old...he’d fall over dead someday, and as far as she knew, he had nobody who would care.

Everyone should have at least one person who cared. *Everyone. Even old drunks and whores.*

They walked back to the bar room amid wolf whistles and calls. “Gauldurn, Hank, you must screw a lot faster than you walk to be done with her already.” Len sneered at his own humor, and several men laughed.

“You shut your filthy mouth. Miz Eden done—”

Eden shook her head. "Ignore them. Go on now. We'll see you later." It was no one's business how she spent her money. Best if people believed she was a hard-hearted woman. Best for her if she *could* be. Then no one could hurt her again.

She rubbed her leg, the ache real, though whether it was the rain or bad memories stirring the pain she couldn't say. Grabbing a towel, she made her way through the tables, swiping crumbs, collecting empty plates and dodging ass-grabbers.

"That's a dollar, Len, if I feel your hand crawling up my skirt again."

The big man scowled. "Why does Hank get some for free?"

"Who says he didn't pay?"

Len scoffed. "That stupid bastard don't have no money."

An angry retort scorched her tongue. Len was a mean drunk, cruel to any man smaller, poorer or just unfortunate enough to be in his line of fire. He was proof that not only rich men were evil.

"Well, what I do or how much I charge is none of your business." Not anyone's business. Hell, she hadn't sold more than drinks and dances for almost two years now. Not since St. Louis. Not since the day she was almost killed.

"Well, you may have to lower prices," Len snapped. "The only men drawing pay in this weather is the McGrady Gang...and those crazy fools would work if a twister was bearing down on them."

"True enough." There weren't harder working men than Cormac McGrady's cuttin' crew. "But I'm not lowering prices. You'll just have to manage your funds better."

Eden glanced out the window. The rain didn't hurt the saloon. Men who couldn't work still had to eat and still *wanted* to drink. Besides, she couldn't afford to lower her prices. Not with the amount of money she had to send to the school every month.

"Bring me a shot of whiskey, Eden. It'll be dessert." Floyd pushed his empty plate away and held up his glass. "Som'thin to keep me warm the rest of the day. And I'll need Judge Parsons' luncheon plate for when I go."

She wove her way to Floyd's table.

"Stevens and Parsons will clean your craw if they smell whiskey on you before noon." And she couldn't chance him being fired as Parsons' butler and valet. He was too useful...overheard too much, saw too much. Without Floyd, she'd be forced to seducing Parsons to get what she needed.

“Naw. The judge got more important things to worry 'bout than me.”  
Floyd gave a lopsided grin.

“Oh? Like what?” Damn. Just last night he’d had no useful information. Something must have happened this morning, and Floyd was nosy enough to eaves-drop.

“You know Parsons. He makes enemies more’n friends.”

“He’s in trouble again?” Interrogating Floyd was wrong, but necessary. If she didn’t report the information she gleaned from his drunken words, her sister’s life was over.

“Ahhh, well...I really shouldn’t say.”

Eden draped her free arm over his boney shoulder and winked. “Let me get you another drink. You deserve one more before you get back to work, don’t you agree?” she drawled.

He grinned, licking his lips as if anticipating his next glass – just as she hoped he would.

“Good.” She hurried to the bar, trying to out-run the guilt, grabbed a bottle and poured him another shot. “Now tell me what’s got Judge Parsons all stirred up?”

“Them.” Floyd pointed out the window to the muddy street. A line of soaked soldiers rode by, each leaning into the slanting rain, twenty men at least, followed by a wagon full of supplies. “Parsons had to ask the President for help. The Katy’s investors are furious, squawking about misplaced funds.”

“Why?”

“All the robberies. Can’t stand to lose anymore payroll or supplies. Those rich men are none too happy with the judge. The Army’s here to stop the thieves and keep the new rails moving forward.” Floyd swallowed his drink and sighed.

Dread dropped into her stomach like a cold stone. The railroad progress *had* to stop ...or at least slow down enough to let the Joy Line win the race. *Had to!* Joy had to win. Those were the senator’s orders – her part, to feed the payroll delivery information to the senator’s hired thieves. But the Army meant trouble. The last thing she needed was someone figuring out why the robbers were so accurate. And yet...she wandered to the window. The Army *could* mean justice.

If the soldiers were to keep peace and establish order while they were here, then maybe they would investigate Mary Rose’s rape. No one else

would. And seeing Mary slip into melancholy more and more each day was like watching her slowly die. If the rapist was found, maybe Mary could regain her strength and move on with her life.

Eden's heart sputtered just a little. But if the senator found out she was talking to the Army, he'd make good on his threat.

Careful. She'd have to be careful. But she couldn't let another rape go unpunished.

She nudged Floyd. "Will the soldiers have legal say over what happens in Ladore? For a crime?"

He poured another glassful and downed it before nodding. "Far as I know. Parsons told Stevens to get things straight or else. But Eden," the balding man shook his head, "I doubt even the Army is going to do anything about Mary Rose. Parsons called in a favor to get these soldiers. They'll do what they're told."

"Maybe." But she had to try. Hope pulsed through her veins. Somehow she'd convince the commanding officer to help. "Thank you, Floyd."

Eden peeled off her apron and ran through the kitchen on the way to her room. "Alice," she called out to the porch where the woman was bent over the scrub board. "I've got to change and go out for awhile. Get the soup bubbling and keep an eye on Mary Rose for me. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Where you going?" Alice poked her graying head inside, her hands soapy from the washtub.

"To find justice."



EDEN SMOOTHED THE SKIRT of her plain brown calico dress and patted her tightly braided bun, draping her woolen shawl over her head. She had to appear a reputable lady of town or else she didn't stand a snowball's chance in Hell of convincing some Army man to hear her out.

Men, especially those in power, didn't respect whores.

The rain had slowed to a drizzle, hanging in the air like a fog. The smell of smoke and manure circled in the air, and she shuddered at the damp breeze. Lifting the hem of her skirt, she stepped off the boardwalk onto the muddy street. Biting back a curse, she tried not to limp. The last thing she wanted was questions from the soldier.

She dropped her gaze and hurried toward the end of town.

Down the street, the sound of men barking orders and hammering tent stakes echoed from the empty lot beside the livery now filled with horses.

Swallowing her doubt, she strode toward the camp.

Would she stoop to lying to claim help for Mary? Yes, why not? Heap yet another sin upon her head. Whatever it took to find justice. At this point murder was the only wicked deed she hadn't committed—though there were men who tempted her to do just that. Two in this town alone. Judge Parsons one, Henry Stevens the other.

Parsons had already made it clear he had no intention of pursuing the man who raped Mary Rose—a *whore in the making*. The hateful phrase burned through Eden each time she replayed the scene. He refused to lose the man-power for a search. He didn't want to know if one of his workers committed the crime. Not that she suspected the McGrady Gang. Cormac's men were the most upstanding men in town. Possibly the only upstanding men in town. But the stragglers who hopped from the Joy line to the Katy, always searching for the higher pay wage, those men were cruel drifters with no morals and no conscience. And she intended to see the man guilty of destroying Mary Rose's innocence prosecuted.

She wove her way through the muddy row of tents already standing, to a large wall-tent at the end of a military street. Poking her head inside the open flap, she spied two men unpacking satchels and setting up a foldable wooden table.

"Excuse me." She cleared her throat and spoke again. Louder. "Excuse me, gentlemen."

Both men turned, the taller planting a worn, wet hat onto his dark head. Damp hair, a little too long, curled around his ears.

Her heart pounded, but she swallowed and stood up straighter. Too late to turn back now.

"Yes, Ma'am. Come in. What can we do for you?" His voice was, deep, strong, but not harsh. There was a lot to be known about a man through his voice. Not his words. Words were lies, more times than not. But if a woman knew how to listen, she could learn with what kind of man she dealt. This one she felt, *she hoped against hope*, was fair.

"I need a word with your commander." She forced her voice to stay calm, sound refined, the kind of soft elegance she'd learned so many years ago. "Would that be you, sir?" Stepping inside, she dropped the shawl to

rest around her shoulders and tried to paste a respectable expression on her face.

“That would be me, Major Bradford, at your service.” He walked toward her, long, lean, a rare handsomeness. She swallowed hard. Damn, why did he have to be handsome? She didn't want to notice a man ever again. Not as long as she lived. The last handsome man she trusted tried to kill her.

“And your name, Miz...?”

“Miz Gabrielli.” She glanced at the other soldier. “And I'd like a private word if that would be possible.”

Major Bradford nodded. “Corporal Ballard, go see how the other men are faring. I want camp set up before dark. Duties commence at dawn.”

“Yes, sir.” The soldier snapped a quick salute and stepped out of the tent.

Major Bradford gave a crooked grin. “Excuse the disorganization. We haven't finished setting up camp yet.” He moved a stack of papers to the table, then found an empty crate and flipped it upside down. “Take a seat and tell me what I can help you with.”

Her insides clenched. She should have practiced what she would say. Intelligence lit Major Bradford's brown eyes. Too many questions would reveal who and what she was, what she did.

Eden sucked in a fortifying breath and shuffled over to perch on the crate. She'd come this far already. “Are you in charge of keeping the law in Ladore now?”

“Well, yes, I suppose I am. At least until the railroad is built. Why?”

“I need to report a crime.”

His brow lifted, but he pulled a crate to his desk and sat across from her. “Tell me what's happened.”

Eden leaned forward and tapped her finger on his desk. “A rape has happened, sir.”

Major Bradford's eyes widened. He grabbed a sheet of paper and dug a stubby pencil from his satchel. “Let's start. Were you ...” A tick twitched along his jaw, a flush crawling up his neck. “Were you the woman ... accosted?”

“No, not me. Mary Rose, the girl who helps cook and do laundry for the Devil's Gate Saloon. She was raped three weeks ago at the crossroads

outside town.” Eden fisted her hands, frustrated anger pulsing through her. “Major, she's only fifteen years old.”

He scribbled on the paper. “Three weeks ago? Did you report this?”

“Yes. The night it happened. I told Henry Stevens and Judge Parsons, the railroad men.”

“And what did they do?”

“Nothing.”

Major Bradford looked up, his dark brows climbing to his hairline. “Nothing? How can they do nothing?”

Eden swallowed hard. *Careful*. “Mary Rose laundered the sheets for the ...brothel girls. But Parsons said Mary was a whore in the making, and a whore can't be raped.”

“Horse's ass.” The curse was a mere whisper but Major Bradford's face colored as if he'd shouted. “Begging your pardon, Miz Gabrielli. I apologize.” He started writing again.

But the muttered insult filled Eden with hope. Maybe, just maybe, he wasn't afraid of Parsons. Maybe she could trust this man. A little. Or at least as much as any *man* could be trusted.

He probably wasn't rich since his belongings seemed to consist of what had been placed on his cot – his saddlebag, a blanket, a pillow and a harmonica that looked like a horse had stepped on it.

“Major,” Eden reached across the table and stilled his pencil, “Mary Rose is not a whore. She's a young girl left in an impossible situation. Her father was killed six months ago in an accident. All she wanted to do was go to school in Kansas City.” The money had already been sent from Eden's account. Mary had been so excited she'd practically floated through the days. “She was supposed to leave next week. Now she won't even get out of bed.”

His gaze stayed on her as he nodded. But behind that gaze wheels turned, questions formed. His eyes narrowed. He glanced to her left hand. Searching for a wedding ring? The thought nearly made her laugh. She would never be so stupid as to think a man would marry her. Not ever again.

“Are you Mary Rose's...guardian?”

“I suppose, though not legally.” She just couldn't stand to let another young girl's life be ruined by circumstance. “No one else in town seemed to care if she lived or died on the street, so I let her stay with me.”

Not even the good Reverend or his mother offered to take in Mary. They'd turned her away on a January night when the wind howled and the snow drifted ass-deep.

“Do you have any ideas who did this to her?”

“No. It was dark and Mary Rose refuses to speak. I've asked her. She did scribble on paper that the man had whiskers and a Southern accent. But that could be anyone.” Eden heaved a long sigh. “There are hundreds of men working in this area at any given time. I know it might be foolish to think the rapist can be identified, but surely justice demands the effort be made.”

Major Bradford nodded. “Yes, ma'am. I'll start making inquiries today. And I'd like to see Mary Rose when she feels up to it.”

*No!* Eden shook her head, forcing a calmness she didn't feel. “She won't leave the – her room.” Good Lord. She'd almost said *the saloon*. “And I don't think she'd feel comfortable in the company of a man right now. Not even you.”

“Well, then I need you to ask her again if she can write down any more details about the man. Anything will be helpful.”

“All right.”

“Where can I find you?”

“Excuse me?” A roar started in her head. She couldn't tell him *where*. He'd never help her.

His eyes narrowed. “In case I make progress or have questions.”

Eden sucked in a deep breath. “Oh, um, I ... I'd rather you give me a few days with Mary then I'll come back here and tell you if I find out anything else.”

The major leaned back, his eyes narrowed even more, studying her. She forced herself not to look away. *Breathe slowly*. If he pressed, she'd have to tell the truth. But then he'd wad up that paper and throw it and her out to the street.

“As you wish,” he finally relented.

But his expression screamed suspicion. Her reprieve wouldn't last long.

“Thank you.” The words came out in an embarrassing *whoosh*. She had to get away from him before he started asking more questions. She stood and turned to the tent opening, then stopped. “I appreciate your help. I had all but given up hope.”



He strode to her side and took her hand in a quick goodbye—but not quick enough. A shiver tickled down her spine at the feel of his warm, callused hand.

“Never give up on anything, Miz Gabrielli. Believe me, I don't.”

Was that warning?—or was she just feeling guilty? Either way the warm feeling of his touch was gone, replaced by a chill of foreboding.

Eden nodded, forced a smile and hurried down the street.

Why, *why* didn't she just tell him to come to the saloon? Ladore was too small a place to hide. A day or two at most then Major Bradford would find out who – *what* – she was. And he would cause a ruckus, one big enough the senator could find out she had been to see the major.

Panic crawled up her throat and frustrated tears filled her eyes. What was she going to do?

If the major was as smart as she thought, maybe a couple of days would give him enough time to gather information about the rapist. She could avoid being out front of the saloon. She could do the cooking and let Alice and the girls serve and bartend. He wouldn't find out who she was and the senator wouldn't be the wiser.

Everything would be fine. It would be. *It had to be.*

Why then, did his parting words skitter down her spine like a warning?



## Chapter 2



SINCLAIR BRADFORD WATCHED the woman scurry down the street and round the corner of the mercantile, a slip in her gait as if she was trying to conceal a limp. She was hiding something – something more than a bad leg. Hedging, withholding information. Not even saying where she lived. She was no lady of leisure, that was certain. Her hands were every bit as rough as his own, and her dress though clean, was threadbare. And she'd become uncomfortable with his simple questions. Why was she lying?

What was she hiding?

He ducked back into the tent. A puzzle always intrigued him, always. But one wrapped in a beautiful package, well, that was more than he could ignore. And this time, more than he *wanted* to ignore. Spending time with her would be no hardship.

If only she hadn't hurried away so fast. She was real easy to look at, and truth be told, he was tired of being alone. Seven years was a long time. What he'd thought would be time well spent healing from a marriage full of lies had simply turned into seven long, miserable, lonely years.

Shaking his head he looked around at his tent, his life, such as it was. Maybe it was time to forget what Coreena had done, let himself be with someone other than a whore whose name he wouldn't remember. Warm the bed with a woman he could wake up with. One who might mean something to him, one who wouldn't lie with every breath – if such a woman even existed. And he wasn't betting on it.

*Damn it.* He hated that his ability to trust had been stolen, hated that he'd become a cynical ass. Hated that most of all. But it was better this way. Really. Safer. He could concentrate on his job.

Two jobs now.

He turned and grabbed a crate to finish unpacking, imagining Father's expression if he found out Sinclair was investigating the rape of someone as unimportant as a laundress. No one crossed Judge Wilson Bradford. He would be furious if Sinclair spent time investigating anything but his secret assignment. Not that Father had been happy since the war, nor would ever be happy that Sinclair hadn't been the son to die at Gettysburg.

Theodore died, Sinclair lived. And Father would never forgive him for that.

He hefted two more crates, trying to erase the memories.

*Hell.* He hadn't thought about the war in awhile now. But now he could smell the choking gunpowder, feel it burning his eyes. Hear the moans of injured men. Hear Theodore's dying words...

Why did Father have to contact him? Why couldn't he just leave him alone? The past had been in the past. Christ, now it burned and throbbed like a fresh wound.

Maybe it would have been better if he *had* been the one to die at Gettysburg. Not the first time that thought had crossed his mind, but the first time in a long time.

Sinclair ran his fingers through his hair. Best to complete his hidden agenda. Figure out who was trying to sabotage the Katy then get his ass back to Fort Hayes.

He pulled his father's letter from the envelope hidden at the bottom of the satchel and skimmed the bold handwriting. How was it possible for disappointment and condescension to burst from ink and paper?

He growled and fisted the letter into a tight ball. He hated the self-doubt this letter stirred. He was a damned major in the United States Army. He served under General George Armstrong Custer for Christ's sake. Things were fine until Father forced this assignment on him. But Judge Bradford would have his way, come Hell or high water. No matter who he had to step on to get what he wanted.

Sinclair blew another long breath, flattened the letter onto his desk and began to re-read his instructions. A senator had accused Parsons of misdirecting investor's funds—Father being one of those investors. Since Father trusted no one, he had started investigating the senator, finding the man was dually invested, some money in Parsons' venture and even more money in the Joy Line. To Father's way of thinking, that screamed of conflict of interests, begging the question, just how intent was this senator on seeing Parsons lose?

Sinclair wadded up the paper and threw it across the room. *Damned politics.*

“Major?”

Sinclair waved Corporal Ballard inside the tent. “Let's finish unpacking. Then I have to pay a visit to Parsons. I'll see what I can find out, but I don't

expect the cagey bastard to be much help. He is after all, a politician.” And that touched just a little too close to home. “I’ll let you know how we will proceed.” He sighed. “We’ve also been given another investigation to pursue.” He handed the young man a crate. “The rape of a girl.”



A FEW HOURS LATER, Sinclair trudged out of the tent and headed down the street. Ladore was like any other Kansas town. Raw, rough. Lawless. But he loved the challenge and freedom the West offered. A man could lose himself out here. Forget the war, the pain . . . or at least try.

*God knows I’ve tried.*

Judge Parsons’ private railcar sat on a sidetrack. Sinclair climbed the narrow car steps and rapped on the door.

“Come in.”

Sinclair stepped inside. Judge Parsons obviously spared no luxury on his offices. Velvet, silk, Mahogany, Teak. The wasteful excess chewed Sinclair’s gut like cheap whiskey. He thought he’d managed to separate himself from this life of superfluity and the memories that came with it. Now, the past charged at him as if in full battle cry.

“You must be Major Bradford.” A tall man stepped forward and extended his hand. The thin smile lifting his mouth wasn’t overly genuine, but Sinclair would bet the silk of his waistcoat was. “I’m Henry Stevens, Chief of Operations. Judge Parsons has been waiting.” The last line was pronounced like a verdict of guilt.

“I’m sure the judge wasn’t aware of the deluge we rode through to get here.” Sinclair looked around. “Hard to see much outside these velvet curtained windows.”

Stevens faltered just a step, but recovered, strode to the back of the car, then cleared his throat. “Judge, the major is finally here.”

“About time. Send him back.” Parsons’ voice held that edge of superiority that set Sinclair’s teeth on edge. “And Henry, join us with the notes you have.”

“Yes, sir.”

Stevens had summed up his position in those two words. He was Parsons’ yes-man. Father had mentioned the judge had a patsy.

“Follow me.” Stevens nodded toward the back.

Parsons sat at a carved cherry wood desk, a cigar in one hand, a pen in the other. He waved him into a chair.

“Major, you're late.” Parsons didn't look up.

“Judge Parsons. Glad to meet you too.”

Parsons *harrumphed* and stubbed out his cigar. “Well, you won't be once I explain the trouble we've been having here. Trouble I expect you and your men to put a stop to. We are losing time *and* miles each day something goes wrong. That means we're losing money.”

“Yes, sir. Some of it my father's.” Might as well get right to the point.

Parsons frowned, then enlightenment lifted his brows. “Bradford? You're Wilson Bradford's son.”

Not a question, and strangely, Parsons didn't sound worried. Relieved was more like it. Wouldn't a man hiding funds and cheating his investors sound worried?

“Yes. Father wanted me to personally come help you.”

“Thank God.” Parsons reached for his cigar and a Lucifer stick.

“Sir?”

“Well, I'd much rather have someone who stands to lose as much as I. Your father is heavily invested. If the Katy fails, your family stands to lose its fortune.”

A sick wave rolled through Sinclair. Father had never mentioned *that* kind of money.

Parsons took a long draw from the cigar. “I can tell by your pallor you didn't know the extent of his investments.” A slight grin lifted the corner of his mouth. “More incentive for you to find out who is sabotaging my railroad.”

Worry twisted in his gut. Christ, what had Father been thinking?

Sinclair pulled a small leaflet of paper from his pocket. “I'll need details.”

“Come.” Parsons stood and strolled to a long oak table with maps spread across. “Here is our problem. Or the main one. We have 70 miles to reach Indian Territory before Joy does. So far we've had payroll robberies, and several barrels of spikes came up missing. And accidents. Too many and too coincidental. At this rate, we will not win the race.” He slammed his palm against the map.

“So just what is it you want me to do?” Hell, Father had put him in a spot. If the Katy failed, Wilson Bradford would blame Sinclair for ruining

the family.

Just as he blamed him for Theodore's death.

“First, put guards on the payroll box. At all times. Second, put guards on the supplies. Third, you must stop the Joy Line from stealing my workers.”

“Judge, I cannot order men to work for you if they choose to work elsewhere. We just fought a war to offer all men freedom.”

Stevens gave a thin smile. “Well, Major, if we don't gain miles by the end of this week, perhaps your own men could pitch in to lay track.”

Sinclair turned and narrowed his eyes. “Forgive me, Stevens, but the US Government has better things for soldiers to do than build your railroad. I will indeed place the guards you've asked for – I'll have my men ride out to meet the supply trains. And I will investigate the robberies. Does the payroll come same time each week?”

“At first it did. After the first couple of payroll thefts, we changed the delivery date to a rotating schedule.”

“Then Judge Parsons, you have a spy.” The fool should have already figured that out.

“A spy?” He stomped back to his desk. “The people who know the schedules are trustworthy.”

“Who would these people be?”

“Just Henry, Kate and myself.”

“Who's Kate?”

“My daughter.”

“Do you trust her?”

“Now see here!” Stevens stiffened. “Kate is above suspicion.”

Hmmm. Easy to see how Stevens intended to move up in business. He'd marry the heiress.

Parsons smiled as if dealing with a simpleton. “Major, why would Kate jeopardize her future? The success of this railroad is all she has. She's too homely to marry well and too stubborn to attract the right kind of man. And she is after all a mere woman, hardly smart enough to plan robberies. So you can remove any doubt you have about her.”

Sinclair nodded. “Fine.” He'd do some checking on Miss Kate Parsons all the same. Of course Parsons wouldn't implicate his own flesh and blood. Though a man would think the judge would defend her in a more respectful

manner. He all but called her ugly and stupid. “Then who else has access to the office—who could overhear your information?”

“No one.” Parsons frowned.

“There’s Floyd.” Stevens looked up from his papers. “Though I doubt he’s smart enough to sell secrets. The man is a drunken half-wit. I don’t think he can even read.”

“Now, Henry,” Parsons scolded, “Floyd keeps the office meticulously clean, my shirt collars pressed stiff, and he pours a perfect brandy. Besides, it’s the little people in this world who help lift men like us to power. Remember that.”

The words could’ve come straight from Father’s mouth. *Sinclair, I did not send you to West Point so you could become a common soldier. West Point is simply a small step on your path to a prestigious political career.*

Sinclair blocked out the past and folded his notes. “All right. I think I’ll start by talking to the workmen. Who’s your man in charge of the crews?”

“Cormac McGrady. He should be in from the cut soon,” Henry interjected, then looked to Parsons like a puppy waiting for the approving pat on the head.

“Working in this weather?” Sinclair nodded outside.

“Mr. McGrady’s Gang is the best damn group of men I have. If all these bastards worked as hard as those Irish fools, the railway would be built already. McGrady could get a dead man to drive a spike.” Parsons sighed, then dropped into his seat and picked up his pen. “Henry, you’ll introduce Major Bradford to the men.”

“Yes, sir. McGrady will be at the saloon. The men always have a drink there.”

Parsons nodded. “Fine. Major, you can start your investigation there.”

The dismissal made Sinclair grit his teeth.

“Judge, we’re not quite done talking.”

Parsons looked up, his expression clear he didn’t like Sinclair’s tone of voice.

“What else?” He tapped his fingers on the blotter.

“I think you should know I’ve heard about the rape, and I intend for that to be part of my investigations.”

“Rape? What are you—” Parsons stopped and waved his hand as if rape were a pesky fly buzzing his head. “Oh, you mean that whore outside town?”



The way he said *whore* grated down Sinclair's back like the screech of train brakes. He nodded and searched his notes.

"I have her name as Mary Rose. Fifteen years old. And from what I was told, she was a cook and laundress. Not a whore. "

Parsons scowled. "Same difference as far as the men around here are concerned. And a whore is the absolute least of my concern. Or yours. That is not why you were sent."

"I don't think—"

"Damn it, Major," Parsons slapped the ink blotter, "there will be no arrests. I can't afford to lose the man power."

Sinclair leaned over the desk. "There *will* be an arrest, if I can find the guilty man. The deadline of this railroad's completion doesn't negate the law."

Parsons' face reddened. "Are you telling me you think a common prostitute is as important as what we're trying to accomplish here?"

"I'm telling you right is right and wrong is wrong. I don't prescribe to the theory that progress somehow voids that truth."

"Perhaps I should telegram Washington and have you replaced for this job."

Sinclair grinned. "Perhaps." He turned for the door. "You do what you have to do, and so will I."

*Damn that man.* He slammed out of the railcar and loped down the steps. He'd traveled thousands of miles from Washington and politics and greed, yet here he was right back in the middle of one of Father's games.

"Hold up there, Major." Stevens *splash-sloped* down the mud-puddled street behind him. "You have to go meet McGrady."

"Fine." But he didn't have to converse with Stevens on the walk to the saloon. He increased his stride, leaving the man a few steps behind. Damn but he wished he could saddle Lincoln and ride back to Fort Hayes. Surely there was an assignment in the farthest, most remote point of Wyoming or Montana, some place he could avoid doing his father's *favours*, some place he could thwart his family's political expectations. Some place he could forget the past. Forget whose son he was.

"...and this is where you'll find the men, if they're not working." Stevens was talking.

Sinclair slowed his pace until the man walked beside him, then stopped to look at the building Stevens pointed to.

“Devil's Gate, huh? Is this the only saloon in town?” Sinclair peeked through the dimly lit windows.

“No, but it's the one the men frequent. You see, upstairs is Garden of Eden, the brothel. As I said, if the men aren't working, they're here for one reason or another.”

“Or both.” The men at Fort Hayes spent most all of their money at the local brothels.

Stevens nodded. “Shall we?” He opened the wooden door.

Sinclair stepped into a room thick with cigar smoke, the sights, sounds and smells just like every other bar room west of the Mississippi. Raucous laughter bounced off the pine walls, intertwined with female squeals and giggles. Tinny piano music split the air along with the *swoosh* of petticoats as a girl danced atop the bar. Glasses clinked, cards shuffled. The smell of smoke, sweat, and sex tinted the air. Lanterns hung from nails on the walls and set in the middle of the tables, a soft hue hiding a harsh reality.

Men lined the walls and crowded around tables, talking, drinking, sopping large biscuits into red-eye gravy and dunking cornbread into steaming bowls of stew, all slipping free of their day of worry—in one fashion or another.

And one of these men could be a rapist. More than one could be robbers and saboteurs.

“So this is the town restaurant too?”

Stevens pushed past a couple of tables. “Yes. You should be able to find most of the men you'll need here.” He stopped beside a large round table full of men—one, an oversized giant. “Cormac McGrady, this is Major Bradford. He and his men are here to put a stop to the robberies. He needs to ask you a few questions.”

McGrady stood and stretched out his large hand. “Glad to meet you, Major. Have a seat and a drink.” His thick Irish brogue rolled over the words.

Sinclair shook his hand. Firm grip, cool palms. The man looked him straight in the eye, no signs of nervousness. Good.

“I'll pass on the drink. Coffee sounds good though.”

“Alice.” Cormac stuck his hand in the air and waved. “Can we have a couple cups of coffee over here?”

“MmmHm. Sure thang.” An older woman sauntered to the bar and grabbed two cups and a coffee pot.

“McGrady, let's take a smaller table.” Sinclair nodded toward an empty corner behind a man wearing a low-brimmed hat over his black, straight hair and sun-dark skin. Part Indian most likely. Nervous, maybe because of his decent, maybe because of guilt. After all, it was the Indian's land the railroad wanted. That would be perfect motive for causing trouble. The government didn't see it that way, but by-God, Sinclair would fight if someone tried to take his land.

“Well, you gentlemen have things to discuss.” Stevens wrinkled his nose as a big-breasted whore and her customer brushed against him. “You don't need me here. I'll head back to the rail office. Major, report to Judge Parsons tomorrow.” He tapped the brim of his bowler and hurried out the door.

Sinclair watched him go. Arrogant jackass. He reminded him of Theodore ... too much.

“I'd enjoy playing poker with you sometime, Major. That is, if your face is always so easy to read.”

“*Hah*. I don't play – for that very reason. I'm afraid I have a hard time keeping my opinions to myself.”

A sly smile lit McGrady's face. “Oh, then, I'd pay to see you and Parsons butt heads.”

“You're too late.” Sinclair glanced around the room, watching, learning faces. The Indian man moved as Sinclair took his seat, keeping his hat low enough to hide his face. “The judge and I have already had words.”

McGrady laughed. “Well, there's always next time.”

“Yes, I'm sure there will be.” Sinclair leaned in. “For now, I need to know—”

“Here's your coffee.” The woman set the cups in front of them.

“Alice, this is Major Bradford,” McGrady made the introductions as she poured.

“MmmHmm.” Her mouth pursed with disinterest. “You eatin', soldier?”

“No, ma'am. Thank you.”

“MmmHmm.”

McGrady blew on the steaming cup as Alice scurried away. “She's president of the Ladore welcoming committee.”

Sinclair spooned sugar into his cup. “And yet, not the rudest person I've met today.”

McGrady chuckled. “So how can I help you, Major?”

“Parsons spoke highly of you.”

McGrady stopped mid-sip. “Don't hold that against me. My men depend on me to secure work and pay. It's up to me to find that work. Doesn't mean I approve of the boss-man.”

“Fair enough. Tell me what's been happening.”

“First it was a busted chain on a railcar twenty miles from here – a whole load of tracks that had to be reloaded by hand. Of course no one noticed until the train arrived with empty flat cars. We lost two days work. The payroll's been robbed off the train a few times. Back when my Addy arrived in town, she was almost killed by a sliding load of rails. Last week ten barrels of spikes went missing.” Cormac sighed. “My gang, McGrady Gang, is just the cuttin' crew. But the men working behind them can't work if they don't have supplies. And none of my men will work if there's no payroll. I had to use some of my own money to hold them over until the next pay came through.”

“That's very commendable of you.” But why hadn't Parsons paid the men from his pocket? Surely if the Katy was as important to him he claimed, he would finance the men on the front crew. Unless he wanted it to go bankrupt...

Sinclair took a careful sip of the steaming coffee. “Do you think the same men who are robbing the payroll are sabotaging the supplies?”

The Irishman shook his head. “It's not just one man or one group of men. There is an endless supply of both men and women who are not happy to see this railroad come through here.”

“Women?” And why did images of Miz Gabrielli have to fill his head?

“Yes, sir.” Cormac smiled. “Even my wife caused just a wee bit of trouble herself, but she's made peace with the railroad and Parsons.”

“Care to elaborate?”

“No. Not really. But I swear my Addy no longer bears a grudge against Parsons or the Katy.”

Sinclair sighed. Lord, this assignment kept getting more involved. “I'll accept your word on that.” *For now.* He sipped his coffee. “What about Kate Parsons? Would she be one of the unhappy women you mentioned?”

McGrady lifted his brow. “Well, she was there when the train nearly got dynamited—”

“What? Kate Parsons dynamited her father's railroad?” Damn, this investigation was going to be easier than he thought

“Oh, no. Addy stopped the farm widow who lit the fuse before anyone was hurt. It was all a misunderstanding.”

Sinclair narrowed his eyes. McGrady wasn't telling the whole truth. “You and I both know dynamite is rarely a misunderstanding.”

McGrady dropped his gaze, then heaved a heavy sigh. “Addy was approached by a politician, a senator who wants to see Parsons fail.” His voice was barely a whisper. “This politician wanted her to provoke trouble. But she helped expose the farm-wife, Helga, who had the dynamite.”

Suspicion shot rapid-fire through Sinclair. A senator? That was no coincidence. It had to be the same senator feeding Father and the investors information. Sinclair sighed. What in the hell kind of mess had he walked into?

“So I'm to believe your wife had nothing to do with blowing up the Katy?”

“Nothing.” The big man's voice was rough, insistent. “Would I be stupid enough to tell you all this if she was guilty? As soon as she found out the women were being misled by Helga, Addy risked her life to stop the sabotage. Ask anyone.” His fist tightened around his cup, but he never blinked or looked away.

“All right, then.” Sinclair sipped his coffee, his thoughts running in ten directions at once. He had to find out the identity of that politician. “Can you tell me the senator's name?”

“Not without talking to Addy first.” He shook his head. “It's not my secret to tell. Besides, we both feel the senator is still dangerous.”

Sinclair frowned. “Do you think this man has hired someone to pick up where Helga left off?”

“I do.” McGrady shook his head. “And I won't take that chance with Addy's safety.”

Sinclair scrubbed a hand over his jaw and decided to change the topic. He'd find out the senator's identity somehow. Just not tonight. “How many men switch rail lines each week?”

“As many as a dozen.”

“Any of them on the Katy crew this week? Are they in here now?”

McGrady nodded. “A few.”

“What about him?” Sinclair pointed to the Indian man, now leaning in the far corner.

Cormac looked. "He's not part of my cuttin' crew, but most of these boy-os aren't."

Damn. The possibilities of suspects were endless. "All right. I'd like a list of names. Men you think have it in them to cause this kind of trouble, men who just want to steal or men hired to sabotage. Then I think a few of my boys better *hire-on* tomorrow." While a few others would be riding the train every day, guarding the money and the supplies.

"Anything you need, I'm here," Cormac said.

"Yes, one more thing." Sinclair leaned in close. "A rape was reported to me this morning."

"Mary Rose."

"Yes. What do you know about that?"

"Not much. Just the poor lass was walking back to town when it happened." He nodded toward the back of the saloon. "Eden is the person you need to ask. She's been taking care of Mary. Even paid for some fancy school in Kansas City."

"Eden?"

McGrady pointed to the *Garden* sign.

Ah. "So she's the madam?"

The Irishman nodded.

Sinclair looked around the room. "Which one is she?" A night with a talented whore should make him forget all about Miz Gabrielli and take his mind off once again being his father's political pawn.

"She's cooking tonight. Come on. I'll introduce you." McGrady pushed away from the table. "Mary Rose is a sweet girl. If you need any help once you find the bastard..." He cracked his knuckles.

"Much as I agree, if I find him, he'll have to go before a judge. Vigilante justice only breeds more violence."

McGrady shrugged. "You know as well as I do violence is all some men understand. And with no sheriff in town, vigilante is what they get." He turned and strode toward the back.

Unfortunately, Cormac spoke the truth. The army couldn't uphold the law in the West. Too many little towns dotted the landscape, too far from a fort for help. Towns like this needed a full-time sheriff.

"Eden?" McGrady led him into the kitchen. "There's someone here needs to speak to you."

Heat from the iron cook stove smothered the room. Warm, delicious smells of yeasty bread and frying pork reminded Sinclair he hadn't eaten today. Pies sat cooling on a sideboard, two pots bubbled with soups, and coffee boiled in the pot.

A shapely woman bent over the oven door. A deep purple skirt hugged the curve of her attractive bottom. Slender, bare arms slid a pan of rolls into the heat, then she stood and stirred a pot of soup.

“What is it, Cormac? I'm busy back—” The woman turned then froze. Pale green eyes widened, and the spoon clattered to the floor.

Surprise tore through Sinclair like a bullet. Gone was the refined woman from this morning. Here stood a lush, earthy creature, dark hair spilling from its pins, blouse gone, just a corset covering a pale blue chemise and her full . . . *damn*.

Just as he'd suspected, she had been hiding something. Something besides well rounded breasts. But...*Christ*. He swallowed hard. He'd never suspected her secret was this.

*She was a madam.*

“Major Bradford.” Her voice quaked, but she straightened her spine as if going into battle.

“Miz Gabrielli.” He let his gaze drift over her. Had her lips been as full this morning? Her breasts sure hadn't been so prominently displayed.

He reined in the surge of lust hardening his body and reminded himself she'd lied to him. *Lied*. Shit. Did he have no sense of judgment when it came to women? His pride couldn't take another beating – Coreena had damn near beat it to death during their marriage.

“You two know each other?” McGrady looked from one to the other.

Miz Gabrielli's throat convulsed, but she said nothing.

“Yes, she came to see me this morning.” Pretending to be everything she so obviously was not. Thank God he hadn't asked McGrady if he knew a sweet woman by the name Gabrielli. The Irishman would have laughed himself silly. “Though she looked a little different.” He narrowed his eyes as he delivered the barb.

She at least had the good grace to blush. Unfortunately it turned the swells of her breasts a tempting shade of pink, made him wonder if she blushed all over.

“I—I spoke with the major about Mary Rose.” She talked to McGrady, but her soft voice brushed over Sinclair like a caress, a tempting, will-

weakening caress. “You know Stevens or Parsons refuse to do anything.” She bent to retrieve her spoon.

McGrady nodded. “Yes.”

Sinclair glanced at the Irishman. “Thank you for showing me to the kitchen.” If the big man was half as smart as Sinclair suspected, he'd leave. Because with or without an audience, Miz Gabrielli was going to explain herself.

“All right, yes, my supper will be waitin'. Major, will I see you tomorrow?”

Sinclair nodded, but kept his gaze on the corseted temptation across the table. “Yes, tomorrow.”

McGrady turned to the door. “Eden, give Mary Rose my best.”

“I will. And tell Adella hello from me.”

McGrady strode from the room.

Sinclair took two deliberate steps toward Eden. Close enough to see the fire in her eyes, close enough to feel the heat of her body. And Christ, she smelled good—would she taste good?

Damn. *Stop thinking about her body.* What the hell was wrong with him? He should be angry at her for lying. Yet he couldn't stop thinking about stripping off her corset and sucking her nipples through the cotton of her chemise.

Hell.

He inhaled a slow, deep breath. He'd just been too long without visiting the Fort Hayes brothel. That was all. And he was angry. *He was.*

“Well, *Miz Gabrielli.*” He took one more step toward her, ignoring the sweat trickling down his back. It was just the heat from the stove. It was not the way her breasts were pushed high in her corset or her long, bare arms.

She raised her chin just a little, daring him, holding her spoon like a weapon as she lifted a finely arched brow at him.

“Well, what?”

He swallowed. “It seems we have several things to discuss. Shall we start with why you didn't tell me who you are?”

Anger tightened her delicate features. “I told you who I am.”

Another lie. He took another step, gritting his teeth against the old hurt, the old resentment. *She's not Coreena.*

“Oh? I don't think so.”



She slammed the spoon onto the table. “What you really mean is, why didn't I tell you *what* I am.”

He leaned forward, towering over her. “I already know that answer. What you are, *Madam*, is a liar.”

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## Chapter 3

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“I AM NOT!”

The urge to slap the smug expression from Major Bradford’s face made Eden fist her hands. How could she ever have thought she could depend on him to help, thought he wouldn't find out who she was?

“I did not lie to you, Major.” But he would see it that way, which meant he would never help Mary. Tears thickened her throat. Damn it all. Once again she’d let someone down, someone who needed her.

He scoffed. “You didn't tell me you owned this...*establishment*. So I have to wonder what other things you lied about.”

“You didn’t ask where I worked.” She poked him in the chest with her spoon, her anger building. “You asked where you could find me, and I answered that I'd rather return to your tent. There is no lie in that. None.” She gave another poke, ignoring the tight set of his jaw, and the hard muscles beneath his uniform.

“So omitting the truth isn't a lie?” His eye twitched.

“Not when omitting the truth will help the innocent. But obviously you don't intend to do that. You're no better than Stevens or Parsons or any other rich man I've ever had the displeasure of knowing. Too busy licking boots to help a lowly whore.”

He reeled back as if she'd slapped him. A tic started in his whiskered cheek. “I *do not* give a tinker's damn about pleasing some rich politician.” He gritted each word so hard, Eden heard his jaw crack.

Anger radiated from him, hotter than the stove. His expression, his reaction out of place ... and she hadn't said one word about a politician.

“Besides,” he stepped forward again, tall, intimidating, so close the enticing scent of leather, man and spice wrapped around her, “I never said I wasn't going to help Mary Rose. I just want—”

“What?” *Here it was.* Men always wanted something. “What do you want? Payment...some compensation?” He was no better than the rest of the men who used women.

“Huh?” His brows knitted.

“Sex? If I bed you, you’ll help me, isn’t that what you mean?” She waved her spoon as she spoke, barely resisting the urge to whack him with the wooden handle.

“No. I never said—”

“You didn’t have to. I know how men act, how men think.” She stepped closer now, so close her breasts brushed him with each angry breath she took. “You’re *all* the same.”

His face tightened, a vein in his temple pulsed. “We’re certainly no worse than women. Lying, cheating.” His voice became louder and louder. “I’ve never met a woman who could tell the truth, and you’ve proved that fact. Women use men.”

“Use men? Hah! Men use *everyone* and care for *no one* but themselves! Men don’t care if you’re starving, or cold, or hurt.” *Bleeding. Half dead.* Her heart pounded, pictures flashing through her mind, blood, pain, death, money, power. With men it was all about the money and power.

“Lady, you don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. I could tell you things—” he stopped short. “Just don’t read me your laundry list of why men are the demise of society, because I can match your stories indiscretion for indiscretion, sin for sin, why woman will be our ruination.” His last words were bitter, his eyes filled with hurt.

They stood so close his words brushed the hair at her temple. Tension crackled between them. Emotion vibrating through her, shaking, trembling, their breathing shallow, angry. She glared up into his eyes and her heart stuttered.

The moment stretched out, seconds, minutes. Neither moved, but slowly his eyes darkened, his lips parted as if he wanted to say more, but he gave a quick shake of his head and stepped back.

*What the hell had just happened?* She never acted like this, never. She was always in control.

He scrubbed a hand over his jaw and shook his head, looking down as if his dirty boots held the answer to a question. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to yell. I’ll help you. And I want nothing in return. I give my word.”

The aching sincerity in his deep voice shivered over her skin. But she’d be a fool to let herself be deceived by pretty words and promises again. “I don’t put much stock in a man’s—”

The kitchen door swung open, and Alice stomped in. “Damnation, Eden, how much longer on them pork chops?” Alice’s eyes widened as she

glanced at the two of them. “Everythin' all right in here?”

“Yes.” Eden waved her away. “I’ll have the plates ready in a minute.” She sucked in a deep breath and backed farther away from the major.

“MmmHmm. Well, I need two bowls of stew and one order of apple pie too.”

“Fine, fine. I’m working on it. Just get the men their drinks.”

“MmmHmm.”

“Alice, go.” Eden squeezed past him to cut a large slice of pie. “Major, if you truly mean to help Mary Rose, I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” For her ward’s sake, she’d put aside her anger. Right now, she needed him to leave. She needed to figure out why after twenty-four years of holding her emotions in tight check, she’d just hissed and spewed all over a man she barely knew.

He leaned casually against the table – obviously ignoring her hint to leave.

“So why didn't you just tell me everything this morning? Why come dressed like a farm wife?”

“Because I didn't trust you.” She turned and flipped the sizzling pork chops. “I’ve tried to get help, but, well, I’ve never found men to be helpful of a whore.” She pulled open the oven door. “In fact, I’ve never found men to be helpful at—*Aarrgh!*” Pain scorched her hand as a pan of cornbread smashed to the floor.

“Damn it to hell and back.” She wrapped her palm in her apron skirt. Sharp heat shot through her hand, her reward for allowing him to become a distraction.

In two long strides he was at her side, his dark brows pulled into a frown, concern tightening his handsome face.

“Let me see it.” He reached for her hand.

“No. Just go away.” Tears filled her eyes, but she blinked them back. “I have work to do.” And she couldn’t stand if he was nice to her right now. She just couldn’t.

He sighed as if she was daft. “You can't work with your hand blistered.”

“I’ve worked in worse shape.” *So much worse.*

“What happened?” Alice busted through the door and scowled at Major Bradford. “I heard you scream. Did he hurt you?”

“No. Nothing. I touched the hot pan is all. I’ll have those plates in five minutes.” Eden *shooed* Alice out, then whirled back toward the stove.

“No you won't.” The major strode to the sink and pumped water onto a towel. “Sit down. Let me tend to your hand.” He stepped toward her.

“I'm fine.” She couldn't think with him so close. “You can go.”

“I could, I'm not going to. Now sit down.” His chin had a stubborn tilt. Fine. He could be stubborn all he wanted. So could she. “I don't take orders. Not from you or any man.”

“Understood. But at least let me see the wound.” He held out his hand, his gaze commanding, then frowning as she refused to show him her hand. “Eden, please. Let me help you. You're hurt.”

His words were gentle. Almost caring. But that couldn't be. *Men don't care.* But the way he said her name, the deep timbre of his voice, like a caress made her want to believe maybe...maybe...She glanced up into his eyes, and was caught, snared in what she saw.

“Easy.” He took one small step closer. “Just let me look. I want to help, Eden. Please. Let's just pretend our skirmish didn't happen. Pretend we've just met. How do you do, I'm Major Bradford.” He bowed. “Full time soldier, part time horse's ass.”

A short giggle escaped her. She couldn't stop it. His earnest apology unnerved her, but his wry remark made her feel...*What? Relaxed? Safe?* Was she really so pathetic?

No, she wasn't.

Unfisting her fingers, she stuck out her hand. “See? Now that you've surveyed the wound, you can leave.”

“No.” He gently took her wrist and placed the cold rag against the large blister.

“*Isssshhh.* Damn the Devil that hurts.” She tried to jerk her hand free.

“I'm sorry.” He removed the towel and examined the burn. “You need some salve on this.”

He held her hand loosely, but the heat of his touch felt as hot as the blister. One long finger stroked her wrist, that single touch, the most intimate thing she'd shared with a man in so, so long, the stroke of temptation, the most perilous feeling she'd had since Alexander.

“Major Bradford—” She needed him to leave. She needed her heart to stop pounding like a silly schoolgirl's. Why was he making her feel things? She'd thought herself immune to men after —

“Sinclair.” His voice rumbled over her.

“What?” She tried to ignore her pounding pulse. *Had the room gotten hotter?*

“My name is Sinclair.”

“All right. But I told you I have work to do. I’ll doctor this later.” *Please go. Just go.*

He shook his head. “Salve?”

Eden sighed. He wasn’t going to give up. Just as he’d told her this morning. “Above the pie safe.” Maybe if she let him doctor it, then he’d go.

He nodded and walked to the shelf. Pulling down the tin, he took off the lid and dipped his fingers inside.

“Give me your hand.”

She studied his face. The same sense of stubborn integrity was still there, in his eyes, the set of his jaw. Integrity mixed with good looks enough to tempt a saint. Dear God, he was sinfully dangerous.

Temptation blocked her good sense in the past. She couldn’t let it happen again. Besides, things that seemed too good to be true most likely were. Especially concerning a man.

“Why are you being nice? I thought you were angry at me.” And angry men were deadly.

His brow lifted. “Being angry doesn’t negate doing what’s right.” Smearing a big dollop of salve onto the blister, he made a loose wrap of the damp towel. “I was sent here to do a job. Since I’ve found out about Mary Rose, part of that job is finding who assaulted her.” He bit his lip as he concentrated on tying the ends of the towel together. “We may have started off on the wrong foot, but I *will* help you. Now sit down.”

He was too damned bossy. “Major—”

“I know. There’s work to do.” He gently pushed her into a chair then turned, peeled off his coat and hat, then stabbed the pork chops from the pan. “What else goes with these?”

“Pardon?” Did he really mean to prepare the orders? To help in the *kitchen*?

“What. Else. Goes. On. The. Plates?” He stressed each word as if she were deaf.

“Umm,” The sight of him standing there, an orderly cavalry major, hair mussed, steaming plate in hand, tied her tongue. “Um, the turnip greens and mashed potatoes. Then two biscuits.”

He placed everything she listed and reached for bowls. “And Alice said two bowls of stew and one apple pie, correct?”

Eden nodded.

He ladled the soup and cut the pie, setting everything on a large serving tray, then hollered for Alice.

The woman pushed open the door and frowned. “So now you're cookin? What you be wantin?”

“Alice,” Eden scolded, “take out the food while it's hot.”

“Fine. But mark my word, he wants something from you. MmmHmm. Want I should get the pistol?”

Eden heaved a long sigh. “No. That won't be necessary. The major is going to find the man who attacked Mary Rose.”

“MmmHmm. Well, then...I reckon he can stay. Besides, I need a steak, rare, one plate of biscuits and gravy, and another bowl of potato soup. And I need them in a hurry, soldier.” She took the tray and scuttled out the door.

Sinclair gave a crooked grin. “She’s full of piss and vinegar, but at least you know where you stand.”

“Yes...” *What kind of man was this?* He wasn't angry at the way Alice talked to him?

He confused her, and she didn't like that. Not one bit. She stood intending to step aside, to the other side of the kitchen. Or outside. Being close to him was dangerous.

He pressed Eden back into the chair. “Sit. You look pale.”

“I'm fine.” Just baffled. Men just weren't nice for no reason. Some perhaps. Cormac had been a good friend to her, asking nothing in return. But Cormac was a poor Irishman. The major, while not rich, had rank, manners. Surely he wanted *something*.

“Well, I'll help you finish up here, then I need to talk to Mary Rose. The more time that passes the harder it will be for me to find the guilty man.” He took a steak from a large cold-crock and dropped it into a pan of grease.

“Once supper is over, we'll go in and see her.”

He nodded, grabbed a plate, two biscuits and started ladling gravy. “And, Eden, just so you know,” he glanced over his shoulder, “I *do* understand why you didn't think you could tell me you're a madam, but I would have agreed to help you even if you came to me this morning in your corset and drawers, carrying a bottle of whiskey. Right is right and wrong is



wrong. No matter rich or poor, everyone has basic rights.” He turned, his gaze catching hers, holding on, searching. “Everyone.”

A flush heated her face. Shock, embarrassment, hope, all surged through her at once. Where was he when she lived in St. Louis? When her life was ruined, when she was almost killed? Maybe, if she'd known Major Sinclair Bradford then neither Alexander nor his father would have gone unpunished. Maybe if she told him she was being blackmailed...No. If she told him her involvement in the robberies, she would go to prison. Sophia would be expelled from the school, put on the streets. Become a whore.

He continued in a low, calm voice. “I just want you to know where we stand. I will always respect someone who’s honest—no matter how ugly it might be, I always want the truth.” Pain clouded his gaze, then he blinked it away, lifted his mouth in a smile too forced to be real as he went back to cooking.

She managed to swallow though her mouth had gone dirt-dry. Guilt did that to her. “I too prefer to know where I stand in any given situation.”

He nodded, the sadness never leaving his face though it reached out and twisted her heart.

Eden stood, putting space between her and the major. Between her and the damned compassion his sadness had stirred inside her. She didn't want to feel anything for this man. Not compassion for whatever hurt he'd suffered, not admiration for his willingness to admit when he was at fault, and certainly not happiness that he could respect her despite her lurid past – and respect was there in his gaze, not judgment, not like how some people looked at her.

Not that she cared what anyone thought of her. It just didn't matter anymore, didn't hurt anymore...not much anyway.

All that mattered was getting free from the senator, then making enough money to buy Sophia an education and a respectable life, any kind of life, just so long as she didn't take up whoring. Too many Gabrielli women seemed to accept that vocation. Her sister would *not* be the third to take this horrible route.

“Would you like some coffee, Major?” She needed to stay busy. All this thinking and considering, all this *feeling*, would lead to nothing but trouble.

He sucked in a long, deep breath and smiled. This time the smile reached his eyes.

“All right. But I thought you were going to call me Sinclair.”

“I don't think that was decided, merely requested.” Did she sound in control? Or could he hear the stupid breathless way her voice lilted? *Damn it.* She didn't want to get comfortable with him, no matter how sincere he seemed. No matter how his gaze flickered with interest each time he looked at her.

“If I say *please*, call me Sinclair, will that help?”

“How about if you just tell me how you like your coffee?”

He chuckled. “With lots of sugar.” He pulled the meat from the pan and plated it with vegetables and bread.

“Sweet tooth?” She barely resisted the urge to tease him even more. This felt too nice, too comfortable. Too dangerous. She hadn't danced with danger in a long, long time. Too long apparently and her body knew it.

“Little bit.” He grinned, a dimple creasing his left cheek. “Thank you,” he added as she passed him the cup.

“You're welcome.” She backed away, away from his manners and heat and that damned dimple she wanted to trace with her tongue.

*No, no, no.* She couldn't let this man make her forget how cruel men were.

Alice stuck her head around the door. “I need two more steaks. Both still mooing.”

Eden nodded. “All right. Here. Take the pie and plate. I'll bring out the soup.”

She moved to the stove, her skirt brushing the major's tall boots as she reached for a bowl and the ladle. “Ow!” The tin of the handle pressed into her new burn.

He frowned. “Are you just determined to hurt yourself again... or just determined to do the opposite of what I asked you to do?”

“The latter.” She stepped around him to serve the soup. She could make it through this evening with him in her kitchen. She could. *She would.*

“With that attitude, you'd be drummed out of the army if you were one of my men.”

“Well, I'm not a man so you'll just have to disregard me.”

“Believe me, I would if I could.” His words were nothing but a gritted whisper, but she heard them all the same.

Heard them, ignored them.

But ignoring the little shot of pleasure his words caused was impossible.



AFTER SHE RETURNED from the dining room, Sinclair turned to her. From the serious, unsure look on his face, she wasn't going to like what he had to say. Maybe that was for the best. She could handle being angry with him much better than liking him.

“Eden, I need to ask you something.”

“All right.”

“You and the working girls probably hear a lot of talk. More than most men realize. Maybe some plans being made?”

“I suppose.” Lord, had he heard the tremor in her voice? Did she look guilty? She felt guilty. Every muscle in her body was drawn as tight as a corset string.

“Have you heard anyone mention the robberies or the accidents? Anything suspicious?”

“Every time there's a robbery the men talk and talk and worry and drink.” But she always fled to the kitchen when that happened. The pain of knowing she was hurting those men by spying, too much to bear.

“No, I mean – “

“You mean have any of us overheard nefarious plans?”

“Yes.” He nodded.

“Major, if you want to know about the railroad's plans, you should ask Parsons or Stevens—or even Kate Parsons. I assure you men hardly sit at my bar and proclaim their next robbery schedule.” She forced a laugh.

“Fair enough.” He gave a half-grin. “I suppose what I'm trying to ask is, if any men have talked while...conducting business upstairs.”

“Ahhh. Well, I haven't heard anything.” She wasn't going to tell him she didn't *conduct* business upstairs anymore. If she did he'd have more questions, questions she couldn't—wouldn't—answer. No one but Alice knew what Alexander had done.

“If you do, I'd appreciate knowing. The Katy can't survive the set-backs that have been going on.”

Her muscles tightened, twisted. “You expect me to ask my girls to help you help Parsons? After the way he and Stevens treat us—like shit on their expensive shoes?” It was like asking her to help the Devil.

He shook his head. “I'm sorry. I do understand your hesitation to help Parsons' railroad, but surely you care about the men whose jobs—even their

lives—are at stake. Robberies aside, the accidents have been very dangerous. Someone could be killed.”

*Like me.* She’d been on the platform that day in New Chicago when Helga tried to blow up the tracks.

Eden moved to the sink and started pumping water to heat for dishes, more to hide her face from his intense study than to keep busy. It wasn't fair he would try to use her sympathies against her.

“I don't know what makes you think I care about anyone in this town.” The words felt brittle, choked. Could he tell?

His soft chuckle filled the kitchen. “This from the woman who begged me to help a young girl, a woman who paid for that girl to have schooling, a better life...”

Eden gasped. Damn Cormac and his big Irish mouth.

“That's different.”

“I thought we were going to be truthful. So tell me, if your friend McGrady is killed next week in one of those accidents, you won't feel any remorse? You won't feel bad for his widow?”

She slammed down the bucket. “Now see here, I don't appreciate you trying to guilt me. Do you really think me so gullible?”

“No.” He took the still bloody steaks from the grease and placed them on plates with potatoes and greens. “I just need help with information. And honestly, you or your girls could hear something that could be useful.”

“Fine. I'll tell them to let me know if they hear something. But I'm not doing it for Parsons.” Not for this tall man standing too close, taking up too much space in her kitchen either. Only for Cormac and the McGrady Gang. Those men deserved to work in what little safety there was in handling dynamite and digging trenches. And somehow she’d have to share that information without laying any trails to her own involvement.

“Fair enough.” He carried the plates to the swinging door. “I’ll take what I can get.”

That’s what she was afraid of.



THEY WORKED THE NEXT hour feeding the men, Sinclair cooking, and, after heated discussion, Eden cut the pies and ladled the soups. The time passed easily. Talking with the major felt like the most natural thing in the world, as if he was an old friend, like Cormac.

Except she was achingly attracted to this friend. He made her smile—even though she'd bit her lip several times attempting to dissuade his teasing. The very fact that she wavered back and forth between throwing him out the door or inviting him into her bed made her dizzy with worry.

Finally Alice announced the crowd had thinned out to mostly drinkers.

“We can see if Mary Rose feels up to talking now.” Eden stacked the dirty plates into the sink. “The dishes can wait.” Better to let the major ask his questions and be gone. This evening was too ...cozy.

“All right.” He pulled the frying pan free from the heat. “After you.” He smiled again, and it was discerning as hell. His dimple, the fact his eyes crinkled at the sides...and the way his hair was still mussed did crazy things to her insides. He was nothing like the men she'd been with. High bred dandies, they were. Alexander being the cream of the crop, or the bottom of the barrel depending on how you looked at it. Nevertheless, all of them were worthless, selfish men who betrayed their wives, their business partners, and anyone dumb enough to associate with them.

She much preferred Sinclair's class of people. Much preferred a lazy smile from a man willing to help in the kitchen over a rehearsed laugh from a man sprawled over a fainting couch. Much preferred the heady scent of saddle leather over bottled toilet water. Much preferred the man following her over any man she'd met in a long, long, long time.

She felt his gaze scorching her back as she led him through the kitchen to the spare room where Mary Rose rested. What was he thinking as he trailed behind? Was he wondering about her limp? Why she'd become a whore?

Something foreign inside made her want to tell him, wanted him to understand this life had chosen her, not the other way around. That given a choice, she would have been anything but a whore. Could have been a wife, a mother. *Could have been someone respectable, wonderful, loved.*

Before they reached the door she stopped short and turned – colliding against the major. His arms shot out catching her, wrapping her in his heat for just a moment, but searing her with the memory she wouldn't soon forget. She glanced up to apologize, but the words froze in her throat. His brown eyes darkened to black, and a thick, languid heat flooded her limbs, making her boneless.

She melted against his hard body. Oh, God, she wanted him, wanted to stay right here in his heat for just a minute or a month. She wanted to feel

safe, warm. Wanted, wanted so much.

She lifted her head. His lips were full and so close. His breath brushed across her cheek, warm, sweet from his sugared coffee. His palm slid up her ribs, his fingers aching close to her breast, closer, closer, so close the breath froze in her lungs. The look he gave her was unguarded, exposed, raw, a look that stirred a spark inside her, sparked embers she'd buried long ago. A spark she thought to keep extinguished forever, but now it scorched her inside out.

And God help her, she liked it.

*Dangerous, dangerous, dangerous.* She couldn't do this.

"I—I'm sorry." She jumped back, out of his arms, breaking the spell. She couldn't let herself be burned up again. Alexander had nearly destroyed her, and she couldn't take that risk again. She just couldn't. "I um, I just wanted to ask you to wait and let me make sure she's decent."

The major exhaled slowly, as if gathering control. His gaze raked her, hot and inviting, before he shuttered his eyes and cleared his throat. "Go ahead in and let the young lady know I need to talk to her. I'll wait here."

Eden nodded, then slipped inside the dark room, releasing a long sigh of relief, or was it disappointment? Both maybe, but it didn't matter. This had to stop. She had too much responsibility to let herself become involved with a man.

"Mary Rose?" She lit the lantern. "Do you feel like talking?" Sitting the lamp beside the bed, she touched Mary's cool, pale face.

And screamed.

Panic exploded inside her. Panic and pain. Mary Rose lay across the bed, an empty bottle of Laudanum in her hand.

He burst through the door, pistol in hand. "What is it?" His eyes were wide, his gaze darting around the room.

"We have to get her to the doctor. Now!"

"Shit." He holstered his gun and rushed to the bed.

Fear fisted Eden's stomach. *Why, why, why?* Damn it, Mary had seemed better this morning. She'd even smiled a little when Eden had brushed her hair. How long had she been lying here? Minutes? Hours? She was so chilled, so pale.

"Where's your doctor?"

"A few streets over."

The major lifted Mary Rose, blankets and all. "Show me which way." He shouldered through the door. Eden followed down the hall, then hurried around him to open the door.

Alice ran into the kitchen. "What's happened? I heard more screamin'. Oh, Saints, no."

"We're going to Doc's." Eden yelled the last word as she bolted out the back door. "Come on, Major. Hurry!"

She ran into the alley, cursing her slowed pace as her bad leg seized with each step. The major's footsteps thundered behind her. They ran across the street and down three blocks to Doc Brown's office. A single lantern glowed through the window. He had to be here. Had to.

"Doc?" Eden pounded on the door. She glanced back at Mary Rose, limp in Sinclair's arms. "Doctor Brown!" Horrifying memories threatened to drown her. Running, crying, knocking on doors, begging for help. "*Help me, please.*"

Tears streamed down her face.

Her legs trembled and her hands shook.

Gripping pain squeezed her chest until she couldn't breathe.

Where was the doctor? She had to get help. Had to save Mary Rose. She couldn't die. It couldn't happen again. Not again. Please God.

"Doctor," Eden screamed. "Doctor, where are you?"

"For pity's sake, Eden." Doctor Brown rounded the corner of the boardwalk, his wife on his arm. "What's happened?" He hurried to unlock his door.

"It's Mary Rose. She's drank a whole bottle of Laudanum."

"Oh, Christ." The doctor ushered them inside and to the back where he examined his patients. "Place her onto the table." He grabbed his stethoscope, pulled open the blankets. "Soldier, take Eden out to the waiting area."

She couldn't leave her. "No, I—"

Sinclair took her arm. "Come with me. Let the doc do his job."

"No." Eden tugged against Sinclair's hold. "No, you don't understand. I have to help her. She can't die. She can't."

"Eden!" He gave her a shake. "Come in the other room and wait with me. Now."

A sob tore through her and her knees buckled. Sinclair's arm steadied her as he led her into the adjoining room.

“It—it's my fault. I—I shouldn't have left the Laudanum where she could reach it. I should have known. I should have walked with her that night, stopped the man. Protected her.”

“Shhh.” Sinclair tried to gather her in his arms, but she broke free.

She didn't want comfort. Didn't deserve it. No matter how hard she tried, destiny would punish her for being what she was. A coward. A whore. A—

“Eden.” Doctor Brown's voice broke through her thoughts. He stood with his head bowed. “Eden, there's nothing I can do. She's been gone too long already.”

“Nooooooooo.” The room started spinning and the years melted away. Horrible memories filled her mind, the same shattering words echoing in her ears.

*There's nothing we can do. Your mama is gone. You have to dry those tears and be strong.*

The old nightmares rolled through her until her head roared with the past.

Ripping open the door she ran.

She didn't want to be strong. She was nine years old and her mother was dead!

“Eden!” Sinclair's shout echoed down the street.

No, no, no. She kept running. Tears blinded her. Her chest ached as if her heart might explode. Her bad leg started cramping. Could she just keep running? Never stop? Run far enough to forget the past?

“Eden, damn it, stop.” Sinclair scooped her up mid-step and held her back tightly against his chest. His breath came in pants against her shoulder, his heart thundering against her spine. “Stop. You can't out-run what's happened.”

“No. Please let me go.” She kicked and squirmed to be free.

“It's not safe for you to be out here alone.”

“I don't care.” She'd do what she must to survive. Just as she'd always done.

*Girls who are alone have to spread their legs for rich old men if they want to have food and a place to live. Now that your mother is gone, you'll have to provide for yourself and your sister.*

“Eden?” His voice pushed the nightmare from her mind. “Let's go back to the saloon. We need to tell Alice what's happened. I'm sure she's worried.”



The rest of the ladies too. They deserve to hear the news from you. I'll stay while you tell them." The soothing sounds of his words wrapped around her like a warm blanket. "All right?"

His breath brushed her neck, his hands stroking her waist. Strong. Warm. God, she just wanted to be warm and safe. Protected. Just once. Just for a little while.

"We'll go back and have a drink. It'll help you calm down."

"I don't drink." Her self-control slipped away like the mist if she drank. And she had to hang onto her control.

Slowly he set her on her feet, and turned her to face him. He tucked a stray piece of hair behind her ear, his fingers trailing down her cheek, his gaze searching hers, silently asked questions she couldn't answer. If she started talking she might never stop. Too many memories, too much pain burned in her tonight. One word would lead to one explanation, which would lead to her pouring out her entire life for the major to examine and judge. She couldn't bear to see disgust on his face. Not tonight.

She squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head.

"All right. No whiskey. How about coffee then?"

Eden nodded, no fight left in her.

The safest thing to do would be to send him away. But coffee could be safe too. And tomorrow would be soon enough to be strong. Tonight hurt too much.

Sinclair took off his coat and draped it over her bare shoulders. "Here, you're shaking."

She was. Shaking, and her teeth were rattling near out of her head. She just wanted to stop feeling for awhile. Stop feeling pain. There was too much twisting her heart – to the point she couldn't breathe.

He pulled her close to his side, sharing his heat. "It'll be all right. I'm here." The words fanned the hair at her temple, his lips warm as he spoke. "I'm here."

Numb, she let him lead her back to Devil's Gate, his large hand holding hers. God forgive her for being weak, but she needed his strength right now.

In silence they walked back to the saloon, around to the back door. Alice waited in the kitchen, her eyes red-rimmed and puffy. Eden shook her head, unable to say the words.

"Oh, saints preserve us!" Alice ran from the room and up the stairs, her sobs drifting down as she told the other girls what had happened. Wails

filled the brothel upstairs, the sound—the pain— so much like the night Mama died, tremors rolled through Eden. Maybe a drink wasn't such a bad idea. Just one shot to help her sleep, to chase away the nightmares.

“I do need a whiskey.” She tugged free of the major’s hand and marched through the swinging door into the bar room. A few men still lingered, drinking, waiting...

Silence fell over the room as they all stared at her.

She couldn't pretend to be nice to these men when one of them could be the rapist. “What are you all lookin' at? Get out. We're closed for the night.”

Chairs screeched across the floor and men scattered. All but one.

“Well, I ain't done eatin'.” Len nodded to his steak. “And I ain't leavin' till I'm done.”

“Get out, Len. Take your damned plate with you, but get out.”

He sneered. “Go to hell. Ain't no woman – no *whore* – gonna tell me what to do.”

Anger boiled through her. Len was a hateful bastard. Mean. Just like Alexander.

“I said leave.”

“No.” He narrowed his eyes. “And when I'm done eating, I'm going to come behind that bar and give you what you're just begging for, a good screwin'. I'm sick and tired of a damned whore actin' so pious.” Throwing his napkin onto the muddy floor he stood and stomped toward her. “In fact, to hell with eatin'. I'm going to give it to you now.”

Her heart jumped into her throat. The look on his face, the same look Alexander had the night he'd nearly killed her.

She grabbed the shotgun from beneath the bar and pointed it at Len. “Get away from me.”

Len sneered. “You ain't gonna do nothing, nothing but squeal and holler just like the others. Takin' on you don't like it, but you will. You all always do.”

He stomped toward her, big, brutal. Threatening.

Blood rushed through her ears. Her vision swam.

He was the man who raped and killed Mama.

The man who raped Mary Rose.

Alexander.

*Blam.*

The blast rocked her back on her heels. Len's eyes widened, his hands immediately on his chest, his gut, feeling, searching for blood.

Screams filled the upstairs and five female heads poked over the stair rail.

The kitchen door slammed open. "What the hell—?" Sinclair stopped short, his pistol aimed at Len, his gaze fixed on the slug hole in the far wall.

Eden cocked the second hammer. "Get out, Len. The next one will go through you." Her hands shook, anger pulsing through her. Sweet, righteous anger. And power. God, the heady power of defending herself spiraled through her like sunshine, a split second of drunken freedom before the old fear returned and her hands started shaking.

Len pointed at the major. "You gonna let this bitch shoot at people? She's crazy. Ain't you got someplace to lock her up? She tried to kill me!"

Sinclair holstered his pistol. "If she intended to kill you, you'd be dead about now." He wrenched the gun from Eden's hands. "Now, get out."

Len spit and started backing toward the door. "When she hurts someone, it's on your head. You hear? And don't think I won't be waiting to report this to your superiors so you will get full blame."

"Go or I'll shoot you myself." Sinclair patted the shotgun. Anger radiated from him. He stood feet apart, the shotgun still aimed in Len's general direction. "Go work on the Joy line, but don't come back to Ladore."

Len frowned but scuttled across the room like a dog with its tail between his legs. "To hell with you. You'll be sorry." He slammed out the door.

Taking all the air in the room with him.

Dear God, she'd almost shot a man.

Her knees wobbled and she gripped the bar for strength.

"Are you all right?" Sinclair cupped her elbow. His chest pressed against her back, keeping her upright.

"Yes. Thank you. You can go now." She was going to fall apart and never recover. He couldn't see that, couldn't be here when that happened. No one could see.

"No." He placed her gun on top of the bar. "We're going to talk first."

Dread bottomed out in her stomach. Why couldn't he just leave before she collapsed into a squalling mess?

He took two steps toward the kitchen, shaking his head, then turned, red flushing his face. “That was the stupidest thing I've seen in a long time. You could have been hurt. Or killed. Most certainly raped. What if I hadn't been here?”

Tears burned her eyes. “I had another barrel to empty on him. And they would have helped.” She nodded above, showing him the five weapons now resting on the banister—three derringers, one ax, one butcher knife.

Sinclair huffed a long breath and ran his fingers through his hair. “Do you realize if you killed him, no jury would let you go free?”

A welcome flash of anger spiked her words. “He intended to rape me! I had every right.”

“This is a brothel. You'd be convicted of murder, plain and simple. Hanged, like a horse thief. And I couldn't stop them!” With each declaration his voice got louder, his frown deeper, his jaw harder.

“Why are you yelling again?”

“I—” His eyes widened. “Hell, I don't know. I didn't mean to.”

A snicker floated downstairs, along with the swish of skirts and the click of doors closing as the women went back to their rooms. Of course they would think she had the situation under control. Had *the major* under control. None of them knew she teetered on the breaking point more days than not. No one knew. No one ever knew.

“I'm sorry.” He shook his head. “I had no right. I should go now. Make sure you lock up as I leave.” His hand drifted to cup her cheek, his palm rough and warm. And tender. “So you're safe.” He gave that crooked smile, then turned and walked to the door.

His last quiet words blew through her like a storm, shaking her body, her mind, her soul. The whisper sounded as if...as if he cared. But that was ridiculous. They'd known each other less than a day. And no man could care about her. Not truly care.

“Good night, Eden.”

Shards of panic pierced her gut. Was it because he was leaving? Because beneath her hard words she wanted him to stay?

“Wait. Have a drink with me.”

He stopped and sighed. “Why?”

“I don't want to be alone.” The words were out before she could stop them. A truth she hadn't admitted to anyone in years. So why, *why* did she just admit it to this man? She didn't know him at all, and yet, something

deep inside told her he could be her friend. Could be much more if she let him. “Just stay with me awhile. Please.”

He studied her for a moment, then nodded. “I’ll get two glasses.”

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# Chapter 4



SINCLAIR LOCKED THE front saloon door and doused the lanterns. Grabbing the whiskey and glasses, he strode into the kitchen. Eden sat at the worktable staring at nothing, lost in thought, sadness etched on her beautiful face.

He studied her, torn between wanting to wrap her into his arms and hold her for about a week, or making a fast retreat to the door. Eden looked about to break, and what the hell did he know about comforting a woman? Not a damned thing. And yet the thought of leaving her didn't sit right. And that scared him most. Because what he *did* know was that Eden made him feel something more than lust. Despite having slopped plates all evening in her kitchen, he enjoyed himself. When was the last time that had happened?

“I put out the lamps and locked up.”

“Thank you.” Her vacant whisper tied him in knots.

He sucked in a long breath. He'd be a damned fool to let himself care about a woman who whored for a living, who had twisted the truth the first time they met, and yet, he *did* understand why she hadn't admitted to prostituting. Most lawmen of any kind, be it civil or army, had only one use for sportin' gals. Hell, *that* was his way of thinking too. Until Eden.

He uncorked the bottle and set it in the center of the table. “Are you sure you want this?”

“Yes. And your company. If you can stay?” Her gaze held his. “I'm sorry. I didn't even ask if you had other duties to attend.”

There was his way out. He could use this excuse and leave now. That's all he had to do. One small lie. It was a good plan. “I can stay as long as you need me.”

Well, it *could* have been a good plan. But he couldn't leave her alone, not when he recognized the kind of suffering she was going through. A person could only hold in so much pain before... they had to reach out to someone.

Was that how this woman broke through every barrier he had so carefully arranged? A soul as lonely and hurt as his own, reaching out?

The lone lantern danced shadows across her lush body, tempting him. But if it was only her beauty, he could control that, cure that. He'd bed her a time or two and be done. But he feared it was more, deeper, something that pulled him toward her. Something he wasn't doing a very damn good job of controlling.

"Are you going to serve that whiskey or not?"

"Huh? Oh, yes. My apologies." He poured two shots of liquid courage and handed Eden hers.

She swallowed it in one gulp.

He watched her pale throat move, her slight grimace as the rot-gut went down. She appeared so delicate, yet moments ago she'd blown a hole through a wall. From the moment she'd walked into his tent this morning, life had been disconcerting. His normal world was structured. People behaved the way they were expected. Not Eden. She kept him guessing and confused.

So why wasn't he marching away from this woman like his ass was afire?

Because he wanted to play this out. Yes, he wanted to bed her – *God, he longed to bed her* – but he also wanted to spend more time with her, learn more about her.

Protect her.

Christ, he'd damn near died when he'd heard the shotgun blast. All he could think of was Eden being hurt. Then there she'd stood, holding that smoking gun like a seasoned soldier.

But the knowledge that if she'd killed Len and cried rape, knowing what a judge would do to her...

He swallowed his drink. Damn. He could feel his hair turning gray.

"Would you have done it?" He couldn't stop himself from asking. Was she capable of protecting herself, shooting a man?

"Done what?"

"Shot Len."

She lifted one pale shoulder, the movement nudging her breasts to the top of the corset. God, she was killing him. He should have insisted she get a shawl.

"Yes. No. Maybe. Men shouldn't hurt women." She gulped another shot. Tears shone in her eyes, but he didn't for a minute think it was from the



whiskey. Here was a woman, who for all her bravado, bore a hurt so deep the pain was encompassing. He knew that pain.

He covered her hand with his. "If you need help making Mary Rose's arrangements, all you need do is ask."

She nodded slowly, as if lost in thought, her green gaze luminous in the soft light. "The reverend won't hold services for a whore. Me and the girls will just have the undertaker get Mary a small plot on the hill." Her lips trembled, but she pressed them together and sucked in a deep breath. "Why? Why would she do that to herself?" She gulped down her drink then shuddered.

He stared into his glass, seeing Coreena instead of whiskey. "To end the pain I guess. Some people aren't strong enough to accept what happens." *Hell*. Memories swarmed him. Things he'd fought years to forget. *This* is why he should have gone back to camp.

He downed his drink.

"But I promised her I'd fix things." Eden poured and swallowed another glassful. "That she could go to school – forget it ever happened."

"I guess she didn't see how that would help." Sinclair poured himself another. "Besides, forgetting is never as easy as people make it sound." He was living proof of that.

She squeezed her eyes closed. "I know. Some things never go away. Not ever." She drained her glass again. "Pour me another and tell me what you're trying to forget, Major."

Sinclair gritted his jaw. Damn but he didn't like her perceptiveness. "What makes you think I'm trying to forget anything?"

Her gaze studied him, and he had to force himself not to look away. She gave a sad smile. "Sometimes there's a hollow pain in your eyes – though you try to hide it."

He gave what he hoped was a careless shrug. "I guess I've seen too much dying."

"You mean the war." Her words were nothing but a whisper.

The fear in his gut loosened. That was a safe enough assumption on her part.

"Yes." The war and Theodore. And Coreena. Too much death. He drained his glass, trying to dilute the bitterness souring his stomach.

"I lived in St. Louis during the fighting." Her statement yanked him from his thoughts. "I had a home, money, gowns...Everything a *whore* could

want.”

The self-deprecation in her tone spoke to his own self-hatred. He glanced at her. The lantern threw soft light on her features. Wide, sad eyes. Pain pinching her brow into a frown. And yet, a grim determination hardened her delicate jaw.

“Then how did you end up here?”

Eden took the bottle, clenching it in a white-knuckled grip. “I trusted a man who betrayed me in the worst possible way.” Her voice caught, raw, hoarse with pain and unshed tears.

“I’m sorry.” God, he knew about betrayal. Better than anyone.

He watched as she poured them each a shot. They were very much alike. Maybe too much. Both guarded, hardened. Alone.

“Doesn't matter now.” She downed her whiskey. “What brought you West?”

Oh, no. His life was not being discussed. “What makes you think I wasn't born and raised in Kansas?”

She smiled, a little lopsided, as if the whiskey was taking effect. “Your speech is too refined. And you have more manners than any Kansas farmer I’ve ever met. You’re Eastern for sure...New York or maybe Boston.”

She was too damned smart. A quick change of tactics should distract her. “Well, I daresay the name Gabrielli isn't native to St. Louis.”

“No.” She shook her head. “My mother was born in Italy.” Eden poured another shot for each of them, swallowing hers in one swig. “She came to America—an Opera singer, the star of the Venetian Company. She preformed for a President, Heads of State, rich, rich men. She was so beautiful.” She picked up the bottle again, but after staring at the amber liquid inside, didn't pour another glass. Instead she tipped the rim to her lips and drank deeply, her pale throat convulsing with each swallow.

“Eden, stop.” He reached for the bottle. “You'll make yourself sick.”

“No. No, I won't. It will stop the pain for a little while. Jus' a little while, that's all I need.”

Sinclair nodded. “All right.” Who was he to take away her comfort? Hell, he'd tried to find peace in the bottom of a bottle every night for months after Coreena killed herself. “So tell me more about your mother's singing.”

“It ended much too soon.” Eden tipped back the bottle again. “See, I *inherited* my poor judgment of men. Mama left the opera stage for a rich

man who threw her out into the streets when he found out she carried me.” Silent tears rolled down her cheeks.

“Eden...” Damn. He hadn't meant to make her feel worse. “I'm sorry.” What kind of life *had* she lived? The agony in her voice twisted his heart. Her eyes glittered with unshed tears, her sadness pulling at him. He could comfort her, but damn, he wanted to do more, so much more.

*Selfish. She doesn't want that.* No, she needed understanding from someone who knew the kind of hurt she felt inside.

He slid his hand across the table and covered hers, rubbing her velvet wrist, stroking her delicate pulse. Her breath caught in the soft quiet of the dim room, her heartbeat throbbing beneath his fingers.

“Sinclair..”

The longing in her voice was all it took.

Without thought he strode around the table and pulled her up into his arms. Hell, he shouldn't be so weak, but the heady scent of warm, willing woman filled his senses. She felt good, right. *So right.* Her breasts flattened against his chest, bare arms caught between their bodies. Her lips parted, her breath caught, and he lowered his head, ready to taste what he'd wanted for hours.

His mouth brushed hers, once, twice ...*Christ, she tasted sweet.* Like cinnamon and apples, like honey. Like nothing he'd ever tasted before.

“Oh, yes.” Her soft sigh was enough to make his heart kick. Heat flooded his veins, and a pounding started in his ears, as if he was coming alive for the first time in years.

*No.* This didn't mean anything. This was her profession. This was just sex.

He pulled her closer, sliding one hand into her thick, silky hair, the other cupping her jaw, encouraging her to kiss him. Hell, he should stop. This was a bad idea, but surrender would be so easy, so enjoyable. They could enjoy a few nights until he had to return to Fort Hayes.

He deepened the kiss, sucking her tongue into his mouth, biting her lip, pulling her body tight against his, letting her feel his erection against her belly. He slid one hand down her back, pressing her against him, her ass firm in his palm. Hell, yes. So much to enjoy.

She moaned, the low, throaty sound hardening his cock even more. She swiped his tongue with hers, hot, quick flicks, and flattened her palm against his chest, caressing, stroking. Moaning.

*Pushing.*

She backed out of his arms. “You—you should go.” Her breath came in soft pants, her eyes wide. She turned and gathered their empty glasses with shaky hands. “I appreciate the fact you’re willing to help find Mary Rose’s attacker. So...thank you.”

She turned her back and stood stiff at the sink.

Oh, no. *Hell, no.* He knew when he was being dismissed. But he also knew what this was about.

“I don’t expect sex for free in return for hunting Mary’s rapist. I’m willing to pay your going rate.” Hell, he’d pay double to have her.

She whirled around, eyes wide and filled with hurt. “What?” The words were nothing more than a strangled whisper.

“I’ll pay you for your time.” He held out his hand. “Name your price.”

She backed away, slowly shaking her head. “Get out.”

“But—”

“Just leave.” A tear leaked from the corner of her eye.

He reached for her again. Why was she upset? What the hell had he done? *Nothing.* He’d been more than fair with his offer—and he knew she was attracted to him. He’d been with enough whores to know when they pretended and when they didn’t.

“Eden...”

“Major, if you don’t go, I’m going to call for Alice.”

Damn. She *was* mad. She stood staring at—or through him—he wasn’t sure. Her face was a void mask.

“Fine, I’ll go.” Let her be stubborn. He wasn’t going to waste any time trying to figure out women. All they did was make a man crazy, and he had enough to do in Ladore without being distracted by a woman. He stepped through the door onto the back porch. “Lock up behind me. Take the shotgun to your room in case Len comes back.”

She shook her head. “I keep a pistol under my mattress. You’d do well to remember that.”

Now she was threatening him? He whirled on his heel. “I don’t know what made you so damned angry, lady, but don’t insult me. I would never hurt or force myself on a woman. I have more respect than that. Perhaps you should try to find some respect for yourself and stop blaming men for what’s happened to you.” And hell no, he wasn’t going to examine the fact

he hadn't found self-respect since Coreena. This wasn't about his faults. Not tonight anyway.

Her expression fell, fresh tears shining in her eyes. Damn it. He turned unwilling to see her pain. He couldn't take anymore guilt, he just couldn't.

"Sinclair, wait?" The soft sound of his name on her lips brushed over his skin like silk. He stopped, then stepped back onto the porch. She gazed up at him, the look so intimate his cock hardened despite the fact he was mad enough spit.

He planted his arms on either side of the doorway. "Yes?"

She took a deep breath. "I just ... I truly could have been a respectable lady, you know."

The melancholy in her voice gut-punched him. If she only knew what *respectable* ladies were really like.

"*Ladies* are not always what they seem. So you're probably better off as you are. Or would be if you'd learn to trust just a little."

Oh, he heard the irony in that, yes. When was the last time he trusted anyone?

She gave a brittle laugh. "The last man I trusted pushed me down a staircase and left me to die."

His gut twisted. Had he heard her correctly?

"What?" His hands fisted. An image of her lying broken and bloody at the bottom of a stairwell filled his mind. Red-hot anger pulsed through him. *Who did that?* Who could have hurt her so? "What happened?"

She gave a false smile. "Well, obviously I lived." She brushed aside a single tear, her flippant answer not fooling him one bit.

Christ. No wonder she didn't trust men.

"Eden—"

"Good night, Major." She started pushing the door, pushing him away again.

*This isn't your fight. Let her be.*

"Fine. Good night." He waited until he heard the lock *click* before shuffling down the porch stairs, but the wrenching sob he heard stopped him cold. He turned and saw her shadow slide down the glass pane of the door. Her agonizing cries splintered his heart. He placed his hand on the knob, hovering. Should he knock? Go back and gather her into his arms? Hell, was she crying because he'd offered to pay her?

He blew a long breath and scrubbed his hand over his whiskers. Shit. This was his fault.

“Eden?” He knocked on the glass pane. “Let me in.”

“No.” Her voice shuddered. “I’m fine. Just go.”

Her shadow moved, skirts rustled, then the lantern went out.

“Eden?”

Nothing. Silence. Oh, he’d bet his horse she was still there, choosing to ignore him, closing out the world, holding in the pain.

Shaking his head, he started toward the street, his steps less than certain. He glanced back at Devil’s Gate. Should he go back? Make her let him help?

*No, let her be.*

He quickened his stride, putting distance between himself and the woman tying him into knots. He felt like he’d been on an unbroken bronc for hours, racing down a mountainside, blind. Drunk. Wild. His legs felt like wet rope. His guts twisted like he’d just been through a battle. Hell, he had.

All because of one beautiful woman with clear, green eyes.

He ducked into his tent and stripped off his coat and hat. Dropping onto his cot, he ran his fingers through his hair.

Weren’t they a pair? Both surviving by keeping everyone at bay, protecting what was left of their pride, their hearts. Yeah, he recognized it in her, as if looking into his own soul. Didn’t mean he liked it. He didn’t need all these memories and feelings stirred up. Best if he just left her the hell alone. In a week or so he’d be gone anyway, back to Fort Hayes where he could control his life.

He pulled off his boots and socks and flopped back onto his pillow. *Ump*. Reaching beneath his hip, he pulled his beaten harmonica from his pocket. Damn thing didn’t even play anymore. He really should throw it away. He blew a quick run, letting the sour notes bring back sour memories. *Pain*. That’s why he kept it. To remind him of betrayal. To remind him that people lied. That love lied.

He swallowed hard and stared at the once shiny metal.

A sick thud started in his head. Fear fighting to stay forefront as memories flashed.

Coreena on their wedding day.

Coreena telling him she was pregnant.

Coreen's suicide.

He heaved a long sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose. Women couldn't be trusted not to break a man's heart.

He'd be a damned fool to give Eden another thought.

A damned fool...



“GOOD MORNING, MAJOR.” Corporal Ballard stepped inside the tent and set a steaming cup of coffee on Sinclair's desk.

“Morning, Corporal. Make yourself comfortable and let me tell you what we've got to do today.”

Sinclair hadn't slept more than an hour last night. He tried to tell himself it wasn't because of Eden, but it was. Apparently he *was* a damned fool.

“Sir?” The corporal stood looking at him.

“Yes, sorry. Sit down. I've come up with a plan of action.” Since he hadn't slept and his mind chugged along like a new steam engine, he *had* come up with several ideas to catch the thief.

He told Ballard about his conversation with Parsons yesterday, then moved on to his plan.

“To my way of thinking there are three people capable of leaking the payroll information. Parsons' being one of them—but let's not muddy the water with him just yet. Right now I don't see any advantage to him bankrupting himself.”

Ballard nodded.

“Right now my strongest suspicion says either Parsons' daughter, Kate, or Henry Stevens is the guilty party. Or both if they're working together.”

“But why would either of them want to sabotage the railroad?” Ballard frowned. “Don't both Stevens and Miss Parsons stand to lose more than they would gain?”

“Daughter and father don't always see eye to eye. He admitted as much. And you know how vengeful women get when they're angry.” By God he'd had proof of that last night. He took a sip of the coffee, letting the hot liquid slide down his throat while he gathered his thoughts. “And Stevens, well, I don't trust that peacock. I think he could be bought before you could say *bribery*.”

Ballard scribbled notes into a small notebook.

“But if you take a woman’s revenge out of the equation, that leaves Stevens. I honestly think he’s the one but...” He couldn’t discount the butler. “Ask around about the old man, Floyd. He’s Parsons valet and cook. I don’t think he has a motive, but ask if anyone has seen him with extra money.”

Ballard looked up. “Then what is the next step?”

Sinclair grinned. “Tricking the guilty into thinking they’re getting exactly what they want. The money. We’ll give them the information of when the next payroll is being delivered. False information, of course. We’ll figure out something else if your questions turn up doubts about Floyd. By that time we’ll know if Stevens or Miss Parsons takes our bait.”

After he explained the rest of the details of his plan, he gave Ballard his orders “So take four men and ride out to the cut-line. You all will need to hire on with Cormac McGrady.” He scribbled a quick note. “Give him this. Then you and the men spread out and ask enough questions to get the workers talking. See if anyone knows any particulars about the robberies in case I’m missing some important detail. We’ll also need to assign a couple of men to ride the train back and forth each trip. I want them in the baggage car with the payroll. Guns ready.”

Yes, sir.” Ballard finished his notes. “What about that problem yesterday?”

“What problem?” At the rate problems arose in Ladore, Ballard would have to be more specific.

“That pretty lady who came in here.”

Sinclair’s heart skipped at just the mention of Eden. “She came in to report a rape. A young girl who, unfortunately, killed herself last night.” He shook his head. “We have less than nothing to go on for this. All the girl said was the man had a Southern accent and whiskers. I’m going to poke around town and see what I can find out, but ...” He let the words hang, unwilling to admit he would fail. Fail Eden. See the disappointment on her face when she looked at him. He’d seen that look too many times in his life.

Ballard glanced up from his paper. “Anything else?”

“Um, no.” Damn, he had to stop thinking of her. “Get the troop ready for morning inspection. Then the men you pick for missions will need to wear civilian clothes so as to blend in.”

“Yes, sir.” He stood and gave a brisk salute, then left.

Sinclair gulped the last of his coffee, then scrubbed his hands over his face. Why was Eden invading his thoughts again? She was just a woman,



just another prostitute. There was absolutely no reason for her to be on his mind.

“Pardon me, sir?” Ballard hovered outside the tent.

“Come in.”

“There’s a message for you. Parsons’ telegraph man just brought it.”

Sinclair sighed and reached for the thin paper. He didn’t have to guess who would send a telegram so soon.

*Father.*

“Thank you. I’ll be out to speak to the men in just a moment.” He waited until the corporal was gone then unfolded the message.

*Sinclair.*

*I will be joining the group of dignitaries traveling to Ladore on June 15<sup>th</sup> to inquire as to the problems with the Katy. All investors are distressed. I expect things to be handled before we arrive. If not, there is talk of taking legal action against Parsons. I do not have to tell you what that would mean to those of us with money on the line. Senator Moreton, two lawyers and the governor of Kansas will be in attendance. These men are out for blood. I have put together a small group of investors who will be with me to try to halt whatever plan Moreton has. Do not let me down again. You have two days.*

*Judge Bradford.*

What the hell!?! He re-read the telegraph. Two days?

He wadded the paper and threw it across the tent. If he didn’t know better, he would suspect Father had this planned all along. Planned for him to fail.

He kicked his chair and fought the urge to curse a blue streak. Then stopped. *Senator Moreton.* He had a name now.

He grabbed his hat. He had to speak to McGrady in person. If he confirmed Moreton was the man who bribed Adella McGrady to sabotage the Katy, then Sinclair was that much closer to solving this mess. And he’d like nothing better than to clamp the irons on a politician.

“Major!” Stevens burst through the tent flap. “Judge Parsons wants to see you. *Now.*”

He did *not* have the time or patience for Stevens. “I’m busy right now.” He didn’t even try to disguise the annoyance in his voice.

“It’s about the telegram you just received.” Stevens’ jaw tightened. “And the judge doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

Oh, he could just bet Parsons was in a lather about the group of angry investors. Nervous as hell about his precious railroad.

“Corporal Ballard.” He motioned to the man hovering at the tent flap. It was time to make a drastic change in plans.

“Yes, sir?”

“Put Connors in charge of the men for morning drill. I need you to saddle my horse.”



“THAT IS THE MOST PREPOSTEROUS idea I have ever heard!” Parsons’ words echoed through the empty train car, his face turning an ugly purple-red. “There is no way in hell I can afford to lose even one payroll, much less two. Do you realize the investors would lynch me if I did such a thing?”

Sinclair shook his head. “You wouldn’t be sending the actual monies. Only real bills on the outside, cut newspaper for the centers. I doubt the thieves bother to look closely. The real payroll won’t be sent at all. I’ll go retrieve it personally.”

Parsons blew a deep breath. “I find it hard to believe this will tell us anything.”

“It will tell us who is leaking information! If the Thursday train is robbed, then it’s Stevens.” Sinclair hesitated, knowing the outburst his next words would cause. “And if the Friday train is robbed, then it’s your daughter.”

“Kate!” A large vein pulsed on Parsons’ forehead. “By God, I won’t have you degrade the name Parsons. Besides, what possible motive could Kate have?”

“Judge, I have confirmed Senator Moreton has more to gain if you lose this race. I’ve also confirmed he’s hired saboteurs on previous occasion.” But he wasn’t going to admit any more. He’d promised McGrady.

“Who?” Parsons started pacing. “Was that old bastard behind that damned Swede and her dynamite? The so-called accidents?”

“I’m not at liberty to say more.” Let the judge think what he wanted. “But it seems to be common knowledge in Ladore that your daughter doesn’t agree with your business methods.” Ballard had gleaned that information just this morning from a slack-jawed rail-worker at the livery.

“And Moreton isn’t above bribery. Perhaps the senator found an ally in your daughter.”

“*Humph.* Kate wants for nothing.”

Nothing but approval from her father. *Damn, that reeked of self-examination.* “Nevertheless, she is a suspect and will be treated as such.”

Parsons frowned, doubt tightening his features. “And what happens when neither train is robbed?”

Sinclair took a deep breath. “If I’m wrong then you can say so.” But the judge wasn’t so sure now or he’d still be arguing. Obviously his Katy was more important than his Kate.

The judge glared at him. “I’ll do more than that. You can bet your ass, I will ruin you.”

Sinclair smiled. As if his life could get much worse.

“Judge,” Sinclair sighed, “somehow, despite the fact you have changed the payroll schedule repeatedly, your money is being stolen right out from under you. That tells me you have an information leak. Someone close to you.” Whether the old fool wanted to admit it or not.

Parsons rounded the desk and paced the width of the car, his expensive boots a mere whisper on the thick rugs. “Well I know Stevens would never betray me like that.”

Sinclair didn’t miss the fact the judge defended Stevens much more than his own daughter. “Then let’s prove it.”

Parsons frowned. “Fine.” He reached for a cut glass carafe from the liquor cabinet.

Sinclair strode across the car to the door. “I’m leaving right now, riding like hell to the main office to get the payroll. That way it’s safe here and the men can be paid Friday evening.”

Parsons’ rubbed his chin. “I don’t like it, but I’ll go along with it—to show your plan and accusations for the ludicrous poppy-cock they are.” He poured a large shot of brandy and gulped it in one swallow. “Damned *investigating* party. I hate that son-of-a-bitch Moreton.”

“Then why are you involved in business with him?” Was this man so ignorant?

A sly smile lit Parsons’ face. “Money. Connections. He knows the people who grow this country, and I needed to know those same people. Even if it costs me some sleep. By the time the Katy is built, I will own

those connections, and Senator Moreton will be the first man I ruin.” His smile turned calculating. Cold.

God, Sinclair hated politics, hated being dragged back into this life.

Shaking his head, he marched to the door and twisted the knob, then turned. “I’m going to get your payroll. Remember, tell Stevens Thursday, tell Kate Friday.”

“*When you’re wrong,*” Parsons scowled and poured another shot, “I’ll see your rank pulled back down to Private. You can shovel Custer’s horse shit from here until doom’s day.”

Wouldn’t that make Father happy? Then he would try to force Sinclair into taking the Bar Exam and begin his law practice, take over where Theodore left off. But that wouldn’t happen. Not in a million years. He wasn’t Theodore, and he’d never be happy stuck in a damned office. Parsons and Father might try to ruin his career, but the Cavalry gave him purpose. And he wouldn’t give that up.

“Judge, *if* I’m wrong you’re going to have a lot more to worry about than getting even with me. You might be the man getting ruined instead of Moreton.” He slammed the door then hurried out and down the steps.

Ballard had Lincoln saddled and waiting, a canteen and rifle strapped in place.

“Thank you, Corporal. I’ll be back tonight. Take the men and sign on with McGrady as we talked about.”

“Yes, sir.”

Sinclair slipped his boot into the stirrup and swung into the saddle.

“You’re in charge until I return.”

“Yes, sir.” Ballard gave a quick salute.

Sinclair turned Lincoln and headed down the street at a cantor, past camp, past the mercantile. Past Devil’s Gate. *Damn.* Was Eden awake? Or still in bed, all warm and sleepy and tousled. He groaned. God, he had to stop thinking like that. She meant nothing to him. Nothing. He wasn’t going to give her, or her kisses, or her breasts, or her haunting eyes a second thought.

His association with Miz Gabrielli was over and done.



SINCLAIR PUSHED HIS way into the Devil’s Gate, several hours later than he’d hoped, three hours past supper. He was soaked, starving and

thoroughly pissed off at Parsons who was still complaining—even after Sinclair had tucked the real payroll safely into the railcar lockbox. It had been a long, wet ride, but much faster and covert alone. A troop of men would have drawn too much attention, and that was the last thing he needed.

Thunder rumbled the glass windows and lightning lit up the dark sky as he waved McGrady over to his table.

“I’m sorry to make you come out in this weather.” Sinclair poured the man a drink.

McGrady shrugged out of his coat and downed his whiskey. “You’d best be apologizing to my Addy. I had pleasurable plans for the lass about the time Private Collins knocked on the door.”

Sinclair shook his head. “Then I’m doubly sorry.” He poured the Irishman another drink. “Tell me what you learned today.”

Unfortunately Corporal Ballard nor the men had found out anything about the robberies or rape. They were no closer to having answers than they were yesterday.

“I wish I had better news for you.” McGrady gave a huge yawn.

The crowd of men had thinned until just a few hovered over a card game and others made their way upstairs for a more intimate game, one with a red-haired gal, the other a large breasted brunette.

His gaze combed the room again. No Eden. Not that he was really looking *for* her. He downed another drink.

Was she upstairs working? *Not that it mattered.*

Was the laughter he heard floating down the steps hers? *And so what if it was?*

He fisted his hands, fighting the urge to start searching for her. What the hell was wrong with him? *Maybe she was just cooking again.*

“Something wrong?” McGrady’s brows wrinkled. “You look like you’re about to have to eat glass.”

Sinclair exhaled and forced his muscles loose. “No. Nothing.” He glanced upstairs again. “I guess Eden’s up there with someone?”

McGrady choked on his whiskey. “Eden? She hasn’t greased a mattress since I’ve known her.”

“What do you mean? You said she was the madam.”

McGrady shrugged. “Oh, she is and she used to *work*, but not since she came here. Don’t know why. She doesn’t talk about her past.”

*She didn't whore?* A grin split his face. He nodded and tried to swallow the stupid happy feeling—*Hold up a minute*. If she wasn't whoring, then his offering her money last night ...*Oh, shit*.

That's why she got so angry. *Wait*. Why should she be angry at him for something he didn't know?

He pushed back his chair and tossed several coins on the table for the whiskey. "I'll let you get back to your wife. I've got other business to attend tonight." His gaze flicked to the kitchen door.

McGrady, the bastard, just grinned. "Yes, I can see that." He stood. "Will you be out on the cut tomorrow?"

Sinclair shook his head. "I need to stay close to town." And wait to hear if the robbers made an attempt on the fake payroll train.

"All right. Good night then, Major."

Sinclair barely heard him. He managed a nod as he headed to the kitchen, his thoughts focused solely on one fact: She'd lied again.

*Omitted the truth*. Yeah, well, same difference.

He should just walk away. Out that door. Right now. Forget he ever saw her.

He wavered mid-step. The door was right there. He could avoid all this confusion, stop this gut wrenching back and forth indecision. Or he could go to the kitchen and figure out what it was about her that made him burn, what made her so irresistible. And no, he wasn't ready to admit he might already care for her.

Stomping behind the bar, he almost ran down Floyd coming out of the kitchen. The man staggered past mumbling about the best apple pie he'd ever had, seemingly unaware he'd almost been flattened by a swinging door. Part of Ballard's report said the old man did nothing but polish Parsons' boots and drink himself silly. He didn't have friends or enemies or clandestine meetings with anyone. Poor as a church mouse and about as popular. And about as smart.

"Hel-loo, Major." He gave a lopsided grin. "You gonna have some apple pie? I can highly rec-recommend it."

"Um, thank you." Although as inebriated as he was, Floyd probably could have eaten dirt and recommended it too.

"You know Eden?" Floyd wavered on his feet.

"Yes." Damn, if the old fool would just move.

"She's a ssssweet gal."

“Yes, well, good night.” Sinclair slipped past him into the kitchen, inhaling the scent of cornbread and ham. And pie, no doubt the one Floyd was praising.

Eden was just closing the back door, her hair tumbling down her back in various curls. She wore a green skirt tonight, topped with a gray corset, a very revealing gray corset. The kitchen was much warmer than the bar, and the thick, rain-filled air outside didn’t offer any relief even with the window open.

Head down, wringing her hands, she talked to herself. No, talked wasn’t right. LECTURED. Scolded, maybe, or else she was trying to convince herself of something.

“...have no choice...have no choice.”

As she picked up a plate for drying, the words floated over to him. Something had happened. He could feel it in his gut. But getting her to tell him—*honestly* tell him—would be damn near impossible.

“Eden?”

She whirled, a plate falling to the floor and shattering into a hundred pieces. “Damn it! Now see what you made me do.” She dropped to her knees and started picking up the shards. “What do you want?”

*You. I want you.* He had to grit his teeth to stop the words from coming out.

“I want to know what’s going on. I want to know why you lied to me again.”





# Chapter 5



EDEN DROPPED THE CHINA pieces again. *Oh, God.* Sinclair had to have seen Floyd leaving. Had he seen her out back, talking to the Russell Brothers? A shudder ran the length of her body. If he had, she was as good as dead. What did they do with spies? Hanging? Prison, surely. Either way, Sophia's life would be ruined.

Christ! She couldn't confess. She wouldn't.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Calmly she stood and wiped her hands. Thank God her skirt hid her shaking knees. A bluff. That was the only way out of this. She'd played cards with some of the best. High stakes games with the richest men in St. Louis and won. If she considered this no more than a game, she'd be fine. Thoughts of imprisonment, death, and worse, failing Sophia, were not an option.

Sinclair's eyes narrowed and he stalked toward her. She raised her chin as if she had no fear, nothing to hide. As if nothing of consequence hung in the balance.

"I want to know why you didn't tell me you no longer whore."

"Oh." Relief flooded her like strong whiskey. "I...well..."

"Then I want you to tell me what has you so upset that you think you have no choice about."

Her stomach gave a sick lurch. What could she say?

*Tell him. Ask him for help.* No! God, no, she couldn't do that. He'd been sent here to arrest the thieves. She was a conspirator, as guilty as the Russell Boys.

"As we discussed last night, everyone has old pain haunting them. Sometimes mine hurts worse than others. That's all." She forced a smile. "As for me not whoring, I doubt that I know everything about you. Do you expect me to be so forthright?"

He cocked his head, studying her. "No, but I don't wear this uniform and *pretend* to be a soldier."

"I'm not pretending to be anything. I used to whore. I told you that. In St. Louis."

"But you don't *now*."

"No."

"Why?"

"Why?" She gave a brittle laugh. "Major, that story would take more time than you have." *Please go away before I puddle to the floor. Please*

*don't look at me like I could mean something to you. Please don't give me hope where there is none.*

“No. Actually, I have all night.” He slid his hat from his head and took off his wet uniform coat. “We can talk while I help you finish the dishes.” He nodded toward the sink.

He wasn't going to give up. He was going to keep at her, keep asking and showing up here and smiling and being nice until she broke. Until she told him every sin she'd ever committed. Until he hated her.

Tears burned the back of her eyes. A wave of panic caught her, made her want to throw herself at his mercy, ask for help, expose the senator for what he was doing.

But the risk was too great. It wasn't only her life hanging in the balance.

Sinclair stood, waiting, a patient smile creasing his face. And God help her, she really wanted to just give in and beg him to hold her.

She swallowed the lump of tears and picked up the dishcloth. “You wash, I'll dry.”

He nodded and strode to the pile of dishes.

She could feel him watching her, feel the unspoken questions, the tension.

“So, I guess I understand why you don't trust men.” He kept his gaze on the soapy plate in his hands.

“Last night you said I should stop blaming men. Find some self respect.” She shouldn't goad him, but the words still hurt. Partly because they held some truth. She didn't respect herself. Once money and gowns had been enough, but when all those were gone, lying in bed nearly crippled had left too much time with her thoughts and fears.

“Yes, well, I'm sorry. I had no right to say you should trust after what you said happened.” He glanced at her. “Is that why you limp? The fall down the stairs?”

She gave a curt nod.

“Was he arrested for what he did to you?” Sinclair handed her a plate, but didn't let go. “Eden, look at me, please?”

His soft question tugged at her until she met his gaze.

“He was very rich and well connected. So no. Nothing was done.” She tugged the plate free and bowed her head to work as if drying circles took intense concentration.

“Maybe I can do something. I have some connections myself.”

“No!” She almost dropped the plate. Good God, he couldn’t make inquires. Sophia would be killed. “I mean, I want to forget.”

“Is that why you stopped whoring?”

“Yes.” Best he think it was the accident. The truth, the fear she’d stupidly care about another man if she got too close, was harder to admit.

“You should have told me. I didn’t mean to insult you...by offering...”

“I would have told you...eventually. I just didn’t expect things to—I didn’t think we’d end up kissing.”

His eyes grew dark, hooded at her words. “Some things are unpredictable.” His gaze skated over her face, landed on her mouth. “You for example. Women in general.”

A tight squeezing empathy took hold of her chest. Here was the man whose eyes reflected ghosts, more than just those of a war. Some woman had hurt him. Badly.

“Tell me who she was.”

He frowned. “Who?”

“The woman who destroyed your trust.”

“No one.” He shook his head. “No one.”

“Now who’s lying? You want to know my secrets, then you owe me yours.” *What am I doing?* A bluff? Yes. No. Was she really going to open that dark door?

He scoffed. “I don’t think so.”

“Fair’s fair.” She brushed past him and opened the door to the bar room. “Clear out, boys. It’s closing time.” Turning, she met the major’s stare.

“So what are you proposing, here, lady? We bare our souls to each other?”

Was she? Was she so sadistic she thought humiliating herself would purge these feelings for him? These damned feelings she couldn’t name and couldn’t rid herself of.

“Yes. I think I am.” Her voice warbled. She wasn’t sure she could go through with it, but the light feeling she got just imagining freedom from her past made her push forward. “Yes.”

His brows furrowed. “All right. You’ve got a deal. I’ll make sure the bar is empty and lock the doors. You put on some coffee. This is going to take awhile.”



EDEN DROOPED AGAINST the counter, her nerves wavered between anticipation and impending doom.

The clock ticked away the minutes while shadows danced across the kitchen floor, flitting like the butterflies in her stomach. The coffee boiled on the stove, the jiggling lid setting her more and more on edge. She couldn't do this. She couldn't. What kind of insanity had made her suggest such a thing? Had she become so sadistic she wanted to do herself harm?

"Do you have any apple pie left?"

She whirled at his words. He stood close, closer than she liked, because she liked it too much.

"Y-yes. I'll cut you a slice." She skittered away from his side.

"And I'll pour the coffee."

She nodded, unable to find enough spit in her dry mouth to form words. She needed something much stronger than coffee. If she was going to tell him her past, she needed whiskey.

Setting the pie on the table, she grabbed a bottle from the cabinet.

Sinclair cocked a dark brow. "Courage?"

Her heart climbed into her throat and stupid, weak tears burned her eyes. "Yes. If I don't have a drink I won't have the strength to tell you anything."

His expression fell, his eyes searching, sad. "Don't then. I—I don't want to cause you more pain." He set down both cups. "Maybe both of us need to let our ghosts stay buried."

He cupped her cheek, his palm warm and rough. And tender. Offering a reprieve from her stupid bluff. She could keep her secrets, push him away, and life would be the same as it had been before she met him. Just her wrapped in her layers of shame. Alone and independent and so damned scared and lonely she cried herself to sleep more nights than not.

What if this was her one chance? What if she could trust Sinclair? Maybe she could tell him part of her past, watch his reaction. If he was truly a good man, if he truly had connections...

She leaned into his palm and swallowed hard. "I think my ghosts need to be brought out into the light." She met his gaze, searching his face for any signs she was making a horrible mistake. Again.

He never blinked. Never wavered. Strong, steady.

"All right. Let's sit down."

She took a step, her legs shaking so badly she stumbled. But Sinclair was there, wrapping his arm around her, tucking her against his warm chest.

“I think I’m going to need that whiskey before I start talking.” She gripped his shirt like a lifeline in a swirling river.

He pulled out the chair and sat her at the table, then grabbed a shot glass and poured. “You know, I like puzzles. I like figuring things out. From the moment I met you, I knew you were hiding something. And I wanted to know what it was.” He handed her the glass. “But now…”

“No, I want to tell you. I—” She gulped down the whiskey. “I just don’t know where to begin.”

“Well, I know about your mother’s singing, and I know about her being put on the streets.” His expression softened and he slid his hand over hers. Warmth and courage seeped into her. “Tell me what happened then? Did you live on the streets very long?”

“No, not at first. Mother found employment as a maid. We lived at the gentleman’s house for several years, until I was almost nine years old. Until she found herself pregnant again.” Eden swallowed another drink. “Then Mama’s lover put us on the street—before his wife found out.”

“God, I’m sorry.” He gripped her hands between his.

“It wasn’t bad at first, but as the months passed, it got colder and colder…” She shivered, the memory stronger than the heat in the room. “We nearly froze and I was so hungry.” A tear dripped onto her arm. When had she started crying? She pulled her hand free and swiped her cheek.

“Honey, if this is too painful—”

“No, I want to tell you. Maybe if I tell this secret the pain will go away.” And maybe if he could hear this confession without walking out the door, she could trust him with the secret she kept now. Maybe.

“All right.” He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dried her tears. “Go ahead.”

“One snowy night, some men found us huddled in an old carriage. They yanked Mother out onto the ground and ripped her clothes. I ran down the alley, pounding on the doors until finally one opened and a woman with a shotgun helped me. Alice.”

“Good,” he gritted. “I hope she killed those bastards.”

“I believe she scattered some shot into a couple of their asses. But the damage was done. We took Mother inside the brothel and put her in one of the beds, but the rape had started her labor.” Eden closed her eyes, heard the

moans, the screams. Heard the tiny cry. “My sister Sophia was born the next day.”

“You have a sister?” His eyes widened.

“Yes.” She could still feel that warm little body wiggling in her arms. The madam had wrapped her in a silk scarf before handing her to Eden and shooing them from the room to wait in the candle-lit parlor. And in the next few hours, she had fallen in love, as if Sophia had been her own child.

“Where is she now?”

“As far away from this life as I can afford to keep her.”

Sinclair stood and scrubbed his hand over his face, pacing back and forth in front of the stove.

So here it was. He was going to shake his head in disgust and walk out the door. She really hadn’t expected more. Not really. What man—

“And your mama?”

Her head snapped up. Sinclair had stopped pacing and stood in front of her, his expression achingly sad.

*He didn’t leave. He didn’t leave.*

Not yet. She hadn’t told him the worst part. Then he would leave.

“She died when Sophia was five days old.” Withered in the bed without ever speaking another word, without ever holding her baby. *Without ever holding me again.* “I—I tried to take care of Mama. I washed her and brushed her pretty hair, but—” A sob stole her words, the image of her so pale and lifeless lying in that bed ripping through her heart like a fresh wound.

He pulled her into his arms. “I’m sorry, honey.” His hands stroked her hair, her back, easing the tight grip the memories held. “So sorry.”

She slid her arms around him, holding on to his heat, listening to the steady beat of his heart. His hands rubbed slow, soothing circles on her back while tears soaked the front of his shirt. He didn’t push her to go on, didn’t make an excuse to leave. He just supported her while she cried. He just *was*.

When her sobs had wound down to shuddering hiccups, he eased her into the chair, then slipped the handkerchief into her hands and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

“Stay right here.” He walked over to the sink and pumped the handle, then dipped a rag into the water and returned to the table, stroking the cool rag over her heated face. “I want to apologize for everything and every

mean thing I said to you.” He gently smoothed her cheeks, tenderness from such large, rough hands. “Please forgive me?”

She nodded, partly too shocked to speak. Mostly too scared to breathe else she wake up from this dream. He was still here, still being kind. It had to be a dream.

She watched him from beneath lowered lids. He seemed lost in thought, and not nice ones. His jaw hardened, a tick started above his eye.

“Eden, did Alice *make* you start whoring? Was she the madam?”

“No! Alice said I could do the laundry and help her in the kitchen. The madam agreed. I worked with Alice and took care of Sophia in a back room...but it didn’t take me long to realize if I raised her in a whorehouse, she’d be a whore. So I started saving money to send her away to a proper school. But by the time she was five I didn’t have even half what I’d need.”

She tilted her head to his, needing to see his face for what she was about to tell him.

“The madam knew I was desperate for money, and she told me some man would pay top dollar for a virgin and she’d split the money with me.”

“Oh, honey.”

Eden pushed away the images, the pain, the sickly-sweet smell of cologne. Some things weren’t meant to be remembered. “I was thirteen when I had my first man.”

He frowned, his brows one dark, brooding line, but he took her hand, his thumb rubbing circles in her palm, silent acceptance to continue.

“By the time I was fifteen, I’d enrolled Sophia in the best girls’ school in St. Louis. I opened my own brothel when I was eighteen. Sophia was doing well in school and I was making plenty of money. When I was twenty-two I met Alexander. The very devil himself. But I didn’t see his cruelty, not until it was too late.”

Sinclair squatted in front of her, his gaze serious. “He was the one who hurt you?”

“Yes. He came by several times a week, always bringing gifts and—” her voice cracked, “and he whispered pretty, pretty words. Words I had waited to hear my entire life. I let myself believe he loved me. And I stupidly stopped being careful until...”

Dear God, could she say it? Could she tell him?

“Until what?”



She swallowed. Hard. “I stopped being careful, until I found myself pregnant.” She gave a hollow laugh, hollow from the shame and guilt and anger that she’d been so damn stupid. “I was truly my mother’s daughter.”

Pain strained Sinclair’s features, but he didn’t speak. Just nodded for her to go on.

“I thought he’d marry me, that I’d become an acceptable part of society. I had so many naïve dreams I thought were coming true. I would be a real lady. Not a whore. Someone would finally love me.”

“Eden, don’t.” Sinclair’s jaw ticked, his teeth gritting out the words.

“No, let me get this all out. I have to.”

He closed his eyes.

“The night I told him...” She had to stop as her throat tightened with tears. “I told him about the baby, told him we could have a family. He laughed at first. Not a funny laugh, but a hard, evil laugh. He called me a damned whore and told me it wasn’t his child. When he said that, something in me broke. I started screaming at him, pounding his chest. The baby was his, Sin, *it was*. After our first time together, I promised him I wouldn’t lay with another man, and I didn’t.” She gazed into his face, willing him to see the truth. And when he opened his eyes, tears welled in the dark depths.

“I believe you, honey.” He wrapped his arms around her, holding her against his chest, pulling her down onto the kitchen floor with him until she sat nested in the vee of his legs.

The memories poured from her now, like a flood, all the pain and anger pushing the words out like water through a broken dam.

“He kept calling me a whore, pushing me from my bedroom, out to the stairs. I didn’t realize he had a knife until it was too late, until it was buried deep in my belly. He laughed—*laughed*— and said, *problem solved*. Then he smiled. The coldest, most unfeeling smile I’ve ever seen, and he pushed me down the stairs. I remember falling. The oak landing nearly broke my back. I flipped over and over. My leg bent the wrong way.”

Tears rolled down her face and dripped onto Sin’s legs but she kept going. “I woke a few days later in a hospital. Alice was with me. Alexander had known the right people to have my house closed as an illegal brothel, my possessions sold to pay city fines, and all my girls scattered to the winds. All but Alice. She stayed and had the good sense to grab all my

jewelry before Alexander got them. The day I was to be released, a letter arrived stating if I didn't leave St. Louis, my sister was dead.

"So I left. I ran like a coward. I lost everything because I believed a man could care about me." She sucked in a shuddering breath. "But I won't make that mistake ever again." *Not even with you.*

With each word he stiffened against her, his hands fisted, his gaze downcast.

There. Now he knew. Just as she'd feared, he was disgusted.

And now he could go.

"Are you done?" His words were tight, angry.

She nodded and climbed to her feet. "There's not much else to say, is there? I understand you'll want to leave now. I don't blame you, and I won't hold hard feelings against you for judging me." How could any decent person *not* judge her?

"What?" He jumped up, his hands flaying in the air as he paced. "Not much left to say? Well, I *could* say that sometimes you make me so damned angry I could spank your beautiful ass."

*Spank?* What was he—*beautiful ass?*

He turned and marched toward her. "Why do you have to be so stubborn? Why do you have to keep degrading yourself?"

"I—I don't. I'm just telling the truth."

He leaned in close, bracing his arms on each side of her, his palms flat against the oak table. His voice softened, though his expression became strained.

"When are you going to stop trying to push me away? Because I'm not leaving."

"Why?" Tears filled her eyes, her throat nearly closing with the ache to cry. "Why do you care about me?"

He blinked. Then stared at her, searching, his gaze devouring. "I don't know. I just do. And I can't stop."

"You will." She wouldn't let herself believe otherwise. It would hurt too much when he walked away.

"No. I won't." His eyes darkened, then focused on her mouth. He cupped her cheek, his thumb caressing her bottom lip. "I can't stop. I'll never stop." Those words were nothing more than a whisper as his lips replaced his thumb.

The kiss was slow at first, slow and deep. He licked into her mouth, not aggressively, almost as if he was asking permission. His tongue slid against hers, teasing, retreating, inviting her to play.

And oh, God, she wanted to.

He tasted like cinnamon and whiskey, smelled like leather and musk, surrounded her, filled her senses. She wanted to get closer, to wrap herself in his heat. Stay here forever.

Sliding her arms around his neck, she buried her fingers in his thick hair. He groaned and gripped her tighter, pulled her closer.

Warmth exploded in her belly, pooling then flowing like warm honey through her. He nibbled down her jaw, nuzzled her neck, his breathing rough and ragged, his whiskers prickly on her skin, his breath hot, moist.

He pulled back, dropping quick kisses on her chin, her nose, her eyelids.

“God, you’re so beautiful.” He put her at arm’s length. “But I don’t want you to think I just want sex. I mean I do, but I want more.”

“More?” What did he mean? Her lust filled brain couldn’t make sense of his words. And the silly hopeful answer that materialized—that he might mean a respectful life—well, she couldn’t let herself go down that path again.

“Yes, more. I want to take you back to Fort Hayes with me. I think we —”

“No.” She shook her head and backed away. He didn’t mean it. Couldn’t mean it. “You just need sex. Afterward, you’ll regret asking. Because underneath it all, you’re a decent man, and decent men don’t care about whores.” No one cared about whores.

He reached for her, but she pushed his hands away.

“Damn it, Eden.” He scrubbed a hand over his face. “I hate that you have no faith in yourself or me. I hate that you carry not only your sins but your mother’s. I hate that instead of happiness in your eyes I see sadness.” He shook his head. “And I hate that you think I’m so *decent*.” He spit the word as if it had a bad taste. “Last night when we were drinking you ask me what pain I was trying to forget. You said I had a hollowness in my eyes.”

She nodded, afraid of what he was going to say.

“I have to tell you something. Why I don’t trust women, why I was so mad at you for lying to me about who you were.”

“All right.” Her words were just a whisper.

“And when I’m done, we’ll see who wants to walk out on whom.”

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# Chapter 6



SINCLAIR SUCKED IN a deep breath and held a chair out for Eden. “Sit down and pour us both a shot.”

There was so much he’d never told anyone, never even said aloud because he was too ashamed. But now, Eden needed to hear this. And hell, maybe he needed to say it. Maybe it would convince her to forgive herself. Of course the irony in that was he didn’t know how to forgive himself.

He took the glass and threw back the whiskey, letting it burn as he tried to put together some words that made sense.

“I’m the second son – technically – born to Judge Wilson Bradford of Boston. My brother Theodore and I were twins. He was one minute older. My father used to point out that I was the weaker even then, settling for seconds from the moment of birth. And it proved to be true. Theodore was smarter, faster, taller, stronger, exactly what my father wanted in a son. Willing to do exactly what my father wanted. West Point. Harvard Law. Politics.”

Eden’s frown twisted his gut, but he pushed forward, despite a cutting fear that she might hate him.

“I—” He cleared his throat. “I’m exactly what you hate. A rich politician’s son.”

“Sinclair!” She squeezed his hands, giving him hope she could accept the rest of his story.

“No. Let me tell you.”

She nodded.

“I liked attending West Point because I wanted to be a soldier. I felt the impending war was a Godsend because it delayed Father’s political plan for me. Not however, my mother’s social plan. She intended to see one or both of us boys married before the war, married into better families so as to socially benefit her.”

Lord, he sounded bitter. Had he never realized how much anger he held toward his mother? Apparently his dislike of social-climbing women started before Coreena, and he’d never even grasped that fact.

“That February in ‘61, before the fighting, Theodore was in Washington at Father’s bidding, kissing the ass of some politician who could ensure my brother’s future. That left me the soul focus for my mother’s match making.”

Eden listened, her green eyes huge and haunted. God, he should just shut his mouth. If he had any hope of her falling in love with him, now was

the time to stop talking.

But he couldn't. She'd been brave enough to purge her past. He owed her the same. Even if she walked away once she knew the truth. If he lost her but she found and owned her own self-respect, wasn't it worth the risk?

Hell, no, he couldn't stand the thought of losing her.

But he couldn't stand the thought of her believing she was less because of how life had treated her.

Scrubbing a palm over his face, he charged forward. "Coreena was the epitome of society. Her family was friends of ours. Part of me thinks I didn't fight Mother too much on wedding because it meant getting married before Theodore. And sadly as a twenty-one year old jackass, I didn't consider the consequences of marrying someone I really didn't love. I figured if she wanted to marry me and stay in Boston while I fought glorious battles and rode the open Western plains, then where was the harm?"

Eden frowned. "Please, tell me you're not married now." Tears choked her words.

"No, honey. No." He walked around the table and tugged her into his arms, her little body softening as she heaved a long breath. "Once I left for the war, Coreena's letters became few and far between, and I suppose I knew something was wrong, but I didn't care enough to ask for furlough until she wrote begging me to come visit. So I did," he swallowed, waiting for the familiar anger to spike, "and Theodore was there, waiting for Father to finish working on his rank, making sure Theo joined the fighting as a *Colonel*, not a low ranking soldier, like me. And while my brother waited, he kept my wife company."

"Oh." Her eyes widened. "Oh, no, no, no..."

"A month after I returned to battle, she wrote telling me she was pregnant. I told myself the child was mine. *Convinced* myself because I had been home and bedded her." He couldn't stop the disgust edging his words. "Just as she'd planned. No wonder she urgently needed me home. A bit hard to tell your husband you're expecting if he hasn't screwed you in six months."

Damn, why did that betrayal still feel like an open wound?

"Oh, God, I'm sorry." The sheer agony in her voice had him tilting her face to his. Tears trailed down her soft cheeks.



“Shhh. I don’t want you to cry for me.” Dear Lord, had anyone ever cried for him?

“I c-can’t help it. How could anyone be so cruel to you?”

He brushed away her tears. How could anyone whose life had been treated so poorly still have so much heart?

She wrapped her arms around his neck, tight, her hair fluttering down his arm. He caught a strand between his fingers and let his mind go back to Gettysburg.

“It was a few hours before the battle. Theo was scared. Wild eyed scared.” He stopped, the pain, tension, the grief of that day like a weight on his chest. “So scared, he started drinking—and confessing all his sins. When he told me the baby was his, I wanted to kill him. He’d always been the best, the first, and the thought my own wife preferred him turned ugly inside of me. A kind of anger I’ve never let out again.”

“Justified anger!” Eden’s eyes flashed, deep green sparking like an emerald fire.

It would be easy to let her sway him. He’d fooled himself for so long, defending that anger.

“Perhaps. Yes, in some ways I was justified. But part of it was self-hatred. Doubt. I always wished I could be perfect like Theo. I thought if I kept trying and was a good soldier, my family would see I was just as good—my *wife* would see it.” He pushed past the tightness in his throat. Why did being honest have to hurt so damned bad?

She caught his cheeks between her palms until they were eye to eye.

“I can’t imagine any man better than you.” She hugged him again, her breath warm on his neck. “Not your brother. Not anyone.”

Warmth shot through him like a boost from cheap whiskey. Here was someone who thought him the best.

*But I’m no saint.* And he had to tell her so. He squeezed her close, then stepped back to finish talking.

“Theo and I got into a terrible fight. By the time they pulled us apart, I told him I hope he died that day. I told him I hoped some damned Johnny Reb blew his head off.”

Eden closed her eyes, tears trailing down her cheeks.

“I meant it too. *At that moment* I meant it. But hours later when the smoke was so thick I couldn’t see twenty feet in front of me, I started to regret those words. None of us had seen a battle like that. Not ever. I tripped

over the dead, men, boys, North, South, bodies everywhere. My men were scattered into chaos. So I started looking for Theodore. When I found him..." Sinclair swallowed hard, "it was bad. He'd been shot in the gut. He – he asked me to forgive him, then," Sinclair sucked in a lung-full of air, trying not to smell the sulfur and blood in the air, trying not to feel Theo's ice cold fingers, "he handed me his damned harmonica and ask me to give it to his baby.

"Then he died. Just like I'd wanted him to. Just like I wished."

"Oh, Sin."

*Damn it.* He didn't want to cry in front of her. He stood, rubbing his eyes, but she was right behind him, wrapping her arms around him as if he wasn't a killer or a rotten son-of-a-bitch.

"Sin, you can't wish someone dead." She sounded angry on his behalf. But she didn't know it got worse.

He turned and stepped back, out of her arms. "I think you can." He pulled the scarred harmonica from his pocket and rubbed his thumb over the warm metal. "Because I had wished Coreena dead too. And when she got the telegram about Theo, she killed herself. Her suicide note said she wouldn't live without the only man she ever loved. And that man surely wasn't me. Never was. Never could be. Theo was the man who held her heart." He squeezed his eyes closed, then exhaled a long breath. Lighter. That's how he felt. Like the yoke that had been choking him was looser. The guilt was still there, but the anger was gone. And even the guilt didn't feel like it was drowning him anymore.

Eden watched him, her eyes wide and sad. He turned, tucking her under his chin, stroking the silk of her hair as it fell down her back, letting go of the past, holding his future.

"I've carried so much anger through the years, and I didn't care if I ever let it go. Until I met you. Now I finally understand why Theodore and Coreena couldn't stay away from each other." He did. He never had but now, God help him, he'd take Eden away from any man who had her or he'd die trying. "That's how I've felt since the moment I saw you. I want you more than the air I breathe." He leaned his forehead against hers.

"I want you too." Her hands gripped his. "I—"

"But you understand now why when you lied I became angry." He shook his head. "I'm just glad you finally told me everything."

She nodded, but her brow still crinkled with worry. "So...what now?"

“This.” Scooping her into his arms, he ducked his head for a deep kiss. No thinking, no worrying, just feeling. The press of her breasts against his chest. The curve of her waist. The fullness of her ass under his palm. Dear God, if she pushed him away now it would kill him.

“Is this all right?” He nibbled down her neck, nipping the soft skin. “Should I stop?” *Please, please don't tell me to stop.*

“No. Don't stop.” She tugged his head lower toward her breasts, moaning when his tongue danced over her skin. “Don't ever stop, Sin.”

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# Chapter 7



LORD, SHE WAS GOING straight to Hell.

She should tell Sin to stop, tell him about the senator and the blackmail. The truth mattered to him.

*Oooh.* But God, what he was doing with his mouth, his hands made it very hard to think. It had been so long since she'd done this. No, no, that was wrong. She'd *never* done this, not this way. Never felt this way.

His mouth was liquid heat, as long drugging kisses pulled her deeper and deeper into a sexual abyss. His cock hardened beneath her, tempting her to squirm against him, to tease.

"Yes. Like that." He pulled her tighter against him, his arms wrapped around her, sliding down her back, cupping her bottom, grinding her with his heat. He growled low in this throat, the need in that sound tightening her nipples and making her warm and wet.

"Let's go into my room."

He grunted his approval, his lips trailing over the tops of her breasts, his tongue dipping low between her cleavage, snaking down to wet a nipple beneath her corset and chemise.

"Mmm. Yes, I want you naked. Now."

"Yes." Yes, she wanted him naked too. Naked and stretched out on her bed so she could take her time learning his lean body.

Taking his hand, she led him down the hall as he placed kisses on her nape. Opening the door, he pulled her into his arms. Her skirt tangled in his boots, legs bumping between each other, lips searching, nipping, pressing open mouth kisses wherever they landed.

She quickly lit the lantern, bathing the room in soft light, a warm welcoming cocoon. Sin pulled her back into his arms and sucked the skin between her neck and shoulder, biting, sending chills racing over her body while heat boiled between them, her skin tingling, throbbing. *Wet.* Oh, she was so aching and wet.

"Touch me, please, Sin. I'm beggin'." Yes, she'd beg. Anything to have more of him. Her Sin. The only sin she'd ever wanted to commit.

He grunted his answer, his hands sliding over her ribs to cup her breasts, sliding down her back to squeeze her bottom, all the while his mouth finding delicious paths down her throat, behind her ear, over her shoulder, wet, warm paths that left her shaking with need. She needed more, needed to taste him too.

She trailed kisses down his neck, flicking her tongue, sucking his skin. God he tasted as good as he smelled. Salt mixed with something uniquely Sinclair. She had to have more. Tugging his shirt from his waistband, she pulled it over his head.

*Ohhh.* He was beautiful. Muscled, flat stomach, a dusting of crisp chest hair, a thin trail of hair leading under his waistband, and a very large erection tenting his britches. She smiled and looked up. His expression was an endearing mixture of tense anticipation, smoky lust—and a silly prideful, lopsided grin every man with a large cock wore.

She took one of his flat, tight nipples into her mouth, then nipped it with her teeth.

He groaned, jumped and his cock bumped against her belly. “God, Eden.” He tangled his hand into her hair and shook out the pins, then lifted her chin with the tip of his finger. “Stop. Look at me.” His voice was rough, needy.

She glanced up as he threaded his fingers through the strands.

“I wanted to take your hair down like this when you walked into the tent.” He spread the loose curls over her shoulders, then skimmed his palm down her throat, lower, lower. “Then I wanted to do this...” He unhooked the first busk holding her corset together. “And this...” He moved to the second and third, his lips covering where the fabric had been. “And this.” The last closures were popped free and her corset fell to the floor, and he wasted no time opening her chemise.

His ragged breathing filled the small room. His gaze skated over her, his eyes heavy lidded, glazed. “Damn, you’re beautiful.” He cupped a breast in each hand, then lowered his head.

Scorching heat and pleasure shot through her. Each suck of his mouth, tightened the pull between her legs. Oh, God. His tongue did wicked things, swirling around each tight bud as he sucked, using his other hand to gently roll and tug her nipple, finally giving the other breast the same attention. All the while she stood in a sexual stupor, her hands gripping his shoulders for support.

He lifted his head and grinned. “Let’s get on the bed. You look ready to fall.”

She nodded, too aroused to speak.

“All right if I take off your skirt?”

*All right?* Did he really need to ask? She couldn't breathe, her thighs were wet with want, her nipples tight and shiny from his mouth. Oh, yes, he could take her skirt off.

Unfastening the button, he let it pool to the floor and untied her drawers. They whispered down her legs, along with her chemise, until she stood naked in front of him.

A sudden panic shot through her. She hadn't been naked in front of a man since before the fall. Back when she didn't have so many scars on her body.

"I...I..." She slid her hand over her stomach scar and tucked her bad leg behind the other.

"Don't hide. You're beautiful." He dropped to his knees and licked her stomach, the feel of his hot, wet tongue sending chills over skin. "Beautiful. And I can't wait much longer to taste more of you."

There was no time to argue as he stood and swept her into his arms then placed her on the bed before sprawling next to her and pressing kisses to the scar, making her forget to be ashamed.

"You're not naked yet." She reached for his waistband.

"Soon." He caught her hands and draped them above her head. "I want to love you more first." His eyes darkened as he gazed at her body.

The word love pushed her further into a sensual fog. Later, afterward, she'd tell him about spying, ask for his help. Right now, she couldn't think of anything but his hands skimming up her thighs, higher and higher, callus over silk, dark over light, his thumbs brushing the wet curls waiting for him.

Desire shot through her. *God! His touch was explosive.* He circled again, the tips of his fingers sliding between her folds, a languid trail spiking her lust to new heights.

"Sin, please."

He hovered over her body, pressing kisses to her eyelids, her cheeks, her lips, teasing, never giving her a full kiss. His rough breathing filled the room, the sound of his whispered awe.

She didn't want to forget this moment. She'd never had this, not ever. Every man she'd ever been with was about his own pleasure. She'd never been treated like she was a delicious meal to be savored.

He lowered his head, his lips soft on her at first, then with a tortured groan he licked his way into her mouth. Hot, wet, silky bliss. Oh, she was



drowning. Her heart pounding as pleasure shot through her. He dropped his head to her breasts, his whiskers scratching the skin of her cleavage as he moved back and forth. His talented hands stroking her thighs, then higher, higher, until he teased her sex with his fingers again, once, twice, dipping inside her heat while his thumb pressed against her nub.

She arched under his touch, silently begging for more. Her core throbbed with want. She needed to feel him inside her. Now.

“Please, Sin, please.”

He lifted his head and grinned. “Oh, I’m going to *sin* with you.” His fingers continued their magic until she whimpered.

“Hurry.” The ache was getting worse.

“No. No hurrying tonight.” Lowering his head, he started kissing a trail over her belly to her curls. “Mmmm. You smell so good.” He inhaled and nibbled down one thigh, then skipped to the other.

She started shaking, the intimacy of what he was doing, too much. No one had ever kissed her sex before. No one.

“Sin, are you sure?”

His tongue flicked over the nub hidden in her curls and she arched off the bed. *Oh, hell yes.*

“Sinclair. Oh, God...” The words ended on a moan as he did it again. She was going to die of pleasure or he was going to drown in her wetness, either way she didn’t see how they were going to survive the night.

“Hook your legs over my shoulders.” The muffled words tickled, but she locked her ankles around his back. “Mmm. Just like that.” Reaching his hands high, he filled each palm with a breast and rolled her nipples between thumb and forefinger in rhythm with the stroke of his tongue, each long, slow stroke.

The room seemed to darken, everything focused on the wet of his tongue, the rough of his hands as he caressed her breasts. A shiver ran over her skin, lust and desire pulling her arms down from above her head, down her body to cover his hands with hers until together they massaged her breasts.

Her climax was building, the blood roared in her ears, broken only by the gallop of her heartbeat.

Sliding her hands onto his forearms, she gripped his rope-like muscles.

She was so close, so close...

She wanted to watch what he did, wanted to watch him make her lose control.

Lifting her head, she gazed down at his head between her legs. Heat shot through her, a bolt of pleasure twisting her so tight, so tight.

She gasped as he sucked her nub. He lifted his head just enough to see her, his eyes hooded with desire, darkened, caught and held her gaze, the moment frozen in time, stretching out, calling out, something delicate yet strong passing between them. Something unchangeable, unregrettable. Something wonderful.

Then his eyes crinkled in a mischievous smile, and he buried his face in her curls and gave a long, slow lick.

Oh! Oh, God help her, she couldn't be still. Her legs started trembling as he entered her with his tongue, lapping her as he moved one hand to circle her nub with his thumb.

She couldn't breathe.

She couldn't see anything but flashing colors.

Her toes curled tight against his skin.

Everything focused on him and his fingers, his tongue, so wet, so firm, so...so...

"Oh, Sin!" The room exploded around her. Beautiful, warm, throbbing. Drowning in desire, sinking deep in satisfaction. There was nothing but her heartbeat, the feel of Sin, the soft light from the lantern, the caress of his hands as he stroked her breasts.

She was floating, flying, fisting the sheet until—Oh, Lord, she was probably breaking his neck with her thighs!

She dropped her legs open, but he just looked up and grinned. "Beautiful."

His chest was covered in a fine sheen of sweat, his mouth covered in her arousal, his hair thoroughly disheveled, and he looked better than any man had a right to.

He grinned. "Did you like that?"

"Come up here and I'll show you how much." She tugged his arm, urging him to crawl up her body. "But take your britches off first." She worked the buttoned fly and tugged the wool down his lean hips.

"Wait."

"Why?"

He hovered over her, his face shadows and angles in the dim light. “Because,” he brushed his thumb over her lip, “I never, *ever*, want to make you feel like a whore again.”

Her heart tripped. He cared enough to stop. Dear God, no man had ever considered her feelings. Only this man, this man she was falling in love with.

She caught his whiskered face between her palms and pressed a soft kiss to his bottom lip.

“Sin, it’s been two years since I’ve shared my bed, and I want you to make love to me.”

“And I want to. You don’t know how much,” he breathed.

“I’ve never *made love* before. I want my first time to be with you.” Oh, they couldn’t do this with lies still between them. She needed to tell him about the robberies, the blackmail.

“Wait. I need to say something.”

“Can it wait?” He brushed a kiss over her mouth. “Please?”

Yes, afterward there would be time.

She nodded.

An expression she couldn’t quite name covered his face. His gaze searched hers, then he locked his hands with hers, twining their fingers as he stretched over her, kicking his britches to the end of the bed. “Thank you for giving yourself to me.”

He slowly covered her lips with his. The slight tang of her own arousal surprised her, but she had no time to react further. Each kiss Sin teased her with grew longer, slower, wetter until he was feasting on her mouth, devouring her. His tongue danced with hers, stroking, advancing, retreating. His breathing became ragged, his cock gently rocking against her hip, the large head beaded wet with his readiness.

The room shrank until there was nothing but Sin above her, his breath rasping over her, and soft, muted light surrounding the bed.

“I need you,” he groaned, sucking one nipple into his mouth. “So damn bad.”

“Yes.” She palmed his firm ass and urged him on top of her. “Now. I need you too.” More than she could even say.

He bumped against her sex, the heat of his cock shocking as he stroked between her folds, spreading her desire onto himself.

“God, you’re so wet.”

“Yes, for you,” she breathed. “Hurry. Please.”

Her body was tied into a knot, centered on the throbbing pulse between her legs. He grinned, the creased dimple more temptation that she wanted to ignore. And she didn’t have to deny herself this anymore. Raising her head, she licked the hollow, then moved to his mouth.

He groaned and kissed her deep, hard. Then he pushed inside her body, inch by inch until he was buried inside her, stretching her to accommodate his size.

“You feel so damn good.” He flexed his hips, the strokes slow and easy but his body shaking with urgency. He lowered his head to her throat and nipped the skin before moving to kiss her breasts. “So damn good.”

He did too. Hell, no man had ever felt so good, felt so right, as if he was made to be inside her. Maybe he was.

Setting a slow rhythm, he filled her again and again. He slid his hands to her hips and lifted, encouraging her to wrap her legs around his waist as his pace became faster, harder. Eden squeezed her eyes closed, too much pleasure, too much emotion. All too much—and he couldn’t see, couldn’t know that this meant more to her than it could ever mean to him.

“Eden.” He slowed, then stopped moving, his words a mere whisper across her forehead. “Eden? Look at me.”

She opened, staring into his dark eyes. He didn’t blink, just watched her, an expression she couldn’t name in his gaze.

“I want you to know who’s making love to you.”

“Believe me, I know.” She’d never forget this moment. Not ever.

“Good.” He pressed a soft kiss to her lips, then gave a deliberate push with his hips.

“Ah, oh, God, Sin.”

He withdrew, then filled her again.

“I want you to come again when I do.” He slipped his hand between them, his fingers finding her nub, starting a slow circle in rhythm with his thrusts. “Want to feel you squeezing my cock.”

She watched as his eyes drifted half closed, his jaw stiff, his breathing hard and heavy. Shivers shot up her body tight, hot, shivering, his fingers circling, pressing, his cock thick, thrusting, thrusting, thrusting...rubbing, rubbing, rubbing.

“Oh, Sin!” Her world shattered.

“Damn.” His moan was muffled against her neck, buried in her hair, and he pulsed inside her, shuddering, his arms shaking on each side of her head until his weight relaxed atop her. “God, woman, you almost killed me.” He chuckled and nuzzled a kiss to each nipple.

She wrapped her arms around him, unwilling to let this moment go. “I hope not. I think I’d like to do that again later.”

She felt his lips curve into a smile against her breast. “Oh, I think we can—”

“Major Bradford!” A male voice echoed from outside in the alley. Sin’s head snapped from her chest.

“Major Bradford!” Pounding rattled the kitchen door.

“Who is that?” Eden rose up on her elbow.

Sin groaned and slid out of bed, grabbing his britches from the floor, yanking them on before reaching for his boots. “Corporal Ballard.” He swiped his shirt from the chair. “I’ve got to see what’s wrong. I told him to come here only in an emergency.”

Eden nodded and scrambled from the mattress, reaching for her wrapper. “Go, I’ll be right there.”

He turned and opened the door, then turned again and pulled her into his arms for a crushing kiss. “We’re not finished. Not by a long shot.” He pressed another quick kiss to her lips then ran down the hall.

By the time she secured her wrapper and twisted her hair into a loose braid, Corporal Ballard was standing in her kitchen, talking in an over-loud whisper.

“Yes, sir, Major. We caught three of them inside Parsons’ railcar. Two were shot. One’s bleeding bad and won’t last much longer.”

*Oh, God, no. No, no, no.* It had to be the Russell Boys. She’d repeated to them the information Floyd had drunkenly shared, the payroll was hidden in Parsons’ desk. And they were headed to his railcar when they left her.

“Who shot them?” Sin tugged on his boots.

“Parsons.”

Sin nodded, then turned to Eden. “I’ve got to go.”

“All right.” Her head pounded so loudly she wasn’t sure if she even spoke the words. She needed to tell Sin the truth. Now, before he talked to the Russell’s. “Sin, wait. I have to tell you something.” She swayed. Dots danced in her vision.

“Easy.” Sin led her to the chair. “You look pale. Don’t worry. I won’t get hurt.” He brushed his thumb over her lip. “I’ve got a reason to keep safe now. Someone I can trust with my heart.” He winked and bolted out the door.

“Sin!” She hurried to the porch but he was gone. Along with any chance she’d had of telling the truth. Along with any chance of a future with Sin.

She crumpled to the floor. He couldn’t trust her, not with the truth, not with his heart. Nothing. And within the hour he would know that.

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# Chapter 8





SINCLAIR SPRINTED TO Parsons' train car, his mind galloping in ten directions, his heart pulling him back to only one. *Eden*. Christ, what he wouldn't give to still be lying in bed with her, loving her.

Did he love her? Not just sex but *love*?

He shook his head and sucked in a lungful of cool night air. He needed to keep his mind on work. After this assignment was done, he would figure out what Eden meant to him.

Running to the end of town, he tried to figure out what had gone wrong. Why his plan had gone to shit. The first robbery wasn't supposed to take place until tomorrow. How the hell could anyone have known he'd brought the payroll in himself only a few hours ago? Only Parsons...

Self-doubt burned his gut. Had he been completely fooled? Was it Parsons all along? But why? What could he possibly gain by losing this race, by losing his fortune?

"The prisoners are over there, sir." Ballard pointed to the far end of the car.

One young man sat on the ground, handcuffed, bleeding from an obviously broken nose. The others lay beside him on the ground, one groaning while blood soaked the front of his shirt, the other glassy unseeing stare proving him dead.

"Damn good thing I decided to lie in wait for these bastards." Parsons puffed up like a rooster, waving his gun toward the thieves. "Otherwise I'd be missing my payroll!"

Sinclair stomped over to the cocky jackass, not slowing until they were nose to nose. "And just how the hell did anyone know it was there? Who did you tell? Your daughter? Stevens?"

"Neither! I told no one."

Sinclair narrowed his gaze. If the bastard was telling the truth, then why was he acting so nervous? His eye kept twitching, a sure "tell" if ever there was one. Playing poker with the old man would have been easy money.

"I think we both know otherwise." Sinclair kept his voice hard, hoping the bluff worked. "If you don't tell me right now, I'll arrest you and hand you over to your investors. They can sort it out."

Parsons' eyes widened. "Now see here!" He stepped back and wiped his forehead. "All right, yes, fine. I sent a telegram to my banker."

"Damn it!" That meant anyone could be the leak. It was like starting from scratch. "You have ruined—"

“I had to! The investors froze any monies until the robberies are stopped. I had to use my own funds for this week’s payroll. I had to have some money moved to cover it,” he hissed.

“Fine. Who is your banker? What connection might he have to your enemies, to Joy?”

“None. He’s my brother-in-law. I support him. I guarantee he doesn’t want my enterprises to fail.”

“Who was with you when you sent the telegram? Stevens?”

It had to be Stevens. Sinclair had a gut feeling.

“No!” Parsons scowled. “I had Floyd send it.”

“Floyd? Your drunken butler?”

“The man was a telegrapher during the war. He’s capable of sending a damned telegram drunk or sober. And I couldn’t very well have Stevens do it—*per your orders*.” The last words were sneered. “Besides, Floyd is always in the railcar. He probably overhears most of what goes on and I’ve never had a problem with his loyalty.”

Sinclair’s mind whirled, the facts colliding with the possibilities, doubt dancing with strict sensibility. Who made the perfect spy? The person above—or below—suspicion.

Floyd. It had to be Floyd. Never mind that Parsons and Stevens pronounced the man too simple to spy—that made him the *perfect* conspirator!

Sinclair reeled and stomped toward the robbers.

“Hold up there, Major!” Parsons fumed. “Just where the hell are you going? We’re not done talking.”

He ignored the pompous bellows and kept walking. He had to get information from one of them, find out if Floyd was truly guilty or if Parsons’ had ruined a perfectly good plan.

Ballard waited by the youngest prisoner, a boy of about thirteen or fourteen. He hadn’t stopped crying the whole time Sinclair spoke with Parsons, and now the pitiful wails filled the night.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“That one was his brother.” Ballard pointed to the dead man. “The other one’s their cousin. Russell is their last name.”

“All right.” Squatting, Sinclair leveled a hard stare at the boy. “What’s your name?”

“B-bryan.” He dragged a sleeve across his bloody nose.

“What are you doing here with these men?”

The boy glared at him, his face dirty and smudged. “I ain’t tellin’ you nothin’.”

“You don’t have to say anything about your family. I just need to know about Floyd.” Sinclair watched his expression for signs the kid might know something. “Things will go easier on you if you help me.”

“Who the hell is Floyd?”

“Don’t t-tell him...anything.” The injured man—the cousin—lying next to them, pushed himself into a half-assed sitting position. Parsons’ had winged him in the shoulder, not a fatal wound, but Bryan wouldn’t know that.

“Your cousin here isn’t going to live to hang. He’ll die and leave you for hanging, so you’d best not take his advice.”

Bryan’s eyes widened. “W-we don’t know any Floyd.”

“Then who is your contact? Who are you working for?”

“You keep your stupid mouth closed, boy. Or else,” the man growled.

“Go to Hell, Tom.” Bryan kicked dirt at him. “I don’t have to do anything you say. You already got Jed killed.” He sobbed.

“Ballard!” Sinclair waved him over. “Take Tom here and tie him to the front of the railcar. I need to talk to Bryan alone. Might as well send for the doc. I want Tom feeling better for his hanging.”

Ballard nodded, catching Tom by the collar and yanking him to his feet.

“Bryan, you better not say a goddamn word.” Tom kicked and fought against Ballard’s hold. “If you do, I’ll kill you!”

Sinclair squatted down until he was eye level with the boy. “Bet your brother wouldn’t like Tom threatening you, huh?” Or at least he thought that was how having a brother was supposed to work. Caring, protecting.

“No. Tom and Jed weren’t gettin’ along none. And now he done got Jed killed.” Tears rolled down his dirty face. “He done hurt Mary Rose...”

“Who?” Sinclair climbed to his feet and pulled Bryan up. “Do you mean Mary Rose? The little girl from the saloon?”

Bryan nodded, his eyes huge, shining with tears.

Sinclair glanced to where Ballard secured Tom. Whiskers, yes, and a bit of a southern drawl. “How do you know he hurt her?”

“S-she was my friend. Th-the purtiest friend I ever had.” He flushed. “We used to fish together on the creek. But Tom seen us one day and said

dirty things about Mary. Then a few weeks ago he come home drunk and said he...he'd...that night..." He shook his head. "He hurt her."

Damn it. Sinclair sucked in a deep breath and fought the urge to cut off Tom's balls. He would hang. For rape, for robbery...but this boy, he didn't deserve death.

Sinclair grasped Bryan's shoulder. "If you tell me what you know about these robberies, I'll make sure Tom is punished. I can make sure you don't hang—but if you don't help me..." Wouldn't hurt the boy to know what was at stake.

"B-but I was just the look-out."

Sinclair shrugged. "Parsons won't care. He wants you all dead."

Bryan started crying again.

"Tell me about Floyd. Has he been informing Tom or Jed when the payroll was coming in?"

Bryan shrugged. "Don't know nobody named Floyd."

It had to be Floyd! Unless...Floyd was just part of a team. "Then who told Jed and Tom the schedule?"

"I don't wanna say. She's a nice lady."

*She? By God, it was Parsons' daughter!* Sinclair pulled Bryan farther behind the train car, away from Parsons' murderous gaze. "She? Do you mean Kate Parsons?"

Bryan shook his head.

"Then who?" Sinclair grabbed Bryan's sleeve. "I can't help you if you don't tell me!"

"Miss Eden," he whispered.

A roar started in Sinclair's ears. "Who?" Surely he'd misheard.

"Eden—over at the saloon."

Sinclair dropped the boy's arm as if it was on fire and backed away. No, it couldn't be Eden. Couldn't be...that would mean she'd...she'd lied to him. *Again.* Worse. It would mean she'd led him along like a moon-eyed pup, tricked him. Listened to him pour out his soul—then made him look like a damned fool.

*Just like Coreena.*

A sick feeling soured his stomach, and he swallowed hard to keep his last meal down. He'd been right all along. Eden had used him from the moment she walked into his tent. *Used* him, distracted him...

She and Floyd were a team. She used him too. Tonight when he'd staggered out of the kitchen...Eden must have liquored him up, then got him to tell everything he knew about Parsons' business. But why? Revenge? Money? Was she splitting the payroll with the Russell boys?

He swallowed the thick bile choking his throat as his body stiffened, his hands curled into fists. She hadn't just used Floyd, she used everyone. *Used me. Me!* Whatever a man's weakness, Eden found it. Whiskey. Sympathy. Sex. Anything she had to do.

*Damn it all.*

"Ballard! Come over here." Sin's voice cut through the crowd.

"Wait, mister, please don't hurt Miss Eden." Bryan swallowed. "She's nice. She feeds me." Words spilled from the boy, but Sinclair couldn't listen. Every word sounded as if it came from under water. Every word, muffled, warped. Every word drowned out by the crumbling of his heart.

"Yes, sir?" Ballard loped forward and eyed the boy.

"Take Bryan into our camp. Place him under guard. I've got one more person to arrest." The words cut a bitter path across his tongue, but nothing like the cynical acid burning him up from the inside out. How could he have been so stupid? Let himself be tricked yet again by a beautiful woman?

He swallowed down the pain and stomped toward town.

No more ridiculous belief in love or honesty. No more lonely nights of longing. And no more aching hope of a future with a wife who he could trust.

Women lied. Women ripped a man to shreds without batting an eye.

But it wouldn't happen again. He'd erase her from his mind, from his heart. He'd force the memory of her tears, of her soft body, of her sweet kisses, of...*damn it!* He'd force all of that out of his head.

Then, once he arrested her and locked her away, he'd take a knife and cut out his damned broken heart.



# Chapter 9



EDEN GRABBED CLOTHING from her bureau and stuffed them along with her money-sock into a valise. She had to leave, had to get to St. Louis.

Then she and Sophia had to disappear.

Sin would be duty-bound to punish anyone involved in the robberies. *No matter what we shared. No matter if he cares for me.* Sin was honorable. He saw things as either right or wrong. And her life had never been anything but wrong.

It had been lunacy to think she could build a life with a man like Sin. And yet...God help her, she wanted that just-out-of-reach life more than her next breath.

She sighed, fisting her clothes in her hand.

The moon slid behind the clouds, bathing the room in darkness. It felt better in the dark, easier to hide from the ugly truth—easier to imagine Sin sprawled on the bed, his eyes hooded, his lips curved in that crooked smile. His callused hands stroking her, his body slick with sweat.

She stopped packing and dumped the chemises and corsets onto the bed. Maybe she could stay, could convince him—*No*.

Snatching up her clothes she pushed them back into the bag. A person didn't get what they always wanted. That's what life had taught her. Not that she wanted much. Just love. Just Sin.

She dumped the bag again.

He'd told her to trust, treated her with kindness and respect. He wouldn't turn on her. He was nothing like Alexander. If she couldn't trust him, she could trust no one.

Lighting the lantern, she perched on the edge of the mattress. The silence seemed to mock her, every breath too loud. Part of her wanted him to barge in and yell. It would be better than this infernal waiting.

Oh, she couldn't sit still. Five paces to the window, five paces to the door. Back and forth. Perhaps she should practice what she would say. She had the letter from the senator as proof—except it wasn't really proof at all. The handwriting did match the letter Moreton had sent the day she'd left the hospital in St. Louis, but neither paper had a letterhead or signature. Nothing. Just handwriting that could belong to anyone. The blackmail letter only outlined what would happen to Sophia if the payroll schedule wasn't reported to the *correct men*. Not even the Russell Boys were named. The only person implicated was her.



She closed her eyes, letting the hot tears squeeze between her lashes as she crinkled the two letters in her fist. Damn Moreton. Even hundreds of miles away he managed to control her life. Her happiness.

*Slam!* The kitchen door shuddered. Heavy boots thundered down the hall.

She fought to catch her breath—and her bravery—both of which were suddenly gone.

Sin charged into the room. Their gazes caught and held, his searching hers, more questions than she could begin to answer lurked in his eyes along with anger. Bitter anger.

He glanced at the bed and his expression hardened. “Looks like I was right. You were going to run out of town. Deceitful traitor to the very end.”

She reeled back, the words stinging worse than a slap.

Swallowing back the choke of tears, she searched for the words to explain. “I was going to run, but I wanted to tell you—”

“What?” he snapped. “More lies? I think I’ve had my fill of those from you.” He took a step toward her, fishing a set of iron handcuffs from his pocket.

“I didn’t lie! I have tried to tell you about—”

“Stop! Just stop talking. I’ve been a God-damned fool letting you use me.” He gave a self-deprecating laugh. “I even let myself think you cared about me.” His voice thickened with each word, his eyes shining as if...

God, she’d caused him so much pain. Why hadn’t she confided in him sooner? Now it was too late. Now he’d never believe her.

Now she’d lose the one man she loved.

“Sin, listen, I—”

“No. Just tell me where the money is.”

“What money?” *What was he talking about?*

“The money you helped steal from Parsons. You had to get a cut from the Russell Boys.”

“I don’t have any of that money! I’m being blackmailed!” She shoved the crumpled letters at him. “Read them. Then maybe you’ll understand.” Tears rolled down her face. She didn’t even bother to wipe them away.

He glanced down at the papers, then tucked the handcuffs away and walked toward the lantern. His body stiffened as he read, his shoulders straight.

His head snapped up, his gaze landing on her. “Who wrote these?”

“Senator Moreton.”

Sin frowned. “Moreton? Why...how do you know him? I mean did you —” He stopped, his mouth tight with the unspoken question.

“I *didn't* have sex with him.” The words were over-loud but she didn't care. “Alexander is his son. Moreton is the reason I couldn't report what had happened. Moreton is the one who sent the note to the hospital threatening Sophia, if I didn't leave St. Louis.”

Sin didn't comment, didn't move. Frozen, he stared at her, disgust tightening his face.

*It's over. He doesn't care about the circumstances that brought me to this point. To him, she was guilty.*

Dropping the letters to the floor, Sin stomped toward her. Blood pounded in her ears and she backed away until her shoulders bumped the door frame. *Run! Run from him. Hide!*

*Useless.* She could never outrun him and there was no place to hide, not from him, not from the pain.

She was losing everything.

Sin caught her around the waist, then cupped her face between his palms and lowered his head, capturing her lips.

The kiss was hot and desperate, as if he hadn't seen her for a year. Or as if he'd found something precious he'd misplaced.

She threw her arms around his neck, tugging him closer. He believed her! She'd nearly lost him. Just the thought made her want to crawl inside his coat, his shirt. Close wasn't close enough.

Threading her fingers through his hair, she deepened the kiss, dipping her tongue into his mouth. He groaned, the rumble vibrating from his chest.

“I...love...you.” His words were muffled between kisses.

Her heart skittered to a stop. “What?”

He grinned against her mouth. “I said, I love you.”

“Oh, Sin, I love you too.”

He rested his forehead on hers. “Damn it, I'm sorry about what I said. Truly sorry. I should have asked you before acting like an ass. I have no excuse except fear. I thought you

were—”

“Like Coreena.” She cupped his whiskered cheek.

“Yes.”

“I'm nothing like her.” She brushed her thumb over his bottom lip.

“I know that. I do. Will you forgive me?”

“Yes, if you’ll forgive me.”

“Done.” He gave her another quick kiss, then frowned. “We have to get Sophia out of St. Louis, bring her here so she’s safe.”

“No!” Her whole life was a lie to Sophia. “She can’t come here! There has to be another way. I don’t want her to be ashamed of me.”

“She won’t be ashamed of you. No one will be if you’re not ashamed of yourself.” He caught her hand in his. “Don’t be ashamed of surviving. I’m damn impressed by you.”

His words spread a warmth through her chest. He was right. She had survived. More than some people could, more than she’d ever imagined she would. Not everything she’d done made her proud of herself, but she’d *survived*.

“Eden,” his breath fanned the top of her head, “tonight scared the shit out of me. I thought I was going to lose you.”

She nodded. “Me too.”

“I don’t ever want that to happen.” He leaned back, studying her. “Marry me.”

“What?” She couldn’t have heard him correctly.

“Become my wife.”

“Wife?”

He frowned. “Yes. If you’ll have me?”

“You can’t marry me. People will talk. Your family would never...we’ve only known each other two days!”

He shook his head. “I don’t give a damn what people or my family says. And there are mail order brides who get off a stage coach or train and get married to a man they’ve just met. We’re much better acquainted than that.” His gaze roved over her curves. “Much better.”

Heat pooled low in her belly. *Much better, indeed.*

Placing his finger under her chin, he lifted until she looked at him. “Marry me. Please. I want you in my life. I will gladly help raise Sophia.” He brushed a soft kiss to her lips. “You’ve made me realize hanging onto anger or fear isn’t what I need. What I need is you.”

“But—”

“But what? I know I upset you. When Bryan told me you were their informant all I could think was you used me.”

“I didn’t. I wanted to tell you.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” He linked their fingers, his thumb brushing the top of her knuckles. “Please, you know we can be happy together.”

Yes, with Sin she could have everything she always dreamed of. With Sin, she had a man who respected her, who taught her to respect herself. That was more than she’d even known she wanted.

And if she didn’t try, Sinclair would be another regret she would have to live with the rest of her life. Was she willing to risk that?

She watched him through her lashes, watched him, watching her. He held her gaze, his open and honest, letting her see past the shutters into his soul, as wounded and lonely as hers had ever been. And she’d be damned if she was going to let him go. One way or another, they’d find a way to make a marriage work. With no more secrets.

“Yes, I’ll marry you.”

He gathered her in a crushing hug. “You won’t be sorry, honey.”

She swallowed the panic trying to climb up her throat. “You might be.”

“No I won’t.”

“What about Parsons’ payroll? I am guilty of spying.”

“I’ve got a plan.”

“I don’t want Floyd to get into trouble.” God, she wouldn’t let someone else take the blame.

“Eden...” he warned.

“It’s not his fault!”

Sin cocked his brow. “In a way it is. He drinks too much and talks too much.”

“Maybe, but he doesn’t deserve to be punished. I tricked him.”

Sin sighed and ran his hands over his face. “I know someone near Fort Hayes who usually needs a bunk house cook. Think Floyd can feed some cow-hands?”

“Yes! Oh, thank you.” She threw her arms around his neck.

“But he’s got to leave tonight, before Parsons finds out what happened.”

Eden nodded. “Then what?”

“Then Moreton is going to pay for what he’s done to you. With the help of the McGrady’s.”

“No! We can’t involve Cormac and Addy.”

“We can, because they already know something about Moreton. Now, McGrady wouldn’t tell me what, but he will. And if we work together—”

“There’s nothing any of us can do.” Her heart started pounding. Sin nor Addy nor Cormac knew how evil Moreton was. He would hurt them all and never blink. “We don’t have proof of anything he’s done. We don’t know why he wants Parsons to lose the Katy. And we certainly don’t have the power or money to get revenge.”

“We don’t have to have money or power.” A devilish smile creased Sin’s face.

“What do you mean?” She wasn’t sure she wanted to know what he was thinking, and she wasn’t letting anyone get hurt over her.

“Parsons.”

She started shaking her head. Rich men couldn’t be trusted. “Sin...no...”

He pulled her into his arms and tipped her chin so their lips were a whisper apart. “Just trust me.”

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# Chapter 10



SINCLAIR WATCHED THE train approach, his gut as tight as a fist. He and Eden had been up all night, first as he told her Tom was Mary Rose's rapist, then as he explained about Bryan. The boy had no one, and Sinclair couldn't stand the thought of leaving him all alone in the world. The fort had plenty of room... Sophia might like having a little brother around.

Eden's eyes had filled with tears as she nodded. Around 2 a.m. they sent Floyd riding toward Fort Hayes with a letter of recommendation as a bunkhouse cook. Before dawn they snuck over to the McGrady's, and the story Adella McGrady told made Sinclair shake with anger. Hundreds, no, thousands of soldiers starving in prison camps, while the senator sold the supplies meant to feed them. Men died. Adella's brother starved to death. And all along she'd had the proof to crucify Moreton.

But Sin knew immediately the information on the paper was forged. He knew George Rogers, the clerk from Parsons' office who supposedly signed off on the forms for the supply wagon to be detoured per orders from Parsons. And he knew that George was killed in battle a week before the paper was signed. George's resignation from Judge Parsons' office had been last minute, so Moreton couldn't have known. Meanwhile, he forged papers and continued to get richer from the stolen supplies. Whether or not he'd planned all along to use Parsons as a scapegoat or whether the forgery was to motivate Adella McGrady, was unknown. But Moreton made a fatal mistake giving Adella that paper, one he'd die regretting.

The train chugged to a hissing stop. Sinclair stood back, waiting until he saw Father through the windows. He had to speak to him alone. No one else was above doubt. Any of these so-called investors could be working with Moreton.

The men exited the train like a row of ruffled roosters, Father in the rear. He'd aged in the past years, no longer so tall, so stern, so forbidding. *Where was the man who made me doubt myself?*

Gone. This man looked old, tired. Worried.

"Sinclair." Father gripped his hand and shook it as if...he was glad to see him.

"Father."

"I'd like you meet some colleagues of mine." Judge Bradford introduced a handful of men, but Sinclair's focus was on the large man at the edge of the platform. Senator Moreton. Adella had described him to



perfection, smug conceit. Cold, calculating. Dangerous. He spoke to a slick dandy wearing enough hair pomade to choke a mule.

Moreton turned, as if he could feel the hatred Sinclair was trying to rein-in. Sinclair fisted and unfisted his hands. Control. He had to maintain control. Grabbing the senator by the throat and choking the life out of him wasn't the plan.

But it sure as hell sounded good at the moment.

"Lastly, I'd like you to meet Senator Moreton." Father nodded ushered him closer. "And his son, Alexander."

A roar started in Sinclair's ears, like a million hornets swarming the nest. *Alexander*. Alexander Moreton. The same Alexander who damn near killed Eden, the same Alexander who was going to get a good ole' army ass-kicking in about five minutes.

Sinclair gritted his teeth so hard, his jaw cracked. Black spots danced in his vision. Fist, unfist. Fist, unfist. His hands shook with the urge to punch Alexander. Sinclair sucked in a deep breath. He was going to kill this son-of-a-bitch. Beat him within an inch of his life, then slowly peel all the skin off his body until—

"Sinclair, are you all right?" Father frowned.

"I'm feeling a bit poorly this morning." Nothing a brutal murder wouldn't cure.

"You do look pale."

Sinclair nodded. The shudders shaking his limbs were real enough. But he wasn't sick.

"I think you should let me take you to your quarters." Father's tone was insistent. "Gentlemen, please see yourselves to the hotel. I'll see you there later."

Sinclair narrowed his eyes on Alexander. No matter what happened with Senator Moreton, his dandy-ass son was dead.



"WHAT IN THE HELL IS wrong with you?" Father threw his hat onto Sinclair's makeshift desk.

"More than you know! Moreton *and* his son deserve nothing less than to be hanged." Sinclair kicked an empty crate across the tent. "You're right about Moreton, he's been sabotaging Parsons, but it goes way beyond investments. And it goes way beyond the Katy."

Judge Bradford frowned. “What have you found?”

Sinclair pushed a stool toward his father. “Sit down, and if you have your flask, take a drink. You’re going to need it.”

Half an hour later, Father handed Sinclair the flask. “Dear, God. Do you realize how far reaching this is?”

“Yes. And I’m not sure if you or your investors can stop him at this point.”

Father pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head. “This is a disaster.”

“Not entirely.” Sinclair stood and started pacing. “I know a way for justice to be served.”

“You’re going to arrest him? On what charges?”

“No. We’re going to tell Parsons exactly what’s going on now—in addition to the fact Moreton has blamed him for the missing supply wagons during the war. Parsons told me he’d aligned himself with the senator to access his political connections. I believe the President is one of those connections. Don’t you think President Grant would like assurance of a second term? If he shows the voting public he’s willing to prosecute one of Washington’s finest, it will go a long way to convincing everyone he’s the people’s President.”

Father’s jaw dropped, then a grin pulled at his mouth, until he was laughing aloud. “Sinclair, you’re wasting a great legal strategist’s mind atop that damned horse of yours.”

Sinclair groaned. “I don’t want—”

“No, no. I’m aware of your objections. But you’ve done a hell of a job here, and I’m proud of you.” He stood and stuck out his hand. “Let’s go talk to Parsons. The sooner we hear back from the President the sooner you can clamp those irons on Moreton. I’d like to personally escort him back to Washington— with you at my side, if you will? Your mother would enjoy a visit.”

Sinclair cleared his throat around the knot growing there. *Father is proud of me. Of me.* Looking at Father’s still extended hand, Sinclair felt years of pain and anger drop free. The respect he’d craved from his family was his for the taking. They could finally accept the life he’d chosen for himself here in the West. A smile curved his mouth.

“Yes, sir. I’d appreciate your company on the trip.” He clasped his father’s hand. “And there’s someone I’d like to introduce to you and

Mother. We have to pick up her sister from school in St. Louis and perhaps we could pay a visit?”

Father nodded. “Your mother would love some grandchildren, you know?” He laughed.

*Children. With Eden.* Yes, hell yes.

“Yes, sir. We’ll be getting married soon, so I believe that’s a possibility.” But only if Father and Mother accepted Eden. Sinclair might have wanted their approval his whole life, but his whole world was wrapped up in a dark-haired, green-eyed beauty. If they wouldn’t welcome Eden into the family, then he, Eden and Sophia would make their own small family.

“Let’s go speak with Parsons.” Father grabbed his hat. “He will need to send Ulysses a telegram to get the orders to arrest Moreton. That bastard didn’t shut-up about the speeches he was going to make once we arrived today. He’s got a political rally planned for late this afternoon. I would give my gold fillings to see you clap the irons on him in front of the crowd.”

Sinclair chuckled. He would gladly humiliate Moreton in addition to any and every form of punishment. The train ride to Washington would be a long, dangerous trip. Just thinking of all the mishaps that might—*that would*—befall the senator made Sinclair smile.

But what about Alexander?

Sinclair could waste time appealing to the President himself, but the chances of Alexander being punished for what he did to Eden was slim to none. No, Alexander deserved brutal frontier justice, and he’d get it. Sinclair would see to that if it was the last thing he did.



# Chapter 11



EDEN SWIPED AT THE already clean bar and stared out the window. Senator Moreton's speech should be in full swing now. The whole damned town was probably in attendance, but Sin made her swear she'd stay inside Devil's Gate. *Alexander was in Ladore.* A shudder scuttled down her spine. Sin had been tense with worry. He had four of his men stationed around the saloon watching for Alexander. But she wasn't scared. Alexander had no reason to hurt her now. No, not her. But Sin, yes. When he arrested Moreton, Alexander would react like a wounded animal, and his violence would be directed at Sin.

Her stomach clenched. Throwing down the rag, she drifted to the window. If only Sin would stride through the door and wrap her in his arms. Then she'd know he was safe.

The crowd's muted roar of approval and cracking applause breezed through the open door. Apparently Moreton made a good impression on the people of Ladore. Poor fools.

Another long round of applause. Perhaps the long-winded liar was finished. She walked to the door and peeked toward the rail platform. The crowd had begun to thin, shopkeepers walking back to their stores, men loading their families into buckboards.

But she couldn't see Sin. Had he arrested Moreton? Had something gone wrong? What if President Grant was involved with the senator's schemes? Not even Parsons could usurp power over the President.

"Whoo-ee." Hank slipped in the door and grinned. "That Senator Moreton sure did have a lot to say."

Eden groaned, but trailed after Hank as he headed for a barstool. Christ, she hoped he wasn't going to start singing Moreton's praises. She would be sick all over the bar.

Hank grinned. "Too bad all of it was a pile of horse shit."

Eden snorted out loud. "God, love you, Hank. I needed a laugh." She set a glass down in front of him. "Beer?"

He nodded.

She filled his glass. "Did you happen to see Major Bradford out there?"

"I did." He stopped drinking mid-swig. "Aww, he your sweetheart, Eden?"

"She's about as sweet on him as I am on you, you old coot. Mmm-Hmm. So you leave her alone." Alice sat a tub of clean glasses on the bar.

“Well Eden must be plum in love then.” Hank winked. “Cuz I know you got them sweet feelings for me.”

*Alice blushed. Blushed!*

“Oh, you get, on and shut your mouth or I won’t be saving you any of the cake I just baked. Mmm-Hmm, you bet your ass I won’t.”

“Now, Alice, don’t go being mean...” Hank climbed off his stool and followed her into the kitchen. “You know you’re my favorite gal...”

A smile pulled at Eden’s lips. Good. Hank and Alice both deserved someone who cared about them. It would make leaving Ladore much easier if she knew Alice was happy. Easier, but not easy. She would miss Alice and the few friends she had here, Addy and Cormac, Hank...But just the thought of her new life with Sin pushed any sadness from her heart.

She’d finally have the home she longed for. When Sin went back to Fort Hayes, she’d be with him—as his wife. He intended to ask for a more permanent post, Colorado he’d said, or anywhere she desired. *Anywhere*. A fresh, clean, respectable life with Sophia and Sin. She smiled. And now Bryan Russell. The boy needed a home and someone to care for him. Thank God he hadn’t been shot during the robbery. She would have never been able to forgive herself. She wouldn’t have a chance at this new life with Sin.

*Sin*. Where was he? She drifted to the window and rested her forehead against the glass. Most of the crowd was gone from the platform, and he was nowhere in sight. Nerves gnawed at her gut. What if—

“Excuse me, ma’am, but I couldn’t help but notice how beautiful you are.” A warm, strong arm slipped around her waist. “I believe I’m going to need a kiss.”

*Sin!*

She turned in his embrace and hugged him tight, burying her face into his chest, inhaling the scent of horse, sweat and delicious man.

“Hell, honey,” he whispered, “I’ll say you’re beautiful more often if this is the result.” His low words rumbled in his chest beneath her ear.

She locked her arms around his lean hips and held him, just held him, listening to the strong beat of his heart.

“All right, tell me what’s wrong.” His lips whispered over the top of her head.

“Nothing.” She shook her head against his uniform, the wool *scratchy* against her cheek.

Sin sighed. “I thought you were going to trust me.”

Eden pulled back and glanced at his expression. Stern, yes. Frustrated, a little. But full of love. A warmth wrapped around her, so secure, so strong and steady. Love, Sin's love.

"I was just worried about you. About what Alexander and Moreton would do when you arrested him." Because God help her, she couldn't imagine living without Sin now.

His dark brows pinched together. "We didn't get the chance to arrest him yet. Parsons is waiting on a telegram from President Grant. He has the Pinkerton's looking into the paperwork on the rations supply wagons, but it might be late tonight or tomorrow before he has the proof he wants."

"But what about Adella's paper? That's proof!"

"The President wants more before he causes this kind of scandal." He sighed. "Moreton isn't going anywhere tonight. He's taken over Stevens' railcar. Apparently the Ladore Hotel wasn't nice enough for Alexander."

Eden shuddered. "That sounds about right. But I bet Stevens is furious over that. His railcar is brand new."

"Parsons has him glued to the telegraph waiting for Grant's response, so he won't be sleeping in his quarters anyway."

"So what do we do now?"

Sin stepped back and clasped her hand. "We go prepare supper. Men will be in here soon, and I want you hidden in the kitchen just in case Moreton or Alexander decide Ladore's food is good enough for them and they come in to eat. Ballard will come get me when the telegram arrives."

She nodded and sent a little prayer of thanks. As long as Sin was with her, she could quiet the fears that he'd be hurt. Or worse.

Maybe President Grant would send men to escort Moreton back to Washington, then Sin would be finished with the whole thing. Finished and safe.

"Come on, woman." He tugged her hand. "I'm not cooking *and* washing dishes."



FOUR HOURS LATER, SIN handed her the last pot to be dried. The supper crowd had been heavy, everyone talking about the senator's speech and the progress of the Katy. Now the bar room stood quiet, only the whispered sounds of Alice and Hank talking as she swept the floor breaking the silence.



“Want me to make some coffee?” She glanced at Sin as he dumped the wash water.

“No. I think you need to get some sleep. You look about ready to drop.” He dried his hands on his britches, then traced under her eyes. “You have circles, you’re so exhausted.”

“I’m not going to sleep until I know this whole mess if over.” She pulled away and grabbed the coffee pot. “We’ll wait together.”

“Stubborn.”

“Yes.” She wasn’t going to deny it. He had better know what kind of wife he was getting.

“Fine. I’ll get the sugar. After coffee, I’d like you to pack a few things.”

“Why?” Dread tightened her whole body. He wasn’t sending her away if that’s what was in his head.

“We have to get Sophia from school.” He winked. “I know you’ve missed her.”

Tears filled Eden’s eyes. “Yes.” So much.

“And Father has invited all of us to visit him and Mother. But only—”

“Major?” Ballard knocked once, then rushed through the kitchen door. “The telegram came, sir. We’re to arrest Moreton immediately.” He handed Sin a rifle.

“About damned time.” Sin whirled and wrapped his free hand around Eden’s waist then pulled her close for a quick kiss. “Stay here with Alice and Hank. Keep your gun close. Don’t answer the door for anyone but me or one of my men.”

“Yes, sir.” She saluted.

Ballard snorted.

Sin frowned. “I mean it.”

“I know.”

“Because I love you.”

Her heart stuttered and tears filled her eyes. “I know.”

He winked. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Eden followed him to the door. “I’ll be waiting.”

“Lock this door.” He went out then stood watching through the glass as she *clicked* the lock.

“I love you.” Could he hear the catch in her voice? She turned away, unwilling to let him see how worried she truly was. If he thought Moreton

and Alexander would just accept this kind of humiliation, he was wrong. Dead wrong.



“I CALL.” ALICE GRINNED over the edge of her cards.

“Hell, woman, are you cheatin?” Hank scowled as he spread out his losing hand. “You’ve won the last three hands. Eden, does she cheat?”

“No. She’s just good.” Eden looked out the kitchen window again. Damn, where was Sin? How long could an arrest possibly take?

“Well, I’m plum outta beans. Good thing we’re not playin for real money. I’d be—”

“Miz Eden!” Ballard pounded the door. “Hurry. The store across the alley is on fire!”

Hank and Alice scraped their chairs back and ran to the hallway window. “Damn, it is. Fiery as Hell already.” Alice came running back, Hank right behind her. “Eden, get your things gathered, and I’ll wake the girls. You know how fast fires jump.” She hurried through the door, her footsteps loud on the stairs. “Girls! Get up!”

“Miz Eden,” Ballard called again, “unlock the door. I’ll start carrying stuff out for you.”

Yes, she and girls could save much more if they had help. She unlocked the door and yanked it open. “Just follow—”

The man who pushed inside wasn’t Ballard. It was Len in an army coat. He stepped over Ballard’s body and gave her a cold, evil smile. “The boss is here to see you, bitch.”

A shiver ran down Eden’s back, a sick, chilling premonition. *Please God, don’t let it be him.* If it was, if she was right...

Alexander emerged from the shadows on the porch and grinned. “Hello, my love. Have you missed me?”

Eden stumbled backward. Her feet caught in her skirt as she scrambled toward the bar room. Her heart pounded in her ears. She had to get away. Had to.

“Now, Eden...do you really think I’ll just let you escape?” Alexander flicked his hand toward the door, silently instructing Len to move. “If you are stupid enough to run or scream for help, your friends will die. Len has no qualms about killing the old woman and man. And he takes particular

pleasure in hurting whores. Something he and I have in common.” His gaze raked over her and he patted his pistol. “As you well know.”

She shivered. Yes, she’d learned that lesson well. She closed her hand around the derringer hidden in the folds of her skirt. One shot. Two men. Two men with guns. Even if she shot one of them, she was still dead. And so was everyone upstairs.

Slowly she let the gun fall back into her pocket and sucked in a fortifying breath. All she had to do was wait for her chance. “What do you want, Alexander?”

He smiled. “Why you, of course.”

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# Chapter 12



PARSONS Poured four snifters of brandy and grinned like a shit-eatin' possum. "By God, that felt good. Seeing that bastard chained to an Army tent makes me happier than I've been in weeks."

Sinclair nodded. "But you do realize the trouble isn't over. There are other thieves, other enemies. The Joy Line will still be trying to stop your progress. That part isn't over. You still have dozens of miles of track to lay before a winner is declared."

Parsons waved his hand. "Bah, I know, but this is about more than railroad competition. This is about besting an old enemy. This is about revenge against Moreton." He held up his glass. "Cheers."

Sinclair *clicked* glasses with the men, ready for the celebratory drink to be over. He wanted to find Alexander. When they'd gone to the railcar with the arrest orders, the bastard had stomped off to send an urgent telegram to Moreton's lawyers. But he should have been done with that by now, should have been at the door complaining by now. So where was he?

"Major!" Private Collins busted into Parsons' railcar. "Come quick! Devil's Gate is on fire!"

"What?" Sin dropped his brandy, pushed Parsons out of the way, ran out the door, then jumped down the iron stairway.

"Where's Eden?" His heart pounded in tempo with his feet on the dirt streets, Private Collins hot on his heels.

"Don't know, sir. The building next to the saloon caught fire. When I went inside to tell Miss Eden, she was gone."

*Gone?* His stomach twisted.

"And, sir? Corporal Ballard was lying outside on the back porch. Stabbed."

Sin's legs went weak, cold fear skittered down his back. Hell. Eden wouldn't leave. Not unless she was forced. And Ballard...*Damn it.* Ballard was the best man serving under him.

"Is Ballard alive?"

"Yes, sir. He's at the doc's now." Collins sounded winded as they entered Main Street.

The sight that met Sinclair stole his breath. Devil's Gate was fully engulfed, a line of people and soldiers passing bucket after bucket of water to dump on the flames.

Shit! It was chaos. So damned smoky he couldn't see ten feet in front of him. Orange shadows danced over soot covered faces and people yelled and

called for more water from every direction.

He searched the crowd, looking for Eden, hoping against hope he would see her in the water brigade. Walking down the line, he asked everyone if they'd seen her.

No one knew where she was.

"Major!"

He whirled. He knew that voice.

Alice ran toward him, her wrinkled face black from smoke.

"Where's Eden?"

She caught him by the arm, her entire body shaking. "I-I don't know. Mmm-Hmm, I know it's something bad though. I can feel it."

"Are you sure she's not still inside?" He could barely say the words. If she was inside, she was dead.

"No. Me and Hank both came downstairs to help her carry her things. We looked all over the kitchen and downstairs rooms. She was gone." Alice started crying, tears trailing tracks down her cheeks. "It's Alexander. I know it is. He's got her."

Hearing the words aloud sent hate spiraling through him. If Alexander hurt one hair on Eden's head, he would beg long and hard before Sinclair put him out of his misery.

"I'll find her. Don't worry." He patted Alice's hand.

He turned but stopped mid-stride. Where the hell would Alexander take her?

*"I can hardly be expected to sleep in squalor much less entertain. We'll take the railcar for our quarters."* Alexander's patronizing words played through Sinclair's head.

Steven's railcar.

Damn it! Eden had been right beside Parsons' car all the time.

He broke into a hard run toward the edge of town, every muscle in his body straining to move faster. As he reached the rail tracks, lanterns burned in car windows. The closer he got, shadows could be seen moving inside.

He drew his pistol and ran over to Parsons' car. Edging along the far side, he flattened his back against the rough wood until he reached the coupler.

He tried to quiet his breathing. Everything seemed eerily quiet. The sounds of the fire and the people faded until Sinclair could pick out sounds around him.

The breeze. A cricket. His damned pounding heart...*voices.*

A man. "...think I'd forget..."

A woman. "Go to Hell." *Eden!*

Sinclair crouched down and scuttled between the cars, slipping to the stairs.

*Crack!* The sound of flesh hitting flesh split the air. "Shut-up, bitch."

Hatred flamed inside Sin, as hot and violent as the fire in town. And just as that fire was destroying the saloon, he was going to destroy Alexander.

Slowly he crept up the stairs. Taking a deep breath, he said a quick prayer.

Then kicked the door open.

"Sin, no!" Eden's eyes were huge, her face red from being slapped, her hair in a tangled mess hanging down over her shoulders.

"Well, hello, Major." Alexander forced Eden in front him, one hand over her mouth, the other pressing his pistol to her head. "I wondered how long it would take you to figure out where we were. Not the smartest man in the army, are you?" He smiled. "But you're finally here, and someone has been waiting for you."

Eden's eyes widened, tears falling from the green pools. Her brows raised in alarm, her gaze darting to—

Sin whirled just as Len stepped from behind the door.

"Told you you'd be sorry, Major." He raised his pistol.

"Nmmmmmmnnnnn!" Eden yelled from behind Alexander's hand.

"Aw, it seems the fair Eden has feelings for you, Major." Alexander laughed. "Kill him, Len."

"Yes, sir. Outside?"

"Yes, you stupid son-of-a-bitch. I don't want blood all over—"

*Blam!*

Sinclair put a bullet through Len's forehead, erasing the intent line of concentration forming as the big man listened to Alexander.

Dropping to the floor, Sinclair rolled behind a large, leather chair and took aim for a spot between Alexander's cold eyes.

Damn it. The bastard was using Eden's body as protection.

A sick fear tightened Sin's gut. He couldn't risk hitting her, couldn't risk losing her.

"Let her go, Moreton, or the next bullet goes in your head." Sin tried to catch her gaze, tried to convey strength, courage...How much he loved her.



All with one look.

Alexander chuckled. “I don’t think you’re willing to risk a bullet going into her pretty head.” He pressed the barrel into Eden’s temple until she whimpered, her hands flailing at her side, clawing through her skirt. “No, there’s a better way to solve this problem—”

A muffled *crack* stole Alexander’s words. He inhaled sharply, his hands falling free from Eden’s throat as he staggered backward.

“Problem solved.” Eden backed away from him, a small derringer in her hand. “Isn’t that what you’d like to say?”

*Christ! She’d shot the son-of-a-bitch.* Sin jumped forward, pulling Eden farther away from the crazed man.

“You...*shot*...” Alexander rasped as his eyes rolled back in his head. He fell back onto the desk, blood seeping through his shirt as he rattled his last breath.

Eden dropped her gun, her eyes wide, her face drained of color.

“Oh, God, God, God, God...” she whispered.

Sinclair holstered his pistol and strode to her side, wrapping her in his embrace. She felt good. Better than good. Damn it, she felt like heaven. Relief flooded through him, his legs feeling a little like jelly. All the battles he’d seen and none had scared him as badly as the last five minutes.

He hugged her a little closer. “It’s fine, everything’s fine now.” The words fanned her tangled hair.

“No, no it’s not.” Wiggling, she tried to pull away. “I’ve got to leave town. I need a horse. They’ll put me in jail!”

Like hell. Just like that, the feeling of relief was gone. Whether he thought so or not, she was considered a prostitute. And she’d just shot a senator’s son.

Sin locked her in his arms. “Shhh, you’re not going to jail. I will ride through hell and high-water to protect you.”

“There’s nothing you can do.”

He gave her a shake. “You’ve got to learn to trust me! I won’t let—”

Footsteps scrambled up the stairs. Sin dropped his hands and grabbed the derringer, pocketing it in his coat.

“Major Bradford?”

“Sinclair?”

“What the hell?” Parsons, Stevens, and Father froze in the doorway, all gape-mouthed. “What has happened here? And who is this?” Parsons eyed

Len's body.

"He's—" Eden began.

Sin stepped in front of her. "His name is Len. He was working for Moreton. Spying."

Parsons nodded. "Good job, Major. By God, you'll have the whole gang subdued before the week is up!"

"What about the blood all over my new wool rug?" Stevens scowled.

"Now, Henry, I think ending the trouble for the Katy is more important than blood stained floors." Parsons turned his back to the younger man.

"Was Moreton's son in on the sabotage too?"

*You bet your ass.* "Yes, sir, you're exactly correct. And apparently he took a liking to Miz Gabrielli this afternoon. He and Len set her saloon on fire and kidnapped her." *Just keep talking. It sounded believable so far.* "I saw them dragging her down the street when I went to see to the fire. When I arrived, Alexander ordered Len to kill me. Fortunately I'm a faster gun than either of them supposed."

"But I—" Eden started to protest.

Sin gave her hand a hard squeeze.

"Miz Gabrielli is nearly sick with shock. I'm going to get her to the doctor. I'll send my men to clean up here and gather the bodies for Mr. Stevens."

Parsons looked around, shaking his head. "See that you do. Stevens will nag like a wife if his car isn't restored."

Stevens frowned.

Sinclair bit back a grin. "Yes, sir. I'll see that it's cleaned."

Father narrowed his eyes. "Let me walk you and the young lady into town, Sinclair." His voice offered no chance of argument.

Shit, Father knew something wasn't quite right. He'd always been able to spot a lie. Made him a damn good judge—and a damn impossible father.

Father followed them outside, then down the stairs, moving to Eden's side as they walked down the street.

"Son, you always were a horrible liar." He kept his gaze straight ahead. "So I will assume we are not going to see the doctor."

Sinclair's mind whirled for a believable answer. None came. "No, sir."

Eden looked from one man to the other, fear tightening her expression. Sinclair entwined their fingers, then gave her a wink. Her beautiful mouth trembled a bit as she tried to smile.

“I’m also going to assume that story you told in there isn’t the whole truth.” Father’s voice sounded intrigued instead of angry.

“Not exactly, sir.”

“It’s my fault, Judge Bradford!” Eden dragged her heels until they were forced to stop walking.

“Eden...” Sinclair turned her in his arms. He was not letting her give up now.

“Son,” Father touched his sleeve, “let’s go into your tent to discuss this. I have a feeling this is a private, *family* matter...” He offered his arm to Eden. “Young lady, I believe you’re to be my daughter-in-law. I can see from the way Sinclair looks at you that he’s smitten.” He smiled. “Of course it takes a special woman to come West and start a business.”

“I—yes, thank you.” Eden glanced toward the saloon. “Not much left of it now, I’m afraid.”

Alice ran down the street, her graying hair falling down her back like a crazed woman. “Girl, are you all right?” She patted down Eden’s arms as if checking for broken bones.

Eden caught her hands. “I’m fine. Don’t worry. Are you and the others safe?”

“Mmm-Hmm. We all got out. Couldn’t save your clothes though.”

“I’ll buy her some new clothes in the morning.” Sinclair wrapped an arm around Eden’s shoulders.

“Mmm-Hmm.” Alice cocked a bushy brow. “Well, see you do. I’ll be at Hank’s if you need me.”

“Wait. Have you heard how Corporal Ballard is doing?” Sinclair held his breath, waiting for the worst.

“Doc says he’ll make it. Stitched him up and he’s sleeping now.”

Sinclair gave a long sigh. “Good. Thank you.”

“Mmm-Hmm.” Alice waddled away, toward the waiting Hank.

Father stood studying the smoking remains of the saloon. “It doesn’t seem fair you lost your investment due to malicious intent of young Moreton.”

Eden turned, her gaze stubborn. “No, sir, Judge, but I’ve found life is hardly ever fair.”

Worry bubbled in Sinclair’s gut. What was Father up to?

“It seems to me Moreton’s estate should pay you damages...”

Her eyes widened. “Can you make him do that?”

“I can. And I will.” He grinned, then offered his arm again. “You probably don’t know this, but I’ve always admired the kind of person who would come West and build a life.” They started walking. “Full of adventure, I suppose. Like Sinclair. He’s made us proud with his accomplishments out here. He’s serving under...”

Sinclair stood rooted to the street while Father and Eden strolled toward the tents. Tears knotted in his throat. All this time his parents had been proud of him and he’d never known. *Because I was too stubborn to talk to them, too stubborn to visit them. Too stubborn to trust in love.*

He wasn’t making that mistake again. He swallowed hard.

“Eden?”

She turned and held out her hand, her expression full of hope and trust and love.

Striding forward, he clasped her fingers. “I’ll love you for forever,” he whispered.

*Two nights later...*

Sin and Eden lay snuggled on his small cot. His heat soaked into her tired bones, chasing away the chill just as his love chased away the nightmares of everything that had transpired the last three days.

There was nothing left of Devil’s Gate but charred wood and tin, all of her possessions gone, and yet it really didn’t matter. Sophia was safe and neither Senator Moreton nor Alexander could hurt anyone again.

Somehow amid all the lies and evilness, she’d gained self respect and the love of the best man God ever made, the man who currently trailed a finger down her bare arm and brushed a kiss to her forehead, one to each eyelid, one to the end of her nose.

Her insides went to mush. How could simple acceptance feel so wonderful? How could she of all people be so happy? *What if it doesn’t last?* Doubt invaded her thoughts. What if Sophia didn’t want to live here?

No, she would. Everything would be fine.

“You’re frowning,” Sin whispered. “Tell me what’s wrong.” He leaned over her, shadows from the lone candle dancing on the canvas wall.

“Nothing...really.”

He cocked his dark brow.

“Aren’t you excited about the trip tomorrow? About getting married?”

“Yes, I’m just a little worried about seeing Sophia again. I’ve only been able to visit her a few times over the years, and she doesn’t know how I’ve

made money.”

“She knows you’ve made sure she was cared for. That’s all that matters.”

Eden nodded. “But what if she’s not happy here? Ladore isn’t exactly St. Louis.”

“No, but it’s got one thing St. Louis doesn’t. *You*.” He winked. “That’s enough to make me want to stay.”

“Really?” She leaned up on one elbow, tilting her head so she could see his expression. “You’d be willing to stay?” She pushed down the fear he’d hate her idea.

“What do you mean?”

“If—when—your duty is done with the army, could you be happy living here, making a home here?”

“Why do you ask?”

She swallowed and pressed forward in a rush. “Alice wants to buy the Ladore Hotel and restaurant. She wants me to put up half the money. You and I—and Sophia and Bryan—could have the entire top floor to turn into our home. Alice wants the back room off the kitchen for herself. There’s a perfect spot in the side yard for a large garden.”

Sin looked at her like she’d lost her mind.

“You hate the idea.” Why was she surprised? He never said he wanted to stay in Ladore past his army assignment.

“No. I don’t.” He grinned, the crease running down his whiskered cheek. “I was approached today by several of the business men.” He blew a long breath. “They’ve ask me to stay on and become the sheriff—once the Katy moves on. I’ll have to fulfill my duties to the army for a few more weeks but then...”

“Really? What did you tell the business men?”

“Nothing yet. I wanted to talk to you first.”

Warmth filled her, an overwhelming feeling of rightness. He considered her opinion before making a decision. No one had ever done that. *Ever*. No man had ever been willing to risk his good name, his career...all for her. This man who abhorred lying, had lied for her. Taken the blame for something she did.

She brushed a kiss to his cheek. “I’ll be happy wherever you are.” And she would. Whether she lived as an army wife moving from fort to fort or as a sheriff’s wife here in Ladore, as long as she had Sin and the children,

she would be happy. Hell, she *was* happy. If some people in Ladore couldn't accept who she'd been, what she'd done before marrying Sin, then she didn't need or want those people as friends—or guests at her hotel.

“I feel the same.” He lowered his head and nuzzled her neck.

“So are we buying...*God, it was hard to talk with him doing that...* a hotel?”

“Sounds like it.” He slipped his hand between their bodies and unbuttoned her chemise, kissing his way over the swell of her breasts.

“Sin, what are you doing?” she teased.

She could feel him smile against her skin.

“If you don't know, then I'm not doing it correctly.”

“Oh, I've got no complaints. I trust you know what to do.”

He raised his dark head, his question plain on his face.

“Yes,” she whispered, “I trust you. With my body, my pleasure, my heart and soul. There's no one I trust more.”

He swallowed hard. Twice. The air between them thickened until they were sharing the same breath. “I trust you too.” He brushed his thumb over her bottom lip. “Something I never thought I'd say to a woman—especially one so gifted at omitting the truth.” He grinned.

She swatted his shoulder. “You'd best settle down.”

“Or what?” He rolled them until she sat astraddle his hips.

“Let me show you...”

And she did.



THE END

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# KATE'S OUTLAW



E.E. Burke



*The heart is the most vulnerable captive...*

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# Prologue



AUGUST 1, 1870,

Ladore, Kansas

"The Indians call it a smoking dragon." Judge Levi Parsons gestured to a framed image of a locomotive hanging in his private railcar.

Kate leaned forward in her chair for a better look. The woodcut print, commissioned somewhat prematurely to celebrate the completion of the *Missouri, Kansas & Texas Railway*, featured an eight-wheel, diamond-stack engine of the type her father had purchased for his railroad.

Two months back, "the Katy" had won what pundits deemed an unwinnable race against their rival. Yet, the tracks ended sixteen miles inside Indian Territory, three hundred miles from the intended terminus in Texas.

"Smoking dragon, eh?" Henry Stevens smoothed his hand over his beard as if to hide a smile. He unfolded himself from where he sat beside her and moved to his boss's side to admire the artwork. "I can see how savages unfamiliar with the railroad might mistake a steam engine for a mythical beast."

"A beast that will devour them if they continue to stand in our way," her father boomed.

Kate rolled her eyes. Lord, but she was tired of his chest beating. He'd been on the warpath ever since his Chief of Operations, Henry, had given him a report on the construction progress, or lack thereof.

Her father pounded his fist on the desk. "We don't have to put up with the Indians' stalling and ridiculous demonstrations. We'll arm the workers, conceal cannons in the freight cars—"

"Cannons? Do you want to start a war?" Unable to sit any longer, she gripped the bolstered chair arm and came to her feet. "These savages, as you call them, are the most civilized of the Five Civilized Tribes. The Cherokee leaders are educated men. We won't get anywhere by threatening them. We must negotiate."

Henry threw a wry smile over his shoulder. "We wouldn't have to negotiate if the Army backed us."

She restrained the urge to roll her eyes a second time. That “the Army” was Henry's answer to their problem was further proof of why she ought to be in charge. If she were a man, she would be. Her gender she couldn't change. However, she might change her father's low opinion of her if she could find a peaceable way to remove the obstacle preventing his success.

"The Army won't move one peg over the border without explicit orders. It's unlikely they'll invade."

"Invade?" Henry barked a laugh. He crossed to a map pinned to the opposite wall showing the existing and proposed railroad route, and put his finger on the block letters *Cherokee Nation*. "Our land, Kate. We won it, fair and square."

"You're wrong, Henry. That isn't our land. Only a portion for right-of-way was awarded through land grants." She crossed to an open window framed by velvet curtains with gold tassels and gazed out at a sea of switch grass scorched by the afternoon sun. To a young woman who'd grown up in the city, this wild, untamed land should seem foreign. Oddly enough, it suited her personality much better than stodgy parlors and glittering ballrooms. Even the air felt different. Out here, the winds blew hot—although no hotter than the air these two men were spewing. All they did was growl and grumble about how to intimidate their new neighbors. Construction would never get moving again if they didn't learn they couldn't walk over everybody.

"Not a single acre of that land will be ours unless the courts uphold the government's right to give it to us. Until then, it belongs to the Cherokee—and we're trespassing."

Henry rolled up his shirtsleeves. He'd already shed his coat when the temperature in the car soared to new heights. "Kate, you sound like an Indian agent."

"I'm merely pointing out that continuing to claim we own the land isn't going to get us anywhere."

She turned to her father, who'd returned to his chair behind the desk. He defied the weather in a three-piece suit with his vest buttoned. "What do you think our chances are of getting those land grants?"

"About the same as getting you to return to New York."

The barb sank deep into Kate's chest. Her father might as well come out and say he had no use for her. Still, she couldn't allow his disregard to drive her away. Finally, she had a perfect opportunity to show him that she was as

capable as any man, more so in this situation because she understood the art of negotiation.

She folded her arms over the bodice of a utilitarian jacket. He disliked her manner of dress, too, but it was far more practical out here to wear bloomers beneath her skirt rather than bustles and petticoats. "If you're basing your odds on my departure, then I would say your chances are nil."

Her father shook his head. "I'm holding out hope, provided the Indians don't prove to be as stubborn as you are."

Need she remind him that she'd invested her money in this railroad and was heir to whatever was left of it after they got the blasted thing built? She had a right to have a say in how it was run and had some good ideas, too.

"Persistence is one of the more useful traits I inherited from you, Father."

"An admirable trait," Henry said, leaping into his self-appointed role as arbitrator. "So is prudence. You know how dangerous it is out here. Until we entered Indian Territory, we had the Army to protect us. As you said, we can't count on that moving forward."

He yielded to her while remaining firmly in her father's camp. Perhaps she'd underestimated his talent for shrewd diplomacy. "What's your point, Henry?"

"My point is, Indian Territory isn't a safe place for a woman. Even one as brave as you." In two long strides, he was next to her and taking her arm as if he were going to lead her somewhere. Perhaps back to her seat.

Kate withdrew from his grasp. Her suitor was quick with the compliments, but made little effort to champion her cause. His excuse? He couldn't afford to antagonize his boss. Things would be different, he argued, once they were married. She wasn't so sure. "Mrs. McGrady lives with her husband at the worksite. You don't have an issue with that."

Henry dismissed her argument with a wave. "I couldn't care less where she lives, as long as she doesn't become a distraction for the rest of the crew. And she's the foreman's wife, so she's his problem."

"I am not someone's *problem*. I can take care of myself."

Her father huffed. "You nearly got yourself blown up in New Chicago."

Kate's face heated at the reminder of the near disaster when a protesting farm widow had strapped dynamite around her chest. "That wasn't my fault. The woman was mentally deranged."

“Does it matter whose fault it was? The explosion stopped construction for a week.”

Did he care that his daughter had been spared by the grace of God and a brave friend? If her own sire thought so little of her, no wonder few men found much to recommend her, save an attractive inheritance.

Kate put on a wry smile to hide the hurt. "Rest assured, I won't suggest dynamite as a bargaining tool."

"I should hope not," Henry interjected. "Whiskey works much better."

The muscles in her neck tensed, drawing her shoulders upward. She could put up with Henry's arrogance, but she had a hard time accepting his questionable practices. "Why is it when we are faced with an obstacle you opt for the most expedient solution. No matter that it might cost more in the long run. Like those inexpensive rails that will have to be replaced."

Henry's amused expression vanished. "Those inexpensive rails enabled us to win this race."

"Kate." The way her father growled her name made it clear he was losing patience.

She lifted her hands in surrender. Berating his trusted operations chief for past decisions wouldn't win his favor. "Yes, we won the race. But serving whiskey to the Tribal Council won't get us to Texas. We'll draw the ire of federal agents, and make the Cherokee leaders more suspicious."

Henry sank into the chair nearest the desk and stretched out his long legs. He laced his fingers over his chest, looking unconcerned. "Honestly, Kate. Who's going to care if we throw a party?"

*Perdition.* Why did she expend energy trying to change Henry's mind? A lost cause if she ever saw one. Her father was the one she needed to win over.

Levi Parsons was a wealthy man, but he'd sunk everything into the Katy. If the railroad faltered, he'd be made a pauper and a laughingstock. They could still succeed without having to sacrifice integrity, but it would take doing things differently than what had been done over the past year.

Kate approached the desk as he continued to sort through papers. "Father, I've lobbied for the suffrage movement, I understand politics. And I've been reading up on treaties governing Indian lands. Allow *me* to meet with the Tribal Council and broker an agreement."

Her father picked up an official-looking document and scowled. "Where do you suppose a bunch of savages get the money to hire Washington

lawyers? I thought they were poor."

She wrestled for control of her temper. Either he sparred with her or ignored her, anything to avoid taking her seriously. "An anonymous donor must be supporting their cause. My guess would be your adversary, Mr. Joy. He was most unhappy his railroad lost the race. But we can't wait for the courts to decide the issue. We must negotiate—"

"Precisely." Her father slapped the paper on the desk. "We can't wait. We're bleeding money every day we sit here."

"I feel certain we could reach an acceptable compromise if you would —"

"Come to the party next week, Kate." Henry cupped her shoulders, which he meant as an affectionate gesture, she presumed. Sadly, she felt nothing save discomfort. He wasn't unattractive, and as aggravating as he could be at times, he could also be very charming. If she could work up tender feelings, marriage wouldn't seem so...distasteful. As it was, she couldn't bring herself to encourage him. Not even if her father dearly wanted the match. She drew a line at what she would do to gain his approval.

Kate twisted out of Henry's grasp. "I don't wish to be part of something I can't support."

Henry's smile turned indulgent. "You can talk to the members of the Tribal Council there. They prefer to negotiate in social settings."

So she could speak to them at a party but not across the bargaining table?

"There's nothing wrong with being social, as long as you're not using liquor as a negotiating tool."

"Of course not." Henry spread his hands, indicating agreement. He placated her. Still, she seized the opportunity he provided.

"I'm glad we see eye to eye, Henry. With Father's permission, I'll arrange a follow-up meeting with the Tribal Council after the event."

Her father leaned back in his chair, stroking a chest-length gray beard, looking thoughtful.

Kate boldly met his cerulean gaze, another trait they shared, along with a head for business. Something he hadn't yet acknowledged.

"Women don't negotiate treaties," he stated.

"It's not a treaty. It's a business agreement."

"Women don't negotiate business agreements."

She'd turned a small trust from her grandmother into a tidy fortune—more than most men could claim—and then had invested the bulk into the railroad. "They do if they have ownership in the business."

"You don't own this business."

Wasn't she his heir? Or did he plan to leave everything to Henry? "But I've made a large investment, and I wish to play a vital role."

An awkward silence filled the sweltering car. Kate's scalp grew damp. She glanced over at Henry, who studied his nails. Now he was silent, when she could use his support.

Her father stood, bracing his fingers on the desk. He did that when he was working up to a storm. "Mary Katherine, your only role is to support Mr. Stevens. While you're at it, I expect you to stay out of trouble. If you cost me any more time or money, I swear I will personally box you up and ship you out on the next train bound for New York."

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# Chapter 1



*AUGUST 10, 1870*

*Territory of the Five Civilized Tribes*

*Uk-tena* crouched on metal rails with its nose pointed south, directly at the heart of the *Tsa-la-gi* Nation. Tonight it didn't hiss or spew smoke, as usual, but lay silent as a predator anticipating a kill.

Jake crept along the dark side of the locomotive, which his people had named after a mythical serpent. No one believed the engine had special powers. Everyone knew it was just a machine. But like its namesake, the *smoking dragon* had been created as a tool of domination. Its owners were the real monsters—and they had to be stopped.

As clouds skated across the sky, light from a full moon struck the engine's iron skin, turning it silver.

Jake crouched lower to make himself small, an impossible task when he was taller than most men, including the one in front of him. He stood out when he'd rather fit in.

Passing between two cars, he glimpsed a bonfire on the other side. Orange flames leapt above the heads of dancers, their writhing silhouettes casting eerie shadows over a patch of ground cleared for the celebration. Strains of fiddle music mixed with shouts of drunken revelry.

The railroad chief's party had been underway since sunset and wouldn't end anytime soon. The honored guests, members of the Cherokee Tribal Council, hadn't attended, and they had warned their people to stay away. But there were always those happy to take advantage of free liquor.

Jake and Charley weren't here to drink. They'd come to steal the payroll.

The rhythmic crunch of footsteps came from the other side of the train.

Charley halted. His black clothes and dark coloring concealed him, but Jake was close enough to see his cousin's fingers curl around the handle of his revolver.

The gun slithered out of the holster.

Jake's heart kicked in his chest. If his cousin started shooting with all these armed workers around, they'd both get killed. Of course, if they were caught stealing, they'd be hung from the nearest tree. Didn't matter that they

were on Cherokee land where the whites didn't have jurisdiction. The railroad workers wouldn't wait around for Indian patrols, or turn over their prisoners to Indian courts. His people didn't recognize white courts, either.

In the Territory, laws were ignored, as were boundaries. That's why he and Charley had no choice but to take extreme measures.

Holding his position, he peered beneath the train.

Denim-clad legs scissored past. As the footfalls faded, he released a slow breath.

By thunder, this job would be his last. After tonight, they ought to have adequate funds, and his outlaw days would be over.

"There, at the end, the fanciest car," he whispered. "The workers said the owner brought the payroll with him."

A moment later, Jake swung up onto the metal platform, taking care not to tread loudly, and eased the door open. The dark compartment remained quiet.

"No one here. I'll cover the windows. You find a lamp."

His cousin slipped past. A match rasped, followed by a sulfurous smell, then a soft glow filled the compartment.

Charley lifted the lamp and light splashed across his features, making a raised scar on his cheek more noticeable. He'd been struck in the face with a saber and the poorly healed injury pulled his mouth down in a permanent grimace. The worse scars, however, were the ones that couldn't be seen.

Circling the room, Jake pulled down tasseled curtains rolled up on brass rods. The glass window reflected his grim expression. His aunt's home had no glass for the windows. No fancy curtains. Her small parcel of land couldn't mean that much to the railroad, yet the rich white men wanted it anyway. The People were justified in fighting to keep what belonged to them, by whatever means possible.

"Where do you suppose they stashed the money?" Charley rasped.

Jake scanned the oak-paneled car. Papers and maps were scattered across a desk positioned in front of bookcases. Behind, a partial wall concealed what he supposed were sleeping quarters. The last time they'd stolen the payroll, the money had been kept in a safe in the mail car. No sign of a safe in here.

"Maybe it's in the desk." He checked the drawers—locked—then ran his hands underneath, feeling for a release that might trigger a secret

compartment. "Nothing. I'll bet he keeps the key on him. We'll have to pry it open."

Pulling a knife, Jake went to work on the top drawer.

Charley flipped open the lid on a fancy cigar box and stuffed the contents inside his coat. He threw a frowning glance over his shoulder. "Hurry up. I hear something."

From outside came a scrape on the metal platform.

Jake scrambled to his feet.

"Stay there. Distract them," Charley commanded in a rough whisper. He pressed his back against the wall to the left of the door and pulled a knife from a sheath in his boot.

Jake shook his head. *No bloodshed.* That was the deal.

The knob turned.

A woman stepped inside, one with hair as bright as a sunset.

Recognition jolted through him.

*Redbird.*

He had only seen her from afar, but there was no mistaking her fiery crown. This was the same woman who'd been following the railroad for months on the arm of the man the workers call *Chief*.

Fear flickered across her face. Rather than screaming, as he expected, she leveled a stern look. "What are you doing in here? This is a private office."

Charley eased up behind her, his lips pressed in a thin line.

Jake's tensed. Charley wouldn't harm a woman...

The knife flashed.

"*Tsali*, no!"

Confusion flickered across Redbird's face at Jake's cry.

The next second, Charley clapped a hand over her mouth and jerked her against him, putting the razor-sharp blade to her throat.

Jake placed his palms on the desktop, prepared to leap over and wrestle the weapon out of Charley's hand. He checked himself. If he startled her, she might bolt, and his cousin's ruthless expression made it clear she wouldn't get away.

Redbird's pale eyes rounded with terror.

"*We have no need to hurt her,*" Jake spoke calmly to his cousin in *Tsala-gi*. "*We agreed, no bloodshed.*"

Charley scowled and jerked his chin at the door. *"Someone might follow."*

Jake forestalled further argument to peer outside. If one of the men came looking for her, it would make matters worse, and things were bad enough already. He hadn't counted on anyone coming back to the car in the midst of a party, much less a woman.

No men lingered nearby and the only sounds were strains of music and drunken laughter.

He shut the door quietly. *"Nobody followed. We can't risk staying here to find the money. We'll tie her up and get out of here."*

Charley flicked a dark glance at the petrified woman in his arms. *"She's seen us. She'll ruin everything."*

*"Only if they connect us with the other theft."*

*"You know they will if she squawks."*

Redbird's frightened eyes darted back and forth as they spoke what to her must sound like gibberish. She was smart to keep her wits about her, but it wouldn't be long before she lost her composure and screamed for help.

*"I'll cut her throat and we can run. No one will be the wiser."* Charley made the threat as casually as if he were discussing the weather.

Jake's gut twisted with revulsion at the suggestion. Kill a woman? Out of the question. Then again, they couldn't let her go.

Charley flexed his wrist and the knife pressed closer to her throat where the skin was pale and soft. His cousin's patience, which was never long, had come to end.

She'd run out of time.

Jake blurted out the only idea that came to mind. *"Give her to me."*

*"You?"* Charley sneered. *"What are you going to do with her?"*

His cousin's tone implied he wouldn't know what to do with a woman. He knew all too well, and though he'd never admit it, he had noticed this one.

Eyes as blue as the summer sky, milky skin sprinkled with sandy freckles, and her hair—he'd never seen the like—coils of fire. She'd tried, without success, to subdue it into a thick knot. His fingers itched to touch it and learn the texture. Whatever it was about her, whether her exotic beauty or knowing she was forbidden, just thinking about having her sent a shaft of lust straight through him.

His mouth went dry. He'd never forced a woman, and he wasn't about to start now. So, what was he going to do with her? *"I'll make her man pay us to return her."*

Charley's obsidian eyes filled with respect, something Jake hadn't seen in a long time, and hadn't expected to see again. *"Good thinking, Wa-ya."*

Good? It was a terrible idea. The worst he'd ever had...and only marginally better than Charley's suggestion. But it was the only way he'd keep Redbird safe.

Untying the scarf around his neck, he used it to gag her. He tied her hands with a braided leather strip from his hatband. His thumb brushed smooth skin on the inside of her wrist. Male awareness buzzed through him. He fought the unsettling pull on his senses. He'd never been attracted to a white woman before, even though white blood flowed through his veins; blood that wasn't as strong as his Cherokee blood.

Frowning to hide his reaction, he whipped out his gun, stuck the barrel into her side and dragged her to the door. He'd rather not frighten her, but he couldn't risk giving her the idea that she might get away. His cousin would sink a knife in her back before she ran five feet.

Lively music still played, and no one appeared to be paying attention to the last car on the train. Charley doused the light. Jake nudged Redbird down the metal stairs, retracing his steps. As they neared the engine, he veered into the high grass.

She balked, making a distressed sound in the back of her throat.

He moved the gun's barrel to her temple. Not cocking the hammer for fear he'd inadvertently pull the trigger.

Charley spun around, glaring at her. He took a threatening step toward them. Moonlight glinted off the knife blade.

Alarmed, Jake holstered his gun and slung the woman over his shoulder. The sooner they were out of here, the better. Before all hell broke loose.

He took off across the field, his captive wriggling like a fish. Her frantic movements caused him to stumble, but he managed to remain on his feet and kept running. By the time he reached the trees where they'd hobbled their horses, sweat slicked his skin.

After he set her on her feet, she made a retching sound. Unless she choked, he wasn't removing that gag.

Charley swung into his saddle. His horse danced, impatient as its master. *"Make it quick."*

*"You go ahead. I have to get her situated."*

*"Strap her on like a side of venison."*

Jake shot his cousin a black look. He wasn't carrying a woman face down across his horse's withers. With a rope, he tied her bound hands to the saddle horn. Then he mounted and hoisted her up in front of him. If she mounted behind him, she might slip off or inadvertently kick and Thundercloud would buck. The horse didn't like heels to his flanks.

He pushed aside her voluminous skirt, expecting to wrestle petticoats. She wasn't wearing any. Instead, she had on leggings similar to those worn by his aunts when they worked in the fields. Only these were made from wool not buckskin. Odd, but convenient.

Shifting in the saddle, he tried to get comfortable. All he accomplished was bringing the rounded softness of her rear against his crotch, which sent a river of heat coursing through him.

Now he wished she had more layers.

Curse her too-thin leggings and curse whatever ill luck had brought her into the railcar at the same moment he and Charley had been searching for the payroll. Had she stayed at the party like everyone else, they wouldn't be in this fix.

Not entirely true. He'd opened his mouth and claimed her. That made her safety his responsibility. He had to protect her, while at the same time preventing her from revealing their secret. Once they were clear of danger, he could think straight enough to figure it out.

He wrapped his free arm around her waist and guided his horse into the trees.

Deep in the forest, the night turned blacker, along with his mood. He could navigate the woods blindfolded, but he'd never find his way out of the dark place where his soul resided. With this act, he'd signed his death warrant. If she came to harm, his damnation was certain.

Overhead, an owl hooted.

Redbird trembled in his arms. Was she afraid of *u-gu-ku*?

Owls were reputed to be ghosts or witches in disguise. Old superstitions...but Jake grew uneasy nonetheless. The owl seemed a bad omen.

He had only taken Redbird to save her life, and he would return her, just as soon as he could figure out how to manage it without risking the mission.

He couldn't allow her to ruin their plans. Too many people depended on him.

She clutched the saddle horn, holding herself as far away from him as possible. They had a long ride ahead and she'd be in agony by the time they reached the hideout if she remained rigid.

He drew her back, using gentle pressure to urge her to relax against him. She finally did, which brought his nose into contact with a mass of soft, curly hair. He inhaled a pleasant lemony fragrance that reminded him of a plant growing in his aunt's garden.

Did Redbird smell like this all over?

She jerked forward, at the same time ramming her heels into the horse's sides.

The stallion bucked.

Jake struggled to stay in the saddle and keep his captive from toppling off. He forced her hips down and barked a warning in *Tsa-la-gi*. She might not understand the words, but she got his meaning and stopped fighting.

What had he been thinking to allow himself to become distracted? Better start paying attention or he'd be on his ass in the dirt while she rode away on his stallion. Then Charley would catch her, or he'd shoot her. He wouldn't allow her to escape.

Beyond the woods, the land turned rocky. The moon's silvery light reflected off the boulders on the steep terrain. They were getting closer to the river. Soon, they would reach the remote bluffs that concealed countless caves, including their hideout.

His cousin set a grueling pace. Charley wouldn't slow down for his own comfort, much less Redbird's.

Around daybreak, Redbird started to squirm.

Jake clenched his jaw. Sitting this close, there wasn't a damn thing he could do about his body's inconvenient reaction to her bottom rubbing against his increasingly hard prick. Was she tormenting him on purpose, trying to distract him? She wasn't kicking or bothering the horse. Perhaps she needed to relieve herself.

*"Tsa-li, hold up. She needs a rest."*

So did he.

After Jake dismounted, he lifted the woman out of the saddle and set her on the ground, taking his hands off her as quickly as possible. Every muscle

in his body had knotted up, and he ached for a release he wouldn't get unless he went off somewhere and took care of it.

"*There...*" He motioned to a clump of bushes to make his meaning understood.

They hadn't spoken a word of English the entire time. He didn't want her to know he understood her language because once he took off that gag she would try to talk to him. He didn't want to talk to her. In fact, he didn't want to look at her. And he sure as hell didn't want to feel her soft body pressed up against him for one more second.

Redbird raised her bound hands and behind the gag her face twisted with an expression conveying misery. She couldn't take care of her needs with her hands tied.

Jake unknotted the leather bonds. Beneath the cords, her wrists were rubbed raw. She'd done that herself by twisting her hands, trying to get away. What did he expect? She didn't know their intentions, naturally feared what she didn't understand. He couldn't reassure her without words, so there was no way around it.

"Go take care of yourself. Then come back. If you behave, I won't tie you up again. But if you try to get away, I'll strap you facedown over my horse."



KATE GAPPED AT HER CAPTOR, surprised by the flawless English that had come out of his mouth. All these hours, he'd spoken to his comrade in a guttural language she didn't understand. Why had he waited so long to make her aware he could speak her language? Was it another means to torment her? He'd been pulling her into his lap, and even through the layers of skirt and bloomers, she could feel his heat and alarming hardness.

She withdrew her hands from his grasp, a gentle hold that seemed at odds with his stern expression. When she pulled the gag from her mouth, his eyes narrowed, but he didn't stop her.

His disfigured partner stared at her, unblinking. His hate-filled expression left no doubt about his feelings.

The horrible stories she'd heard of women being raped and scalped swirled through her mind. Was that what lay in store? Her skin, already damp with perspiration, turned clammy.



She'd read that the Indian tribes in this part of the Territory were mostly educated and followed Western culture and manners. These two Indian men were dressed in Western fashion, but their manners were far from cultured.

"Go on," her captor urged. His eyebrows, the color and shape of raven's wings, gathered in a frown over light brown eyes flecked with gold. His striking handsomeness was another unanticipated piece in the puzzle of who he might be.

"Be quick about it." His curt command snapped her out of her momentary daze. Handsome or not, he had the temperament of a porcupine.

Kate stumbled away on rubbery legs and went behind the bush he'd indicated. If she didn't relieve herself soon, her bladder would burst. As she squatted, she heard leaves crunch. He'd walked away, but not far enough she could outrun him. After she'd finished relieving herself, she stayed crouched. Hopefully, the two men would think she was still occupied while she took a moment to gather her courage and formulate a plan.

Best she could tell they'd ridden in a southerly direction. Beyond that, she had no idea where she was, except it wasn't anywhere near civilization.

From a skirt pocket, she withdrew a small compass, purchased before leaving New York in case she got lost in unfamiliar lands. She hadn't imagined she would be abducted. The compass and her memories of the railroad maps wouldn't do her much good if she couldn't get her bearings. Her stomach clenched with renewed fear.

How far away was the worksite? Had anyone noticed she was gone?

Henry might notice her disappearance, if he weren't focused on his guests. The foolish party had been his idea. Serving whiskey to the Indians. Not only was it illegal, it was ill advised, and certainly not how one negotiated in good faith. Had she not been so aggravated, she might've stayed at the party instead of seeking sanctuary in her father's private rail car. He rarely paid attention to her, and he'd said he was leaving as soon as the party was over. By now, both men were used to the way she came and went as she pleased and would think she'd simply left without telling anyone.

She slipped the compass back into her pocket, praying someone would notice she was missing, even if she had to eat her words about being self-sufficient.

Muttered conversation drifted over. Foreign words.

No chance she could get to the horses without being seen, and they would shoot her if she tried to sneak past. At least, the one with the scar would. The younger man was harder to read. He'd protected her from his partner, who'd been ready to cut her throat. But it might be that he simply wanted to claim her as *his* prize.

Goose flesh prickled her skin, the same sensation she'd felt when he'd held her against him and put his nose in her hair.

Heaven help her, she had to escape regardless of what he'd threatened. Being armed would give her a fighting chance. But how could she steal a weapon?

"Hurry up." Her captor's voice came from over by the horses.

She grasped a rock the size of her fist. If she could bring him close, she could knock him out and take his gun. "I need help, please."

Silence met her request. Followed by a quick exchange, and then slow footfalls made by someone with a long stride. The younger Indian was the taller of the two.

Kate rested on her knees, keeping the rock hidden in the folds of her skirt.

The tall Indian appeared around the side of the bush. In the early morning light, he didn't look like a savage. Rather, he reminded her of the cowboys she'd seen around town in their chaps and jeans, boots and leather vests.

Unease rippled through her. She tightened her grip on the rock, determined. This was the only way she'd escape, so she had to get over her squeamishness.

"What's wrong?" His tone conveyed concern she hadn't expected. She squelched a spurt of guilt. He only cared that she would slow them down.

"I can't stand. My legs feel weak. I'm not used to riding."

He hooked his thumbs over his gun belt. "What do you want me to do?"

That seemed a stupid question. Most men would sweep in and scoop her up. Did she have to give this one instruction? "Lift me, please. I can't walk."

For a heart-stopping moment she thought he'd refuse. Then what? Her plan wouldn't work if he didn't come to her aid.

Her heart jumped when he moved. He towered over her, but the bushes would conceal him when he bent down to pick her up. Then she would hit him hard enough to render him unconscious and get his gun before the other man realized what had happened.

Instead of bending over, the dratted man went down on one knee. He removed his hat and threaded his fingers through straight, inky hair that fell past his collar. The strands looked damp where the hatband had pressed against his head.

Close up, he no longer resembled a cowboy. His native heritage was stamped on his features—broad forehead, blade nose and high cheekbones. Oh my, but he was attractive, even sweaty and frowning.

Something fluttered in her stomach, as if she'd swallowed a butterfly. The trapped insect lodged in her chest. She couldn't think about his handsomeness or the flashes of civility she'd seen. He was a savage, and savages raped and killed women who weren't smart enough to seize their opportunity to escape.

He offered his hand. "If you walk around, the feeling will come back."  
"My legs won't support me. Will you carry me?"

With obvious reluctance, he slipped an arm around her waist.

Kate forced her body to relax even though her muscles screamed from being tensed and her fingers ached from clutching the rock. She looped her other arm around his neck.

His grip on her waist tightened. The warmth from his fingers seeped through her clothes, setting off the tingling sensation she'd felt before at his touch. Only this time, it seemed to crackle.

Had he felt it, too?

He must have, because he stared at her mouth like he wanted to take a bite.

She licked her lips, too nervous to speak.

As he drew her closer, his breath feathered her cheek.

Her insides quivered...with fear, surely.

She wrapped an arm around his shoulders, keeping the rock out of sight.

Now. She must strike, for she wouldn't get another chance—

"*Wa-ya!*" His partner's cry split the air.

He dropped her and jerked to his feet.

She rolled back on the ground, and scrambled to hide the rock behind her back. Oh God, had he seen it?

"Coming." His voice was a full octave lower than before. He clamped his fingers on her arm and yanked her to her feet.

"Give me that," he growled, snatching her weapon. The fury gathering in his eyes turned her blood to ice.

She cringed, anticipating the blow. When it didn't come, she cracked her eyes open.

He cast the rock aside with a harsh word that sounded like a curse.

Relief flooded her insides, followed by a torrent of guilt. She'd never done anything so underhanded, had never plotted to intentionally hurt another person.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't *want* to hurt you. If you'll let me go—"

He clamped down on her arm and dragged her back to his horse. She stumbled over the uneven ground, biting her lip to keep from crying out at his bruising grip.

When he snatched the scarf from his pocket, she thought he meant to gag her again. Instead, he bound her wrists.

Would he strap her over his horse as he'd threatened? She nearly wept at the thought of the humiliating ride ahead. Rather than taking control of the situation, she'd made it ten times worse.

His partner's murderous glare sent cold dread coursing through her veins.

Her father had threatened to box her up and ship her back to New York. He might get his wish...and return her in a coffin.

Without a word, the cold-eyed Indian turned his mount and started up the incline. Ahead, the earth seemed to drop off into the sky. She could hear water rushing.

Her heart raced as she called to mind a horrible scene from one of the Leatherstocking Tales. Did these men intend to murder her on a precipice like that mad Huron had done to poor Cora?

Kate struggled not to beg for mercy. She was a Parsons. She would leap to her death, not go there on her knees.

Her captor gripped her waist and hoisted her up. Startled, she snagged the saddle horn and swung her leg over the horse. He would allow her to ride astride like before. Perhaps he wasn't as savage as she feared.

When he mounted behind her, she scooted forward to avoid contact. With a grunt, he grabbed her hips and wedged her bottom against his pelvis.

Her entire body caught fire.

The wretch wouldn't spare her. He'd just come up with a different punishment.

The odious Indian took up the reins in one hand, curling his other arm around her in an embrace more intimate than any she'd experienced.

"Don't even *think* about moving," he ordered, in perfect English.

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## Chapter 2



"WA-YA, get up."

Jake jerked awake at the touch on his shoulder. He rolled over, wincing as a rock dug into his side. He couldn't have dozed for more than ten minutes.

Less than a foot away, Redbird lay curled up in his blanket with her back to him, facing the rock wall of the cave.

He'd planned to punish her by making her sit pressed against him for the remainder of the journey, but all that accomplished was to make his balls ache and his head pound. By the time they'd reached the hideout shortly after daybreak, he was ready to shoot her or himself, or both.

Charley motioned. "Come outside. I want to talk to you."

Jake sat up and rubbed his stinging eyes. Heaving a weary sigh, he pulled on his boots, snagged his gun belt and stalked outside.

The sun peeked over the bluff, illuminating a silvery haze that hovered over the river. The surface ruffled as water flowed over a bed of stones. Still pools tucked into the shore made for easy fishing. He loved this quiet, hidden place. Pity they wouldn't be able to use it again. Redbird would be able to describe it...just as easily as she'd be able to describe the two men who'd taken her. Jake's brief moment of peace was shattered.

He couldn't ransom Redbird. If the Army thought Cherokee men had started abducting white women, they would send soldiers over the border. What had happened during the white man's war, the wanton killing and plundering, it would happen again. Only this time, the carnage would be his fault—his and Charley's.

His cousin sat on a rock near the river, looking far too calm for a man whose actions might start a war. He'd set a fire and had two fish roasting on spits. The coffee pot steamed over a clump of coals. Delicious smells made Jake's stomach rumble. Or maybe the constant churning was a reaction to his cousin's summons.

Charley wanted to know the plan.

Problem was, Jake didn't have one.

He hunkered down near the fire. He'd better come up with something, fast. "You wanted to talk?"

"Let's eat first." Charley wiped his knife on the leg of his jeans. He flicked his wrist, sending the tip into the dirt a scant inch from his foot. He retrieved it and tried again, this time coming closer.

When he'd been a lanky youth and Jake still a child, he'd urged Jake to join him in the game to see who could get the knife closest to his foot without injuring himself. Seemed a stupid risk and Jake had balked at doing it. That was the first time Charley had called him a coward.

"Why do you do that?" Jake grumbled.

Charley gave him a mirthless smile. "Does it bother you, *Little Brother*?"

Once, that had been a term of endearment. Now it sounded like an insult.

Jake ate half his portion and set the rest aside. Redbird wouldn't be worth anything if they starved her.

Charley had no such concerns. He devoured the cooked fish and tossed the bones into the fire. Then he poured a cup of coffee and cradled it in his hands. "We need to get a note to the railroad man in charge. The one they call Chief. How much do you think she's worth to him?"

Tension coiled inside Jake. They wouldn't need to send a note if he kept her. The absurdity of the notion struck him. He didn't want to be stuck with a white woman, especially one who wanted to bash his head in. "We can't just send a note asking for money. Need to figure out how to trade her without stirring up a hornet's nest."

Charley raked him with scorn. "You think too much, *Wa-ya*. We have to act before they do."

Always his cousin wanted to act, not think. If he stopped long enough to consider the issues, he might see they weren't as simple as he thought.

"Why do you suppose the railroad hasn't been able to convince the Army to send soldiers across the border?"

"They prefer stabbing us in the back." Charley flicked the knife and the tip sank into the edge of his boot. "Or maybe in the foot, so we can't run."

Jake found little amusement in his cousin's dark humor. "Politics. The Army doesn't want to appear aggressive and spark a war, but if we give them a reason, they won't hesitate. That woman belongs to an influential



man. Once they realize we've got her, they'll have the excuse they need to make trouble for our people."

"It was *your* idea to take her." Charley brushed his thumb across the edge of the knife, a gesture that made Jake's skin crawl. "Make them believe somebody else did it. Like the last time, when we stole the payroll."

Jake retrieved their only cup and poured himself some coffee. That ruse with the payroll theft had been his idea, too—one of his better ones.

Disguised as a worker, he'd learned when the payroll would arrive and even where it would be kept. After he and Charley had broken into the mail car and made off with the money, he'd planted a rumor and the authorities blamed a gang hired by the railroad's rival.

The cutthroat contest between two railroads racing to the border of Indian Territory had given him an unexpected advantage. Now, there was only one railroad to contend with—the one given the right to pass through land that didn't belong to them.

"That ruse won't work this time. They won't believe the other railroad would hire two renegades to abduct a woman."

Charley stood. "All right, then. I'll put her down."

Jake choked as coffee went down his windpipe. He coughed so hard his cousin had to pound him on the back. He looked up, his eyes watering. "We're talking about a woman," he rasped. "Not a lame horse."

"Same principle. If we aren't getting money for her, she's worthless." Charley's nonchalant assessment was more chilling than the knife in his hand.

When had killing become so easy and life worth so little?

After his cousin had lost everything that mattered.

Guilt shuddered through Jake. He couldn't let Charley down. Not again. But he drew the line at murder. He got to his feet, standing between his cousin and the cave. "No killing. That's what we agreed when we started this."

Charley's features turned to stone.

Jake refused to look away. His cousin would think even less of him than he already did.

Finally, Charley's knife went into its sheath. He snatched his hat off the ground and slapped it against his leg. Dust went flying. "I'll set a false trail in case they're tracking us."

Jake passed his fingers through his hair, which was damp with sweat. He hadn't been certain Charley wouldn't challenge him. He couldn't imagine fighting his own kin. Thankfully, his cousin hadn't forced his hand. "Good. That'll give me time to think. About what we should do."

"What's there to think about?" Charley's gaze grew flat. "If you're too soft, I'll take her with me and take care of it. Bury her out in the woods where nobody will find her."



KATE WINCED AS SHE used her teeth to tear at the bandana binding her wrists. Her skin stung from being rubbed raw. Although her captor had used cloth when he retied her hands, he'd secured the knots tight. But he didn't know how stubborn she could be.

Her father knew. In fact, everything about her seemed to annoy him. She was too stubborn, too opinionated, why even her hair was too bold. Whenever he looked at her, he saw an ugly duckling that had never transformed into a graceful swan. If she could prove her worth, he might see her as more than a vessel for accomplishing his dynastic goals, or a hardheaded nuisance.

Her captor would agree with the nuisance part.

Shortly after they'd arrived, the younger Indian had dumped her in the cave, threatening to punish her if she moved an inch. She didn't need a translator to tell her he was annoyed. Still, he hadn't abused her, despite having ample opportunity. If he'd wanted to kill her, he could have done so before now. He and his partner must be holding her in hopes of getting money.

She dampened the cloth with spit and made her hands as small as possible. At last, she was able to slip them free. Without pausing, she went to work on the rope around her ankles. Throwing it off, she scrambled to her feet.

Dizziness struck.

She reached out and braced her hand on cool rock, waiting until the lightheadedness passed before creeping to the mouth of the cave. Hugging the wall, she peeked outside. With luck, her captors wouldn't be watching and she could sneak out.

Drat. The two men stood a stone's throw away, and there were no bushes nearby or places she could hide. If she left the cave they'd see her.

The man with the scarred mouth stormed off in the direction of the trees. The taller one headed for the cave, wearing a scowl. Alone with her, he might stake his claim.

With a panicked gasp, she turned to flee and tripped over a rock. Pain shot through her big toe. Picking herself up, she stumbled deeper into the cave, heading for the interior with no other thought except escape.

"You don't want to go back there."

She threw a fearful glance over her shoulder.

Daylight outlined her captor's lean form at the mouth of the cave. He didn't appear to be in a hurry to pursue her, which might mean this wasn't the way out. Another few steps revealed nothing but darkness.

Behind her, sand crunched.

She whirled around, putting out her hands, coming up with the only thing she could think of that might stop him. "I have needs that must be attended to..."

"Needs?" His gaze traveled over her. Her face burned as she took his meaning.

"Personal needs," she clarified, or tried.

"You won't find what you need back there. Only bat droppings and animal skeletons."

He wanted to frighten her, so she might turn to him for comfort. That would never happen. Trembling, Kate held her ground. "I won't find what I need here, either."

Was that amusement curling the side of his mouth? "You'd do better to use the bushes outside. I'll take you."

And remain close while she was vulnerable? She took a step back. "If you don't mind, I'd rather go by myself."

"I do mind. You aren't getting out of my sight." He took hold of her arm.

She flinched at a sharp pain in the same spot where he'd grabbed her yesterday.

His grip loosened, then he ran his fingers down to her elbow, brushing her jacket sleeve. Her skin quivered like he'd stroked her bare flesh. Unnerving, this effect he had on her.

"Did I hurt you?" His eyes filled with what looked like regret.

"It's just a bruise." She had the strangest urge to brush back his dark hair and murmur assurances. He hadn't hurt her that badly, not in the way

she thought he might.

Truly, she'd lost her mind if she imagined this heathen outlaw needed consoling. He wasn't the one who'd been abducted.

"Are you hungry?" He held up a partially eaten fish skewered on a stick. "I saved you some breakfast."

"Is that...yours?"

"Half of it. I didn't touch this side."

He'd saved part of his food for her.

While he rolled up the blankets, she finished off the remainder of the fish. His unexpected generosity surprised her. There had been other things he'd done, small but significant kindnesses, like covering her with the blanket and using a scarf instead of leather strings to retie her hands.

The fear banding her chest eased slightly. He wasn't as hard as he wanted her to believe. Which meant she might be able to coerce him into returning her.

He hefted the saddle and handed her the bedroll. "Come on."

"Where are we going?" As soon as she stepped outside, she stopped, momentarily blinded by the bright daylight. After her eyes adjusted, she spotted her captor's paint stallion near a copse of trees.

He nudged her in the direction of his horse. "Let's go."

"What's the hurry?" She wondered why he would leave this well-hidden place. The two men might've argued about how to split the ransom, and he planned to spirit her away so he could keep all the money he hoped to get. That could be a good thing, considering how his partner had eyed her with such hatred. Greed, she could manage.

How much should she offer him? Most of her wealth was tied up in railroad stock and her cash went to living expenses. Still, she could scrape together enough to impress an impoverished Indian. "I'll give you a hundred dollars if you take me back."

Without looking at her, he threw the blanket and saddle over the horse. Maybe it wasn't enough, or he expected more from someone associated with the railroad. For certain, she couldn't let him learn her true identity. If he found out she was the daughter of the man who owned the railroad, he'd ask for a fortune.

"What if I promise to give you enough so you won't have to steal anymore? You could go somewhere and start over."

Her captor shot her a frown. After securing the bedroll, he clamped his hands around her waist.

Awareness zinged through her.

She jerked away, flustered and confused. Why this bizarre attraction to a stranger, an outlaw? It made no sense. Had to be the odd situation that made her feel close to him. Only, she knew Henry better and never felt these things when he touched her.

"Get on the horse," he demanded.

"I just offered you money. Name your price."

His dark gaze made a slow trek down her body.

The tingles returned, this time stronger than before. She prayed he couldn't see how thoroughly he unsettled her. "You...you want gold, I imagine."

"I want you to stop talking and mount up." He laced his fingers together, indicating she should put her foot in his hand so he could assist her. "Here you go."

Kate hesitated. If she rode in front of him again, he would touch her and her body would betray her. Besides, she couldn't get away with his arms around her. "I'll ride behind you."

His scowl reappeared. "So you can kick my horse again?"

"I won't. I promise." She mentally crossed her fingers.

"Get in the saddle. Unless you want to stay here and wait for Charley."

"Charley? Is that your partner?"

Alarm flashed in his eyes. He'd let the name slip unintentionally, along with something else. That cruel look on the other man's face, she hadn't misread it. Charley wanted to kill her.



## Chapter 3



JAKE HELD REDBIRD TIGHT as he guided his horse down the narrow path leading away from the hideout. His anxiety had ratcheted up with every minute she'd stalled.

Time wasn't on their side.

He'd trick his cousin into thinking he was returning her to the railroad worksite. Charley would be furious when he finally figured out where they were going. At least the extended detour would delay any decision on ransoming their captive—or killing her.

"Are you taking me back?" She craned her neck to look around the next bend. "The path looks familiar."

Observant, as well as clever and resourceful. He'd admire her if she weren't such a pain in the ass.

Jake sighed wearily. He considered telling her where he planned for her to stay until he could return her safely. She wouldn't believe his good intentions, might think he was soft and try to run. He was too tired to put up with her tricks. Let her think he was returning her. She'd be more docile...for a time. "You have a good eye. We passed by here before."

She nodded, taking his answer for yes. He tried not to feel guilty. After all, he was keeping her safe—at least safe from Charley. He wasn't so certain he'd be able to keep his hands off her if she didn't stop moving.

Her hair had come loose from the knot and curls circled her head like a fiery halo. The color and texture provoked more than curiosity. He longed to rub his face in it. If he did that, it would arouse him and frighten her and make the journey a misery for both of them.

"Here, wear this to protect your face." He dropped his hat on her head so he wouldn't keep looking at her hair and wanting to touch it.

"Thank you. I didn't have the opportunity to collect mine."

His lips twitched in response to her pert reply. When she reached up to adjust the hat, his smile faded. Blisters had formed and broken around her wrists. The last time he'd tied her hands, he'd used cloth to avoid damage to her tender skin. She'd worked hard at escaping her bonds. Even ripped his scarf, which was still damp and ragged where she'd been chewing on it.

Feisty. Not easily frightened, yet smart enough to know when fear was her friend. Quick-thinking, too. She would've bashed him in the head with that rock had Charley not called out. A lesson he couldn't afford to forget.

When he reached the creek, he led the horse into the water and let the stallion pick his way along the shallow bed.

Redbird's shoulders tightened as she gripped the saddle horn and leaned over the horse's withers, attempting to avoid contact. If she kept that up, she would soon be in agony.

He circled his arm around her waist. She resisted. Not surprising. He'd made her use him as a saddle yesterday. If he could put up with this uncomfortable attraction, so could she.

"Easy now." He used the tone he took with fidgety mares. "Relax. I won't hurt you."

"So you say."

"I do say. And I keep my word."

She cast a doubtful frown over her shoulder, yet allowed him to pull her against him. He expected her to ask him to remove his arm. She surprised him by curling her fingers around his wrist.

A smile pulled at his lips. Cuddling her close eased the discomfort of riding double in a saddle meant for one. That was why he'd done it. Since he'd turned to thievery, he'd gotten better at lying to himself.

For a time, they rode in companionable silence. A warm, pleasant feeling settled in the center of his chest, took him a moment to work out what it was. *Contentment*.

His heart jumped like a jackrabbit. No, that wasn't what he felt. He could never be content with a white woman.

Except, this wasn't just any white woman. Redbird was special. He'd watched her from afar and noticed how proudly she held her herself, like a queen...or a goddess.

Her lemony fragrance teased his senses. He leaned forward, realized what he was doing and sat back. Lust had addled his mind. Didn't matter if she fit perfectly in his arms, or if she smelled so good he couldn't stop sniffing her hair. She was no sun goddess or even a benign spirit, and she belonged to a rich white man, not a poor Indian.

Anger heated his skin. That railroad chief didn't deserve her if he couldn't take better care of her. "Why did your man bring you along?"

"My man?"



Did she have more than one? "The workers call him Chief."

"Oh. You mean Mr. Stevens. He's Chief of Operations, that's why they call him that. He's not my—I mean, he didn't bring me out here. The decision was mine."

She'd been about to deny their relationship. Made no sense, unless she thought to mislead him to protect her husband's money.

"He should've made you stay home. It's not safe for you to be wandering around alone."

She released a soft snort. "They'd be in complete agreement with you."

"They?"

"He, I mean, Mr. Stevens."

Again, she'd stumbled.

Jake's instincts warned she was hiding something he needed to know. To keep her safe, he had to find out as much as he could. "How long have you belonged to Stevens?"

She tensed in his arms. "I'm not his possession."

"But the workers said you belong to him."

"The workers?" She twisted with a frown. "When did you talk to the workers? And why were you asking about me?"

He'd let too much slip already, and had better watch his tongue. Smart as she was, she'd soon figure out the reason he'd been spying. "Turn around. You're spooking my horse."

She faced forward. "You're avoiding my question."

"I overheard them talking at the party."

When she didn't press further, he relaxed. She'd accepted his explanation.

He was still curious as to whether she actually belonged to the railroad chief. If she wasn't married... Jake capped the notion before it formed. Of course she belonged to Stevens. Why else would she be with him so often? Like most whites, she lied. If he had a grain of common sense, he wouldn't trust a word out of her mouth.

Eventually, he guided the horse out of the creek. The forest remained quiet. Birds stayed in the trees. Nothing indicated they were being followed.

He released a relieved breath. His cousin must've fallen for the trick and headed back to the worksite. That would give him a chance to get Redbird to a place where she'd be safe, yet unable to cause trouble.

She sat straighter and looked around. "You're not taking me back. We're going the opposite direction."

Too bad she was so observant.

"Never said I was taking you back."

"But you..." She removed her hand from Jake's arm, indicating she'd withhold her trust also. "Where are you taking me?"

"Somewhere safe."

"Safe? Your partner wants to kill me."

"Nobody's going to kill you." Not as long as he drew breath.

Troubled, he touched the arrowhead hanging from a leather string around his neck. The powerful totem had belonged to the famous warrior Dragging Canoe and passed down through his mother's family. His ancestor had defeated many enemies, some of them in his own clan. Jake refused to believe his cousin would become his enemy, but he wouldn't let Charley hurt Redbird. This time he had run not because he was a coward but because he refused to be forced into choosing between them.

"I'll pay you five hundred dollars if you'll take me back."

Jake's instincts perked up. "*You'll* pay me? Don't you mean Stevens?"

"I can get my hands on the money. Why does it matter where it comes from?"

He was tempted to see how high she would go. But if he traded her she'd be able to identify them, and he couldn't take that chance. Not until their land was safe and he and Charley were far enough away not to cause problems for their family.

"Can't take you back. Not yet."

Redbird retreated into sullen silence. He didn't believe for a minute she accepted her fate. More likely, she was plotting how to escape. Out here, there was nowhere she could go, so she could scheme all she wanted.

Jake's skin and hair grew hot as the sun's rays beat down. He used his sleeve to mop the sweat from his forehead. He missed his hat. His horse needed water, and Redbird probably needed relief. Wouldn't hurt to stop for a few minutes.

He headed for the shade of a river birch overhanging a creek. "We'll rest here."

Helping her down, he noticed her face looked flushed, but she wasn't sweating. He'd seen this before when one of his young cousins had been overcome by heat.

"You need water. Go get some."

Redbird wobbled over to the edge of the creek, sank to her knees and dipped her hand to scoop a drink of water. Once he was satisfied she was following his instructions, he removed his coat to cool off and turned his attention to the horse. But he kept his eye on her.

After getting a drink, she hung her head and didn't move from that spot.

Worried, Jake knelt in the grass next to her. He reached over and cupped her cheek.

Her face still looked red even though she'd been wearing his hat. Was that normal for a fair-skinned woman? He decided it wasn't.

"Take off your jacket." At her look of alarm, he softened his voice.

"You're getting too hot."

"I'm not that hot." She eyed him doubtfully, but then she removed the jacket and withdrew a dainty handkerchief, using it to dab her face. That little bitty rag wouldn't do much good.

Jake dunked his scarf in the creek, took hold of her arm and squeezed water over her forehead and reddened cheeks. When she tried to pull away, he held tight, this time taking care not to bruise her. He didn't want to scare her, but the way she looked was scaring him.

"You'll get sick, if we don't get you cooled off." He pried open the top three buttons of her high-collared shirt, wanted to undo more, but if he started undressing her, he wouldn't stop.

Using the wet scarf, he bathed her throat.

Beads of water dribbled down the slender column of her neck and collected in a hollow at the base. He imagined putting his lips on that spot and following his hands as he undid her remaining shirt buttons.

He thrust the wet rag into the creek. The cold water chilled his hands but did nothing to cool the fever infecting the rest of his body.

Redbird clutched the collar of her shirt and scooted back. Obviously worried he would molest her. Only a fool wouldn't be. By now, she had to be aware of her effect on him.

"Shouldn't we leave?" She darted an anxious glance at the woods. "In case your partner shows up."

No denying what she'd already figured out. "He's at least half a day behind."

"Still..." Her brow knitted.

Charley wasn't the only man she feared. And her glances at the trees meant she was still thinking about running.

"You'll be in more danger getting lost in the woods than remaining with me."

Her expression said she didn't believe him.

He had to ease her fears, or he'd be chasing after her every time they stopped.

Jake rested his hands on his knees, vowing he would keep them to himself. "Don't be afraid. I swear I'll keep you safe, Redbird."

"Redbird?" Kate's hand flew to her hair. Lord knows it'd been compared to worse than a cardinal's bright coloring. Still, her captor's jest hurt more because it reminded her that all men, even those regarded as savages, found her unattractive.

She smoothed the messy curls and retreated behind her only defense—self-deprecating humor. "You shouldn't insult the poor bird. It might take offense."

The devilishly handsome Indian regarded her with that searching look she found so disconcerting. "Redbird is the daughter of the sun."

What was he talking about, an Indian story?

"Did Redbird look like me?" That seemed unlikely.

"The legend doesn't say what Redbird looked like, but I always imagined she had hair like flames, and eyes as blue as the sky vault." He hadn't used the word beautiful, but the way he described Redbird made her feel that way.

Her hand drifted up to her hair again. It must've have changed since she'd last seen it. "You meant to compliment me?"

"It wasn't an insult." His gold-flecked eyes burned with a look she didn't often get from men, especially handsome ones.

She tore her gaze away. Bending over the gurgling stream, she cupped a handful of water. "I-I believe I need another drink."

He'd stopped at a secluded glen. They did need rest, but that wasn't all he had in mind if his heated looks were any indication. He'd become aware of her attraction to him, and he planned to seduce her. Why else would he be making up names and telling her pretty stories? He might view it as a conquest. After all, how many Indian outlaws, even handsome ones, could claim they'd bedded a rich white woman?

On the other hand, he hadn't threatened her. In fact, he'd helped her cool down. She still didn't trust he was taking her somewhere safe. After all, lying and cheating were as natural as breathing to outlaws.

Kate threw a frantic glance at his horse, grazing a few paces away. He'd catch her before she could reach the animal, much less get on the darn thing.

"Feeling better?"

His concern was a ruse to gain her trust so she'd be more easily manipulated.

"Still thirsty." Taking another drink, she studied him from the side of her eyes. The gun on his hip, she could slip it out of the holster if he let down his guard. How would she distract him?

Act like she wanted to be seduced.

No, she couldn't do it.

Yes, she could if her life depended on it.

What if he tried to overpower her? Could she shoot him?

She'd make him believe she would. She had to be bold. Calculating. Like an outlaw.

Steeling her nerves, she looked at him through her lashes as she'd seen debutantes do when they wanted to bring a man to their side. Was she doing this right? She'd never felt comfortable flirting and disliked being coy. Yet, given her plight, she would try anything.

"You think my hair is pretty?" She tried not to grimace at how ridiculous that sounded.

He didn't move. Didn't even react. He might think the heat had affected her mind.

With a deep breath to relieve her jitters, she removed the pins from her hair and unwound what was left of the knot. She'd tricked him before, and he didn't strike her as stupid. This would never work if she didn't convince him of her interest.

Using her fingers, she combed a mass of curly locks over her shoulder, keeping her eyes averted so he wouldn't see what a basket of nerves she'd become. "Most men don't like the color of my hair. I'm surprised you do."

"Wonder what it feels like." His response came out rough and low, almost like he'd talked to himself and hadn't realized he had spoken aloud.

She gave him another bashful glance. "You can touch it. I don't mind."

Surprise registered on his face, but then he reached out.

Their fingers brushed.

Desire crackled through her with lightning swiftness and she gasped, her gaze jumping to his face. Thank heavens he was fixated on her hair, or he would've seen her alarm and realized she was acting.

With a rapt expression, he rubbed a bright curl between his fingers. "Lamb's wool."

That was one comparison she'd never heard. "Lamb's wool?"

His eyes warmed to the color of old gold. "Wool from the first shearing is the softest."

Delight warmed her skin. Another compliment, and so utterly unique it had to be sincere. Perhaps he was fascinated, because she looked different from Indian women. Whatever the reason, she couldn't let his admiration, and her frightening attraction, distract her from her goal.

Getting his gun.

She stroked her hair in invitation, her hands shaking as his gaze intensified. "What else have you wondered?"

His expression of awe transformed into a look that she could interpret without explanation.

*Lust.*

He fisted a handful of her hair and dragged her to him, tilted her face, and took her mouth. His firm lips ground against hers, insistent, demanding.

Shock held her immobile.

He drew back for the space of a heartbeat, his hot gaze searching her face, scorching it. He'd realized she had no clue as to what she was doing.

Her courage wavered. Before she could retreat, his arms went around her and he bent his head, brushing his lips over hers, gently this time, asking, not demanding. He flicked his tongue over the sensitized flesh, each light touch sending shivers up her spine. Her breath stalled in her lungs as he kept up the gentle assault: licking, nipping, soothing.

Heavens, he wasn't just kissing her. He was seducing her mouth.

He drew in her sigh, capturing her breath. Her heart fluttered into her throat to follow as a willing captive. Any inclination to resist evaporated beneath the hot, enticing kiss. Unfamiliar intimacies made her tremble. Prickles of excitement rose on her skin.

She gave in to a compelling urge to put her arms around him, measuring the breadth of his shoulders, stroking the lean, corded muscles in his arms.

She was already well familiar with the rock-hard muscles in his legs, having her backside pressed against him for many hours.

Her acceptance of his kiss emboldened him. He spanned her waist with his hands as if measuring her for a corset, while his thumbs stroked the underside of her breasts. His touch made them ache, made her want more...

She clung to him as he taught her the intricacies of kissing: the rhythm, akin to dancing, or like fencing, a series of parries and thrusts. Each kiss drew them closer. She knew she ought to push him away, but she couldn't. Her body answered only to this intense attraction.

He broke the kiss, gasping. Had he forgotten to breathe, as well? Her mind reeled from a lack of oxygen. Before she regained her wits, he began to trail soft kisses across her cheek, whispering in a roughened voice words she didn't understand. Whatever the meaning, she sensed he was praising her.

He pressed her down onto the soft grass, cool in comparison to her fevered skin. His unique male scent mingled with earthier smells. She drank his kisses, as intoxicating as her father's best brandy. Only a taste made her insides melt and sent warmth rushing through her veins.

Sunlight danced in the leaves above her head. The creek sang near her feet. All part of the magic spell she didn't want to end. She exposed her neck to his burning lips while his hands moved over her, shaping her curves, awakening her body to something she'd never known before.

*Passion.*

So this was what it felt like, what she'd heard whispered about and had even read about, disbelieving. Sensual passion had to be a form of madness. How else could she explain why she'd slide her fingers through his hair, bringing him closer?

With a groan, he stretched out on top of her, notching his hardness into the soft cradle of her hips. She ought to be scared witless. Instead, she felt strangely in control. He had succumbed to her, not the other way around.

Her breathing quickened as she ran her hands over his back, feeling the play of muscles beneath his vest and the soft fabric of his shirt. He was made so different, yet they fitted perfectly, like two pieces of a puzzle.

"Redbird," he murmured.

Kate's heart preened at the moniker, which conjured the image of a fiery haired goddess. She loved the way he said it in his southwestern drawl tinged with a hint of foreignness.

His fingers shaped her breast and he gently squeezed. Not for the first time was she glad she eschewed corsets. Only her shirt and camisole came between them, though even that seemed like two layers too many. He discovered the shape of her distended nipple with his thumb and caressed it. She arched her back as tendrils of pure pleasure snaked through her.

How could something so wicked feel so good?

He continued to stroke and fondle until she gasped for air. Never had she given a man the liberties she was giving him. But then, no man had given her such enjoyment. Some part of her—the irrational, rebellious part—longed to throw off convention’s constraints and experience it. His fingers went to the buttons on her shirt. He’d read her mind. Now he’d undress her, then she would feel his hands on her bare skin, and his lips...

Yearning became an insistent ache. Desire swelled like waves whipped up by a strong wind, tossing her to and fro. Her whole body shook with uncontrollable tremors, new and foreign, exhilarating and overpowering, and...

Terrifying.

Some small rational part of her mind reminded her why she’d invited this outrageous intimacy. So she could escape, not bask in her first sexual encounter. She hadn’t expected passion to overwhelm her. What made her think she could bend such a powerful force to her will? If she didn’t break free, she was in danger of being swept away.



WHEN REDBIRD GRABBED for his gun, Jake reacted instinctively and clapped his hand over hers the same moment she wrapped her fingers around the handle of his revolver. Surprise swept away the sensual haze.

By thunder, she'd almost done it again, but not with a rock, this time with his gun.

Furious, he wrenched her fingers off the weapon and then pinned her hands to the ground. Bringing his face to within an inch of hers, he snarled. "Is this how you get what you want?"

Her eyes grew round, the black centers crowding out the blue like storm clouds covering the sky. She looked as horrified as poor Redbird of legend must've been when that poisonous snake showed up at her door.

Jake released her with a curse and jerked to his knees, muttering. *Crazy.* He had to be. That was the only explanation for why he would mistake



desperation for desire. He'd never wanted a woman like he wanted this one, and the way she responded to him had convinced him she felt the same way. But she felt nothing, except the need to escape. That's why she'd lured him, invited him to kiss her and touch her, so she could bring him close, muddle his mind. Then steal his weapon.

His face burned as he got to his feet. He knew better and still he'd fallen for her tricks because he associated her with a fantasy that had come to him in youthful dreams. Redbird had told him they were destined to be together, and he'd gotten the insane idea that somehow this white woman was her incarnation.

He'd better get his head out of the clouds before she shot it off.

Daring her with his eyes, he offered his revolver. "You want this? Come get it."

She struggled to a sitting position, and lifted her chin in a show of bravery. Quivering lips spoiled the effect. "Stop taunting me. You got what you wanted."

"If that's what you think, you have no idea what a man wants."

Looking shaken, she clutched her gaping shirt to hold it together. He'd managed to open the buttons to the waistband of her skirt. If she hadn't lunged for his gun, he would've had his hands on her tits. He was tempted to toss aside the revolver and take up where they'd left off.

Did she realize how close he'd come to losing control? His body throbbed with unsatisfied need. Even now, he fought a pressing demand to strip her bare and take what she'd offered.

"Button your shirt," he snapped.

Her face flamed, turning her pale, freckled skin blotchy. Humiliation did nothing for her looks. "Will you give me some privacy?"

"So you're back to being modest now," he said, with disdain he didn't feel. The moment he'd kissed her, he had sensed her innocence. She had let him paw her out of desperation, not because she was promiscuous. He tempered the insulting remark. "My horse doesn't like strangers. Keep that in mind before you try to steal him."

Jake turned around. If she wanted, he'd give her the chance to be foolish.

He threw a worried glance over his shoulder to make sure she didn't approach the high-strung stallion. If Thundercloud got spooked and kicked out, she could be injured—or killed.

She didn't run for the horse. Instead, she presented her back while she drew on her jacket and fastened the buttons to her chin. He suspected she would expire from the heat before she took it off again.

Forcing his attention away from the alluring temptress, he scanned the quiet woods. Bad enough he'd fallen for her tricks, but the longer they tarried, the greater the chance Charley would catch up. He should've thought of that when she took down her hair.

His eyes drifted back to the woman, although he'd never really lost sight of her. He ached to gorge his senses on her: kissing, touching tasting... She was so beautiful, his Redbird.

He gritted his teeth. She wasn't *his* anything.

Needing distance, he stalked after his horse.

The paint walked over and Jake rubbed the horse's velvety nose. "That's a good boy."

His own words mocked him. He'd behaved worse than a stallion after a mare in heat. If Redbird hadn't lunged for the gun, he would've taken her right there on the grass. And after he'd sworn she would be safe with him. Granted, she had cast a lure. But what should he expect after he'd abducted her and then refused to tell her his plans.

He owed her an apology. Honestly, he owed her more than that, but he could never repay the debt. He couldn't even give her what she wanted—her freedom.

Leading the horse around in front of her, he adopted a hard expression. He'd tried kindness and she took advantage. For her own safety, he had to purge the tender emotions she stirred. He couldn't afford to be soft.

He drew off his scarf. "Give me your hands."

Tears pooled in the corners of her eyes. She blinked fast, but the tears came faster than she could get rid of them.

Her distress twisted the knife in his chest. He reached for her, half hoping she'd slap him. She didn't. She didn't even fight as he folded her against his chest. Clinging to him, she wept.

Not once since they'd taken her had she cried. But now, he'd broken her spirit like one might break the spirit of a treasured mare. It had to be the worst crime he'd ever committed.

He drew his fingers gently through her tangled curls. "You need a brush. I'll find one when we get to my aunt's house."

She drew back to look at him. Her eyes were still bright with tears, like two blue pools. "Your aunt's house? Why are taking you me there?"

Because he couldn't return her and he couldn't take her with him. This incident proved he had no self-discipline where she was concerned.

"I meant what I said about keeping you safe."

She twisted out of his arms. Using the dainty handkerchief, she wiped her face and blew her nose. With a sniff, she drew up straight as a soldier. "Is Charley coming after us, or were you just using that as an excuse to gain my trust, so you could..."

"Toss up your skirts? Do you really believe that's why I've been driving my horse for nearly the whole day?"

She cast her eyes downward, making it clear what she thought. Thus far, he'd lived up to her low expectations.

He heaved a weary sigh. What she thought of him shouldn't matter, yet it did. He wanted her trust and respect. Maybe he needed that to soothe his conscience. Regardless, he wouldn't change her perceptions by continuing to degrade and mislead her.

"Yes, Charley will come after us. Does knowing it's not an excuse make you feel better?"

"No."

He didn't think it would.

Jake drew the reins over the horse's head. "Let's go, Redbird."

Her eyes flashed blue fire. "Don't call me that. Don't ever call me that again."

A valid point, he had no right to name her.

"What should I call you?"

"As you haven't seen fit to give me your name, I shan't give you mine."

Again, she had a point. If he wanted to learn a secret, he'd have to offer one in exchange.

He laced his fingers, lifting her booted foot to hoist her into the saddle. Then he mounted behind her, taking care to give her as much space as he could. "Call me Jake."

"Jake," she repeated in a sultry voice that sent a sizzling current down his spine. "Is that short for Jacob?"

"Yes," he managed, without sounding winded.

"I'm Kate."

Not Mrs. Stevens or Miss Whatever...just Kate. This told him nothing. There were hundreds of women with that name. Of course, there were quite a few men named Jake, too. He hadn't told her his full name and wouldn't. Why make it easier for her to send him to the gallows?

She gripped the saddle horn, looking painfully uncomfortable as she held herself erect. He didn't invite her to sit back because he couldn't hide his body's reaction, even if he somehow managed to mask how deeply she'd touched his heart.

The shadows had lengthened by the time they reached the valley that cradled the familiar farm. As soon as they reached the house, he'd leave Redbird in the care of his aunt so he could set off after Charley and convince his cousin to return her peacefully. Once she was out of his life for good, these uncomfortable feelings would go away.

Kate's head bobbed and her body sagged sideways. Jake cradled her with one arm, giving in to an inconvenient protective streak. He looked down at his sleeping captive. Her scent stirred up images of pale limbs and rose-tipped breasts.

With a muttered curse, he jerked his nose out of her hair. He shifted his hold on her, enough to prevent her from falling off the horse, but not so close, like a lover.

Kate wasn't Redbird. She belonged to the railroad man, and thus was his enemy.

Only, she didn't feel like an enemy when she was in his arms.



## Chapter 4



KATE WOKE TO THE SOUND of birds chirping. Daylight shone through an opening in a chinked wall cut large enough for a window, but without the glass. For a moment, she wondered if the birds had flown inside and made a nest at the foot of the bed.

Last night, Jake had shaken her awake when they'd arrived at what appeared to be a deserted log cabin. After assuring her she would be safe, he pointed to roughhewn stairs leading to a loft and suggested she get some sleep. She'd collapsed on a narrow cot.

Never had she been so exhausted. The night before, curled up beside Jake on the hard floor of a cave, fearing for her life, she hadn't shut her eyes. She hadn't thought she could sleep knowing Charley would be coming after them, fearing the cold-eyed killer even more than she feared her growing attraction to Jake. But sometime during the night, she'd lost the battle to remain conscious.

She rolled over, making ropes beneath the thin mattress creak, and pulled a quilt over her head. Having slept, she was rested enough to face the day. She wasn't ready to face Jake.

He'd planted himself at the base of the stairs, probably slept there, if he slept at all. Short of jumping out the window—and with the way her luck was going, she'd likely break her neck—she had no chance of escape. Her previous attempt, using her newfound womanly wiles, had ended in failure and abject humiliation. She had lured him...and then enjoyed every moment, not even thinking about stealing his gun until it was too late. Pretended interest had transformed into startling reality, and she had shamed herself and led Jake to believe she had no discretion and even fewer morals.

She'd expected him to truss her up like a Christmas turkey. Instead, he'd been kind.

Jake might be an outlaw, but he'd behaved with honor. She owed him an apology. More than that, she owed him kindness, in return for protecting her from his partner.

Kate poked her head out of the covers.

On a small table holding a pitcher and bowl, she spotted a brush that hadn't been there before, along with a clean cloth; yet another thoughtful gesture.

She washed her hands and face and used the dampened cloth to wipe her neck. A bath would be nice, but she wouldn't press her luck. Removing her clothes with Jake around would be inviting trouble.

Today, she would find out more about him, and in doing so, discover how to get back to where she belonged. Which was...where?

She hadn't felt like she belonged anywhere for most of her life, except perhaps with her governess, who had encouraged her to become independent and reach for what she wanted. She wanted a respected position at her father's side, helping him run the railroad. An impossible goal for most women, but she was smart enough, and persistent enough, to achieve it.

The chirping stopped. Muted voices came from downstairs. Her skin went from warm to ice-cold in less than a second. Had Charley caught up with them? Her stomach cramped with fear. Jake had promised she'd be safe.

She tiptoed to the opening in the floor where stairs led down to a single room. Low conversation drifted up.

"The white woman cannot stay. You bring shame on our family by taking her from her people. Don't make it worse by keeping her."

Kate sucked in a sharp breath. Not Charley. A woman. Jake's wife? She pressed her hand over her mouth to stifle a moan. Oh God, he was married, and he'd brought her home. How could she face him? Face his wife? He should've told her. She wouldn't have thrown herself at a married man.



JAKE'S AUNT PROPPED her hands on her ample hips with an admonishing look that made his stomach knot with worry when he was little. Still unnerved him. The top of her head didn't even reach his shoulder, but she conveyed more authority than a war chief.

"I'm not keeping her, *Na...*" The floor creaked as he paced the cabin, stopping at the door, which she'd propped open to let air flow through.

He couldn't help notice how different her simple home looked compared to the fancy rail car where he'd captured Kate. Unfinished chinked walls compared to oak paneling. Handmade stools and caned chairs

instead of upholstered sofa and plush armchairs. Windows with curtains made from animal hides instead of velvet. The differences between them didn't stop there.

Even if he'd met Kate under better circumstances, they had nothing in common, except this intense attraction. She felt it, too. Consider her fumbling attempt to steal his gun. She'd been as caught up in passion as him. That lessened the sting, but not the danger.

Jake threw a wary glance at the stairs. He had to convince his aunt to shelter Kate, which would give him time to reason with his cousin. Even Charley wouldn't violate Cherokee customs and murder a woman under his mother's roof as an honored guest.

*"She needs a safe place to stay while I figure out how to return her without causing more trouble. I don't want the soldiers coming after us."* He switched to *Tsa-la-gi* so Kate wouldn't understand if she were eavesdropping.

Most of the time, he spoke English, even with his family. His people had adopted the white man's ways and had lived in peace alongside them for more than a century...which made their betrayal all the more bitter. His mother had suffered the ultimate betrayal.

*"You should've thought about the soldiers before you took her. Why would you do such a thing?"* Na waved her hands and made a sound of disgust before returning to the fireplace to tend a pot simmering with fragrant herbs in melted lard, one of her salves. The local healer and midwife, she had been out all night delivering a baby. Lack of sleep had made her grouchy, and finding a white woman in her bed hadn't improved her mood.

He had to provide some explanation, or she would never agree to let Kate stay. *"The woman surprised us in a private railcar."*

Na leaned over and stirred the concoction. *"She caught you where you shouldn't be. This is why you took her?"*

Jake speared his fingers through his hair. He couldn't fool her, never had been able to, except for keeping his and Charley's secret. They'd told everyone they were involved in business dealings. Their family would be horrified to learn the truth, yet he couldn't keep up with the lies, which entangled him worse than a fly in a spider's web. *"Tsa-li panicked and threatened her."*



*“Threatened her?”* Na whirled around, her eyes wide with shock. *“Why would he do that?”*

Avoiding her question, he sat at the table, pushing away the plate he’d darn near licked clean after she’d put breakfast in front of him. He couldn’t tell his aunt that Charley intended to slit a woman’s throat. *“He was afraid she might accuse us of stealing.”*

Na left her medicine untended and came to the table. She reached out and touched his hair, an affectionate gesture that put a knot in his chest. Her eyes drew down in profound sadness. *“What have you done, Wa-ya?”*

Jake’s throat tightened. He kept his attention trained on his empty plate because he couldn’t look his aunt in the eye. His mother’s eldest sister had taken him in, raised him as one of her own, and he repaid her with shame. *“I do only what I have to do...to protect our family and our people.”*

*“Taking a white woman is not protecting us. That is bringing us trouble. Has Tsa-li drawn you into this?”*

How easy it would be to blame his hotheaded cousin whose hatred of whites was legendary. Charley’s mind hadn’t been right ever since he’d returned home five years ago. But it wasn’t just the war that had caused his descent into madness. Jake carried a heavy portion of the blame. He’d vowed to protect his cousin, even if he had to protect Charley from himself.

*“No, it was my idea.”* Jake spoke softly in English, having nothing left to say that wouldn’t incriminate him.

He propped his elbows on the table and held his head in his hands. If Na wouldn’t shelter Kate, he’d run out of options. He couldn’t keep her with him, it was too dangerous; also, he was too susceptible. He couldn’t think clearly when she was around.

His aunt’s work-roughened hand came to rest on his shoulder. She gave a comforting squeeze. *“Go to the council. Talk to them. Seek their guidance.”*

He shook his head. *“That would make things worse.”*

The council might banish him and Charley, or turn them over to the authorities, or worse, try to cover for them. He didn’t care about his reputation or his life, but he cared about his family and didn’t want to see them suffer because of his mistakes.

The stairs creaked. Kate’s booted foot appeared and she made a slow descent. The guilty look on her face told him she’d been crouched at the

top, listening. He couldn't be angry with her for what he would've done had their roles been reversed.

As he came to his feet, their eyes met. His traitorous mind dug up memories better left buried. This insane attraction would lead him astray, and he'd come too far to stumble over something he should avoid. Somehow, he'd convince his aunt to keep her here, and, more difficult, convince Kate to trust him and stay put until he returned.

"Good morning..." She ventured a few steps into the room. Damp curls clung to her forehead and cheeks. She'd plaited her hair into a tidy braid, which hung over one shoulder. Knowing how soft and springy the strands felt only made his longing worse. She still wore her soiled jacket over her shirt. Her skirt was rumpled and had grass stains. He doubted she'd taken even one item off. Not after what had happened yesterday.

"Did you sleep?" His question came out sounding like a demand, not what he intended. He could be civil, despite the fatigue and worry and the gnawing ache he'd fought from the moment he touched her.

He pulled out the chair next to him. "Come, sit here..."

Kate's gaze darted between him and Na as if she found something puzzling. Before he could ask what, his aunt spoke up.

"You must be starving. I'll get you some breakfast." Na wiped her hands on her apron. "Coffee?"

"That sounds heavenly." Kate didn't take the chair he'd pulled out. Instead, she sat opposite. Her rejection of what he considered a simple courtesy felt like a kick to the gut.

Having nothing helpful to say, he remained silent while Na bustled about, getting Kate's coffee and breakfast.

Kate cradled the mug with her hands and lifted it to her lips, keeping her gaze averted. He wished she felt safe with him, but that was as likely as a sheep feeling safe with a wolf.

His aunt transferred hot corn cakes from a skillet onto a plate, along with thick slices of bacon. She would see to it that Kate had enough to eat. Sheltering her was another matter. Na had made no such commitment.

He had to make a final appeal, for Kate's sake, as well as his own sanity.

*"Let the woman stay, Na. Just for a few days, until I talk to Tsa-li. Then I'll take her back."*



WHEN JAKE SWITCHED to his native tongue, Kate grew annoyed. He did that when he wanted to talk about her. Did he think she didn't know? She was tired of secrets.

The plump little Indian woman, garbed in a homespun dress and apron with graying hair twisted into braids atop her head, looked too old to be his wife. With a pleasant smile, she placed a plate on the table in front of Kate. "Let us speak English, for the sake of our guest."

His mother. Only a woman who'd raised a man from childhood would feel free to rebuke him, and only a son would let her get away with it. The interaction was revealing, as were the few words Kate had understood earlier.

The older woman didn't want her here and didn't approve of her abduction. Possibly, she could become an ally, or at least shed light on Jake's motives.

Kate fixed a smile on her hostess. "I beg your pardon. We haven't been properly introduced..."

"Tell me your name," Jake drawled, "and I'll introduce you."

Manners dictated he use her surname. Such a clever retort...she could be clever, too.

"Certainly, Mister..."

He sealed his lips and his face tightened in displeasure.

"That's what I thought." She turned to the woman standing beside her. "Please, call me Kate. Are you Jake's mother?"

Lines creased the woman's nut-brown cheeks as her lips curved in a smile that said she'd found the exchange amusing. "I'm his *et-lo-gi*, his aunt. Call me *Na*."

How kind for her to translate. Perhaps she could translate Jake's remark. "Has Jake told you why I'm here?"

"I told her you needed somewhere safe to stay until I can take you home." Jake's eyes warned against further questioning.

Na turned away and shuffled silently over the plank floor in soft leather shoes, putting her pan and cooking utensils into a dry sink. Whether she agreed with him or not, his aunt appeared unlikely to offer help. This should come as no surprise. Still, Jake's decision to bring her here seemed illogical.

"When will you take me home?"

“Soon.”

“Can you tell me why I can’t go back now?”

“No.”

One-word answers would get her nowhere.

Kate’s shoulders sagged. He couldn’t expect her to stay put. At the same time, she had no idea where they were, much less how to find her way to the worksite. “Can you promise I’ll be safe?”

“Yes.” He spoke that one word with such conviction she wanted to believe him. However, she wasn’t sure she believed him enough to stake her life on it.

She picked up her fork. Hungry as she was, she had little appetite, yet she needed to eat to keep up her strength. Na had provided molasses to pour over the flat cakes made from cornmeal. Not fluffy pancakes and maple syrup, like what she was used to, but delicious nonetheless.

Aside from abducting her, Jake had treated her decently. He’d protected her from his partner, refrained from molesting her, even after she’d given him ample opportunity; he’d made sure she had a bed to sleep on and a safe place to stay with a relative who knew how to cook.

No matter how comfortable he tried to make her situation, she remained his captive. Perhaps he didn’t believe she had the money she’d offered and still planned to ask for a ransom. Henry would take such a note directly to her father.

The next bite stuck in her throat.

If her father had to ransom her, he’d be furious. Not only would he refuse to let her negotiate an agreement with the Cherokee leaders, he’d ship her off to Timbuktu. Somehow, she had to convince Jake to allow her to arrange her own release.

She leaned over, lowering her voice. “You needn’t bother Mr. Stevens about my return.”

“Why not? Doesn’t he want you?”

Her face grew warm beneath Jake’s speculative gaze. Honestly, she had no idea whether Henry wanted her. He wanted the benefits that would come from being married to her, but he might not consider her one of them. Nevertheless, he would do whatever necessary to ensure her safe return. Then he’d join her father in insisting she go back to New York.

“I told you, Henry doesn't own me, and he’s not my husband.”

“Then why were you following the railroad?”

How dare Jake question her? She wasn't the criminal.

"Why were *you* breaking into a private railcar?"

Annoyance flashed across his face, along with something that hinted at more complex emotions. He rested his arms on the table, leaning forward, directing his response only to her. "Because they won't stop otherwise. They'll keep stealing from us."

His accusation took her aback. She looked around. Na stood with her back to them, washing dishes out of a bucket, as there appeared to be no running water. His aunt wore a simple, homespun dress that looked faded from washing. The house consisted of one room, which served as both kitchen and sitting area, and a loft with a cornhusk mattress for a bed. The windows had no glass, the walls were unfinished, and the furnishings hewn by hand. He couldn't be serious. What would her father possibly want from these people? They had next to nothing.

"What makes you believe the railroad's owner is stealing from you?"

"He's building his track through our land without our permission. If that's not stealing, I don't know what is."

She felt certain he hadn't known her identity. Yet, he'd targeted her father's railcar. "You abducted me to get back at him?"

A dark stain crept into Jake's face. "That was a mistake. We didn't know you'd be there, and if not for..." He clamped his teeth shut before it slipped out, but she easily filled in what was left unsaid. If not for Charley's panicked reaction, Jake would never have taken her. Afterwards, it must've been Charley's idea to ransom her, and that was why Jake fled.

How enlightening.

Jake wasn't an evil man. She'd seen enough to know that. Now, she discovered he wasn't even greedy. His dilemma wasn't over money. He wrestled with the question of how to return her without endangering his family should she turn him in. His motives for the break-in remained unclear. He must've thought he could somehow protect his interests.

"What were you after the other night? Private papers? Maps?"

Jake's lips thinned. He wasn't confessing to anything.

"Even if you intended to vandalize the car, it wouldn't serve any useful purpose. Perhaps the railroad route can be altered to go around your family's holdings. I could talk to—"

"It doesn't matter where they put the track. Cherokee land doesn't belong to them. Your government forced us out here, the white leaders in

Washington promised this would be our land for all time, then the railroads came...” Jake narrowed his eyes, accusingly.

He viewed her as culpable because of her relationship to Henry. He’d truly hate her once he discovered her father owned the railroad.

Kate set her fork down. She couldn’t eat another bite without choking on it. She couldn’t condemn Jake for trying to protect his family, but she couldn’t hold back the march of progress, either. “Even if you stop the Katy, another railroad will find a way through. The economic incentive is too great.”

Jake leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. “You mean whites are too greedy to be satisfied with what they have.”

Even if what he said were true, being bitter wouldn’t change anything.

“You don’t have to view the railroad as evil. Having a rail line could be beneficial.” She glanced around the primitive cabin. “A railroad could bring in useful appliances. Goods would be more affordable.”

“If we had money to buy them.”

“You will. The railroad will bring jobs.”

“Not for Indians. And don’t forget white settlers. The railroad will bring them in by droves.”

She understood why he’d resent white immigration, but he wouldn’t halt it by breaking the law, and at some point, both sides had to learn to live together.

“You have to admit, your people have realized benefits from embracing progress.” She parroted what she’d read. “The Cherokee are civilized, forward-thinking people. Your nation has a constitution and a written language. Your children are educated in schools and seminaries—”

“We weren’t animals lurking in the forests before your people showed up.”

Kate drew back, surprised by his angry response.

“Adopting a constitution based on your government’s laws changed our culture—a culture that’s been around far longer than whites have been in this country. And it didn’t make everything better. In some ways, it made things worse.” He crossed his arms, daring her with his eyes to refute him.

Her face grew warm under his scrutiny. She must’ve sounded so foolish, presuming things she had little knowledge about. Reading about something or someone didn’t equate to having experience, or even understanding.

“Forgive me. My intention wasn’t to offend you. I do respect your culture and your history. What I know of it. I’d like to know more.”

A muscle in his jaw jumped. He rubbed his face and looked away. “Forget about it.”

She couldn’t forget about it, and she knew she wouldn’t forget about him, even after he returned her, which she felt sure he would do, as he’d promised. Before he did, though, she had to say something to convince him not to continue down a dangerous path that would inevitably lead to disaster.

“I only meant to say that your people have recognized good things and used them for benefit. You could do the same with the railroad. Find a way to compromise.”

Jake took up a spoon and examined it, as if he found the utensil more interesting than her. She deserved that, even if she knew it wasn’t true. His ardent kisses had convinced her of his desire, and by now he had to know she desired him. That didn’t mean he was happy about it. Yet, she’d arrogantly assumed he would be pleased if a white woman wanted him. That he ought to be grateful for her attention. She’d presumed many things, most of them wrong.

“We tried compromise,” he said, finally. “*Your* people don’t want peace. They want to take what little we have left and give it to rich whites.”

No more talk of Redbird. He’d put her in the same company as the rest of her conquering, deceitful race. It hurt more than she wanted to admit.

“Even if I don’t fully understand your struggle, I want to help.”

“Why?”

“Why do you want to do what you think is best for me?”

He rubbed the back of his neck and set the spoon down. “Because I want you off my hands.”

His answer hurt, even if being rejected was for the best. Neither of them could afford to give in to forbidden longings and foolish yearnings. She had to limit her concern to helping him preserve his land. Possibly, he could help her come up with a way to resolve the standoff.

“We could work together to find a solution that would be best for both of us. Protect your family’s interests, as well as the railroad’s.”

His gaze dulled. “That’s not possible. Our interests are at cross purposes.”

Still, she wouldn’t give up. “It is possible, if each side gives a little—”

"Why would the railroad give anything if they're counting on getting our land for free?"

Why indeed? With the land grants tied up in court, her father—and the railroad—risked going bankrupt. However, revealing their uncertain financial situation wouldn't gain Jake's cooperation. That would only strengthen his resolve to hole up and hold out, until the next railroad came along. In the end, no one would win.

She chose her words carefully. "At the moment, we have an opportunity, if an acceptable compromise can be reached."

His aunt stopped washing dishes and came over, closer to Jake. Apparently, the conversation had gotten interesting. "What do you mean by compromise?"

"Our definitions differ," he muttered.

"I'm sure they do," Kate acknowledged. "But thus far, neither side has been willing to have a meaningful discussion. We could change that."

"Unless you can reverse those tracks, I don't see how."

"*Wa-ya*, listen..."

He frowned at his aunt. "There's nothing she can do to stop the railroad."

Frustrated, Kate planted her hands on the table. "You're right, I can't stop it, even if I wanted to. The *Katy* won the right to construct the railroad and the treaty calls for the line to go through Cherokee land. You won't alter its direction by holding me hostage."

Na put her hand on her nephew's shoulder in a gesture that bespoke caution. "You are angry with the white men, for good reason. But be careful which wolf you feed. Bitterness will lead you down a bad path, like the one *Tsa-li* has taken."

His aunt urged him to listen to his conscience. Kate guessed what it would tell him. He hadn't acted rashly when he'd lost his temper with her. He'd fled rather than face off with his cousin over her fate. Jake would choose peace, if he could.

Taking a chance, she pressed ahead. "Wouldn't you rather do something that gives everyone an advantage instead of fighting a war you can't win?"

His arms remained crossed, his posture closed. "How do I know this isn't another one of your tricks?"

"What would that buy me? More time spent with you?"



He held her gaze without blinking. “Do you think I’d trust someone who tried to get our leaders drunk so they would sign away their rights?”

She felt dirty for even being associated with that carousal. Her father shouldn’t have turned to his Chief of Operations for advice in diplomacy. Being a man of action, Henry knew how to get railroads built, but he didn’t have the patience for difficult negotiations. “I didn’t agree with them. In fact, I tried to talk them out of it.”

“Them?”

Drat. She’d done it again. The last time she’d stumbled over her tongue, he hadn’t pressed her for an explanation. But he would never trust her if she lied now, and she wanted Jake’s trust. Rather, she needed his trust in order to help him and his people, and in the process, secure her own situation.

She must risk putting her faith in him, and hope he would return the favor. “Henry Stevens and...my father, Levi Parsons.”

Jake’s gaze sharpened. He leaned forward, resting his arms on the table and arched an eyebrow. “Your father is the man they call Judge Parsons?”

“Yes.”

“The one who owns the railroad?”

“The very same.”

Jake muttered a response. She didn’t need to understand his language to know he’d cursed. He threaded his fingers through his hair, shiny and black as a crow’s feathers. The texture reminded her of silk. She’d stroked his hair, touched him in ways that made her blush to recall.

When he looked up, catching her staring at him, she stammered. “Th—that’s why I can help you. We’ll find another route, or some other solution.”

“Why will he listen to you this time if he didn’t before?”

*Good question.*

“I’ll have the right people behind me. We can come up with a good compromise and present it to your council. If they agree, we’ll take the proposal to my father. Together.”

Silence reigned for a breathless moment.

Holding her breath, Kate studied Jake’s face for his reaction. His expression would’ve made a rock proud.

Kate’s nerves grew taut as she watched for some sign of cooperation. She wasn’t sure if she’d gained ground or lost it, or if he had decided she was worth more as a prisoner than a partner. The only thing she knew for certain—they would both fail if they didn’t help each other.

He scooted his chair back and stood. “Finish breakfast and let’s go.”  
Elation surged through her. “To the council?”  
“No, I’m taking you back to the railroad.”

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## Chapter 5



JAKE STRODE OUT OF his aunt's cabin. He'd wasted enough time avoiding the inevitable. Even if Kate wasn't the railroad chief's wife, she'd admitted to being the daughter of the owner. Parsons was a powerful man who'd shown he had few scruples. What he might do to recover his daughter sent shudders through Jake. He must return Kate Parsons before soldiers crossed the border and war broke out.

A congregation of speckled chickens pecking in the yard squawked at his approach. He dodged an ornery hen and made for the pasture where he'd left Thundercloud. The stallion had already spotted him and pranced back and forth in front of the split-rail fence. They'd make better time on two horses, but he wasn't taking his aunt's only mule.

"Jake, wait. We need to talk..." Kate hurried up beside him.

"Talk while we ride. It'll take a day to get back to the worksite."

"But I don't want to go back." She grabbed his arm, and he had to stop or drag her through the dirt.

Crazy woman. She ought to be running for the horse instead of slowing him down. Her remarks about helping him only proved she'd lost her mind. He was certain he'd left his good sense back in that railcar. His patience, already stretched thin, snapped.

"What's wrong with you?! You tried to bash me in the head, then you tried to shoot me to get away, now I offer to return you, and you don't want to go?"

Her cheeks flushed a deep rosy hue that made her eyes appear so blue he'd swear he could fall into them. "Yes, well...I was afraid of what you might do. I'm not afraid anymore."

Her touch on his arm made his pulse race. He stared at the buttons on her jacket. He couldn't even be close to her without wanting to remove her clothes. "You'd be afraid if you had any sense."

Her grip on his arm didn't loosen. "There's no point in snarling like a dog, you can't frighten me away."

"Frighten you? Hell, I'm trying to *protect* you, foolish woman. I can't guarantee you'll be safe as long as you're with me. So I'm taking you

back.”

“But you brought me here, and you intended to leave me. What made you change your mind?” She searched his eyes, and he got the distinct and uncomfortable impression that she saw through him, into his inner thoughts and the turmoil. “Will you trust me not to betray you?”

He might as well give her his gun.

Desperate to break the inexplicable connection between them, he shook off her hand and took a step back. “I don’t trust anybody outside my clan, especially not whites.”

That he had a weakness for this one reinforced the need to be cautious. She ought to be twice as wary.

“Have you even thought about the risk? Your people won’t accept you if they think you’ve been alone with an Indian. No white man will have you, certainly not that railroad chief. And don’t tell me you don’t belong to him. He thinks you do.”

She took a step closer, her hand outstretched as if she might touch him again; defy his warnings, defy convention, defy every unspoken rule that separated them and made any kind of a relationship impossible.

Jake shuffled backwards. This small, defenseless white woman scared him to death. He was a bigger coward than he’d thought.

The mulish glint in her eyes softened. “I won’t betray you. I meant it when I said I want to help. There has to be a way to save your family’s land and resolve this conflict, and bring both sides together. You and I have a chance to make that happen.”

She imagined the impossible, a future where people who despised and distrusted each other could live in peace in spite of their differences; a world where someone like him might fit in.

“You’re crazy. And I’m crazy for listening to you. There’s nothing you can do.”

“Nothing?” Her eyes widened with astonishment. “Jake, I’m Levi Parsons’ daughter. His heir. He *will* listen to me, if we’re able to work out a reasonable compromise—”

“My people don’t want compromise.”

“Your leaders won’t turn down a fair settlement.”

“You have no idea what our leaders will do.”

Frowning, she propped her hands on her hips. “All right, you’ve made your point that I’m ignorant of Cherokee culture and politics. That’s why I

need your help. All I'm asking is for a chance to talk to the council. This might turn out different than you think."

He stared at a light sprinkling of freckles on her cheekbones, longing to trace a pattern with the tip of his finger. This peculiar, unconventional, unbalanced white woman entranced him. If she asked for the moon, he'd try to lasso the bright orb and pull it out of the sky. He had as much chance of success roping the moon as he did convincing the council to listen to an idealistic daydreamer. "It won't turn out the way *you* think. I don't want you involved."

"Then why tell me about your family and the danger if you don't think I can help?"

By the seven clans, she was peskier than a horsefly.

He'd spouted off to justify what he was doing so she wouldn't think the worst of him. She made him long for things to be different. She made him yearn to be a better man. Though he wouldn't say that. Bad enough she'd discovered her feminine power and seemed intent on wielding it.

"Another mistake." He raised two fingers, and quickly dropped his hand. He didn't have enough fingers to represent the number of mistakes he'd made. "I'm not taking you to the council. Why do you want to talk to them anyway? Are you afraid your father's railroad won't get built and you won't be rich anymore?"

She cast her gaze to the ground, and then he felt bad for shaming her. "I won't lie and say money has nothing to do with it. I'm invested in the railroad, so of course I'd like to see it succeed..." Once again she met his eyes. "But not at someone else's expense. I don't want your family, or your people, to be hurt."

Her sincerity sank deep into his heart. Having a shield wouldn't help. Her arrows were invisible and more powerful than any defense he concocted. His only weapon was the bitter truth.

"Somebody always gets hurt when soldiers are involved."

"Who said anything about soldiers?" Confusion and worry flickered across her face. She could be so transparent, which made it all the more astonishing that she'd duped him so easily. "You twist my words, or refuse to believe me. Why, because I'm white? That's as bad as Henry thinking you're a savage just because you're an Indian."

Had she just accused him of prejudice? Unbelievable. "It's not the same."

“It is the same. You’re afraid to trust me because of the color of my skin.”

He gave in to the voracious hunger and reached out to touch her smooth, fair skin, running his finger along a freckled path. “I happen to like your white skin.”

Her trembling response shimmied up his arm and spread in waves through his body, bringing every nerve and muscle to attention. The air crackled with energy, signaling an approaching storm. He could scoop her up, carry her into the gale, and lose himself in her arms.

That would be the biggest mistake he ever made. As before, others would suffer on account of his selfishness. He had to end this.

“I don’t trust you. Your father owns the railroad.”

She blinked as if coming out of a trance. “Y-yes, he does, but he’s not the person you’d be negotiating with, not Henry, either. You’d be doing business with me.”

“I don’t want to do business with any of you. You’re not Cherokee.”

She winced at the blow, but then came right back. “I don’t have to be brown and speak your language to care.”

Something tugged inside his chest. Likely the hook she’d buried in it.

He shifted his gaze over her shoulder because looking into her eyes was uncomfortable and far too risky.

Out in the pasture, near his horse and the mule, his aunt’s milk cow and sheep grazed on the remaining grass. With the creek still running, her corn, beans and squash had done well this year and would help feed the members of their extended family. Should the railroad prevail, she’d be forced to move out of the valley and into the rocky hills. That soil wouldn’t yield enough to feed a family of birds. If Kate could possibly influence her father to leave Cherokee land, he couldn’t afford to reject her offer.

“Parsons wants to build his railroad through here and take our water. Then they’ll cut down the trees and strip the land just like they’ve done everywhere else. You want to help us? Get him to build his tracks somewhere else.”

Kate took a solemn survey of her surroundings. “They have to build the track near streams or rivers to get water for the engine’s boilers. Do you know of another route? One that doesn’t go through existing farms?”

Oh no, he wasn’t becoming her advisor.

“You’re assuming we want to give up any of our land.”

“I didn’t say give it up. The railroad can pay for it.” She crossed her arms over her chest, her gaze challenging. Had she ever considered becoming a horse-trader? She’d excel at it.

Jake assumed a firm stance. He wasn’t about to be outdone by a white woman half his size. “Your father doesn’t want to pay. He’s fighting to get it for free.”

“And that battle is becoming very expensive.”

“For who? He has plenty of money.”

“He didn’t make it by throwing it away.” Her blue eyes snapped and her cheeks turned a delightful shade of pink. She was beautiful when she got riled.

Jake was tempted to keep the argument going to see what else it might spark. “The council isn’t interested in selling.”

A small line appeared between eyebrows the same bright color as her hair. “How do *you* know what the council will approve?”

“My uncle is on the council.” He blurted the retort. Then wished he could call it back.

“Your *uncle*?” She clapped her hands together like a delighted child presented with an unexpected sweet.

Jake closed his eyes, groaning inwardly.

“Why, that’s even better. You can take me to meet him. We could discuss—”

“Forget it.” If he brought her to his uncle, he’d have to explain too many things, such as why he and Charley had been inside her father’s railcar, and he had no idea how to explain Redbird. She was unlike any woman he’d ever known. “I told you. We’re not interested in selling.”

“All right, then. Lease your land.”

Her suggestion took him by surprise. He’d never considered such a thing. “Lease?”

“Rent it out.”

“I know what leasing means. I just hadn’t thought about making money off the railroad in that way.”

He found her quick intelligence as provocative as her freckles and red hair. Her mind was always working. If she were in charge of their mission, success would be certain. As it was, he had to rely on his plodding, meticulous thought process.



Leasing land to the railroad, an intriguing idea if, as she said, *progress* was inevitable. If their leaders controlled the amount of land parceled out and where the tracks ran, the railroad line might bring some benefit. Not much, but some.

Still, he didn't trust the whites to stop with ties and iron rails. "What's to keep them from building houses?"

Disbelief flickered in Kate's challenging gaze. She hadn't believed he would like her idea. She rushed ahead with the answer, gesturing with her hands. "Lease only the right-of-way needed for maintaining track. Your leaders will have a say in what they put around it, and the money you make would be yours to keep."

Jake gave in to a reluctant smile. He thought he couldn't admire her more, and she'd given him another reason. He even admired her persistence. Didn't mean he'd give in to what she wanted. In his experience, rich men could always find loopholes.

"There's no guarantee the government won't award the grants later. Better to keep the railroad out."

"Jake, listen to me..." She ran her hand up his sleeve. Sensual awareness shimmered through him. If she noticed he'd stiffened, she gave no sign. "Even if you stop the Katy, it doesn't mean some other railroad won't get through. The government is determined to make that happen. Better to deal with the devil you know, rather than one you don't know."

"The devil I know?" He gave her a pointed look. "Who would that be?"

Her hand fell away. "What will it take to convince you I'm sincere?"

Her expression was so open, so vulnerable he was tempted to give in.

The fledgling idea she'd hatched might grow into something useful, but it required trust on both sides. He might be able to trust Kate, but he didn't trust her father.

"Get Parsons to give up his claim on our lands."

Her expressive face communicated surprise, and then disappointment. "I wouldn't count on that. He's as short-sighted and pig-headed as you are."

"Then we have nothing more to talk about." Jake took her elbow. If she resisted, he'd throw her over his shoulder. "Let's go. I need to get you back to your people before Charley comes home."



## Chapter 6



*CHARLEY, JAKE'S COUSIN, Na's son...* They were all part of the same family.

Kate reeled from Jake's confession, which he'd held back until moments before they left the farm. He must've known if he told her earlier she would've run away. As it was, her trust in him had been shaken. He'd fled rather than fight. If Charley caught up with them, would Jake keep his promise to protect her?

As they rode through the wilderness, she clung to his waist—this time he'd allowed her to mount behind him—and tried to ignore the fireworks going off all over her body. She couldn't resist his appeal, regardless of the danger. "You assured my safety. Why did you bring me to the one place I wouldn't be safe?"

"Charley doesn't live there anymore."

"But his mother does."

"She wouldn't let him hurt you."

The memory of Charley's baleful stare made Kate shiver. Looking back, she could see it was Charley, not Jake, who'd terrified her. "He doesn't strike me as the type to be swayed by his mother."

"He wouldn't harm anyone under her protection. It's disrespectful."

Indian customs would hold the hand of a killer? Kate didn't wish to test the theory. "Do you think he'll follow us?"

"Maybe. Don't worry. I'll keep you safe."

He'd said that earlier, right before he kissed her and nearly undressed her, and then brought her home to the mother of a man who wanted to kill her.

Unaccountably, she believed him. So why wouldn't he believe her?

Kate sighed, frustrated. The other men in her life hadn't listened to her. Not Henry, certainly not her father. Still, Jake was different. He *had* been listening. Oh, he'd resisted and argued with her, but eventually she'd gotten through to him. He was just too stubborn to admit it.

His resistance could be rooted in distrust. After all, she represented the things he hated—whites and wealth. Only, he didn't act like he hated her. In

fact, he treated her with more respect and consideration than her father did, possibly even more than Henry.

Jake had challenged her knowledge and forced her see where her thinking was flawed; but he hadn't ridiculed her. He hadn't dismissed her interest in the railroad or her ideas for solving the problem on the basis of her gender, of which he was painfully aware. He was probably as confused as she was about the unexpected attraction that leapt between them.

Some time later, he guided his paint across a shaded creek. Cool droplets kicked up by the horse's stride splashed her ankles. The aromas stirred up from the creek mingled with his scent, purely male and yet unique, like him.

When the horse quickened its pace, climbing up the opposite bank, she pressed closer. Jake's stomach muscles tensed. She longed to run her hands over his hard abdomen and chest and revel in amazement at his response. In all her twenty-five years, she hadn't met a man who'd responded to her like Jake did. Nor had any other man ignited her desire. Strange though it seemed, they appeared to be made for each other.

Everything she'd been taught would argue against such a match, the least of which would be the obstacles created by being on opposite sides of a very nasty battle. Besides, he'd made it clear he didn't trust her and would resist exploring this utterly compelling, if illogical, attraction. His continued rejection dragged on her confidence. They might never have a future together, but she refused to let him just walk away. If he returned her, nothing would be resolved. Not for her. Not for Jake.

He didn't realize it, but he'd done her a favor by bringing her into his life. If she could convince him to help her put an end to this feud between his people and the railroad, then her time out here wouldn't be wasted. She would've done some good. Even her father would be forced to acknowledge her victory, which strengthen her argument for being involved in the management of the railroad. He might be convinced to appoint her as his representative in the Indian Territory, which would put her in Jake's orbit...a titillating thought.

First, she had to convince Jake to change his mind about taking her to the council. She had hours, actually the whole day, to get to know him better before they reached the worksite. What she learned might give her an idea. He obviously cared deeply for his family. There had to be other members she hadn't met.

“Do you have a...” she forced out the last part of the question, dreading the answer. “A wife, children?”

“I’m not married.”

Relief swept through her, followed by a ridiculous surge of hope, which was tempered by the thought that he was related to a man who wanted to kill her. “Do you live with your aunt?”

“Not anymore. I stay with one of my mother’s brothers, and help him with his business.”

This was good. Jake did something besides break into railcars.

“What sort of business?”

“He trades things.”

Kate worried her lip. There had been numerous thefts of equipment and supplies. Were Jake and Charley responsible for those? “Does he do much trade in...railroad ties?”

“Horses and livestock, mostly. Legally acquired.”

She couldn’t see his face, but she’d swear he was smiling when he answered. Thank God, he didn’t earn a living by thievery. She couldn’t be involved with an outlaw. Even one she had a hard time resisting.

Succumbing to her yearning, she laid her cheek on the back of his shoulder. He couldn’t continue to reject their connection if she refused to break it. “What about your parents? Are your mother and father still alive?”

“My mother died when I was born. I didn’t know my father.” He clipped the last word, making it clear his parentage wasn’t a topic he wished to discuss.

Her heart ached for him. “Who watched out for you?”

“My aunts and uncles took me in. That’s the way of our people. A mother’s family and clan take care of her children.”

The notion amazed her. She rarely saw her mother’s family, and she certainly wasn’t welcome to live with them. Then again, she wasn’t an orphan. She just felt like one.

The horse waded into a grassy field painted with wildflowers bathed in bright light. Beneath the noonday sun, her head grew warm. She was glad for the floppy straw hat his aunt had loaned her.

Jake slowed the paint to an amble. His shoulders lowered when she removed her hands from around his waist. That he’d be more at ease without her touching him shouldn’t disappoint her so much, but it did.

“What about you? How big is your family?”

Kate's spirits perked up. His interest signaled a willingness to form a friendly bond. That was the first step in any relationship. "Not as big as yours, just my parents and me. I'm their only surviving child. My brother died when he was eight."

"You were raised alone?"

*Alone?* He couldn't possibly know how alone. "Father's business kept him away from home." He'd virtually ignored her. "My mother was...too distracted..." With lovers, sought out behind her father's back. Or he'd known about it, and that's why he stayed away. "I never knew my grandparents."

Even friends had been few because she'd been painfully shy as a child, something she hadn't outgrown as much as overcome. Thank heavens for dear Miss Applegate, who had praised her cleverness and fed her curiosity. "I was close to my governess, and I had my books."

"Sounds lonely."

Kate's throat tightened. God forbid that Jake would pity her. She didn't want that. Nor did she want to return to the worksite empty handed, looking as though she'd messed up again, which was what everyone would think because she wouldn't betray Jake by confessing she'd been abducted.

"I'm not complaining about my childhood." She strove for a light tone. "I have more than most people, and I'm in the fortunate position of being a railroad heiress, which could be fortunate for you, too."

"Very fortunate." His sarcasm couldn't be missed. He'd throw a wet blanket over a fire rather than let the flames warm him. Or maybe it was just her warmth he wished to douse.

He nudged the horse into a loping gait. With no option except to slide off, she tightened her hold on his waist, bringing her chest flat against his rock-hard back.

Strands of his hair blew into her face and tickled her nose. He smelled of soap and leather and sunshine. She hadn't intended to sniff him, but couldn't very well avoid it sitting this close.

He didn't stiffen. That only meant he'd become resigned to the necessity of having her hug him to stay on the horse. For her part, it would be best if she ignored this inappropriate longing and focused on what was more important—convincing Jake to champion her suggestion.

"With the council's support we could persuade my father to change routes. The proposed line follows the old Texas Road, the most direct path,

but it's also the most rugged terrain we've encountered. Henry complains all the time about how expensive it is to grade the road. You could help us locate a better route."

"I'm not a surveyor."

"But you know this land, and we have surveyors. They can assist you."

"I am not taking you to the council," he said, firmly.

"Why are you so determined to keep me away from your leaders? I swear I won't betray you, if that's what you're worried about." She hugged him, for emphasis.

He straightened his spine, which made it difficult for her to hold on.

Disappointment threaded through her. Was he pulling away because he couldn't bear to have her touching him? Perhaps he viewed this attraction between them as nothing more than an inconvenient itch.

Kate loosened her embrace as tears stung her eyes. She wasn't a weepy female, but Jake had the power to hurt her because she cared about what he thought. She cared about him. And what she felt wasn't only physical. She liked and respected him, and the more she got to know him, the more she admired him. Had they met under other circumstances, she might have set her cap for him. That is, if she could draw him away from the beautiful women who would be hovering around, hungry as hummingbirds.

She released her foolish daydream with a sigh. Any relationship with Jake—past one of mutual benefit—wasn't going to happen. That didn't mean they couldn't work together to find a solution to help his family and keep her father's railroad solvent long enough for her to inherit it.

"If you won't accept my help, what do you plan to do?"

"You're worse than a woodpecker," he muttered under his breath.

"I'd stop pecking if you'd give me straight answers."

Jake lapsed into silence. She might've taken it as more rejection, except she'd noticed he also did that when he was thinking about something. Thoughtfulness she accounted as a good trait, one she'd do well to cultivate.

"I'll wait for the courts to decide," he replied, finally.

"The courts?"

He appeared to be savvy to the legal wrangling going on, both surprising and annoying. He wouldn't put his faith in her, but he was willing to trust the white men's judicial system.

“Waiting on a court decision could take years. Would you leave your future in the hands of a group of men who have no vested interest in seeing your people treated fairly?”

“You’re saying you have a vested interest?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. If I can resolve this standoff, my father will see that I’m capable of playing a larger role. I’ll gain more influence in decisions. Maybe even a place on the board.”

“You want power.” He made it sound like a curse word.

“Power can be used for good.”

“I don’t know of any power that’s used for good. Especially in the hands of a white man.”

She fisted her hands against his stomach. “Your haranguing against whites is wearing thin. And in case you haven’t noticed, I’m not a man. I’m a *woman*.”

His muscles contracted on a huff. “How could I *not* notice when you keep pressing your breasts against my back?”

Was he being crude in an attempt to shut her up? She wasn’t so easily offended. “I know how it feels to be powerless and unable to protect myself. I would never use my strength to prevail over someone in a weaker position.”

His shoulders tensed at her not-so-subtle dig. “That explains why you’d want to see me hanged from the nearest tree. Not why you’d want to help me.”

“Hanging you won’t do either of us any good.”

“Glad to hear you think so.”

At his droll tone, Kate’s tension eased. If he was bantering with her, they were back on steady ground. She pondered her next move.

“If my father agrees to give up the government-awarded grants, would your leaders lease the land for right-of-way?”

Jake’s chest expanded and he heaved a sigh. “Are you always this persistent?”

“I wouldn’t get anywhere if I backed down every time the mule balked.”

“First I’m pig-headed. Now I’m a mule.”

She smiled against his back. “Are you seeking confirmation...or forgiveness?”

A breeze blew past, carrying with it the fragrance of peaches.



She peeked over his shoulder. They were nearing an orchard, and the trees were laden with fruit. Several hours had passed since breakfast. His aunt had packed leftovers, but fresh fruit was too tempting to pass up.

“Could we stop here and get a few peaches? Do you think whoever owns it will mind?”

“Our people own this land. They don’t mind sharing with visitors who are invited.”

She didn’t point out that she hadn’t asked for an invitation.

He halted near a tree where the branches sagged from an abundance of treasure. “We can stop here and rest a while.”

Kate grasped his broad shoulders when he circled her waist to lift her down. His hands lingered. So did hers. He might resist her efforts to gain his cooperation, but he couldn’t resist this magnetic attraction any more than she could.

The fragrance of ripe fruit filled her senses, her body hummed with a charged energy that electrified the very air. Something was about to happen, something that would change her life forever...unless she walked away.

She picked two peaches and handed him one. Jake tucked the fruit into a sack hanging from his saddle. She bit into hers and sweetness exploded in her mouth. “Mm, delicious,” she said, offering him a bite.

He wrapped his fingers around her and brought the peach to his mouth. She stared, entranced, as he licked the juice from his lips. At the same time, slipping an arm around her waist, drawing her closer. He took her straw hat and draped it over the saddle horn before tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

His tender familiarity set off a sensual firestorm, the same thing that had happened before when he’d kissed her and fondled her breasts. God forgive her, she wanted him to kiss her again. Touch her.

As if he’d read her mind, he bent his head and molded his lips to hers.

The peach dropped from her hand, forgotten.



JAKE COULDN’T STOP himself even if they’d been standing in front of a steam engine. Redbird’s lips, pink and wet with juice, were too luscious to resist—like the fresh peach, only better. She tasted so sweet. He couldn’t get enough.

She plowed her fingers through his hair, knocking off his hat in her haste to return his kiss. She had a fierce hunger for him, too. He couldn't imagine why, outside of some physical attributes women found pleasing. Maybe that was the only reason. Based on how she responded, it would be enough to gain her consent to do more than kiss.

Gripping a handful of her hair, he pulled her head back so he could sample the pale skin on her neck. She melted in his arms with a moan.

All his good intentions flew away, like the flock of birds they'd startled out of the trees when they'd ridden up. The way she'd pressed against him and touched his stomach and hugged him had worn down his resistance. Why work so hard to keep his hands off her if she wasn't concerned about it?

He unbuttoned her jacket and shirt, tugged open the ribbons on her undergarment, slipped his hand inside and palmed her bare breast, roughly the same size and firmness as the peach she'd given him. He found the nipple and gently plucked the tight nub, eliciting a gasp.

Lust coursed through him, hot and heavy. His erection strained against his trousers and he pressed his hardness into her soft belly.

"Jake, please—" Her breath hitched as he fondled her breasts and undulated his hips, seducing her as crudely as he would a whore.

"I will," he promised. "I'll please you."

He demanded, and she surrendered, eagerly accepting his tongue, even rubbing hers alongside his, which pulled a helpless groan right out of him.

Did she realize how blatant an invitation that was? No, she was an innocent, getting her first taste of pleasure. If she learned this fast, he'd be her willing slave in no time. She was supposed to be his prisoner, but the further they'd ridden, the more she'd wheedled and joked and made him crazy with wanting her, the tighter the bonds had become.

How the hell would he let her go?

Maybe he didn't have to let her go...not yet.

She wanted him as much as he wanted her, so why fight it? But if he took her and put a babe in her belly, he was no better than the careless *yu-ne-ga* who'd sired him.

An image formed in his mind, a dream he'd once had. Two wolves grappled for control, one with a pure white coat and the other dark as midnight. The white one was strong and brave, yet the dark one was winning. He knew what it meant; he'd become that dark wolf.

He stroked the turgid tip of her breast and satisfaction surged through him when she trembled. God yes, he could please her, and she could please him. Later, they would part ways and go back to their separate and very different lives and forget about each other.

Holding her tight, he bent and suckled her breast. Her gasps soon turned to desperate, breathy mewling. She dug her fingers into his hair, not to drag him away, but to pull him closer.

His body throbbed with anticipation.

Here in the shaded orchard, he could make a makeshift bed from a blanket he packed. Undress her and spread her out, feast on her fruit until she bucked and cried his name. Only then would he give her the release she craved. She could return the favor. There were many things he could teach her. He didn't have to spill his seed inside her to enjoy them. They could both find pleasure without making a child.

"Jake," she breathed his name. "Love me..."

Her mindless plea chilled his overheated body.

Who was he trying to fool? If he did those things with his sweet Redbird, he would never get her taste out of his mouth or her image out of his head. Not to mention, if he coaxed her out of her clothes, he couldn't guarantee he wouldn't give in to the temptation to bury his aching manhood inside her and thrust until he reached oblivion.

He'd never wanted a woman like he wanted this one. He hadn't thought it possible to care so much when he had nothing left to give.

Redbird deserved more than a tumble in the grass. So much more...

He broke off the kiss.

Kate blinked as if awakening from a trance. He expected her to slap him, or pull away. Instead, she gazed up at him with longing and trust, which had the effect of wrenching his heart like she'd reached inside his chest and wrapped her fingers around it.

She placed her faith in him, might even believe she cared for him, and all he could think about was using her to slake his lust. Even if his body was in agony, he couldn't do it.

As much as he wanted her, she didn't belong to him and never would, and he had no right to take the precious gift she offered. He'd turned his back on honor and become a thief, but he refused to steal an innocent woman's heart. He'd only break it.

Jake withdrew his hand from inside her shirt. He solemnly slid the buttons back into place. "We don't have time for this. We must go." His voice came out rougher than intended.

She tilted her head back. The moisture welling along her lower lids made her eyes bright. Maybe she thought he was angry, or she was hurt, or embarrassed. Whatever the reason, the last time he kissed her, he'd made her cry. Misery would be his parting gift. The curse he bore extended to those around him, especially anyone he cared about.

He released her, and stepped away. "I'm sorry."

Uncertainty crept into her expression. "Sorry you kissed me?"

"No. I will never be sorry for that."

"Neither will I," she said with a brave tilt to her chin. Then she glanced away, wiping her eyes with her sleeve, looking lonely...and lost.

He recalled what she'd told him about her childhood. She'd grown up with only a governess for company. He'd been surrounded with family and members of his clan. That didn't mean he could fill the emptiness in her life any more than she could shed light into his. They were from worlds as far apart as the sun was from the moon.

She stared at some point over his shoulder. Rather than abating, the tears continued, streaking her cheeks. He frowned to hide how much it bothered him to see her grieving.

"Why are you crying?"

Her gaze shifted, meeting his with uncomfortable directness. "Why are you taking me back?"

"You know why. It's not safe for you here."

"That's not the only reason."

It was the only reason he would give her. No point admitting he'd reached his limit on temptation. She wasn't meant for him. He'd endangered too many people, including her, by abducting her, and things would only get worse the longer he held onto her.

He searched for his hat and picked it up from the ground behind him. "We need to move quickly, before we run out of daylight."

Rather than get on the horse, she reached up to a low-hanging limb and picked another peach. "I'm not going back to the worksite."

He debated tossing her into the saddle. Knowing her, she'd ride off south toward Tahlequah and leave him standing here. He drew the reins

over his horse's neck. "We've been through this. I'm not taking you to the council. It's a waste of time. They won't listen to you."

They hadn't listened to him, either, until he'd backed his suggestion with money.

"Yes, you've made that crystal clear." She stuffed the peach into the sack that contained the rest of their food. "Take me to Ladore."

"Ladore?" He nudged his hat back, puzzling over her odd request. "That's another two days' ride."

"Not if we catch the workers' train."

Maybe the sun had gotten to her again. She was talking foolishness. "What makes you think I'd get on a train with you?"

"Because it's the quickest way to get to Ladore."

"We're not going to Ladore."

She lifted his aunt's straw hat from the saddle horn where he'd hung it before he kissed her. Not the first poor decision he'd made since meeting her. "I've taken lodging in Ladore and I want to get fresh clothes and clean up. I'll send a telegram to my father to meet us there. You can explain to him in person what you want."

"Your father?" Now he knew her mind had slipped. "He'll shoot first and ask questions later."

"He won't shoot you if you're serving as a go-between for the negotiations."

"What negotiations?"

"The ones where we'll work out a compromise. One that will be satisfactory to both sides." She spoke slowly, as if speaking to a half-wit. Then she lifted her foot. Took him a moment to realize she wanted him to help her into the saddle, not kiss her boot.

Once they were mounted, he kicked the horse into a brisk trot. She circled her arms around his waist and smashed her breasts against his back. He gritted his teeth as desire consumed him. Did she think because she rubbed her sweet body against him he would grant her wishes?

"We're not going to Ladore," he rasped.

"You'd rather go to jail?"

"Are you threatening me?"

"I'm negotiating."

"It's called blackmail. Maybe your father calls it negotiation, that's why you're confused."

“Call it what you will. I didn't want it to come to this. If you'd just be reasonable about presenting our idea—”

“*Our* idea? Since when did it—?”

“Present our idea to lease the land and suggest an alternate route, one that doesn't come anywhere near your aunt's farm. Once my father signs off, which I'm sure he will, you and I can present the proposal to the tribal council. Why wouldn't they agree? It makes perfect sense.

“And if I refuse, you turn me in to the sheriff for stealing?”

“No, I tell them you abducted and molested me.”

“Thunderation!” His roar spooked the horse and the stallion broke into a canter. Kate clung tight as he pulled back on the reins and regained control. “That's a lie.”

“No, it isn't. You did abduct me, and you kissed me. Three times.” She waved three fingers in front of his face.

“That's not molesting you.”

“It is in polite circles.”

Angry, Jake gave the horse his head across a flat stretch of land. She clung tight as a tick.

He couldn't get angry with Kate, having only himself to blame for this mess. If he hadn't come up with the idea to steal from the railroad, none of this would've happened. He also wouldn't have met Redbird. If he had any sense left, he'd regret it.

“Please, Jake. Together, we can resolve...we don't have much time.” Her voice sounded faint, words carried away by the wind. “I've overheard...father will ask the President to send troops...enforce the railroad's right... You know where that will lead. Don't let hard feelings get in the way...”

Feelings? He'd done his best to ignore them. Emotions were messy and confusing and generally inconvenient. The ones she stirred up were also dangerous. Thinking of her as Redbird and the fulfillment of a vision could only lead both of them into a world of hurt.

If he were honest, though, he had to admit that part of him wanted to follow Kate Parsons and see where this crazy idea of hers might lead. *Her* idea. Not his.

He didn't dare approach the council and invite their questions, but he could present the proposal to his uncle, who could present the idea. She was right about courts. The case could drag on for years. He wanted an end to

the feud as much, if not more, than she did, and leasing land seemed a better solution than stealing payroll.

But he wasn't getting on that worker's train.

He'd posed as a tracklayer in order to spy on the railroad. One of the workers might recognize him. If Kate overheard, her mind would start working and she'd begin asking questions, the kind he didn't want to answer.

Jake turned the horse north toward Kansas, and toward a town he'd never intended to visit again. "All right, Ladore it is. But we'll ride there. No trains. After we talk to your father, if he agrees with your proposal, I'll take it to my uncle."

"We'll take it, you mean."

"No. You won't be coming back with me."

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## Chapter 7



KATE HELD TIGHT TO Jake as his horse crested the edge of a plateau. Lion-colored grass bent by a persistent wind stretched for miles around. They'd crossed into Kansas, and at this pace would reach Ladore by nightfall. He'd driven them hard, stopping only to catch a couple hours sleep or to snatch a bite to eat. He hadn't touched her again except to help her mount or dismount. She tried not to be disappointed, and failed.

He might kiss her like he needed her more than air, but he made no promises and had never led her to believe this attraction would go anywhere. If she pushed him too far, he would take what she offered and he would still leave her.

She should've thanked him for not ruining her. Instead, she had blackmailed him into taking her to Ladore. Which would explain why his mood had turned dark and gotten darker with each passing mile.

As the stallion splashed across a creek, water sprayed the bottom of her bloomers. Her outfit was past saving before they'd left the farm, but he didn't have to gallop through every mud hole. He charged his horse up the bank. She glued herself to him to keep from toppling backwards.

"Are you comfortable?" The tautness of his muscles signaled he was not. Was he bothered because her breasts were pressed against his back? He should've thought of that before he stormed the bank.

"I'm enjoying this ride more than the one we made to your hideout."

"Can't say the same," he muttered, slowing the horse to a walk.

She released a ragged breath and leaned back so her breasts wouldn't annoy him. The close contact tormented her as well, but she would never admit as much. His mood would no doubt improve once they'd said their goodbyes.

Tears welled in her eyes. She adjusted the straw hat to block blinding rays coming from the west, wishing she could blame her misery on the sun. Sadly, she could place blame nowhere save at her own feet. Still, she had done what she had to do and what was best for both of them.

"This isn't how I wanted to accomplish things, by dragging you in front of my father, but it's better than letting you ride away without a resolution.

At least this way, there's a chance he'll reroute the line and your aunt won't have to move."

"There's also a chance he'll have me thrown in jail."

"I won't betray you, Jake. I'll tell him I left on my own to seek a meeting with the Cherokee leaders and you offered to help." One problem remained, and she hadn't yet come up with a solution. "I'm not sure what to say about Charley."

"Leave him to me."

Jake had protected her thus far. He wouldn't let her come to harm. Helping him save his family's land was the least she could do, considering what he'd risked on her behalf by defying his cousin and accompanying her into what amounted to a lion's den.

If her father didn't buy the story she'd concocted, he might dismiss Jake. Or worse, send him away empty-handed. She didn't express her concerns, however. That would be all the excuse Jake needed to drop her off at the edge of town and ride away.

In the distance, buildings rose out of the prairie. Ladore. They were getting close. Once they arrived, she'd send a telegraph to her father and arrange for a meeting, and after that...she would never see Jake again.

Despair struck her with the force of a physical blow. Having the sensation of falling, she ventured putting her arms around his solid form.

He'd been her anchor these past few days, a tenuous friendship had started to bud, and he'd given her a taste of what real passion could be like, which made her feel beautiful and desirable. She couldn't bear the thought of parting.

There was still time to convince him to take her with him—to meet with the council, nothing more. He'd made that crystal clear.

"When we arrive, I'll arrange a room for you at the hotel. You'll need sleep and a good breakfast before we meet with Father."

"Will meeting him spoil my appetite for lunch?"

Confrontations with her father had ruined her meals more than once. "It might."

"Then I'll eat enough in the morning to last me through the day. But I can find my own lodgings."

"There's only one hotel in town."

"They have stalls at the livery."

“Stalls for horses. If you’re worried about the cost, don’t be. The railroad rents extra rooms for out-of-town visitors that sit empty most of the time. You can take one of those.”

“Don’t count on them giving me a room.”

"Why? Because you're an Indian?" She gave him a reassuring hug. "That might be true in some hotels, but Eden won't turn you away. She takes in railroad workers who look a lot scarier than you."

When they reached town in the late afternoon, the streets remained crowded. Ladore was growing faster than a six-month-old puppy and looked about as awkward, with boards thrown down as makeshift sidewalks and canvas tents standing in for businesses and homes. Permanent structures were going up fast, if the steady crack of hammers was any indication.

Jake maneuvered around deep ruts in the road and flatbed wagons loaded with building supplies. The disapproving looks they drew were a small part of what they would face should they remain together.

He’d known all along and had tried to warn her. She could tell him it didn’t matter, but she knew it did. Her father would never accept the match much less give her a position in the business.

Keeping his gaze trained forward, Jake ignored the stares. He couldn’t be used to them, but he refused to let people’s rudeness bother him. Kate held her head high so he wouldn’t think she was ashamed.

Mounted troops were everywhere, with two remaining companies in the area stationed just outside of town. As a patrol rode past, Jake tugged his hat brim low over his eyes. Even though he was dressed like the cowboys who regularly rode through town, his straight black hair, brown skin and distinctive features gave away his Indian ancestry. He might fear they would stop him and ask why he was riding double with a white woman.

“Don’t mind the soldiers,” she said under her voice. “They’re only here to guard the railroad.”

“And the railroad heir.”

“I’ve never been guarded by soldiers.”

“Wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

He meant because Charley might be following them, or maybe because she had been alone the night she stumbled onto them in the railcar. Had soldiers been with her, she had no doubt the confrontation would’ve turned into a bloodbath. Now she was glad she’d been alone.

The Ladore Hotel towered three stories, the tallest building in town, and featured a balcony that overlooked the town's one street. Her room had a view...so did the vacant one next to it. Her heart fluttered at the thought of Jake being near.

After looping the reins to a hitching post, he helped her down. His hands remained around her waist a moment longer than necessary, his gaze lingering on her face, urgent, almost desperate. He regretted parting, too, but his pride wouldn't allow him to admit it.

Kate longed to put her arms around his neck and pull his head down for a kiss. That would spark more than suspicion. They'd both be run out of town. "I need to introduce you, but I don't know your surname."

She had fallen for a man she hardly knew. The realization was sobering. He glanced around, as if he feared someone might overhear.

"Colson," he said at last.

"Jake Colson?" That didn't sound Indian. She wondered if it was an alias. If he'd broken into other railcars, he wouldn't want anyone to know his real name. Then again, if he were wanted in Kansas, he would've refused to cross the border.

The crease between his brows deepened as if he'd read her mind. "My father's name."

"Did he name you Jacob?"

"He didn't know I existed." Jake's curt reply implied his sire hadn't married his mother. Possibly, the man had been white. A thousand questions popped into Kate's head, but she held them in.

The mysteries in Jake's past couldn't be her concern. She had to focus on the reason she'd brought him here, to save his family's land and settle the standoff between the railroad and the Cherokee people.

She forced a cheery smile and offered her hand. "Mr. Colson, a pleasure to meet you."

"The pleasure is mine, Miss Parsons," he replied in a silky drawl. He grasped her hand gently and brushed his thumb over the inside of her wrist where her pulse throbbed.

Every inch of her skin tingled like she'd been bathed in a shower of sparks. When he dropped her hand, she had to catch her breath.

Good grief! It was time she pulled herself together and remembered why she'd come out here. To gain a place at her father's side, helping him run the railroad. That would never happen if he thought she was involved

with an Indian. Considering Jake didn't want to marry her, she wouldn't have to choose between a life with him and her longtime goal.

Jake gazed over her head, scanning the street.

"Are you still nervous about the soldiers?"

He took hold of her arm. "Come on. Let's go check on that hotel room."

"Fine, yes. Let's..." At least he'd stopped talking about sleeping in a stall.

A grubby-looking Indian boy loitering near the front door held out a hat. She'd give him money if she had her change purse.

"*Osiyo*," Jake greeted. He spoke to the boy in the guttural language she'd heard him use with his family, and then dropped a coin in the upturned hat.

"*Wado*," the boy replied, before racing off and retrieving Jake's horse.

"Did you give him leave to take your mount?"

"As far as the livery."

She glanced over her shoulder doubtfully. Some of the beggars were also thieves. "He might steal it."

"I trust him."

Jake's firm statement struck like a sharp blow to her breastbone. He put his faith in a beggar because the boy was Indian, yet he distrusted her because she was white. After she'd offered her help, repeatedly. After she'd offered her body... He might think she'd done it to manipulate him, like before. She would never gain his trust if she forced his hand.

She grasped his arm. "If you feel uncomfortable here, you can leave. I'll bring my father down to the Territory to meet with you there."

He opened an etched-glass door and motioned her inside. "We're here now. Might as well do as you suggested."

The lobby teemed with tracklayers garbed in denims, thick-soled shoes and heavy gloves, as well as workers who ran the trains and were covered in soot.

"Why are those tracklayers here? They finished this part of the line three months ago." Jake spoke softly next to her ear, his breath brushing her cheek like a warm caress, inciting shivers.

She had a hard time focusing on his question. "I-I suppose they're here to repair portions of the track that have been washing out with the rain. During the last weeks of the construction race, Henry ordered the crews to throw down ties and rails straight on the prairie, without proper grading.

One could argue that speed won the race, but his shortcuts will cost the railroad in the long run.”

“You don’t agree with the chief.”

“We see things differently.”

“And this is why you haven’t married him?”

“No. I can love a man I don’t agree with, but I can’t marry a man I don’t love.” She feared she loved a man she would never have the opportunity to marry, but she didn’t say that.

Kate squeezed through the crowd, passing by a round oak table where a spray of sunflowers erupted out of a large urn. Eden always did have an eye for the dramatic; she also had sharp instincts for business. However, it was her soft heart Kate was counting on. Harnessing a burst of nerves, she approached the registration desk.

Light from an overhead lamp reflected off a bent head piled with ebony curls, artfully arranged. In months past, Kate had envied Eden's lush beauty. Now, she discovered she was proud of her bright hair and light blue eyes and even her oh-so-average figure because Jake seemed so fond of the entire package.

Eden looked up. Surprise, then relief flashed across her face. "Kate!"

"Good evening." Kate greeted her friend like she'd been gone for a day instead of a week. "I'm here for my key."

Eden hurried around the desk wearing a perplexed frown. "Where've you been? We were so worried. The Major has been out looking for you."

Warmth centered in Kate’s chest. She hadn’t been sure anyone would notice her absence. How nice to know they cared enough to be concerned. However, she couldn’t go into a long explanation and invite more questions. If her father found out Jake had broken into his railcar and abducted her, he wouldn’t negotiate with him. He’d have him strung up.

She lowered her voice to a conspiratorial level. "I've been down near the Cherokee capital in sensitive negotiations..." It wasn't a lie, exactly. More like an exaggeration. “I’ve brought back a delegate who’ll be meeting with my father, hopefully tomorrow.”

Eden’s eyes shifted over Kate's shoulder and her delicate brows formed a question.

Kate turned to the silent man behind her. From beneath the shadowed brim of his hat, he surveyed the room, almost as if he expected trouble. He

must fear being thrown out. "Mr. Colson, this is my friend Mrs. Bradford. She owns the hotel with her husband, Major Sinclair Bradford."

Jake pulled off his hat and gave a courteous nod. "Ma'am."

Kate steamed ahead. Nothing tried, nothing gained. "I hope there's an extra room. Mr. Colson needs a place to stay tonight and a good meal."

Eden didn't bat an eye. "I'm sure I can come up with something." She went behind the desk and in a moment brought back a key. "Room two-twenty, just up those stairs and on the right."

"Much obliged." Jake's loose-limbed stance made him appear relaxed, but he had a tight grip on his hat. Lingering nervousness. He didn't feel comfortable mingling with white men. Even though Eden had offered her hospitality, that didn't stop the stares they'd received. Or was he worried about meeting with her father?

Once they'd gotten settled and she had the opportunity to freshen up, she would give him more insight into her irascible sire, and they could come up with a good strategy. Jake possessed a keen mind and might have ideas she hadn't considered.

She brushed his arm, a light touch. "If you'd like to go on to your room, I'm sure Eden can send up dinner later."

"Good idea. See you later," he murmured, before he made a turnabout and headed for the stairs.

His odd remark set off a fluttering sensation in her chest. Did he mean she should go to her room...or his? For the sake of her reputation, she would have to be very careful.

As it was, their arrival would stir up gossip. People in town knew her, or if they didn't, they knew enough to recognize her. Now Eden's husband, who led the troops stationed in the area, had become involved. Too much talk would sabotage her plan before she had a chance to implement it.

"Negotiations are at a delicate stage. I'd prefer to keep Mr. Colson's visit quiet." Kate found the hotel owner's steady appraisal unnerving.

"I have to let the Major know you're back. He'll want to talk to you."

"Of course. I didn't mean to cause a stir." She could handle this unanticipated complication.

"And you might run into Mr. Stevens. He's in town."

The news sent Kate's heart pounding harder. Henry? Here? He was supposed to be a hundred miles south at the worksite. If he became involved, he would try to take over.

She would avoid him until after she and Jake talked to her father. "If Mr. Stevens happens by, you can tell him I've returned, but that I'm...indisposed."

Her request was met with a slight nod. Eden flicked a glance over Kate's shoulder in the direction Jake had gone. "He's very handsome, your escort."

"My escort?" Kate's cheeks grew warm. Eden implied she and Jake were involved in an *affaire de coeur*. "Oh, you mean Mr. Colson. Yes, I...I suppose he is...handsome."

Eden arched her brows in a way that said she wasn't fooled a bit. Considering she'd owned a brothel at one time, she wasn't in a position to judge, or spread rumors.

"May I depend on your discretion?"

"You can depend on my friendship...and support." Eden's lips curved in a knowing smile. She leaned in, lowering her voice. "I've put Mr. Colson in the room across from yours. Shall I bring your dinner up as well?"

Kate threw a glance over her shoulder in the direction Jake had gone. They would need privacy to talk about their plans, which meant she would have to go to his room, or invite him into hers. They would be able to dine together...and whatever else might transpire...one last time. She turned back with a smile. "That would be lovely."



JAKE TROTTED THROUGH the upstairs hall and exited out a door leading to a stairway. He'd debated telling Kate he'd seen Charley, then decided it was better to confront his cousin without her interference. She might panic, or worse, get between them.

The sun sank beneath the horizon with a final fiery breath over the prairie. Long shadows cast by the few men remaining in the streets and on the sidewalks looked like misshapen ghosts...a bad omen.

Jake crossed the street to a new saloon built on the burned ruins of another. The woman Kate had introduced, Mrs. Bradford, had run the old saloon and a brothel above it. Apparently, she'd married and gotten away from that life. She was one of the lucky ones. He and his cousin had gone into her saloon when they'd come to town disguised as railroad workers. She hadn't acted like she recognized him.

Sure enough, Charley's horse was tethered outside the new watering hole.



Jake pushed open the door. Light from low-hanging lamps barely penetrated a thick cloud of smoke blanketing the open-beam ceiling. Around tables, men were engrossed in card games. Some flirted with the waitresses. Trilling laughter mingled with an off-key melody energetically plunked out by a man in a scarlet vest seated at a piano near the bar.

Several men at the bar looked over when Jake entered, a few glances lingered.

Tension buzzed through him. He hadn't thought to encounter so many tracklayers this far north where the railroad had already been built. One of them might recognize him. He recognized some of them. Or, they'd notice his dark hair and skin. Most saloons didn't serve Indians. Some, like this one, would cater to *breeds* dressed like white men. He could brave it out long enough to get to his cousin and talk him into leaving.

In a far corner, away from the card games and giggling girls and other patrons, Charley sat at an empty table with an untouched drink in front of him. He cleaned his nails with the tip of his hunting knife.

Feigning calm he didn't feel, Jake stopped at the bar to pick up a drink and then meandered over, as if searching for a vacant chair. Less suspicious if it didn't appear that he and Charley knew each other. "Care if I sit here?"

His cousin pointed with his knife.

Jake pulled the chair around where he could keep an eye on whoever came in the door, set his drink down and took off his hat. He pushed the hair off his forehead and leaned back.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, loud enough for Charley to hear, but not so loud he would be heard above the piano and noisy chatter.

"Waiting for you." Charley's casual tone sent a chill down Jake's spine.

Impossible. He couldn't have missed the signs that he was being tracked. He'd learned too well. "Did you follow us all this way?"

"Think I'd waste my time chasing you around?" Charley gave a soft snort, making the answer clear. "I went back to the site, made sure our tracks led nowhere. The workers were searching for the woman. Heard them say she's the big chief's daughter. I figured you'd bring her back to where she had her bedroll."

Jake refused the bait. Charley had ridiculed him for not knowing what to do with a woman, and now implied he'd jumped into Kate's bed. He wouldn't disrespect her by acknowledging any type of relationship. He braced his arms on the table and leaned forward. "What do you want?"

"The money you said we'd get when we snatched her."

"Demanding a ransom will start a war. We can't take that risk. It's over. Let it go."

His cousin gripped the bone-handled knife, although his fist remained on the table. His voice dropped to a harsh whisper. "It isn't over. It won't be over until those whites tear up that track and leave."

"They aren't going anywhere. We have to outsmart them, not fight them."

"Outsmart them? That's what I'd call running away."

Jake let the insult roll off. He'd known Charley would view his actions as cowardice. For once, he didn't care. He'd done the right thing by protecting Redbird, and he wouldn't let Charley goad him into doing something foolish, like starting a fight. "I took her away to keep you from making a big mistake."

"I'd say you're the one making the mistake."

The piano player struck an off-tune chord, as if on cue, offending Jake's ear as much, if not more, than Charley's accusation. Before Kate, his life had been defined by mistakes. Some made by others. Most he had to own. Returning Redbird wasn't one of them.

"Leave her be. She won't tell anyone we took her."

Charley's black eyes glittered with scorn. "Since when did you start believing liars?"

"She's not a liar."

"All whites are liars."

"And according to them, we're all savages. As long as we go on hating each other, we don't have to face who we are...what we've become."

"Always the philosopher." Charley swigged his whiskey in one gulp and set the shot glass down with a *thunk*. "You disappoint me, *Wa-ya*. I hoped you might live up to your name. But you're not a wolf. You're a lamb."

The sharp pain in his chest made Jake wonder if Charley hadn't plunged the blade deep. But no, he still held the knife in a hard-knuckled grip. His cousin would never let him forget the cowardly act that had cost them both everything. As if he could forget. He slept as little as possible to escape the nightmares, which ended with him waking up trembling and drenched in sweat. "Being brave doesn't mean being stupid."

Charley twisted in his chair, raising the knife. "Are you calling me stupid?"

“You gonna gut me with that thing?” Jake kept his tone calm and his gaze riveted on the gleaming blade.

His cousin’s frown became troubled. The knife disappeared into a sheath in his boot.

Jake exhaled pent-up tension. If his cousin’s conscience bothered him, there was still hope. He had to reach the old Charley, the one who’d taught him how to track and hunt and catch fish with his bare hands, the brother who was trapped inside this cold-hearted outlaw.

He placed his palms on the table and dropped his defenses, pleading with his older cousin. “We don’t have to steal, *Tsa-li*. We can find a way to protect our land without bringing shame on our family.”

Charley’s lips thinned. “I’m not ashamed of what I’ve done, and I’m not so yellow I’d run from a fight.”

“We can’t fight all of them. There’s too many, and they’re too strong. I have a meeting with the big chief tomorrow. If I can negotiate a deal, we can end this—”

“Negotiate.” Charley sneered the word. “Stand Watie negotiated with the bluecoats, and look where that got him. He was a respected leader and a great general, now he’s a poor farmer squatting on a tiny piece of land that doesn’t grow anything but rocks. *You* negotiate. I’ll keep fighting.”

Charley stood and grabbed his hat.

Jake shoved his chair aside, following his cousin out the door and through a group of railroad workers on their way inside. He leapt into the street, grabbing his cousin’s arm. “No, *Tsa-li*. Fighting won’t solve anything, neither will stealing or killing—”

Charley whirled and his fist slammed into Jake’s nose. The explosive pain splintered like shards of glass had been driven into his face.

Jake staggered back, blinking to clear his vision, lifting his hand to his nose, disbelieving, as blood spewed down the front of his shirt. They’d never fought. Not even when Charley had threatened to kill him for what he’d done...or hadn’t done.

“You stinking coward.” Charley’s contorted features blurred into a shadowy image and back into focus. “Was bedding that white woman worth it? Maybe I’ll go see what she’s got that makes you so eager to do her bidding.”

White-hot rage streaked through Jake, burning away all thoughts but one. Protect Redbird.

He brought his fist upward, connecting hard with Charley's chin, snapping his head back. The punch took Charley off guard, probably because Jake had never struck him. Before his cousin could react, he hammered at Charley's midsection, forcing him to retreat.

Charley recovered his wits and came back with a snarl. Jake had the advantage of height and ten fewer years, but Charley's well-honed muscles, quick reflexes and experience more than made up for it. He dodged Jake's fists and then pounded at his ribs.

"Fight!" someone shouted. Men poured out of the saloon, forming a ring around them. Excited voices peppered the air with vulgar encouragements.

Jake knew he had to knock Charley off his feet. He could hardly catch a breath. He grappled with his cousin until they fell to the ground, then he shoved Charley's shoulders down, sinking him into the mud and manure.

Straddling his cousin's chest, he delivered punishing blows. The blood of his warrior ancestors pounded in his ears like ancient drumbeats.

"Break it up!" The order delivered in an authoritative bark penetrated the red haze.

With great effort, Jake reined in his bloodlust. He'd never lost control like that before. He would've killed his cousin if someone hadn't stopped him. Dazed, he stared at Charley's bloodied face, feeling nothing.

The mud made a sucking sound as he pulled his knees out of it and stood. He grabbed at a stabbing pain in his side, and found that he couldn't draw more than a cupful of air without his ribs catching fire.

"What's the problem, gentlemen?" The commanding voice belonged to a soldier. Markings on his coat identified him as an officer.

Jake bit off a curse. Bad enough he'd let Charley goad him into a fight. Drawing unwanted attention from the Army was the last thing they needed. He wiped his mouth. His fingers came away smeared with a mixture of blood, dirt and spittle. "Pers'nal matter," he mumbled around a split lip.

Charley groaned as he rolled over and gathered his knees under him. He looked like he'd been run down by a stampede. The beating might've changed his mind about going after Kate.

Attempting to make peace, Jake offered his hand.

His cousin ignored it and stumbled to his feet, blood dripping from his nose, which canted to one side. Jake felt no pride for the damage his fists had done. He regretted injuring Charley. He didn't regret stopping him, and he'd do it again if necessary.

"Show's over. Move on," the officer instructed the remaining crowd. Surprisingly, his pistol remained holstered and no other soldiers accompanied him. They usually traveled in packs.

Disappointed grumbles faded as spectators shuffled into the saloon. A few holdouts clustered behind the hitching rail.

The bluecoat remained in Jake's line of vision, or what little vision he had left through one eye. "Are you Mr. Colson? The man who accompanied Miss Parsons into the hotel?"

Jake hid his surprise. He'd never seen the man before, yet the officer knew his name. "Who wants to know?"

"Major Bradford."

Bradford. The lady at the hotel was named Bradford, too, and Kate had said she was married to a soldier. Didn't make sense that Eden would send her man after him...unless. Disbelief, and then bitter disappointment washed over him.

Redbird might've flown to the authorities when she found him missing.

That being the case, lying about knowing her wouldn't help. Regardless, he refused to expand on his association with Kate, for her own good. "I have a room at the hotel. Stepped out to get a drink."

The major glanced at Charley, whose scowl deepened. "Looks like you found trouble."

With a shrug, Jake downplayed the fight. He had to give Charley a way out, while letting him know he wasn't leaving Kate defenseless. "We had a disagreement. This man is leaving. I'll head back to the hotel."

"No you won't." A tall bearded man in a dark suit strode up, invading Jake's space and ignoring the officer's attempt to stop him. "You aren't going anywhere."

"Mr. Stevens, let me handle this."

So, this was Henry Stevens. Jake had never seen him close up. The expensive clothes, the way he stormed in and took charge, fit with the arrogant picture Kate had painted of the man she disagreed with. The man she didn't love. When she'd admitted as much, Jake had never been happier about anything in his entire life.

Stevens clenched his fists, directing an angry glare at Jake that seemed personal, even though they'd never met. "Well Major? Aren't you going to question them?"

"Fool," Charley muttered in *Tsa-la-gi*. He wasn't talking about Stevens.

The guttural response drew a suspicious look from the major.

Charley tensed like a cougar read to pounce.

Jake instinctively moved to block Charley from getting a clear shot at the two men, should his cousin decide to shoot his way out of this.

Stevens pointed a finger in his face. "These two Indians. They're the ones who robbed us..."

Disbelief descended in an icy waterfall down Jake's spine. Kate? No, she wouldn't...

Before he could react, Charley broke and ran for the hitching rail. He leapt into the saddle, and wheeling his horse around, waved his gun, scattering the remaining loiterers. "*Run Little Brother! Run away...or die.*"

"Tell him to dismount and put his weapon down before someone gets hurt." The major drew his gun at the same time he locked his fingers around Jake's upper arm.

The soldier's hold wouldn't have stopped him, if he wanted to flee. This time, he refused to run. He had to stay and make sure Kate would be safe...even if she'd betrayed him. He remained positioned in front of the officer, blocking a clear shot.

With a curse, Charley crouched low over his horse's neck and thundered down the street into the darkness.

"Damn it, don't let him get away," Stevens whipped out a revolver from beneath his coat and took aim at the fleeing figure.

Jerking free from the major's hold, Jake struck the other man's arm. A deafening crack resounded and smoke burned in his nose. He wrestled for the gun to prevent the hothead from shooting Charley in the back. No more killing.

Stevens plowed his elbow into Jake's injured ribs.

He dropped to his knees with a grunt and cradled his side, unable to straighten without excruciating pain.

Red-faced and panting, Stevens held the gun with both hands. "By God, I ought to blow your head off."

"Put away the firearm," the major ordered. "We won't get answers from a dead man."

Jake slumped over, putting his hand in the mud to keep from landing face down.

These two wouldn't let him anywhere near Kate. He'd be arrested and locked up and unable to protect her. Though at the moment, he was sorely

tempted to wring her neck.

He slid an appraising glance at the railroad chief, who'd finally put the gun away, not the furious frown. Much as he disliked the man, he had no choice but to send him to watch over Redbird. "Is Kate Parsons your woman?"

"Damn right she is," Stevens muttered.

Kate didn't agree. But if Stevens believed it to be the case, he should protect her.

Jake challenged the man's angry gaze. "Don't leave her alone."

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## Chapter 8



KATE TWISTED HER HAIR into a loose knot, pulling a few strands loose around her face, no longer feeling the need to smooth her curly hair. Jake liked the way it looked...and felt.

She'd hurried through a cold bath, would've preferred to have it heated, but didn't want to take the time. Not when she needed to talk to Jake, find out what was bothering him and tell him about the uncomfortable conversation she had with Major Bradford.

As soon as she'd finished arranging for supper with Eden, the Major had appeared and started asking questions. She'd given him the same story she told his wife. Jake was a Cherokee representative in town to negotiate an agreement with her father.

Major Bradford's eyes remained warm, but she sensed he didn't believe her. Eden had once remarked her husband could detect falsehoods like a hound sniffing out a rabbit. He certainly put his nose to the ground, asking what Jake looked like, where Kate had met him, where he'd come from. She stuck to her story, and at last the Major lost the scent and stopped asking questions.

Kate selected a navy skirt and cream-colored shirt with matching stripes. After making do with quick cleanups in creeks, it was a blessed relief to return to civilization. Another reason things would never work out between her and Jake. He couldn't afford more than the basic necessities.

Still, did it really matter he was poor? She wasn't. But money wasn't the issue. If she chose to wed an Indian, her father would never forgive her, nor would he let her near his beloved railroad. Her hopes for running it would vanish faster than a wisp of smoke.

Kate stared in the mirror at her unhappy expression. The idea of taking the reins on her father's business didn't excite her as much as it had when she'd first arrived. The thought of being with Jake, on the other hand, grew more appealing by the day.

If Jake wanted her to stay with him, he would've said so. As it was, he'd insisted they go their separate ways after the meeting with her father.

He was right. They were from two different worlds and weren't meant for each other.

So why did it feel like part of her would be ripped away when he said goodbye?

A knock rattled her door.

Her heart leapt. Was it Jake? She assumed he would wait on her to come to him. He'd grown impatient, which meant he wanted to see her as much as she wanted to see him. Giddy, Kate hurried to let him in.

As she opened the door, her spirits fell. "Eden? Is it dinnertime already?"

The somber hotel owner wasn't carrying a tray. "Will you come downstairs? The Major would like a word with you."

"I just spoke to him. Can't it wait until tomorrow?"

Eden's face grew pinched. "I'm afraid not. Your friend, Mr. Colson, he's in jail."

Kate sucked in a sharp breath. "Jail? Why? What happened?"

"I'm not sure. Sin said there was a fight."

"A fight?" Kate's head grew light. The moment seemed surreal. Jake was in his room. He'd agreed to have dinner with her...or had he? She whirled and grabbed a cloak draped over a chair. "There's been some mistake. I'll clear this up."

Why had Jake left? Who had he been fighting? Questions darted through her mind as she raced past Eden and down the stairs. If she could get to Jake, he could tell her what happened. If he was in trouble with the Army, she'd swear he'd done nothing wrong, would lie through her teeth, whatever it took to get him out of jail.

Kate had almost reached the front door when someone called her name.

"Miss Parsons—" At the bottom of the stairs stood a man wearing a blue officer's coat, lean, with collar-length chestnut hair and a square jaw. Eden's husband, Major Bradford...she'd flown right past him.

She stalked over, her anger fueled by fear. "Why is Mr. Colson in jail? What reason do you have for arresting him? He's done nothing wrong."

Sinclair Bradford's fine eastern breeding showed in a gracious nod of assent. "Let's hope you're right. But I have a few questions that need to be cleared up."

Kate glanced around the lobby, nervous. They'd drawn the attention of several guests, men in railroad bibs. If her father got word of this scene...

She took a deep breath to slow her racing heart and lowered her voice. “There’s been some mistake. Can you take me to see Mr. Colson?”

“Of course. Right after we have a brief conversation.” He nodded in the direction of the parlor and offered his arm. Short of bolting, she had no choice but to let him guide her inside. He was too much of a gentleman to torture her, after all.

Propped in front of the fireplace with his elbow on the mantle was a tall gentleman whom she recognized with a start. Henry looked angry enough to demand her head.

“What are you doing here, Henry?”

“It’s good to see you, too.”

She blushed at his sarcastic retort, which she deserved. Everyone—Henry and her father included—considered them a couple. The Major must’ve alerted him.

As he approached, she fought the urge to dart away like a cornered rabbit. “I’m sorry Henry, I...I couldn’t...”

“Couldn’t what? Let me know you’re alive?”

Couldn’t tell him the truth.

His sable hair, usually neat and smooth, looked like he’d run his fingers through it multiple times. Dark crescents hung beneath his eyes. Realizing he might’ve lost sleep worrying about her made her feel positively guilty.

“What’s going on Kate?” he demanded. Then his gaze softened. “Don’t be afraid. I won’t allow the Army to interrogate you.”

“This isn’t an interrogation.” Major Bradford shut a set of folding doors leading to the lobby. He gestured to a rosewood sofa. “Would you both care to sit down?”

She aimed for the middle of the sofa, spreading her skirt so there was no room for Henry to sit next to her. She didn’t want him close, even if he’d offered to be her champion. He would sense her nervousness and become suspicious.

With confusion written on his face, he turned away and sank into an armchair.

Major Bradford selected a straight-back chair from a reading table and pulled it over in front of her. His mouth kicked up in an apologetic half-smile. “I know you’re worried about your friend—”

“That Indian isn’t her friend, no matter what he says.” Henry’s unequivocal tone didn’t match the doubt in his eyes when he met her gaze.

Kate clasped her hands in her lap to prevent them from shaking. Henry and Jake had met? Had *they* gotten into a fight? She couldn't repudiate Jake, but she couldn't let on they were close, either. That would complicate things immeasurably. "Mr. Colson is a Cherokee representative. He came here in good faith to negotiate a settlement."

She braced for a flurry of questions and demands for explanations. To her surprise, Henry remained silent, the only sign of inner struggle were his fingers curled tightly over his knees. That could mean he gave her the benefit of the doubt, or simply chose to wait until she fashioned her own noose. Taking a calming breath, she fixed her attention on the solemn officer in front of her and recited the story she'd rehearsed.

"I've been in delicate negotiations that required utmost secrecy, which is why no one has heard from me. Mr. Colson agreed to come to Ladore to present a proposal that would allow track construction to continue, should it be approved. His arrest sends the wrong kind of message...don't you agree, Henry?"

Henry's expression flattened. "He should've thought of that before he got into a brawl in the middle of the street."

"A brawl...with you?"

Henry's lips twisted in an expression that said he found her question ludicrous. "With another Indian. Had a scar on his face, like a man seen near the worksite the day after you disappeared."

Her heart leapt. *Charley*. He'd tracked them. Jake must've seen him and gone after him, and, dear God, they'd fought...over her, no doubt. She was too terrified to be relieved to know he would challenge his cousin to protect her.

Henry and Major Bradford suspected Charley, but they hadn't mentioned suspecting Jake. Feigning ignorance would buy time to come up with some excuse. "Perhaps Mr. Colson felt obliged to...to defend himself from an enemy."

"Colson stopped Mr. Stevens from shooting the other Indian when he fled on horseback," the major observed. "I'd wager they aren't strangers...or enemies."

Kate gazed out the window. Darkness filled the panes, making the outside world appear ominous. Charley was out there, somewhere, and he would be filled with murderous rage. If she was lucky, he'd flee south

rather than risk capture. She couldn't voice her fears without betraying Jake. "Did he tell you why they were fighting?"

"He refuses to say anything until he talks to you."

She worried the edge of her sleeve between two fingers. Had Jake now decided she was trustworthy? If only he'd believed in her before. "He doesn't trust whites."

Major Bradford straightened. "Apparently, he trusts you."

No, had he trusted her, he wouldn't have left without talking to her.

"How do you know that Indian? Where did you meet him? Did he have something to do with your disappearance?" Henry's questions flooded the room.

Hadn't he said he'd protect her from being interrogated? No, he only assured her he wouldn't let the Army do it.

She licked her lips to relieve a sudden dryness in her mouth. Evading the truth, while remaining honest would be tricky business. "Mr. Colson helped me understand the issues his people are facing. Even then, it took a great deal of persuasion to convince him to come here and give us a chance to prove we could be fair-minded."

Major Bradford studied her for a long moment. His face gave nothing away. He would be deadly at chess. Obviously, he wasn't letting her talk to Jake until he'd gotten his answers. Rather than make up stories, she went on the offensive.

"What is it you're not telling me? Did you arrest Mr. Colson for disturbing the peace? Or is there another reason you haven't chosen to share?"

"We believe he might be involved in one of the payroll thefts."

Her mouth dropped open. That was the last thing she'd expected to hear. Her father's competitors had hired thugs. "Whatever gave you the idea Mr. Colson was involved in a payroll theft? You arrested the Russell gang and one of them confessed."

"Yes, to two other robberies, but not the more recent theft."

"So?" She lifted her arms and shrugged. "They lied."

"Perhaps," the major said smoothly. "But new evidence came up while I was looking into your...disappearance."

Henry scooted to the edge of his chair like he was about to leap out of it. "For Christ's sake, Kate, you're negotiating with *outlaws*. McGrady told us that one of the men we hired on a few months back was asking questions

about the payment schedule, and about you, specifically. Described him as a tall Indian."

The skin on her arms prickled. Jake had slipped once, implying he'd heard about her from the workers, but then he'd denied talking to them. What Henry reported made it sound as if he'd been planning her abduction. Not according to Jake. He had admitted only to breaking in, thinking somehow he could stop the construction. He'd let her believe he was a good man down on his luck, not a clever thief who'd orchestrated one of the biggest heists in the history of the railroad.

Twenty thousand dollars.

Kate bit her lip to keep it from quivering. Jake was poor. His aunt lived in a one-room cabin. There was no evidence he had that kind of money.

"I don't suppose you've noticed there's more than one Indian working on the railroad. I suspect you could find a tall man amongst them." She hoped her voice sounded dry, as usual, or at least calm.

"Don't be naïve, Kate." Henry shot to his feet. He didn't appear calm. For a moment, she feared he might grab her and shake her. Instead, he paced in front of the fireplace. "The Indian we hired disappeared after the payroll went missing. I've sent a telegram to the worksite asking McGrady to come up here so he can identify the man we've got in jail. My gut tells me that Indian's one and the same."

She wrapped her arms around her stomach, feeling suddenly ill. If Jake and Charley had stolen the payroll, and intended to do it again, it made more sense why they'd broken into her father's railcar, and why Jake had panicked and abducted her, and why Charley wanted to kill her. That would also explain why Jake was so adamant about not wanting to get on the workers' train and why he'd kept his hat pulled low and avoided looking at the tracklayers in the hotel lobby. He hadn't expected to see them, and he'd been afraid someone might recognize him.

Kate's chest burned like her heart was on fire. She dropped her gaze to her lap so Henry and the major wouldn't see her despair.

Jake had lied to her. Worse than covering up his intentions, he had misled her about his character. He wasn't the honorable man she believed him to be. Rather, he was a conniving outlaw. Oh, he might not be a killer, but he would take advantage of the opportunity she'd offered on a serving platter. No doubt, he planned to use this meeting with her father to fool him into forking over money, calling it a lease payment. No wonder Jake

wouldn't take her to the tribal council, they wouldn't get a penny of what he collected. She'd been blind not to see the truth.

"Miss Parsons?" The major spoke her name kindly. "Is there anything you'd like to say?"

Lord, it was tempting to blurt out the whole sordid story, but she couldn't form the words. She couldn't betray Jake, even though he'd betrayed her. With every kiss and tender touch, he'd betrayed her. He'd awakened her to love. That's what this was, this thing dying in her chest.

She clasped her hands and squeezed her eyes shut. Oh God, she wanted to scream, wanted to hit something...preferably Jake. He'd let her make a fool of herself by bringing him here and parading him around like he was a respectable gentleman, when he was nothing more than a dirty rotten thief.

"I have nothing more to say," she replied in a voice dulled by grief. She would confront Jake with the truth, demand he confess his crimes and face justice. "Will you take to me to see Mr. Colson, please?"

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## Chapter 9



THE SOUND OF FOOTSTEPS came from beyond the barred windows. Jake leaned against cold hard stone, in the darkness, focused on determining how many people approached. Kept his mind off the physical pain, and the mental torment.

Based on the railroad chief's accusation, he'd been found out. Kate must've told them about the bungled break-in. She had been the only one in that railcar besides him and his cousin.

Her betrayal hurt worse than Charley's fists.

Gravel crunched. Two sets of footsteps. Might be men coming to drag him out of jail and lynch him from the nearest tree. Indians weren't generally afforded the same justice as white men, even ones that happened to be part white.

The iron door creaked, and light flashed in the narrow passageway between two cramped cells. Jake occupied one. Possibly they'd caught Charley. The odds were against it. His cousin had sworn to die in battle, not hanging from the end of a rope.

Another flicker, and then a bright light shot through the bars.

Jake lifted his hand in front of his face and squinted through splayed fingers at two dark figures, could make out the form of the fat jail guard, and an unknown smaller person in a shapeless cloak standing next to him.

Could be an undertaker come to measure for a pine box.

"On your feet," the guard ordered. "You got a visitor."

He shifted his legs so he could stand, his movement stirring up an awful stench coming from the filthy straw. How long had it been since this place was cleaned? Never?

Using the brick wall behind him as leverage, he climbed to his feet. Every part of him ached and his side felt like someone had stabbed him with a burning stick. Probably a broken rib from one of Charley's well placed blows. He hoped his cousin was hurting this bad, which would prevent him from wreaking more havoc.

The guard moved the lantern, and the person next to him drew back a hood. Light reflected off a woman's pale skin and red hair.

Jake's heart stumbled. *Redbird*. He hadn't thought she'd come. Did this mean she hadn't betrayed him? If not, he hoped she had a good explanation for how he'd ended up in here. Even if it wouldn't help him, he'd feel better knowing she'd been loyal.

She stepped closer to the bars, her face a pale oval in the flickering light. Unless he got closer, he wouldn't be able to look into her eyes and see past her solemn expression. He hated for her to see him like this—trapped, beaten and bruised, stinking worse than a dead possum.

The guard hung the lantern on a hook outside the cell. His mouse-colored mustache twitched as though he just noticed the bad smell. Lazy *yu-ne-ga* could do something about the foul conditions if he'd put down clean straw. "Want me to stay, ma'am?"

"The cell is locked. I can find my way out." Her voice had a dull quality, as if she'd been grieving and was resigned to the loss. Premonition sent an uneasy quiver through him.

The guard raked Kate with a leer that made Jake long to strangle him. "All righty then. When you wind up your visit, bring that lantern back to the office. He don't need it out here."

The outside door clanked shut.

Jake combed his fingers through his hair and picked out a dirty piece of straw. She had to be offended by the stench. Soon, the rats would lose their fear and start scurrying again. He shouldn't have sent for her. "Kate..." His voice sounded rustier than the hinges on the barred doors. "You shouldn't be in this place."

"Come closer. I can't see you in the shadows."

"Not sure you want to see me..." He debated maintaining his distance so he wouldn't offend her. His feet moved forward. He couldn't stop them.

Her eyes widened, and then she gasped.

Jake didn't need a mirror to know he looked bad. "Charley is in worse shape, if that makes you feel better."

Her face contorted with grief, and then she bowed her head. "Nothing will make me feel better right now."

The ache in his side spread to his chest. Regret. For losing his temper, for punishing his cousin with his fists when he could've stopped, but mostly for the pain he'd caused an innocent woman he never meant to hurt.

"Henry told me you prevented him from stopping Charley and he got away."

“I prevented him from shooting Charley in the back,” Jake mumbled around a swollen lip.

“From what I hear, you two fought like rabid grizzlies out to kill each other.”

“We fought because...” The fight had been inevitable and couldn’t be avoided anymore. “Charley threatened to go after you.”

Her face grew paler. “That’s what I feared.”

“He’s lost his mind.” Jake couldn’t explain his cousin’s cruelty any other way. The man he’d fought wasn’t the same one he’d grown up with. He might’ve let Stevens end Charley’s pain, but he couldn’t stand by and watch his cousin get shot in the back.

Kate released a shuddering sigh.

Jake curled his fingers around the bars, wanting to hold her, knowing better than to try. He didn’t deserve to hold her. Not after what he’d put her through. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you why I left. Thought I could talk him into leaving without involving you.”

Her head came up and all trace of grief vanished, replaced by a controlled expression that was so unlike her it chilled him to the bone. “You didn’t tell me because you don’t trust me.”

Anger was the only emotion he could handle at the moment. “You didn’t trust me, either. Or you wouldn’t have talked to Stevens and sent that bluecoat after me.”

She drew back, the hurt surprise on her face too spontaneous to be feigned. “I didn’t send *anyone* after you. I didn’t even know you’d left the hotel until Eden came to my room and told me you were in jail.”

Redbird hadn’t betrayed him. The tension banding his heart eased slightly. He still couldn’t figure out how Stevens had known. “You didn’t tell them we broke into the rail car?”

“Of course not. I promised I wouldn’t betray you.” Her wavering voice carried a thread of accusation he didn’t understand, considering he was the one in jail.

“The major knew my name.”

“I introduced you to his wife, remember?”

Jake did remember, and in hindsight, supposed he should’ve used an alias. Though his name meant nothing. He hadn’t used it when he spied on the railroad. “Where did Stevens get his information?”

She folded her arms across her chest, appearing defensive. "I saw Henry after you'd been arrested. The major appeared to be very interested in you, and he asked quite a few questions."

Jake's side began to burn. He shifted his position, but didn't let go of the bars for fear his knees would give way. He'd never seen the major before or Stevens up close, and he and Charley had made certain they weren't being followed that night.

"What questions?"

"He wanted to know what you looked like, where and when I met you."

"How did you answer?"

"I lied. Just as you lied to me." She dropped her arms, her hands fisting at her sides, suddenly looking like she wanted to pummel him even worse than Charley had done. "You stole the railroad payroll last May...you and Charley, and that's what you were looking for when you broke into my father's railcar."

Her accusation caught him off guard. He nearly lost his grip on the bars and slid to his knees. How had she put together his connection with the recent break-in and the payroll theft? The soldier and Stevens, they knew, or they had enough evidence to suspect.

He would hang for certain, now.

Despair crept over him, followed by a sense of resignation. Or was it relief? Having no more secrets meant being freed from the weight of lies and evasiveness. He'd longed to be honest with Kate, and he should've been, but he hadn't been brave enough. She showed bravery to come over here and confront him.

"Is it true?" she asked, this time softly. Almost as if she wished he would deny it.

He owed her the truth, even if it meant she would never again look at him the way she had in the peach orchard, or in front of the hotel. What he'd seen in her eyes, he hadn't dared name because he couldn't offer her the kind of promise it would demand. But she'd made him believe for a moment that he could give her the world. He'd felt strong and powerful and honorable. He hadn't felt that way in so long. Maybe never.

"It's true."

"I wondered whether you'd lie."

Her blunt admission stabbed him worse than the knifing injury in his side. His hands slipped, he couldn't hold on, no more than he could hold

onto Redbird. She'd flown from his grasp.

"Jake?" Concern warmed her voice and her hands closed over his like she was trying to keep them in place. "Are you...about to swoon?"

He'd never swooned in his life.

Gritting his teeth, he forced his legs to straighten. "No. Not swooning."

"Are you sure?"

"Just need to...wrap my ribs." He spoke in choppy sentences. If he kept his breathing shallow, his side didn't hurt as much.

She moved her hands to his wrists and circled them with her fingers, pressing against bruises inflicted by handcuffs. He bore the pain without flinching. Having her touch him was worth the momentary discomfort. Her eyes grew bright.

If she cried for him, it meant she still had tender feelings. She hadn't purged him from her heart entirely. He was a selfish bastard to feel better because she grieved on his account, but when had he been anything but selfish?

He reached out and cupped her face, which felt awkward with the bars between them.

That wasn't the worst thing standing between them.

"You shouldn't cry for me."

"I'm not."

That hurt, but he deserved it. "Then why the tears?"

"You asked me that once before. Remember?"

"When you wanted to know why I was taking you back. Now you know."

"Now I know." She removed his hands from her face as if she couldn't bear to have him touch her.

He wrapped his fingers around the bars, wanted to wrench them open, take her in his arms and kiss her until she forgave him. Instead, he held his expression neutral.

Anguish twisted her features. "Why did you let me believe you were a good man?"

"I never told you I was a good man."

"You never told me you were a low-down crook, either." She grabbed his sleeve. "What did you do with the money? Did you buy that fancy horse? You certainly didn't invest it in improvements for your aunt's home."

His face got hot. "I didn't use the money on myself or my family. I used it for a good cause."

"A good cause?" She took hold of the bars just below his hands, creating the strange illusion she was the one imprisoned. "What would that be?"

He hesitated. If he lied or refused to answer, she'd forever believe the worst. On the other hand, if he told her the truth and she betrayed him, those white judges would throw their case out. Then what could he do? He sure as hell wasn't negotiating any deal with her father. The big chief wouldn't talk to him anyway. He'd want a hanging.

"If I tell you, you have to swear not to betray me."

Her brows shot up. "*Me* betray *you*?" She released the bars and took a step back. "That's rich. You've betrayed me in every way possible."

He didn't flinch at her wrath, knowing she needed a target and he was a deserving one. "It's not just my family at risk. My whole nation would suffer. I've got to have your word."

"I offered to help you before, did everything I knew to gain your confidence and that still wasn't enough. You didn't trust me then. Why would you trust me now?"

He clenched the bars. "I came here with you, didn't I?"

"Because I blackmailed you into it."

"No. I did it because..."

The mask she'd donned to confront him had fallen off and emotions flitted across her face. Concern, longing...

He rested his forehead against the bars. He couldn't say he'd followed her because he couldn't bear to let her go. That would give her hope, and he'd run out of hope. There was something he could tell her, though. Something he should've told her before.

"I believe in you." His voice grew rough. "You're a good person with a pure heart...and I do trust you."

Her hand flew to her mouth, stifling a sob. "Don't... Don't say things you don't mean."

"I mean every word. I trust you'll do what's right. Even if it's not easy."

She inched closer, hurt etched on her face. "Despite what you think, I'm not after revenge. Perhaps your head on a plate, nothing more."

"You can have it." Hell, she might as well take his heart while she was at it. He had no use for it without her. "Just give me your word you won't

use what I tell you against my family or my people. I don't expect you to protect me."

She might want to throw him down a deep dark hole after he told her what he'd done.

Her brow furrowed in confusion. "All right. You have my word."

He heaved a sigh of relief. Now he could tell her the truth. "We used the money on the lawsuit to challenge the land grants."

If he'd told her he'd used his ill-gotten gains to build a machine to fly to the moon, she couldn't have looked more surprised. "The lawsuit? Are you saying you stole the railroad's payroll to pay for the court battle?"

Stealing wouldn't have been his first choice, but he'd plotted the crime, so he had to own it. "I studied the laws and cases pertaining to treaties, found what I thought was a good defense. But I'm not a lawyer, and I knew none of our people had enough money to support taking a lawsuit to court."

"So you decided to steal it." The straw crackled beneath her boots as she stepped forward into the light. Rather than disdain, her expression reflected awed curiosity. "And Charley? What's his part in this? Did he suggest robbing the railroad?"

The answer wasn't that simple.

Jake pushed away so he could gain some distance from her, which might allow him to think straight. He couldn't focus on anything but Redbird when she was near.

He wouldn't blame his cousin for the choices he'd made. On the other hand, Kate deserved to know what had brought him to this point in his life and to the decision to turn to thievery.

"Charley wanted to take money from whites to get the funds we needed. He didn't have a plan. I knew he'd end up killing somebody if I didn't do something. So...I suggested we take what we needed from the railroad, and offered to do the job with him...as long as he agreed not to hurt anybody."

She shook her head like she didn't believe his story. Maybe she thought he was trying to make himself look better. "It was my idea to steal the payroll. I planned it and carried it out, with Charley's help."

"Like Robin Hood," she murmured.

Jake wasn't sure he heard right, being distracted by the pain in his side. He couldn't remain on his feet any longer. He lowered himself to the greasy straw and leaned against the bars. "Did you say Robin Hood?"

She squatted next to him. “Take from the rich railroad baron and give to the poor tribe. A Cherokee Robin Hood.”

He’d heard the tale, but hadn’t made the association. “Guess you could call it that. You could also call it stealing.”

She searched his face. What was she looking for? Some sign of honor and decency in the face of an outlaw. That was only true in stories, not reality.

“I’m not a good person, Kate. I’m sorry if I let you believe that.”

“I haven’t decided about the good part. But you are very clever. Brilliant, even.”

“Brilliant?” He released a pained laugh. “That’s an improvement over *low-down crook*.”

She dipped her chin as if embarrassed before returning a faint smile. “I won’t tell my father, but I wish I could, just to see his reaction. He’d be apoplectic. He’s so rarely bested.”

Jake gazed at her, wonderingly. “Am I dreaming? Or did you just compliment me for stealing your father’s money?”

Her gaze shifted away as if his observation made her uncomfortable. “You might’ve come up with a better plan that didn’t involve stealing, if you hadn’t been so concerned about protecting Charley.

“I owe him.”

“Owe him? Why? Because he’s your cousin?”

“No, not just that…” Jake tried to swallow past the knot in his throat. He also owed Kate. The whole truth. Except, if he told her why he owed Charley, she wouldn’t be impressed, and she sure as hell wouldn’t call him brilliant. There was only one word she could use.

*Coward.*



KATE SHIFTED INTO A sitting position as close to Jake as the bars would allow. Beads of perspiration slid down the small of her back. Lord, it was sweltering in here. How could he stand it? And that atrocious stench coming from the hay, even animals had cleaner stalls.

Dirt and blood stained his shirt, nasty cuts marred his cheekbone and lower lip, and his right eye was puffy and bruised. Judging from his shallow breathing, he had several broken ribs. Had no one sent for a doctor? As soon as she left, she would see to it.



But she wasn't leaving yet. Not until she had the answer to why Jake felt he owed Charley. This, she suspected, would reveal a great deal about what had driven him to violate his conscience and become a thief.

"Will you tell me what happened?"

Her question was met with silence. Apparently the answer was more complex than she realized, or he was reluctant to share the story.

She leaned her shoulder against the bars. "I'll wait until you're ready."

He turned his head, which brought them so close he could have kissed her. He didn't. Perhaps he no longer wanted to, or he was in too much pain, or...he felt unworthy.

She could see that now, being close to him and seeing past her own doubts and insecurities. Why hadn't she seen it earlier? His reluctance to care for her didn't come from being an Indian. He was proud of that. He felt unworthy for another reason. "You've trusted me with so much. Will you not trust me with this?"

His contemplative gaze shifted to some point just past her shoulder. As usual, he would consider his words before he spoke. "It happened during the War of Rebellion, or the Great Cause, depending on which side you supported. We didn't support either side. Didn't matter. Our leaders couldn't keep us out of the white men's war."

"During the war?" This could mean anywhere from five to nine years in the past. "How old were you?"

"Fifteen when Charley and my uncles left to join General Watie. With the older men gone, Charley said I ought to stay home and watch over the women. I promised him I would."

A sense of doom took hold. Kate gripped the bar. She didn't want to hear the rest. Yet, she'd insisted. Jake didn't seem to notice her distress. His eyes were trained on a place in the past.

"One day, bluecoats came to the house. They were loud and rude, waving their guns around, demanding something to eat. Charley's wife, Ocoee, tried to calm them, but they cursed at her. I told them we wouldn't feed them if they were disrespectful. One of the soldiers knocked me down and took my gun. He said he would shoot my parts off. Ocoee pleaded with him. Promised she'd fix them dinner. Said she'd give them whatever food they wanted if they'd leave us alone."

Jake turned his face away, but not before she saw bleakness in his expression. She started to reach out, to reassure him. But he wasn't a

fifteen-year-old boy needing comfort, and she had no business touching him.

“Ocoee fixed dinner and she sent me to get water. She met me by the creek. The soldiers had found the corn liquor and were getting drunk. She’d left with some excuse, but the men followed her and said she wasn’t finished cooking for them. I told them to leave her alone. One pulled a gun and shot at me, but he was so drunk he missed. Ocoee wrestled with him. She yelled at me, told me to leave and stop causing trouble. The man kept firing, the others were laughing. I could tell they enjoyed watching me jump. A bullet grazed my shoulder...”

Jake’s throat worked. “I ran.”

Kate’s constricting heart throbbed with horror and sympathy. He’d been little more than a boy. Scared, outnumbered, unarmed.

“I hid in the woods, and after the men left, I slipped back inside the house. I found...” His voice cracked. He swallowed before continuing. “I found Ocoee sprawled on the floor, naked, with blood on her thighs. Flies were crawling on her. I carried her to the creek to wash them off.”

Bile surged up the back of Kate’s throat. She covered her mouth.

*Oh God, poor Jake, and that poor woman.*

“Ocoee was beautiful, and brave, like you. But I can’t remember what she looked like. When I close my eyes, all I can see is her head twisted like they’d tried to take it off.”

Jake’s voice had gone flat, devoid of emotion. He could’ve been telling a story, someone else’s story. But it hadn’t happened to someone else.

Kate struggled to maintain the tenuous grip she had on her emotions, calling on every ounce of willpower not to break down and weep. Jake didn’t need her tears. He needed her strength. “If you’d stayed, they would’ve killed you, too.”

“Better if I’d been the one to die. More honorable.” Harsh lines etched on his face revealed the depth of his self-loathing.

She understood why he felt guilty, anyone with a shred of compassion would feel the same, but he had to let go of the past and move on, stop wasting his life trying to make up for something he couldn’t change.

“Choosing to live isn’t dishonorable.”

When his expression remained wooden, she reached through the bars and gripped his shoulder, squeezing to get his attention. “If you’d died trying to protect her, what good would have been accomplished? Those men

would've raped and killed her anyway, and her sacrifice would've been useless. She gave you the chance to live. Wishing you'd died shows contempt for that precious gift."

"I don't wish for a useless death. I wish I could've traded my life for hers." The pain threaded through his words tore at Kate's heart.

"I know you do," she said, unable to manage more than a whisper. "But that's not what happened. You weren't given that choice."

"No, you're wrong. I was given a choice. I made the wrong one."

Kate followed his arm until she reached his hand and placed her fingers over his. "You have a choice now, as well. I pray you'll choose to accept Ocoee's gift. Bring her honor by embracing life."

Jake laced their fingers together. His grip became so tight it hurt, and the ache spread until it encompassed her entire body.

She'd arrived here tonight with guns loaded, prepared to mete out justice. Her outlaw had completely disarmed her, and with the truth, no less.

Despite what Jake thought, he was one of the most honorable men she'd ever met. He'd kept her safe, had returned her, even fought his cousin—the one he felt he owed so much—to protect her. Even if he hadn't been entirely honest, he'd trusted her enough to come with her and give compromise a chance. And he'd come knowing full well he risked his freedom, and his life.

According to the law, Jake should go to jail, and if convicted, he would be there for a very long time. Her heart told her he'd been imprisoned long enough, having locked up his heart and his happiness years ago.

"It's late." Jake spoke softly. "You should go."

With ponderous movements, he came to his feet. Then he reached through the bars to offer her assistance. Given his injuries, she would pull him down. She took his hand and also gripped the bar, using it to support her weight, as she stood.

Brushing off black bits of straw and Lord knew what else from her skirt, she surveyed the filthy cell. "Your injuries require tending and you need sleep. Neither of which you'll get in here."

Jake's lips twisted in a wry smile. "Don't imagine I'll be leaving anytime soon. But I feel better since you came to see me."

"If that's so, then I'm glad I came." Kate felt no better. In fact, she couldn't imagine feeling worse. Her plans lay in shambles, her hopes

destroyed. There'd be no partnership with Jake in forging a negotiated settlement, no relationship of any kind.

She lifted the lantern off the hook. Light slashed across his face. His flat expression conveyed more hopelessness than any sign of emotion might've done.

“Goodbye, Kate.”

A knife-like pain pierced her chest. She recalled telling him, in anger, not to call her Redbird, and he hadn't since. Much as she longed to be his Redbird, she couldn't. But there was something she could do before they parted ways. She could give him a gift like Ocoee had done years ago. What he chose to do with it would be up to him.

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# Chapter 10



"RELEASE THAT INDIAN? Are you crazy?" Henry stood, propping his fingers on the desk the way Kate's father did whenever he wished to tower over her to rant about something. "You can't be serious. That man and his partner stole our payroll."

"We don't know that." Kate popped out of the chair and crossed to the window so Henry couldn't see her face. She was a terrible liar.

Of course she knew what Jake had done. He'd admitted as much. But there were other things he'd revealed, as well—his love for his family, his sacrifices, his commitment and devotion to his people. Those qualities defined his life. Not his crimes.

Jake's heart called to hers in a way she couldn't explain, but knew it had something to do with who he was...with who they both were. She couldn't turn her back on him any more than he'd been able to turn his back on her.

"Is that why you're here?" Henry demanded. "Because of that Indian?"

Yes. No, she couldn't say that. Henry would flat-out refuse to help. She wouldn't have approached him at all, had she not been desperate. Only with his support would she stand a chance of getting her father to bend.

But first, Henry would have to bend, and she would fare better gaining his cooperation if she appealed to reason. He was, above all, a practical man.

Kate stared through the window at the busy train station outside Henry's railcar. She hid her hands in her skirts as she wrung them. "Why should we press charges against Mr. Colson? We need him on our side. He has ties to the Cherokee Tribal Council."

"And I'm President of the United States." Henry approached her from behind and cupped his hands on her shoulders. "Come now, Kate. We both know that Indian's an outlaw."

She escaped the unwelcome touch as she spun around. "He's the nephew of a council member. We'd be foolish to pursue a case against him."

"He could be the head of their blasted council and I'd still press charges. If we don't punish these heathens for breaking the law, they'll steal us blind before we make the Texas border." Henry pushed back his morning coat and

gripped his sides, revealing a holstered gun. Made him look like a well-dressed gunslinger.

"They're not *heathens*. I'd wager Jake is more educated than you are."

Henry's startled reaction, though quickly covered, suggested she might've struck a nerve. He stroked his hand over his beard, which could imply thoughtful consideration, or he was plotting revenge. "Since when are you on a first name basis with that Indian?"

Kate's patience, worn threadbare over the past few days, snapped. "He's not *that Indian*. He has a name."

"I'm sure he does. I'm just surprised you're so familiar with it."

Her familiarity with Jake went beyond his name, but she wasn't going to say that. Even if she were inclined to confide in someone about the wreck her heart had become, it wouldn't be the suitor she rejected.

"Do you want to save this railroad? Then work with me. Don't waste your time pursuing charges against Mr. Colson. We'll never get to Texas if we throw everyone in jail we think *might* have stolen from us. We need to make peace with these people. Show them we understand their concerns."

"*Their* concerns? What about ours?"

"If we give them assurances we won't take their land, they'll address our concerns. We'll find a way through."

"Without right-of-way? How do you propose we get to Texas? Fly?"

She ignored Henry's snide remark. "We'll negotiate for the use of their land."

"What do you think I've been doing?"

"You've tried to bribe them and trick them, and Father is fighting them in court. Not once have either of you suggested a compromise, which is what I'm proposing."

In the stretch of silence, she could hear tapping. The telegraph operator in the small office in the front of Henry's railcar would be sending her father the message she'd painstakingly written. Everything hinged on what he decided to do. Not once in the whole time she'd been out here had she been able to bring her father around to her way of thinking. Why would he listen to her this time? He wouldn't if Henry opposed her.

She would get down on her knees and beg if she had to. Had she felt less threatened by Henry's close relationship with her father, she might've recruited his support much earlier.

"Henry, please."

He stared at her like she was a puzzle to be solved. Without a word, he walked to the door between his office and the telegraph room, shut it and turned around. "What's come over you, Kate?"

Even if she told him, he would never understand. "I'm trying to ensure we make it to Texas without going bankrupt."

Henry propped his hip on the edge of the desk, his favorite pose. She wasn't sure if he did it to put visitors at ease, or to intimidate them. "That's not what I mean, and you know it. Why is this Indian important to you?"

He'd seen her reactions when they'd been talking to the major. He knew she'd gone to the jail. He was many things, but not a fool. Still, she couldn't admit her interest was personal. His pride wouldn't let him come to Jake's aid.

"We have nothing to gain by ensuring Mr. Colson goes to jail."

"Nothing to gain?" Henry arched a sable eyebrow. "How about stopping payroll thefts?"

She had to reassure him without tipping her hand. "Mr. Colson isn't a threat to anyone."

"He's a threat to me." Henry crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm not making any deals until I know what's going on. And don't tell me that ridiculous story you told the major about secret negotiations. He didn't buy it. Neither do I."

Kate dabbed a handkerchief on her forehead. The urge to seek the open window was strong, but it wouldn't be any cooler over there, and avoiding Henry's question would only fire his suspicions. She brushed back a damp curl, and carefully chose her words to remain as close to the truth as possible. "I met Mr. Colson the night of the party. He provided me with an opportunity to get to know his family."

"You went off alone with a stranger? An Indian?"

"Things aren't always as they seem, Henry. Sometimes circumstances that appear dangerous at first turn out to be a blessing in disguise. Now I know why Jake risked so much. His people have suffered the cruelest treatment. They've been betrayed repeatedly. They're sick and tired of the lies and the greed." She gestured to the window. "This is *their* land. If we want to pass through it, we should ask their permission and compensate them for the use."

Henry didn't move from where he perched on the desk. His face could've been carved in stone. "Is that all you have to say?"



“What did you expect me to say?”

He sighed audibly. "Kate, I know you have a bleeding heart for every lost cause. But this one..." He shook his head. "Your father will never approve."

Distress tightened her throat. "He doesn't approve of a great many things about me. You, on the other hand, can do no wrong, it seems."

Henry's expression shifted. Was that sympathy, or just a trick of the light? "You could change his opinion."

Could she? If she managed to save her father's railroad, he might grow to respect her. He might even accept her if she married Henry and gave him grandchildren—boys, of course. But neither her father nor Henry would love her in the way she needed to be loved.

Being with Jake had opened her eyes. He valued her for who she was, not who he wanted her to be. He cared about her enough to put his safety aside and accompany her into enemy territory. Now she realized why he'd done it, for her sake even more than his. Even if she could never have him, he was the man she wanted. None other would be first in her heart.

She shook her head. "No. I don't think I can change how Father views me, because I'm not willing to be the one who changes."

"Kate..." Henry's voice dropped low, no longer businesslike. "I don't mind your soft heart. Actually, I respect you for it. You remind me of my —" He cut himself off before he finished, but she knew what he'd been about to say.

*His sisters.* Henry's only soft spot. He'd told her little of his background, but enough for her to know he'd been the sole provider for three younger sisters since he was little more than a boy. That had endeared him to Kate. She found little else endearing about the ruthlessly ambitious operations chief. But her father hadn't chosen Henry for his sentimental side.

Henry removed his coat and rolled up his sleeves, revealing tanned wrists. He had picked up a hammer and lent a hand to the remaining crew after they had to let so many men go to preserve their resources. He would barter, bargain, cut corners, drive spikes, or do whatever it took to make this railroad succeed. She wouldn't. Not if it meant trampling on the rights of others.

"Why are you here?" He asked the question a second time, and then proceeded to answer it. "This isn't about some ragtag band of Indians. It

isn't even about the railroad. You're here because of one man."

Shivers stole over her despite the oppressive heat. She couldn't keep pretending, not to Henry, not even to herself. She had come because she loved Jake, and she would do whatever it took to save him.

She dropped to her knees and raised her hands in supplication. "Please, Henry, I beg you to help Jake. He isn't the kind of man you think he is. He's decent and honorable, and he only wants to protect his family and his people. We can't—we shouldn't—judge him. Not after what we've done."

"For God's sake, get up off the floor." Henry leapt off the desk, looking alarmed. His flustered response seemed curious, considering she was the one on her knees. "You don't have to beg...and you haven't done anything wrong."

"You think not?" Kate took his proffered hand and allowed him to help her to her feet. "In Kansas, our railroad took the land those settlers had poured their sweat and dreams into. A young woman accosted by one of our workers killed herself, but you were reluctant to slow down long enough to ferret out the truth because you had a race to win. Now my father is asking the courts to strip a sovereign nation of its rights. How can you stand there and say we've done nothing wrong?"

Above a starched white collar, a crimson stain spread up Henry's neck. "I never said *I* hadn't done anything wrong. I said you hadn't. Except for getting involved with that...outlaw."

Kate retrieved her hand. "Mr. Colson isn't an outlaw." Not anymore.

Henry's troubled gaze flickered over her. She'd seen that assessing look before, when he considered the value of something compared to the effort it would take to acquire it. At last, he heaved an impatient sigh.

"Let's not argue his innocence. As you said, none of us are pure. But tell me why I should stick my neck out for this...*alleged* criminal...just because you want me to?"

That sounded more like Henry. He weighed everything by what he stood to gain. In this case, he'd expected they would marry, which would improve his station and further his career.

To his credit, Henry had attempted to woo her, rather than simply presuming her agreement. But she wasn't in love with him, nor was he in love with her. Her rejection had wounded his pride, and that was the offense he most struggled to forgive.

A smarter woman might flatter him and stroke his ego to get what she wanted. But Kate wasn't comfortable with coyness and Henry's ego was big enough. She would rather strike a fair deal with the businessman—the one who wanted to run this railroad much more than she did.

“If you help me get what I want, I'll give you something that will convince Father to make you president—without having to wed me.”

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# Chapter 11



PAIN ROUSED JAKE FROM a deep sleep. He rolled over and winced at a poke in his side. Not a twinge from his mending ribs, something under the blanket. Full awareness came in the next moment, and he sat up with a groan. He wasn't in jail. He'd awakened in the cave that was his temporary home.

Jake pulled a sharp-edged stone from beneath the bear skin rug. Ought to be more careful where he made his bed.

Daylight shone through the slanted entrance. Somewhere outside a blue jay chided. Seemed to say, *Get up, lazy.*

Sitting, Jake scrubbed his fingers through his hair, which was getting longer because he hadn't bother cutting it. His ancestors had worn their hair long, why not him? He liked it, and no one else was around to offer an opinion.

His cousin had fled to Texas, according to his aunt. He didn't plan on following. He couldn't do any more for Charley than he'd already done. Redbird had shown him that.

She'd also helped him see other things. Such as how life could come from death, and how giving a little meant getting far more in return.

His heart thudded painfully. He wished he could've told her that, and how much she meant to him. But he would never find the words in English or *Tsa-la-gi*.

Last night, he'd dreamt she came to see him.

He glanced around the dismal cave. Last time she'd been here, she had been bound and terrified he would rape or kill her, or both. She wouldn't venture back to this place, even if she could find it again. He was lucky she'd changed her mind about seeing him locked away.

Two months ago, she'd somehow arranged his release. The lawyer she'd hired had told Jake he had to stick around until the investigation was over. If formally charged he would face trial. The attorney had assured him there wouldn't be enough evidence to support a conviction.

Jake took off for the Territory.

He knew better than to think a white jury would need much evidence to convict an Indian, and he wasn't so honorable he wanted to spend the rest of his life behind bars. His only regret was not being able to see Kate again. Though she might not be too hurt that he hadn't waited around. They hadn't parted on the best of terms.

Standing, he stretched. Bath first, then breakfast. Then he might hunt, or fish. He had no special plans. None that would excite him as much as being with Redbird. That wouldn't happen, not in this lifetime; so he would take her advice and find a way to be useful, even if he couldn't be content.

He'd left her a note, thanking her for everything. Sweated over every word, but what he wrote seemed inadequate in light of what she'd done for him. The only way he knew to repay her was to give her what she'd fought so hard to achieve—a negotiated settlement between the railroad and the Cherokee Nation.

That's why he remained here, in hiding, biding his time until he heard from his uncle. He'd written his recommendations and made his best argument for leasing land to the railroad. His uncle had presented the proposal, and now he could do nothing but wait until he heard if they approved Kate's idea. After that, he could move on to a different place, somewhere far away from his family. Where he wouldn't cause them any more trouble.

Leaving his clothes in the cave, he strolled naked down to the river. The sand warmed his bare feet. He felt restless, as if he'd forgotten something or left an important task undone.

Stopping to scoop up a flat stone, with a flick of his wrist he sent it hopping across the water's surface. He picked up another rock, squinting as the sun struck silver on the river. He shifted his gaze upward, beyond a forested bluff, to a sky as blue as Redbird's eyes.

Last night, it had been pitch black.

That's what he'd forgotten, the New Moon.

He hadn't participated in the ritual celebration since Ocoee died. Hadn't been willing to release the bad feelings trapped inside him. Redbird had helped him get to the point where he could let go of his shameful past; but if he didn't purge the lingering guilt, it would devour him, leaving nothing but a useless husk.

Jake dropped the rock and walked into the river. Chicken flesh prickled his skin as he waded out to where the water reached his chest. Taking a

deep breath, he submerged.

He remained beneath the surface as the impurities gathered in his lungs and his chest began to burn. Dark spots danced in his vision. He continued to stare into the murky water until he felt light, almost weightless.

*Now...now* he could rise.

His toes dug into the silt and he pushed up, breaking the surface, gasping for air. Water poured off his hair and over his bare skin. A thousand tiny rivers washed away the sweat clinging to his body and the sins weighing down his soul.

Closing his eyes, he chanted the song of renewal.

Nothing would change the past. But at last he was free to be a better man in the future, which was another way he might repay his debt to Redbird.

He leapt up and splashed out of the river, laughing, feeling cleaner than he had in years.

*“Wa-ya!”*

He spun in the direction the call had come from, his gaze flying to a rocky outcrop where a hidden path led down to the cave.

His uncle raised an arm, waving. Someone stood next to him...looked like a woman dressed in men’s trousers.

Jake caught a glimpse of red hair beneath a floppy hat, and his heart came to a dead stop.



KATE PERCHED ON A LARGE rock, sipping coffee from Jake’s tin cup, one leg drawn up, her booted foot propped on the boulder. Wearing trousers without skirts was incredibly freeing. Perhaps Jake felt the same way about his choice of clothing and his living quarters. He’d donned a deerskin shirt over trousers of the same material. On his feet were moccasins. Based on the look of the campsite, with spears for fishing and a quiver of arrows near a stretched hide, he’d been out here for some time, living off the land.

He might not want to leave this peaceful place. Then what would she do?

Her heart constricted as her gaze caressed his strong jaw. Sparse bristles darkened his chin and around his mouth, other than that, he didn’t have much hair on his face—or his body.

The thought of him unclothed set off another burst of shivers.

Gracious, what a sight he'd made coming up out of the water like some pagan river god, with his black hair slicked back and his bronze skin gleaming wet. She'd been struck speechless, until she'd gained the presence of mind to turn around and give him privacy.

After he'd gotten over his initial surprise, and gotten dressed, he'd cooked them a breakfast of fresh fish while his uncle shared news of the negotiations between the council and the railroad. Jake's finely crafted proposal had been well received and an agreement was imminent, one that would protect Cherokee sovereignty over their lands while letting the railroad steam ahead. His uncle had left as soon as they'd finished eating, telling them he had to get home and would leave her in Jake's care, as she and Jake had business they needed to discuss.

"What sort of business brings you out here?" Jake held her cup steady while he poured more coffee. Their fingers touched, and a thrill shot through her.

"Important business." She sighed as he drew his hand away. He'd been hovering ever since she arrived and at times close enough to touch her, but he hadn't, until now...and this touch appeared accidental.

Setting the coffee pot near the fire, he sat on a tree stump a few feet away, legs planted, arms resting on his knees. He'd given her no invitation to occupy his lap.

Kate wrestled her disappointment behind an encouraging smile. She knew he wanted her, she hadn't misread the heated glances when he thought she wasn't looking. For some reason, he remained determined to keep his distance.

She'd been devastated when he fled town and had assumed he meant what he said about forever parting ways. However, during the last round of talks with the council, which she had insisted on attending with Henry, she couldn't hold back from approaching his uncle to see how Jake was faring.

What she had learned had given her the courage to come out here.

"You and I have a few things to settle," she started.

"Such as?" His expression conveyed curiosity, but it was the longing in his eyes that gave her hope. His uncle had told her Jake talked of nothing but Redbird and his desire to make her happy. If he missed her half as much as she missed him, he might consider her offer.

"I want to know why you left..." Her voice sounded surprisingly calm, considering her nervousness. Heavens, her hands were shaking. "Without



saying goodbye.”

Regret flashed across his face before he schooled his features. “Didn’t think I ought to stick around for the lynching.”

Tenderness welled in her heart. That’s why he remained secluded and isolated from his family and friends. He thought he was a wanted man. She was the only one looking for him.

“There wouldn’t have been a lynching. Our foreman couldn’t give a detailed description of the suspects...” after Henry suggested to McGrady that he might not remember correctly. “The judge threw out the case, and Henry convinced my father to close the books so they could focus on gaining an agreement with your leaders and restarting construction.”

The strained lines around Jake’s mouth relaxed. “That’s why you’re here, to tell me I’m not wanted?”

“No, I could’ve sent your uncle to tell you that. I’m here to make you an offer.”

Kate gathered her courage. She’d given this a great deal of thought. Although it would change the trajectory of her life, where she ended up would be exactly where she was meant to be—by Jake’s side.

“I’ve decided to go back East and support my friend, Miss Anthony, in her tireless campaign for suffrage. Come to Washington with me. Study the law. Become an advocate for your people. I’ll sponsor you, so you won’t have to worry about where the money will come from.”

“Washington?” He looked utterly confused. “I thought you wanted to run the railroad. You told me you wished to have more influence in your father’s business.”

“Yes, I did say that, but... it wasn’t the job that I wanted, or the power...” She reached down and picked up a stick near the rock she was sitting on, and began to draw circles in the sand. What she needed to tell him was so important, but now that she was here and with so much at stake, she couldn’t seem to find the words. “What I wanted most...was my father’s love. What I came all the way out here to find.”

“Did you find what you were looking for?”

Kate responded with a sad smile. “I’m no longer his heir.” He’d cut her off when she told him she planned to ask Jake to return to Washington with her. But he had cut her off emotionally long ago, after the child he’d truly wanted—her brother—had died.

“You’re without resources?” Jake looked worried.

She stopped doodling with the stick and looked up so he could see the love and gratitude in her eyes. “No, I inherited a small fortune from my aunt and invested it in the railroad. Now, thanks to you, that investment will pay off.”

Jake hadn't moved an eyelash. His unwavering attention gave her strength to tell him part of what she'd come to say.

“I can't be who—or what—Father wants me to be, and he can't love me like I want to be loved. But I've made my peace. You helped me see that I am loveable and admirable and valuable, just the way I am...”

Poor Jake. He looked stunned. Maybe he hadn't expected her to say that, or like most men, wasn't comfortable with emotion-laden conversation.

She breathed out a self-deprecating laugh. “Besides, Father doesn't need my help. He's got Henry. You should've seen him in action when we met with my father. Henry latched onto the prospect of leasing and before the discussion was over, he managed to make the whole thing look like it was his idea. He'll be named president soon, I suspect.”

Jake leaned forward with a scowl. “That wasn't his idea.”

Her beloved's righteous anger on her behalf pleased her. Jake wasn't threatened by her intelligence or abilities, and had no problem with letting her use them.

Another reason she loved him.

“I knew my father wouldn't buy it if he thought it was my idea. I let Henry take the glory, and he convinced my father to give up the fight to own your people's land.” She lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “Seemed a fair trade-off.”

Henry had also helped her ensure Jake's release, but she didn't say that, because she didn't want Jake to feel beholden to Henry. Her father's favorite would get what was coming to him.

She paused, picking up her coffee to take a sip. “Besides, I've got better things to do than fight for control of something I discovered I don't even want. We have your future to think about.”

Jake cocked his head. “My future?”

“You do intend to have one?”

“Yes, but...as a lawyer? In Washington?” He laughed.

“What's so funny?” She'd been excited when she thought of it because it all seemed to fit so perfectly. “You'll be a wonderful lawyer. You're

intelligent, educated and you have a good mind for strategy. I know you want to help your people, and you could accomplish so much good representing their interests.”

The former outlaw stared into the fire, ruminating. Sunlight struck blue-black glints in his damp hair, which hung loose nearly to his shoulders. She loved his long hair and itched to stroke it, and other parts she shouldn't be thinking about. Not until they were married...if they married.

Despite being fathered by a white man, as far as he and his family were concerned, he was Cherokee. He might not be willing to bind himself to a white woman, even Redbird.

She would stand beside him, regardless.

“I never thought...”

She jerked her attention from his hair to his solemn expression and her excitement dimmed. He might not consider this idea as good as her last. They could put their heads together and come up with another one. “If you don't think you'd like to be a lawyer—”

“Actually, I think I would.” Jake's mouth tipped up in a bemused smile. “I just never imagined I could do something like that.”

“You can do anything you set your mind to. All you need is the opportunity and...” She leaned forward, putting her heart into her gaze. “I want to give it to you.”

He blinked, seeming stunned by her declaration. Then concern crinkled his forehead. “If you show up in Washington with an Indian in tow, you'll be spurned. They'll call you names. Ugly names.”

She gestured to the trousers she wore. “Do you think I care what other people think? I never have, and I never will. If someone chooses to make an issue of it, we shall snub our noses at them and go about our business.”

He knelt at her side before she realized he'd moved, holding her in the intent gaze that had so unsettled her to begin with. Now, his rapt regard sent shivers of pleasure racing through her. “Why would you do this for me?”

She could say it was because she was a crusader always looking for a good cause. That was only a tiny part of the reason she wanted him to come with her, and it wasn't what he was asking. “I want to do it because...I love you.”

He dropped to both knees and dragged her into his arms.

She clung to him, hugging, crying. She couldn't help it. Burying her face in his neck, she nuzzled his warm skin. He smelled so good, and it felt

so good to hold him. The past two months had seemed like forever and she'd feared she would never see him again.

"Oh Jake," she whispered in his ear. "Please don't send me away."

He drew back. The tender look on his face brought tears to her eyes. "I know how to say '*I love you*' in English and *Tsa-la-gi*, but words don't capture what I feel..." He touched his chest. "In here."

Another piece of her heart fell at his feet.

She drew his head down and he kissed her; a lush, passionate kiss, the kind she'd dreamed about and longed for and needed so badly she thought she might die.

When he had left, her entire world had come crashing down. She told herself they weren't right for each other, that they had no conceivable future, until she reconceived her future at his side. She hadn't known true happiness before meeting Jake. Now, knowing he loved her, she couldn't imagine being happier.

"Redbird," he murmured, feathering kisses across her cheek while she lovingly combed her fingers through his hair. "Am I dreaming? If I wake up, will you fly away?"

"Darling, why would you think that?"

"I never told you the end of Redbird's story."

"No, you didn't. Is it a happy ending?"

He gave her a rueful smile. "Afraid not. She was killed."

Kate's chest grew tight. "How?"

"*Uk-te-na*, the smoking dragon, destroyed her."

"The smoking dragon. Isn't that the name your people gave the steam engine?" She stroked his cheek to reassure him. "Were you afraid the railroad would take me away? Destroy who I am?"

He gazed deep into her eyes. "Your spirit is too strong to be conquered, like Redbird's. She came back to life as a bird. Like that one..." He pointed to a crimson cardinal perched on the limb of a pine tree. The bird fluttered its wings and took flight.

Amazement bubbled up her throat and came out in a delightful laugh. "Why, that's beautiful, and it *is* a happy ending."

"In some ways it is." Jake pressed a tender kiss against her forehead. "Except Redbird couldn't return to her family, so she flew away."

Kate's heart swelled with so much love she couldn't contain it. "Redbird might not return to her love, but I will never leave you, *Wa-ya*. My Wolf."

At his look of surprise, she grinned. “You’re uncle told me your Indian name. It fits you perfectly. You’re the wolf who guards his pack.”

His eyes glittered with amusement. “Are you offering to be part of my pack?”

She couldn’t wait any longer to tell him her dream. “I’m offering to be your mate...and redbirds mate for life.”

He became serious. “You’d be my wife? This is what you want?”

“More than anything.”

“Then I’ll go with you to Washington. I’ll go wherever you go, and never leave your side.”

By the time he finished his pledge her tears were flowing.

He wiped them away with his thumbs. “Here now, I’ve made you cry again. I never meant to, but it seems that’s what I do.”

“These are happy tears. The kind you cry at weddings, or when babies are born, or when you find your one true love.”

Jake kissed her again. She tasted her tears on his lips. They tasted like joy.



THE END

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## Steam! Romance and Rails, The Series



WELCOME TO *Steam! Romance and Rails*, a series set in the American West during the golden age of steam railroads. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the United States entered a time of explosive growth and expansion unmatched since. The country had just emerged from a devastating civil war and people needed to have faith in something. That something turned out to be what railroads represented: opportunity and hope for the future.

A fiercely contended construction race between the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railway, (more commonly known as “The Katy”) and the Missouri, Fort Scott & Gulf Railroad Company, (dubbed “The Border Tier”) encapsulates the spirit of these times. This fascinating era also provided inspiration for my railroad-themed historical romances.

The race took place primarily in 1870, when both lines were laying track through Kansas as fast as they could to be first to reach the border of Indian Territory (modern day Oklahoma). Congress had promised the winning line free land and the exclusive right to pass through Indian lands into cattle-rich Texas.

New York investor Levi Parsons, the force behind the Katy, and real estate tycoon James Joy, who ran the Border Tier (dubbed “the Joy line” by Parsons’ crew), were ambitious men willing to do anything to secure the prize. Spies, saboteurs and even outlaws disrupted the competition and turned the contest into a battle.

Most of the activity took place in southeastern Kansas in an area dubbed the Cherokee Neutral Lands because it was supposed to serve as a buffer between white settlers and the Indian Territory. But as early as 1850, whites began to settle there, and by 1865, shortly after the Civil War, thousands of immigrants were pouring in.

The Cherokee, or *Tsa-la-gi*, people had suffered setback after setback. Thirty years earlier, their homelands in the Southeast had been taken from them and they’d been forcibly marched west and relocated. They’d been

dragged, divided, into the Civil War, and subsequently lost more land as a result. By the time the Katy showed up on their doorstep, they were sick and tired of the white men's lies and broken promises.

The 1866 treaty gave one railroad the right to pass through their territory, but said nothing about giving land away, so when Congress promised free grants to the railroad, the Cherokee Nation objected—strenuously. A bitter lawsuit ensued and ultimately, the courts ruled in their favor.

In the meantime, the Katy struggled to keep building so it didn't go bankrupt after exhausting most of its resources to win the race. The line eventually crossed the Red River into Texas and became, for a time, a thriving railroad.

Today, the Katy no longer exists and portions of its rail bed have been turned into scenic hiking and biking paths. The Cherokee Nation has survived and thrived, ironically adapting to modern times much better than the railroad it challenged so many years ago.

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*A Dangerous Passion* by E.E. Burke  
Excerpt



Chapter 1

*MARCH 3, 1873, PARSONS, Kansas*

An ambitious man could expect to make enemies. It was the inevitable byproduct of success. Henry wasn't concerned about the length of his list, only the names he needed to add to it, which he intended to do tonight.

He pushed open the doors to the Rail Yard Saloon and strode into the narrow smoke-filled room. His gaze skittered past an off-duty crew hunched over the bar, burly tracklayers playing cards beneath a sign warning *No Sharps Allowed*. That meant gamblers, not the popular rifle, which was standard issue for railroad employees traveling through Indian Territory, or anywhere along the Katy line for that matter.



Shaking the dampness off his overcoat, he draped it over an iron spike hammered into the wall. Hung up his bowler, and adjusted his suit coat over the handle of a Colt revolver holstered at his hip. Not that he anticipated needing a gun in here. One street over at a place catering to sodbusters, the story might be different. His opponents included local farmers, competitors, most of his peers. Now it appeared even members of the Katy's board had also turned against him.

Henry greeted the men he passed by name as he waded through the crowded room. The railroad workers didn't particularly like him—he hadn't reached second in command by being warm-hearted—but they'd more than proved their loyalty. In return, he'd given them his.

He made his way to a table in the corner where his assistant waited with a bottle of whisky and two empty glasses. George Caldwell had been a good hire for more reasons than proper etiquette. It was his ties to the railroad elite that were most interesting in at the moment.

Henry pulled out a chair. "Pour us a drink, Mr. Caldwell. We should celebrate the opening of our new depot."

"Yes sir. Thank you, sir. Very generous." Caldwell measured two shots with care. The younger man's hands, slender and pale as a girl's, had not seen the hard work that put callouses on Henry's palms. Still, the dapper New Yorker was punctual and efficient and willing to do whatever his boss required. What more did one need in an assistant?

"Is there something you wanted to discuss?" Caldwell had his notebook and pencil at the ready. His black eyes snapped with curiosity.

Henry lifted his glass. "We'll talk business later. Let's have that drink first. Here's to Mr. Parsons."

He always started with a salute to his boss, one of the few people who liked him. Rather, Mr. Parsons liked what he'd done by defeating their mutual enemies. The Katy's president had made his expectations clear. Henry would build a successful railroad, in return the wealthy investor would make him heir to the top position. It was an agreement Henry intended to keep, by whatever means necessary.

"To his success in Europe," Caldwell added, before the glasses clinked.

Sadly, the thought of foreign money didn't improve Henry's mood. He took a swig. *Irish whiskey. Imported.* That might do the trick. Except, he could think of better uses for expensive liquor than getting drunk. Loosening tongues, for one.

“Drink up,” Henry urged, taking another swig to give young George the idea.

Caldwell tipped his glass a little higher. A flush stained his cheeks. Another drink and he’d be primed for questions. The well-connected Easterner kept up regular correspondence with his wealthy family, which included two of the Katy’s biggest investors. He might’ve picked up scuttlebutt about the board’s intentions.

Henry sipped his whiskey, letting the smoky flavor linger on his tongue. He ought to relax more often, appreciate the finer things in life, but he couldn’t take the time. That was part of the problem. He’d worked at such a furious pace to build the railroad that he hadn’t paid enough attention to the politics, especially the dirty ones.

What had prompted the directors to launch an investigation? Couldn’t come at a worse time. To add to the insult, they’d hired a former Erie Railroad officer who’d been ousted amidst much speculation. Henry hated being in the dark regarding their motives. Moreover, he resented the fact his boss hadn’t seen fit to warn him before setting sail for the Continent, leaving him to rely on his greenhorn assistant for family gossip.

“Any news from home?” he inquired in a casual tone.

“My sister has a new son.”

“We’ll drink to her fecundity.” Henry poured a generous second round.

Caldwell drained his glass without further encouragement. At this rate, he’d soon be tossing back drinks like an Irish tracklayer—and hopefully be just as gabby.

Henry leaned back and folded his arms over his chest. “Any business-related news?”

His assistant blinked like a mechanism winding down. “Regarding the Katy?”

*No, regarding the price of tea in China.*

“The board,” Henry clarified, keeping a tight rein on his impatience.

“Any idea why they hired that investigator from Boston?”

This drew a puzzled frown. “To write a report?”

Henry held off on the third shot. Caldwell’s face was flushed and he was starting to sound like a nincompoop. He might drink like an Irishman, but he couldn’t hold his liquor like one. “Of course they want him to write a report. I’m asking if you know *why*?”

Caldwell gazed into his empty glass as if he'd find the answers there. "Rumors, I suppose."

Tension pulled at Henry's shoulders. The hesitant tone in his assistant's voice set off alarms. Members of the board might've guessed the railroad's true financial picture. He leaned forward on his arms, keeping his voice low. "What rumors?"

"The usual. That Mr. Parsons is incompetent, and you're an insufferable ass."

Henry stared at the idiot. Caldwell didn't intend to blurt that out...unless he desired other employment. "Are you attempting humor? Or quoting your father?"

The startled alarm on his assistant's face might've been humorous if Henry had been in the mood to be amused. "Oh...no sir. Those are just vicious rumors. I wouldn't give them credence."

"I don't. If being an *insufferable ass* could've gotten me fired, I would've been gone years ago. As for Mr. Parsons, the railroad wouldn't be here without him."

Henry corked the bottle. Caldwell hadn't told him anything he didn't already know. The board would replace him if they could find a better man. There wasn't a better man. Not to lead the Katy.

He fished in his waistcoat pocket for his watch. Six-fifty. The time would be different on the railway clock in St. Louis, which was different from the one in Chicago and at every hamlet in between. Towns set time according to the sun. But the Katy ran according to what was on Henry's timepiece. "Better get going. The train is due in ten minutes."

Caldwell straightened, surprisingly attentive for a man who moments earlier had been about to fall into his glass. "Sorry, sir. It's been delayed."

"Delayed?" Henry glowered. "Why didn't you tell me?"

His assistant's face reddened at the chastisement. "Just found out before I came over. There's a barricade on the tracks south of Fort Scott. Might take all night to clear it."

"Damn squatters." Henry snapped watch cover shut. "If they spent half as much time plowing as they did vandalizing our tracks, they could afford to buy their land twice over."

Loud shouts from across the room drew his attention. One of the tracklayers danced a jig on a table to the delight of the crowd. Amazing how these men could celebrate, no matter what the situation. They'd

endured every imaginable hardship to build the railroad and faced danger every day to keep it running, yet neither the president nor the board of directors recognized their sacrifice.

Henry withdrew a fold of bills from his inside coat pocket and handed the money to his assistant. "Buy a round of drinks for the house. Announce it's on the Katy.

Caldwell did as he was told.

A moment later, a roar went up from the crowd. Men surged to the bar. Several turned and lifted glasses in Henry's direction. "To the Katy!" they cheered.

Henry dipped his chin in acknowledgement. His cash, but he'd let the Katy take the credit. These men needed to believe there were others besides him who appreciated them. He sank back in the chair. Once he was president, he'd be in control and could make changes as he saw fit. More money would be poured back into the railroad and distributed among its employees, instead of filling the pockets of a few rich men and greedy politicians.

His assistant returned with a smile. "You know the right levers, *Chief*. Those Irish boys will heave ho all winter for free whiskey."

That wasn't why he'd done it. This time. Henry couldn't claim charity had motivated him in the past.

A shrill whistle pierced through the clapping and singing. Henry shot to his feet. That train was nearly at the station. The engineer must've run full steam to make up time. He threw money on the table, instructing Caldwell. "You pay. I'll go meet our guest."

A brisk reminder of winter sent snowflakes swirling out over the muddy street, into the encroaching darkness. Taking a firm hold on the brim of his favorite hat, Henry leaned into the wind as he strode down the sidewalk toward the newly completed depot. The impressive brick and stone structure ought to convince anyone, even a railroad investigator, that the Katy was financially sound.

The train let loose with another long whistle. Out in the darkness, its headlamp flickered.

Henry searched for a red signal light. Why wasn't it lit? He'd given explicit instructions for this train to be the first to arrive at the new depot. Breathing fire, he shot across the street. Did he have to be a signal operator, too? One more blasted ball to juggle, as if he didn't have enough.

The whistle shrieked, twice more and much louder this time. Then the roar of the engine became deafening as it charged past the new depot, heading for a weathered shack another fifty yards away. Next to it, a signal had been lit.

Henry released a stream of profanity. The fools had directed the train to the *old* depot.

He veered off across a field between the two buildings, lost his footing in the slippery mud and barely righted himself. By the time he neared the ramshackle building, he was panting hard and seething with fury.

A lantern mounted atop a pole illuminated the weather-beaten walls of a squat frame structure that had served as the train station since the town's inception two years ago. As Henry reached the steps, he noticed four men on horseback, lingering in the shadows. Their odd behavior struck him, but those thoughts were swept away by anger as he rushed past and tromped through the door.

"Floyd!"

Henry jerked to a halt in the dark room, surprised. He fumbled in his pocket for a pack of matches. Striking one, he peered through the small window separating the waiting room from the office. Not only was the station agent not here, no one was here. Floyd must've told everyone to leave, thinking the train wouldn't be in until morning. That was the only explanation that made any sense.

A loud squeal signaled the slow down of the train.

Henry shook out the match and lit another. He turned up the wick in a kerosene lamp and hung it on a hook attached to a ceiling beam. Better get the stove going or the passengers would freeze while they waited. Squatting down, he opened the grate.

The back door struck the wall with a loud bang and a cold gust swirled into the room. Four men stepped inside...the same ones he'd passed outside. Their ponchos dripped melted snow. Wide hat brims were pulled low over their eyes and heavy scarves concealed their faces. Cold perhaps...or didn't want to be recognized.

Henry came to his feet, unbuttoning his coat to get to his gun. At the sound of a hammer being cocked, he froze. Despite being a fairly good shot, he was no quick draw. Whoever cocked that gun could kill him before he cleared leather. Worst case, they were here to rob him. Best case, they'd reacted after seeing him go for his gun.

“Sorry, you startled me.” He held his hands away from his sides so the men could see them. “Are you here to meet someone arriving on the train?”

He hoped so. Otherwise, he was in trouble.

“You Stevens?” one of the men asked.

*Big trouble.*

The man’s voice wasn’t one Henry recognized. In fact, nothing about the men looked familiar. He hadn’t even heard their spurs. His gaze fell to the heavy brogans on the speaker’s feet. Drifters, outlaws, men who lived in the saddle, wore boots.

Awareness reignited Henry’s anger. *Blasted sodbusters.* Did they think they could scare him into giving in to their demands?

From outside came the hissing of an engine letting off steam. Soon, passengers would come pouring through that door behind him.

A chime sounded. The conductor’s cry distracted the men for a second. That was all Henry needed. He bolted out the back door to the platform. Those farmers wouldn’t take on an armed railroad crew.

Shots rang out. Wood splinters flew off the doorframe. The conductor, standing next to the train, staggered, apparently struck by a bullet.

Henry’s heart convulsed. Those crazy settlers were willing to kill to get what they wanted. He hadn’t expected that.

On the steps leading down from the parlor car, a young woman stood with one foot poised as if she were ready to leap off the train and bound onto the platform in her eagerness to disembark. Henry glimpsed the startled expression on her face.

He yanked his revolver from its holster. Outgunned or not, he couldn’t run. He had to protect that woman, the other passengers, and the crew.

“Get back!”

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## About E.E. Burke



WEAVE TOGETHER PASSIONATE romance and rich historical detail, add a dash of suspense, and you have books by bestselling author E.E. Burke. Her chosen settings are the American West, and her latest series, *The Bride Train*, features a cast of unusual characters thrown together through a misguided bride lottery. She's earned accolades in regional and national contests, including the RWA's prestigious Golden Heart®. Over the years, she's been a disc jockey, a journalist and an advertising executive, before finally getting around to living the dream—writing stories readers can get lost in.



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## About Jennifer Jakes



JENNIFER JAKES' FIRST love has always been reading. Summers were spent in the library with Sacajawea and Pocahontas . . .until her mom handed her a Harlequin Romance. From that day on, Jennifer was hooked on romance. Now she combines her love of the Old West and Romance in her writing. Her debut novel, RAFF'S REDEMPTION, was a 2010 RWA Golden Heart Finalist in the Historical category. [www.jenniferjakes.com](http://www.jenniferjakes.com)



### Books by Jennifer Jakes

*Rafe's Redemption*

*Twice in a Lifetime*

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## About Jacqui Nelson



JACQUI NELSON'S LOVE for historical romance adventures with grit and passion came from watching classic Western movies while growing up on a cattle farm. She's a Romance Writers of America® Golden Heart® winner and three-time finalist. You'll find cardsharps, scouts, spies and Wild West trick riders in her stories. Fall in love with a new Old West... where the men are steadfast and the women are adventurous. Find out more at Jacqui's website: [www.JacquiNelson.com](http://www.JacquiNelson.com).



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*Between Heaven and Hell*

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# BETWEEN LOVE & LIES - EXCERPT

Gambling Hearts Series, Book 1

By Jacqui Nelson



*In a town ruled by sin, will he earn her love or her lies?*



## PROLOGUE

*SOUTH OF DODGE CITY, Kansas*

*May 1, 1876*

They were destroying everything: the tiny apple tree she'd sheltered in the wagon during the long, sweltering journey from Virginia; the fence she'd devoted weeks to repairing over the winter with scraps of deadwood; the vegetable garden she'd sown during the first whisper of spring and painstakingly coaxed to life every heartbeat since.

All trampled, devoured, gone.

Sadie glared at the beasts, eyes burning with tears of hopeless rage. Graceless creatures, they wielded heavy horns that stretched out of their skulls like spears. Texas longhorns. The Devil's helpers.

In the middle of them rode Lucifer himself, sent straight up from hell to torment her and tear away everything she'd slaved to build.

She tracked the long-legged, well-built rider as he steered his horse through the milling animals, angling toward her and her father—and their sod house. Dismay tightened her throat, left her bereft of air and hope. Even that stalwart structure was in danger of being leveled by the heaving mass in the care of the man coming ever closer.

The intruder, similar to all the other Texas drovers, was covered in a layer of trail dust so thick it hung on him like a second skin. But it was one of the only things he and the other men had in common. While the rest hollered and cracked whips over the backs of the beasts in their charge—trying to persuade them to return to the trail—this man urged his charcoal-colored mount through the river of hide and horn, making a beeline for her.

His silence, along with his ability to guide his horse with remarkably little effort, infuriated her. As the distance between them shortened, unease crept up her spine.

His gaze was unwavering, never leaving her.

She tightened her grip on the ancient shotgun clutched at her side, and concentrated on her anger and frustration, transferring them from the longhorns to settle solely on him. She did not want him to come any closer.

Yanking the shotgun up to her shoulder, she took aim.

The cowboy straightened in his saddle but otherwise did not acknowledge her hostile action. Nor did he slacken his pace; if anything, he bore down on her even faster.

*Damn him to hell.* Her finger tightened on the trigger.

Something slammed down on her shotgun, pitching the rusted barrel earthward. The buckshot tore a savage gouge out of the clay in front of her and kicked up a cloud of dust. The blast forced her to stumble back.

Her father's red face inserted itself between her and the cowboy. With a curse, he jerked the weapon from her grasp.

As she stood gawking at him, the cattle, spooked by the shotgun blast, bolted—fast and in every direction. Her father sprinted toward their lone plow horse, scrambled onto its back and galloped away from the melee and her.

She shouldn't have expected anything different. Still the hurt came. Sharp and deep. Once again he'd thought only of himself. He'd abandoned her in the center of the herd, alone and defenseless.

*I'm going to be trampled. I'm going to die.*

Time suspended as she contemplated her life ending. She felt...numb. Her hard work had been obliterated in a blink. She couldn't summon the will to move a single step, let alone face the prospect of starting over.

The cattle's bellowing and their thundering hooves became a single roar. The heat of their breaths hit her first, then their bodies. Walloped square in the chest, they knocked her off her feet. But the surge did not wash over her. Instead, something snared her waist, jerking her up until she crashed into an immovable wall.

She sucked in air and immediately wished she hadn't. Pain pierced her ribs. Dust billowed and shrouded the air. Through slitted eyes she realized her leather-clad perch was already covered in a blanket of dust...and she was being held against it. She struggled to raise her head and discovered a square, beard-stubbed jaw directly above her.

Lucifer—in the disguise of a Texan cowboy—held her in his lap while waves of cattle buffeted his mount, his grip on her solid but not bruising as

he guided them to safety. When they'd cleared the beasts and the noise level dropped a notch, he peered down at her. Eyes like warm whiskey stared at her from a face etched with concern.

"Are you hurt?" His voice came low and ragged, fanning out in bursts, caressing her face.

Her world tilted and the air once more left her lungs. She forced herself to remember he was responsible for destroying everything she held dear. Anger flooded her, pushing away all other thought, the same way his herd had swept away her dreams.

Mustering all her strength, she curled her fingers into a fist and struck him in the abdomen. Pain ricocheted up her arm. He didn't budge. He merely blinked, his brows lowering. Infuriated by his lack of response, she unleashed a flurry of hits, striking him with her fists, elbows and feet.

Beneath them, his horse whinnied shrilly and reared up.

Blind to everything but her need to make him hurt as much as she did, she launched her entire body at him. They tumbled from the horse and struck the ground, him landing first on his back, her on top of him. He released a grunt of surprise, but his hands stayed around her waist. She scrambled to her knees. His hold tightened, not letting her go farther. She struggled to break free. And failed. That didn't stop her from trying, over and over.

"Hold still. You don't want to spook my herd again. I want to help you."

His voice caught her off guard, held her immobile. The tone was gruff and demanding but edged with a note of pleading. Its undercurrent tugged at her.

She shook her head, refusing to yield to him. "Help me?" She slammed her fist down on his chest. "Do you know how long it took me to plant that garden? Or make that fence?" She hit him again.

He didn't move, not even to flinch. Couldn't he feel her punches?

Exhaustion and frustration clenched her hands so tight her bones ached. "You've destroyed everything I built!" She pounded out her fury on him until she couldn't lift her arms.

Only then did he move. He pulled her close, drawing her into the curve of his body, guiding her head onto his shoulder. His palm cradled the back of her head, while his fingers smoothed the wild tangle of her hair.

No one had held her with such care in a long time. Not since her mother had died. Great sobs shook her. She slumped against him, unable to contain

her sorrow.

The callused pad of his thumb traced her cheek. He brushed away each tear as it fell. Did he honestly believe he could make things better with his gentle persistence? She hid her face against his tear-dampened coat, smelling of leather, wool and the earth—and tried to think.

His scent reminded her of her farm. Straightforward. Stalwart. Steady. Her land may have challenged her, but it'd never abandoned her. Her insides tightened with a longing so intense it hurt.

“If I could undo the damage, I would.” His words caressed her ear. Soft and husky like silk and sand. “You can’t stay here. Come with me to Dodge.”

He wanted her to leave her farm? The realization unleashed the storm in her belly, like a herd of pronghorn antelopes spying a mountain lion.

She jerked away, scrambling off him. This time he didn’t move to stop her. She didn’t go far, though. She didn’t have the energy. Sitting stiff-backed beside him, she stared at the rubble that had once formed her home. The salt of her tears stung her skin and her eyes ached, mirroring the pain in her heart.

His leather chaps creaked as he stood and stepped closer. The din associated with the longhorn herd had faded, the cattle having returned to the trail, once again heading north toward Dodge. The drover didn’t follow them, nor did he touch her. The heat of his body did, though, intensifying the unsettling fluttering in her stomach.

“It can be rebuilt.” Plainspoken words, without a trace of doubt. “It’s not—”

A bitter bubble of laughter burst from her. Maybe miracles happened in his world. She clenched her teeth. She wouldn’t let him see how much he’d hurt her. See that a scream was building inside her. One so big that, if she let it out, she was certain she would shatter.

He exhaled a long breath. “I know it won’t be easy.”

*You have no idea.* She swallowed her reply as she spotted her father steering their aging swayback mare toward her. She lurched to her feet.

Behind her, the cowboy’s hand found her elbow, strong and solid, the one thing keeping her upright. “At least no one was hurt.”

She shrugged off his hold and forced her own legs to support her weight. She refused to look back. Instead, she stared at her father and dreaded what was certain to come. She knew this side of him too well—his

manipulative mind, his greed and his lack of love for her, his own flesh and blood.

But when her father reached them, the cowboy surprised her by speaking first. “It’s a right shame, my herd moving through your homestead like that, Mr.—?”

“Sullivan. Timothy Sullivan. And yes, it is.”

What her father lacked in stature, he made up for with a classically boned face and a thatch of white hair that a long time ago had been as red as hers. With looks as compelling as his smooth-talking tongue, he should have pursued a career in the theater. Then maybe he could’ve made a contribution to their meager funds rather than draining whatever she earned. Unfortunately, he was more interested in drinking and gambling.

He eyed Sadie briefly before he looked at the man standing behind her, his familiar features settling into a look of mournful loss. “Me and my daughter worked hard building the place.”

*Liar!*

He hadn’t spent a single minute on their farm. He’d left that all up to her. She cringed at his charlatan nature, knowing he’d ply the cowboy with a consummate actor’s skills as he strove to extract a reward for something he played no part in creating.

The cowboy astounded her again. “I’ll compensate you fairly for your loss, Mr. Sullivan. It’s the least I can do for you...and your daughter.”

Not wanting to witness any more, she turned away. She couldn’t block out the scrape of his footsteps, the jangle of his spurs, as he approached her father. They rang harsh against the tender earth of her home. He murmured something in a deep rumble that she couldn’t decipher.

The surprise in her father’s gasp was unmistakable. “You are most generous, sir!”

She spun to face him. A stack of greenbacks rested on his soft, white palms. The cowboy assumed giving her father money would help her? Her plummeting prospects stole the starch from her spine. When her gaze found the cowboy, her eyes blurred with more useless tears.

His brows drew together and he took a step toward her. She took one back, shaking her head, forcing all the emotion from her heart and, she hoped, from her face. She kept moving away from him, to where her home had once stood.

Giving that much money to a compulsive gambler was a sure-fire recipe for disaster. It'd be gone come morning, and so would her future.

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