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PASSION'S EMBRACE

is Cia Leah's first novel
as a published writer with
Romance Novels ePublishing.
We expect to hear more from
this talented author.

Chapter I

Gus Thorne walked out of the house with his steaming mug of coffee and stopped abruptly, letting the screen door slam shut behind him. The steady drone of distant, pounding hooves disturbed the crisp, morning air. Coming down the road towards the house was a magnificent black stallion and a woman of equal beauty riding astride him. Gus's heart slammed against his chest as the woman brought her mount to a rearing halt. His throat constricted with fear for the woman, but she easily held her seat and the animal's forelegs hit the ground with a thud.

Dreema Knightes leaned forward and rubbed Devil's neck. "Good boy," she said, and turned her attention to the man standing on the porch. "Mr. Thorne?"

Gus set his mug down on the porch railing and went down the steps to stand beside the horse. As he gazed up at the beautiful woman, his mouth turned dryer than Texas dust. She possessed a beauty unlike any woman he had ever met. She had ebony hair that hung below her knees, almond shaped eyes, the color of springtime grass, and a small, slightly upturned nose. Her lips were rosy and sensuous and were turned downward as if she were displeased by something. She was dressed in men's jeans that hugged her slender form and encased her long shapely legs. "I'm Gus Thorne," he said, reaching out his hand in a welcoming gesture.

"I'm Dreema Knightes. I bought the Clayborne ranch and your beast of a bull is accosting Miss Daisy in my pasture! Please hurry and get your horse before that side of beef injures her!"

Gus raked a hand through his hair. "Would you please repeat that?"

Dreema stared down into Gus Thorne's handsome, confused face. Knowing that time was of the essence, she scooted forward on the saddle. "Just hop up behind me and I'll show you. There's no time to waste! One of my cowhands told me it was your bull!"

Gus hesitated briefly and looked back toward the house. His Aunt Mildy's voice pulled his attention to where she stood on the porch. He hadn't even noticed she had come out of the house.

"Go with her. You know how ornery Old Red Eye is in the spring and whomever Miss Daisy is, she must be in serious trouble."

Gus groaned and grabbed the saddle horn, put his foot in the stirrup, and swung up behind Miss Knightes. The stallion danced sideways with the added weight, but she easily controlled the big steed. "Hold on tight, Mr. Thorne. I intend to get there as fast as possible to save Miss Daisy. Just point me in the right direction through your field."

Gus pointed in the direction past the barn. "That's the quickest way to the West pasture where I put Old Red Eye." He no more than got the words out of his mouth when the animal beneath them leapt forward and broke into a ground-eating run. The barn whizzed by just as he almost lost his seat.

"Put your arms around me and hold on tight! I promise I won't break!"

Gus grabbed her around her slender waist, while trying to blow strands of her black hair out of his face. It was everywhere. The scent of roses assaulted his senses as he tried to keep his hands at a respectable distance

between the woman's upper and lower body. His hands were suddenly clasped by hers and placed beneath her breasts.

Dreema smiled in spite of her concerns for Miss Daisy. Every time her breasts bounced against Gus Thorne's arms, she felt his whole body tense. At twenty-one years of age, she was not naive and knew she was affecting his male senses.

Dreema smiled and nudged Devil with her knees urging him to run faster. Gus was tall, dark, and handsome. Tanned from long hours in the Texas sun and heavily muscled from labor on his ranch. He was well over six foot two, had large blue eyes and long, dark lashes. His black hair was long and hung over his shirt collar and she could imagine running her hands through it. He had kissable lips that were accentuated by the cutest dimples. Life in Texas seemed more exciting than ever, she thought, as she prepared to jump the partially broken fence ahead.

Gus guessed the woman's intention to jump the fence looming ahead of them. Although he could tell she was an expert horsewoman, he couldn't help feeling uneasy. He hadn't ridden behind anyone since the age of four. Instinctively, he tightened his arms about her and moved his body closer to hers. At the right moment, he leaned forward as she did and felt the stallion leave the ground. For a few seconds they were airborne, then the stallion landed on the ground, never breaking his stride. Gus leaned back and sucked in a sharp breath as Miss Knightes's body slid back against his. He gritted his teeth and hoped his body wasn't going to betray him and alert her to how she was affecting him. Just as he thought his situation hopeless, he saw Old Red Eye mounting a black and white heifer in the field in front of them. He glanced around for Miss Daisy as Miss Knightes halted the horse.

Gus dismounted. "Where's Miss Daisy?" He inquired, looking around again.

Dreema stared at him in consternation. "Damn it, can't you see what is right before your eyes?"

Gus let her profanity slide. After all, she was upset over Miss Daisy, but for the life of him, he couldn't see anyone or anything, but Old Red Eye and his new love. "Miss Knightes, maybe this Miss Daisy you're so worried about has decided to return to your ranch. Your house isn't far from here. I'm sure she's just fine."

Dreema's mouth fell open and she stared at him for a minute wondering what he was talking about. She stepped in front of him and poked her index finger into his chest. "If you don't make your bull quit accosting Miss Daisy right this instant, I swear I'll get my rifle and shoot that side of beef and serve him up for supper!"

Gus groaned. "You mean that is Miss Daisy?" He pointed at the cow that Old Red Eye had just jumped off of. When Old Red Eye got ornery and had his eye on a cow as pretty as this one, nothing short of murder could stop him.

"Of course that's Miss Daisy and you have to make him stop!" She watched in horror as the bull mounted her cow again. She cried in outrage and grabbed her rifle. "I'll blast that beast to kingdom come!" she declared, raising the gun and taking aim.

Gus moved to her and grabbed the gun, aiming it towards the sky. "You can't shoot my bull!"

"You just watch me!" she replied, trying to wrench the rifle out of his grasp.

Gus grabbed her around the waist and lifted her to him, flinching when the gun went off. A woman was dangerous enough, let alone having possession of a firearm. He wrenched the rifle from her hands and set her Miss Knightes on her feet, then placed the gun back in the scabbard. "What the hell's wrong with you, woman?" He growled, glaring intently into her furious green eyes.

Dreema moaned. "He's accosting her again. Oh, he'll ruin her. Make him stop it!"

Gus ran a weary hand through his hair. "Other than killing him, how do you propose I do that?"

Dreema stomped her booted foot. "I don't care how you do it, just get it done!" She placed both hands on her hips and glared at him.

Gus shook his head. "It doesn't matter now. The damage is already done. I'd say nine months from now, your Miss Daisy will be delivering Old Red Eye's calf."

"Damn it! This is your fault! Why would you put a bull in a pasture that has a weak fence?"

Gus advanced towards her. "If you don't stop that infernal cussing, I'm going to turn you over my knee. You talk worse than the girls at Miz Pat's house in town."

She stared up at him. "And just how would you know that? Go there a lot, do you?"

"That's none of your business," Gus ground out. He stared into her green eyes that seemed to shoot sparks of darker green from their depths. She was so beautiful, although not lady like enough in his estimation.

"That may not be my business, but your bull has ruined my cow. You owe me for your bull's indiscretion."

Gus gritted his teeth so hard his jaw hurt. "I'll buy the cow. Just name your price."

Dreema watched as Miss Daisy and the bull moved under the shade of the trees and lay down. She loved her cow. She had brought Miss Daisy into the world and then made Miss Daisy's mother as comfortable as possible as she lay dying from the birthing. She had spent a lot of sleepless nights feeding and caring for Miss Daisy and as the calf grew, she had followed Dreema around everywhere.

She also realized the damage was done and she could no more sell Miss Daisy than she could give up breathing. She would take extra special care of her and assist her in the birthing of the calf when the time came. Still, she could not let Gus off that easily. Of course, money was not the issue here. It was the principle of the situation. Dreema's father had been a prominent attorney back in Ohio. After the tragic accident that had taken his and her mother's life, Dreema had inherited everything.

Dreema had considered her position as owner, and after much thought had decided to sell all her property, and leave the memories and pain behind. She had moved to Texas, lock stock and barrel. Having always been high-spirited, most of the men she knew only wanted to marry her for her inheritance. Several of her beaus had even told her she would have to settle down if she ever became their wife. She had dropped them immediately. The

one thing she desired most was to get married and have a family. Dreema would settle for nothing less than a man who loved her and not her wealth. She would find one, damn it! She thought, stomping her small foot in irritation. Surely somewhere there was a man that would not be intimidated by her wealth or her free spirited nature.

She glanced up at Gus. His blue eyes were boring into hers waiting for an answer. Every time she looked into those eyes, her heartbeat accelerated and butterflies danced in her stomach. Maybe she had found what she had been searching for. He would make a perfect husband, although she would have to teach him how to have fun. He was too serious and life was too short to let it slip away without living it to its fullest. She decided to jump in with both feet and demand the ultimate price. She also had no doubt that he would react worse than a bull once she voiced her price.

She took a deep breath. "Are you engaged or married?"

Gus frowned. "What?"

"I asked if you were engaged or married?"

"No, I'm not, but I don't know what business it is of yours or what it has to do with this situation."

Dreema smiled. "You said you'd offer any price for the damage done to Miss Daisy?"

"Yes," Gus snapped. "Just name your price and you got it. You have my word on that."

Dreema stuck her hands in her pants pocket. "I won't sell Miss Daisy, but I do demand payment. My price is that we become engaged immediately and get married in a month."

Gus laughed. "Very funny, Miss Knightes, but I don't have the time to be standing around joking. I have a ranch to run and it's already getting to be late morning."

"You can call me Dreema and I'm definitely not joking. My price is marriage. You'll find that I do not kid around about matters of importance."

Gus clamped his mouth shut. He had never encountered such a woman in his life and his temper was beginning to soar. She stood there with her hands stuffed in her pockets and her chin raised in determination. The gentle breeze blew her long, lustrous hair towards him as if it were alive and ready to ensnare him in its silky strands. "The price you ask is downright crazy. I have no intention of marrying you or anyone for that matter."

Dreema smiled. "Really?"

"Absolutely."

"A man your age should have been married years ago. I can understand why none of the ladies in town has lassoed you yet, and you're still a bachelor. She pulled her hands from her pockets and boldly stepped closer to him. Dreema stared up into his blue eyes and wondered how dark they would become at the height of passion. She raised her hands to his chest and felt the thunderous heartbeat that quickened at her touch. She let her hands slip around his neck, her fingers threading through his hair, while she leaned against the solid wall of muscles. In a heightened state of expectation, she pulled his head down, rose to her fullest height, and captured his mouth with her own.

Gus's heart slammed against his chest, and set up a pounding tempo. He knew he should set her away from him but he couldn't resist the soft sweetness of her lips. This is madness his mind screamed, but not loud enough

to stop this temptress and her sweet lips. Throwing caution to the wind, he slipped his arms around her waist and pulled her closer. He heard her soft intake of breath as she opened her mouth for his full invasion and he greedily took advantage of the situation, sliding his tongue into the soft recesses of her mouth. Damn, but she tasted like honey and her body fit perfectly against his. Her breasts pushed against his chest and he felt her desire. Like a drowning man, he slid his hand from her tiny waist and captured her breast in his hand. His thumb found the sweet bud hidden beneath her shirt and caressed it gently.

Dreema moaned and clung to him. As his mouth ravished hers, and his large hand caressed her breast, she felt as if the earth were spinning beneath her feet. Never had she been kissed so thoroughly or expertly. All her senses came alive, every nerve, and every inch of her skin tingled. She kissed him back with wild abandon, forgetting all else, but the feelings he invoked within her.

So absorbed with the little firebrand in his arms, Gus didn't hear the approach of riders until he heard someone clear their throat and the whinny of horses. He broke the kiss instantly, but kept a supporting arm around Dreema. He looked at the two men staring at him from horseback and the rifles they held aimed at him. The oldest dismounted.

"If you know what's good fer ya, ye best be lettin' the lady go."

Dreema turned at the sound of her Uncle's voice. "Uncle Andy, put that gun down before you hurt someone. You too, Jack."

"Ain't puttin' 'til you git away from that varmint! Why tis enough to make me want to string him up to the nearest tree!"

Gus reached for his gun only to realize he hadn't strapped it on this morning. Hell, he didn't even have his hat. He watched Dreema walk towards her Uncle and push the gun to aim towards the ground.

"Uncle Andy, it's alright. I'm fine. Besides, I kissed him."

Jack laughed. "Pretty good kissing a stranger, Dreema, when I've tried several times and been slapped for my efforts."

"Shut up, Jack." Dreema turned to glare at him.

Gus focused his attention on Jack. He was about twenty- eight or so, if his guess was right. Blond hair fell across his forehead where his hat was pushed back. He was short and stocky and heavily muscled. He had blue eyes that were now cold with anger as he stared at Dreema and then focused his attention on Gus. He knew he had made an enemy. Gus held his gaze with a quelling look of his own.

Dreema turned her attention to her Uncle. "Uncle Andy, this is Gus Thorne. Gus has asked me to marry him and I have accepted. Now be nice and shake hands with your future nephew-in-law."

Gus gritted his teeth until he thought the pressure would break them. He wanted to tell the man that his niece was loco, but after the scene he had just witnessed, he didn't think her Uncle was in the right mood to hear anything he had to say at the moment.

"You're engaged?" Andy said, taking off his hat to stare at her. Just how long have you known this man?"

Jack swore and jumped down from his horse. "Maybe he's already had his way with her before we got here. Think I'll just beat the truth out of him until Dreema comes to her senses."

Gus grinned as Jack advanced towards him. Right now he felt like he wanted to hit someone. It was hard to believe that his day had started like all the others to wind up in this nightmare this morning, and all because of a beautiful hellcat that had stole his breath away with just one kiss, and one randy old bull.

Dreema moaned. "Jack, stop it this instant!"

"Just shut up, woman, I'll handle this," Jack yelled, throwing his hat on the ground.

Gus side stepped as Jack's right fist came at him. He turned and landed a solid blow to Jack's jaw and the man went down. He stepped back and waited for him to get up.

Dreema and her Uncle ran to step between them. She threw Gus an exasperated look. "Get on my horse and leave. You can bring him back to me tonight when you come for supper. I'll expect you at seven."

"I'll walk back, and as far as supper goes, I have made other plans for tonight." He turned, and with long strides to work off his anger, headed towards his pasture leading to his barn.

Dreema stomped her foot and glared down at Jack who still lay on the ground rubbing his jaw. "If you ever interfere in my life again, I'll fire you and send you packing in the blink of an eye! Do you hear me?"

Jack pushed himself to his feet and brushed off his pants. "Yeah, I hear ya, but you and me ain't finished by a long shot!" He grabbed his hat, mounted his horse, and rode off towards the ranch.

Dreema turned to her Uncle. "Well?"

Andy laughed. "Heaven forbid should I ever tell ya what to do. As fer Jack, I told ya I didn't like him from the start when you hired him. He's mean. Just ask the other hands. Anyone steps in his way; he'll squash 'em like a bug. As fer that fella over yonder," he said, "I think you've finally met yer match. It'll be interestin' to see who wins. You'll have to tell me all about it on the way home."

Dreema went to her horse and mounted up. "Uncle Andy," she said, moving her mount alongside his, "Rope Daisy over yonder and lead her home. Gus's bull bred her. That's what started this whole thing."

Andy laughed. "Life in Texas is sure gonna be interestin' around here."

Dreema watched as he roped Daisy to lead her home. She nudged Devil along side Daisy and talked soothingly to her. A bellow from behind them made Dreema turn in the saddle to see what Gus's bull was up to. To her amazement, the bull was following them. She laughed. Interesting wasn't the word for life at the ranch whenever Gus found out his bull was missing. Of course, he'd probably blame her for it, but it insured he'd show up at her house soon.

Gus was wearing buckets of sweat by the time he arrived at the house. Texas heat, almost like the firebrand he had held in his arms. He went around the side of the house and entered through the kitchen door. His Aunt Mildy was just setting lunch on the table.

Gus walked into the adjacent room that held a large bathtub, a pump, and sink on the right side with a mirror above it on the wall. He pumped water into the sink, washed, and dried off, then joined his Aunt in the kitchen. "Did

Dan and the men go to the South range?" He asked, sitting down and filling his plate with home fries, brown gravy, ham and peas.

"After they got all the chores done here first. I told Dan what had happened and he insisted he'd have the hands get your usual work done before they left. He said that way, when you got back, you could go ahead and mend the fence where Old Red Eye broke through it."

"Good," Gus said, taking a slice of homemade bread. He spread butter and strawberry jam on it and took a bite. "You're the best cook in Texas, Aunt Mildy."

"Quit avoiding the issue at hand. You know I'm dying to hear all about our new neighbors," she said, sitting down across from him and fixing her plate.

Gus took a sip of his coffee. "Miss Daisy was none other than a heifer. Not a woman in dire need of rescuing as we both assumed."

"Miss Knightes was talking about a cow?"

"Yes. A black and white one that will no doubt be delivering Old Red Eye a calf in nine months."

"My goodness. If Miss Knightes was upset about him getting into the field with her cow, she must be fit to be tied after what Old Red Eye did."

"Miss Knightes's name is Dreema, and she was extremely upset. So much so that she demanded payment for the damage done." Gus pushed his plate away and got up to pour himself more coffee. He returned to the table, sat back down, and leaned heavily back in his chair. He wondered if he should tell his Aunt what Dreema's demands were.

"Don't tell me we've added another cow to our herd?"

"Not exactly. Her price was that we become engaged and immediately wed after a month."

Mildy dropped her fork. "What did you say?"

"You heard me right and to make matters worse, her Uncle showed up and found us in a compromising condition."

Mildy's mouth fell open and she stared at her nephew in amazement. "What?"

Gus frowned heavily. "Don't look at me like that and close your mouth. We were just kissing, or she was kissing me, and before I knew what happened, I was kissing her back. That's when her Uncle showed up. He was mad enough to spit bullets and so was the ranch hand with him. To complicate matters, Dreema told them I'd asked her to marry me. Excuse my language, Aunt Mildy, but I'm in one hell of a fix and I don't even know how I got into it!"

Mildy smiled at him lovingly. "What do you intend to do about it?"

Gus pushed to his feet. "I sure as hell don't intend to get married, and I've never in my life met a woman as exasperating and headstrong as Miss Dreema Knightes. I don't know where she came from, but she has a lot to learn about manners. Why, she was even cussin' worse than a cowboy and she wears jeans, and is just too headstrong if you ask me!"

Mildy laughed. "Sounds like you've got your work cut out for you. Maybe it's a good thing she bought the Clayborne place. You've been set in your ways for too long and need some spice added to your life. You need to learn how to live it up a little. You're old before your time and life holds more in store for you than work and living alone."

Gus frowned. "If I want to live it up, all I have to do is go into town and visit Miz Pat's," he said, walking to the door and taking his gun belt from the hook on the wall and strapping it on. He saw the look of annoyance on his Aunt's face at the mention of Miz Pat's.

Mildy sighed and started clearing the table. You know how I feel about Miz Pat, as you be callin' her. She runs that house of ill repute as if it's the most natural thing in the world and it galls the good women of town that she has the nerve to show up in church each Sunday and wink at all the married men.

Gus laughed. She's just teasing them. She just wants to be accepted for herself, not her profession. Remember what the Bible says, those without sin, cast the first stone."

Mildy wiped the table. "Doesn't that apply to Miss Knightes, then, too?"

Gus grabbed his hat and shoved it on his head. "I'm going to get Old Red Eye and mend that fence. See you later." He escaped out the door before his Aunt Mildy could say anything else.

As he walked to the barn, a pair of almond shaped, green eyes flicked across his memory, as did the taste of sweet lips. "Damn!" He swore and pushed the thoughts aside.

Chapter II

By the time Gus was done mending the fence, he was angry enough to kill and butcher Old Red Eye himself. After arriving back at the place his bull had broken through, he had found the animal nowhere in sight. After tracking him for a while, he knew without a doubt that Old Red Eye had followed his ladylove home.

Gus sighed heavily. Now, he'd have to go get him and it wasn't something he wanted to do. He wanted to stay as far away as possible from Dreema as he could get. He didn't need some difficult female upsetting his life. He liked it just the way it was. He was his own boss. Most of his days were as he planned them unless something came up unexpectedly.

He placed his hammer, staples, wire stretchers, and barbed wire in the buckboard, climbed up on the seat, and headed home. It would serve Old Red Eye right if he left him over there, but it damn well might get the ornery beast killed. Dreema wasn't any too patient when it came to her Miss Daisy and Old Red Eye wouldn't let a barn or anything else stand in his way if he wanted to get to his lady love. No, he would just have to go get him. That's the only choice he had. He pulled the buckboard up to the barn just as Dreema's Uncle rode into the yard.

"Mr. Thorne. You have to git over to the ranch. That bull of yourn followed us home and is giving anyone and anything in its path what fer. He's bound and determined to git into the barn with Miss Daisy. Dreema said if you wasn't there in a half hour, she was goin' to shoot him and put him out of his misery!"

"Son of a..." Gus cut the last word short as he glimpsed his Aunt hurrying towards them.

"What's wrong, Gus," she said, slightly breathless.

"Aunt Mildy, this is Dreema's Uncle Andy. Andy this is my Aunt Mildred, but everyone calls her Mildy."

Andy swept off his hat. "It's a pleasure, Ma'am, to meet you and my name's Andy Grant. I'm Dreema's Uncle from her mother's side."

To Gus's surprise, he saw his Aunt's face redden in a blush. Damn, had everyone gone plumb loco today? He'd never seen his Aunt look at a man with so much interest since his Uncle Matt had died. He cleared his throat noisily to get their attention. "I'll get my horse and head over to your ranch."

His Aunt smiled. "You do that, Gus. I'll just invite Mr. Grant in for some lemonade. It's so hot today and I can get acquainted with my new neighbor."

Andy grinned and extended his arm. "Why Ma'am, that's the best invite I've had since we moved here."

Gus watched in amazement as they left him standing there and walked towards the house. "Of all the..." He turned and headed into the barn. It wasn't bad enough that Dreema thought he was going to marry her, now he had to worry about her Uncle courting his Aunt. Well, neither of them was going to upset his life. Not by a long shot!

Dreema was ready to scream. Miss Daisy was locked up in the barn, but Old Red Eye was determined to get to her through the wood of the barn.

Two of her ranch hands had roped the cantankerous bull, but on her instructions not to hurt him, couldn't budge the big beast from the door.

"Let me shoot him, Dreema," Jack yelled as he tightened the rope more around the bull's neck.

Dreema watched from the porch at the effect Jack's stranglehold had on the bull. He whipped his big head around in a jerking motion and she saw his eyes bulging. "Jack, let up a little! You're choking the life out of him!"

Jack laughed and tightened the rope more and Ned Walker, who had a rope around the bull's head from the other side, also didn't give an inch, although he didn't pull any harder. Just as the bull fell to his knees, she saw Gus Thorne riding down the lane.

Gus felt the heat of raw anger surge through him when he saw Old Red Eye on his knees choked down by the two men with ropes. He pulled his gun from his holster and fired twice in the air, as he pulled his mount to a rearing halt beside Jack's mount. He held the gun to his chest. "Let the bull go now, or you're a dead man."

Jack let the rope slip from his hands. "You'll pay for this. Get your damn bull and get the hell off this ranch!"

Gus's fist shot out at Jack. The jarring pain to his knuckles felt good in the face of his anger. Gus grinned when Jack fell off his horse and landed in a heap on the ground.

Dreema ran from the porch as Gus slid from his horse and went to his bull that had gotten back on his feet. He removed the ropes and scowled fiercely at all the burn marks on Old Red Eye's neck. "It's all right, boy. I'm going to take you home."

"Is he all right?" Dreema asked, coming to stand beside him.

Gus glanced down at her. "He wouldn't have been if I hadn't shown up when I did. What were you going to do, let the man kill him?"

"Of course not! I told Jack to ease up on the rope. I just wanted him and Ned to keep the bull from breaking in my barn door."

"It would have been much simpler if you would have sent your Uncle after me when Old Red eye started to follow you home, or did you think that I'd have to come get him?"

Dreema smiled up at him. "Of course I did and it had the desired effect, didn't it?" She watched his blue eyes darken in anger; a vivid image of arms and legs tangled beneath pristine sheets brought a red glow to her skin.

At that moment Old Red Eye noticed he was no longer tied. He took his big head and pushed Gus into Dreema knocking the unsuspecting couple to the ground in a tangle of arms and legs. Gus saw Red Eye's hind legs move forward towards Dreema's foot. He grabbed her tightly around the waist and rolled out of the way of the bull's hooves.

Dreema found herself on top of Gus, her breasts were crushed against his chest and her nether region was pressed intimately against him. She gazed into his eyes, her hair falling in a shield about them. To her immense satisfaction, she felt his desire press against her. She grinned and pushed her hands against his chest and levered herself up, straddling him.

Gus groaned. "Get off me, now!" He growled.

Dreema laughed. "I like it here."

Gus couldn't believe she had the audacity to tell him that. Any other woman would have been blushing beet red, but not her. She was enjoying this

too much and if she didn't get off him soon, he wasn't going to be able to hide his hardness when he stood up. Old Red eye's bellowing drew both their attentions and Ned Walker was staring at them intently. To complicate matters, Jack was coming around and swearing up a blue streak.

Gus placed his hands around Dreema's waist and lifted her off him, setting her none too gently on the ground beside him. He leaped to his feet and pulled her up. Miss Daisy's bellow answered Old Red Eye's.

"Damn it, Red, we've got to get the hell out of here!"

He strode to his horse, took the rope down, and went to the bull. He made a noose and slipped it around the bulls' neck. The bull jerked violently. "Easy, boy, you know I'm not going to hurt you, but it's time to leave. You've worn out your welcome." He went to his horse and mounted up, tied the rope around the saddle horn and nudged his mount in the sides. The slack tightened and Old Red Eye dug his front hooves into the dirt.

Gus groaned with embarrassment and frustration. Not only was he having a mean time getting his body under control, but also at the end of the rope, was another male from his ranch wanting the female from Dreema's ranch. Gus bit his tongue. He had to get out of here and Red Eye had to go with him and there was only one way to get Old Red eye to move and that was to have his ladylove lead the way. Once he got him home and in the special pen he had built for him, he'd have to stay put. He wouldn't be able to get out of it until he was let out.

"He doesn't look like he's going to follow you," Dreema said, moving to stand beside Gus's horse to stare at the ornery beast.

"The only way I'm going to get home is if you have Miss Daisy lead the way. Will she follow you peacefully?"

"Yes. I'll have Ned get my horse and lead her out." Dreema turned to address Ned when Jack pushed himself off the ground and advanced towards her and grabbed her arm. She flinched from his painful grip.

"Let him get his own damn bull home! You've had enough trouble for one day!"

"Let go of me, Jack! You're hurting me!" Dreema jerked her arm away from him.

"I said you ain't going anywhere!"

Dreema glared at him. "You're fired!" Ned, tell cook to pay Jack a fair wage. You're the new foreman now."

"Yes, Ma'am," Ned said, turning towards the bunkhouse.

Jack swore. "You can't fire me! Not after what I put up with getting you here all the way from Ohio!"

"Get out of here now Jack," She seethed between gritted teeth, "or do I have to get my rifle to make you leave? I never want to see you around here again!"

Jack reached for her, but the click of a gun made him look up. He knew Gus would pull the trigger and not think twice about it.

Gus aimed straight for Jack's heart. "You heard the lady. Get going and if I ever see you lay a hand on her again, I'll kill you. Move!"

Gus glared back at Jack who threw him a look of pure hatred. Gus didn't miss the message inside the look he bestowed on Dreema before striding to the bunkhouse. "That man is nothing but trouble. You should be careful about who you hire," he said, slipping his gun back in the holster.

Dreema sighed. "Jack's sister and I are best friends. Jack had been fired from his job back in Ohio, and since he had no other options at that time, I promised I would hire him and give him a job on the ranch for as long as he wanted. I didn't know that he would cause so many problems or that he could be as mean as a rattler when he didn't get his way."

Gus nodded and dismounted. "I'll get your horse and Miss Daisy so we can be on our way. I'll bet Ned has his hands full right at the moment."

Dreema followed him into the barn. She watched as Gus saddled up devil. He was so starkly masculine. He wore a blue-checkered shirt that stretched to its limits as he placed the saddle on Devils' sleek back. His shoulders were broad, his waist lean, and his tight fitting jeans showed off his long, muscular legs. His boots were large and well worn from use.

He finished saddling the stallion and handed the reins to her. He had such large hands, deeply tanned by the sun, and callused from hard work. She took the reins from him and accidentally brushed her fingers against his. Lightning seemed to sizzle through her veins and she gazed into his eyes. Without a moment's hesitation, she stood on tiptoe and placed a gentle kiss against his firm lips. "Thank you," she said quietly.

Gus groaned and pulled her roughly to him. His lips slanted over hers in a fiery possession that took his breath away. When she gasped for breath, he slipped his tongue inside the sweet recesses of her mouth, and after a few seconds of teasing her, she tentatively flicked her tongue against his. Molten heat seared his veins and thrummed along his nerve endings. He pulled his mouth away from her hot lips and kissed a trail of fire down her chin, to the slim column of her throat, to the base where her pulse beat rapidly.

Dreema clung to Gus's shoulders. She realized she was playing with fire, but she couldn't resist the temptation. She had never met a man that could melt her with just one look, one touch, or by just being near. God help her, she had just met him this morning, but she felt as if they had known each other a lifetime. She had never been in love before and had never believed in love at first sight until now. She wanted Gus and whether he knew it or not, he wanted her. His lips moved back to capture hers and all thoughts fled.

Gus came back to reality as Old Red eye bellowed and he heard his horse whinny. He broke the kiss abruptly. The sound of their erratic breathing seemed to fill the barn's interior. He stared down into her green eyes that were clouded with passion. "What kind of woman are you?" Gus rasped.

Dreema stared at him. "What do you mean by that?"

Gus frowned. "Damn it, I just met you today. How can you fall into my arms, demand marriage, and practically invite me into your bed, all in one day!"

"You kissed me this time!"

"You wanted me to!"

Dreema laughed. "Yes, I did," she admitted, getting the rope and placing it around Miss Daisy's neck. "And I'll tell you another thing, Gus Thorne, I liked it!"

"What!"

Dreema mounted her horse and looped the rope around the saddle horn. "I said I like your kisses, but I'll let you in on a little secret. I'm not a loose woman. I know you must think I am after all that's happened between us today, but I'm a virgin, and when you honor our agreement, you'll find I'm

telling the truth!" She nudged Devil's sides with her knees and rode out the barn door.

Gus inhaled deeply. That's all he needed was an innocent virgin throwing herself at him. God help him. He walked out of the barn and mounted his horse. "Come on Old Red Eye, we'll just follow the girls home," Gus said, when he saw the bull was about to pass him up on his way after the heifer. "Oh hell! I don't know about you, old boy, but I sure as hell don't like what's happening around here."

Jack rode into town and headed for the nearest saloon. Miz Pat's was known for its cleanliness and the girls knew how to make a man forget his troubles, and if they didn't, he'd make sure they did.

He tied his horse to the hitching post and entered through the swinging glass doors. Heading straight for the bar, he didn't notice the man who dropped his cards in the middle of a poker game and walked toward him.

"Whiskey," Jack said, throwing some money on the scarred bar top." The bar tender nodded and pushed him a shot glass and opened the bottle. "Leave it," he demanded, filling his glass. He downed the fiery amber liquid and relished the heat that spread from his throat to his gut.

"Hello, Jack. Long time no see." The man said, stepping up beside him.

Jack choked, the second shot of whiskey going down his windpipe. The man slapped him hard on the back a few times. "Can't choke to death, yet. You still owe me. Besides, it took more money to just track you down. I don't like being skipped out on."

Jack swiped a hand across his tearing eyes. "How the hell did you find me?"

The man laughed. "Now, that's not a nice thing to say. I remember a time when you thought I was your best friend. You still feel that way, don't you, Jack?"

Jack felt sweat drip off his forehead. He removed his hat and wiped a shaky hand across his brow. How the hell was he going to get out of this mess?

"Beer," The man told the bartender when he stepped over to them. He waited until he moved away. "By the way, people around town know me by the name, Adam Greely. Remember that. Let's go to a table and talk business."

Jack followed him without question. He knew there was no use in begging mercy from this man. He would kill his own mother if it meant he got what he wanted. He'd have to do some fast thinking.

Gus and Dreema arrived at the ranch to find Mildy and Andy sitting on the porch sipping lemonade.

Gus frowned and led Old Red eye to his pen. Only when the bull realized that miss Daisy wasn't going to be sharing his quarters, did he start to bellow and paw the ground.

Dreema tied her horse to the hitching post, dismounted, and let Miss daisy loose to wander around. She wouldn't go far, but Dreema shook her head as the cow headed directly for Old Red Eye's pen. Miss daisy mooed and licked the bull's face through the fence.

Mildy laughed. "Would you look at that, Andy? I think those two critters are in love."

Andy chuckled. "I think there's a lot of that floatin' in the air."

Mildy blushed, and watched as Dreema came towards them. "Come on up here, Dreema, and have some lemonade. Gus will be along as soon as he sees to his horse."

"Thank you," Dreema said, joining them, and sitting on the porch rail.

Mildy smiled. "It looks like Old Red eye has stirred up a heap of trouble today."

Dreema nodded. "I'd say that bull knows what he wants and goes after it. I was really upset about him breeding Miss Daisy, but it's over and done with. I just hope she doesn't die in birthing like her mother did. I've raised that cow since she was born. She means a lot to me."

Andy stood up and put his arms around Dreema. "We'll take good care of her and she'll be jest fine."

Mildy stood. "Well, Dreema, I've already invited Andy to stay for supper and I hope you will too."

"Only if I can help in the kitchen," Dreema said, smiling at the older woman.

Mildy reached over and took her hand. "Well, you're company, and I usually don't have company help, but I can tell your Mama brought you up right and I'm not going to refuse your gracious offer. Come on in and we'll cook some stew for these men." She turned to look at Andy. "Why don't you put Dreema's horse in the barn and Miss Daisy too? Gus will show you where things are to take care of them."

"I'll do that," Andy said. "Maybe Gus can give me some pointers on how to run a ranch. Ranchin' is a lot different than takin' care of a small farm in Ohio. Call us when supper's ready. I'm starved!"

Mildy laughed. "Come on, Dreema. We got some serious cooking to do. Wouldn't want our men to starve, now would we?"

Gus glanced out the barn door. He saw his Aunt and Dreema go inside the house and Andy heading towards the barn with Dreema's horse and Miss Daisy in tow. Damn, were they going to move in? It seemed that this morning was a lifetime ago and all he wanted to do was take a bath, eat supper, and go to bed. Then maybe this nightmare would end.

As Andy approached the doorway, he grabbed the pitchfork and started forking fresh hay into the empty stalls. The ranch hands would be in soon. They were to bring in his mares today to the corral. Old Jed Tucker was going to bring over his stud for breeding purposes tomorrow. Jed's horse, Firestar, would beget some good offspring. He was looking forward to seeing some fine horseflesh on his ranch.

"Hey, Gus," Andy said, coming into the barn. "Your Aunt Mildy invited us to stay for supper. She said ya could fix these two critters up fer a while."

Gus bit the inside of his jaw so hard he tasted blood. "Yeah, you can tie the cow up over here and you can give her some water and hay. I'll unsaddle Devil."

"Much obliged," Andy said, grinning broadly. "Ya know Gus, Mildy is a fine woman. Perty too. We sure did talk each other's ears off while ya were gone. I ain't ever met a woman so fine."

Gus slapped the saddle down on the top rail of the stall. "Yeah, she's a decent person and means more to me than anything."

Andy didn't miss the note of warning in Gus's voice. He started to walk over to him to tell him he wouldn't do anything to hurt Mildy when the loud shouts of cowboys echoed sharply from outside.

"That's the cow hands bringing in the herd of mares that are to be bred tomorrow. Take care of Devil. I'll get the corral gate open for them." Gus started to walk towards the door when Devil's shrill cry rent the air. He turned and saw the stallion rear up on both hind legs and paw at the air, then come crashing back to earth, and race past him. "What the hell!"

Andy stared. "My God, Gus, ya got ta get em. He smells them mares!"

"What?" Gus yelled, hearing the commotion outside.

Andy stepped up to him and grabbed his arm. "Devil's not gelded and I think maybe that's what ye be thinkin'."

"Damn!" Gus swore, running outside. What he saw made his blood turn to ice, then to a slow simmer, then to a boil. Devil was racing through the field with the mares in hot pursuit. "Get them!" He ordered the ranch hands. "We'll never find them tonight. It'll be dark in an hour!" Damn it, Dreema and Devil made a good pair. Both were ruining his peaceful existence.

Dreema and Mildy heard the disturbance and dropped what they were doing and rushed out to the porch. Gus was mounting a horse a ranch hand had just dismounted from, and by the look on his face, Dreema knew someone was in trouble and she sensed it was she. She stepped back as Gus reined the horse to a stop by the porch steps.

"Get up behind me. That damn stallion of yours just ran off with my mares!"

Dreema ran down the steps, grabbed hold of Gus's outstretched hand, slipped her foot in the stirrup, and swung up behind him. She wrapped her arms tight around his waist and held on.

Gus urged his mount into a ground-eating lope, but Devil and the mares were nowhere to be seen. His ranch hands were disappearing over a rise and he headed that way. "What are you doing riding a stallion that hasn't been gelded? They can get pretty feisty."

Dreema moaned. "I'm sorry. I didn't know you were bringing mares in heat to corral today or I would have told Uncle Andy to make sure Devil was locked up in a stall."

Gus clenched his teeth together. "If you whistle for him, will he come to you?"

"Usually he does, but that's when he's not surrounded by mares, either."

"Damn it, Dreema, your turning my life upside down and inside out in just one day. Hell, I don't even know what it'll be like when I get up tomorrow. Somehow, I just know it's going to be downright crazy!"

Dreema sighed. Crazy wasn't the word for what had happened today. Yet, she found it sheer pleasure to be riding behind Gus. Her breasts were pressed against his back and she felt the play of his muscles as he guided the

horse to where the other ranch hands had stopped. They had a mare roped and she hoped it dissipated some of Gus's anger.

Gus frowned at the ranch hands. "Is that the only one you got?" He stared at his ranch foreman, Dan Givers.

"Boss, this mare had a rock lodged in her shoe and stopped here. She couldn't keep up with the others. That stallion headed over that way. My guess is, he smelled water and is going to hole up by the creek somewhere."

Gus looked at the sky. Dusk was descending. There was no way they were going to be able to track them tonight. He turned in the saddle and looked at Dreema. "Whistle for that Devil of yours. Maybe he'll come back."

Dreema took a deep breath, placed two fingers in her mouth, and whistled. She smiled when Gus slapped his hands over his ears in response to the shrill noise. She repeated the process several times until she was out of breath. "I don't think Devil hears me."

"Or doesn't want to," Gus muttered. He turned to his men. "Go on back to the ranch and get your supper. You've had a long day. We'll just ride a ways and see if we can find any sign of them or which way they're headed." He nodded to his ranch hands and nudged the horse into a canter. He knew the mount beneath them was just as tired as the men. He groaned as Dreema wiggled to get more comfortable behind him.

Dreema snuggled against Gus's strong back. She loved the feel of him. He was lean, yet the muscles in his body were like leaning against a rock. She leaned her cheek against his back, reached up with one hand and undid the braid in her hair that she had put in when helping Mildy with supper. Thinking of supper reminded her that she had not eaten since this morning. Too bad Devil had to act up. She smiled at the thought of Devil breeding the mares.

Gus swore softly. The wind was blowing Dreema's black hair over his shoulders, across his arms, and over his legs. He'd never seen such long hair. It was well past her derrière, almost to the back of her knees and seemed as if it was trying to ensnare him. The last rays of light quickly vanished as he guided his mount to the creek where his foreman said he thought Devil had been headed for. He squinted into the dusky light.

Dreema placed her hands on Gus's shoulders and pulled herself up to look around. "There," she pointed, lifting her leg over the horse and sliding to the ground. Devil had just mounted a beautiful white mare.

Gus slid to the ground. He watched as the mare accepted Devil's attention without a fight. He had to admit, but only to himself, that the stallion was beautiful, strong, and healthy. Two other mares approached Devil as he jumped off the white mare.

Dreema whistled. Devil threw his head in the air, and turned to stare at her. "Devil, you come over here, now," she said firmly. "You've done enough damage for one day." The stallion shook his head and pawed the ground.

Gus laughed. "I don't think he cares what you think of him at the moment and I don't think he's going to come anywhere near you."

"Devil, you come here or I'm going to catch you and put you out to pasture and never ride you again! I'll have you gelded!"

Gus grinned as Devil shook his head. "I think it's a little too late for that."

Dreema looked up at him. "Why aren't you yelling and having a fit and blaming me for all this?"

"It's too late for that, and besides, now we're even. I demand payment for your horse's indiscretion."

Dreema frowned. "Just what price do you demand?"

"I'm no longer your intended groom to be. I'd say you owe me a bigger debt than I owed you, since your horse has bred six of my mares," Gus said, mounting his horse. He reached a hand out to assist Dreema to mount behind him, pulling her up easily.

Dreema slipped her arms around Gus's lean, hard waist. "The way I see it is, I owe you and you owe me. I think now we are both committed to one another."

Gus laughed as he headed home. "We'll see about that."

Chapter III

Gus awoke at the crack of dawn to hear the whinny of horses and the shrill cry of none other than Devil. He threw back the covers and went to the window and looked out. It was just light enough to see Dreema riding astride Devil and the mares following behind.

Devil pranced and reared, but Dreema easily held her seat. Her Uncle Andy opened the corral gate as Dreema urged Devil inside to wait for the mares to enter, then rode back out as her Uncle closed the gate and fastened it.

Gus shook his head as he saw his Aunt Mildy walk across to them. He just knew they were going to have company for breakfast. He dressed, went down stairs to the kitchen, and poured himself a cup of strong, hot coffee just as the kitchen door opened and Dreema and her Uncle and his Aunt came in.

"Morning Gus," Mildy said, going to him and giving him a kiss on the cheek. "I hope you slept well?"

"I did," Gus said, turning his attention to Dreema and Andy. "Good morning, you may as well sit down and have some coffee and breakfast."

Mildy laughed. "I already invited them. Come and sit down and make yourselves at home. I'll get you your coffee."

Gus sat down too and looked at Dreema. "I see you brought my mares home. Any trouble?"

Dreema smiled. "None at all. Devil brought them to the ranch early this morning. He wanted his breakfast. He's a picky eater. Spoiled rotten."

Andy laughed as Mildy gave him a cup of coffee. "That Devil knows what's good for him. Knew he'd better come home."

Mildy laughed. "He's a right smart horse and beautiful too," she said, placing a platter of fried ham, home fries, and eggs on the table. She sat down beside Andy.

"Looks mighty fine," Andy said, smiling at her. "Your cooking is the best I've ever tasted."

Gus grinned. "Aunt Mildy wins all the ribbons at the fair for her jams and pies."

Mildy smiled. "I do it with love and I need to go into town today. I want to get a few things for your birthday party this weekend. Dan is in charge of the barbecue. So far, there are forty people coming, not to mention Griffen Morston and Rachel."

Gus glanced at Dreema, and then looked at his Aunt. "Griffen and Rachel are coming? That means they will stay until Monday."

Dreema wondered who Rachel was and why Gus seemed so nervous all of a sudden. She pushed her plate away and watched Gus as Mildy got up and walked away. She returned to the table with a golden brown peach pie.

"Griffen wrote that he'll be in town for two weeks on business. I've invited them to stay here. Griffen's wife can't come. Her mother is ill and Denise must stay and take care of her."

Gus stood up. "If you'll excuse me, I'll get the buckboard ready to go into town. I need some supplies too."

Mildy smiled. "Andy will drive me in since he needs to get some things too and Dreema and you can ride on ahead."

Gus frowned. "Guess that's settled," he said, going to take his gun from the hook by the door before strapping it on. He pushed his hat on his head.

"I'll be ready to leave in fifteen minutes." He walked out the door and to the barn. While his hands were busy with preparing the buggy for the trip into town, Gus thought of Rachel.

Rachel was the most beautiful young woman he had ever met and most definitely knew how to be a lady. Unlike one feisty female he knew. Yet, as he hitched up the horses to the buckboard, visions of Dreema chased away the image of Rachel and he remembered the feel of her in his arms yesterday. He shook his head and patted the horses as he finished his task. It seemed like years since she had rode into his life instead of just a day.

Gus saddled his mount and went to stand beside Dreema's horse Devil. The horse whinnied and pushed him back with his head. "Hey, if you don't watch out, I'll have you gelded without your mistress's permission," he said, as Devil's head went up and he turned his head to look towards the kitchen door where Dreema was just coming out of the house.

"Devil giving you a hard time?"

"Gus laughed. "Just being pushy," he said, watching as the stallion nuzzled Dreema on the neck."

Dreema laughed. "I missed you too, Devil. You're my baby, aren't you?" She wrapped her arms around Devil's neck and hugged him.

"You have him spoiled. Horses like that aren't worth their salt."

Dreema smiled. "Want to see what Devil can do while we wait for your Aunt and my Uncle?"

"Sure," Gus said, wondering what the horse could possibly do to impress him.

Dreema patted Devil. "Come on, boy," she said, leading him to the middle of the area between the house and the barn.

Gus watched as the horse knelt as Dreema bowed before the big steed. She walked to his side and slipped into the saddle and Devil got to his feet. He watched with admiration as Dreema instructed the horse through various tricks. Not once did Devil not respond to one of her commands. Only when the horse reared repeatedly did Gus's heart lodge in his throat for fear she would fall. It didn't happen, and through it all, Dreema's form was excellent and it was as if rider and horse were one.

Gus strode over to her and patted Devil. "Good show, boy," he said, as Dreema slid from the saddle.

Dreema laughed. "He does a lot more, too," she said, slipping a hand in her pants pocket and pulling out a cube of sugar and giving it to Devil.

"More tricks you mean?"

Dreema stared at him. "Devil will protect me with his life if the need arises. He won't let anyone hurt me and he's a fantastic swimming partner."

"You swim together?" He raised a quizzical brow, imagining the scene and liking the mental picture it presented.

Dreema laughed. "Yes, and Devil loves it. We swim at the dam the Clayborne's built. It's down some right now, but still deep enough to swim," she was saying as Mildy and Andy came out of the house.

Gus grinned. "There's also a bunk house up there too. I remember that place. I was helping Douglas Clayborne one time when one of his ranch hands was bitten by a rattler. Took him there and cared for him. It was touch and go, but he made it.

Dreema swung into the saddle and grinned down at Gus. "I doubt you would recognize the place. I've made many changes to it. You'll have to drop by sometime and I'll show it to you."

Gus tipped his hat. "It'd be my pleasure, Miss," he said, jumping into the saddle. "Since your Uncle and my Aunt are on their way, I guess we'd better catch up to them."

Dreema rode beside Gus until they approached the wagon that was turning towards town. She couldn't help but wonder what Rachel looked like. Too, she wondered what was between Rachel and Gus, not to mention they would be staying under the very same roof. Dreema rode up to the side of the wagon Mildy was on and smiled at her. Mildy was a sweet lady and Dreema liked her a lot. She also knew her Uncle was falling in love with Mildy. She glanced at Gus on the opposite side of the wagon and wondered how he would feel about that. He was discussing the running of a ranch with her Uncle. They seemed to be getting on quite well. Mildy's voice drew her attention and she smiled down at her. "Pardon me," she said, "I'm afraid I was daydreaming."

Mildy laughed. "Beautiful day for that, isn't it? I was just saying that you know you and your Uncle Andy are invited to the barbecue."

"Thanks, Mildy. We'll definitely be there and if you would like, I'd love to come and lend you a hand with the cooking and baking."

"I accept. Have you ever made a birthday cake?"

Dreema laughed. "No, can't say that I have. Mother always had the cook prepare them."

"Oh," Mildy replied thoughtfully. "Then surely, this move to Texas must be quite hard for you."

"I'd just say it is an adventure. I love this way of life and I'm not totally unused to cooking and working on a ranch. I used to stay with Uncle Andy a lot and cook and clean for him and take care of the animals and muck out the barn--to my mother's horror," she said, laughing at the memories it portrayed.

Mildy smiled. "Then there's a lot that I'll have to teach you about life for a woman in Texas. We have a quilting bee twice a month. There's one next Thursday and it'll be at my place. Too, there are church socials and bake sells and all sorts of things for a woman to become involved in. I'll introduce you to everyone at the barbecue. Too, your Uncle Andy is escorting me to church this Sunday and I'd love for you to come with us. You can make some new acquaintances and make some new friends."

Dreema was about to reply when a shot rang out and she felt herself flying out of the saddle. She hit the ground hard and fought to get her breath. A red hot, searing pain in her right arm assaulted her. She moaned, then felt the world spin as blackness engulfed her.

Gus swore. "Get down, Aunt Mildy and Andy!" He pulled his gun and shot in the direction the bullet had come from and rode to Dreema's side. Devil had come to lie down beside her, as if shielding her with his own body from another attack. The horse nickered softly and nudged Dreema's pale cheek with his head.

Gus saw the blood staining her right arm and chest. He deftly tore her blouse away and inspected the area closely. The bullet had sliced a deep groove in her upper arm, but had missed anything vital. He pulled a clean

handkerchief from his pocket and pressed it against the wound and tied it around her arm snugly to staunch the flow of blood.

Gus had just lifted Dreema in his arms to carry her to the buckboard when Devil rose on his feet, pawed at the ground, then took off at a mile eating pace in the direction where the shot had been fired. Andy and Mildy scrambled out of the wagon, running around to the back of the buckboard where Gus placed Dreema.

"How is she?" Andy asked anxiously.

"It's just a surface wound, but will be sore as hell for a few days. Let's get her into the Doc's," Gus said, noticing the tears in Andy's eyes. "You go ahead and ride with Dreema so you can cushion her head in your lap, I'll drive the buckboard."

Andy jumped up to gently position Dreema in his arms. "Let's go."

Gus tied his horse to the back of the buckboard and jumped up in the seat by Mildy. He gave her a gentle hug and urged the horses into a gallop. "Hold on, Aunt Mildy."

"Is Dreema going to be alright?"

"Yes, and by God I'll find out who done this and they'll pay!" Gus ground out as he shot a quick glance to where Devil had disappeared. Where had that horse gone and why?

The man watched as the black stallion raced towards him, his saddle empty. He laughed. "Stupid horse spooked when his Mistress got shot." He shook his head and mounted his own steed and turned in the direction of town.

As he rode off, a shrill whinny made him turn in the saddle and he saw the horse bearing down on him. His face whiten and kicked his mount unmercifully into a ground eating pace.

He leaned low over the saddle horn and urged his mount faster, but as he glanced sideways he saw the stallion racing past him. The horse stopped about ten feet in front of him and reared again and again, it's shrill cry like that of a devil incarnate.

He felt beads of sweat pop out on his head as he maneuvered his horse around the black devil, but the horse seemed to know instinctively what his next move was. He felt the animal beneath him shudder and the next thing he knew, he was on his backside looking up at the belly of the stallion. He scrambled out of the way just in the nick of time before the horse's big hooves came down to land right where he had been.

Quickly, he scrambled to his feet. "Get the hell out of here or I'll shoot you next!" He pulled his gun out of the holster, but before he had the time to pull the trigger, the horse's hooves struck him in the chest, knocking the air out of him with a whooshing sound and he fell to the ground in a heap. His last thought before he passed out was he wouldn't get to spend the twenty bucks in his pocket.

Devil reared, pawed the air, and then raced to catch up with Dreema.

Gus had just come out of Doc Morter's place when he caught sight of Devil racing hell bent towards him. The stallion came to a dust eating halt and pawed the air. He was lathered and Gus stood still until his hooves hit the ground again. "Easy boy," he said soothingly, approaching him cautiously.

"She's going to be just fine and as soon as Doc bandages her up, we're taking her home."

Gus reached out a hand tentatively, not wanting to take any chances, but Devil whinnied softly and sidled up to him and nuzzled his neck.

"It's ok, boy," Gus said, stroking his neck. "Let's get you rubbed down at the stable, then I can gather my supplies, and we can head home." He grinned as Devil nudged him as if urging him to hurry.

"Alright, We're going," he chuckled as Andy's voice drew his attention. He stopped and turned to see Mildy and Andy standing side by side. Andy had his arm hooked in his Aunt's.

Mildy smiled. "I see Devil has found us. Smart horse. Doc says that Dreema will sleep for a couple hours and then we can take her home. Did you talk to the sheriff and tell him what happened?"

Gus nodded. "Sheriff Markster said he'd investigate and get back to us. I'm going to rub Devil down and give him some water and feed. Looks like he's been running hard."

Andy grinned. "He probably found who shot Dreema and paid him back for it."

Gus frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Andy shrugged. "Just what I said."

Gus shook his head. "I'll meet you both back here in a couple hours. He started walking to the stables with an anxious Devil nudging him to walk faster.

Mildy sighed. "Let's go the General Store first and get Dreema some new things to wear home. I told Doc to throw hers away."

"Yep, that sounds like a fine idea. I also want to get her a small present and get one for Gus's birthday from her and me. What do you think he'd like?"

Mildy smiled. "Well, he needs a new gun holster and a new belt. I'm getting him a shirt and pair of pants and new boots."

"A new gun holster it will be then," Andy said, moving with her towards the store across the street. "Then, I want to take you to lunch."

Mildy smiled up at him. "Why sir, that's the nicest invite I've had in a long time."

Neither noticed the two men at the saloon entrance watching them. One moved away and got on his horse and rode out of town. The other went back inside.

Gus came out of the stables with Devil following him when the stage came rolling to a stop in front of the hotel. He watched in amazement as Devil trotted past him to stand at the hitching post beside his mount in front of Doc Morter's place. Grinning, he decided Devil didn't need to be tied and moved to go to the General Store when a woman's voice shouted at him. He turned towards the stage and saw Rachel waving prettily at him. Her small hands were enclosed in white gloves. He grinned and walked towards her and her father whom had just stepped down from the stage.

Gus laughed as Rachel threw herself into his arms and giggled in delight. "Hey there, cutie!"

"Hi Gus! I have missed you so much!"

"You're a little early aren't you? Not supposed to be here 'till this weekend."

"Oh, but Papa knew how impatient I was to see you again and he decided he could leave a couple days earlier."

Gus grinned and released her. "You look absolutely beautiful!" He turned to Griffin. "Hello, Griffin, nice to see you again."

"Hello, Gus. The same here. How are things?"

"Just fine. Had a little mishap with a neighbor a little while ago. Just waiting until we can take her home. She's put up at Doc's right now."

"Nothing serious, I hope."

"Someone decided to shoot her in the arm. Thank goodness she only got grazed. Aunt Mildy and Dreema's Uncle Andy are around somewhere."

Rachel frowned as she listened. "Who is Dreema?"

Gus smiled down at her. "She bought the Clayborne ranch next to us. They are right nice folks. You both are pretty close in age so you'll probably become friends."

Rachel smiled. "Oh, I'm sure we will," she said, wondering what this Dreema looked like. The name bespoke of dark beauty. She wouldn't let anyone interfere with her plans for Gus. "When can we be on our way to your ranch? Is there any chance of you taking us there now? I'm exhausted."

Gus frowned. "Stay here, I'll get Andy and Aunt Mildy to take you. I'll load their supplies in the buckboard and Griffin, you can ride my horse and Rachel can ride between Aunt Mildy and Andy. I know that's not the best of arrangements, but with all that's happened, it's the best I can do unless you want to rent a buggy."

Griffin nodded. "That's fine. I'll just get our luggage into the buckboard while you get your Aunt."

Gus didn't miss Rachel's little pout as he walked away to leave them to gather their luggage. He entered the store to hear Mrs. Deeper's shrill voice telling him not to come any closer for about three seconds.

Gus waited a couple seconds longer, then approached the counter. "Birthday presents huh?"

Mrs. Deeper pressed her thin lips together. "You, Gus, are worse than a child. Shame on you."

"Yes, Ma'am," he replied, grinning widely, turning to his Aunt and Andy. Griffin and Rachel arrived on the noon stage. Rachel is tired and wants to go out to the ranch now, so can you and Andy take them? I'll stay and escort Dreema home and make sure she's safe."

Andy nodded. "Be right fine with me and I'll be home as soon as I can leave yer place. You stay with her until I git there?"

"Sure will, and don't you worry. I'll make sure she's taken care of until you do. You have my word on that."

"Your word's good enough for me. Help me get these parcels and supplies in the wagon and we'll be on our way."

Gus nodded and helped load the wagon. As he watched them drive off down the street, he noticed Jack; Dreema's ex foreman ride up to the saloon. He had a half hour yet so he decided to go to Miz Pat's and get a drink.

Dreema awoke slowly, feeling so groggy; she swallowed hard and forced herself to open her eyes. She glanced around her. She was in a room

with two other beds, which were empty. The walls were painted white. Everything was white.

She started to push herself up to a sitting position when a searing pain in her arm made her groan. Yet, she wasn't one to lie in bed. She gritted her teeth and sat up on the edge of the bed, gasping when she noticed she was bare under the white sheet. She clutched it to her with her left hand and looked to see why her right arm hurt so badly. It was wrapped in a pristine white bandage. A small spot of blood showed bright red on it. She turned as the door opened and a heavy-set lady came bustling in. Her white hair was pulled back in a bun at the nape of her ample neck and her large blue eyes twinkled merrily as she came to stand beside her.

"I'm Mavis Morter, Doc Morter's wife and head nurse. You're fine and there's nothing to worry about. Doc fixed you up right good."

"What happened," Dreema asked, and then remembered the shot and falling from her horse.

Mavis sighed. "Someone took a shot at ya, but missed all your vital parts. You'll just have a sore arm for a few days dear. Doc will give you some laudanum to ease your pain when you're home and of course he'll give you some before Gus comes to pick you up. Now let's see about getting you dressed. Mildy brought you some new clothes since we threw away the others. Blood on them ya know."

Dreema shook her head. The after affects of the drug made it impossible to keep up with the woman. "I can manage," she said, as the woman laid her things on the bed beside her.

"Nonsense, you're hurt. I'll help you and don't be shy. I've undressed and dressed more people in my lifetime than anyone else in this town. Well, besides, the saloon ladies across the street, that is."

Dreema felt her face redden. "I've never had anyone dress me before except my mother when I was a little girl."

"Well, let's get to it, shall we?"

Dreema was mortified as the woman pulled away the sheet and began dressing her as if she were a small child. Dreema gave in to the woman's administrations and was happy for the help. Her arm throbbed unmercifully.

Gus downed a shot of whiskey and leaned closer to Pat. "Tell me who that man is with Jack." He pointed to the table in the far corner.

"I don't know. He just arrived in town a few nights ago. I do know he has plenty of money to spend. Meaner than a rattler though when he doesn't get his way."

"Like Jack, huh?"

Pat nodded. "I'd say the two of them are nothing but trouble. Jack has a temper to kill and he's already beaten one of my girls. I warned him tonight if it happened again, I'd ban him from the saloon or shoot him myself."

Gus chuckled. "That's my girl, and I know you'd not miss either. Do me a favor and keep an eye on those two, will you? Tell your girls to find out what they can about him."

Pat smiled. "Do I get a kiss for my efforts?"

Gus laughed deeply. "You sure do sugar," he said, leaning down and kissing her sensuous lips. He gazed into the depths of Pat's hazel eyes as she stared back into his blue ones. He bit her bottom lip gently and broke the kiss.

"Phew, darlin', you're the greatest kisser around. Makes this old girl's heart flutter!"

Gus grinned devilishly. He liked Pat. He'd known her about five years now and they had become the best of friends and shared lots of confidences. He'd also made love to her several times, but that had come to an end with their special friendship. There were times he came to the saloon when something was bothering him and just sat in her suite of rooms upstairs and talked and enjoyed her company.

She was forty-seven years old, a little on the chubby side, but was a pretty lady. She had long dark hair with just a few traces of silver, lending her a regal look. She had a personality that was giving and loving, but because of her profession, people, mostly the women, gave her a hard time or shunned her. He knew it hurt her feelings because she was not one to judge anyone else unless she had reason to.

He kissed her again. "Come to my birthday barbecue, ok?"

Pat's tinkling laughter floated throughout the room, making everyone stop what they were doing to stare at her and smile. "Do you mean that?"

"Of course. I'm going to be forty. Should be able to decide whom I want to attend. Bring a friend, ok?"

Pat threw her arms around him and hugged him close. "Thanks sugar. I'll wear something respectable and be with a respectable citizen of our town. Mike Markster."

Gus laughed loudly. "Can't get any more respectable than the Sheriff. See you Saturday." He grabbed his hat from the bar and walked out.

Gus ran across the street to the Doc's house, unaware that he was being watched and followed. He opened the door and stepped inside to find the doctor arguing with Dreema.

"You have to take this before the ride home or you'll be in severe pain."

"I'm not taking any more of that stuff. I feel like I'm half dead already. I can stand the pain."

Doc turned to Gus. "Maybe you can talk some sense into her. Headstrong is what she is."

Gun laughed. "That she is and more trouble than Old Red Eye himself. Take the medicine Dreema. I'm taking you home."

"No, I said."

"I'll pour it down your throat if I have to."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Want to bet?"

"I will not be drugged asleep."

"Doc, can she take a portion of it that will not knock her out?"

Doc sighed. "That's what I been trying to tell her. Just enough to ease the pain on the ride home, then at bedtime she can take a full dose to get a good night's rest."

"Take it, Dreema, or I'll leave you here all night long and come collect you tomorrow."

"You wouldn't dare do that and if you did, I'd ride Devil home."

"No you won't because he'll go with me."

"Not if I tell him to stay here."

"At the rate we're going, we aren't going to get home at all and I have guests waiting on me."

"Guests?"

"Yeah, your Uncle Andy and my Aunt Mildy took Griffen and Rachel out to the ranch. They arrived early."

"Dreema's shoulder throbbed and she felt so tired. She only wanted to be home with Uncle Andy and in her own bed. She took the medicine from the doctor and drank it. "Happy? Now take me home."

"Thank the Lord," Doc said, getting up from his chair. "I'll stop by your place tomorrow to check on you. Remember to rest and no lifting and such. You'll tear out those nice neat stitches I put in you."

Dreema stood and swayed. She felt Gus's strong arms lift her as if she weighed nothing. "Thanks Doc, we'll be on our way."

Gus carried Dreema out the door and heard Devil whinny softly. He stopped in front of Devil and let the horse show his mistress he missed her and loved her, for that's the only explanation Gus had for the way Devil worshiped her.

"Good boy, Devil," Dreema smiled in the fading rays of daylight. "I love you too, boy," she said as he nuzzled her neck softly. "Get down Devil, so I can get on your back."

Gus watched as the horse knelt on his forelegs and he placed Dreema in the saddle and mounted behind her to hold her steady as the horse got to his feet. Devil rose up and Gus was amazed that he didn't even jar them. "Let's take her home, Devil," he said, turning the horse in the right direction.

Devil trotted slowly as if sensing his mistress's discomfort and Gus sat back in the saddle and wrapped his arms around Dreema, letting her lean her head on his chest.

Gus's heart clenched at the thought that she may have been killed. Who would want to shoot her? Why would they? Yet, his first suspicions had led to Jack, but the Sheriff had confirmed that Jack had been at the saloon the whole time. A faceless enemy was a hard one to fight, but he wouldn't give up. He'd find the bastard and make him pay. "Gus's thoughts were interrupted as Devil stopped and snorted. He pawed the ground three times. "What the hell," Gus said, leaning to look at the horse across Dreema's shoulder.

Dreema lifted her head groggily. "We're being followed," she said. "I've taught him many things and this is one of them."

Gus swore and had no doubt that Devil sensed something was wrong. It was dark out now and the moon shinning full and bright made them an easy target. Can you stand to ride a little faster, Dreema?"

"Yes, I don't want to be shot again. "Devil, go home now!" She braced herself back against Gus and felt his arms tighten about her as Devil only hesitated briefly and broke into a ground eating pace. "He knows the way home by heart."

Gus let the reins loosen and wrapped the ends around the saddle horn with one hand while holding Dreema with the other. After he was finished, he scooted forward and took hold of the saddle horn, enclosing Dreema in the safety of his arms. Every once in a while, he felt her stiffen and knew the jarring was causing her pain. He stretched his neck around and peered behind them, catching a glimpse of a horse and rider chasing them from behind. "Don't be frightened, I'm going to fire a warning shot."

Dreema nodded. "Devil, don't stop, just keep running," she whispered to the stallion.

Gus withdrew his colt from his holster and turned, aimed, and fired. He watched as the rider's horse reared when the bullet hit the ground in front of it and saw the rider land in a heap on the ground. They had gained some time.

Chapter IV

Jack pushed himself to his feet, picked up his hat, and slapped the dust from his pants. "Damn! I owe you Gus and Dreema!" He watched as they faded away into the darkness on the road ahead of him.

He moved to his horse, caught the dangling reins, and mounted. He sat there for several minutes just looking ahead at the road illuminated by the moonlight. He was in deep trouble. More so than when he was in Ohio. He had run from a man so ruthless and was feared by many whom began dealing with him. The ones that crossed Adam Greely once ended up dead. Jack guessed he was lucky to still be alive.

He turned his mount in the direction towards town. He rode slowly. He was in no hurry to face Adam again. Yet, he had a pocketful of money again and didn't have to worry about the necessities or niceties of life. Adam Greely paid well for the dirty work he wanted done.

As Jack rode, his thoughts turned to Dreema. During their trip, he had done all he could to get her to fall in love with him and had been turned down repeatedly. At first, he had been the perfect gentleman, thinking to woo her with kind words, gifts, flowers and such. When that hadn't worked, he had thought maybe she wanted a man with a firm hand and strong mind. He'd been slapped several times for his efforts after that.

As he neared the outskirts of town, he wondered how he was going to persuade her to marry him. She had money and lots of it, not to mention she was beautiful too. Of course, once she was his, he would tame her. It would be his pleasure to tame her. Yes, his pleasure indeed, he thought as he rode up to the saloon.

Gus dismounted as soon as Devil halted in front of the steps to Dreema's house. He lifted her in his arms and carried her inside. He went straight to the sitting room and laid her gently on the sofa. "You ok?" He asked, moving to light a lamp on the table beside the couch.

"Yes," she said, feeling like her arm was nothing more than a throbbing pain that would never cease. The lantern flared to life and she saw Gus stare down at her. Even with the pain, she wanted him to hold her and kiss her. "You seem to know where everything is here," she said, trying to divert her mind from him and the pain. Neither was working.

Gus grinned. "I knew the Clayborne's well and have been here many times. "I'll make you a cup of hot tea and make it nice and sweet. I know you're exhausted and in pain.

Dreema sat up. "I can manage and Uncle Andy should be along soon."

Gus laughed. "With all the stuff he has to unload, he'll be awhile yet and I want you to be taken care of and as comfortable as you can be. I'll be right back."

Dreema sighed heavily and leaned back against the softness of the sofa. She was dead tired and hurting, but the pain she would put up with. What she wanted to know was who had shot her and why? She got to her feet, steadied herself, and went into the kitchen. Gus was busy making her tea and making a pot of coffee too. He looked at ease in the kitchen although with his rugged good looks, he seemed out of place.

Gus turned from the stove to find Dreema staring at him. He moved to grab a chair and assist her into it. "You never listen, do you?"

"Who shot me?"

"We don't know yet."

"Why would someone want to shoot me?"

Gus went to the stove and made her tea and set it in front of her, then grabbed a cup of coffee and joined her at the table. He knew what kind of pain Dreema was suffering, because a bullet had grazed him a few times in the past. It had to be worse for a woman than a man. "Got any enemy's?"

Dreema took a sip of tea. "I haven't been here long enough to make any," she said.

"The Sheriff is looking into it. He'll let us know if he finds out anything. In the meantime, be careful. Don't go anywhere by yourself."

"I don't and won't be scared into changing my lifestyle. I will not let anyone scare me into being afraid to be alone. I'll buy a gun tomorrow. I always have my rifle with me, but I want one like yours and you can teach me to shoot it."

Gus groaned. "Women don't strap on guns here. It just isn't done!"

Dreema felt the room begin to spin. She glanced at Gus and saw him spinning too. "You put the medicine in my tea!" She accused, trying to focus clearly on him.

Gus laughed. "Uh huh, I did, and now it's off to bed with you!" He rose from the chair, picked her up in his arms, and headed for the stairway.

"I didn't want that medicine!"

"Hush, you will get a good night's rest. Which room?" He asked as he stepped up to the second floor.

"The room on the right."

Gus entered the room by the glow of the moonlight shining through the windows and placed Dreema on the bed. "Where's your nightgown?"

Dreema tried to focus on what he was saying. She felt the pull of the medicine and just wanted to fall asleep. "My what?" She asked groggily.

"Your nightgown," Gus said, leaning over her. He brushed long tendrils of hair from her face and smiled as her eyes opened and closed sleepily.

"I don't sleep in one," she said.

"What?"

"I don't sleep in one. I just put on a robe if I get up."

Gus groaned. "Then you can sleep in your chemise." He began unbuttoning her blouse and when he was finished, pushed the material back to find she wasn't wearing any. His breath stopped in his throat as he stared helplessly at her breasts. Her skin was darkly tanned and her breasts rose and fell with each breath. She was beautiful. He took a deep breath and set his mind to the task at hand and quickly shed her clothes and tucked her in. "I think you can sleep comfortably now," he said, his voice sounding strangely gruff and low.

Dreema sighed. "Kiss me goodnight, Gus?"

"Woman, you are sorely trying my patience!"

"Please? We are engaged."

Gus groaned. "Just one little kiss goodnight and that's it and you go to sleep. Quit fighting that medicine!" He leaned down and barely touched his

lips to hers. They were warm and so very soft beneath his and he could feel the warmth of her breath as she breathed.

Dreema slipped her uninjured arm around his neck and pulled him closer and kissed him slowly. "I already am in love with you, Gus."

Gus kissed her softly and pulled his lips from hers to stare into her beautiful green eyes, but found them closed. "What the hell am I going to do about you?" With that, he walked out of the room and down to the kitchen.

Gus poured another cup of coffee and was just going to sit down at the table when Andy came in. He moved to the stove and poured another and set it on the table.

"How is she?" Andy asked.

"She's sleeping and will sleep all night. I put the medicine the doc gave me in her tea and made it so sweet, she didn't know until it started to take effect."

"Thank God," Andy said, moving to sit down at the table. "That gal's my life and I love her as if she were my own daughter. She's stubborn as a mule though. When she has her mind set on something, she goes out and gets it."

Gus frowned. "Yeah, I know."

Andy laughed. "Yep, Gus, I'd be a little wary about her if I were you. She isn't one to give up without a fight."

"I'll handle it, Andy," he said, taking a drink of coffee. "We had another run in while on the way here. Someone was following us. I landed a shot in front of their horse and they hit the dust. Didn't notice being followed after that."

"Why would someone want to hurt Dreema? She wouldn't hurt anyone. I know she's high spirited and says what she thinks, but what reason could there be, unless..."

Gus leaned forward. "Unless what?"

Andy pondered on whether or not to tell Gus only something he knew. He stared into Gus's blue eyes and knew he could trust him and already did. "Dreema don't know this, but the accident that took her ma and pa's life wasn't no accident."

"What are saying? Give me the whole story."

Andy rose from the chair and opened a cupboard door. He took out a bottle of whiskey, put it on the table, and refilled their coffee cups. He poured a liberal amount of whiskey in each one. "It happened a little over a year ago. My sister, Mary, and her husband, Randolph, Dreema's parents, were going to a party. Their house was located on a high hill above the town that gave the most beautiful view of the Mighty Ohio River. I was there that night and thank God I was, because Dreema was in a state of hysteria after what happened.

Gus waited patiently as he waited for Andy to continue. His clear blue eyes stared off into the distance as if living the scene all over again in his mind and Gus knew the memories had to be painful ones. Andy's sigh was one of acceptance as he ran a trembling hand through his thick gray hair.

Dreema and I were standing on the balcony of the second floor waving at them as they left. Randolph was not the slowest of drivers with a buggy, but he was driving fairly slowly that night. As they started down the hill, a very steep one, and the first of many, they seemed to be gaining speed. I

remember Randolph leaning out and glancing back as if for one last time, he had to see us. It was just a feeling I had at the time and still do.

"Go on," Gus said quietly.

"The buggy never made the first turn, but plunged over the hill. I still remember my sister's screams until all was quiet."

"My God," Gus said, and Dreema saw it too."

"Yes, and in her frilliest of dresses, she jumped over the balcony, slid down the rails, and took off at a run. By the time I arrived at the scene with the household staff, Dreema was scrambling down that hill, regardless of the berry briars and crab apple trees that tore at her clothes and skin. We heard her screams of denial and pain. I went down after her while the others got help. It took hours until we got their bodies back up to the house to prepare for the funeral."

"So, you learned later that it wasn't an accident."

Andy sighed heavily. "Yes. Someone had rigged the brake. There was no way they could have slowed down once they started down that hill."

Gus took the bottle of whiskey and poured some in his now empty coffee cup and drank it straight down. "And you think they might have followed Dreema here and are now after her. Why?"

Andy sighed. "If I knew that one, I'd know who to go after."

"What about Jack?"

"He's mean, that one is. Don't know what he did to get fired back home, but it had his family all upset. His sister is supposed to come for a visit in a couple weeks. Sunnie will give him what for when she gets hold of him. That's for sure. She and Dreema are like sisters."

Gus shoved back his chair. "Well, I got to go and I know you want to check on Dreema. He rose and stretched. "Uh, Andy, I undressed her for bed."

Andy nodded. "Got a surprise too, didn't ya?"

Gus laughed. "Yes, but I was a perfect gentleman."

Andy rose and extended his hand. "I know that Gus. Just remember that when Dreema has her heart set on something, she won't let nothin' stand in her way."

Gus shook his head. "I've been warned," he said, grabbing his hat and walking to the door. Did you bed down Devil? I forgot all about him."

"Yep, sure did, but you'll find him standing by the front steps guarding his mistress as she sleeps."

Gus shook his head and walked out the door. Devil whinnied and pawed at the ground. "She's sleeping like a baby, boy. She'll be safe with you watching over her." He moved to his mount that stood tied to the hitching post where Andy had tied it. He mounted, glanced up as a light came on where Dreema's room was, and knew her Uncle would look after her throughout the night, without getting any sleep himself, but what he'd catch in the rocking chair beside her bed. As he turned his mount and headed for home, he could still feel the sensation of her lips against his and knew he'd protect her with his life if the need arose.

Chapter V

Gus arrived home to find his dinner waiting for him in the oven. Beef stew and thickly sliced homemade bread. He washed his hands and sat down to eat.

He thought over the events of the day and thanked God the gunman shooting at Dreema had not killed her. Now all he had to do was find out who it was. He decided to call on the Sheriff tomorrow and see if there had been any new leads.

Sheriff Mike Markster was a pretty good guy and Gus had ridden posse with him many times. He was a fair man and listened to both sides of the story, but if he knew he had the right man that had done something wrong, he locked him up and kept him there until the judge came through.

Gus finished eating, rinsed his plate off, and put it in the sink. He poured a cup of strong, black coffee and sat down again, just as he heard the kitchen door leading to the sitting room swing open. He turned to see Rachel standing there. His eyes swept appreciatively over her body, clothed only in a silk gown and robe of ice blue. Her hair fell to her shoulders in ringlets. Shorter than most women wore here in Texas, but city girls seemed to pick up new trends easily.

"Hi," he said, as his mind remembered Dreema's long black strands. He couldn't imagine her cutting her hair like that and he wouldn't want her to.

"Hi, Gus," she said, moving to give him a kiss on the cheek that lingered for several moments.

"Want some coffee?"

"No, thanks. I'm fine. I thought I heard someone down here and thought it might be you. I have missed you so much!" She sat down in the chair beside him and smiled at him.

"I missed you too Princess," he said, using the nickname her father used most of the time.

Rachel smiled. "I wasn't too sure you had since you didn't seem to be coming home tonight."

Gus grinned. "Where would I have stayed?"

"With that Dreema lady maybe."

"You aren't jealous, are you?" He touched a fingertip to her pert little nose and laughed at her little pout.

"Maybe," she replied, suddenly grinning, showing tiny white teeth.

"Dreema needed someone to see she got home safe and I had to do it. Her Uncle isn't that handy with a gun and doesn't know how things are handled here yet."

"So, why are we talking about her?"

Gus frowned. "Your claws are showing."

"You're mine, Gus. I won't let anyone else have you."

Gus chuckled. "You're too young for me and you know it."

Rachel got up and moved to slip onto Gus's lap and wrapped her arms around his neck. "In case you haven't noticed, I have grown up quite a bit, and in more ways than one." She kissed him, loving the smell and feel of him. Once she had him, she'd make him sell this stupid ranch and move back east with her. They'd have a grand house with servants and she would show Gus off to all her friends. She wouldn't let anyone stand in her way.

Gus pried her arms away from his neck and stood up, taking her with him. He pushed her back from him. What has gotten into you? You used to be such a little lady."

Rachel smiled. "I'm not a little girl anymore," she said, untying and letting the robe slip to the floor.

Gus stared at her. "Her skin was milky white. Dreema's sun-kissed skin flashed through his mind. Rachel was well endowed, but no doubt she would turn plump in her middle years. She was too soft and didn't know what a day's work was like or an hour's for that matter. "Put your robe back on, Rachel. I'm getting a bath and going to bed. Tomorrow will be a busy day." He left her standing there sulking and went into the adjoining room, turned the lock, and stepped into the tepid water his Aunt Mildy had prepared for him before she went to bed.

As he washed, letting the water ease his aching muscles, he thought of Dreema and Rachel. The next two weeks were going to be pure hell and he knew it. Just wait until the two women met. He ducked his head under the water, soaped, washed, and rinsed his hair, then shook his head like a stallion being cornered. Damn, women were nothing but a nuisance!

Rachel paced back and forth in her room. She stomped one silk slippers foot. Gus didn't seem affected by her body at all. She stepped to the oval, floor length mirror and inspected her body critically. She didn't see anything wrong, or anything that would turn a man off. She was soft and curvy and well endowed. Her lover's back east had never complained. So, Gus must be all dreamy eyed over this Dreema. She would have to meet the woman and put her in her place. With those thoughts, she walked to the bed and slid between the covers. Yes, she'd most definitely put a little hick town cowgirl in her place.

She thumped her pillow. "Just you wait, Dreema, you have definitely met your match!"

Dreema awoke slowly, feeling the effects of the drug. Her mouth felt like cotton and her head felt stuffed with it. She pushed herself up and groaned as a pain sliced through her shoulder and down her arm.

Determined not to give into the discomfort, she threw her legs over the side of the bed and sat up, suddenly staring into her Uncle's light blue eyes.

"Where do you think you're goin', little girl?"

"Uncle Andy, have you slept in that rocker all night? You must be exhausted!"

"Slept just fine. Now git back in that bed."

"I have to cook your breakfast and have so many things to do today."

"You ain't doing anything! I'll cook breakfast and bring you a tray and take care of you like I always have. While I'm doing that, there's a basin of hot water that I brought up a while ago for you to bathe."

"Thanks Uncle Andy," Dreema said, knowing he loved her very much. Yet, she wasn't staying in bed all day. She would wash, get dressed, and go down and join her Uncle in the kitchen.

"That's my girl," Andy said, kissing her on the cheek. He walked from the room and closed the door softly behind him.

Dreema unwrapped the covers she still held around her and gasped in surprise. She was buck-naked and as soon as the thought registered in her mind, she vaguely remembered Gus undressing her. She blushed, for all her forward actions, she had never thought he'd see her naked.

Rising from the bed, she went about her morning ablutions, not without some difficulty, due to her injured arm. It hurt and was stiff and sore. Yet, she knew if she just babied it, it would get stiffer, so she gritted her teeth and used it anyway.

As she went downstairs, she heard voices coming from the kitchen. She stepped into the room to find the Sheriff sitting at the table drinking a cup of coffee as her Uncle placed bacon, eggs, and fried potatoes on the table. The Sheriff rose to his feet as she entered and pulled out a chair for her.

"Thanks," she said, smiling up at him. She was amazed at his size. He was well over six foot four, to her estimation, and huge.

"Welcome, Miss. How's the arm?" He sat back down as Andy set a cup of tea beside her plate.

"She's supposed to be resting in bed, but she's as stubborn as a mule," he said, taking a seat. He quickly said a prayer of thanks. "Dig in. I'm hungry."

Dreema laughed. "I am too," she said, sipping at her tea first. "Tell me, Sheriff, have you found anything out about who might have shot me and why?"

"You can call me Mike, Miss. I was just telling Andy that we found the body of Clyde Nicks about two miles away from where you were shot. His gun had been fired once. It was kind of a strange scene because he looked like he'd been trampled by a horse, but what killed him was a gunshot to the heart according to Doc."

Dreema stared at him for a few moments and then her gaze switched to her Uncle's. She noticed his slight nod and knew that Devil had gone after her attacker. She thanked God Devil hadn't killed the man, but then again, who had? Evidently there was more than one person after her or someone was hiring someone to gun her down. "Do you have any clues as to who shot him?"

"Nope," Mike said, eating his bacon and swallowing hard. "No clues at all, but sooner or later, I'll find out what this is all about. In the meantime, you be careful."

Dreema nodded and began eating her breakfast when they heard someone ride up. She turned towards the kitchen door as her Uncle went over and opened it. Gus stood there, his hat in his hand. His gaze locked with hers for a few seconds, and then slid to Mike's.

Andy moved aside. "Come on in, Gus. I'll get you a cup of coffee and some breakfast."

"Thanks, Andy, but coffee will be just fine. I already ate." He moved to sit in the chair by Dreema. "How's the arm?"

"It's fine," she said, moving it around slowly, trying not to show how much it made it hurt.

Gus grinned. "Yep, and hurts like hell too, if you'd just admit to it. I've been grazed more than once and even been shot a couple times and so has the Sheriff. Huh Mike?"

"Yep, more times than I care to count."

Dreema leaned forward. "Why were you shot?"

Mike laughed loudly. "Miss, this is Texas! Unrefined and wild! I'm the only lawman for miles and miles. There are men out there who kill just for the pleasure of it or men who want something and aim to take it anyway they can get it. Gus has acted as my Deputy at times and been shot for his troubles."

"A lot different than Ohio," Dreema said, pushing her plate away.

Mike nodded. "Yep, and you'd better remember you aren't in Ohio anymore. If you have to use a gun, do it, but only in self defense."

Gus groaned. "Don't tell her that, Mike. Just tell her to be escorted wherever she goes. She's dangerous enough without a gun in her hands."

Dreema listened to her Uncle Andy's laughter and Mike's, then rose from her chair. "I hope you three are amused. I plan to go to town as soon as I get Devil saddled and buy a gun and enough bullets to protect all of Texas!" She threw a disgusted look at Gus and walked out the kitchen door.

"Gus groaned. "Look what you've done, Mike.

You've given her a license to go out and buy a gun. Can you imagine what the people in town are going to be saying seeing her riding around in her men's pants with a gun strapped to her waist?

Mike sighed heavily. "Can't be any worse than what they put Pat through."

"Who's Pat?" Andy spoke up.

"She's Mike's girlfriend, but owns Miz Pat's Saloon in town."

Andy grinned. "Only been in there once since I've been here.

Dreema came in after me and started a conversation with one of the gals there and it was causing quite a stir."

Gus pushed himself to his feet. "That girl will be the death of me. Just watch and see! I'm going to go see what she's up to," he said, just as he heard Devil's shrill cry. Gus rushed out the door with Andy and Mike following.

All three men stopped dead as they watched Devil rear repeatedly as Jack stumbled back against the barn. Devil's hooves slashed the air just inches from Jack's chest.

Gus scanned the area. "Where's Dreema?" He had to yell above Devil's cries to be heard.

Andy started running to the barn. "She'd better be alright or I'll kill him with my bare hands!"

"Gus, can you get that horse under control?" Mike asked, as he started approaching the barn.

"That's Dreema's ex foreman, Jack, he has cornered. He's a bad one," Gus said, whistling for Devil. The horse reared once more, and then ran towards him.

Gus reached out and rubbed Devil's sleek neck. It's ok, boy. Where's Dreema?" Devil shook his big head and galloped into the barn. Gus followed, glancing at Mike as he grabbed Jack by the arm and took away his gun. He heard Dreema's voice as he entered.

"I'm really ok, Uncle Andy."

"You're bleeding like a stuck hog, girl! You've pulled out those stitches!"

Gus ran to Dreema's side and knelt down beside her. He pushed away her blood soaked shirt and pulled away the bandage. "Several of the

stitches were pulled. "We'll have to get Doc out here to get this fixed. What happened?"

Dreema looked up as Mike walked through the barn door with Jack who was cussing up a storm. "I hit him," she said, glaring at Jack.

"The bitch gave me a black eye and set her horse after me!"

Gus got to his feet, walked to Jack, swung back his right fist and landed one on his other eye. Jack fell to the barn floor in a heap, moaning like a baby. "That makes two," he said, returning to Dreema's side.

"Come on, let's get you into the house and taken care of," he said, picking her up in his arms.

"I can walk, Gus. Put me down!"

Gus laughed. "Not a chance!" He walked to where Mike had Jack detained. He stopped and stared at him. "If you ever come back here again, I'll kill you," he said, and walked out the barn door. He had noticed Mike's slight grin, but knew he'd give him hell for saying that.

Mike turned to Jack. "You get out of here. Don't come back or I'll arrest you next time. Is that understood?"

Jack nodded, wanting only to get back to town and get a cold steak on his eyes and a few cold beers. He reached down, grabbed his hat off the barn floor, shoved it on his head and left.

Mike looked at Andy. "You haven't seen the last of that one yet."

Andy nodded. "I know that, but I won't let him hurt Dreema if I can help it. I'm going into town and buy us both a gun. Will you tell Gus that I'll send the Doc out and to stay with Dreema until I return?"

Mike nodded. "Yep, and I'll catch up to you and ride into town with you."

Andy nodded. "Thanks, Sheriff. I appreciate it," he said, walking away to get his horse saddled. He knew Gus would take good care of Dreema while he was gone. He just hoped Jack was well on his way so he wouldn't run into him. He'd like to break the man's nose for all the trouble he'd caused.

Jack rode hard for town and headed straight for the saloon when he arrived. Heads turned and a hush fell over the crowded room as he strode to the bar. "Beer," he told the bartender, "and keep 'em coming."

Adam Greely sat at a back table and was amazed when Jack walked in with two black eyes marring his face. He had a fair complexion and they showed up like black walnuts on white silk. He picked up his beer glass and walked over to the bar, settling his huge frame against the bar, and crossing his expensive black boots. "So, I gather you didn't make any headway with the lady."

Jack threw him a warning look. "Don't mess with me right now. I'm not in the mood for it."

Adam laughed derisively. "You think I care what kind of mood you're in? I could shoot you right where you stand."

Jack stared at him. Adam was well over six foot tall, weighed about two hundred fifty pounds or more, and had the darkest brown eyes he'd ever seen. They were almost like a black hole. He knew he was no match for him in a fistfight, with a gun, or anything else. Not unless he could shoot Adam in the back or catch him unawares. Yet, he knew if Adam would survive, he'd be

a dead man in either case. "If you did that, you wouldn't get what you wanted, now would you."

"No, and that would make me very angry. I might have to kill a few people around here, including some women."

Jack shivered. "Yeah, I bet you would too."

"You know I would and if you can't get what I want, then I will. One way or another."

Jack shrugged. "Makes no difference to me what you do, but I'll get what you want. I also have a few debts to pay to a few people while I'm at it."

Adam slapped him hard on the back, laughing when Jack's beer sloshed out of his glass and down the front of his shirt. "Come on, let's get a couple of steaks for those eyes. You'll have to tell me who gave them to you."

Jack downed the rest of his beer and followed Adam out of the saloon. He saw Dreema's Uncle go into the Mercantile across the street. He would start with him first.

Andy walked into the store and saw Mrs. Deeper's just finishing with a lady customer. He walked up to the counter and waited patiently until she finished. She turned to him and smiled as the lady left with her parcels.

"May I help you, Mr. Grant?"

"Yes Ma'am. I'd like to buy two guns and two gun holsters."

Mrs. Deeper's smiled. "You're going to become a true Texan and wear a gun? Why do you need two?"

"I need one for my niece also."

Mrs. Deeper's mouth fell open, and then she pressed her lips firmly together. "Mr. Grant, it is not proper for a lady to wear a gun. It is just unheard of!"

Andy nodded. "I realize that, Ma'am, but someone already took a shot at her and I want to make sure she can protect herself if the need arises."

"But, sir, it is unheard of! The ladies about town will be talking about her. They're already talking about her wearing men's pants!"

"Ma'am, if you don't want to sell me the guns, then I'll jest go somewhere else."

Mrs. Deeper's stared at him and saw the determination written on his face. She wouldn't turn down a sell, but she would certainly speak to Mildy about it. Someone had to turn that girl into a lady. It was disgraceful that she'd already been seen inside a saloon and wore those awful pants, and now a gun strapped to her waist! She laid the desired items out on the counter for his inspection and accepted the money as he paid for them.

"Thanks, Ma'am," he said, taking the heaviest holster and strapping it on. "Guess I will have to get used to wearing one of these. He had the other items wrapped up to take home, then left the mercantile.

Mrs. Deeper's shook her head as she saw him mount his horse and ride off. No good would come to those two. Why, the girl was already being shot at. Whoever shot her probably thought it was a man. The bell above the door tinkled and she smiled brightly as Adam Greely came towards her. He was such a charming man and spent money like he didn't have to think about rainy days. "Good Afternoon," Mr. Greely," she smiled, "What can I do for you?"

"Ah, my dearest Mrs. Deeper, how are you today? I must say you are absolutely radiant. Must be making a lot of sales today."

"It has been a prosperous morning. I just sold two colts and two holsters."

Adam smiled widely. "He hadn't even had to ask and now he knew what Andy Grant had bought. Any information he got was of use and he made sure he knew everything when it came to getting back what he wanted. "What I came to see you about was someone informed me that you and your husband has a small farm outside of town that you were considering selling. I'd like to buy it."

Mrs. Deeper's mouth fell open. "But, you haven't even seen it yet, Mr. Greely. No one has lived there for a while and it isn't like the ranches around here. I'm not sure it would be appropriate for you."

Adam laughed. "Please tell your husband to come down stairs and I'll give him his asking price. I'll also need quite a few things to fix it up the way I want it. I will select some of things while you go get him."

"Right away, Mr. Greely. Right away." She went through the door leading to the back and ran up the stairs to their rooms above. She had waited a year for this opportunity and now she could buy the small cottage at the end of town that she had always dreamed of. Fate was dealing her a good hand. She burst into the small sitting room and shook Bill awake who had fallen asleep on the sofa. She didn't want to keep Mr. Greely waiting.

Adam Greely selected the finest of items he saw as he heard the Deeper's coming down the stairs. Yes, his plans were coming together nicely. Very nicely, he thought as he moved to shake hands with Mr. Deeper. "I have the cash with me and if you will sign over the deed, I will move in promptly."

"Deal," Mr. Deeper said, smiling broadly, "and you have the finest of neighbors out that way. A Miss Knightes and Gus Thorne."

Adam Greely handed him the cash. "Deal," he said, smiling coolly.

"Oh, and why don't you come to Gus Thorne's birthday barbecue tomorrow as our invited guest? We'll introduce you to your new neighbors," Bill Deeper smiled.

"Why, thank you, Sir. I'd love to. I'm looking forward to meeting Mr. Thorne. I've heard lots about him and his ranch."

Chapter VI

Gus mingled amongst the guests that had arrived early for his birthday barbecue and accepted the gifts, then laid them on a table to be opened in front of everyone later. He laughed as he accepted one from his foreman Dan. "This had better be better than last years present, old buddy."

Dan laughed. "Old Buddy, am I? Well, look whose forty today, and me, I'm just a young man of thirty eight."

Gus groaned. "That's it. Just rub it in, but I can outwork you any day and you know it!"

Dan nodded. "Uh huh, and that's why I run your ranch for you. I've got the brains."

Gus punched him on the shoulder. Dan had been raised on the ranch and was like a brother to him instead of a foreman. Even though Dan insisted he have his quarters in the bunkhouse, he knew he was welcome to live in the house like he used to when they were young boys. Dan thought the foreman of the ranch would be more respected by the men if he acted like one of them and lived like them, and that meant even calling Gus boss.

When it came to the ranch, they both made the serious decisions and when times got rough, they acted together on the situation. Gus had given Dan a thousand acres of one of the best parts of the ranch so when he wanted to settle down, he'd have a good start. Dan had built a fine cabin there and usually went there when he took some time off just to relax and work on the fences he was putting up. "Brains, huh? Well, we can decide that this weekend when we go into town and play poker. I bet I win and wager ten of my best mares."

Dan laughed. "You've got a deal and I wager a month without pay."

Gus grinned. "Deal!" He said, noticing more people were arriving and coming towards him. His breath caught in his throat as he caught site of Dreema walking towards him with her Uncle. The men's pants were gone and in their place was a dress like none other he had ever seen. It was made of sky blue silk and the bodice fit her like a glove. Tiny pearl buttons ran from the v-neck to her small waist, where the dress flared out slightly and fell to the floor. When she walked, he noticed small silken slippers peeking from the hem of her dress. It would be perfect for dancing, he thought, as they stepped up to him.

"Happy Birthday, Gus," Dreema said, handing him his present.

"Thank you, and you too, Andy. You look beautiful tonight Dreema."

Dreema blushed. "Thanks. Uncle Andy said I had to dress up. Can't wait to get out of this thing."

Gus and Dan laughed drawing the attention of Rachel whom had just stepped out of the house. She moved towards them, wondering whom the man and woman was with them.

"Hello, Gus, Dan," she said, and then focused her attention on the other two people.

Gus smiled. "Rachel Morston, I'd like for you to meet Dreema Knightes and her Uncle, Andy Grant. Our neighbors."

Rachel bowed slightly. "It's my pleasure, I'm sure," she said smugly, thinking her manners would show this country girl something. Yet, she was quite surprised to see her dressed in one of the latest fashions the east had to offer.

Dreema smiled politely. "It's a pleasure Miss Morston, and I must say your dress is absolutely beautiful."

"Why, thank you," Rachel replied. "Yours is one of the latest back east. How did you manage to get one out here? Did you order it?"

"No. I have a room full of dresses and gowns from back east. I used to live there," she said, throwing her Uncle a look.

Andy cleared his throat. "Yep, Dreema has more finery than a store. Nice to meet ya Miss."

"Likewise," Rachel smiled woodenly, "and if you will excuse me, I need to see my father for a minute."

"Of course, Miss Morston," Dreema smiled. "It was nice to make your acquaintance."

Gus threw Dan a quick look and was glad when Dan escorted Rachel to where her father stood talking to several gentlemen. "I'm happy you could make it tonight. I was hoping your arm didn't hurt you so bad that you wouldn't be able to attend."

Dreema smiled. "I wouldn't have missed it for the world and my arm is fine. Just a little sore."

Gus smiled. "Good to hear and there's been no more trouble?"

"No," Dreema said, as her Uncle slipped away to go inside the house to see Mildy.

"Well," Gus said, "Let me introduce you around to people until Aunt Mildy comes out. I also want to ask if you will dance the first dance with me?"

Dreema smiled. "I'd love to," she said, as he took her arm and guided her over to several men and women standing near a table laden down with food.

As Gus began the introduction, Dreema didn't miss the look of pure hatred being sent her way from Rachel who stood regally beside her father. She had made yet another enemy it seemed. She shot the other girl a smile and turned her attention to the people Gus was introducing her to.

Rachel tapped her slippered foot and seethed. Dreema Knightes was all dark beauty. The total opposite of her and must weigh at least forty pounds less than she. Her hair was done up on her head in ringlets with the back cascading down to her knees almost. Why, it was disgraceful to have hair that long. Yet, as she watched the men's reactions when Gus introduced her, she knew the males all liked the way she looked.

Rachel glanced up to see a man standing next to a tree staring at her. She shot him an alluring smile. He was big and from his attire, must also be from back east. She lowered her gaze modestly as he moved towards her.

Adam Greely knew he'd found a partner as soon as he saw the murderous looks being directed at Dreema Knightes. He walked up to her and took her hand, bestowing a kiss on her smooth skin. "My name is Adam Greely. If I'm not being too bold, I must say you are quite beautiful."

Rachel smiled brightly. "Why, thank you, Sir. You're most handsome too and have impeccable manners. My name is Rachel Morston."

Adam smiled coyly. "Rachel, such a beautiful name for such a lovely woman," he said, as the players began playing music on the wooden platform made just for this occasion.

Adam turned to see Gus leading Dreema onto the platform and take her in his arms. They stood talking as the birthday music played and everyone

hooted and cheered, then Gus took Dreema in his arms and they danced to a slow dance. The band consisted of three fiddle players and harmonica players. People began to join them as they danced and soon the party was in full swing. He looked at Rachel. "Would you do me the honor of dancing with me?"

Rachel was fuming inside but smiled brightly, took his arm, and let him guide her onto the platform amongst the other dancers. As he swung her around to the now fast music, she caught glimpses of Dreema and Gus, but soon, she saw Dan break in and take her away from him. Adam's voice caught her attention.

"Get ready, Rachel, to come in the direct path of whom you are staring at."

Rachel smiled as Adam expertly maneuvered her so she bumped in Gus.

Gus turned and saw Rachel gazing up at him. "Platform isn't big enough to hold all these people. Have to make it bigger next year," he joked.

Adam laughed. "I'm sorry. I'm not that good a dancer and was just trying to please the lady. She is quite beautiful, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is. Have we met?" Gus remembered him from sitting at a table with Jack.

"No, we haven't. I'm Adam Greely. I was invited by the Deeper's. I bought their small ranch today. We're almost neighbors."

"Nice to meet you and I hope you enjoy your new home," Gus said, wondering why a man like him would want to buy a place out here. Adam Greely didn't look like the type to run a ranch.

"Thank you, Mr. Thorne, and if you would be so kind, would you please finish out this dance with Miss Rachel? I see Mr. Deepers and need to have a word with him about something."

"You can call me Gus. Everyone does and I'd be happy to dance with Rachel."

Rachel threw Adam a look of thanks and smiled brightly. "Thank you, sir, for the dance and your company."

"You are quite welcome, Rachel. The pleasure has been all mine." He bowed slightly and left the platform.

Gus watched Adam for a few seconds as he went to talk to Bill Deeper. He had a bad feeling about that guy, but maybe it was his imagination. Yet, as he took Rachel in his arms and guided her in dance, he didn't think so. There was something about that guy that just irritated him and he couldn't quite put his finger on it. Rachel's voice pulled his attention back to her and he smiled down at her. "Having fun?"

Rachel pouted. "I thought you would dance the first dance with me."

Gus threw back his head and laughed, mindless of all the stares and smiles directed at him. "Put those claws away. I was just being nice. There's nothing going on between Dreema and I and nothing going on between you and I."

Rachel smiled up at him. "You are mine, Gus. I told you that before."

Gus shook his head and maneuvered her towards her father. "I think you should dance with your father at least once, since your mother isn't here." He lifted her from the platform in front of Griffen. "Your daughter insists that she dance with her Daddy."

Griffen grinned. "Why, that's a dream come true. Dancing with my daughter. She was taught by her mother and is the best dancer in all the east." He took his daughter's arm and led her onto the platform.

Gus saw his Aunt Mildy and Andy by the table, getting them something to eat. He was starved. He moved beside them and grabbed a plate. "I could eat a cow," he said, piling his plate high with food.

Mildy laughed. "Seems everyone is having a good time."

Gus nodded and swallowed before answering. "Yeah and they've all commented on the cooking. Everyone loves your food, Aunt Mildy."

Andy spoke up. "I'm going to get fat if I keep eating like this."

Mildy smiled. "I'll still like you when you're fat, Andy," she said, blushing slightly.

Andy winked at her and saw Gus frown slightly, although he seemed not to be paying attention to them, but occupied with eating. "Let's go get a chair while we eat, ok? Mildy, I bet you're tired after all this here work you went to for this shindig."

Mildy sighed. "I sure could use a break and maybe a little dancing after we eat."

"Sure enough," Andy said, as they moved to some empty seats facing the platform.

Gus sat down and soon finished eating. "Aunt Mildy, that potato salad is better and better every time you make it. I'm stuffed, but can't wait for the birthday cake."

"You'll just love your cake! Dreema found a recipe that her cook had and I used it. Mighty fine icing and the cake will melt in your mouth."

"Where is Dreema, anyway? I don't see her anywhere."

Andy leaned forward to stare across Mildy at him. "She went to the barn to see how Devil was doing."

Gus groaned. "I thought you brought her in a buggy."

"Nope. Even with that perty dress of hers, she just hiked it up and jumped on Devil's back. No stopping her when she wants to do something."

Gus stood up. "I'll go check on her," he said, wondering what Dreema could be thinking to go off alone after all that had happened to her. He set his empty plate on one of the tables and moved off in the direction of the barn. He had just reached the door when he heard a feminine shriek and Devil's sharp whinny. He rushed inside to find Rachel standing there soaking wet, her blonde hair dripping and her gown clinging to her. Dreema stood there with the empty bucket in her hands.

Rachel sputtered and went towards Dreema. "I'll kill you for that!"

"Just try it," Dreema replied, throwing the bucket aside, surprised when she heard Gus swear.

Gus rubbed his shin and stared murderously at Dreema. "Watch where you're throwing things!" He limped to stand between the two of them. "What the hell is going on here?"

Rachel burst into tears and threw herself at Gus, and wrapped her arms tightly about him. "She's a mean and despicable person!"

Dreema shook her head. "Oh, boy," she said, going to Devil and throwing his saddle on him. Her arm hurt unbearably, but she pushed the pain aside and saddled the horse. All the while, Rachel's sobbing voice filled the

interior of the barn with childlike cries and hiccups. She heard Gus's soothing voice trying to calm her.

Next, Dreema pulled the gun holster out of her saddlebags and strapped it on, liking the feel of the weight of the gun belt around her waist. She had practiced with her Uncle early that morning and she wasn't too bad. Yet, she didn't know if she could shoot someone or not. She led Devil from the stall and mounted, noting Gus's irritated look.

"Just where do you think you're going?" He asked, letting go of Rachel and facing Dreema.

"Home."

"No, you aren't"

"Yes, I am."

"Over my dead body," Gus ground out, placing his hands on his hips and moving to stand in front of Devil.

"Get out of my way, Gus," Dreema warned, as Devil danced under her. She knew Devil sensed the tension between the two of them, but she also knew he would obey whatever command she gave him.

Rachel, get up to the house and keep your mouth shut," he ordered, never removing his gaze from Dreema's.

Dreema watched as Rachel stomped her foot. "You come with me. Just let the little witch go!"

Gus turned to glare at her. "You watch your mouth. You're a visitor here and will show the respect of one. Now go to the house, change, and rejoin the party or go to bed."

Dreema watched as Rachel glared at her for a second, then turned and ran from the barn. She focused her full attention back to Gus. "I'll leave now, too," she said.

"You aren't going anywhere. You're staying for the cutting of the birthday cake and see me open my gifts. Your Uncle Andy is having a good time and if you leave, you'll ruin his evening."

Dreema nibbled at her bottom lip. "If you don't tell him, maybe he won't notice."

Gus sighed. "Get off the horse, Dreema, or do I have to take you off."

"You won't be able to get near me. Devil won't allow you. Now, are you going to move or do I have to go around you?"

Gus turned and walked to the doors leading from the barn. He glanced at her as she rode slowly towards him, thinking he was letting her go. Quickly he pulled the doors closed and fastened them shut.

Dreema halted Devil and glared at Gus. "Damn it, Gus, let me go!"

Gus approached Devil. "Come here, boy," he said softly.

Dreema reined Devil in as he moved forward. He pawed the ground, shook his head, and stopped. "No, Devil," she said gently but sternly.

Gus gave up trying to be nice. He approached Devil, patted him on the neck, and pulled Dreema off his back in one lithe motion. "Devil and I have become quite good friends. We both want what's best for you and don't want to see any harm come to you."

"Put me down!" She pushed against his shoulders until tears stung her eyes from the pain in her arm. Yet she glared into Gus's blue eyes and didn't stop.

Gus groaned. "You won't stop even if it means hurting yourself huh? You have to be in control. You have to be in charge. You have to do everything yourself and be so damn independent. Like strapping that gun around your waist," he said, letting her body slide slowly down his.

"Yes," Dreema said, gazing up into his blue eyes. "I can take care of myself. I'm not some simpering female like Rachel!"

Gus frowned. "What is it that makes the two of you hate one another right off the bat? You don't even know each other yet."

Dreema laughed. "You mean you honestly don't know?"

"Well, maybe, but I'm not getting involved with either one of you, so it doesn't matter, does it?"

Dreema pressed closer to him and wrapped her arms around his waist, feeling the rock hardness of him against her and loving it. "Even though I can't stand your arrogant attitude at times, I know what I want. I want you, Gus, and you'll see that you want me too. Guess it just takes you more time to realize it."

Gus fought the inclination to capture her lips and kiss her into submission to his every whim. He wondered if that would work or if it would only complicate the situation. Hell, he knew he desired her. Who wouldn't? Yet, common sense told him she was too young for him and he wasn't the marrying kind. He didn't want to settle down. He liked his life just the way it was. "Take that gun belt off and put it away and I'll unsaddle Devil," he said, moving out of her embrace.

Dreema stared at him as he began to remove Devil's saddle. "I'm not going back up there while Rachel is there. I might end up giving her a black eye instead of a cold bath to cool her down."

"You're going back up there with me and stay with me or with your Uncle or my Aunt Mildy. Rachel already knows I'm angry and will do as she is told. She's a lady."

Dreema's mouth fell open at that statement as she watched Gus lead Devil into a stall. She shut her mouth and placed her hands on her hips and waited for Gus to turn around. "Rachel is a spoiled brat and a mean one at that. You think I cuss a lot, well, let me tell you, she knows words that I haven't even heard of yet."

Gus walked towards her. "As I said, Rachel's a lady. You were the one holding the empty bucket."

Rachel glared at him. "And I enjoyed it immensely too!"

Gus reach out and pulled her close. He unfastened the gun belt and laid it on a bale of straw close by. "You're too feisty for your own good. I'll bet all the men back in Ohio are happy that you're gone. Why couldn't you pick another place besides here to move to? It would have saved me a lot of headaches."

"You, Gus Thorne, are just too set in your ways for your own good. I'm going to change that!" She smiled sweetly at him, turned, and walked out of the barn to join her Uncle.

Gus watched her leave, noticing the way the dress outlined her body. He felt himself respond and silently berated himself for it. He was glad he was going into town this weekend with Dan. They'd leave Friday night and come back Sunday morning after church. He walked out of the barn just as Mike and Miz Pat drove up in a buggy.

"Hello, Miz Pat and Mike. Thought maybe you were going to miss the party altogether. He walked to assist Pat from the buggy. "You look beautiful," he said, kissing her lightly on the cheek.

Pat smiled. "Bought a new dress for the occasion. I'm happy you like it," she said as Mike came to join them.

"She's the most beautiful lady in town."

"She sure is," Gus said. He was happy to see the love on both of their faces as they gazed at each other. Pat's dress was very pretty with tiny rose buds on cream cotton. The neckline was high and respectable and had frothy folds of cream lace falling to form a collar at the top and the long sleeves had matching lace at the ends. "Let's join the party, shall we?" Gus said. He glanced up at the window of Rachel's room to see the light on. A man's silhouette flicked across the curtained window and he thought Griffen was probably trying to settle Rachel down after her experience with Dreema.

Rachel pulled up her stockings and gazed in the mirror at Adam Greely as he watched her. She knew he was enjoying what he saw and she made the most of it. He had intercepted her when she was coming back from the barn and she had let him comfort her and escort her to her room. She had invited him in when he had told her he would assist her in any way he could to help her in her situation with Gus.

As she slid another dress on, she turned to him and smiled. "Sir, would you be so gallant as to assist a lady fasten up her dress?"

Adam smiled. "Of course, my dear," he said, moving to stand behind her. He let his fingertips brush her skin slightly, satisfied when she didn't flinch or move away. He quickly buttoned it and leaned down and placed a kiss on the back of her neck. "All finished, dear, and now you're ready to go back to the party. Just give me a few minutes first so that no one suspects we've been together."

Rachel turned and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "You are very kind Adam. I'll see you next week at your ranch and we can make our plans. I promise you won't be disappointed," she said, smiling up at him. She watched him smile and nod in agreement as he slipped out the door. She waited a few minutes and then left too. Dreema would get her comeuppance soon. She would make sure of it.

Chapter VII

Gus and Dan arrived in town around noon. The week had slipped by fast and there had been no more trouble. As they walked their horses to the stable, Gus heard Devil's shrill cry and went inside. Old man Prickert took Gus's mount.

"That Devil sure is causing quite a stir in here. Think the other horses don't want him here. He intimidates them, I think."

Gus laughed and walked to Devil. "Hi boy," he said, rubbing his neck. "Where's your Mistress?"

Devil nickered softly and pushed Gus back with his head.

"Ok, boy, I'll go find her," he said, patting the stallion and walking towards where Dan stood outside the stable doors.

"Dreema's over at the stage greeting the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on," Dan said, indicating with his hand for Gus to look.

Gus squinted against the sun as he pushed his hat farther back on his forehead. Dreema was hugging a frail looking blonde woman. "Let's go see who it is."

"Right," Dan grinned, "and I hope she's single."

Gus laughed. "If she isn't, you're in trouble, but I think she's Dreema's friend from Ohio. None other than Jack's sister."

Jack stood outside the saloon and watched Dreema as she hugged his sister. He heard Adam laugh as he stepped up beside him. "My sister isn't to be harmed in any way," he warned, giving Adam a cold look.

Adam frowned. "You trying to threaten me, Jack?"

"It's not a threat but the truth. You leave her out of this."

"Then you'd better keep her out of my way and get me what I want. Remember that and you better go greet your sister. I'm going out to the ranch. I've hired some men and I want to see what they've done this week to improve the place. See you around, Jack, and remember what I said."

Jack watched as Adam mounted his horse and rode off, and then ran across the street. He ignored Dreema, Gus, and the other man as he stepped in front of his sister. "You're a sight for sore eyes and are so beautiful, Sis!" He said, hugging her tightly.

Sunnie laughed. "Well, hello, little brother! I was just going to ask Dreema why you weren't here to greet me too. I thought you were too busy running the ranch to come."

Jack held her for a second longer, then set her away from him. He glanced at Dreema, but knew she hadn't said anything to her. "I don't work for Dreema anymore. I work for a Mr. Adam Greely, but we can talk about that later. Let's get you settled in the hotel. I'm paying for it too."

Sunnie stared at Jack. He was leaner and darker than when he had been home, but she sensed something wasn't right. She just hoped he wasn't in something she couldn't get him out of again. "I'm staying at the ranch with Dreema. We're just going to have lunch before we leave town. I'm famished."

Jack grinned down at her. "Then I'll get you the best steak dinner in town."

"Mr. Thorne and Mr. Givers have already invited us and we have accepted. I'm sure they won't mind if you join us," she said, glancing quickly at the other two men, noticing their grim looks.

Jack shook his head. "That's ok. I'm not cleaned up right now, so you go along with them and maybe we can have dinner tomorrow night?"

Sunnie smiled. "It's a date," she said, hugging Jack tight. "I've missed you. Maybe you can ride out to the ranch later and see me?"

Jack threw Dreema a quick look and smiled at her nod of approval. "I'll be there. Now go eat before you wither away to nothing. You're too skinny!"

Sunnie laughed and punched him on the shoulder. "Just you remember who's the oldest here, brother."

"If I don't, you always remind me," he groaned. He hugged her one last time and walked back to the saloon. Before he went inside, he saw Gus throw him a warning look and he knew exactly what it was about. He shrugged and stepped inside the saloon.

Gus turned to Dreema. "You and Sunnie go on ahead and Dan and I will get Sunnie's luggage taken care of. We'll join you in a few moments."

"I'll order you two a couple steaks and it should be ready by the time you get to Mrs. Mable's." Dreema and Sunnie moved towards the end of town, where several horses were tied to a hitching post outside a small, white house. Mrs. Audrey Mable had lost her husband two years ago during a bank robbery. Jim Mable had been a teller at the bank and had been shot when he refused to give the robbers the money. Due to his bravery, the men had been caught. Afterwards, Audrey Mable had turned her house into a restaurant and kept herself, never looking at another man since her husband had been killed. Dreema still remembered her Uncle telling the story, unable to believe these things had happened here. She heard Sunnie laugh and turned to look at her. "I'm sorry, I was thinking about something."

"A good looking man, named Gus, no doubt."

Dreema laughed. "You think so?"

Sunnie's laughter floated on the hot Texas wind. "Yes, and we're going to have to catch up on everything once we get back to your ranch, which I can't wait to see!"

Dreema laughed. "I also know that a certain cowboy has already caught your eye too," she said as they stepped inside Mrs. Mable's place. The aroma of delicious food surrounded them.

Sunnie groaned. "Do you smell that? It's ham and I just know I smell fresh blueberry pie too."

"The best in town," Dreema said, taking her friend by the hand and leading her into the dinning room. She chose a seat away from the other diners and they sat down. "So, tell me about all the gossip back home."

Sunnie informed Dreema of all their friends who had gotten married since she had left and about their new wives. She quieted as the waitress came to take their order, and then resumed their conversation. "There is one thing I think you should know and that is your attorney was found dead on the morning of my departure."

Dreema's heart stopped beating for a second. "Wayne is dead? What did he die from? He isn't that old and always seemed so healthy," she said, trying to come to terms with this news.

The waitress brought their orders and Gus and Dan walked in and joined them. "Just in time," Gus said, sitting next to Dreema, leaving Dan to sit next to Sunnie.

Dreema could only stare at Sunnie. "Tell me what he died from, Sunnie."

"He was murdered."

"Who was murdered?" Gus and Dan spoke up simultaneously.

Sunnie told them and Gus frowned. He remembered Andy's words about what had happened to her parents. Now Dreema's lawyer had been murdered. He had to tell Mike about this as soon as possible. "How was he murdered?"

Sunnie took a sip of iced tea. "He was found in his office strangled to death with a rope. They say that whomever done the deed, killed him slowly as if they were trying to get some kind of information from him."

Dreema got up from her chair. "Please go ahead and eat. I need some fresh air." She took off at a fast walk, left the restaurant, and walked into the small rose garden behind Mable's house. She breathed deeply and the scent of the roses calmed her a little. Wayne was such a close friend of the families and she had dated him for a time. Mostly they were just good friends and she trusted him with everything. Once she knew she was leaving, she had all her records transferred to a lawyer here in town. Mr. Jeff Tripord. She jumped as Gus's voice called to her.

"You all right?" he asked, coming up behind her and placing his hands on her shoulders.

Dreema turned and buried her face in his chest, inhaling the scent that was Gus, all leather, spice, and man. She felt his arms wrap around her and she wanted to cry but she wouldn't in front of him. "Why would anyone murder Wayne? He was a trusted friend and lawyer. He was well respected by everyone that knew him. He worked with my father all the while he was in school. He was one of the best. This is so hard to believe."

"I understand," Gus said, knowing how a trusted friend's loss could be. "Do you need to contact anyone there about your affairs and who will be handling them?"

Dreema shook her head and blinked back the tears that threatened to spill over. "No, just send condolences to his family. I had all my records transferred to Mr. Tripord here in town. The other things are locked away in a trunk at the foot of my bed."

"Important stuff?"

Dreema gazed up at Gus. "Just the papers and things from the sale of the house and some papers of my father's that I haven't gone through yet. It would still be too painful. Why?"

Gus shrugged. "I just wondered if you had everything under control, being a woman and all. Of course, you have your Uncle Andy to help you with all the details and things."

Dreema placed her hands on her hips and glared at him. "Oh, and I suppose with me being a woman and all, I wouldn't know anything about selling a house and handling my own affairs. Well, let me tell you something, Gus Thorne, I know more than you do probably. I went to the finest schools, not to mention working side by side with my father in his office at times. I can handle just about anything a man can and probably even better!"

Gus tried not to let his amusement show, but he burst out laughing anyway. "I bet you think you do, but that's a man's job and takes a man to do it."

"Oh!" Dreema said, "You are the most obnoxious, outrageous, overbearing man I have ever met!"

Gus gasped for breath as he tried to sober his emotions. She was madder than a rattler in a sack. Her stance was rigid, which gave him a nice view of firm round breasts straining against the white shirt she wore with the waist tucked tightly inside the top of her pants waist. Her long, slender fingers were splayed out from her hips, slanting downwards, almost covering her whole stomach, just inches from meeting where he judged her belly button to be. Her long legs were spread wide apart and he could clearly visualize her the night he had to undress her for bed. He felt himself react and finally drew a deep breath and brought himself under control. "And you, Dreema, are all spit and fire," he said, approaching her and slipping his hand around to the back of her neck. Without even thinking about it, he pulled her to him and possessed her lips in fiery possession. He felt her relax and took full advantage and pulled her close to him, not caring that anyone could see them from the street or entering and exiting the restaurant.

Dreema felt her stomach flutter wildly and her heart begin to hammer triple time as Gus's lips assaulted hers with searing heat. All the other times he had kissed her, she had done the kissing mostly, but now he was in total control. Unschooled in the arts of lovemaking, except for some kissing of beaux who had always been the perfect gentlemen, she was at a loss at what was expected of her response wise. Yet, she threw caution to the winds and took full advantage of the situation and began kissing him back with a hunger she never knew she possessed.

Gus found her lips sweet and seductive, like the first taste of a candy confection. Even though she had literally thrown herself at him countless times since he had met her, he knew the passion he was awakening in her now, was new to her. He felt it in her kiss, in the trembling of her desirable body, and the little gasps of breath she sucked in as he moved his lips against hers. He slowed the kiss, just barely touching her sensuous lips and opened his eyes to gaze at her. Her cheeks were flushed a hot pink, contrasting beautifully with the dark stands of hair that fell against the side of her face. Her lashes fluttered like butterflies landing softly on a flower petal, savoring the sweet nectar given to them. He groaned and pulled her to him, so distracted, he didn't see Rachel and her father stepping up to the restaurant.

Rachel's face flamed scarlet then whitened as she watched Gus kissing and holding Dreema so close, it looked like they were molded together. She shrugged off her father's insistent tugging on her arm to continue into Mable's. She shook his arm free, lifted her skirts, and marched over to the two. "How dare you!" She screamed, grabbing hold of Dreema's arm and digging her nails in.

It took Dreema a moment to gather herself and feel the daggers digging into her skin. "Let me go," Rachel, or you'll find yourself eating dust."

"You little whore! How dare you seduce him?" She hissed, not seeing Gus's blue eyes staring at her murderously.

"Let her go," Rachel, "now!" Gus's voice held a warning that shouldn't be denied.

"I will not!" Rachel said, and felt the sharp bite of Dreema's pointed toe boot hit her shin with a force that made her screech out in pain. Her eyes watered and she retaliated with a slap to Dreema's soft cheek.

Gus advanced to Rachel, determined to stop her when Dreema's cold deadly voice stopped him. He glanced at her and if it would have been a man looking at him, he knew he would be a dead man. "Dreema," he warned. "Let it go."

Rachel also saw the look in Dreema's green eyes. Deadly sparks flew within their depths like daggers ready to impale themselves in whomever they were directed at. Yet, Rachel wasn't about to back down. She had the advantage of weight behind her. She raised both hands and pushed them with all her might into Dreema's chest.

Dreema fell back and landed on the ground. In an instant she was on her feet and tackled Rachel, slamming her against the side of the building. She heard the air whoosh out of Rachel's lungs and left her to slide down the side of the building.

"Rachel gasped for breath and got to her feet, going for Dreema's face with her nails barred.

Neither girls noticed they were drawing quite a crowd and Gus was at a loss as what to do about it, with Rachel's father holding a restraining hand on his arm.

"It's time Rachel learned a few lessons about life. I have spoiled her too much and I think she's finally met her match," Griffen said, watching as Dreema sidestepped his daughter's assault.

Dreema turned as Rachel missed her with her nails and kicked her in the backside, sending her tumbling head first into the rose bushes. Rachel's scream was like a demon from hell and Dreema grinned a little at the words that started flowing out of the woman's mouth. She'd heard them all before the night of the party and so would Gus now, plus everyone else she thought, as she saw the audience they had. She turned to leave when Sunnie's warning soprano voice yelled, "Watch out Dreema!"

Dreema turned in time to see Rachel running towards her with a metal rake aimed at her. She bided her time, sidestepping just in time to keep it from being slammed into her head. She grabbed the wooden handle, pulling it downward, and just as she did, Rachel yanked on it and Dreema felt one of the prongs dig into her side and slip out, tearing her shirt and the skin. She saw the look of pure pleasure on Rachel's sweat and make up stained face.

Dreema yanked hard on the rake and it went flying in midair and she heard someone yelp, but didn't look to see if it had hit someone. She approached Rachel whose attention for the moment was focused on someone else. "Rachel," she said quietly, but with meaning. "Gus and I are engaged and he is mine. Remember that and stay out of my way!" She pulled back her fist and hit her on the chin. Rachel sprawled at her feet unconscious.

Dreema turned as Rachel's father came and knelt down beside his daughter. "I apologize Sir," she said, feeling sorry for the man. He glanced up at her and smiled.

"No need too. My Princess was getting too high and mighty before we got here. I hope she's learned her lesson."

Dreema nodded and went to stand beside Sunnie and Dan. She looked around for Gus but he was nowhere in sight. "Where's Gus?"

Dan grinned. "Over at Doc's place, which is where you need to go to see how bad that cut is from the rake. He pointed to her side."

Dreema glanced down and saw her shirt was soaked with blood and it was stuck to her side. She pulled it from her pants and raised it up to look at the wound. "God, I just know Doc is going to put in stitches."

Sunnie laughed. "Then let's go get it done since Rachel is coming to. I'm sure she won't mess with you again, though."

Dreema heard Rachel's sobs fill the air, turned and started walking toward Doc's. Sunnie and Dan fell into step beside her. "Why is Gus at Doc's?"

Dan laughed. "Oh, he just had a slight mishap. I'm sure he'll fill you in when we get there."

Dreema glanced at Dan and wondered what had happened, but had a feeling it probably had something to do with her.

Gus swore as Doc poured antiseptic in the wound in his leg. It felt like someone had dropped a match into the hole. "Did you have to do that and smile like you enjoyed it Doc?" He threw Doc an exasperated look.

Doc Morter laughed heartily. "Yep, can't say that I didn't. Haven't had you for a patient since the last time you got shot. I remember what a hard time you gave me, so I'm just paying you back."

Gus shook his head. "I thought Doctors were supposed to have compassion."

"Oh, my boy, we do. We certainly do. Now, I'm going to wrap it nice and perty," Doc winked, gathering his bandages as the door opened behind him. He heard his wife ask if everyone was decent. "Yep, all covered and just a bare leg showing. Bring whomever it is in."

Dreema entered the same room she had been in when she had been shot. Gus was sitting on the bed, the sheet covering his lower half and his bare leg showing from under the sheet. "What happened to you," she asked, stepping over to him.

"You," he said, glaring up at her.

"Me?"

"Yes you."

"What did I do?"

"This!" He said, sticking his leg up at her and twisting it so she could see the deep puncture wound just a half-inch from the bone in the front of his leg right in the middle. Dreema felt her gaze slide up and down his leg, taking in the darkness of hair covering his leg that was neither thick nor thin, but just right and as he let his leg drop to the floor, she saw the play of steely muscles ripple beneath his skin.

"I did that?" She asked, feeling a little funny inside as she still stared at his bare leg.

"Uh huh," he said accusingly, and then noticed her blouse was soaked with blood. He jumped from the bed and despite Doc's warnings to stay put, walked over to her and lifted her shirt. "Good God, Rachel got you with the rake, didn't she?" He asked as Mavis Morter came over to him and slapped his hand away.

"Shame on you, Gus! Lifting up a girl's shirt and showing her bare skin to your eyes. What has gotten into you?"

Gus frowned. "Sorry, Mavis. Just not my old self at the moment."

Doc laughed. "Guess you could say that," he said, stepping beside Dreema and inspecting the wound. "Mavis, you wrap up Gus's leg while I take care of this girl. She's going to need some stitches."

"Right away honey," Mavis said, pulling on Gus's arm to sit back down on the bed.

Gus watched as Doc led Dreema to the other bed and waited until she sat down before turning to look at him.

"Mavis," pull that partition in front of Gus's eyes and make sure he stays put until I'm done."

Gus grinned. "It ain't nothing I haven't seen," he whispered under his breath. Most beautiful sight I've ever seen."

Mavis glanced at him as she sat down on the stool to wrap up his leg. "What did you say?"

"I just said that girl will be the death of me yet."

Mavis nodded. "Seems that way," she said, smiling brightly.

Gus listened as Doc's voice took on a soothing quality and Gus just knew he was starting to stitch her up. She never cried out in pain and he thought of how he had cussed when Doc had cleaned his wound. She was tough, but he bet that deep down she was the softest woman he'd ever known. Mavis made quick work of his leg and he got up and slipped into his pants and sat back down to wait. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, Doc shoved back the partition.

"She's all done. Only needed seven stitches. Refuses something for pain again, but I'll give you some for her Gus and yourself before you two leave."

"Thanks Doc," Gus said, watching as Dreema got to her feet. He saw the slight wince of pain cross her face that was drained of all color, but as she looked at him, a rosy hue flushed her cheeks and she smiled tremulously at him.

"I think it's about time we got you and Sunnie home," Gus said, limping towards her.

"Thanks," Dreema said, as the door flew open and Rachel's father assisted Rachel inside.

Rachel glared at Dreema as big fat tears slid down her cheeks. She had cleaned up only to find several rose thorns stuck in her derriere. Her backside was stinging and burning and she wasn't in the mood to come face to face with Dreema at the moment.

Rachel's father cleared his throat. "Ah, Doctor, my daughter needs some attention when you're finished with the others."

"What's the problem?"

"Well, she has some rose thorns in her backside that need to be removed."

"Doc glanced quickly at Dreema who was trying without succeeding to hide a grin. "Well, I'm done here so take her over to that bed there and make her put a gown on and heist it up over the injured area."

Rachel moved past Dreema and threw her a murderous look. "I'll pay you back for this," she said as her father yanked hard on her arm to follow him. "Come along Rachel, and keep quiet. I've had enough for one day." He said, and then turned to Gus. "I think it best if we stay at the hotel in town during

the rest of our stay. Can you have our things sent out first thing in the morning?"

"You know you're still welcome, Griffen," Gus said.

"Thanks Gus, but I think this is for the best and I'll finish my business here as soon as I can and we can go back home."

Gus walked to him and shook his hand. "I'll see you around town and maybe we can play a few hands of poker at the saloon."

"Sounds good, Gus. He turned to Dreema. "I'm sorry about all this, Miss, please forgive my daughter."

"Father!" Rachel yelled. "I am not sorry for anything!"

Dreema smiled. "It's forgotten." She walked out of the room and heard Gus following her. She also felt a chill run down her spine as Rachel's vindictive words called out. "You'll pay for this if it's the last thing I do Dreema Knightes! Gus is mine!"

Chapter VIII

Rachel drove the buggy up to Adam's ranch and was amazed at the changes that had taken place since the last time she had seen it. She waited until one of the ranch hands came and assisted her from the buggy and walked up the front steps that were now solid and sturdy with a fresh coat of paint.

The house was a two story, although small, quite pretty now that Adam had added shutters and new panes of glass and paint. It wasn't somewhere where she would live, but it would do for the time being for a meeting place to accomplish what she wanted done and would have done. She smiled as Adam opened the door.

"Rachel, my dear, how nice of you to visit. Please come inside." He held the door open and admired her beauty as she walked past him. He had been with women more beautiful, but he liked her thirst for vengeance. It matched his. "Please make yourself comfortable. Ann, bring some tea and cakes for us," he called loudly, "I have a guest."

Rachel sat down gingerly on the overstuffed couch, happy for its softness against her derriere. The ride in the buggy had been excruciating for her, but nothing was going to stop her from doing what she wanted done and she knew Adam was the one who could get it done. She also knew what price she'd pay to accomplish what she wanted. "Please sit next to me, Adam," she said, patting the seat beside her.

Adam sat down and took her hand in his. "I hope you don't mind, but I picked you up a little present yesterday. I heard all about your fight with Dreema and thought I'd try to make you a little happier." He reached inside his vest pocket and pulled out a small silver wrapped box.

"Oh, Adam, what is it?" She took the box and greedily tore open the paper. She opened it to find a beautiful sapphire necklace inside. "Oh, Adam darling, it's absolutely stunning!" She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him passionately.

Adam savored her sweet lips for a few moments before setting her away from him. "Let me put it on you."

Rachel turned and waited as he slipped it around her neck and fastened it, then let her fingers touch the cool stone that hung from the middle. "You're going to spoil me, Adam," she said, turning to kiss him again.

"Nonsense dear," he said, standing as Anna brought in a tray loaded with sweet cakes and a pot of tea. The woman set them down on the table and left the room.

"Rachel, will you do me the honors of pouring the tea?"

"I'd be happy to, Adam, and there is something I wish to discuss with you."

"By all means, do, my dear," he said, sitting back down beside her.

"We are both after the same thing. Revenge is such a sweet word, isn't it?"

Rachel laughed and smiled into Adam's black eyes. Devil eyes, she thought, and laughed louder. Dreema didn't stand a chance against the both of them.

Dreema rode out to the dam before the break of dawn the next morning. Her Uncle and Sunnie were still sleeping when she had slipped away. She needed some time to herself and she wanted to swim to ease the pain in her

side. The stitches wouldn't feel so tight while in the water. Of course, Doc had insisted she not get them wet, but she knew what would make it feel good and she was going to do it.

"Let's go swimming, Devil boy," she said, leaning over to pat Devil's sleek neck.

Devil whinnied and shook his head as he increased his stride.

Dreema laughed as the first rays of dawn approached in such awe inspiring colors of pinks, gold's, hues of green, and traces of a light blue sky. They would arrive just as the sun hit the water. She sat back in the saddle and loosened the reins, enjoying the quiet beginning of another day. So absorbed in the beauty around her, she didn't notice the rider about a mile away from her.

Gus reined in his mount and pushed his hat back. He squinted to see if he could make out the rider on Dreema's land and there was no mistaking the horse was Devil. He glanced behind Dreema as she rode and frowned when no one showed up behind her. What the hell was she doing out here by herself? He followed at a distance, making sure he was far enough behind that she wouldn't catch sight of him when it dawned on him that she was headed towards the dam and the cabin built there.

He bided his time and rode slow, never leaving her out of his sight until she came to the dam and dismounted. He watched as she quickly unsaddled Devil and he wondered how she could ride and do those things. Her side must be hurting like hell this morning. His leg sure was, but he had a ranch to run and was checking out the fence on this side to make sure when he left Old Red Eye out to graze, he wouldn't end up in Dreema's pasture and cause more trouble. The poor bull had been penned up enough and needed to get out and exercise.

Gus maneuvered his mount to a place in the fence he knew he could open and slip through. He had used the small gate several times when he had business with the neighbors. He dismounted, opened it, and led his horse through to the other side. He shut it and rode towards the dam slowly. The sun was coming out in full brilliance and it was going to be another hot day in Texas. He had learned to love Texas heat from an early age.

He rode his mount in the opposite direction of the lake and came around to the front of the cabin. It was all whitewashed and panes of glass filled the empty holes that used to gap open. White curtains with red roses hung in the window. It was quite pretty but looked out of place here somehow.

Dismounting, Gus tied his mount to the hitching post and walked around to the back of the cabin, stopping in mid-stride at the sight that met his eyes. Dreema stood there beside Devil and all he could see was her sun-kissed skin and the beautiful sight of her black hair being lifted by the wind to dance about her in fairyland style. The site of horse and rider side by side in their natural state was a sight he would never forget for as long as he lived. He listened intently as Dreema's voice floated to him.

"You go first, Devil," she said, moving to stick her foot in the water to test the temperature. "It's going to be cold until we get used to it."

Gus watched as Devil walked into the water until he was almost covered. He turned his big head and whinnied at Dreema.

Dreema laughed delightedly. She strode out and jumped in head first, coming up beside Devil, gasping at the shock of the ice-cold water.

Gus's heart slammed into his chest as he watched Dreema surface and slip onto Devil's back. She held onto his mane as the horse swam out to the middle and back again, only to return to the middle again.

Gus grinned. Devil was letting her use him as a source of heat until she became used to the water's temperature. He swore that horse was human and he knew that horse was in love with his mistress.

Gus waited until Devil swam to the far side of the damn and threw his morals to the wind. He undressed in record time and moved to the water and dove in. The shock of the cold water hit him with a force that would stun most, but like Dreema, he withstood the drawbacks to receive the best to come afterwards.

He surfaced to find Dreema and horse swimming side by side. He swam out to them, moving to Devil's other side. Devil's head whipped around and he whinnied softly, his breath rippling the water in front of him.

Gus patted his side and treaded water as Devil left him behind, then dived and came up under Dreema's belly and lifted her up out of the water. She fought instinctively, but calmed when she saw who held her.

"Gus!"

"What?" He smiled up at her as he lowered her against his body, loving the hot pink flush that stained her cheeks as she slid along his naked body.

"Let me go! What are you doing here and quite naked too?"

"Swimming with you and Devil. He doesn't mind." Gus felt her body pressed against his and felt the coolness of her skin against his. Her breasts pressed into his chest and her legs tread water in sync with his.

"You can't do this! What if someone comes and sees us?"

"Then Devil will swim over here and hide me until you get rid of them, but at least you're safer with me than you are alone."

"Devil will protect me from any intruders, animal or human." She gasped as she felt his manhood press against her most intimate place. A feeling of desire swept through her like wildfire and she stopped treading water and wrapped her legs around Gus's middle.

Gus groaned as Dreema's silken skin slipped around him. She was all softness and allure and he pulled her on top of him as he lay back in the water. Her slender hands gripped his shoulders as he swam back towards shore with her. He had never felt such need for a woman as he did right now.

Dreema had never felt anything so sensuous as lying atop Gus as he swam, taking her with him as if it was the easiest thing in the world. They were pressed so intimately together and his body was as solid as a rock.

As they neared shore, she felt his arm slip around her waist and lift her as he stood up. She felt the sun kiss her body with warmth as Gus's blue eyes stared deep into hers. Her breath stopped as he lowered his head and kissed her lightly, and she felt herself respond with a passion she had never experienced before.

Gus groaned and swept her up in his arms and carried her to the small cabin. Once inside, he laid her gently on the bed, staring at her beauty. She was slim, with gentle curves, and her wet, black, hair contrasted sharply with her golden skin.

Dreema stared at Gus's magnificent body. He reminded her of a wild stallion. He was solid, strong, and wanting. She let her eyes drink in the sight

of him as he stood naked watching her and she felt her heart quicken as he lay down on the bed and took her in his arms.

"Dreema," he said huskily, as his lips possessed hers in fiery need. He let his hands roam at will, touching, committing each response his touch brought to memory.

Dreema felt his work roughened hands slide along her body and stilled at the rage of emotions that swept through her like Texas wildfire. When his hand paused to lightly caress her breast, his finger teasing her nipple into a hardened bud, her breath caught in her throat.

Gus felt her still at his touch and he realized she had never been this far before. He reined in his passion and began to love her slowly. For all her bravado and forward ways, he knew now that she had been telling the truth about being a virgin.

Dreema felt the change in Gus and wondered if she had done something wrong as his lips left hers. She stared into his blue eyes, darkened in passion, and raised a trembling hand to his lips. She lightly traced his lower lip with her fingertip and felt her stomach tighten in ecstasy as he sucked her finger into his mouth to lightly tease the tip of her finger with his tongue.

Gus slid his leg across Dreema's silken thighs as he took her hand in his and loved each of her fingertips, then kissed the palm of her hand, moving to kiss the inside of her wrist. "I want to make love to you," he whispered, then gathered her close in his arms and kissed her with a passion beyond anything he had ever felt before.

Dreema pressed herself closer to Gus and kissed him back until she was breathless, sucking in a quick breath as his lips left hers to trail a path of fire across her cheek to her throat. She felt his lips pause at the base of her neck before he moved down to kiss the top of her breast. She arched backward wanting to feel his lips on her breast.

Gus groaned as he gently flicked his tongue over one sweet bud as it strained upward for his touch. When he sucked the sweet morsel in his mouth, he heard her soft moan of want and felt her hands grip his back, urging him even closer.

Dreema felt his hardness press against her and throwing all thoughts aside, began to love Gus back.

Gus's heart slammed against his chest as he felt Dreema's lips touch his shoulder. Her kisses were so soft, sweet, and gentle; so unlike the girls at Miz Pat's that he was used to taking to bed. Her body trembled and he held her tightly as he let his hand slide down her small stomach to rest lightly between her thighs.

Dreema gasped when she felt Gus's hands slip to touch her most intimate place where no one had ever touched her. She held her breath and when Gus began to caress her, she closed her eyes and felt her body respond as if it had a mind of its own. She was powerless to stop and felt herself strain towards him.

Gus knew he couldn't hold back much longer as he felt Dreema's heat. She was ready and he knew it and he wanted her like he had never wanted another woman. In one lithe movement, he rose above her and pressed against her.

Dreema stared up at Gus. She would always remember this exact moment as he slid slowly inside her. When he paused and stared into her eyes, she wrapped her legs around him and pushed upwards.

Gus gasped as he felt her moved towards him and lowered his lips to catch the cry of pain that slipped from her lips. He held himself still, waiting for the pain to subside, and then he began moving slowly inside her.

Dreema felt the burning pain subside as Gus began to love her slowly and tenderly. The uncomfortable sensation soon turned into a desire beyond her wildest dreams. She rose to meet his thrusts, feeling a need to be swept away by his desire as it carried her to heights of pleasure she had never before experienced. She didn't know what she was striving for, but knew that Gus was the sustenance of her need and she moved in time with him.

Gus increased the tempo of their lovemaking, striving to hold himself back as he waited for her desire to match his. When he heard her soft moan, he gathered her in his arms and held her tightly and felt her first spasms of release clutch him in ecstasy.

Dreema felt the world spin out of control as she was swept away into a world of pleasure with Gus the center of her universe. When his lips ravished hers heatedly, she pressed up against him and felt his heat at the very core of her.

Gus laid still just kissing Dreema for several moments before he rolled to his side, taking her with him, and holding her tightly in his arms. "You ok?" He asked quietly.

Dreema smiled and rose up to gaze at him lovingly. "Never better! Can we do that again?"

Gus laughed. "You are a vixen!"

Dreema laughed but paused as the sound of Devil whinnying at the door caught her attention. She went to the door and opened it to find him standing there with her clothes hanging from his mouth. "Good boy," she said, lovingly patting his sleek neck. She took her clothes from him and petted him one more time. "Go get Gus's clothes, Devil."

Devil threw his head up and down and turned and galloped away. She waited as he soon returned with Gus's. "Thanks boy," she said, turning and entering the cabin once again.

"Devil brought our clothes," she grinned.

Gus laughed. "That horse is more human than some people I know. He thinks he is human and is totally in love with you."

Dreema went to a small stand in the corner and dipped some water out of a bucket she had placed there on her last trip out here. She poured it in the small white, rosebud decorated basin and picked up a cloth and washed herself off. The site of the blood on the rag reminded her that she was no longer a virgin but a woman in the full sense of the word.

Gus noticed the blood and glanced at the stained white sheets. He didn't regret making love to Dreema, but knew she would expect marriage now and he wasn't ready to settle down. "I'll just go take a dip and get dressed outside. Come out when you're ready, ok?"

Dreema glanced at him. "Ok," she said, wondering if she had done or said something wrong as Gus strode out the doorway. She admired his well-built physique until he disappeared from her site.

Gus had just finished dressing when Devil whinnied and started pawing the ground. He glanced around, his hand automatically moving to the colt at his side.

He scanned the area where Devil faced, but didn't see anything moving. He walked towards the cabin and just reach the door when Dreema stepped out. A rifle shot echoed in the air, and a bullet slammed into the wall just to the right of Dreema. He grabbed her and pushed her inside, slamming the door behind him. "Get down and stay down!"

Gus moved to stand beside the window and reach out and lifted the curtain. Another shot rang out and he hit the floor as the glass shattered.

"Who's doing this?" Dreema said, scooting over beside Gus. "Why are they doing this?"

"I don't know, but I'm going to find out if it kills me."

Dreema heard Devil's shrill cry. "Oh God, Gus, he's going to go after them! I don't want him hurt!" She pushed up from the floor and started to the door, when another shot rang out, entering through the broken window to lodge in the opposite wall.

Gus grabbed her and pulled her down next to him. "Devil can take care of himself! You stay put!"

"I'm not about to sit here and let someone shoot my horse!" She cried, as the sound of hooves crashing against wood startled them both. She looked to the back of the cabin and saw the wood splinter and give away.

"I'll be damned," Gus said, as Devil's high shrieks matched the sounds of his hooves crashing against the wood. He gathered Dreema close and shielded her from the flying wood as boards splintered and gave way to the impact of Devil's hooves. "We can get out now. Come on," He said, pulling Dreema up with him.

Dreema saw the hole in the wall where Devil stuck his head through. She walked up to him and hugged him tight. "Move back, boy," she said gently, as another shot rang out.

Gus helped Dreema through first, and followed. "Do you think Devil can get my horse from out front?"

"Yes," she said, patting Devil's neck. "Go get Gus's horse, Devil," she said.

Gus watched as Devil took off around the side of the house. A shot rang out and they heard Devil's shrill cry. "Damn! When I get my hands on whomever is out there shooting at us, I'm going to shoot him full of holes!"

Dreema whistled and waited. Devil didn't answer. "There's something wrong, Gus. How tight did you tie your horse?"

"Just threw the reins over the over the hitching post. My horse won't go anywhere without me."

Dreema moved to the side of the house and stuck her head out cautiously. Nothing happened. No shots rang out, not even a cry from Devil. It was too quiet. Before Gus could guess her intentions, she took off around the house. Gus's horse stood where it was, but Devil was gone. She whistled, waited, and then heard his shrill whinny from the direction where the shooter was. Just as she started to run that way, Gus came up behind her and pulled her back.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Going after Devil. Something's wrong."

Gus saw the worry clouding her face. He also noticed that no more shots rang out. "Come on," he said, mounting his horse and pulling her up behind him. He rode to where a fence line separated Adam Greely's farm from Dreema's and saw Devil standing over a man's body. He'd know him anywhere. It was Jack and if he didn't miss his guess, Devil had killed him.

Chapter IX

Dreema stood in the barn, hugging Devil's sleek neck gently. She had attended to his wound herself, not letting anyone else near him. Even though the bullet from Jack's gun had only grazed his neck, she couldn't bear the thought that he had been hurt trying to protect her.

She glanced out the barn doors towards the house. It would soon be dark, and she knew she couldn't avoid going into the house any longer. She just didn't know how she was going to face Sunnie.

Dreema had told her Uncle Andy what had happened and that she needed to attend to Devil's wound, when she had arrived at the house. Gus had taken Jack's body to the Sheriff in town to explain the situation to him.

She held onto Devil for a while longer, felt him nuzzle her ear, then left to go to the house. Sunnie sat in the kitchen with Andy, her tear soaked lashes spiky against the whiteness of her face, her blue eyes streaked with red, puffy and swollen, and her lips trembled. "I'm so sorry..."

Sunnie wiped her nose, hiccupped, and ran into Dreema's arms. "Andy explained everything to me and all you have been going through. To think Jack did such awful things, and today trying to kill you and Gus..."

Dreema hugged her friend gently. "I wish you didn't have to find out and I'm sorry that Devil caused his death."

Sunnie leaned back to look at Dreema. "I know how much you love that horse and he loves you. I love Devil too, and it wasn't really his fault. Jack shouldn't have shot him either. Devil was just trying to save your life and he didn't know that Jack would fall against a rock and crack his skull open."

Dreema led Sunnie to her chair and pulled up one beside her. She took her friend's hand in hers. "I'm just so sorry. I don't know what to say or do or anything. I can't believe Jack was trying to kill me."

Sunnie sighed heavily. "Jack was bad. I tried so hard to make up for his life back home in Ohio. He was in so much trouble. There was a man there he owed lots of money to and the man had threatened to kill him if he didn't pay up. I'm sure Jack got out of it by offering to do whatever the man wanted him to do. Then when you offered for him to come here, I thought Jack would straighten up and it would be the best thing for him, but I realized on the day I arrived that something was wrong. I just didn't know what."

Dreema remained quiet, regretting that her friend was going through such heartache. She felt it was her fault. If she hadn't hired Jack to come to Texas with her, then none of this would be happening. What she couldn't figure out was why Jack had been trying to kill her. Was it because she had fired him? Yet, he had started working for Adam Greely in town and it seemed that he paid Jack more than she did. She was about to ask Sunnie if she knew Adam Greely when someone knocked at the door. She was grateful when her Uncle Andy opened the door. She felt so tired that all she wanted to do was try and sleep, but she knew her friend wouldn't be able to and would stay up with her.

"Come on in," Andy said, motioning Gus and Sheriff Mike Markster inside.

Dreema looked at Gus. She saw the events of the day stamped upon his tired face as he moved to convey his condolences to Sunnie.

"If there's anything at all I can do for you, please don't hesitate to ask. I also made the funeral arrangements for you, but if you want anything changed at all, please feel free to do so. I just thought..."

"Thank you, Gus," Sunnie said, getting up and extending her hand. "I appreciate all you've done and everything all of you are doing for me. I just feel awful that my brother has done such despicable things."

Gus squeezed her hand gently. "It's not your fault, and if you don't mind, Mike has some questions for you."

"I don't mind at all," Sunnie said, as she sat back down, thankful when Dreema grasped her hand in hers.

"Can't this wait?" Dreema asked, as Gus and Mike sat down at the table.

"No it can't," Mike replied, nodding a polite thank you as Dreema's Uncle placed a cup of coffee before him and Gus. "Here are some personal effects of Jack's. I got the stuff from his room and from his body when Gus brought him in." He took the belongings out of Jack's saddlebags he carried with him and laid the things out on the table. "I want you to know, though, that before you go through them, there are some letters there posted to you, that I've read. It's just my job, Ma'am, and nothing more, but I was hoping you could explain some things in them to me. I also want you to know that Gus and I told the undertaker and people who asked what had happened when Gus brought Jack's body in, that Jack had died from an accident. No one needs to know anymore than that."

Sunnie felt tears slide unchecked down her face. "Thanks so much for that and I appreciate it." She wondered how Jack could have been so cruel to these people that tried to protect his reputation even after what he had done to them. She looked at the things sitting on the table. "There's so much money there. Are you sure it was Jack's?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Mike said, and there's a large deposit in the bank that's his too. It's yours now and you can collect it tomorrow or have it changed into your name."

"Where would Jack get that kind of money?" She asked looking at Dreema for an answer.

"I've no idea at all. I paid him good wages for being my foreman, but nowhere close to what the Sheriff is talking about."

Mike picked up one of the letters that wasn't tied together and handed it to Sunnie. "I think the answer lies in this letter. Read it and tell me what you think."

Sunnie slipped the letter out of the envelope and opened it. It was short, and written hastily: Dearest Sis, he found me and once again am under his pay. Your loving brother, Jack.

Sunnie put the letter down. "All I know is there was a man back in Ohio whom Jack owed lots of money to. He liked to gamble, and this man kept getting him out of trouble, but I think Jack done things for this man that weren't legal. I think this letter means the man found him here." She said as Gus leaned forward to look at her.

"Do you think this man would hire Jack to kill Dreema? Do you know his name or know who he might be? Have you ever seen him?"

"I don't know why anyone would want to kill Dreema, let alone Jack, since we've been friends for years and our parents were too. It doesn't make any sense."

Gus thought for a minute, and turned to Andy. "Was Jack at Dreema's house anytime during the day that her parents died?"

"My God! Yes he was!" He said, watching as Dreema's face whitened. He was there maybe an hour before the accident. Jack and Dreema's father had a heated argument about something. Randolph told me it was a legal matter he couldn't back down on, but he wasn't at liberty to tell me anything else."

"Then you think that maybe..."

Dreema stared at her Uncle, then at Gus. "What are you two talking about?" She demanded, returning her attention to her Uncle.

"Nothing. Just trying to put two and two together."

"Uncle Andy, I know what putting two and two together add up to, and I want to know right now what you're talking about."

Andy ran a shaky hand through his thick, white hair. "I never told you because I thought it was for your own good. The accident that took your parents life wasn't an accident. Someone tampered with the brake on the buggy. It was murder, Dreema. Someone wanted your parents to die. I just didn't have the heart to tell you. I'm so sorry."

Dreema felt her heart thud hard against her chest. "You mean you think Jack did it?"

"It's looking suspicious at this time. I just never put it together until Gus and I had a talk the night he brought you home when you were shot."

"You knew?" Dreema asked, staring at Gus. "You knew and you didn't tell me?"

"I knew about your parents, but it wasn't my place to tell you. We really thought it for the best that you didn't know. Whomever killed your parents, Dreema, is now trying to kill you, and I think the person responsible is here in town, which brings me to think I might know who it is," he said, turning to Sunnie. "Do you know a man by the name of Adam Greely?"

"No. I've never heard the name before."

Gus shook his head. "There's just something about that man that irritates me. I can't put my finger on it, but I know there's more to him than meets the eye," he said, as Mike leaned forward.

"Did you know that he bought the Deepers' farm that borders on yours and Dreema's property?"

Gus shoved up from the chair. "Yeah, and why would a man like him want a small farm like that? Especially when you can tell he's city folk."

"The Deeper's told me yesterday. I was on my way out of town, and they were moving into that small cottage house at the end of town. I thought you had bought the property, but Mr. Deeper's told me that Adam Greely walked into his store and offered to buy the property right on the spot and paid cash for it. He also bought lots of merchandise to fix it up out there. The Deepers' were quite happy."

"Where does that man get his money? He throws it around town like he's the richest man in the world."

"I have a few inquiries out on him that might lead to something. I was just hoping that Sunnie might recognize the name," Mike said, turning to look at her again.

"I'm sorry, but Jack never talked about an Adam. I know the man he talked about was big though. I'd seen Jack around town with him a couple times when I was passing by in a buggy or doing some shopping."

Mike grinned. "Big as in size? About six four, well over two hundred fifty pounds, and always dressed in the finest suits available back East?"

"Yes, that sounds exactly like him."

"I knew it! Mike said. "What do you think, Gus?"

"I think he's the one and the same, and I think Dreema has whatever he wants."

Dreema stood up and walked to the stove. She needed a cup of tea. So much had happened today, and she was beginning to feel numb. To learn that her parents had been murdered instead of it being an accident had ripped another hole into her heart that would take more than time to heal. Right now, she wished Jack weren't dead so she could confront him face to face. She set the kettle on the stove to heat; then turned to Gus. "Just what would I have that someone would try and kill me over it? What would I know that someone would go to such lengths?"

Gus saw the tiredness etched on Dreema's beautiful face, the dark circles that were like bluish smudges beneath her eyes, and the pain in the depths of her green eyes tore at his heart like nothing else ever had. He wanted to get up out of his chair and take her in his arms and kiss away all the hurt. "I think whomever is trying to kill you thinks you know something about them or that you know something your father knew. You said you have papers of your father's in a trunk in your room that you haven't gone through. Do you have any idea if anything in those papers might be incriminating enough that someone would kill you to get it or to keep you quiet?"

"There's a lock box in the trunk that contains my father's most private papers. I don't know what they are, and don't have the key for it," she said, turning to lift the hot kettle from the stove. She made her tea and a cup for Sunnie too, and moved to sit back down at the table, surprised when her Uncle reached into his pants pockets, pulled out a key, and slid it across the table to her.

"Randolph said when the time came, I would know what this key was for. He gave it to me for safekeeping, and I guess I know what it's for now. Go get the lock box, Dreema."

Dreema picked up the key with trembling hands, rose from the table, when shouts from outside made them all get up and run outdoors. "Oh, my God, the barn's on fire and Devil's in his stall!" Dreema screamed, slipping the key into her pants pocket and running for the barn.

Thick smoke poured from inside, but Dreema slipped past her men who shouted at her to stay back, as they carried buckets of water and threw it on the burning wood beside the doors.

She heard Devil's terrified screams and the smashing of wood as he tried to get out of the stall. By the time she reached his stall and opened the gate, she was gasping for breath. Her lungs felt on fire and each breath was like a vice choking the very life from her. "Run outside, Devil!" She screamed

with her last ounce of strength, just as strong arms reached around her and picked her up.

Gus held Dreema close and ran back outside with Devil right beside him. He carried Dreema to the front of the house and set her down on the porch swing. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I think so," she whispered hoarsely. "Devil's not hurt is he?"

"No, he's just fine, and waiting for you right at the bottom of the steps," Gus said, as Sunnie came out of the house with a glass of water.

"Here Dreema. Drink some. It'll help clear your throat of the smoke."

"Thanks," she whispered, relishing the cool water as it slid down her irritated throat. "Where are Uncle Andy and the Sheriff?"

"They're all fighting the fire and if you're ok, I'm going to go help them. Take care of her, will you Sunnie?"

"Sure thing, Gus," Sunnie said, taking Dreema's hand and helping her to her feet. "Let's go back inside."

Dreema went inside and hugged Sunnie tightly. "Thanks, Sunnie. I'll join you in the kitchen as soon as I get changed out of these clothes. I can't stand the smoke smell."

"I'll make some more tea and put on coffee for the ranch hands. It looks like it's going to be an even longer night."

Dreema nodded, and went up the stairs to her room. She had just stepped inside when she was grabbed around the waist and a large hand clamped over her mouth.

"I wouldn't do anything to make a racket if I were you. Some friends of yours might get killed, like Sunnie for instance."

Dreema didn't recognize the man's voice, but she knew he was big. His hand covered most of her mouth and nose and with the smoke still in her throat and lungs, she could barely breathe. She shook her head so he knew she would cooperate and wouldn't do anything to jeopardize her friend's life.

"Smart girl," he said gruffly. "Do you know how much you can hear from an open window? Now get that key and give me your father's lock box and do it promptly before the fire's out and everyone returns to the house."

Dreema felt the cold hard steel of a gun press against her spine. She reached in her pocket and pulled out the key, and held it up for him to see.

"I'm going to remove my hand from your mouth, but I warn you, I won't hesitate to kill you right here on the spot if you get any ideas of calling for help or trying to escape. Is that understood?" He said, grabbing the key out of her hand.

Dreema nodded her head once again; then gasped for breath as he pulled his hand away from her mouth. "The trunk is unlocked," she said, moving to open the lid. She laid some things out on the floor until she came to the lock box. She lifted it from inside and turned to the man with the gun aimed at her. It was a mistake. She knew that as soon as her eyes met his black ones. He'd kill her now, she thought, when Sunnie's voice spoke up right outside her door.

Before Dreema had the time to warn Sunnie, she stepped through the door and right into the man's reach. He pulled her into the room and up against him. "I'd advise you not to yell out or you both die. Is that understood?"

Sunnie nodded, her terrified blue eyes staring at Dreema.

"Let her go," Dreema said.

"I plan to, but you're going for a little ride. Now tie up your friend here. Use your sheet."

Dreema moved to pull the sheet from the bed, glancing out the window that faced the barn as she did. Flames licked the top of the barn and she saw the men still fighting the fire. There was no one in the house but her and Sunnie. There wasn't anything she could do right now but tie Sunnie up and save her life at least, she thought, as the man pushed Sunnie towards her.

"Tie her to the bed and be quick about it!"

Dreema did as she was told and as soon as she finished, the man grabbed her arm. "Let's go."

Dreema felt the cool night air touch her heated skin as they slipped from the house, and walked to the back of it. Her eyes widened at the sight of Rachel standing beside two horses.

"What's she doing here, Adam?" She demanded.

"Shut up and let's go," he said, handing the lock box to Rachel.

Dreema rides in front of me. I don't want her trying anything funny." He said, motioning for Dreema to mount his horse.

Dreema mounted the horse while Adam held the gun on her, then slipped it into his holster, before he jumped up behind her, and slid a steely arm around her waist. "Let's go!" He said, kicking his horse in the side.

Dreema knew she had to do something, but just didn't know what. If she whistled for Devil, she was sure Adam would retaliate, so she coughed loudly a few times.

"Stop that," Adam said, squeezing his arm more tightly around her.

"It's the smoke," she said. "I had to run into the barn to save my horse." She heard Devil's distant cry. He had heard her, but would he be able to find her in time?

Chapter X

Gus wiped the sweat from his forehead as he passed the last bucket of water. The barn couldn't be saved, but at least most of the fire was out. He hadn't been surprised when Dan and some of his cowhands had shown up, helping to put it out. A fire could be seen for miles around here in the dark of night and he was glad Dan had noticed and come with the men.

As he turned to see where Andy was, Devil came up to him and pushed him back with his head. "It's all right, Boy," he said, patting the stallion's sleek neck. We'll have you a new barn built in no time," Gus said, thinking the horse just upset over the fire.

Gus walked where Andy was standing with Dan when Devil nudged him again, only harder this time. He ignored him and moved to stand beside Andy. "You ok," he asked.

"I'm fine, Gus, but Dan said the Sheriff told him the fire was set deliberately from what he could tell. Kerosene can was thrown off to the side of the barn."

Gus was about to comment when Devil came up to him, reared, and ran to stand at the front of the house, then back to him. "What's wrong with him, Andy?"

"There must be something wrong with Dreema! Come on," Andy said, running for the house.

Gus and Dan followed him into the kitchen, but Dreema and Sunnie weren't there. "Maybe they went to bed," Gus spoke up.

Andy shook his head. "Dreema wouldn't with the fire going on. She would have been here or come back outside. Something's wrong! Gus and Dan, you check the rooms upstairs. I'll check the ones down here."

Gus went straight to Dreema's room with Dan close on his heels. He stopped dead inside the room as moonlight shown through the window and he saw Sunnie tied up on the bed, struggling to get free. "Light the lamp on that stand over there," Gus shouted to Dan, moving to untie her. He removed the gag around her mouth first.

"He took Dreema!" Sunnie cried, as Gus quickly freed her.

"Who did?"

"The man that Jack worked for back in Ohio. I recognized him, but didn't act like I did. Dreema had the lock box with her too." She burst into tears, as Dan slipped on the other side of the bed with her and pulled her gently into his arms.

"Adam Greely?" Gus asked.

"No one mentioned a name, but I know it was the man Jack was with back home. You have to find Dreema. He'll kill her! His eyes are like looking into a black, bottomless hole!"

"That's Adam Greely," Gus said, looking at Dan. "You stay here with Sunnie and make sure she's all right? She's been through a lot today."

"I won't leave her side. Go find Dreema."

Gus was already walking out the door. He ran into Andy when he stepped on the last stair. "It looks like Adam Greely has Dreema," he said, as Mike came into the house.

"That stallion is having a fit out there." Mike came to stand beside Gus and Andy.

Adam Greely has Dreema. We need to find her before he kills her.”

Mike swore. “I’ll round up some men. Meet me outside.”

Andy moved into the kitchen and flopped down in a chair. “If anything happens to Dreema, I’ll kill that man with my own two bare hands!”

“We’ll find her,” Gus reassured. “Maybe you should stay here in case Adam Greely doesn’t find what he wants in the lock box and comes back for what he really wants. I’ll leave a few men posted outside the house and my foreman, Dan, is with Sunnie upstairs. He’ll also keep a watch out.”

Andy sighed. “Take Devil with ya. He’ll find her and heaven help the man who has her.”

Gus walked over and slapped Andy on the back. “I promise I’ll find her and bring her home safely.” He walked out the door.

Dreema thought her ribs were going to break from the pressure Adam applied to her waist as they rode. She guessed they had been in the saddle for a about an hour, and wondered where he was taking them to.

When they finally stopped, Dreema looked around. There wasn’t any house or anything that she could see, and she wondered if he was going to just kill her here. “Where are we?” She asked, not really expecting an answer.

Adam slid from the saddle and pulled her off the horse roughly. “You’ll see. Rachel, light your lantern and open that old hidey hole in the ground the Deeper’s made,” he said, chuckling as he shoved Dreema forward.

“Hidey hole?” Dreema asked, as the area around them brightened enough to see as Rachel held the lighted lamp and walked about ten feet to her left.

“It’s not bad, really. Although, why the Deeper’s needed a place like this is beyond me. I wonder what they did for a living before they decided to settle here and open a store.”

Dreema watched as Rachel bent over and lifted a wooden door that seemed to be part of the ground. All sorts of images were going through her mind at the thoughts of going down into what appeared to be a gaping hole.

Adam pushed her roughly. “Get going. Rachel will go first, then you, and then I will follow. Watch your step. Some of the wooden rungs on the ladder aren’t too sturdy. I’d hate for you to die before I get what I want.”

Dreema waited for Rachel to descend down into the hole, then turned around and made her way down the steps right after her. The musty smell assaulted her nostrils as she went deeper into the ground. Finally her booted foot hit solid ground. When she turned around, she was amazed to find a room made out of stones and rocks, with a table and a cot. Rachel set the lantern and lock box on the table as Adam took hold of her from behind and led her to a chair and shoved her onto it.

“Sit, and I don’t want any trouble. No one will hear you down here anyway and no one knows about this place, so you may as well figure your time is limited,” Adam said, moving to sit in a chair across the table from her. He quickly opened the lock box and withdrew some papers. “Ah, they are here!”

Dreema recognized her father’s handwriting as Adam laid one of the papers down on the tabletop and moved to open the next one. After he had finished reading all of them, he stuffed them in his jacket pocket and looked

across the table at Dreema. "I told Randolph that I would do what ever it took to get these and that including killing him and your mother to do it."

Dreema jumped up and lunged across the table at him, her nails raking him across his cheeks. "I hate you!" She hissed, scrambling across the table and pummeling him with her fists.

"You bitch!" Adam growled, backhanding her hard across her face, and jumping from the chair as she fell to the floor at his feet.

Dreema shook her head, trying to chase away the stars that danced before her eyes, when Adam grabbed her roughly and slammed her into his chair. She gasped for breath as he fit his large hand around her throat and applied pressure.

"Your father was an idiot! If he'd just kept paying the blackmail money, then I wouldn't have had to kill him. He stopped paying and had a private detective get all the dirt he could on me, then he called me into his fancy office and laid the evidence on his desk for me to see, then told me in no uncertain words that he was through doling out money when he could turn the evidence over to the authorities and have me put in jail for the rest of my life. Jail was the last of my worries, because I could have been hung for my misdeeds! There was no way I was going to let him get away with turning the tables on me!"

Dreema tried to swallow, but his grip on her throat was too tight. "What did you have on my father?" She croaked, wanting to know exactly what he had done.

Adam laughed. "Tell her Rachel, what I told you her Daddy did." Adam laughed, releasing his hold on Dreema's neck and moving to sit in the chair at the head of the table. He pulled his gun out of his holster and aimed it at her. "And don't try anything stupid again."

Rachel moved to sit in the chair across the table from her. "It seems your Daddy had an affair with a woman. My dear, stupid Dreema, you have a brother that you don't even know about!" Rachel laughed, enjoying delivering the news.

"I don't believe it!" Dreema cried. "My father loved my mother!"

Adam grinned. "He may have, but he couldn't resist the charms of Lydia Mayerts. I came across the information quite accidentally one night when I had wine and dined Lydia and she had had too much to drink. She told me the whole story and as how Randolph had been supporting her ever since she had gotten pregnant to him. Your mother had no idea of his infidelity, and I must say, your father paid dearly for Lydia to keep quiet and to raise their son."

"So you and her were both blackmailing him?"

Adam grinned. "No, just me. Lydia wouldn't have anything to do with it."

Dreema felt tears slipping down her cheeks. "She had a brother. Having been raised as an only child, she wondered what it would have been like to grow up with a sibling. Still, she couldn't imagine her father having an illicit affair. She felt so disappointed in him. "So what are you going to do now?"

Adam rose from the chair. "I'm leaving. You might say I am just going to disappear off the face of the earth. As for Rachel, she's going to stay

on and comfort Gus, and you are going to rot down here in this hole. Let's go, Rachel."

Rachel rose and smiled. "Bye Dreema. Just think of how happy I will make Gus as his wife."

Dreema shook her head. "He'll never marry you, Rachel, and if he would, he'd find out sooner or later what you have done and he'll hate you."

Rachel laughed. "He'll never find out. After all, Adam is the only one who knows my involvement in this, and he will be long gone. Make no mistake, Dreema, Gus is mine!" She walked to the ladder and left with Adam following close behind her.

Dreema heard the trap door shut and heard the lock slide in place. She was alone with no way out. Thankfully, they had left the lantern. She knew it didn't have enough oil in it to burn for long. She prayed Gus would find her soon and she knew Devil wouldn't rest until he did.

Gus rode Devil bareback. His saddle had been in the barn and everything had been destroyed. He had been to Adam's house, but, as he suspected, there was no one there, and from the looks of it, Adam had packed his belongings and had them sent on ahead to wherever he was planning on going.

"We'll find her, boy," Gus said, leaning forward and patting Devil's neck. She has to be around here somewhere."

Devil danced beneath him and pawed the ground. Gus thought he might as well let the horse go where he wanted to. "Go find Dreema, Devil," he said, loosening his grip on the reins.

Gus wasn't surprised when Devil broke into a run. He was thankful for the moonlight shedding soft light on the wooded area Devil ran into. He admonished himself for not giving Devil his head when they had left the ranch. Devil hadn't wanted to go in the direction Gus had wanted him to, but had gone to the back of Dreema's house and wanted to go into the woods there. Gus had had his hands full just getting the horse to go to Adam Greely's. Even though Gus was sure Adam wouldn't have returned home, he thought there might have been a clue to as where he had gone. Gus had found nothing helpful. Suddenly, Devil stopped and pawed the ground.

"What is it, boy?" Gus pulled his gun from its holster to be on the safe side. He didn't hear anything though or see anything unusual. When Devil moved forward and pawed the ground this time, his hooves hit something hard. Gus slid off Devil's back and bent down. There was a wooden door, surrounded by stones in the ground. "Dreema, are you down there?" Gus shouted.

Dreema heard the pounding on the door above and knew Devil had found her. She made her way up the ladder and shouted, pounding frantically at the wooden door. "I'm in here!"

She shouted as loud as she could, when suddenly the door was pulled open and Gus's arms reached down and lifted her out.

"Are you all right?" Gus asked, holding her tightly to him.

"I am now," she said, hugging him close. "I knew Devil would find me. We have to hurry though or Adam and Rachel will get away!"

"Rachel?" Gus asked, setting her away from him. The bruise on her cheek was visible in the moonlight and he wanted to kill Adam for hurting her.

"Yes, Rachel was with Adam. My bet is he took her back to her hotel room before he skipped town."

"Why would Rachel be mixed up with Adam Greely?"

Dreema walked to Devil. "Down boy," she said, and slipped onto his back as he bent down on his forelegs. "Because with me out of the way, she can have you." Dreema said, as Gus slid onto Devil's back behind her.

Gus slipped his arms around Dreema's waist as she turned Devil towards town. "What is it with you two women? Neither one of you are getting me! I like being a bachelor just fine!"

Dreema smiled. "We'll see about that, Gus. We'll just see about that!"

Dreema and Gus rode into town, just as the Sheriff did. They rode up to the hotel and Gus helped Dreema dismount. "Did you find Greely?" He asked, turning to Mike.

"No, but I have it on good word he's inside the hotel with Rachel," he said, moving to Dreema. "I'm glad Gus found you. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Sheriff, and Adam Greely told me he killed my parents. It's a long story, but Adam was blackmailing my father. My father had Adam investigated and turned the tables on him. That's what was in the lock box. All the proof my father had collected on Adam."

"Does Greely have the proof with him now?"

"Yes. He took it."

"I want you to go to my office and stay there until Gus and I come for you," Mike said, turning to Gus. "Are you ready? Do you know which room Rachel is in?"

"Hers is right beside her father's. Number 21."

"Let's go," Mike said.

Gus turned to Dreema. "Make sure you go to the jail and wait for us. I don't want Greely getting his hands on you again."

"I'm going with you."

"No you aren't and we don't have time to stand here arguing about it."

"I'm not leaving," Dreema said, leaning against the hitching post.

Gus swore. "Damn it, Dreema. You're going to be the death of me yet! Will you at least stay in the lobby?"

"Do I have a choice?" She looked from Gus to Mike."

"No!" They replied in unison.

Dreema walked into the lobby with them and waited as they spoke to the clerk. Both men drew their guns out of their holsters as they walked up the stairs. She waited until they were at the top and turned right, then followed. There was no way they were leaving her behind.

Adam Greely rose from the mussed up bed, looked down at Rachel, and grinned. "You always look like a cat in heat after lovemaking. You're insatiable and I need to get the hell out of here!" He pulled his pants on, and reached for his shirt.

Rachel purred. "Lovemaking makes me feel like a cat," she said, raising up on her knees and letting him view her naked body. She loved tempting men, especially dangerous ones, and she knew Adam was extremely dangerous.

"I had planned to be long gone by now. I knew I shouldn't have agreed to escort you back to your hotel room."

Rachel was about to reply when the door crashed open, and the Sheriff and Gus stormed in, guns drawn. "Rachel squealed and grabbed for the quilt. "'He raped me!'" She screamed, sobbing hysterically.

Adam swore and grabbed for his gun belt lying on the stand when the Sheriff's voice stopped him.

"If you want to die, then reach for it!" He said, as Dreema walked into the room.

Dreema looked at Rachel on the bed, whose eyes grew round when they met hers. "I thought you wanted Gus, but I guess he is just one of many in line?"

"You bitch!" Rachel screamed, scrambling off the bed and lunging at Dreema with claws barred. "I wish Adam would have killed you!" She said, as Gus grabbed her and held her back.

"That's enough, Rachel!" He said, dragging her back to the bed. "Cover yourself!"

Rachel turned in his arms and slipped her arms around his waist. "Oh, Gus, it was horrible what he did to me! I didn't want to help him, but he said he'd kill me!"

Gus set her on the bed and pulled the quilt over her. "Shut up!" He said, as Mike nudged Greely with his gun and urged him out of the room, as Rachel's father came in from the hallway.

"What's going on?" He said, rushing to Rachel's side, and slipping his arms around his daughter.

Gus shook his head. "It seems Rachel was in cahoots with Adam Greely. They kidnapped Dreema tonight and if I wouldn't have found her, she'd have died down in that hole in the ground."

Griffen shook his head. "I'm sorry Dreema for all you have been through and I promise that we're leaving on the stage first thing in the morning and my daughter will never bother either one of you again!"

Dreema moved to the side of the bed. "I just need these papers in Adam Greely's jacket to give to the Sheriff," she said, picking it up and removing them from the pocket. "I'll wait outside," she said, glancing at Gus, as she passed him and went to the lobby.

Outside, Dreema inhaled the fresh clean air, but just as she exhaled, a hand slipped around her mouth. She struggled but was drug off into the alley at the side of the hotel. When she saw Mike's prone body, she knew she was in Adam Greely's clutches once more.

"You really didn't think I was going to jail, did you?" Adam whispered fiercely. "I have people working for me. Money will get you anything."

Dreema struggled to breathe, but when Adam raised his other hand and she smelled the sickening odor of chloroform, she knew it was a losing battle. Her head started to spin and she felt the heaviness in her limbs, then darkness consumed her.

Dreema awoke slowly; feeling as if she had been in a deep, drug induced sleep, like the laudanum had afforded her when the doctor had given it to her. Nausea hit her full force and she gulped as she opened her eyes fully to see where she was. Dizziness assailed her and she quickly closed them for a couple seconds more, then opened them again. After quite a few tries, she finally managed to see where she was.

She pushed herself up, but found her left arm handcuffed to the iron railing of the bed she lay in. Pushing with her feet, she managed to sit up against the rails. She was in a private railroad car and then it registered that the sound that kept ringing in her ears was the incessant chugging of a train as it rode over the tracks. "Oh, God, I have to get out of here," she whispered hoarsely as the door opened showing another car in front of the one she was in, as Adam came in to sit down beside her on the bed.

"Well, I see you finally woke up. For awhile there, I thought I may have let you breathe that chloroform too long. Yet, it served its purpose. I am finally free and I have the papers that you wanted so much to put me away in prison for a long time."

"Gus will come after me. He'll hunt you down no matter how long it takes!"

Adam laughed. "You really think I care about Gus? Do you think I am really afraid of him?"

"You'd better be. You won't be free for long!"

"Women are such spiteful creatures, but you see, I covered my tracks well. My men knew exactly what to do."

Dreema stared into his coal black eyes. The Devil's eyes, she thought, and then remembered Mike lying on the ground in the alley. "Did you kill Mike too?"

Adam rose from the bed and moved to the table in the middle of the room. He poured some whiskey in a glass and saluted her. "One of my men hit him from behind as he was leading me off to jail. I don't know how hard he was hit, nor do I care, so I can't answer that question for sure."

"What are you going to do with me?"

"Hmmm... That's a good question," Adam said, moving to sit down beside her again. "You are such a pretty woman. All that long dark hair, and that slim figure, with curves all in the right places. I'm sure I can get a pretty price for you in Mexico. Some men will pay anything in a card game to acquire such fine beauty," he said, reaching out and caressing her cheek.

Dreema jerked her head away. "Don't touch me! You're vile and disgusting!" She saw Adam's eyes seemed to glow with hate, and he grabbed her chin roughly and turned her face to him.

"Don't press your luck, Dreema. I could kill you right now and just dump you off the train, or I could kill your pretty little friend, Sunnie. "Drake! Bring her in!"

Dreema watched as Sunnie was dragged through the door by a man that was even bigger than Adam. Sunnie's white blonde hair was tangled and dirty, and she had a large bruise on her cheek. Her blue sprigged dress was ripped and hanging off her shoulder to expose her chemise. "Sunnie," Dreema

whispered, moving to get up, but the restraints of the handcuff kept her shackled to the bed.

"Dreema! You're all right!" Sunnie cried, as the man moved to the opposite side of the bed and pushed her roughly down on it, then handcuffed her right arm to the bed rail on her side, as Adam stood up to stare at them both.

"Such a touching scene," he said, then turned to Drake. "You'll guard them the entire trip. The door to this car is to be locked at all times. When I am sure I have Dreema's cooperation, then the handcuffs can be taken off and they can have full use of the car, meals, and a much needed bath and change of clothes. I want to keep my insurance policies alive and well at least until we get to our destination and Dreema signs over her inheritance."

Dreema put her free arm around her friend. "You'll pay for this Adam, if I have to kill you myself!"

Adam laughed derisively. "Let's see if you're willing to keep that promise when you are hungry, and for your friend's sake, since she is not of sturdy stock like yourself. You wouldn't want to see anything happen to her, I'm sure. Now, I am going to leave you in Drake's care and going to the dinning room for supper."

Dreema watched as Adam left the car, then turned to Sunnie. "Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

Sunnie scooted as close to Dreema as she could. "I'm a little sore, but all right. Don't worry about me. I'm stronger than he thinks."

"I know you are," she smiled, hugging Sunnie. "You may look like you are a frail person, but you got strength and determination."

"You look like you just woke up."

"I did. Adam gave me a good dose of chloroform. I woke up here."

Sunnie pointed at Drake. "Muscleman here, grabbed me when I stepped out of the house. He just socked me a good one and the next thing I knew, I was being dragged in here."

Dreema looked at Drake. "Can you get us some water?" When he didn't move but just stood there with his arms folded over his chest, Dreema decided to try again. "Please give us a drink of water. The chloroform has made my mouth turn into dust. I can barely swallow."

"No tricks," he said gruffly, moving to the table and filling a glass from a pitcher.

Dreema accepted the tepid water and drank half, then gave the rest to Sunnie. "Thank you," she told Drake as Sunnie handed him the empty glass. "Do you think that my friend and I could be alone for awhile?"

Drake looked at them suspiciously. "What are you up to?"

"Nothing, but we can't rest with you standing over us and I am still feeling the effects of the drug and want to sleep," she said, watching as his brown eyes narrowed slightly.

"Well, I guess it's ok. You can't go anywhere. I'll be right outside the door."

"Thank you, Drake." Dreema smiled at him and saw just a flicker of a smile curve the corners of his thin lips as he left the car. She heard the key turn in the lock before turning back to Sunnie. "That's better. At least we have some privacy and if I don't miss my guess right, Drake is not beyond a woman's wiles. Maybe we can sweet talk him."

"You think so?"

“Yes, or gain his trust,” Dreema said thoughtfully, sliding down in the bed. “Let’s rest for awhile. We have to keep our minds sharp and I’m still feeling the effects of the chloroform.”

“I’m tired too,” Sunnie said, lying down too. “Do you think Gus will come after us?”

Dreema yawned. “You can bet your life on it.”

Chapter XI

Gus watched as Doc sewed up Mike's gash on the back of his head. He couldn't leave to find Dreema until he knew Mike was going to be all right. "You're sure he's gonna be fine, Doc?"

Doc Morter nodded. "He'll be just like new in a couple days. He has a slight concussion and I'll have to keep him here for observance overnight, but he'll make it."

"Good," Gus said, as Doc put the last stitch in and gathered his instruments. "Can I talk to him?"

"Sure. He's a little groggy from the laudanum, but he should be able to talk for a bit. I'll leave you two alone."

Gus waited until Doc left the room, then moved his chair beside the bed. "Mike, you awake?"

"Barely," Mike said.

"Can you tell me what happened?"

"It seems Greely had someone on his payroll. When I stepped outside the hotel and walked down the steps, someone hit me from behind. I blacked out for a few seconds but came to and heard him telling someone to take Dreema to his private car. Then things got kind of fuzzy again and I heard the other man say they had Sunnie."

"Did you recognize the man's voice?"

"Yeah. It sounded like Pete Wilkie."

"He'd do anything for a bottle of whiskey," Gus said. "I'm going to the saloon to see what I can find out."

Mike ran his hand over his shirt until he found his badge. "Here, put this on. You're now acting as an official lawman. Get going and find Dreema and Sunnie."

Gus took the badge from him and pinned it on his shirt. "I should have just been a lawman instead of a rancher. I've worn this badge often enough," he grinned. "You get better and if I'm not back in a few days, come and find me."

"Will do. Now git!"

Gus leaned over and patted Mike on the shoulder. "I'll find them if it's the last thing I do and bring Adam Greely in and heaven help him if he's hurt Dreema or Sunnie."

Dreema woke to find herself surrounded by darkness. She pushed herself up against the rails of the bed, careful not to disturb Sunnie. She had no idea what time it was and she wished that Drake had lit the lantern when it had gotten dark.

Pushing her hair out of her face, she thought of her Uncle Andy. She was his only living relative and she knew she was like a daughter to him, instead of his niece. He wouldn't rest, she knew, until she was back home and safe. He also had access to her money in the bank and as soon as he found out she was missing, he would go to the bank and have the money changed over into his name alone to keep it safe. She could sign whatever Adam Greely wanted, but it wouldn't do him any good. Even the ranch was in her Uncle's name, to be transferred to hers upon his death. Adam Greely would not get anything of hers.

Thoughts of her father and mother invaded her mind, bringing pictures of her growing up. She had been a happy child. Even though her father taught her the values of life and educated her, he tolerated her playful antics and pretty much left her to do as she pleased. Her Mother, on the other hand, had tried to turn her into the perfect lady, teaching her embroidery, sewing, social graces, and all the things a well-born lady should know.

Dreema sighed. The news that she had a half brother excited her. Even if she was appalled at the idea that her father had been unfaithful to her mother, she couldn't wait to see the brother she had never known. As soon as she could, she would get her Uncle Andy to escort her back to Ohio and find him.

She slid back down in the bed and thoughts of Gus swamped her, making her heart race triple time. Gus with his blue eyes that darkened in passion, Gus with that sexy smile that accentuated the dimples in his cheeks, Gus with arms like steel and hands so gentle, it took her breath away every time he touched her. "Gus," she whispered as she fell back asleep.

Gus entered the saloon and stood for a moment to let his eyes adjust to the light and focus through the hazy, smoke filled room. Pete Wilkie was at his usual table in the back with a shot of whiskey cradled in his shaking hands. He walked over to the table, pulled out a chair, and sat down. "Pete, I'm going to give you one chance to stay out of jail and one chance only, and if I lock you up, you aren't getting a drop of whiskey the whole time you're there."

"What'd I'd do?" Pete croaked, lifting the glass and downing the last of the whiskey he could afford to buy.

"Adam Greely," Gus stated coldly.

Pete stumbled out of his chair, but before he rose half way out of it, Gus reached out and grasped his arm in a none too gentle grip. "Sit down! You aren't going anywhere until you tell me the whole story and I want to hear it right now!"

Pete swiped his arm over his sweating forehead, knocking his hat off in the process. "I don't know nothin' about nothin'!"

Gus leaned forward. "I said you only had one chance. Let's go."

"No!" Pete cried, making every head in the saloon turn to look at him. He saw a few people snicker. He knew they thought he was a washed up drunk. He didn't care though what anyone thought.

"Then tell me what happened with Adam Greely a few hours ago and who hit Sheriff Markster over the head hard enough to give him a concussion. After that, you damn well better tell me where Greely took Dreema."

"I need a drink first," Pete said shakily. "I need it bad."

Gus turned to one of the girls at another table. "Bring me a bottle of whiskey." He said, then turned back to Pete.

"How much did Greely pay you to hit Sheriff Markster over the head and help him take Dreema?"

"A couple dollars for whiskey," Pete replied, his mouth watering as the girl brought the bottle and set it down. He watched as Gus held the bottle with one hand and paid the girl with the other, giving her a good-sized tip.

Gus shook his head. "Is that enough money to risk spending the rest of your life in jail?"

"It was whiskey money." Pete reached out his hand to take the bottle of whiskey.

"Not so fast, Pete. Before I give you this bottle, I want information and I want it right now. Tell me where Greely took Dreema."

"I just done like Drake paid me to do. He had a buckboard in the back of the hotel. There was a blonde haired girl already lying in the back. She looked like she was sleepin' or somthin'. He told me to distract the Sheriff enough until he could come up behind him and help Greely get away. That's all I did was stumble up in front of the Sheriff and before I knew it, the Sheriff lay flat on the ground out cold. Then this woman came out of the hotel and Greely grabbed her and held somethin' over her mouth and she went limp and they put her in the buckboard too. I heard Greely tell Drake to head for the train station that his private car was waiting. That's all I know, I swear!"

"Are you talking about Drake Morgan?"

"Yup," Pete said, reaching again for the bottle.

Gus opened the bottle and filled Pete's glass to the rim. He watched as Pete gulped it down. Drake Morgan, he thought. Why would Drake Morgan get caught up with the likes of Adam Greely? Then it all made sense. Drake was having financial problems. It was rumored that he couldn't pay for the taxes on his small ranch due to bad luck. Gus had thought of seeing if he could help the man in some way, but he knew that Drake was too proud to take charity. Now he wished he'd offered because it seemed Drake was now involved in something that was way over his head. Adam Greely played for keeps. When he was done with Drake, Greely would probably kill him so there wouldn't be any witness's left. Gus slid the bottle across the table to Pete. "If you remember anything else you might have forgotten, then you go tell Sheriff Markster. He's at Doc's place," Gus said, standing up. He reached into his pocket and pulled out some money and threw it on the table. That should keep you in whiskey for a few days."

Pete smiled. "Thanks Gus," he said, grabbing frantically at the coins.

Gus walked out of the saloon and stood on the wooden sidewalk. Dawn was just beginning to break. The streets were quiet and the birds sang just like any other morning in town. Only this time, Gus felt more lonesome than he had in a long time. He went down the steps and walked to the train station to wait for the teller to open the doors. It looked like he was on his way to Mexico to find the woman he loved and by God she had better be unharmed!

Dreema awoke to the delicious smell of coffee. She pushed herself up and stretched, only to find her arm still shackled to the bed. She saw Drake sitting at the table drinking coffee. He never glanced their way. "What time is it?" she ventured, hoping he was going to be nice enough to give them some coffee but before that, she had more urgent needs.

"It's about eight o'clock," Drake said. "Boss said I should let you two loose. There's hot water back there and some clean clothes," he indicated the curtain behind the table. You can attend to your daily needs and there's coffee I brought for you. I'll bring you both some food in about thirty minutes, so make it snappy," he said, getting up and moving to Sunnie's side of the bed first. "And no funny business either or you won't get anything to eat. Is that clear? Besides, there's no where to go out here. Nothing but rattlesnakes and

Indians." He moved to release Dreema, then left the car, locking the door behind him.

Dreema slipped off the bed. "I think every bone in my body is sore," she said, as Sunnie moved to the table and poured them each a cup of coffee. There was no cream or sugar, but she didn't care.

"Here," Sunnie said, handing her a cup. "It's good."

Dreema sipped the hot coffee and sat down in the chair. "Adam has a nice set up it seems. Evidently he has this private car and a dinning car also."

"Is he really that wealthy?"

Dreema nodded. "It sure seems that way and he's always looking at new avenues of wealth including mine."

"Will you sign everything over to him?"

Dreema smiled. "When the time is right. I need to hold out as long as I can to buy time for us. Do you want to bathe first and attend to your morning ablutions? Then we can make some plans."

"You go ahead," Sunnie said. "I just want another cup of coffee right now."

Dreema stood up and hugged Sunnie. "We'll be fine. I promise, so don't worry ok?"

Sunnie nodded and hugged her back. "I know, but I just have this creepy feeling that something else is going to happen and I don't know what it is."

Dreema shivered. "Don't tell me you've had one of your dreams."

"Yes. I'll tell you about it after your bath. We don't have much time and I want breakfast. I'm starved."

Dreema hugged her friend once again then slipped behind the curtain. She attended to her other needs first, then slipped out of her clothes and settled herself in the tepid water. There was a bar of lavender scented soap and she washed herself quickly then did her hair, which wasn't an easy task in the small tub. Finally she got all the soap rinsed out and jumped out of the tub and dressed quickly in her own clothes. She didn't want to wear anything that Adam Greely had picked out for her. When she joined Sunnie again, Drake stepped through the door with a tray of food.

"Aren't you bathed yet?" He asked, looking at Sunnie as he held the tray in one hand and locked the door with the other.

Dreema moved forward. "Here, let me help with that." She took the tray from his hand and placed it on the table, motioning for Sunnie to go get her bath. When Sunnie disappeared, Dreema turned to Drake. "I'm afraid it is my fault that Sunnie isn't bathed by now. My hair takes a long time to wash."

Drake moved to stand by the table. "I'll make sure I wake you up a half hour earlier tomorrow. Now go ahead and eat while it's hot. I'll be back in an hour to collect the tray."

"Would you like to join us? It looks like there is plenty of food to go around."

"I don't think Boss would like that much. I'll eat in the dinning car," he said, moving to open the door. Oh, and I'm afraid you only have spoons to eat with, no forks or knives. Boss's orders."

"Thank you, Drake," Dreema said, smiling at him sweetly. She watched as a flush crept up his sun-toughened face. If she didn't miss her guess right, she would bet anything that he was a rancher. Just how in the

world did he get mixed up with Adam? She was bound and determined to find out.

"You're welcome, Miss," Drake said, then slipped out the door and locked it.

Dreema sat down and looked at the food. At least Adam wasn't going to starve them like he had threatened to do. There were scrambled eggs, home fries with gravy, two thick slices of fried ham, and blueberry muffins. She fixed her plate as Sunnie stepped through the curtain to join her.

"That smells so good!" Sunnie cried, sitting down beside Dreema. She picked up a blueberry muffin and spread creamy butter on it, then took a bite.

"I'm hungry too. Lately it seems I'm hungrier than usual and tired more than usual. I hope I'm not coming down with something."

Sunnies stopped eating. "You sound like you're pregnant."

Dreema dropped her spoon and it landed on her plate, splashing some gravy on her shirt. She thought back to the day at the dam and Gus making love to her. Oh, God, it couldn't be, could it? She tried to remember when her period was due. Last week! She turned terrified eyes on Sunnie.

Sunnies shook her head. "Oh, Dreema, don't tell me you're going to have a baby? When did you...? You and Gus?"

Dreema nodded, then felt her stomach revolt. She jumped up from the table and ran through the curtain and lost every bite she had eaten and drank. When Sunnie appeared next to her, holding a damp washcloth against her head, she slumped to the floor. "That's why I've been feeling queasy!" She pushed herself to her feet and wrapped her arms around her friend. "What am I going to do?"

Sunnies patted her gently on the back. "You're going to have a baby," she said, as Adam pushed back the curtain.

"Touching scene. I wonder how much Gus would pay to get you back knowing you were pregnant with his child?"

Dreema moved to get at Adam, but Sunnie held her back. "He doesn't know that I'm pregnant. I may not be. It just might be a stomach ailment or something."

Adam laughed. "Yeah, one that will be with you for nine months. Now get out here," he said, turning and moving to the table. "Drake go get some crackers for Dreema. Bring enough so she will have them when she needs them."

"Yes, Sir, Boss."

Adam grinned. "You know, I may not have to kill Drake after all when this is all done and over. I may find other useful jobs for him to do, but in either case, it won't make much difference. I'll have everything I want, won't I Dreema?"

Dreema didn't answer. Let him think what he wanted. A man like Adam Greely only thought about his next victim, and his accumulation of wealth. She walked to the table and sat down and poured herself a glass of water. "When will we arrive at our destination? Will we stay on the train?"

Adam motioned for Sunnie to take the chair by Dreema, then sat in the one on the other side of them. "It's nice to see you being so civil, Dreema. Pregnancy must agree with you. As for where we're headed, it's just a small town that hardly anyone knows about except for outlaws and the likes. Once in

a while you get a stranger who just happens to pass through, but mostly, they move on or are urged to if they aren't inclined to. You have to have the right connections to get the things you want out of life. My connection is Hildago. I won't mention any last names. It's not important, but he has agreed to let me hide out there until my business is all taken care of. In a short while, we will be leaving the main railway onto one that will lead us there. It is well hidden, so the train will stop for awhile while my men clear the tracks and let us through, then we will stop again for them to make sure the railway is well concealed. Hildago would not feel kindly toward anyone that gave away his secret entrance and railway that he had built himself into his hide-a-way. You will both stay on the train, as I will when I am not conducting business."

Dreema frowned. "Meaning this is our prison. No fresh air or walking to stretch our legs?"

Adam pushed up heavily from the chair. "I didn't say that. You may go into the dinning car and Drake will be with you at all times, plus the train will have guards posted around it. I have brought some very valuable merchandise for Hildago. After it is unloaded from one of my cars, then you will be able to move around outside. I suggest, though, that you don't give Drake any problems or offend anyone. Women are scarce out here and I wouldn't take any chances if I were you. I'm sure you get my meaning," he said, as Drake entered with crackers for Dreema.

"We're almost there, Boss," he said, handing the crackers to Dreema.

"Good. See to it Dreema and Sunnie have everything they need. It seems Dreema is expecting a baby. I want her to have anything she wants to eat or drink. If we don't have it in the dinning car, then send the cook after it. Her baby is a very valuable tool."

"Yes, Boss," Drake said, his eyes on Dreema.

Dreema watched Adam walk out the door, then looked at Drake.

"Thank you for bringing me the crackers."

"You're welcome. I didn't know you were pregnant."

Dreema caught the slight catch to his deep baritone voice. "I didn't either until a few moments ago. Do you have children, Drake?"

Drake's eyes shifted to gaze at the floor. "No, Miss. My daughter died at birth and my wife took off with another man three months later. If you need anything, just knock on the door. I'll be right outside."

"I'm sorry," Dreema replied.

"It's been awhile, Miss. He walked to the door, then turned to look at her again. "Who's the babies father?"

"Gus Thorne."

"Does he know? I mean about the baby?"

"No."

"He's a good man," Drake said, and walked out the door.

Dreema turned to Sunnie. "What did you make of that?"

Sunnie shrugged. "I think Drake knows Gus and is feeling bad for all his misdeeds."

"Yeah, me too. I don't think Drake knew what he was getting into. I wonder why he signed on with Adam Greely to begin with?"

"The same reason my brother Jack did. Money."

"Yeah and we both know Adam has enough to go around, plus options for always laying his greedy hands on more," Dreema replied, as the

train slowed to a stop. "Looks like we'll be in the outlaw's town in a little while. I think I'm going to take a nap." She moved to the bed and flopped down on it. At least I can turn any way I want to without being handcuffed to the bed."

"Sounds good to me too," Sunnie said, joining her. "Before we go to sleep, though, can I tell you about my dream?"

"Yes, I had forgotten all about it. What did you dream?"

"Well, it was very disturbing, but it was also quite exciting. I dreamed that we were on a train, and here we're on one. While we were traveling, someone held up the train. He was tall, dark, and handsome. He had a black beard and mustache and he had the prettiest gray eyes I've ever seen. He wore a buckskin shirt and pants and his body, well, never mind," Sunnie said, closing her eyes and sighing deeply.

Dreema reached over and playfully poked her on the shoulder.

"Well, what else happened?"

"Nothing," Sunnie groaned and opened her eyes. "I woke up."

Dreema laughed. "Sounds like love to me, but I thought you liked Gus's foreman, Dan."

"I do, but he doesn't make me... Well, you know!"

Dreema shook her head. "We have been friends forever and I never would have thought that you would want excitement and adventure in a man. I always thought you would want someone steady and down to earth, and in case you didn't notice, Dan has gray eyes."

Sunnie giggled. "I want a man who makes me feel like I'm a woman, not some fragile thing to be taken care of and cottoned to."

Dreema yawned. "Well, I hope you find your dream man. I only want Gus. He's all the excitement I can handle if I ever see him again," she said, feeling tears moisten her lashes.

Sunnie reached over and hugged her, then lay back down. "Hey, Gus is going to come after you. Look at all the times he came to your rescue with Adam and Rachel and Jack even."

Dreema sniffed and hiccuped. "I'm getting moody. I never cry," she said and the tears fell down her cheeks nonstop.

Sunnie gathered her friend in her arms. "It's going to be all right. You and the baby are going to be ok. I'll see to it. Don't you worry and go to sleep. You'll feel better after your nap."

Dreema let the tears fall. Why did this have to happen now? Yet, as that thought crossed her mind, she thought of the baby she carried and as she closed her eyes, she remembered Gus as he had kissed her as he had made love to her that eventful day. She sighed and fell asleep.

Sunnie gently removed her arms from around her friend and slipped from the bed. "She wouldn't let anyone hurt Dreema or her baby. She would fight to the end. Walking to the tiny window of the car, she pushed back the red velvet curtain and looked outside. The sun was high in the sky and the land looked as lonesome as she felt. She let the curtain fall and went back to lay on the bed. Where was the man in her dreams?

Chapter XII

Gus threw some more wood on the campfire and looked over at Dan. After three days of traveling, they both sported beards and mustache's. "You know what this reminds me of Dan?" He asked, pouring himself another cup of coffee from the tin pot on the fire.

"Yeah, days that are better left forgotten," he said, leaning back against his saddle and pulling his hat low over his eyes to block out the moonlight. He just wished he could shut out the night sounds too so he could drift off to sleep.

"You look exactly like you did when I found you that time and pounded some sense into you and made you come back home."

Dan lifted the brim of his hat and sent Gus a warning look. "I said those days are best left alone."

Gus laughed. "I thought those were good days. It was the first time I had been off the ranch for any extended period and I remember dad telling me not to come back until I found you and knocked some sense into you."

Dan sighed. "You aren't going to let me get any rest, are you? You're so worried about Dreema that you can't sleep and you won't let me either. Some friend you are."

"Well, what about Sunnie? I know you're sweet on her too and she's in trouble and that's why you're here."

Dan pushed up against his saddle and pushed his hat back on his head. "Sunnie is a fine woman. Fragile and sweet and I don't think she'd cotton too much to me. I'm not a gentleman."

Gus threw back his head and laughed. "Do you really think she wants a gentleman? One that is all dandified and treats her like she's a piece of fine china?"

"Well, sure."

"My friend, you have a lot to learn. You've been around lots of women. You should know they like their men dark and dangerous and have a mind of their own and can't be pushed around by the opposite gender."

"Those kind of women, I find at Miz Pat's."

"But those kind of women just ply their trade and their feelings the way they see them and the way they are. Women like Dreema and Sunnie are the same, only they show their feelings in a more refined way."

"What the hell are you talking about Gus? Why don't you just shut up and go to sleep or something?"

"What I mean is, that when it comes to courting a woman or making love to her, it's even better when the sparks fly between you. You know, irritate the hell out of them and don't put up with their wiles and such and they'll fall in love with you."

"Is that why you fell in love with Dreema. Have you made love to her yet?"

Gus leaned back against his saddle and stared thoughtfully at Dan. He wasn't one to kiss and tell, but this was Dan, his half brother and best friend. The one that Gus nor his mother had known anything about until in the middle of the night about thirty years ago when Dan's mother had shown up on their doorstep with Dan in tow. She had made Gus's father promise to take

care of their son, as she had lain upstairs in the guest bedroom dying of consumption.

From that day on, Dan had become a member of the household and even his mother had learned to love him, but as Dan grew up, he resented the fact that he had been left behind because he was part Indian and that Dan's father had married a white woman. When Dan turned eighteen, he had just disappeared one night. They had heard rumors of a half-breed that had turned outlaw then bounty hunter and Gus's father had sent him to find Dan and bring him home before he got himself killed.

It had taken Gus neigh on eleven months to track Dan down and when he did; they had gotten into the worst fistfight he'd ever been in. Neither of them won, but both held a deep respect for each other after that. Now, as he stared at Dan, dressed in his buckskins and with his beard and mustache, he felt like he had stepped back into time. Dan's impatient voice pulled him out of his thoughts.

"Well? You gonna tell me or not? I haven't got all night. I want to sleep."

"Once at the damn. You know the cabin there?"

"Yeah and what if you got her pregnant?"

Gus felt as though he had been hit in the gut by a sledgehammer. He couldn't breathe, then jumped up to stare down at Dan. "What!"

Dan laughed. "Payback time. You give me the third degree and I give it right back. You do know it only takes one time and sit down. You make me nervous shuffling back and forth on your feet. Stop being so antsy. You've been that way ever since we left to come out here and find Dreema."

Gus settled down against his saddle again and took a deep breath. "I'm not ready to be father yet."

"Well, just in case, dear brother, you better at least throw that thought around in your mind a little and in your heart."

Gus rubbed his jaw and felt the scratchiness of his own beard. "If Dreema is with child, then she will be more vulnerable and won't be able to fight if she needs to."

"She'll fight even harder if she is. She won't let anything happen to her or the baby if she is pregnant."

"I hope so," Gus said wearily. "Do you really think that Adam Greely is headed for the outlaw, Hildago's hideout?"

"It's the only place I know of that Greely could even attempt to hide out at while he's doing his dirty dealings. I have it on good word that Greely purchased crates of guns and whiskey and had them loaded on his train. This comes from a trusted source."

"And you know this place well?"

Dan settled down and pulled his blanket over him. "I lived there for almost a year. I should, and I think if Greely is there, he won't even recognize me from seeing me at your birthday barbecue or about town the way I look now. I am known there as just Breed, nothing more."

"You will be recognized by people living there, and you will be known as an outlaw turned bounty hunter. Will that cause you problems?"

Dan laughed. "Bounty hunters can always turn outlaw again."

"Won't you have to prove yourself? Won't Hildago demand some form of payment to let you into his hideout?"

"I'll have to fight my way to get to him, but once I do that, it will be easy. Hildago is not a man to miss easy money and he is not a man who would turn down one of the best outlaw's in the land, even if that were a few years back. I will have to ride with him again."

"How am I going to fit in with all this?"

Dan sighed heavily. "Damn, I just knew we should have talked about all this before we left. In about six hours, the sun's going to be up and we have quite a ways to ride yet. Hildago's hideout is like a small town. It's in the middle of nowhere, but has a secret railway, leading off the main railway. Only his most trusted men know of it. That's how he's able to rob trains that go through there and get lost. It's way out and you'd have to be an Indian or very good detective to find the entranceway it is hidden that well. There are several bordellos, homes, and saloons, and a restaurant, and even a jail. Most of these building are nothing more than shacks and the men there are mostly killers and the women nothing more than whore's."

"And Hildago lives in the town too?"

"No, he is there only to do business. He has a hacienda located in the canyons beyond there with a wife and kids and his family."

"Then he has acquired great wealth along the way."

"And gaining more each day as time passes, but one of these days, his luck will run out and he will be hung for his misdeeds if he isn't killed first by one of his many enemies. You are going in as a friend of mine. We ride together. I'm just worried that you may run into Greely and he may recognize you. Hopefully your hair and whiskers will grow more in the next couple of days. It's funny that I'm half Indian and my hair grows twice as fast as yours."

"You inherited that and those gray eyes from our father. I inherited my mother's blue eyes and I hate shaving so I don't mind I don't have to shave everyday and just get a shadow of a beard."

"I think your new hat makes a difference in your looks and that will help some. Greely was always used to seeing you with your other one and the black lends an air of mystery about you as does your new clothes."

Gus laughed. "Yeah, it feels different wearing them too. I'm not used to being dressed all in black. Now go to sleep, brother, and let me think some."

"About damn time!" Dan swore, and turned his back, and pulled his hat low over his eyes.

Gus grinned. "He knew that Dan's gruff voice and actions were due to his thinking he had to be responsible for both of them. He was a greenhorn, so to speak, to the way of life that Dan had lived for years, but he wasn't a greenhorn to killing a man. Acting as a deputy and sometimes Sheriff had its drawbacks. He had to kill three men and wound several to bring them to justice. He had no qualms about using his gun if needed to save Dreema and Sunnie or his or Dan's life if the need arose.

Pulling his blanket around him, Gus shoved his hat off his head and let it fall beside him. The moon was full and bright and he could see their horses tied up at the edge of the stream that ran through the area. The night birds and lonesome call of a coyote were like music to his ears and the stars in the inky sky above shone like diamonds. A cowboy's home was under the open skies in daylight and darkness. Nothing could compare to nature's beauty, except for Dreema.

If she did carry their child, then he would have no choice but to marry her and make an honest woman of her. Just how had she wormed her way into his heart when he had done everything possible to make sure he didn't fall in love? What was it about her that made him think of making love to her again and again and spending the rest of his life with her until they were both old and gray and sitting on his front porch and rocking grandbabies?

Gus sighed and let his mind slip back to the time in the cabin when he had made love to Dreema for the first time. He fell asleep with the thoughts of silken skin, tender touches, and almond shaped green eyes clouded with passion.

Dreema awoke to find the room of the rail car in darkness. She sat up and a wave of nausea washed over her. Feeling her way to the table, she fumbled until she found the lamp and lit it. She turned up the wick and warm, buttery light chased away the darkness.

Grabbing a cracker, she munched on it, and felt her stomach settle a little. After three more crackers, she was ravenously hungry. When she got up to go to knock on the door and see if Drake was there, she realized the train was no longer moving and raucous voices and laughter broke the stillness outside. Evidently, they had arrived at the Hildago's hideout.

"Drake?" She called, knocking lightly on the door. She heard the key turn in the lock and the door swung open.

"You two awake now? I came in several times, but you were both sleeping and boss said not to disturb you."

"Thank you, Drake, but do you think we could have something to eat? I'm really hungry. I'll wake up Sunnie."

"Just tell me what you want, and I'll go get it."

"I don't know what I want," she said, pondering the many foods that were on her mind at the moment. She wanted everything, it seemed, but when the smell of spicy chili wafted to her on the wind, her stomach growled hungrily and her mouth watered. "Chili. A big bowl of chili and bread and something really sweet."

"I'll be right back."

Dreema didn't miss the amused smile that curved one side of Drake's mouth as he closed the door and locked it. She was going to have to make sure she used that to her advantage. Her being with child had softened his demeanor only more and she knew it was because of what he had been through with his own wife and the child they lost. He seemed like a nice enough man and she wondered if he would live to maybe get his life back in order or if Adam Greely would kill him. She hoped not, for she liked Drake and felt sorry for him and for the child he had lost and the loss of his wife to another man. Those two events had to have left their scars. She promised herself she would do whatever she could to help him if he needed it.

Moving back to the bed, Dreema shook Sunnie awake. "Get up, sleepy head. It's dark out and Drake is bringing us some food."

"Goodness. Did we sleep the day away?"

"Yes, but I think we're now both rested enough after the ordeal we have been through. We need to try and make plans. Tomorrow morning, I'm going to see if Drake will let us walk around after breakfast so we can see just where we are and what this place is like."

"Sounds good to me. I'm tired of being cooped up in here," Sunnie said, slipping off the bed. What is Drake bringing to eat?"

"Chili and bread and something sweet."

"Oh, Lord, I just know your being pregnant is going to make me fat too."

"Fat? I hadn't thought of that, but I will be getting bigger, won't I?"

"Yes, but not right away. I think you start showing around three months."

"And all my pants are skin tight. Do you think we can let them out a little when I start showing? I hate dresses."

Sunnie laughed. "You will be the first woman in the West or in the world probably who wants to wear pants the whole entire time she's pregnant."

"Let's sit at the table and talk until Drake gets back," Dreema said, moving to the table to grab another cracker. I wish he would hurry up. I'm so hungry!" She sat down and watched Sunnie slip into the chair beside her. "Do you remember when my mother made me dress up all the time?"

"Yes, and I remember you riding around with your frills and lace all bunched up around your knees while on a horse's back. Do you know that you were the talk of the town? Of course, no one ever said anything in front of you or your parents, because they were so well respected, but you caused quite a stir."

Sunnie's words brought back the memory of Rachel telling her she had a brother and Adam informing her that her father had an affair with Lydia Mayerts. "Do you know a Lydia Mayerts back home? Adam told me my father was having an affair with her for years. He also had Rachel tell me I have a half brother. Do you know if this is true?"

"Do you remember the time I stayed at your house when my parents had to go on a trip to New Orleans?"

"Yes, but what has that got to do with what I asked you?"

"Well, one evening I went to search for you, not knowing that you had gone to visit with your Uncle Andy at the farm for the day, and I walked into the stables and found your father kissing Lydia."

Dreema's heart sank. "So it is true. How do you know who she is since I had never heard of her until Adam told me about her?"

"I lived in town. There's quite a difference in being right in town, then living where you did. Although you weren't far away and lived in a magnificent home, you were quite sheltered. Even when you worked for your father in his office, everyone knew never to say anything to you."

"Tell me about her," Dreema said, as the door opened and Drake walked in carrying a tray full of food.

"I hope this is enough," he said, looking at Dreema. "I know how hungry women in your condition can get."

"Oh, it smells so good! Thank you, Drake!" She picked up a large bowl of chili off the tray and took a bit. "This is hot and spicy and tastes so good!"

Drake beamed. "Good. You enjoy it. I'll be right outside if you need anything."

Dreema took a couple more bites before turning to Sunnie. "Tell me about Lydia while we eat."

"Are you sure you want to hear this? I mean, your father and you were so close that I don't want to make you think less of him in any way."

"You won't. Besides, I want to know who my half brother is too."

Sunnie took a bite of her chili and groaned. "This is going to kill me it is so spicy and hot," she said, eating anyway.

"Quit stalling, Sunnie. Tell me."

Lydia Mayerts is a beautiful woman, even to this day. I saw her right before I left. She was in church with her son, Randolph Morgan Knights."

"She named her son after my father and he has our last name?"

"Yes, it seems your father made up the necessary paperwork so his son would be legal in the eyes of the law."

"Being my friend, why didn't you ever tell me? You knew how much I always wanted a brother or sister."

"Because it wasn't up to me and I thought maybe your father or mother would tell you one day."

"Adam said my mother never knew."

"She knew, all right. Your mother came to visit mine one day after she had been to the doctors. I was young at the time, so I guess they didn't think anything about me being in the room while they talked and I practiced on the piano. Your mother told mine that she had just found out that she could never carry another baby or take a chance at having intimate relations with your father any longer. It could kill her. She was very upset and said she knew how much Randolph wanted a son. They talked for a long time and your mother said she was going to give Randolph the freedom he needed to fulfill his dream of a son."

"Sunnie finished the last of her chili and pushed her plate away. "But how did Lydia Mayerts come into the picture?"

"I don't know exactly how they got together, but they were seen about town a few times. People talked when Lydia became pregnant, but no one wanted to be on the wrong side of your father. He was the best lawyer in town and many times helped people who needed it without charge. He had enough clients who had money that he could afford to do that."

"Yes, I remember several times my father helped someone even if they didn't have the money for a lawyer. Is Lydia's son still living back home?"

"Yes, he has his own lawyers office there. Your father left him quite a bit of money and he also educated him."

Dreema reached for the peach cobbler. "I want to meet him. When we get out of this mess, I want to go back home and see him."

"Maybe we can travel back together and your Uncle Andy can come too."

Dreema pushed her empty plate away. "I'm stuffed and tired. Why don't we go back to bed and then tomorrow, we can finally get out of this car for a little while."

"That sounds like a good idea, although I don't know how I'm going to sleep after eating all this."

Dreema laughed and went to the bed and lay down. Her last thoughts were of her brother and of Gus. She wanted to see Gus before anyone else.

"Hurry up and find me, Gus," she whispered, before falling into a deep sleep.

Gus awoke at the crack of dawn to find Dan had breakfast cooked and was in the process of saddling their horses. "Morning." He said, throwing off his blanket and getting to his feet to pour a cup of coffee.

"I told you to go to sleep last night instead of talking all night. Knew you'd be tired this morning and grouchy."

"I'm not grouchy!" Gus snapped, taking a sip of the hot, black coffee.

"How much further do we have to ride before we find this God forsaken hideout?"

Dan laughed and moved back to the fire. He filled two plates with bacon and beans and handed one to Gus. "I told you last night. A day yet, but I want you to be on the alert. We should be in Hildago's territory in about five hours. He sends out sentries to scout out the area to make sure no lawmen get within miles of his home which is nestled in between them with only one entrance. He does have an escape route when needed, but only a handful know about it."

"Meaning you know about it."

"Yeah I do, but it isn't an escape route you want to try if you can avoid it."

Gus finished the last bite of his breakfast and broke camp. "Do you think Dreema is all right?" He asked, as they mounted up and started riding.

"Adam Greely is not a stupid man. If he were going to kill her, he would have done it long ago. Besides the papers her father had that incriminated him, he is keeping her alive and well for some other devious reasons. My guess is he wants her inheritance and if he finds out she is pregnant, he will be contacting you to see how much he can ransom her to you for."

"And if he does that, I won't be home to get the ransom note. Then what will he do?"

"Let's hope we have Dreema and Sunnie out of there before that happens."

Gus nodded and urged his mount faster. He was so close to Dreema, but it seemed he was miles away with all the obstacles that blocked his path. One way or another, he was going to rescue her and when he got her home... Gus smiled at the thoughts running through his mind.

Chapter XIII

Dreema was awakened by someone shaking her. She jumped up in bed to find Drake staring down at her, then felt a wave of nausea wash over her. She pushed past him and ran behind the curtain and threw up. "Oh, God, is it going to be like this every morning for nine whole months?"

"Only for the first few weeks, then it should get better," Drake said from the opposite side of the curtain.

Dreema took a washcloth and wiped her face and rinsed out her mouth with water from the pitcher Drake had refilled. The tub was filled with steaming water, but she was too weak at the moment to take advantage of it. She walked back to sit at the table as Sunnie gave her a quick hug. "I'll go first, all right? Eat some crackers."

Dreema nodded and looked up at Drake as he stood on the other side of the table just staring at her. "Thank you, Drake."

"Do you think you might need to see a doctor? I'm sure there's one here or maybe a mid-wife," he said, as Adam Greely stepped into the room followed by a beautiful Mexican woman.

"Those were my thoughts exactly," Adam said, indicating for Drake to leave the room. He waited until the man left and closed the door behind him before turning back to Dreema. This is Senora Hildago's midwife, Jaunita. She is going to check you and make sure you are pregnant, which I have no doubt about now, and make sure you are all right."

Dreema jumped up out of the chair. "Check me? How?"

Adam laughed. "Well, I think there is only one way to do it, but being the gentleman I am, I'm not going to explain it to you. Before I contact Gus for the ransom, I need to make sure. I will leave you in Jaunita's capable hands."

Juanita smiled and moved to the bed and patted it. "Take clothes off. Lay down. My English not so good, si?"

Dreema shook her head. "No."

"Senorita, come lay down."

Dreema didn't mean to hurt the woman's feelings. Jaunita was old enough to be her mother and still very beautiful with her long, dark hair, pulled back in a braid and wound tightly around her head. "I don't need anyone telling me I'm pregnant. I know."

"I bring many babies in world, si?"

"I will have mine at home and Doc Morter will deliver it."

"Come. I go soon."

"No." Dreema jumped as Sunnie came up behind her and touched her on the arm.

"Dreema, let her check you out. It can't hurt. I'll be here all the time with you."

"I don't know what she has to do to me. I mean... This is awful!"

Sunnies laughed and leaned over and whispered in Dreema's ear. Dreema's eyes grew wide with fear and humiliation. "You've got to be kidding! How do you know all that?"

"My mother, Dreema. She explained it all to me so I would be prepared one day for when I have children, realizing that Dreema's mother had died before she had a chance to tell her the facts of childbirth."

"I knew where babies came from and how, but I never thought you had to go through all that. I want Doc Morter to check me and deliver my baby, not some Mexican woman I don't know. What if she doesn't know what she is doing?"

Jaunita moved to Dreema and put an arm around her and led her to the bed. "Sit. I will check you. I deliver many babies. Hildago's wife eleven times."

"Eleven?"

"Si, now lay down."

Dreema did as she was instructed, but as Jaunita continued the examination, she knew her face was a fiery shade of red. She was mortified that a woman she did not know was checking her most intimate places."

"There. Done," Jaunita smiled. "You are fine. Baby is fine. I guess you to be just a few short weeks."

"Dreema pulled the blanket up around her. "I could have told you that."

"Si. I inform Senor Greely. Make sure you get plenty of rest and eat good," she said, turning and leaving the room.

Dreema pushed back the blanket and rushed behind the curtain and threw up again. With Sunnie's aid, she sunk into the still warm water of the tub and tried to relax. "I will never do anything again to get pregnant! I will stay unmarried and untouched from now on!"

Sunnie giggled hysterically. "Until Gus gets his hands on you again!"

Dreema dunked her head under the water and washed her hair. "We'll just see about that!" She finished her bath and dressed in the same clothes she had on for the past few days. I wish I had a clean change of clothes so I could wash these out. I'll tell Drake to get me some pants."

"There's a nice skirt and blouse that Drake brought in this morning. Why don't you put them on? With your suntan and long, black hair, you could pass as Mexican. I like the way the skirt flows around my legs. It's lots cooler too."

"That's it!" Dreema cried. "If I can slip away from Drake while I am walking outside, I may be able to steal us a horse and we can get away from here."

"How are we going to slip away from Drake? He watches us like a hawk. Besides, we don't know where we are at or which way is home."

Dreema walked out to sit at the table. "At least it is the beginning of a plan. I'm going to see if Drake will let us go outside and get some fresh air after breakfast and I wish he'd hurry up, I'm starved!" Dreema said, as Adam Greely walked in.

"Well, little mother to be. Drake here has a big breakfast for you and after you finish, he will take you outside for some fresh air. I'll be out doing a little business for the rest of the day, so I just wanted to make sure you both know not to cause any trouble. Hildago has granted me four guards, so I wouldn't test their shooting skills. It doesn't make any difference if they shoot a woman or a man, so the choice is yours."

"I'll watch them, boss," Drake said, sitting the tray down.

Adam laughed and walked towards the door. "If you don't, I'll shoot you when I get back." He slammed the door behind him.

"I don't think I like him anymore," Drake said, pulling out a chair and slumping into it. I miss my ranch. I have enough money now to get the taxes paid and do a lot of repairs and get a few heads of cattle. That's all I ever wanted anyway." He looked at Dreema.

"Well, maybe we can come up with a plan that will help all of us out of this situation. We just need to make sure it is fool proof so one of us doesn't get killed. Do you know how to get us home from here, Drake?"

"Yes, Miss. I'm familiar with the territory and I know where the secret entrance way is."

"Then we will make plans. Why don't you join us for breakfast? There's plenty of food and Adam isn't here to know you had breakfast with us."

"I can't. I'll go eat in the dinning car the way I always do. I'm being watched too."

"I'm sorry," Drake. If it wasn't for me, then none of this would be happening."

Drake pushed up heavily from the chair. "No, Miss, it isn't your fault. I made a mistake when I thought Adam Greely was only after what was due him. I know now he is using others for what he can get. I'm sorry I had a part in all this. Please forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive. So, do we just knock on the door when we are ready for our walk?"

"That's fine. I'll eat and then be right outside."

Dreema watched him leave. "You know Sunnie. We just got some good luck on our side. Drake finally sees Adam as he is and he's homesick. We're all going to have to work together and make sure we don't make any mistakes," she said, piling her plate high with flapjacks and sausage. I'm feeling lots better already and I just know that Gus will be here soon. I have a feeling that he's close by."

Gus rode behind Dan as they entered Hildago's town. "Does he have a name for this place?" He asked Dan as they rode down the street. Several times his horse reared as men and women ran across the street in front of them. Most were drunk even though it was morning yet.

"Outlaw's Heaven!" Dan grinned and I guess some think of it that way too since there is no law here other than Hildago's."

Gus urged his horse up beside Dan's. "Where are we headed?"

"See that shack down there? It usually has a couple beds that aren't occupied because it's at the edge of town. That's where we want to go. The railroad runs right beside it. We'll know in a few minutes if Greely is here or not."

Gus wanted to kick his horse into a run and get there as fast as he could, but he knew he had to use every caution and that from now on, he had to let Dan lead the way. This was his territory. He knew the rules and Gus wouldn't do anything to jeopardize any of their lives anymore than necessary.

As they passed through the town, Gus noticed it was just as Dan had described. There was just a bunch of shacks thrown together haphazardly. The buildings weren't even straight, but one thing he noticed immediately was there wasn't any trash in the streets. Some places even had pots of flowers and brightly designed pottery sitting on uneven steps. As they passed one store,

Gus saw belts and hats with concho's decorating them and colorful skirts and brightly woven wool blankets.

"Bingo!" Dan leaned over and said. "Look."

Gus saw the train. There were several guards standing around it and as they rode up to the building beside it, Dreema and Sunnie stepped through a door in the last car and stood on the small platform before Drake lifted them down to the ground. Gus's heart slammed against his chest and it took all of his self-control not to ride up and snatch Dreema onto his horse, despite the threat of being shot at and ride off with her towards home.

"Easy," Dan cautioned, "Dismount and take your time getting your bedroll and saddlebags off your horse so you can see she's all right." He did the same, taking in Sunnie's long blond hair gleaming almost white in the sun and her figure enhanced by a white blouse that showed an enticing glimpse of cleavage. As she walked, the colorful skirt swirled about her knees, showing him her silky bare legs below the ruffles edging the bottom.

"Give me a couple minutes." Gus's voice shook with emotion. He drank in the site of Dreema as she walked, stretching and looking up at the sky as though she hadn't seen it in a long time and he guessed she hadn't. He knew that to take away her sunshine and her freedom was one thing that could slowly kill her and he vowed he'd never let anyone hurt her again. When he reached for his rifle, he saw her look up and turn his way. Their eyes met and he saw the slight frown that pulled down the corners of her mouth, then she laid her hand on her stomach in a gesture that he would never forget, and in that moment, he knew she carried his child.

"We can't stay out here long," Dan said quietly, as a man came out of the building.

"Hey! What are you doing here? No one's allowed here without permission. How'd you get past the sentries?"

Dan turned and looked at the man. Of all the lowlife's to be here in Outlaw's Heaven, it just had to be Deek Anders. He was one of the worst of the worst and there was no love lost between the two of them. "I know my way around," Dan said, just as Deek made a roaring sound and barreled head first at him.

Dan sidestepped and with one lithe movement, reached out and grabbed him by his neck and squeezed, lifting him off the ground. "Don't mess with me, Deek. I'll tear your guts out and tie you up with them Indian style!"

"Breed!" He yelled and twisted around and brought his fist up and landed it on Breed's jaw. Pure pleasure ripped through him, as Breed flew back to land no more than five feet from two women who had stepped closer from the train to watch the fight.

Breed shook his head and jumped to his feet, making sure he faced Sunnie. He saw her blue eyes widen in surprise.

"Watch out Mister!" She screamed.

Breed twisted around in time to see Deek barreling towards him again. He met him head on and knocked him to the ground. He heard the breath whoosh from his lungs and took the advantage of time and pulled out his knife. He pushed the deadly blade against Deek's throat. "If you aren't out of here in five minutes, and I mean five minutes, then I'm going to slash your throat from ear to ear and then feed your worthless hide to the buzzards!" To make his point, he sliced a thin line across his throat, then jumped to his feet.

He turned to the women. "Sorry about the ruckus, Ladies." He winked at Sunnie and returned to his horse where several men stood watching and whooping him on!

"Breed! Is it really you?" Old Owen Parks called, then slapped him on the back. "You really gave Deek what fer! About time too! He's liked to drive us all out of Outlaw's Heaven! Are you here bounty huntin' and should I hide?"

Breed laughed. "Nah, I quit that. Traveled too many miles until I was saddle sore. I made good money, but I missed the old gang and here I am."

"Who's the feller with you?"

"His name's Trev. We've been riding together for awhile. He's ok."

"He has an eye for the women, I see," Owen grinned, pointing at him. "He hasn't taken his eyes off them there gals since we came out here."

Breed laughed. "One of his downfalls. That's how we ended up riding together. Seems he had a fancy for a Sheriff's wife and the Sheriff had a hankerin' to kill him for it. I rode into town and saved his neck from the noose. Right Trev?" He said, moving over to nudge him in the side. "I said, right Trev?"

"Trev?" Gus said, looking at Dan as though he had lost it, then noticed the men looking at him. "Oh, yeah, right, Breed!" He agreed as he watched Drake escort Dreema and Sunnie back into the railroad car.

Breed shook his head. "Owen, would you happen to have any of that chili you were always so good at making and some of those biscuits? I'm starved!"

"Sure do! Come in and make yourself at home," he said, as Deek pushed past them, gathered his gear, and left.

"You know you're gonna have trouble with that one. He'll wait until your back's turned and then shoot you. Just throw your gear on one of those beds, he indicated by the front door and come and sit down at the table. I'll get your food."

Breed took the one right inside the door and indicated for Trev to take the other one. He was glad he had thought of a name so quickly for Gus. Gus was just too obvious and Trev used to be the name their father had called him when Gus had gotten in some kind of trouble. It would be one that would be easy for him to answer to. "Let's go eat, Trev," Breed said, leading the way to a partitioned room in the back.

Trev pulled out a chair and sat down. "That sure does smell good," he complimented, as Owen placed two large bowls of chili and thick slices of bread down on the table.

"Be ready to sweat! She's spicy and hot!"

"Sounds good to me. I'm tired of beans and bacon."

Owen laughed. "Yeah, I remember when Breed and I rode together. When it was his turn to cook, I had to liven up the meal with some hot peppers and spices. Breed just made plain old beans and bacon and left all the grease in there too. Hard on the stomach."

Trev laughed. "Seems he knows you well, Breed."

"Owen was like a father to me. There isn't much about my life he don't know."

Trev looked at Owen as he poured them coffee and himself a cup and joined them at the table. He glanced out into the outer room. "Ok, we're all alone now, so why don't you tell me why you're really here?"

Breed took a few bites of chili and bread before answering. "Adam Greely and the women he has here."

"I thought as much, hearin' as how Greely had just hightailed it out of Texas and was layin' low here while he went about his business. You know he sent a telegraph to a Gus Thorne today demanding ransom for one of the women. Seems the woman's pregnant."

Trev leaned forward. "Do you know how much ransom he asked for?"

"Now I sure do since I be the one who sent the telegraph for him. Two grand, but you know what he bragged about? He said there was no way in hell you would get away that cheap, but it would make a good down payment to start with."

Trev caught Owen's meaning. You know who I am then?"

"Knew as soon as I set eyes on ya! You're all Breed talked about when we two was alone and having a game of cards and whiskey."

Trev glanced at Breed.

"Don't be getting a big head over it. I was just homesick," he said, throwing Owen a meaningful look.

Owen laughed. "I'm happy to see everything worked out for the good for you, Breed. You're a good man. Now, though, you're both in way over your heads. If there's no answer to that telegram in a couple days, Greely's gonna be upset and that's going to make Hildago upset and you know that spells trouble with a big T!"

"What does Hildago have in all this? I know that Greely brought him guns and ammunition and whiskey."

"He sure did and that soothed Hildago for awhile, but Hildago is just as greedy as Greely. Hey, that's rhymes!" Owen slapped his thigh and laughed.

"And what is Hildago thinking he can get if he plays his cards right?"

"Greely's private train for one. Hildago's always wanted one and that's one reason the guards are there. To protect the train, not to protect Greely like Greely thinks it is. Hildago also knows the women are valuable to someone, but Greely hasn't told him who their valuable to yet, but Hildago will be here tonight and he'll be in to see me and I have no choice but to tell him all about the telegram that Greely sent today."

Breed pushed back his empty bowl. "When Hildago finds out just how valuable Dreema and Sunnie are, then he'll have them escorted to his hacienda as his guests, but in reality, they will still be prisoners."

"Yup," Owen said, looking at Trev to see how he was takin' the news.

Trev rubbed his beard thoughtfully. "Hildago is in it for the money, right? So, if he knew he could make a deal with the man who had the money to pay the ransom, then he would get Greely out of the way?"

"He's planning on killing him anyway, so I don't see how it would make much difference. He already knows which bank Greely keeps his money in and how much he has. Hildago has a few men in Ohio right this minute to rob the bank where Greely has most of his money, then when Greely can't

come up with payment, Hildago will have him shot, and he will still have his insurance. The women.”

“If I let Hildago know who I am, would he deal with me?”

Owen shook his balding head. “He won’t trust you, but if you got the money he wants, then he will work with you. I’d say to let him work with Breed and for you just to stay in the background. He knows Breed and he likes him, that is as much as Hildago can like anyone, but with Breed being a half-breed and an outlaw, he will trust him more and he may even let you all leave instead of killing you and keeping the women for his own pleasure.”

“I’d kill him first, Trev whispered fiercely, looking at Breed. “What do you think?”

“It’s the only chance we have. Hildago knows that I won’t betray his trust or give away his hide out. I’ll speak to him and tell him I have brought you to him so you two can work out a deal. Hildago also needs cattle. It’s hard keeping food for the whole town, especially when Hildago takes most of the shares for him and his family and hates to spend it to keep his town alive and well. I think if you offer him several hundred head of prime beef, that will encourage him to lean toward deals with you.”

“What about the money? How do I get it here from my bank back home?”

“Is there someone there that can hand over a couple of grand?”

“My attorney. If I write a letter, he’ll get the money out and give it to whomever Hildago sends.”

“Then I’d say you got a chance, but remember, don’t let any of the other ones here know who you are. I think Greely has some men around here on his payroll to keep their ears and eyes open for him. When Hildago finds out they’re dead men.”

“Breed’s already filled me in on that much. When will Hildago arrive in town?”

“After dark. He never comes in the daylight and he leaves before daylight too and he’ll have an army of armed men with him.”

“No one, not even the outlaws here in town get close to Hildago unless he wishes them to.”

Trev pushed up from the chair. If you two don’t mind, I’m going to step outside for a smoke, then get some shut eye. It’s going to be a long night it looks like.”

Breed laughed. “You don’t smoke.”

“I do now,” he said, pulling out a cheroot and lighting it up. Talk to your friend and catch up on things. I’ll make sure no one comes in unannounced.” Trev nodded at Owen and left the room and walked outside.

Trev had just leaned up against the front of building by the door when he saw Adam Greely coming out of a building across the street. He pulled his hat low over his forehead and pretended to be staring at his feet. All he wanted to do was run over to him and beat the hell out of him for what he had done to Dreema and for killing her parents. It made no difference that Jack was the one who had done the deed itself, but Greely had paid Jack to do his dirty work for him.

He watched as Greely hurried to the railroad car and hefted his large frame up on the platform leading to the dinning car. “He hoped he was at least feeding Dreema and Sunnie good since it was lunch time, then saw Drake

coming out of the car with a tray of food and take it to the car where the women were. His mind eased somewhat. "Hang in there Dreema. I'm here," he whispered beneath his breath. "No matter what I have to do, I'll get you back home."

Dreema smiled at Sunnie as she kept going on about the gray eyed man in the buckskins they had watched fight. When Drake brought in a tray with crispy fried chicken and potatoes and gravy and shelled peas, she noticed his black eye. "What happened?" She stood up to touch the bruised area gently.

"I made the mistake of telling Greely I was quitting when this job was done. Guess he didn't like it much."

"I hope you hit him back!"

"I didn't get a chance. He pulled his gun on me and told me if I messed up one more time he would shoot me and then the care of you ladies would be in his hands only and he wouldn't take as good care of you as I do."

"I'm sorry, Drake. If not for me, then neither you nor Sunnie would be in this mess." She sat back down in the chair and felt tears well in her eyes and unable to stop them, they fell down her cheeks. She sniffed and wiped them away, but more fell.

"Don't cry, Miss, and don't blame yourself. I got myself in this situation and I'll find a way out of it. If I were a killer, I would just shoot Greely and get it over with, but in this town, I'd be killed before Greely hit the floor, then you'd both be left unprotected."

"We have to do something and soon," Dreema said.

Drake nodded. "I got to go back or Greely will wonder what I'm doing in here. I'll be back in an hour and let you walk around outside again for a while."

"Thanks, Drake," Dreema said, watching as he walked out the door, his shoulders slumped in defeat. She turned to Sunnie who had already filled her plate and was eating. "I don't know why, but I have this feeling that Gus is close by."

"If he were, then why hasn't he gotten us out of here?"

"Because he would have to be careful and plan his actions."

Sunnie nodded. "True, but if anyone were going to rescue me, I'd love for it to be that guy that was fighting outside. He winked at me and it's the funniest thing. It's like I know him, but that's impossible."

"Maybe it's not. Did you see the other man with him?"

"No. I was looking at the one fighting."

Dreema got up from the chair and moved to the small window facing the town. She pulled back the red velvet curtain that covered it and looked out. Sure enough, the man she was talking about was leaning against the building smoking. She studied his actions, and as if he knew she was looking at him, he looked her way, slipped off his black hat, then put it back on. For a long time they just stared at each other, then the man smiled and her heart pounded furiously. "It's Gus!" She cried, lifting her hand and waving.

"What?" Sunnie rushed to look out too. "Where?"

"Right there! The man leaning up against the building."

"It doesn't look like Gus. He has a beard and long hair and his clothes are different."

Dreema smiled and nodded as the man tipped his hat and moved to go back inside the building. She let the curtain fall back in place and walked to the table. She picked up a piece of chicken and took a bite. Suddenly her heart felt lighter and she didn't feel as scared. "I would know that smile anywhere. No matter how long a beard he'd wear and of course, he couldn't ride in here looking the same as he did at home, or Greely would know who he is."

Sunnie sat down beside her. "Then the man in buckskins must be..."

"Dan!" Dreema said, giggling. "And you wanted a man who was more dangerous than he was and more exciting!"

Sunnie laughed too. "I'm really hungry again," she said. "You know, by the time you have this baby, we are both going to be fat then neither Gus nor Dan will love us anymore."

"I don't think it would matter one bit to either one of them, but we have to be careful not to give them away. We have to act the same because if we do any differently than we have been, Adam will get suspicious and we need to be ready in case Gus and Dan come after us to escape."

"How long do you think it will take?"

"I hope not long. I just want to get out of here and be safe in Gus's arms once more," she declared, finding it so hard to sit wait when Gus was so close by.

Trev walked back into the building to join Owen and Breed at the table in the back. When he pulled out the chair and slumped heavily into it, Breed looked at him.

"You didn't." He stated, leaning forward on the table.

"Didn't what?"

"Didn't somehow let Dreema know it was you?"

Gus rubbed his beard. "I couldn't help it. When she pulled back the curtain and looked at me, she had such a confused look on her face and an expectant one. I had to let her know I was here for her. I had to give her hope and the smile on her face was worth it no matter what happens. At least she knows I've come for her and she's not alone." He said, as Owen set a cup of coffee in front of him, then added a shot of whiskey to it. "Thanks."

"You know, Breed. It might not be that bad. Now the women know you're here and it will keep them from doing something foolish, like trying to escape on their own. You know they aren't going to let on or act any differently. They're smart enough to know that you have a plan or have to devise one to get them out of here. I think Trev did the right thing."

Breed leaned back in the chair and stretched his long legs out under the table. "Let's hope so. We can't afford for anything to go wrong at this point in time. I just wish Hildago would ride in now instead of having to wait until tonight." He said, just as the sound of men on horseback sounded outside with whooping and hollering.

Owen grinned. "Well, it looks like you're getting your wish. Must be something important for Hildago to show up in town in the middle of the afternoon. He walked to the door and waited, knowing Hildago would come to his place to find out information from him about Greely.

Trev looked out past Owen's slim body standing in the doorway to see several riders rein in their horses in front of the building. Raucous voices talking in Mexican filtered in through the door as Owen stepped back to let one

man enter and Trev knew it was Hildago. His countenance bore respect and loyalty and his dark brown eyes sought out Breed.

"Breed, my friend! I heard you were here!" Hildago said with a heavy Mexican accent tainting his English. "Have you returned to ride with me once again or to try and take me in?"

Breed rose to his feet and moved forward to shake Hildago's hand. "Do you think I'd have a chance in hell, my friend, of capturing the most famous outlaw in the land?"

Hildago laughed loudly. "Not a chance in hell, no!"

Breed looked at the men filing into the room. He leaned towards Hildago and whispered. "What I have to offer you is for your ears only and your most trusted men."

Hildago turned. "Pedro, Fernandez! You will stay and the others will wait outside. Shut the door behind them!" He moved to stand before Trev who had risen from his chair. "Who is the gringo?"

Breed moved to stand beside Trev. "Hildago, I want you to meet my half brother. His name for now is Trev."

Trev removed his hat to show his respect and offered his hand. "I'm honored to meet with you," he said, finding himself in awe of the famous outlaw, Hildago. He wasn't a big man, but he carried himself with an air of authority and dignity. His smile was wide and showed even white teeth that contrasted sharply with his dark skin. His black hair was cut short and his mustache trimmed neatly.

Hildago laughed and shook his hand heartily. "You know how to keep living! Owen, bring us some whiskey and big bowls of that chili you got on the stove. I've missed your cooking!" He pulled up a chair and sat down, indicating for Breed and Trev to join him. "First we will have a drink to honor our friendship, Breed, and to honor the acquaintance of a new one."

Breed grinned and stood up, holding his glass of whiskey. "To Hildago, the best friend an outlaw ever had."

"Si!" Hildago cried, as he waited for Breed and Trev to drink first, then tossed the whiskey back in his throat and swallowed it. "Another!"

Trev filled Hildago's glass and waited for him to make the next move. He knew that Hildago was always used to being in charge and sensed that this was a test of his patience and his ability to let Hildago move the conversation to the matters at hand.

Hildago set down the glass as Breed resumed his seat. "Now tell me what you are here about and what you have to offer me." He focused his keen brown eyes on Trev.

Trev told him the story of Adam Greely beginning back to the time of Dreema's parent's deaths up to the present. He watched Hildago's eyes darken when he told him that Dreema carried his baby. "Then she must come to my hacienda, where she will be treated with the utmost respect and waited on hand and foot. She must not be allowed to remain in that hot railroad car where she cannot move around and enjoy the fresh air! You will all be my guests! Fernando, make the necessary arrangements. We will leave shortly!"

Trev looked at Breed before saying anything. At Breed's nod of approval, Trev reached out his hand to Hildago; "Thank you and I appreciate your offer of hospitality. I am honored to stay at your home."

"Si!" Hildago smiled and turned to Owen. "Has Greely sent any telegraphs?"

Owen moved to sit at the table. "A couple. He telegraphed to his bank in Ohio and he telegraphed Gus Thorne for two grand for the return of Dreema, but he told me he would take the money sent and then demand more ransom for her and the baby."

Hildago leaned back in his chair and lit a cheroot. "Greely is not always honest when he speaks to me," he said, turning to Trev. "You are Gus Thorne, Si?"

"Yes, and for your help, I am willing to deal with you."

Hildago puffed on the cheroot and stared thoughtfully at Breed's brother. "I will trust you because I know Breed. I know he would not have brought you here if he thought you would betray me in any way or my hideout. "So, do you offer me the two grand that you would have paid Greely?"

Trev leaned forward and stared into Hildago's eyes. "I offer you four grand and a thousand head of cattle from my ranch."

Hildago's eyes widened. "You must love this woman very much! This I understand. I also know that the child plays an important part of what you offer. You will make a good husband and father. This I know. Like me, I provide for my family. Maybe not in honest means like yours, but I do what I have to do for them and my people here."

"Understood," Trev answered.

"Are you prepared to deliver the cattle to my hacienda personally and the money?"

Trev didn't hesitate. "Yes, you have my word, he said as Breed spoke up.

"And mine too."

"Deal!" He reached out his hand and Trev and Breed shook on it. "Now, let us go get your woman and her friend. I will give you tonight to be with them, and I think Breed would also like to see the light haired one. You will all go with me to my hacienda and I have a carriage ready for the women to ride in, so they will be comfortable. In the morning, you will leave to bring me your offer. Is this good?"

Trev rose to his feet. "It is very good," he said, reaching his hand out to Hildago once more. "And if there is any time at all that you need more cattle to feed your people, then you send someone to my ranch and I will give them to you for your help and for your hospitality to Dreema and Sunnie until we get back."

Hildago stood and shook his hand. "I have made a good friend. I will protect them with my life and they will have anything their hearts desire until you return."

"I trust you, my friend," Trev said as they started moving to the door. He stopped. "What about Greely? What if he holds the women hostage from you?"

Hildago laughed and slapped Breed on the back. "You're brother, he does not know Hildago very well, huh? He is still afraid this Greely will hurt his woman. Come!" He moved to step out onto the wooden porch as his men surrounded him, their rifles ready. "Bring Greely to me and his man, then release the women!"

Trev watched as Hildago's men surrounded the train and boarded it. He heard Greely's outraged cries as he was pulled from the dinning car, his napkin still tucked into his shirt.

"What's going on?" He demanded, staring murderously at Hildago. Hildago stepped forward. "You try to cheat me and call me your friend!"

Greely shook his head in denial. "No! I am not cheating you!"

"Silence!" Hildago demanded. "You will be shot for your treacherous betrayal and your man!"

"No! No! I will give you the two grand I telegraphed Gus Thorne for. You can have it!" Greely said, as Drake was pulled out of the car to stand beside him.

"You, give my man the key to release the women!"

Drake handed it over to one of the Mexican men with no qualms at all and watched as the man went to the railcar and unlocked the door, then turned back to stare at the Mexican man, called Hildago. He was formidable and as he glanced sideways at Greely, he smiled when he saw him shaking in his boots. For once, Greely was truly terrified. He just hoped he wasn't going to die for his part in Greely's dealings. He hoped Dreema would try and help him.

Dreema looked up from the table, expecting to see Drake. Instead a Mexican man stood there. She stood up and pulled Sunnie up beside her.

"What does he want?" Sunnie asked, her voice trembling in fear.

"I don't know what's happened, but let's stay together. Obviously, he is indicating that we should go with him."

Dreema held tightly to Sunnie's hand as she walked to the door and stepped out onto the platform. The place was full of men and one in particular stood out from all the others. His attention was focused on Greely, but when he noticed her and Sunnie, he walked to the steps. "Senorita's. You are both very beautiful. Come. I have a surprise for you."

Dreema took his offered hand, not knowing what else to do. They were no match for this man and his army. "Thank you," she said, as he assisted her, then Sunnie down the steps to stand beside him. She knew without a doubt that this was the outlaw Hildago.

"Ah," Hildago smiled. "You are also very gracious besides beautiful. Come."

Dreema and Sunnie walked with him, where he stopped in front of Greely. "You dare hold a woman who is with child and ask ransom for her? You dare to lie to me about the money you get for her and her friend?"

"I didn't know she was pregnant!" Greely cried.

Hildago's fist shot out quickly and landed in Greely's face. "You lie!" He turned to his men. "Take him and his friend!"

"No!" Dreema cried, rushing to take hold of Hildago's arm. "No, please! Drake is not bad. He did everything to help us. He was good to us!"

Hildago stared down into the greenest eyes he had ever seen. They were like the springtime grass and shaped like almonds. If he weren't already a happily married man, he would take her for himself. She had fire, this woman of Gus Thorne's. She would give him many sons. "You wish for me to let him live?"

"Yes, please! I will do anything you want or ask of me, but please do not harm him!"

Hildago couldn't resist the urge to make this beautiful woman squirm. She showed no fear at all as she gazed back into his eyes. "You will do anything?"

"Yes," Dreema said without second thought. "If not for Drake, Greely would have left us with little food and would not have cared for us like he did.

Hildago laughed. "Then you will go with a man of my choosing."

Dreema swallowed. "I am another man's woman and I carry his child," she said, wondering where Gus and Dan were. Had Hildago killed him?"

"Si," but you will go with this man I choose and you will marry him at my hacienda this evening."

Dreema felt like she was going to throw up again. She looked from Hildago to Drake and knew she couldn't let him die. "I will do whatever you want me to, Hildago, to save his life."

Hildago threw back his head and laughed. "Ah, Senorita, you are like the wind. Vicious one moment and soft and docile the next. "Trev, Breed!" He yelled. "Come and get your women! Drake, you may thank the lady for saving your life."

Drake exhaled the breath he had been holding. "Thank you, Sir," he said, moving to stand protectively at Dreema and Sunnie's side as two men walked up to them.

"Gus!" Dreema cried and ran into his open arms. "Oh, Gus! I have missed you so much! I knew you were here! I knew it was you!"

Gus laughed and captured her lips in a fiery kiss, as Hildago and his men cheered. "Are you all right," He asked, tearing his lips from hers to look at her.

"I'm fine. Drake took good care of us."

Gus turned to Drake. "Thank you, Drake. I knew you weren't a bad person. I knew you done it to save your ranch, but anytime you need help, just come and ask me for it. Maybe we can work something out. I know you are good with horses and I have some fouts that will be born soon. Maybe you can break them when the times comes and give me some advice on breeding?"

"Be happy to Gus." Drake felt like the weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders.

"Thanks, and if you can do me another favor, I'll pay you well for it. While Dan and I go back and get a thousand heads of cattle for Hildago, will you stay here at Hildago's hacienda and watch over Dreema and Sunnie? Make sure they are all right?"

"Sure I will," Drake said as Dreema stepped between them.

"What do you mean take care of Sunnie and I while you and Dan go home?"

Gus glanced at Breed, but saw him carrying Sunnie to the carriage Hildago had brought for them. "Dan and I have made a deal with Hildago. I have to deliver him a thousand head of cattle and you and Sunnie will be his guests while we are gone."

"I'm going home with you, Gus, is it's the last thing I do! I'm not leaving your side!"

Gus ran a weary hand over his beard and sighed. "You have to stay here. It is the only way that Hildago will trust us."

"Well, we'll just see about that!" Dreema walked over to where Hildago stood with his men. There was no sign of Greely. "Sir Hildago," she said. "I want to go home with Gus."

"Ah, my lovely Senorita. You will be a guest in my home with my family. You will enjoy your time there," he said as a shrill scream rent the air.

Dreema jumped and looked around as another inhumane cry ensued. "What is that?"

Hildago placed his arm around her shoulders and led her towards the carriage. "It is nothing for you to worry your pretty little head about. It is business to be taken care of by men. Now let me help you into the carriage. You will ride with Breed and Sunnie and your intended."

Dreema got into the carriage and scooted over on the seat for Gus to get in beside her as another scream rent the air, only to end abruptly. "What is that?" She looked at Gus as the carriage began moving and she saw Hildago mount a beautiful black stallion.

"That was Adam Greely and you don't want to know how they killed him."

Dreema gasped. "They tortured him?"

"Forget it, Dreema," Gus said. "It's over and done with. Greely is dead and can't hurt you anymore."

Chapter XIV

Dreema sat in the courtyard at the Hildago hacienda. Gus had been gone for three weeks and it was hard to believe that she was now his wife. She looked at the ring on her finger given to her by Hildago and his wife as a wedding present.

She blushed as she remembered Gus's lovemaking on their wedding night. Hildago's men had serenaded them through the night with music below their bedroom window. And the party he had thrown lasted until noon the next day. It had been beautiful and Gus magnificent. Never in all her life had she ever thought she would be this happy, but she missed Gus terribly and knew that she had no choice but to stay here until he returned.

Remembering Gus's face when she had told him about the baby was something she would never forget. Their lovemaking had been passionate before that, but as Gus had leaned down and kissed her stomach with the sweetest caress of his lips, Dreema had thought she would never be able to catch her breath ever again. And as his lips had continued their journey, she had felt like a million butterflies danced upon her skin. It was a night of whispered promises, gentle touches, and intense passion. So engrossed in her thoughts, she jumped when Hildago cleared his throat.

"Senora Thorne, excuse me for interrupting your thoughts."

Dreema blushed. "It's all right, Hildago. May I do something for you?"

Hildago grinned. "It is I who wish to do something for you. Come, I will show you," he said, offering his arm.

"You have done too much for me already," she said, taking his arm. She couldn't believe that this fine man, who was the most notorious outlaw in Mexico and beyond, could hold such kindness, manners, and be so giving.

"I have done nothing, yet. Come, we go to the corral. I want you to see a present from me."

Dreema walked to the corral with him. Her white blouse felt cool as the sun glared down on her from a cloudless blue sky and her colorful skirt danced around her bare legs in the breeze. The ground beneath her feet felt warm and smooth as they neared the corral. When the mare reared, Dreema's breath caught in her throat. "Oh, Hildago! She is magnificent!"

"Gus told me about what a fine horsewoman you are. He said you had a black stallion at home that would make a fine match for this mare."

"Dreema ran to climb up on the corral fence. "What's her name?"

"I named her Night Fire, for she is as black as the night and has a fire for life."

"Come here, Night Fire!" She called. She watched as the mare threw her head back and stood and looked at her. "Oh, come on Night Fire. I have a handsome stallion at home. His name is Devil and he will just love you. You will make beautiful babies!"

Hildago laughed. "There will be many babies at the Thorne ranch!"

Dreema climbed the rest of the way up the fence and dropped easily to the ground on the other side. "Come on, Night Fire. I want to get to know you," she encouraged, moving slowly towards the mare. When she came within arm's length, she reached out her hand for the mare to smell her. "That's my girl," she praised, as the mare walked up to her and pressed her face

into Dreema's shoulder. She laughed as the mare nickered. "Do you know how to kneel?"

Hildago watched as Dreema worked with the horse and finally found the command that made the mare kneel. His breath caught in his throat as Dreema slipped on the mare's back, grabbed hold of her mane and nudged her into a gallop. Soon they were racing around the corral as his men gathered to watch also. It was if horse and rider were one and when Dreema's hair fell loose of its braid and her hair tumbled below her knees to fly in the wind, Hildago's breath caught in his throat. It was the most beautiful site he had ever seen and he would remember it to his dying day.

Dreema rode the mare to stand in front of Hildago. "Thank you so much! I haven't ridden in so long and I missed it so much! She's beautiful, Hildago!" She slid off the horse's back, climbed over the fence and hugged Hildago and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you and I will send you Devil's and Night Fire's first colt for your wife. I know Lupa loves horses."

Hildago pushed her away gently. "Lupa will love that," he said, noticing his men grinning at the scene they witnessed. He was just about to turn away when gunfire erupted around them. He lifted Dreema in his arms and ran for the hacienda as his men scrambled and started firing back. "Get inside and stay there. Tell my wife to secure the hacienda!"

Dreema rushed to find Lupa, but found she was already getting the children together and the servants were securing the windows. "Lupa, what can I do and where is Sunnie?"

"She's in the courtyard! Bring her to the church!"

Dreema ran to the courtyard, only to find Sunnie being held at gunpoint by a man she didn't recognize.

"I wouldn't yell out if I were you, Lady. I won't hesitate to shoot her."

"Who are you?"

"Deek Anders, as if it's any of your business. Where's Breed?"

"In Texas right now."

"What! I was told he came here and that he was sweet on this little piece of fluff!"

"He left with my husband on business." Dreema yelled. She didn't know how to get Sunnie out of the fix she was in and with all the shooting going on outside the hacienda, she knew it would be a while before anyone came back here looking for them in all the excitement. She shivered at the thought of Sunnie being in the hands of this man. He was deadly. She could see it in his eyes. Even more so than Hildago was. He was at least six feet tall, wore a black shirt with concho's and black pants. His face was hard and unforgiving.

"Then I guess I'll just have to take this little woman with me to make him come and get me, won't I?"

"No!" Dreema cried, running towards them, but the man aimed his gun and shot at her feet. She jumped as the bullet hit the ground in front of her.

"Stop it!" Sunnie screamed. "She's going to have a baby!"

"Doesn't matter to me if I kill her or not. If she wants to live, then tell her not to move closer. You're coming with me."

"Sunnie!" Dreema cried, as the man dragged her back to the wall. She watched as a man leaned down and pulled Sunnie up and over it and then Deek jump up and grab the top of the wall and vault over it.

Dreema stood there and stared at the wall, then turned and ran for the front of the hacienda. There were still some shooting going on outside but it seemed to have lessened considerably. Hildago's men must have been able to take charge against the attackers.

As she approached the heavy doors leading to the outside, she caught site of a gun belt hanging on the wall. She lifted it down from the hook, strapped it around her waist, and checked the chamber for ammunition to find it loaded. Extra shells lined the belt.

Satisfied she could protect herself, she slipped out the door and looked around. The front of the hacienda was deserted and the shooting she had heard was barely audible. Hildago was chasing his attackers.

She ran to the corral and whistled for Night Fire. The mare threw her head up and galloped towards her as she pulled the gate open. Dreema grabbed the saddle hanging over the corral and quickly saddled the horse. "Kneel, Knight Fire," she instructed, and patted the horse on the neck as it lowered to the ground. "Good girl. We're going after Sunnie," she said, slipping into the saddle and slipping her feet in the stirrups.

Dreema urged Night Fire into a gallop and rode around the hacienda to where she figured the court yard to be inside the walls that surrounded it, and slowed Night Fire to a walk. She wasn't a tracker, but she found where Deek had left his horses and the footprints of two men. Both a different size and then she spotted Sunnie's smaller one. She followed the trail up into the hills that she figured led down into a canyon.

It took a while to get to the top because of loose rock, but she finally made it. "Wow, Night fire, I didn't think the descent would be so steep," she said, as Night Fire seemed to agree by shaking her head, then to Dreema's surprise, the mare turned left.

Dreema trusted the mare's instincts and let her go, smiling when she took her to the top of a rise and halted. She looked down below her at the canyon and in the distance, she saw Deek and his partner riding out of the canyon. She was on the right trail anyway.

"I don't suppose you know a better way down there than this Night Fire. I want to get to Sunnie, but I don't want to do anything to risk the life I'm carrying."

Dreema started to turn Night Fire back around to the place they had just been, but the horse nickered and swung her head. "What?" Dreema said, leaning over to pat her on the neck. What are you trying to tell me now?" She let the reins loosen and Night Fire walked about fifty feet ahead. "Good Girl!" Dreema said, as Night Fire began the ascent down what looked to be a path made for riding. Not once did Night Fire misjudge her step nor jolt Dreema as she held onto the saddle horn. When they arrived at the bottom, Night Fire galloped ahead.

Dreema smiled. "It seems you know just where you're headed."

As they rode, Dreema thought of Gus. Where was he right now? It had been three weeks since he left, and she knew he should be back by now. She had no fear that Hildago would hurt her, if something had happened. She trusted Hildago with her life, outlaw or not.

By the time Dreema rode out of the canyon, she couldn't see any sign of Deek. She reined Night Fire in and looked about her. It was late afternoon and she knew that darkness would soon fall and she didn't want to spend the night alone out here. The landscape was beautiful under the beginning setting sun and Dreema caught her breath, as the blood red colors seemed to turn the ground into a blaze of red, dotted with small cacti and large cactus. Night Fire shied at the hiss of a snake and Dreema looked for the rattler. It was curled up by a rock about ten feet from them, ready to start its night hunt.

"What do I do, Night Fire? I've lost my friend and don't know how to help her now."

Dreema glanced around once more and a cloud of dust in the distance indicated that riders were close by. She debated on whether to ride ahead and see if it was Deek and risk getting captured herself, or turn around and hope that Hildago had returned to the hacienda and send some men after him and to bring Sunnie home.

Dreema urged Night Fire into a ground-eating gallop, trusting the horse to know the land better than she did. As she got closer to the dust rising in the air, she saw two riders racing towards her and as Devil's shrill cry reached her ears, Dreema's heart almost stopped. "Gus!" She cried and urged Night Fire into a run, riding up beside Gus as he snatched her out of the saddle onto his lap.

"What are you doing out here by yourself? Do you know how dangerous it is and why are you riding like that when you are pregnant?"

Dreema threw her arms around his neck and cried. "Sunnie! They took Sunnie! I was trying to find her and was just about to turn back to the hacienda when I noticed the cloud of dust and thought maybe it was Deek and his men that took Sunnie."

Gus glanced at Dan and saw the murderous look in his eyes. He felt sorry for any man that had to face his wrath. "Let's get back to the chuck wagon. We'll camp here tonight so Dreema can rest and you can get the supplies you need and go after them. Take a couple of men with you."

"I'll go alone," Dan said, kicking his horse in the side and racing back to the cattle.

Gus dismounted and handed Dreema Devil's reins and moved to the horse she had ridden. He laughed as Devil nickered softly as Dreema leaned over his neck and hugged him. "If not for Devil, I might have missed you. I was riding along side the cattle and before I knew it, we were riding hell bound and leather towards you. I didn't see you at first, wondering what had gotten into him, but as soon as I saw the rider in the distance, I knew it was you."

Dreema hugged Devil and patted him. "I missed you so much," she said, swiping a tear from her eye," laughing as Devil threw his head up and down in agreement, then stepped towards Night Fire. "I brought you a girl friend. Her name's Night Fire. Isn't she beautiful?"

Gus chuckled as he mounted the mare. "Look you two. We don't have time to be courting right now, so let's get back before Dan leaves."

By the time they rode up beside the chuck wagon, Dan had his gear all ready and a packhorse loaded with supplies. Dreema slipped from Devil's back and went to stand beside Dan. "You find her and bring her home?"

"I'll find her and bring her back home to the ranch. Can you tell me where I can pick up their tracks?"

"Where you found me, I had just ridden down a canyon. I could see them from the top headed in that direction," Dreema said pointing to her left.

"I know where he's taking her. Does he know I'm here?"

"No," Dreema quickly explained about the assault on the hacienda and finding Deek holding Sunnie hostage in the courtyard. "I told him you had gone back to Texas with my husband on business, so I don't expect he'll be expecting you any time soon."

"Good," Dan said, and mounted his horse. He looked at Gus. Tell Hildago what's happened and that I am sorry I cannot ride with him again right now and get Dreema home before anything else happens."

"We're going home tomorrow. Don't worry about us. I have the men and we'll be fine. Just go get her."

"I'll get her and Deek and his men are dead men!" Dan let out a spine tingling war hoop and kicked his mount in the side.

Dreema shivered. She had never seen such hatred in a man's eyes. Not even in Adam Greely's. She moved to Gus and put her arm around him. "Dan's part Indian?"

"Yes, and my half brother."

"He'll bring Sunnie home." Dreema said, as Gus led her to the chuck wagon. "What will he do to Deek when he finds him?"

"He'll kill the men riding with him quickly and silently, but I'm afraid Deek will die a slow, agonizing death."

"May Dan's Great Spirit watch over him," she whispered reverently.

"He will," Gus said. He'll bring her home and I can't wait to get you back home where you're safe, and I have a surprise waiting for you."

"What is it?"

"I can't tell you, or it wouldn't be a surprise, now would it?"

"How is Uncle Andy? Did you see him? He knows I'm all right, doesn't he? I bet he is so worried."

Gus laughed. "Whoa! Slow down, but I just remembered, you have two surprises waiting for you."

"Two! Can't you at least tell me what one of them is?"

Gus laughed and leaned down and kissed her. "Your Uncle Andy and my Aunt Mildy are getting married."

"No!" Dreema cried. "Are you teasing me?"

"Nope and the wedding is next Saturday so we have to get home and make lots of wedding plans."

Dreema laughed and hugged him tight. "I'm so happy for them and you don't mind Uncle Andy becoming your Uncle too?"

Gus laughed. "Andy and I get along just fine. I think a lot of him and he makes my Aunt Mildy happy and I haven't seen her this happy since my Uncle Matt died. Now, you stay here while I go and tell the men to bed the herd down for the night. Cook's name is Cookie, believe it or not and he'll get you anything you want and I even brought along tea for you for on the way home. Have him make you a cup."

Dreema walked over to Cookie. "I'm hungry," she told him.

Cookie laughed. "Yes, I figured you would be. Gus told me about the little one. Sit, sit, and I will bring you lots of food and a nice hot cup of hot tea."

Dreema laughed and sat down on a wooden stool that sat beside the back of the wagon. She watched Gus ride off in the twilight and thought of Sunnie. She prayed she'd be all right and hoped they all made it home safely.

"I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride."

Dreema stood up and cheered with the others in the church as her Uncle Andy kissed his beautiful wife, Mildy. She was so happy to be home and to see her Uncle so happy.

She watched as her Uncle escorted Mildy out of the church and then followed behind. Well-wishers threw handfuls of rice at them as they hurried down the sidewalk to the buggy that was decorated with paper flowers and had tin cans tied behind it. There was going to be a big barbecue at the ranch for them. Dreema had given the ranch to her Uncle and Mildy as a wedding present since her and Gus were living at his.

"They make a beautiful couple, don't you think?" She asked Gus as he led her to their buggy.

"Yes, they do," he said, helping her up into the seat.

Dreema smiled as he got in beside her and moved off down the street after them. "I don't think I've ever been this happy. I just wish Sunnie were here. Do you think that Dan has found her or that something has happened to Dan?"

Gus put his arm around her. "Would you stop worrying for just one day and enjoy in your Uncle's happiness?"

Dreema leaned against him. "I'm hungry."

Gus laughed. "We have enough food at the ranch to feed an army and Aunt Mildy made her famous potato salad too."

"Then let's ride faster!" She laughed, when she suddenly remembered something. "Hey," she said, looking up at him. "You said you had two surprises for me when we got home, and this wedding was one, but what happened to the other one?"

"You'll see when you get to the ranch."

"You're giving me a present on your Aunt's wedding day?"

Gus looked up at the sky. "Heaven help me and give me patience."

Dreema punched him lightly on the shoulder. "What's that supposed to mean?" She said as they neared her ranch.

"Just what I said. You are so inquisitive and I love you with all my heart," Gus said, as he parked the buggy behind the several that lined the road to the house. He hopped out and ran around to lift her down. "Come on so you can see your present."

Dreema let Gus lead her to the porch and up the steps. Standing at the top on the porch, was a man. She glanced at him, looked away, the quickly looked at him again. Her heart pounded and she held onto Gus's hand tightly.

"Dreema, meet your brother, Randolph."

Dreema felt the tears slip down her cheeks unchecked. She was uncertain as to what to do, but all she wanted to do was hug her half brother. When he opened his arms and stretched them out to her, she cried and ran into them. "Oh, I don't know what to say! I've wanted to meet you ever since I learned about you! Let me look at you!"

"You are more beautiful than I remember," Randolph said, clearing his throat and glancing at Gus.

"Come on, you two. Come into the parlor where you will have more privacy. I'll go see how things are going with the barbecue and bring you both something to eat and drink."

Dreema stepped into the house as Gus held the door open for them and moved to sit on the couch and reached out her hand for Randolph to join her. "You said as beautiful as you remember me. We never met that I know of but I would have loved to have known you as we were growing up."

Randolph moved to sit next to her and took her hand in his. "I knew about you all along. Our father just thought it best that you didn't know about me. He said he didn't know how you would feel about it, being an only child and all and he didn't want you to feel slighted in any way. He thought you might resent me because I was the son he always wanted. By no means, though, did he love you any less. You are all he talked about to me most of the time and it helped me to feel like I knew you even though we had never met. When your father used to take you out to lunch, I used to be at the restaurant. I would sit at a corner table and watch you with him and it gave me such joy and pleasure to have such a lovely sister."

Dreema pulled her handkerchief from her pocket and dabbed at her eyes. "I would have given anything to have been raised with you."

Randolph fought to control the wetness behind his lids. "I would also have loved that. Do you think we can make up for lost time, big sister?"

Dreema cried and threw her arms around his neck. "We can sure try, but will you be going back home soon?"

Randolph shook his head. "I'm opening up a law firm in town and Gus helped me purchase a house that I can use for my office and home. 'I'll open the doors to new clients in a week and I still have my firm back home in Ohio. A fellow lawyer is running it for me. There will be times that I have to go back, but I am making my home here. I don't want to miss any more time with my sister. There's just one problem. I don't know how you might feel about it."

"What is it? I'll help you in any way that I can, I promise."

"I want to know if you would mind if my mother lived with me. She has a heart condition and I didn't want to leave her back home by herself. She's here. Mother, come here, please?"

Dreema stood and looked at the woman who stepped into the room. She was beautiful even though age had started to show with wisps of silver through her dark hair. She had large blue green eyes and was very dainty. This was the woman her father had loved and the woman who had given him a son and Dreema a brother. She saw the hope in her eyes and had no doubts as she stepped up to her and enfolded her in her arms. "Thank you, Lydia" Dreema whispered, for making my father happy and for giving me the brother I always wanted.

"Oh, Dreema," Lydia cried. "You were always so special to me too. I watched you grow up into a fine young lady and your father always told me about your playful antics that he loved so much. He was so proud of you."

"We are all proud of you, and thank you Sis," Randolph said, moving to enfold the two most important women of his life.

Dreema laughed. "I like that word, Sis. Just you remember I'm your big sister too!" She punched him playfully on the shoulder, and turned to Lydia. "Don't you think we should find him a wife?"

Lydia laughed and cried at the same time. "I've been telling him that he should get married. Maybe you can introduce him to some ladies here at the barbecue tonight."

"Oh, no you don't you two. You leave me alone. I like being a bachelor just fine!" He said, as Gus stepped into the room with a tray laden with food and drink.

He set it down on the end table and turned to smile at Randolph. "You may as well forget being a bachelor for life. These two won't rest until your freedom is gone for good. Believe me, I know!"

Lydia laughed. "Sounds like a happily married man to me."

"I sure am," Gus said, and right now, I want her to eat. After all, we're expecting a baby."

"You mean you didn't tell them before?" She laughed as Gus led her to the sofa and handed her a plate. "No, but I couldn't wait for you to tell them."

Randolph moved to sit in the chair opposite the couch. "I'm going to be an Uncle!"

Lydia smiled and sat down beside Gus and Dreema. "I knit, so I can start making lots of things for the baby."

"Thank you so much," Dreema said, smiling at Lydia. "Maybe you could teach me how to knit? I know how to embroider and make bibs, but that's about it."

"I'd be happy to teach you. Now feed that baby!"

Dreema laughed and enjoyed the feeling of family as they ate. Never did she think she would ever be this happy. She thought back to her father and mother, and wished they could be here to enjoy this day and to know that she held no animosity towards Randolph and Lydia.

Later that night as she lay in bed wrapped in Gus's arms, Dreema whispered. "I love you and thank you for all you have done for me."

Gus held her closer. I would move the heavens and the earth if I thought it would make you happy."

"So you don't regret all that we have been through?"

"Never," he said, lifting her up to gaze into her beautiful green eyes.

"I have a surprise for you," she said teasingly, "but I don't think I'll tell you until tomorrow.

Gus grinned. "I'll make you tell me."

"And how will you do that Mr. Gus Thorne?"

"Like this, Mrs. Gus Thorne," he said; slowly capturing her lips in a heated kiss that slowly and enticingly moved to her throat, then lower. "Tell me now," he cajoled.

"Not yet, my love," she whispered breathlessly.

Gus lowered his lips to kiss the top of her breasts. "Now," he asked huskily.

"Soon," she whispered, arching her back in expectancy.

Gus captured one sweet bud in his mouth and flicked his tongue over the sweet morsel, then moved to the other, loving the taste and feel of her.

"Now will you tell me?"

"You're getting close."

Gus felt his heart begin to pound against his chest as Dreema's hands grasped his shoulders to slide down his back, as he placed tiny kisses on her stomach. She was beginning to show and he felt the difference and kissed her lovingly, then moved to capture her lips in a fiery kiss. As her hands pulled him to her, he gazed down into her passion clouded green eyes and slowly entered her, listening for that tiny catch in her breathing as he began to love her.

"I love you, Gus," she whispered as he carried her to the stars, let her touch each one, and slide down rainbows of beautiful colors to land on fluffy white clouds.

"I love you, my love," Gus whispered, pulling her into his arms as he lay back against his pillow. "Will you tell me the surprise now?"

Dreema raised up on her elbow and gazed into his blue eyes that were still clouded with lingering passion. "I went to Doc Morter today."

"Are you all right? The baby?"

"Yes, I am fine and the babies are fine."

"Thank God," Gus said, as he settled back into the pillow only to rise up slightly and look into her blue eyes again. "Babies?"

"Yes, babies."

"You mean?"

"Yes, two," Dreema smiled.

"Twins?"

"Twins and I'm hungry again."

Gus laughed and jumped from the bed and picked Dreema up in his arms. "Thank God I brought back lots of stuff from the barbecue and there's wedding cake too," he said, carrying her down to the kitchen and gently setting her down in a chair. He turned up the lamp and stopped to just drink in her beauty as she placed her hands on her stomach. He knelt down in front of her and placed his hand over hers. "Two. We're having two babies!"

Dreema nodded and threw her arms around his neck. "I love you so much and our children will have each other to play with and never be lonely. They will grow up together!"

Gus laughed. "And we'll have more than two. We'll have a big family."

Dreema laughed in delight. "Besides you, my love, that is all I ever wanted."

*** * *The End* * ***