

The background of the cover is a dark, moody photograph. It depicts a person's hand and arm, clad in a dark, possibly leather, sleeve. The hand is positioned near a heavy metal chain that hangs down. In the upper right, a black high-heeled shoe is visible, resting on a wooden surface with a decorative, carved pattern. The overall tone is somber and mysterious.

LILY SORREN

THE
LAWMAN

The Lawman
by Lily Sorren

Hard Shell Word Factory

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The Lawman
by Lily Sorren

With love and thanks to my mother, and in memory of my father.

You doubled the joy of good times and halved the sorrow of bad times.

And to my husband, Curt.

My hero always, and my strength

Chapter 1

Kansas, 1868

MORGAN MCCALL HAD never believed in abusing a woman, but tonight—just for tonight—he wished he did. He knew of one fanny in sore need of blistering.

For one night, or even just one hour, he wished he could forget he'd given his word to protect the woman. Forget that he believed in honor and duty. Forget every civilized thing that a man raised as a gentleman of the South was expected to be and do.

He smiled grimly as he eyed the ruined welcome banner the townsfolk had painted for the woman known as Cattle Kate. Flapping overhead, strung between two saloons, it sagged in the cold downpour. Its cheery red letters melted from the cloth like wax from a candle, disappearing into the mud beneath his boots.

He wished it were that easy to make Cattle Kate disappear.

Uneasiness gnawed at his insides and his stomach clenched. Every instinct he possessed screamed that this particular female would be nothing but trouble. No decent woman would traipse across the country unchaperoned as she'd done, even to report on the 'First Cow Town Of The West,' as headlines from New York to Chicago had dubbed Abilene.

Besides, baby-sitting another man's wife galled him more than he cared to admit. He'd had enough trouble from his own wife.

Despite the fact that it was almost summer, the unrelenting storm had left Morgan cold clean through to his bones. Every muscle in his body ached, and an emptiness pulled at his gut. He recognized the pang of hunger even as he became aware of a gnawing inside him for something ... more. More than nights spent patrolling dirty streets and even dirtier saloons. More than a life spent breaking up brawls among drovers who were practically young enough to be his kids.

He shoved his hands deep into his pockets and continued walking. For just a moment he allowed himself the luxury of a daydream, of wishing he could just turn around and go home. He pictured a roaring fire in the grate to warm his outside, and the laughter of his son and daughter to warm his inside.

More than anything else, he wished he didn't have to set eyes on Mrs. Katherine Stewart.

From the detailed description her father-in-law had sent in the telegram, she probably resembled Mary. Pretty and petite, just like his Mary.

His stomach hurt just from thinking her name, even after all this time. How innocent and sweet it sounded; how horribly inappropriate it had been for a woman who could leave her husband and two children for another man.

Even if the whole of Abilene thought of Cattle Kate as some kind of legend, he'd known the minute he'd read the telegram that she was just like his ex-wife, gallivanting across

the countryside instead of staying home where she belonged. He'd wager she probably had children to boot, and left them with some damned nursemaid.

Hell, it would be his pleasure to usher her little fanny right out of town.

His resolve strengthened, Morgan knew exactly what he'd do that night after depositing Katherine Stewart where she'd be safe—and putting her firmly in her place. For the first time, he would visit the brothels in the Devil's Addition. At least for one night, he'd lay the memories to rest in a bottle of rye and take comfort in the soft curves of a warm, willing body. Maybe two.

Decided on a course of action, Morgan relaxed. As he strode past the saloons, his peace of mind didn't last long.

"Hey, McCall, be sure ya hold that little filly's skirts up real high now, so she don't git 'em dirty," a drunk shouted from the Alamo Saloon.

Before the laughter died, a faceless voice from the Elkhorn hollered, "Ain't it time to strap on your Colts again, Mac? I hear Cattle Kate can stir up a handful of trouble."

Even short and bespectacled Warren Hedgepeth couldn't resist adding his two bits as he hung from the Pearl's swinging doors. "Marshal, you want some help to keep Cattle Kate in line?"

Despite the pounding rain and the cracking thunder, Morgan heard every comment and every hearty guffaw. Every one reminded him of the ribbing he'd taken when the men had learned he couldn't hold onto his woman, and they made

him more determined than ever to get Katherine Stewart out of Abilene as quickly as possible.

By the time he reached the depot, Morgan wanted to string up the man who had started this whole mess. Warren Hedgepeth, a puny telegraph clerk, had discovered when Mary left that a little gossip went a long way toward gaining him acceptance in this raw town.

And now, even with a bum leg, the little piss-ant had spread word of Cattle Kate's arrival faster than a prairie fire.

* * * *

MORGAN STOOD IN the shadows watching Katherine Stewart's every move as she waited alone on the depot's platform. A large silver locket dangled across her bodice, winking at him in the faint light. A prim black bonnet cast her eyes in shadow. Trim and dainty, she looked like she was playing dress-up in her mama's somber Sunday clothes. Lace gloves and ridiculous kid slippers, so out of place in Abilene's muddy streets, added to the laughable image.

When a flash of jagged light knifed through the sky, followed by a deafening thunder clap, she jumped, dropping the large carpetbag, the hat box, and the small valise she'd been struggling to hold on to.

Struck by how much she suddenly resembled a frightened child, Morgan was surprised to see her quick recovery. She seemed to grow before his eyes, squaring her slender shoulders and stiffening her spine, as if preparing to face whatever threat nature or man threw in her path.

An admirable show of strength, he conceded grudgingly. But with his next breath, he reminded himself that she was no better than Mary. No better than the soiled doves in the Devil's Addition—maybe worse. At least with a calico queen, a man got what he paid for, and he damned well knew the price up front. At what cost would the citizens of Abilene embrace Katherine Stewart? He had a sinking feeling it would amount to ruin, but he wasn't sure yet of whom.

* * * *

"WELL, WHAT HAVE we here? The famous Cattle Kate scared out of her silk stockings by a little lightning and thunder?"

At the sound of a deep, velvety drawl, Kate whirled around. A shiver skittered up her spine when she spied a man looming in the darkest pockets of shadow, so tall and broad that she found even his silhouette intimidating.

"Ian..." she breathed, but no sound passed her lips.

She looked closer at the shape of the stranger's wide-brimmed hat and the duster flapping at his booted calves. The only similarity between him and her husband was the aura of raw power that emanated from him.

Be strong, her mind commanded. He doesn't know...

Guilt and shame reared up inside her. She pushed them back down and drew a steadying breath, welcoming the chilly air pressing against the sudden dampness on the back of her neck. She tried to make out his face, but little daylight remained and his features were hidden by his hat brim. A hint of silver glimmered from his hatband, reflecting the lamplight

from an office of the nearby stockyards. A barely perceptible smile revealed a brief flash of strong, white teeth.

When he continued to block the path to the steps without so much as a caveman-like grunt, she decided it was time to put an end to his nonsense. After all, she'd survived worse at Ian's hands than whatever this neanderthal thought to try.

Shoulders squared, she stepped forward and extended a gloved hand. "You seem to know my name, but I didn't catch yours."

The tall stranger ignored her hand, sliding his into the pocket of his mud-splattered duster as he leaned against one of the platform's support pillars. "Go home, Mrs. Stewart. You don't belong here."

Why was this odd man so deliberately rude to her? Did the big ox have a bee in his britches? She withdrew her hand. "If you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

"There are no stories here your readers would be interested in. You're coming with me. Matt," he called over his shoulder, "help the lady with her bags."

Kate's shoulders stiffened at the way he said 'lady,' making it sound no better than something that crawled on its belly in the dirt. From the corner of her eye, she spied a dark-haired youth scurrying toward her belongings.

"Sir, I don't even know who you are, and I am certainly not going anywhere with you."

The boy opened his mouth to speak.

"Quiet, Matthew. Pick up those bags and take them home."

"Yes, sir." Struggling under the weight of her belongings, the boy hurried into the night.

Kate fidgeted with her locket. "You may be able to bully the child, but I assure you I won't be bullied quite so easily, Mister..."

"It's not mister, it's marshal. Marshal Morgan McCall." He brushed aside his lapel, revealing the five-pointed star pinned to his shirt.

This uncivilized brute was the law? Lord help her if she should need assistance.

When the marshal's intimidating grimace turned into a smirk, she realized just how silly she must look with her mouth hanging open. Before she could shut it, he advanced, and with the rough tip of an index finger under her chin, shut it for her.

Kate swatted his hand away and took a quick step backward. She clutched the cords of her reticule, wondering if she could make herself use the little two-shot it contained.

"If you'll excuse me, I have a reservation at Mr. Joseph McCoy's Drover's Cottage." Chin high, she gave Marshal McCall a pointed look. "You may direct the boy to deliver my bags there."

She turned to leave, but he grabbed her elbow and spun her around to face him.

"Don't walk away from me, Mrs. Stewart. You're not giving the orders here, I am. I've been hired to protect you—"

Kate wrenched her arm free. "Hired? By whom?"

"Your father-in-law, Leland Stewart. He's received letters threatening your life."

"Oh, really? And just who were these letters from?"

"They weren't signed, but Leland believes a fellow named Thorne is behind them."

"Yes, well, that sounds like Captain Thorne. I'm not surprised to hear he was too cowardly to even sign his own name." She held a cupped palm over her mouth, pretending to stifle a bored yawn. "I'm afraid Captain Thorne's escapades no longer hold any interest for me."

She swiped at her midnight-blue skirt, trying in vain to wipe away the train's dust and cinders, the innumerable wrinkles.

In an instant, McCall closed the small space between them and wrapped iron-hard fingers around her upper arms.

Kate's head snapped up at the assault. She pushed against the solid wall of his chest, trying to put distance between them. He was so close, she could see a tiny muscle jump along the hard line of his stubbled jaw.

"Your life is in danger, Mrs. Stewart. Or don't you care about anythin' that's not fun and fancy?"

McCall was breathing hard, as if he was trying very hard not to lose his temper. Judging by the grip he had on her arms, she didn't think she wanted to be around if he did lose control. Kate struggled to free herself.

McCall gave her a little shake. "I should rattle the teeth out of that empty head of yours. This isn't a parlor game. Somehow Thorne found out you're headed here and he's on your trail. As long as you stay here, there's a chance you could be killed."

He glowered down at her, waiting, but she refused to answer, refused to be bullied ever again.

He heaved a long-suffering sigh. "Look, Mrs. Stewart, I don't like this any better than you do. But I gave Leland my word I'd watch over you while you're in Abilene. Like it or not, we're stuck with each other. I'll take care of you until arrangements can be made for your journey home."

Kate finally managed to jerk free of his grasp. Standing straight and proud, she poked a finger at the marshal's solid chest beneath the star winking on his dark shirt. "Don't trouble yourself over what happens to me and my 'empty head.' I don't need help from you or anyone else, and I'll thank you to mind your own business. Thorne is nothing but a weasel, and I can handle him."

"Your father-in-law doesn't think so. Matter of fact, he warned me you'd be a touch on the disagreeable side."

"Neither my welfare nor my personality are any concern of yours. I've managed perfectly well for two years without anyone's help, and I'll manage this time, too."

McCall's scowl deepened, his dark brows furrowing together. "You're doin' a damned fine job of it, too, standin' here with a strange man, alone in a deserted depot on the fringe of hell."

He jerked her closer against the hard length of his body. His hat brim skimmed her forehead, knocking her black straw bonnet askew, crushing its yellow silk roses. He was so tall, she had to tip her head to see his face. When she did, she found herself staring into the coldest eyes she'd ever had the misfortune to see. They narrowed, roaming over her face and form, then his lip curled as if he'd already passed judgment and found her pitifully lacking in some crucial way.

There was no way he could know the truth about her past, and yet she knew, positively knew, the mere sight of her in that moment was repugnant to him.

Kate fought the urge to flinch at the naked loathing blazing in his hazel eyes. The depth and strength of it washed over her. She felt its familiar, solid weight crushing her shoulders like a mantle made of brick. She'd almost forgotten how it felt...

The chilling look in his eyes was one she'd seen a thousand times on her husband's face. It was a look that told her as plainly as words ever could that she was no good and she never would be.

It was almost as if McCall knew what she'd done, but that was impossible.

He pulled her even closer, letting her feel the strength coiled in his muscled arms, his hard thighs and lean hips. "Do you realize what I could do to you, right here and right now, if I wanted to? If I were a different kind of man?"

She trembled in his arms. "No, please..." She recognized the tremulous cry for mercy as her own. "Please, no more..."

But it was only a memory, a whispered trick of the mind. Kate breathed deeply, filling her lungs with fortifying night air. She searched for strength to push away the nagging memories of that horrible night, to bury them in the shadowed recesses of her mind, where they belonged.

She'd built a new life and no one here knew the horrible thing she'd done to her child. Her husband was dead and no one could hurt her anymore.

But the lawman was another matter. Judging by the cruel set of his mouth, she wasn't entirely certain his words were meant only as a warning.

Without a second thought she drew back her foot, then kned McCall hard and high between his long, muscular legs.

When he bellowed like a wild, wounded animal and loosened his hold, she felt her heartbeat quicken. It seemed to beat freedom ... freedom ... Once again, precious independence was hers, and she wouldn't give it up without a fight. Lifting the heavy folds of her skirt, she ran as fast as she could, her heartbeat pounding in her ears. Freedom...

She got halfway to the edge of the platform before she felt hard fingers clamp around her wrist. She gasped when he spun her around and hoisted her into his arms as effortlessly as if she weighed no more than a sack of chicken feathers.

Kate squirmed and clawed for release as McCall, hobbling and grumbling, carried her up and down crude, unfamiliar streets.

Dear Mother of God, where was this madman taking her, and what did he intend to do with her once they got there? She pounded on his chest, but McCall wouldn't even look at her. She kicked at the air and was rewarded with nothing but the harsh sting of the rain as her skirts flew to her knees.

"Release me!"

"Stop squirmin', Mrs. Stewart. You'll only make it harder on yourself. On the other hand," he said, looking down at her with a wicked grin, "I'm findin' this mighty pleasant. I didn't think you had such nice curves hidden under all those weeds.

If you keep this up, darlin', maybe you can convince me to forget about your temper tantrum back there."

His taunting words made her realize that the way he cradled her, with one arm crooked under her knees and the other wrapped under her shoulders, caused his fingers to press intimately against her breast. With each squirm and wiggle, she only managed to grind her hip provocatively against his flat stomach.

What the rude beast deserved was a solid slap to that whiskered jaw of his. Unfortunately, being held aloft by a crazy man almost five feet above the ground made a woman want to hang on to him with both hands.

The knowledge that she couldn't slap him—yet—did little to ease her aching desire to do so. She stared hard at the angular jaw she planned to assault the very moment an opportunity presented itself. The marshal was as coarse in his treatment of women as Captain Thorne, and certainly as callous as her husband.

The rain continued to sting her face and limbs, and it obscured her vision. She could see little of McCall except the lower half of his face. His thick moustache dripped in the pouring rain as his mouth curled up in a mocking smile. Kate felt her last bit of restraint snap.

"I demand to be put down. Now."

The marshal gave her a sidelong glance and harrumphed.

"Release me this instant!"

McCall looked as amused as the men now lining the street three deep, watching them.

Clearly she would have to do more than talk to win her release, but what? Standing several inches above six feet, McCall was a good foot taller than she was, and a sight stronger, too.

They passed the gaily lit lobby of a handsome structure she knew must be the Drover's Cottage, since she'd heard it was the only three-story building in town. Its plate-glass doors, dry and inviting beneath a large overhang, reflected their progress.

Kate gasped at the image staring back at her. She looked less like a Stewart than she ever had in her life. Her bonnet had been lost and most of her hairpins had fallen out. Auburn waves cascaded over McCall's arm and several wisps clung to her cheeks. The sodden bolero jacket and underlying silk garments hugged her body like a lover.

Ian, God rest his miserable soul, had never approved of anything less than a perfect toilette. A Stewart must always appear proper, her husband had said. No matter the circumstances, no matter the cost.

Other men—like Captain Thorne—had made it clear that when her prim and proper image fell briefly away, her looks were enticing, whether she wanted them to be or not. Perhaps, just this once, she could use them to her advantage.

The idea was far from proper, she chided herself. Then again, it had been a very long time since she'd considered herself to be either good or proper.

Kate draped her arms around McCall's neck. "Marshal, this rain has me chilled clear to the bone. Why, my clothes are clinging to every inch of me. I must look a fright."

As she'd expected, her comments distracted him. His gaze roved over her bodice, traveled to the curve of her hip pressed against his stomach, then downward, lingering at her knees and calves.

"No, Mrs. Stewart. You are actually quite lovely, even in the rain. And you damn well know it," he said before lifting his head to navigate the rutted road.

With great care and timing, Kate pulled herself a little higher against his chest, closer to his neck, and sank her teeth into it for all she was worth.

"Damn you, woman!" He dropped her on her rear in the middle of a mud puddle, where she landed in a pile of cow dung.

Kate barely heard the cheers and guffaws coming from the gruff onlookers as she reveled in the liberation she'd won. While she hadn't expected McCall to fling her into the road, at least she was free.

With a good deal of slipping, she managed to rise to her knees in the cold mud. With that accomplished, she wiped a wild curtain of hair from her face, smearing the smelly ooze everywhere she touched.

She glanced over to where McCall stood with his long legs planted wide apart. He rubbed the bright red spot on his neck, looking mad enough to shoot her.

Her heart drummed a wild rhythm in her chest. Her mind raced, trying to think what she should do. During her time in the west, she'd found most men unfailingly polite to a lady, and they almost always adhered to the strictest code of gentlemanly behavior. She'd never been mistreated, but then

she'd never come across anyone as arrogant and uncivilized as McCall.

Firmly convinced a man like McCall wouldn't think twice about shooting a woman, she scrambled around in the puddle, searching for her reticule and her two-shot.

Thunder rumbled overhead. McCall took a squishing step toward her. "If you want to act like a spoiled child, I'm going to treat you like one."

She scooped up an odorous brown wad. Eel-like clumps slid through her fingers as she flung it at McCall. When it splattered on his fuzzy cheek, she grunted her satisfaction.

McCall's eyebrows slammed together. With one menacing step forward, he stood in the puddle beside her. He picked her up and flung her facedown over his shoulder and continued down the street. "You're comin' home with me because there's no place else for you to go. Drovers have taken most rooms in the hotels and boarding houses. Buyers from up north and back east have taken the rest. Even the land outside town is full up with herds waiting a turn at the stockyards."

"You could've told me that in the first place," she huffed as his shoulder poked her stomach with each angry step he took.

"You'll be safe at my home until you can leave—on the next train out—and you will behave yourself." Not waiting for her reply, and ignoring the mud plastered there, he swatted her upturned bottom. "Try to enjoy the ride, darlin'."

Chapter 2

CHARLES STEWART RELEASED the curtain, letting it fall across the window of his suite at the Drover's. From his vantage point high above Texas Street, it was plain to see he could stop worrying about McCall interfering with his plans. The marshal had his hands full trying to control the lively spitfire slung over his shoulder.

Any other day, he thought, it might have been amusing to watch the piece of calico get what was coming to her. He could ill afford a distraction, however, with his goal so near to completion.

Katherine wouldn't be so high and mighty now, especially after the arrangements he'd made. When she saw him, she'd probably throw herself into his arms, thankful to finally have a real man to protect her.

* * * *

"TAKE OFF YOUR clothing, Mrs. Stewart." Morgan pulled Kate from his shoulder, roughly setting her on her feet.

She squinted into the darkness and tried to figure out exactly where she was. The room's sparse furnishings suggested it must be a bathhouse of some sort.

An old dressing screen listed drunkenly in a corner. Water steamed in a scarred tub beside a stool piled high with flour-sack towels. A tiny window, propped open by a stick, let in little fresh air.

Dizzy from being carried over his shoulder, sickened by the odors of sweat and stale cigar smoke, and stunned by his command, Kate found herself uncharacteristically speechless. Not wanting to, but needing to all the same, she reached for something to steady herself and found nothing but the hard wall of McCall's chest.

She braced her palms against him. "What did you say?" The words came out like a croak.

"Take 'em off. They stink to high heaven."

She shoved against his chest, propelling herself away from him. "If I offend your sensibilities, Marshal, you have no one to blame but yourself. If you'll recall, you're the one who flung me into the street."

"You asked for it, darlin' when you gave me that love bite."

"Don't flatter yourself. And don't call me 'darlin','" she said, mocking his soft drawl. "I was minding my own business when you kidnapped—"

"Just doin' my job ... darlin'." He reached out with a large fist and grabbed the velvet cord that hung from her neck, slowly roping her in like a calf about to be branded, pulling her to him until they were nose to nose. His hazel-green eyes, golden flecks gleaming, bored into her, dared her to resist.

"Take off those clothes," he ordered, anger underscoring each word.

"I will not."

"Don't make me do it for you." Under his thick moustache, his lips curled into a devilish smile. "Or is that how you like it?"

"What I would like is for you to stop manhandling me. If you would just get out of my way, I could do your town a lot of good." She tried to release the locket's cord from his grasp. "I will not leave here without the story I came for. But I'll be more than happy to leave Abilene—and you—behind when I'm through."

His grip on the cord tightened. "And probably go racin' across the country again instead of home to your poor, neglected husband."

"But I—"

"Shimmy out of those stinkin' clothes. I won't take you home smellin' like the stockyards. Celia's got plenty to do without cleanin' up after the likes of you."

Celia—is she his wife? How on earth did the woman put up with him?

McCall abruptly let go of the cord, as if the touch of it soiled his hand. Without warning, he spun her around. She felt his fingers grip the collar of her jacket a moment before he jerked it down her back, pinning her arms to her sides.

The sound of the fabric shredding was like the shot of a cannon to Kate's ears, setting her in motion. She twisted and turned, trying to break free of the silken bondage. She sputtered, furious beyond words that she'd allowed herself to fall into the hands of a bully once again.

As McCall flipped her around to face him, Kate felt the hot sting of tears in her eyes. She swallowed hard and tried to suppress their flow.

Quickly she lowered her lashes, hoping he hadn't seen the display of weakness. She raised a hand to swipe at the moisture before risking a glance at him.

The stark fury etched into the hard lines of his face startled her more than anything McCall had said or done so far.

"I'm sure you've used this act on your husband a thousand times—weeping and batting those big blue eyes to get whatever you wanted," he said. "Save it for him, darlin'."

Abruptly he released her, but he refused to look at her. "Do as I say, Mrs. Stewart. When I take you home, I don't want my little girl to be frightened by your wild appearance."

He walked away to light the single candle in the room, then strode behind the screen. "I'll wait here."

Kate stood in the center of the room, amazed that McCall actually expected her to undress and bathe in his presence.

He spoke as if he could read her thoughts. "You're as safe as a baby with me. I'm not interested in anythin' you have to offer. Now, take 'em off."

"Marshal McCall, I don't think—"

"Clean up first. Then we'll talk."

Kate's gaze drifted from the screen to the tub of water. She couldn't believe she was even considering his request, but her mind swam with all the reasons why she should do as he asked.

Her clothes smelled awful and so did she.

Her spine and limbs, achy from the long journey, would benefit from a long soak.

Her soul, too, needed relief. The thunderstorm earlier had stirred up memories of Teddy as fiercely as it had whipped the clouds through the sky. She longed to steep in the water's warmth and let it soothe the jagged edges of her nerves.

Also, she didn't want to frighten any child, not even McCall's.

But she couldn't just do as he asked. More than anything, she needed to show Marshal Morgan McCall that neither he nor any other man alive could tell her what to do.

She had done many unusual things in her travels for the *Evening Journal*, but taking off her clothes in front of a strange man hadn't been one of them. She'd traveled to remote military outposts, observed a buffalo hunt, even ridden with Texas drovers to Colorado along the dangerous Goodnight-Loving Trail.

"What in blazes is takin' you so long?" McCall barked from behind the screen.

Kate jumped at the intrusion into her thoughts. Her mind raced for a way to buy the few precious moments she needed. Only one thing came to mind and the words rolled off her tongue before she could change her mind.

"Give a lady some time, Marshal. It isn't easy for a woman to disrobe in front of a man she's just met, even if that gentleman is as attractive as yourself." Kate swallowed convulsively, trying to push down the bile that rose hot and bitter at the thought of how she'd just complimented the brute.

"Hurry it up," he said, sounding ruder and more insistent than before.

Kate squeezed her hands into tight fists. "Just one moment longer, Marshal." She nearly choked on the sugar in her voice. Eyeing the room, she realized that if she ran to the door he'd catch up to her in no time at all, just as he had at the depot.

"Lady, if you don't want me to come out there and wash you myself, I'd better hear silk droppin' and water splashin' real quick."

"You wouldn't dare!"

He grunted. "Try me."

Kate tossed her reticule on the floor, then quickly shed her gloves and slippers. With trembling fingers, she unbuttoned her bodice, then wiggled out of the traveling suit, letting it slosh to the floor. She untied the ribbons of her three full petticoats since they'd never fit through the small window. Finally, she peeled the stockings from her limbs.

That was as much as she would remove. She'd die before she'd let any man see the evidence of her sins.

Covered only by her chemise and underdrawers, she shivered when a cool breeze swept her skin. The full impact of what she was about to do hit her. Where could she possibly go dressed—or undressed—as she was?

"Reconsidering my offer to bathe you?"

She cast a nervous glance at the screen, then at the tiny window.

"You're not thinkin' of tryin' something stupid now, are you? I'm comin' out. If you're not decent, cover up."

"Please, McCall. Don't." She needed only a minute, possibly less. "I ... I need to hang up my clothes."

She crossed the room and draped her belongings on a wall peg. They'd never fit through the tiny opening and she could return for them later. Turning, she stopped and gasped.

McCall stared at her, unblinking, as if she hadn't a stitch on.

Stupid, stupid. She'd let him fluster her so thoroughly, she hadn't stopped to consider that the peg was in his line of vision. Straightening her spine, she said, "Haven't you ever seen a lady's unmentionables before?"

McCall threw back his head and laughed, the mocking sound echoing in her ears as she returned to the tub. Thrusting her hands into the water, she splashed around.

"That's better," she heard him mutter.

The bile rose again in her throat as she pictured him, an irritating smile under his moustache. She tiptoed to the window and gingerly set aside the stick that propped it open. Bracing her arms on the sill, she pulled herself through the frame.

* * * *

MORGAN EMERGED FROM behind the screen, suddenly very glad he'd long ago lost at least a few of the gentlemanly ways he'd learned as a boy in Virginia. What he wasn't so sure of, though, was why. Standing there looking at Katherine Stewart's sassy behind tipped in the air, squirming in the translucent silk, he was torn between wanting to take a switch to it and caressing it.

His mind called for blistering that beautiful fanny, but his body shouted for something else entirely. What Cattle Kate

needed—what she deserved—was a sound spanking. Try as he might to picture himself administering it, the only image that filled his thoughts was one of her rounded bottom cupped in his palm, squirming sensuously.

Suddenly aware of what she was doing to him, Morgan recoiled physically. The realization he was tempted to reach out and touch her—a married woman who had deserted her husband as Mary had deserted him—rocked him to the core.

He cursed silently, vehemently. He hadn't felt this way about a woman's body in a long time; hadn't paid so much as one visit to the calico queens in the Devil's Addition. Now, after less than an hour, this Stewart woman had him thinking about all kinds of things he didn't want to think about.

The only explanation he could come up with was that he'd been without a woman for too damned long—longer than was healthy, that was for sure. Hell, he hadn't bedded a woman in so long, he'd probably feel aroused if it was Squirrel Tooth Sal wiggling in front of him, covered up to her chin.

Reassured, Morgan let out a heavy sigh. The sooner he hid Katherine Stewart away, the sooner he could get to the Alamo and to Cherry's bed. After the best whore in town worked her magic, he probably wouldn't give this spitfire a second thought.

Her round little bottom squirmed some more. The lace of her chemise ripped on the splintered frame. Morgan's blood heated.

Her hand slipped. She teetered precariously, half-in, half-out of the window.

Morgan was behind her in a second. He grabbed her hips and hauled her back inside.

Her soft body pressed flush against his hardness. She fought like a she-devil straight from hell, but sweet heaven, she felt like an angel rubbing that soft fanny against him.

But she's far from angelic, pulling a stunt like that. Did the stubborn fool think she had wings sprouting from her shoulders, and she could just float out a window that was higher than she was?

Morgan flipped her around. "If you want to split your head open, don't do it while I'm lookin' out for you."

She struggled and her chemise dipped lower. Against his will, his gaze fell to the valley between her breasts.

"Leave me be!" She strained to break his hold, but Morgan wrapped his arms around her tiny waist, pinning her arms to her sides.

"Easy, darlin'. Hold still."

She wrenched an arm free and slapped him hard across his jaw. The sound echoed deafeningly throughout the room.

Silently he glared at her, and what she saw on his face must have finally convinced her to be still, since she no longer fought him. Neither, though, did she back down. She glared back at him just as fiercely.

The fire in those eyes, almost lavender in the candlelight, did something funny to his insides. He was keenly aware of the woman in his arms, of every panting breath she took, of the rapid rise and fall of her full breasts straining against him. A white-hot flame ignited in his belly. It grew stronger and fanned dangerously lower.

She felt damned good in her unmentionables. The question of how she would feel without them flew into his mind. He released her, pulling back so quickly she staggered before catching her balance.

"Take off those frills and wash up. You've wasted enough of my time." Even to his own ears, his voice sounded strained.

She stood with her hands balled into fists. "I won't. You can't make me."

Ignoring her childish protest, Morgan scooped her up. In two steps, he reached the tub where he dumped her, kicking and screaming, into the steaming water.

Seated behind the screen once again, Morgan grinned. It was worth all the trouble Cattle Kate had caused just to see the look on her face when she'd hit the water. That stubborn woman had now been in the tub a good fifteen minutes, and she hadn't stopped muttering yet.

She'd used cuss words he hadn't thought a woman like her would even know. But why should he be surprised? Nothing else about her made any sense. Her clothes were made for a fine lady, but she worked at a man's job. She trimmed herself in flowers and lace, but she swore like a bullwhacker. Despite her petite size, she packed a meaner wallop than many a rowdy cowboy he'd known. She was one of the prettiest women he'd ever laid eyes on, but she was meaner than all get-out. And as much as he hated to admit it—even to himself—she had grit.

At the thought of all that fire packed into one tiny, lavender-eyed woman, Morgan's grin curved into an ear-

splitting smile. Then, realizing what he was doing, he wiped the smile on his sleeve as if it were a whore's kiss.

He stuffed his hat on a corner of the screen, then rolled and lit a cigarette. He puffed furiously, wishing he could be done with her for the night.

She was quiet now, too quiet. He'd heard the last of her splashing a few minutes ago. Morgan checked on her through a small hole in the screen's fabric.

She sat with knees drawn up to her chest, head resting on her forearms. He couldn't help thinking she looked vulnerable sitting there like that, like a lost little girl.

He took a long drag, blew the smoke out on a sigh, then stomped on the cigarette. His long leg bumped the screen and toppled it with a crash. Kate jumped, raising her shoulders above the water. She found him bent over, scrambling to right the screen and looking anywhere but at her.

Or so she thought.

Morgan had already beheld a beautiful sight, one that took his breath away and reminded him that even though she acted like a spoiled child and cussed as good as any man, the female across the room from him was definitely all woman.

By the time she looked up, he'd averted his eyes—with more than a little difficulty—from her creamy flesh. Under a shimmering auburn veil, her rounded breasts peeked shyly at him from beneath her now-transparent chemise.

Chapter 3

BEHIND THE SCREEN, Morgan scowled as Kate's soft laughter drifted to his ears. He was certain it was prompted by his obvious chagrin when the screen had fallen over. She didn't have the good sense, or the good grace, to be embarrassed by her nearly naked state. It was just more proof she was an easy poke, wanton down to her bones.

Problem was, the memory of her beautiful face and sweet body wouldn't leave him. He clearly recalled how enticing she'd looked, her pale skin glistening in the candlelight.

The silken curtain of her hair had hidden the finer details of her form, but it couldn't disguise her shape. He knew if he ever held her full breasts, they'd fill his hands perfectly. In the play of light and shadow, he thought he'd discerned their dusky centers. He couldn't help wondering if they were a deep rose or more coral, like a sun-kissed peach. Even now he felt his throat constrict as he wondered how the tempting peaks would feel beneath his lips and what they'd taste like on his tongue.

He couldn't remember ever needing a drink as badly as he did just then. He pulled a leather pouch of tobacco from his shirt pocket and rolled another cigarette. He lit it, then tried to fill the awkward silence by inquiring about Leland's reasons for suspecting Thorne.

"I exposed Captain Thorne's misdeeds in a newspaper article," Kate explained. "Subsequently, he was drummed out of the army."

"What exactly did he do?"

"Everything was clearly and truthfully explained in my article," she answered curtly, as if that should be explanation enough.

Morgan's only reply was a derisive snort.

"I assumed with all of the paperwork your job entails, Marshal, that you could read."

"Oh, I can read all right. I just don't care for fluff."

"My work is hardly fluff. Why, I've won civic awards, certificates of merit, a commendation from the army. I've done things no other woman has dared—"

Morgan chuckled. "I just bet you have, darlin'."

He heard her sputtering in response to his insult. It went a long way toward restoring his good humor. "Unruffle your feathers, Mrs. Stewart, and tell me the rest of it."

"*Hmmph.*"

Morgan scrubbed a palm across his jaw, striving for patience. After everything he'd already done to her, she got this worked up over an insult to her correspondence skills? It just proved she didn't care about anyone or anything other than her work.

"Tell me," he said through clenched teeth, "what you did to Thorne. It just might help keep you alive."

There was a splashing sound, as if she'd flung the wash cloth in vexation.

Morgan felt as though he were dealing with his five-year-old daughter. His good mood was quickly slipping away. "All right. Maybe I shouldn't have used the word 'fluff.' But I'm

warnin' you, don't push me. Tell me about the damned article."

"Apology accepted." She proceeded to regale him with stories about her time at Fort Riley with the 'lovely' Lieutenant-Colonel and Mrs. George Custer.

"Get to the point."

"I am, if you would just listen." She let out a sigh. "Well, the Colonel and Libbie—that was his wife's name—were great animal lovers, especially the colonel. He kept a kennel of twenty to thirty dogs, but one by one they were disappearing.

"The colonel was like a little boy when he played with his dogs, and he often admitted them to his quarters. They created so much noise as they romped around that the rest of the fort actually thought he was beating poor Libbie."

She was quiet for so long Morgan thought that might be all she'd tell him. Then she cleared her throat and continued. "One night, before I knew about the parlor games the Custers played with their dogs, I heard all the commotion and suspected the colonel, just like everyone else. I went to investigate—"

"You mean you were going to interfere in a private dispute between the commanding officer and his wife? What could you have done if what you'd suspected had been true?"

"I don't know. I only knew I had to help poor Libbie if she was in danger."

When she grew quiet again, he prodded, "There's more?"

"There is. I heard a strange keening, almost like a wail, and it occurred to me that someone—or something—was in terrible pain. When I crossed the parade ground and reached

the kennel, I discovered Thorne torturing a helpless puppy, killing it inch by inch."

She sounded agonized at the mere memory of what she'd seen. Was it possible, somewhere deep within her heart, she harbored a shred of decency, a sense of right and wrong?

"I informed Colonel Custer," she continued, her voice steadier than a moment earlier. "He had Thorne stripped of his rank. When my article was published in newspapers across the country, public outcry forced the army to dishonorably discharge Thorne."

"What exactly were the charges?"

"I don't know and don't care. Thorne deserved whatever he got. Any man who would harm—"

"And what did you get out of it?" Morgan held his breath, waiting, wondering if she would disappoint him.

She didn't.

"Why, I received a commendation from Colonel Custer."

He cracked a rude laugh. "And what exactly motivated you? The poor dog, or the prospect of that commendation and all the fame that would come with it?"

"Regardless of my commendation, Thorne was a coward without a shred of honor. Of course, a man like you wouldn't understand the concept of honor, would you?"

A man like him. She was looking down her snooty nose at him just as Mary had. And she was even worse than he'd thought—stripping a man of his livelihood while lying about her motives. She might be beautiful on the outside, soft and sweetly tempting like the meringue on Celia's pies, but inside she was as hard and cold as a tombstone.

It was all he could do to keep from hauling her out of the tub and plunking her on the back of the first horse he found. He didn't care which direction the animal went, just so long as it was away from him and his children.

* * * *

RESTING HER HEAD against the tub's rim, it was all Kate could do to keep from laughing aloud as she recalled the way McCall's face had glowed with embarrassment when the screen had toppled over.

She grinned like a child on Christmas morning. Without even realizing it, McCall had given her the perfect way to pay him back in full for all the humiliation he'd heaped on her since meeting her at the depot.

She doubted if the marshal, as confident as a strutting bull, had ever in his life known the sting of humiliation, but she'd be more than glad to teach him how it felt.

"Marshal McCall?" Her voice was sweet and clear, as innocent as a church bell as it echoed in the sparsely-furnished room. "There isn't any soap. Would you mind fetching me a bar, please?"

Kate heard him muttering under his breath. She knew the exact moment he found it when he swore a blue streak.

"Could you please bring it to me? I'd like to finish bathing before the water cools."

His gaze averted, he crossed the room, walking sideways like a crab skittering across the sand. He held the bar out at arm's length.

"Don't be silly, Marshal. My arms aren't that long. Come closer."

He took another step.

"That's a little better, but not much. Surely you're not afraid of me?"

Before pressing him further, Kate paused, ensuring that her hair and the water covered her sufficiently. "Look at me, McCall. I won't hurt you," she said with a teasing laugh.

He faced her squarely. His gaze fell on her lips, then slowly moved over the rest of her. From the hair coyly swirling in front of her breasts to the caps of her knees poking through the steam, she felt it touch every inch of her as bold and hot as a caress.

"I'm not afraid of you, Mrs. Stewart. Merely trying to give you some privacy. This may be how they do it in Philadelphia, but here we treat a lady with respect—something you don't deserve. You haven't acted like a lady from the minute you stepped off the train. I doubt you even know how."

Certain he'd been flustered just moments ago, and equally sure Leland would never hire someone who would harm her in any way, she pushed her daring game further.

As she lifted her shoulders from the water, she watched with satisfaction as his jaw clenched. His body tensed and he squeezed ridges into the soap as his gaze roamed over her, seeing nothing and yet everything behind the clinging waves of auburn hair.

"Cover yourself." His voice was husky, barely above a ragged whisper.

Kate heard the barely-leashed restraint in his voice, saw it in his stance, and boldly pressed him further. She held out her hand, palm up. "The soap?"

With a step he was behind her, grasping her hand in his larger callused one. With his other hand, he made a great show of dropping the soap into the water.

"How clumsy of me," he said. "Allow me, darlin'." He thrust his free hand into the water to fish out the soap.

She yanked her palm free of his and hugged her knees. "N-no ... you can't be serious. You wouldn't..."

"Oh, but I would. Surely you're not afraid of me?"

He reached to the bottom of the tub, not bothering to remove his coat or push up his sleeves. She felt the fleeting caress of his hand on her bottom as he searched for the soap.

Kate flinched. "I've found it," she said in a small, tremulous voice. She held up the bar as evidence. "You may go back behind the screen."

"Afraid not, darlin'." He plucked the soap from her hand. "You started this little tease. Now I'm goin' to finish it."

She knew then that she'd gone too far. Afraid now of the dangerous game she'd started, and of how he might finish it, she clutched at the tub's sides.

She peeked over her shoulder. "Don't you think you've humiliated me enough for one day?"

"You wanted help with the soap, ma'am, and I'm more than happy to oblige."

His hand felt hot on her shoulder. She cast a forlorn look at her reticule and wished with all her heart that she now held the two-shot it contained. Although it probably wasn't

powerful enough to kill anyone, it would be enough to halt a man in his tracks, or so Leland had told her. Kate shuddered, wondering if Leland had ever seen a man of McCall's size.

"Might as well relax and enjoy it, darlin'."

She felt him draw a steady finger through her hair, parting it. When he placed a handful back over each of her shoulders, his fingers grazed her skin. At the intimate contact, waves of heat spilled through her limbs, at odds with the chill that washed over her exposed skin.

Caught off guard by the gentleness of his touch, Kate felt the air rush out of her lungs. Even as she thought about voicing her objections, she found herself unable to speak, unable to move.

Morgan watched the glow of the candle's flame weave a halo about her head. He studied the tempting curve of her shoulders, giving in to the urge to trail a fingertip down her spine. She trembled when he reached her silky bottom, and he heard her breathing grow shallow and rapid.

Even as he thought about pulling away, he was drawn to the sight of her, and to the soft feel of her skin. He watched, entranced, as the water lapped at her dark coral nipples, first revealing, then concealing them from his gaze. Morgan released the soap, not caring where it went.

She squirmed, as if she had suddenly grown quite uncomfortable with the game she'd started.

He didn't know what devil possessed him. He only knew he felt an urgent desire to cover her body with his and feel her move like that beneath him.

Morgan watched as the water continued to lap against her body. He told himself again and again that he should leave her be, as she'd asked him to earlier. Problem was, he enjoyed looking at her too damned much. He drank in the sight of her like a man who'd thirsted in the desert enjoying the first sweet taste of wine.

From the corner of his eye, he spied something shimmering in the candlelight. Then he saw it. The circle of gold on her left hand.

Morgan grew still. He violently cursed himself twelve ways to Sunday for being such a fool. She'd made him lose control, as if he were still a boy in short pants who'd yet to poke his first woman.

He swiped her reticule from the floor and strode away to pluck her belongings from the peg. "I'll have some clean clothes sent in. You've got five minutes. If you're not ready, you'll go through town as you are," he said without turning to look at her.

Morgan stormed out of the room with Kate's ruined clothes tucked under his arm, but not before he heard the soap thud against the wall. It hit the spot where his head had been just a moment before.

* * * *

DESPITE THE DUSTER the marshal had draped her in, Kate shivered as McCall escorted her through town beneath a gray curtain of wind-whipped clouds. Even through the heavy material, she swore she could feel the heat of his hand on her arm.

Head high, she cloaked herself in as much dignity as possible, which wasn't much considering the mortifying scrap of fabric McCall had provided for her to wear beneath the heavy coat. Attempting to stay warm, as well as preserve a bit of modesty, she clutched the two sides of the duster together. With each step she tried to ignore the rough-looking men who leered at her from every alley and doorway.

She supposed they were headed toward McCall's home, where he'd directed the boy to bring her bags, but she wasn't sure. Jaw set, hat pulled low, McCall hadn't uttered a word since they'd left the bathhouse. He hadn't even batted an eye when she'd emerged in the scarlet dress—simply hung the coat across her back—but she was sure the color of her cheeks had rivaled its gaudy hue.

Anger, quick and hot, had flashed through her veins as she surveyed her appearance. The flaming silk hugged her body as if it had been painted on, exposing her knees, plunging deeply down her chest. She imagined the scandal—if it could possibly be any worse—if a seam split. She hadn't been able to don the dress without first removing her wet chemise and underdrawers.

Hugging herself tighter, Kate nurtured her fury, welcomed it as a defense against both the mean-spirited lawman and her own embarrassment. She dug in her heels, surprising McCall into a stop. "You arranged for the bathhouse in advance, didn't you?"

He spared her a glance, then tugged her along.

"You arranged for this God-awful dress, too. Blast you, you deliberately planned the whole thing."

McCall ignored her and kept walking.

A moment later, blinded by fury, she tripped up the boardwalk. She watched as he withdrew a ring of keys from his pocket and unlocked the door of a building whose window proclaimed in black, block-shaped letters, Abilene Town Jail.

Only after they'd crossed the threshold and he'd bolted the door behind them did he release her. He whipped off his hat and slapped it on top of a massive desk. Papers of all sizes fluttered to the floor. He ignored them, keeping his gaze on her.

"Just to put things straight between us, Mrs. Stewart, I did not arrange for anything in advance. How could I have known that the great Cattle Kate—a legend in her own time and a heroine from New York to Kansas—would be childish enough to bite a man?"

He swiped at the mud caked on his cheek. Brown flecks broke off and clattered as they hit the floor. "Or that, when she's down on all fours, she'd start makin' mud pies."

She couldn't help it. She felt a corner of her mouth lift. "My aim wasn't bad."

He grunted. "For a woman."

Her smile grew fuller. "For anybody."

His moustache twitched. She was sure he was fighting a grin. The very appealing look on his face made it easier for her to ask.

"Why, McCall? Why dress me like this?"

His half-formed smile withered. "That dress wouldn't have been my first choice, but all your things are already on their way to my house. I couldn't exactly go to the mayor's wife

askin' for a dress. What would I say? 'The famous Cattle Kate, the lady you've been plannin' to honor at a tea party, ruined her own clothes actin' like a shameless painted cat?'" His dark brows furrowed together as he glared down at her. "I was thinkin' of your reputation."

She looked down at the dress shining beneath the duster, outlining her curves, then back at McCall. "You can't be serious."

She never would have believed it if she hadn't seen it with her own eyes. McCall actually blushed.

"I sent Del—an old friend—to find something. He ... uh..." the marshal paused, coughed. "I suppose he could've used better judgment."

"I should say so."

The scarlet silk swished as she passed him on her way to the door. Her hand was on the bolt, ready to flip it open, when she felt his long fingers clamp onto her arm a second before he swung her around to face him.

His gaze filled with a wicked light as it raked over her, making her feel as naked as she very nearly was in the gaudy costume.

She forced herself to meet his gaze and demanded, "Am I under arrest?"

"No."

"Then I'd like to leave."

"Not just yet."

"But you said—"

"What I said was, I'm not arrestin' you. Not yet anyway."

She didn't like the hardness that had crept back into those hazel eyes. The open, appealing man she had spoken with a minute before was gone, as was all trace of blush or smile. The man who'd taken his place was wolfish, predatory.

The corners of his black moustache tipped up, but the amusement that played across his lips failed to warm his eyes. His gaze paused on the swell of her breasts peeking out from the front of the duster. She yanked the edges of the coat closed.

"The streets are full of men ready to rut with anythin' in skirts. They're fresh off the trail and haven't seen a woman in three months. They've had to wait their turn for a whore, and from the looks of 'em, I'd say they've chosen you for their first poke. Make it easy on yourself, Mrs. Stewart. Go home."

His coarseness roused her anger, making it churn in her belly until she thought she might actually become ill. Blinded to everything but the goading man in front of her, she jerked free of him and planted her hands on her hips. "I am a well-respected, nationally read correspondent, and I demand to be released."

McCall jabbed an index finger in the direction of the door. "Half those men out there can't read their own names, let alone some damned newspaper. They don't know Cattle Kate from Eve. But remember, darlin', after the show you put on today, barin' your legs on the way to the bathhouse, and now walkin' across town half-dressed, they're goin' to make it their business to find out who you are and where you're stayin'.

"Should I let those cowpokes in to show you, up close and personal-like, what life is really like for a woman alone here? Or maybe..." He paused, just long enough to ensure that she understood his meaning. "Maybe I should set you loose right now. You really haven't done anything—yet—that I could arrest you for. And you don't want my protection anyway, do you?"

He pulled her close, held her flush against his body. The duster's edges slipped apart a few inches. "What's it to be, sugar? Will you deal with me or those hungry men outside?"

She felt his warm breath fan her cheek. "Let me go, McCall."

"Oh, I'll let you go all right. As soon as you give me your word you'll go home where you belong. If you don't, I can't guarantee your safety. If those lusty cowpokes don't get their hands on your lovely body, Thorne sure as hell will. Either way, it won't be a pretty sight. Do you want to get yourself killed? Or worse?"

"Consider yourself off the hook, Marshal. You're fired."

"You can't fire me because you're not the one who hired me. Now stop this foolishness and we can go and have supper."

"You're mad if you think I would sit across from you at your table and act as if none of this took place. As mad as you were when you thought you could order me to bathe."

"Yeah, and we both know how that turned out."

Kate braced her fists against his chest and tried to push him away.

"Will you listen to reason, Mrs. Stewart? Or do you enjoy the way those men eye you like a whore?"

Kate chose to ignore the insult. God knew, she'd heard worse from her own husband. For long moments she silently stared at him, refusing to show any sign of submission.

Finally, she spoke. "Do you really think you can scare me off with tough words and empty threats? This isn't over."

"It's over. You just don't know it yet."

McCall twined long fingers through her damp hair. He tugged her head back, not ungently, so she had no choice but to look into his eyes. He had her attention now but, unfortunately, she also had his. Every breath she took strained the cheap silk and emphasized the swell of her breasts straining for release against the low-cut bodice.

Morgan vividly recalled the coral peaks that had taunted him in the bathhouse, the saucy little fanny that had beguiled him. A slow, strong heat burned in his blood.

He braced himself against the ache that assailed him. "Do you know what the upstanding citizens of Abilene say when the drovers ride into town? They say, 'Hell is now in session.' There's whorin', gamblin', and drinkin' all over the streets. It's no place for a lady. It's not even a place for you."

Again she ignored his taunt. "I'm not leaving. But I promise you, I'll make you sorry you ever tried to bully me."

He dragged her to the window, yanked the shade up, and pulled her in front of him. His hands anchored her shoulders. "Take another look, then tell me who's goin' to be sorry."

Morgan's shoulders tensed when he saw that the crowd of eager, drunken men milling around across the street had already doubled in number.

Hell and damnation. He'd only said those things about the cowpokes using her to scare her—to frighten the daylights out of her—so she'd go home where she'd be safe. Now, as he glanced from the men to Kate, his stomach turned at the thought of what any one of those bastards would do to her if given five minutes and half a chance.

He yanked down the shade and dragged her back from the window. Turning to face her, where she stood quiet and still in the middle of his jail, Morgan reminded himself she was no innocent young girl. Her behavior in the bathhouse had been proof enough of that.

Despite these reminders, he felt an unexpected twinge of guilt for what he was about to do. He was not entirely sure he could throw a woman in jail, even if it was for her own safety.

Morgan looked at the loose hair wildly framing her face, flowing to her hips, making her appear young and vulnerable. Two hairpins, probably the only ones she had left, strained to keep the glorious mane swept from her face. Her slim fingers held tight to the locket that dangled in the valley between her breasts. And those eyes, so wide and lavender-like in the dwindling twilight...

Spying her gold wedding band as she clutched the locket, he closed his mind to any other possibility. She chose to leave behind a husband; maybe even children. *Let her pay the price.*

Like a wolf stalking its prey, he advanced. "Will you leave Abilene? Or do I let you fend for yourself against those men outside?"

He watched her throat convulse as she swallowed hard.

"I'm afraid neither choice is acceptable."

Despite her obvious fear, her voice held steady. He had to hand it to her. Cattle Kate surely was one hell of a woman.

"Then I'll have to lock you up. Protective custody, so to speak."

"But I haven't done anything."

"And I don't intend to let anybody do anythin' to you," he said as he took her by the arm and led her down the long, narrow hallway that housed two small cells. "Trust me. This is for the best right now. I'll let you out when the streets quiet down. Sometime around, oh ... three or four in the mornin'." Almost as an afterthought, he added, "Maybe."

When they were almost to the first cell, she broke his hold. He watched her face as she studied the corridor, looking for a way out, then as she realized there was no way to get past him in the narrow space.

He kept up a slow, steady assault, spurs jangling with each footstep as he backed her toward a cell. He didn't stop until her shoulder blades pressed into the bars of a cell door.

She pushed several strands of hair from her eyes and glared up at him defiantly.

"You're like a damned mule who's dug himself into a mud hole," Morgan said with deadly calm. "You won't leave under your own steam, will you? Yet you're too stubborn to leave well enough alone."

"In case you haven't noticed yet, you can't make me do anything I don't want to."

"I already did, darlin'. You're just too full of spit and vinegar to realize it."

She opened her mouth to say something, but he cut her off. "A woman like you could get hurt plenty here."

"I'm tougher than you think." Kate drew herself up to her full height, which didn't appear to be much as McCall towered over her. Looking him in the eye as best she could, she said, "Go ahead and lock me up. You'll have to let me out sooner or later, and the second you do, I'm going right back to work."

"Do you honestly think you'll be safe if I lock you in a cell?"

Kate noticed that his drawl was more pronounced than before. His voice was softer, tinged by a tender note. He touched her cheek and his fingertips, feather-light, raised goosebumps on her flesh as they trailed down her throat, back and forth across her collarbone, dipping lower and lower to the spot where the tight bodice offered up her breasts to him.

Each unsteady breath she drew brought his maddening fingertips closer to what they sought. "Yes ... No ... I don't know!" She swatted his hand away. She couldn't think straight with him flustering her so thoroughly.

"Darlin', all you have to say is yes, and I'll take care of the arrangements to send you safely home."

Kate tried to back farther away, but the cold bars dug into her back. "I can't go. There's nothing to go home to."

The admission passed her lips before she realized it. She looked away, horrified she'd let even that much about her past slip out.

"What are you talkin' about?"

"Nothing." The word was a tortured whisper. "Nothing at all."

McCall pulled back, clutching the bars at either side of her head. "I want to tell you a story," he said, a sudden, hard edge in his voice.

Kate studied him, shocked by how quickly his persuasive tenderness had disappeared.

"Late last year I arrested a Mexican cook from one of those Texas outfits. His *compadres* ripped the roof clean off my jail to get at him. If they'd do that for a scrawny, ugly cook, there sure as hell isn't much they wouldn't do to get their hands on a woman like you, especially dressed like that. Do us both a favor and go back to Philadelphia, to your husband."

If Morgan hadn't been adept at reading a man's eyes—or a woman's, for that matter—he might have missed it. But there was no mistaking the deep sadness in the depths of her eyes.

"Answer me, Mrs. Stewart. Why won't you go home?"

"I won't walk away from my job."

"A woman like you shouldn't even have a job. You should be home takin' care of your man, bearin' his babies."

There it was again. Only this time it was a look of raw pain that flitted across her face, its intensity marring her features. Then, as quickly as it had come, she buried it.

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For a few moments more they parried their words back and forth, but it was obvious that she wasn't going to give him any answers.

Morgan pushed the bars and she stumbled backward into the cell. He locked it with a clang. As he retreated down the hallway, the words she used to describe him and his parentage, as well as his ancestors, singed his ears.

With a smile, he poured a tin cup full of black coffee. He sat at his desk chair and propped his boots on the desktop. If he knew anything at all about a coddled woman like her, a few hours behind bars would break her and send her running home.

Chapter 4

KATE SAGGED AGAINST the bars and eyed the tiny cell. She searched for anything that would aid her escape, but there was nothing. Beneath the barred window, a thin blanket covered a narrow cot. A small shelf supported a cracked bowl, a pitcher, and a tin cup. A chamber pot sat in a corner.

She pressed a cheek to the bars and gazed down the hallway. A door that separated the cells from McCall's work area stood open.

The marshal sat behind a battered desk, his muddy boots draped on its scarred top. She could hear him jingling the ring of keys and whistling a cheery tune.

If she could just get him to open the door, she might be able to make a run for it, especially if she could distract him somehow. The plan wasn't perfect, but it was all she had. Mimicking what she'd read of prisoners doing in dime novels, Kate drew the tin cup back and forth across the bars, loud enough to be heard above the raucous crowd outside.

"McCall!"

The whistling and jingling stopped.

"Answer me, McCall! I know you're out there."

"Pipe down back there."

"I need to use the ... um ... the backhouse. Where is it?"

He mumbled something that sounded maddeningly like 'damfino.'

Gripping the bars until her knuckles turned white, Kate strove to employ her sweetest tone. "Excuse me?"

"Darlin', there is no excuse for women like you."

"Blast it, McCall, I need to visit the backhouse, or the outhouse, or whatever it is you call it here. Where is it? And don't say 'damfino.'"

A low chuckle floated down the hall. Her entire body shook as she rattled the bars. "Tell me where it is."

"Don't have any."

"The devil you don't."

"Use the pot."

At the sound of his laughter, she banged the cup harder against the bars. A full five minutes passed before he sauntered down the hallway, hat pushed back on his shaggy head, arms folded across his powerful chest. His moustache twitched and there was a twinkle in his eyes.

Straining for patience, she said, "Unless you want a big mess in here, I need to visit the backhouse."

"Any mess you make, you'll be cleanin' up."

"You still don't understand." She lowered her lashes, trying to look sufficiently embarrassed. "It's my time."

Any decent woman wouldn't so much as whisper such a thing in a man's presence, but as her husband had been more than willing to point out, she wasn't decent. Deep down in her heart, it stung to think of herself that way, but right now it didn't matter. Nothing mattered but her freedom and her work, and McCall had kept her from both long enough.

She glanced at the dark devil staring down at her, blocking the path to her hard-won independence, and knew she'd say anything, do almost anything, to escape. "I need some clean

rag or something. There was nothing in the bathhouse that I could use. You took all my things and I—"

"Aw, for Chrissakes!" Above his collar, his neck flushed a brilliant pink. He stalked away, slamming the door behind him.

When he returned several minutes later, she didn't hear the jingle of keys. "Aren't you going to let me out?"

"I'm no fool, Mrs. Stewart. Don't make the mistake of treatin' me like one." He shoved something through the bars, letting it flutter to the floor. "Here you go."

She stared in disbelief at his broad, retreating back and his narrow, swaggering hips, then down at the limp pile of cotton rags. She kicked the ragged scraps, and they scattered and flew like ashes in the wind. Her fury still not abated, she raised her foot and swiped at them again, managing this time only to bang her toes on the bars. She howled like a banshee.

"Hurt, did it?" His deep voice floated down the hall, followed by another annoying chuckle.

Kate swatted the bars with her open hand. Pain shot through her palm to her wrist, and she howled louder than before.

"Hush up back there! Man can't get any rest around you."

"You can't keep me in here! You can't—"

"If you don't stop beatin' up my jail, I'm goin' to have to shackle you."

The voices of the men outside grew louder and closer.

"Hey, Mac, let 'er out! We'll take real good care of 'er, won't we fellas?" one of them shouted, his speech slurred.

Hoots of assent mingled with the tinkling sound of glass breaking. A string of obscenities followed. The odors of warm beer and cheap whiskey floated through the window, turning her stomach.

"She won't be needin' Cherry's ol' cast-off dress where we'll be takin' her," another man said, a leer in his leathery voice. "Flat on 'er back with 'er legs spread, she won't want for nothin'. We'll have that hellcat purrin' like a kitty."

Their lewd laughter intensified. They were directly beneath the window now, but Kate barely heard any of it. McCall's story about the Mexican cook, combined with his threat to shackle her, stilled her for long, tortured minutes, evoking a vivid picture in her mind more frightening than any threat she now faced from either McCall or the louts outside.

She slumped onto the cot and drew her legs beneath her. Hugging herself, she stared blindly at the stone wall. Her body shook with shame and her limbs grew chill with fear as she recalled one horrible night in the Stewart mansion when she actually had been shackled.

Kate squeezed her eyes shut, but it did no good. She still clearly saw the hatred burning in her husband's eyes. She covered her ears, but couldn't blot out the haunting sound of Ian's cruel laughter, or the contempt that had oozed from every word that left his lips—lips that had once spoken only words of love to her before he found out what she was really like.

She lay down and hugged her knees to her chest. A single hot tear slid from the corner of her eye. "I'll kill you before I'll

let you shackle me," she whispered fiercely to McCall, though he was nowhere near.

She'd almost buried the bitter shame of that night; almost buried the pain from Ian's whip. Almost.

Busy working, never staying in one spot for long, she hadn't thought of it much anymore. But after McCall's threat, the memory now pierced her heart and soul as deeply as it ever had.

She swiped at her tears. Swallowing hard, she rid her throat of the choking lump lodged there. Pulling the blanket over her head, she struggled for composure.

She wondered how much time had passed. It had been so long, surely the marshal would let her go soon.

The distinct crack of a whip pierced the air and Kate jumped. Was she losing her mind? It sounded so real, so near.

Another crack erupted. It seemed to come from the outer office. She hurried to the bars, pressing close to try to glimpse what was happening.

Still lounging at his desk, McCall flicked his wrist. A long, deadly looking whip unfurled. He repeated the motion and the rawhide hissed through the air. Dear Mother of God, she had to get out of there.

With trembling hands, she pushed stray wisps of hair from her eyes and her fingers brushed against a hair pain. With a silent prayer of gratitude, Kate scurried to the door. Now, if only she could remember how she'd picked the lock on her chamber door after Ian had taken to locking her in.

Silence again came from the outer office as she reached through the bars and inserted the pin into the lock. She turned it two, three times and jiggled the bars. When nothing happened, she withdrew the pin to try again.

Her hands trembled so hard the pin slipped from her fingers. It fell through the bars, out of reach. Frantically she raked her fingers through her hair, letting out a jagged sigh of relief when she found the only remaining pin. She took a deep breath and inserted the pin into the lock. It seemed like forever, but at last she heard the click that signaled success.

She crept to the door that separated her from the office and peered out. That damnable whip on top of the desk was the only weapon in sight. McCall had to keep a firearm somewhere. Or was he fool enough to rely merely on the rawhide? There wasn't a man west of the Mississippi who didn't carry at least one firearm, either a revolver or a rifle. In particularly dangerous areas, prudent men carried both. She hadn't seen so much as a holster strapped to McCall's thigh.

Debating what to do, she spied her reticule on a corner of the desk. Squaring her shoulders, she determined she'd use her derringer if she had to.

Hat covering his eyes, breathing steady, McCall looked as if an earthquake wouldn't wake him. It would serve the big ox right if she did escape. She slipped over to his desk, her fingers poised to grasp the reticule's silken cords.

Iron-hard fingers clamped around her wrist. Lavender-blue eyes locked with hazel ones for an instant before the room filled with several quick, heavy thumps. The front door burst open. Three grinning men crossed the threshold and threw

down a thick chunk of wood they'd apparently used to batter down the door.

With a speed unexpected in a man so large, McCall snatched up his whip. "Get back to the cell," he snarled at her.

Unable to move, she stared at the intruders, her fingers still clutching the reticule.

"Hell, McCall," a burly redhead hollered. "Take a breather. Let somebody else poke the new gal for awhile."

Encouraged by his companions' laughter, the redhead lunged for Kate. He tripped drunkenly and fell hard on his face, but not before he'd managed to snare the dress's lurid neckline in hands as large as bear paws. He yanked hard as he fell, ripping it jaggedly down the center.

He struggled to his knees, still clutching two scarlet scraps of fabric as if they were trophies. His eyes gleamed unnaturally as he rose to his feet and staggered toward her. Shocked into motion, Kate clasped the dress's ragged remnants to her bare breasts and ran toward the back door. Her mud-caked slippers slid out from under her. She tried to break the fall, crying out when her palms and knees smacked into the splintery floorboards. Her reticule flew from her grasp.

One of the redhead's companions, a dark, hairy brute, pounced on her back. His crushing weight pinned her to the floor. When his sharp nails raked down her back and dug into her buttocks, she bucked and kicked, trying to dislodge him.

"Ride her, Harry!" shouted the third intruder, a skin-and-bones cowpoke. "Gee-haw!"

In a frenzied instant, the one called Harry managed to yank what little remained of the cheap costume down her squirming hips.

Extending her arm over her head, painfully stretching her fingers, Kate managed to drag her reticule closer. She groped blindly, closing her eyes for a brief second of relief when her fingers closed around the derringer's cold grip. Before she had a chance to cock the two-shot, McCall's whip sliced through the air. It hissed a scant two inches above her head.

It was all too much and too reminiscent—the suffocating constraint of being held face down, having her clothes torn from her back, the sibilant lash striking above her. Kate screamed and kicked, but the dark man straddling her didn't budge.

Then she was free.

Trembling, Kate turned, barely comprehending the sight before her eyes.

McCall was there, chasing the big redhead and his skinny companion out the open door with no weapon except his whip, which neatly slashed open the seams on their backsides. They yipped and hopped like toads as the rawhide's deadly tip hit its marks. She looked to the spot where she'd been pinned beneath Harry, only to find him sprawled unconscious on the floor.

Kate scooted back into a corner out of the line of sight of the men milling in the street, straining their necks to gawk into the jail. Stomach churning, she turned away. She could hear McCall on the boardwalk as he faced the crowd.

"Anybody else want to have a go at it?" he demanded.

"Aw, hell, Marshal," a barrel-shaped man in overalls said. "The way that gal marched across town, we figured she was fair game. You two was alone together so long, we thought you'd a been done by now. No harm done. Ain't that right, boys?"

A murmur of assent rippled through the crowd. Someone shouted, "She was so durn sweet, you jest hate to give 'er up, eh, Marshal?" The men roared with laughter.

McCall cracked his whip. From the ensuing yelp, Kate assumed he'd split the backside of yet another man's britches. Curious, she leaned over and discovered he'd neatly flicked a lean cowboy's hat into the mud.

The rawhide snaked out twice more, flicking two buttons off the front of a stocky man's brown denim pants. The crowd fell deathly silent, halting as one.

"You there, Tom." McCall pointed to a boy of no more than sixteen or seventeen. "You ride for the Flyin' W outfit. You others, too, far as I can tell."

The men nodded.

"What do you suppose would happen to your jobs if your boss got wind of what went on here tonight? Alex Webb's a God-fearin' man. He wouldn't cotton to what you and your friends tried to do to a helpless woman."

Grumbling arose from the crowd. Like schoolboys, the men hung their heads.

"Move along. Get going before I have to lock you all up."

Morgan watched the men amble down Texas Street as they talked low among themselves. They splintered into small groups, drifting into several different saloons. When they

were finally out of sight, he returned to the jail and started to drag the unconscious Harry toward a cell.

"I'll deal with you in a minute," he growled, glancing at Kate. She was slumped on the floor, her unfocused eyes bright with unshed tears.

Morgan dropped the man, letting his head thunk on the floor. He hunkered down beside Kate. "Mrs. Stewart? Can you hear me?" He put a hand on her shoulder and gently shook her. "Answer me, Mrs. Stewart."

Something wasn't right. Cattle Kate gave as good as she got, judging by the bite marks on his neck and the ache in his jaw. He hadn't known her long, but he already knew a man would have hell to pay twice over if he tried to get the best of the spitfire. But here she was, trembling like a kitten and as docile as a newborn babe.

Had those drunken fools hurt her? Morgan's stomach clenched. He recalled how he himself had abused her, locking her in his jail to scare her into going back east, and in so doing, save her damned pretty hide from whoever was out to hurt her.

Trouble was, his plan had succeeded too well. She was scared all right. Scared out of her head.

Hell, his plan wasn't supposed to lead to getting her nearly raped. He'd only wanted to force her hand and make her go home. Most likely she'd go now, but he couldn't make himself feel any joy at the prospect.

A deep shame scalded him for inadvertently, stupidly causing harm to someone he'd sworn to protect. Anger, too, burned within him when he saw the bruises on her face and

knees, and the fresh scratches running down her arms and breasts.

Morgan ran his hands over her head and neck, checking for more serious injuries. Finding none, he gripped her shoulders. "Can you stand?"

Still no response.

He took her hands and pulled her up, then turned her around. From top to bottom, Morgan looked her over as thoroughly as a doctor examining a particularly worrisome patient, and he was just as objective about her nakedness. The only thing he noticed were more fresh scratches down her back and across her bottom.

Examining her further, he looked down. What he saw caused his breath to catch in his throat. Numerous old scars criss-crossed the tender flesh on the backs of her thighs like deep cracks carved into a dried-out riverbed.

Lord knew, he'd seen worse horrors during the war. In the line of duty he'd even done worse, God help him.

But never to a woman.

As gently as he knew how, he turned her around to face him. "Who did this to you?" he questioned softly. "Was it Thorne?"

She shook her head. "No more, Ian. Don't—"

Her fearful cry rent his heart. *Ian*? Was that Thorne's given name? What in hell had the sick bastard done to her? No wonder Leland Stewart thought she needed protection.

Her blue eyes grew wide with fear. Morgan softly stroked her arms. "It's all right, darlin'. It's over. No one's gonna hurt you now. I promise. I won't let him."

Her trembling intensified. She mumbled incoherently, saying something about someone named Teddy and begging that Ian fellow not to whip her anymore.

Morgan tried to pick her up, but she sprang wildly to life. She'd been grasping that silly little gun of hers throughout the whole ordeal. She hadn't let him take it away. Now she suddenly aimed it at his head and pulled the trigger. It clicked again and again.

Morgan yanked the empty weapon from her hand and stuffed it in his waistband. She lashed out, clawing at his face. The gashes on his cheeks bled freely, but he was too worried about the woman in his arms to feel their sting.

He'd seen the same thing happen once during the war. A fellow officer, caught up in reliving the horrors of battle, had lost touch with the here and now. The poor devil had suffered a senseless death, falling on his own saber while he fought an imaginary enemy.

He figured Cattle Kate was experiencing something similar. Stark terror over whatever she was reliving in her mind drove her to fight him as if Lucifer himself were after her soul.

She struck out at him wildly, blindly, hitting his head and chest. She kicked his legs. As strong as he was, in her delirium, she was almost his match. She bit his arm, then pulled free, lunging for the unconscious drover.

At first Morgan thought she intended to attack the man. Then he saw the glitter of metal in her hand and knew she'd pulled a knife from the sheath in the drunk's belt. Though it seemed impossible to calm her, he knew he had to subdue her before she hurt herself.

The Lawman
by Lily Sorren

With a restrained blow to her jaw, Morgan knocked her out, catching her before she fell. "Forgive me, darlin'," he whispered. "Forgive me. It wasn't supposed to be like this."

Chapter 5

MORGAN SAT ON the floor, unable to do anything but stare down at the unconscious beauty in his arms. Now that Kate wasn't biting and slapping him, kicking and cursing him, she looked so damned fragile. It was almost like looking in on his children when they were asleep. No matter how ornery Matt and Sarah were during the daylight, he always thought they looked like honest-to-goodness angels when they closed their eyes at night.

Angelic—that's what Cattle Kate was just then, and he wouldn't have been surprised to see a halo shining around her glorious auburn mane. She was damned pretty, her body surprisingly, perfectly well-rounded in all the right places.

Morgan drew a ragged breath, and to his amazement, realized he was staring at her as if he'd never before seen a naked woman. Hell, he'd bedded his share of women before settling down, but try as he might, he couldn't recall ever becoming so hot or so quickly aroused just from looking at one.

Slowly, he dragged his gaze from Kate's shapely legs, past the mound of dark curls nestled between her thighs, over the curve of her hips and pale belly. He watched the steady rise and fall of her coral-tipped breasts as she breathed deeply, finally at peace in unconsciousness. In the flickering light of the kerosene lamp, lacy shadows danced beneath her lashes, making him want to reach out and run the pad of his thumb over her soft cheek. Fighting the impulse, he looked away and

spied a slight discoloration along her delicate jaw. A small, purple bruise had already begun to form.

Hellfire and damnation. Before tonight, he'd never raised his hand to a woman.

When Mary had been unfaithful with numerous men, he'd known she deserved a sound beating, and that he'd had the legal right to administer it. He'd never been able to bring himself to do it. Maybe if he had, the accident in Chicago never would have happened. Maybe if he'd taught Mary to behave as a decent wife should, that little boy would still be alive. Maybe he'd still be capable of firing his Colts, instead of leaving them for years in the trunk at the foot of his bed.

Maybe ... maybe ... Life was full of maybes. They didn't change anything. Regret and two bits would get him a shot of rye or two warm beers, but not much else. He shook his head in disgust.

Carefully, he removed Kate from his lap and set her on the floor. So confused he could spit buckshot, he gritted his teeth and scooted away, settling back against the stone wall, his wrists atop his up-drawn knees. He closed his eyes, his mind reeling from the contradictory emotions she inspired in him.

In the instant when he'd realized she'd tried to escape, anger and surprise had nearly choked him. Now, as he looked down at her petite, battered body, he felt as if his hardened heart might actually bleed with compassion. The deep scars, high on the backs of her thighs, rocked him to his very soul.

Recalling their criss-cross pattern, Morgan frowned. They hadn't been inflicted accidentally, of that he was certain. Someone had beaten her, probably within an inch of her life.

Morgan's stomach twisted. He'd done his damndest to intimidate her with talk of hell on the streets, but she'd obviously endured a much worse private hell than his simple threats could conjure.

He'd put her through more than most women would've been able to bear without bursting into tears, but she'd firmly stood her ground with her head high, even attacked him like a she-devil as the steady ache in his jaw proved plainly enough. He hadn't been able to break her wild spirit. Judging by the way she'd broken down now, someone else had tried a helluva lot harder and succeeded.

Had it been Thorne? *What would the bastard do if he got his hands on her a second time?*

Morgan could deal with the spitfire, even hate her and want her gone, but a curious, unfamiliar feeling assailed him when she turned all soft and looked so lost huddled on the floor. He didn't know how to deal with this.

He glanced her way, assuring himself that she was still out cold. Answers to his questions could wait until another time. Maybe, if she felt up to it, he'd talk to her after supper.

The drunk who'd attacked her lay sprawled several feet away. Morgan dragged him to a cell and returned to the outer office. Slowly, so he wouldn't rouse Kate and scare her again, he scooped her up. Balancing her in his arms, he reached for his duster and draped it over her body.

Adjusting her weight, he cradled her like the small, hurt child she reminded him of. She cried out, struggled a few seconds, then drifted back into oblivion.

"I think you're a fraud," he said softly, his lips brushing her hair. "There's more to you than you let on, and I'm goin' to find out what it is. But for now, let's get you home."

He strode out the back door and into a small lean-to. After propping Kate in a pile of hay, Morgan saddled his horse. He picked her up and settled her on the giant gray's back, mounting up close behind her.

* * * *

KATE AWOKE TO loud, angry sounds, as if someone were banging dishes onto a table. From somewhere far away, she heard the muffled voices of a man and a woman arguing hotly.

The aroma of beef stew wafted into the room, along with the enticing smells of biscuits, apple pie, and coffee. She tried to sit up, thought better of it when her jaw throbbed unmercifully, and eased herself down onto a soft feather pillow. She struggled to overcome the effects of the heavy sleep that made her feel drugged, wincing at the ache in her jaw.

Looking around the pretty, unfamiliar room, Kate tried to remember how she had gotten there. The throbbing intensified with the slight movement. With trembling fingers, she touched the swollen, painful tissue. What had happened to her face? The last thing she could remember was McCall's hand snaking out to stop her...

The full impact of the evening's events hit her then. She remembered, in excruciating detail, everything that had happened at the jail. She groaned, and with all the strength

she could muster, forced herself to leave the bed's warm comfort. She had to find her things, especially her two-shot.

Looking down, Kate saw she was covered by a soft cotton gown she'd never seen before. With a bitter laugh, she wondered if she'd ever get to wear her own clothes again. The black devil had taken all of her baggage. She'd had to abandon her chemise and underdrawers, and been forced to wear that shameless dress.

That dress. How easily those men had stripped it off her. The hairy one had held her face down—

The vivid images stirred memories of a faraway time and place. She squeezed her eyes shut, feeling as sick and ashamed now as she had then. She covered her ears, trying to block the memory, but it was no use. Her husband's voice haunted her—deadly quiet and full of conviction. "It's time to pay for your sins."

"You can't believe what you're saying." Around her broken sobs, she'd pleaded with him. "You're a doctor, a man of science—"

The crack of a whip drowned out the rest. Again and again, the corded leather rained down on her legs. With each lash, her muscles jerked.

"Your fault," Ian had said. "Yours alone."

The sound of raised voices intruded, cutting off the vivid memory. Winded, she fell to the bed, letting her legs dangle over the side.

But the fog shrouding her thoughts refused to recede. She had no strength to ward off a fresh wave of disjointed images: McCall hugging her waist, holding her close as they

rode atop a huge gray horse ... the worry in his voice when he'd inquired if she was all right ... the mingled scents of coffee and tobacco as his warm breath fanned her cheek.

She breathed deeply and the fog began to clear. She recalled riding through deserted back streets. McCall had made a great effort to keep her body covered by his long duster. The duster—how had she gotten into that?

Oh, no. Dear God, please, no. McCall had seen her scars.

She couldn't face him, not yet, not knowing he would surely question her about the horrible marks on her limbs.

A loud rap sounded at the door. Before she could answer, someone flung it open. A pink-cheeked woman bustled across the threshold.

"Howdy, Cattle Kate. I'm Celia, the marshal's housekeeper." She placed a covered tray on the bedside table and turned the wick on the kerosene lamp high enough to illuminate the room. Cupping Kate's chin in a work-hardened hand, she turned it from side to side, eyeing her jaw.

Startled, Kate pulled back, pressing her shoulders into the headboard.

"Only the Lord knows what that man put you through before bringing you home," Celia said with a cluck of her tongue. "Looks like you two had a real go 'round, judging by the state you was in when he brung you home. We couldn't rouse you, so I changed your clothes and tucked you in. Didn't think a lady like you would wanna sleep in that old duster. Figured you could use a hot meal, too, though I didn't think you'd wanna sit across the table from a roomful of strangers jest yet."

Kate's eyes grew wide. Didn't the woman ever stop for a breath of air?

"You been sleepin' a good bit now." Celia eyed her speculatively, but not unkindly, making Kate blush to recall the state she'd arrived in. She grabbed the quilt and pulled it up to her chin.

"I do go on, don't I? I'm jest so excited to have another woman 'round to talk to. Especially you, Cattle Kate. You're famous, you know that? I ain't never met nobody famous before. I done told Morgan he shoulda took better care of you." Celia waggled her forefinger in the air. "There I go again, lettin' my mouth run on. You jest enjoy your supper." She removed a white cloth from the tray.

Kate's mouth watered as she eyed the array of food. Noticing the pride on Celia's face, she said, "Thank you. It smells delicious."

"When you're ready to come downstairs, there's some folks jest itchin' to meet you. You already met Matt, but you ain't met little Sarah. She's the apple of her daddy's eye. That young'un's got him wrapped tighter'n the yarn on my knittin' needles. And Jesse—he's Morgan's deputy—you couldn't pry him away 'til he gits a good look at you. You're all this town's been abuzzin' 'bout since the marshal went and got that telegram."

"I wish people wouldn't make such a fuss. I just came to do a job, nothing more."

Celia waved a hand at her. "Fancy that, modest and pretty all in the same package."

Kate felt herself blush again at the compliment. "I had hoped to slip quietly into town so I could observe everyone before they realized who I am. Apparently my father-in-law's telegram has made that impossible."

"Not to mention Warren's behavior," Celia added with a wry smile.

"Warren?" Kate shook her head. "I'm afraid I don't know him. Is he downstairs, too?"

"Warren? Here in this house?" The housekeeper cackled as if that was the best joke she'd heard in a decade. "Landsakes, he knows better'n to set foot on one blade of Morgan's grass, let alone sit at his table."

Kate frowned, thoroughly confused. "Then what has this Warren to do with me?"

"Nothin' really, 'cept in a roundabout way. Clerkin' for the telegraph, he gets news way before other folks. Spreads it, too, faster'n the wires the telegram came in on. It weren't Morgan who let everybody know you was comin', you know."

"I see," Kate said, although she wasn't entirely convinced the blame wasn't McCall's. Correspondents, some from as far away as New York, had been coming to Abilene since the previous autumn, and she'd never heard of any of them receiving a greeting like the one she'd gotten.

She wasn't up to arguing the point just then, though. Instead she said, "Regardless of who is responsible for the gossip surrounding my arrival, it will make my job more difficult to report on Abilene and its citizens. It won't do for everyone to recognize me and be on their best behavior, hoping to be mentioned in one of my articles."

"Ain't no best behavior in Abilene," Celia warned, a stern look quickly replacing her friendly demeanor. "You'd best not go anywheres without Morgan or Jesse by your side."

The unsolicited advice rankled, but Kate found it hard to resent Celia. She obviously meant well.

She tried to change the subject. "It was very kind of you to make up a tray for me, but you shouldn't have gone to such trouble. I don't want to be a bother."

"No bother at all. Matt and Sarah wanted to bring it up, but I wanted to give you some peace before they started hammerin' at you. Full of questions, those two are."

Reminded of the children, a desperate feeling of loss pierced Kate's heart.

"You all right? I love Morgan like a son, but I swear if he did anythin' to hurt you, I'll tan his hide but good."

"No. No, it's nothing," Kate lied. "Marshal McCall and I didn't see eye to eye on a few things, but I'm fine, Celia, just fine. I'm just tired from the long trip."

She liked the housekeeper's forthright manner, even if she did fuss like an old broody hen. She sounded as if she'd gone toe to toe with McCall on occasion and had even won a round or two. Celia was a pure delight, even if she did talk too much and too fast.

On impulse, she reached out and placed a hand on Celia's arm. "Thank you."

She took comfort from the mingled scents of cinnamon and fresh-baked bread that clung to the housekeeper's serviceable brown calico and white apron. The corners of Celia's pale eyes crinkled when she smiled, which was often.

Strands of silver streaked her brown hair, secured in a snug knot at the base of her neck. The woman's smile was warm and genuine, unlike her employer's granite features.

"I'm grateful for all you've done to make me feel welcome," Kate said. "I hope you won't think me rude if I remain in my room tonight. I feel a bit unwell."

At once she felt both guilt and amazement at the lie that sprang readily from her lips, allowing her to avoid McCall and his children. She felt guilty for lying to someone as kind as Celia, and amazed at how adept she'd become at prevaricating since Teddy's death. Although she made sure her stories for the newspaper were as truthful as possible, lying about her personal life had become second nature.

"Do you think the children would mind if we get acquainted tomorrow?"

"They'll understand," Celia assured her with a pat on the shoulder, her eyes crinkling in another warm smile. "You rest now. Jest put the tray outside the door when you're finished."

* * * *

CELIA WAS A WONDERFUL cook, Kate marveled after she'd eaten every delectable morsel. The meal had bolstered her spirits and she was determined to start work right away. Searching for her clothes, she found they'd been unpacked, neatly folded, and placed in a large, intricately carved chiffonier. Celia's work, no doubt. Kate silently vowed to somehow make it up to the housekeeper for the little white lie she'd told earlier.

She found her reticule propped against the mirror of a dressing table that sat between two tall, narrow windows. Opening it, she found that everything was still there except her derringer.

Blast that black-hearted mule, McCall. How dare he appropriate her personal belongings? No doubt he'd hidden it somewhere in this house. It seemed unlikely he'd keep it on his person since he didn't even carry a firearm of his own.

With a smug smile, she congratulated herself for having had the foresight to pack the ammunition Leland had given her inside her hatbox. She retrieved it and stuffed it into her reticule, determined to find and load her two-shot for her own protection.

Anxious to begin recording her impressions of the town so far, she donned a simple gown of chocolate brown poplin. She made short work of the jet beads stretching from neckline to waist, then straightened the lace on the high collar and cuffs with a flick of her fingers. From beneath her bodice, she withdrew a heart-shaped locket, her most precious possession.

She removed her stock of paper, her silver pen, and a small bottle of India ink from her valise and placed them on the dressing table. Hoping to jar loose from her brain the words and emotions needed to bring alive for her readers the little bit of Abilene that she'd seen so far, Kate stood and paced the room, allowing her thoughts to flow where they would.

She cast a critical eye about the room, noting the pink-and-gold striped wallpaper and the frothy lace at the

windows. Intricate carvings of Cupid's face stared back at her from the bed's headboard and footboard. Mercury-glass ornaments perched on an *étâgere* glittered like silver in the lamplight.

How odd. The elegant room obviously didn't belong to the housekeeper or to a child. *Would a hard-bitten man like McCall want a cherub staring down on him as he slept? And how had he purchased such costly furnishings on a lawman's pay?*

His salary would be a matter of public record, she knew, and she made a mental note to ask Mr. Joseph McCoy about it when she toured his stockyards. McCoy, whose enterprise last year had turned the small, dead town into a money-making gem, would have made it his business to know all about anyone the town hired.

Also, the seamy Texas Street saloons warranted a visit. They'd provide her readers with a comparison to other, more upstanding business ventures.

Rejuvenated by the plans for her series of articles, Kate set her pen to paper. The words seemed to flow from the ink-soaked nib of their own volition. She paused, then smiled as she read her lead paragraph. It produced an unflattering—but truthful—view of the marshal as black as the India ink with which it was written.

Hell is now in session on the plains of Kansas.
Instead of a pitchfork, the devil deftly wields a
rawhide whip over the delights of his domain.

* * * *

TWO HOURS LATER, Kate put her pen aside and shook a cramp from her hand. She stood and worked out the kinks in her shoulders. Rubbing her eyes, she realized how silent the house had become. Perhaps now was as good a time as any to search for her two-shot.

Cracking the door, she listened for any sounds from downstairs or elsewhere in the house. Hearing none but the rhythmic ticking of the tallcase clock on the landing, she stepped into the hallway.

"Has Her Majesty finally decided to grace us with her presence?"

She froze, immediately recognizing his velvety drawl.

McCall sat on the landing, wrists resting casually on his drawn up knees. Before she could gather her wits, he stood and approached, backing her into the room.

She stared at him, taken aback by how tall and virile he appeared. It was the first time she'd seen him in decent lighting. He'd washed away the grime of the streets, and in its place, she smelled the fresh scent of soap plus a hint of whiskey. With a start she realized the marshal was an extremely attractive man in a rugged sort of way.

Tight black trousers accentuated his trim waist and lean hips. His shoulders—the broadest she'd ever gazed upon—snugly stretched a crisp, white, cotton shirt and black leather vest. His holster was conspicuously absent.

The dark hair framing his tanned face was a little too long. He wore it brushed back from his forehead to reveal striking

The Lawman
by Lily Sorren

hazel-green eyes. His moustache was as thick and full as the
whisks of a broom, and dark stubble shadowed the harsh
planes of his face. His generous lips were drawn taut in a
hard line.

It was bad enough that McCall looked so thoroughly,
potently male. What was worse, though, was the anger flaring
in his beautiful eyes, directed straight at her.

Chapter 6

KATE'S STOMACH somersaulted. She clutched the folds of her skirt to keep her hands from trembling. She couldn't shake the feeling that somehow McCall would figure out the meaning of her scars, and the reason she'd been whipped.

These marks shall serve to warn other men ... a sign of your sins ... Ian's voice echoed in her mind.

Clutching her skirts tighter, she decided to strike first rather than wait for McCall's interrogation. She forced herself to meet his hard gaze. "Really, Marshal McCall," she huffed, as if speaking to someone unbelievably obtuse. "If I'm to board here, I won't have you barging into my room. It is quite improper."

Ignoring his smirk, she rushed on. "I'm terribly busy at the moment. I'll be downstairs tomorrow if you wish to speak with me." On wobbly legs she walked to the door and opened it wide, dismissing him.

In the blink of an eye, McCall reached out and slammed it shut. "This is my house. I'll enter any room I damn well please."

He leaned back against the door, his casual posture at odds with the deep, threatening timbre of his voice. "I saved your worthless hide from those drunks, and this is how you repay me? By refusin' to eat supper with my family?"

His family? Supper? That's all this was about? She felt the tension ease from her shoulders.

McCall stepped closer. "I can't believe I was worried about you. I shouldn't have wasted my time. Catty bitches always land on their feet, don't they?"

Kate gasped at the affront.

"Remember this," he warned. "Even though your rich family treats you like a queen, and your readers fawn all over you, I will not allow Celia to cater to you. You'll take your meals at the table like everyone else. Is that understood?"

"How dare you? Get out."

"Do you have any idea of the harm you've caused?"

Kate's shoulders tensed again. Fingering her locket's cord, she retreated several paces. "I don't know what you're talking about. I've been in this room all evening. I haven't done a thing you could object to."

It occurred to her that she hadn't spoken the entire truth. She eyed him, hoping he wouldn't cross to the dressing table and spy what she'd written.

He took her elbow and dragged her out the door and down the hallway. "Be quiet and you'll find out exactly what you did."

They stopped beside the last door at the far end of the hall. He pressed her back against the wall.

She turned to leave. "This is ridicu—"

"Just listen." This time his hands remained firmly on her shoulders.

She tilted her head, straining her ears. "Someone is crying. A child. A little girl, I think." Kate slid free of his hands as understanding dawned. "I haven't even met Sarah yet. I've done nothing to make her cry." She spoke in a vehement

whisper, not understanding why she felt compelled to keep her voice low, and more exasperated because of it.

"Oh, but you did." He took her hand and led her down the staircase, through a long hall, and into the kitchen.

Kate cautiously eyed two large dogs sleeping on a rag rug in front of the cookstove. The shaggy, reddish muzzle of one rested intimately on its companion's sleek black rump. Simple yellow curtains hung at the window. An oak table dominated the area, bowls of melted strawberry ice cream overflowing onto its scarred top.

Cheerful and lived-in, the room reminded her of the loving home where she'd grown up. In that moment she found it all too easy to picture McCall's children seated at the table, animatedly sharing tidbits about their day, as she'd done with her family. She found it even easier to envision the disappointment on their faces when she'd failed to come downstairs.

Afraid it would be a case of too little, too late, she nevertheless stammered an apology for her behavior. "Celia must have used half a pound of sugar to make the ice cream. I know it's too expensive to waste—"

"I don't give a damn about the expense." McCall pulled out a chair and slammed it down on the plank floor. "Sit."

Kate jumped. The dogs raised their heads in unison and looked at McCall.

She clasped her hands at her waist. "Your kind invitation is hard to resist," she said with mock sincerity, "but I prefer to stand, thank you."

"Sit!" McCall's large hand pressed on her shoulder and she went down.

This time, at the sound of their master's booming voice, the dogs staggered to their feet. They ambled from the room, long tails wagging. The click of their nails against the floor was the only sound in the kitchen as McCall glared down at her.

Her back ramrod straight, she watched as he whipped around another chair and straddled it.

"Really, Marshal, it's only ice cream," she said, unable to think of anything else in her defense, yet totally aware of the inadequacy of her words. "I'll replace the sugar."

"It's not the sugar. It's my little girl crying her eyes out upstairs."

His hopeless tone startled her. She began to think maybe it wouldn't hurt to hear him out.

"Celia told me Sarah spent hours lookin' for wild berries, chatterin' away about how she hoped it wouldn't rain before she got enough to make Celia's special recipe for you."

He shifted his weight, rubbing a hand across the stubble on his chin. He drew a deep breath before looking at her. For once, the man actually appeared uncomfortable.

"Since her mama left, you're the first thing Sarah's shown a spark of interest in. Most days we can't get her to come out of her room, much less talk to us. She sits up there all day, every day, huggin' the stuffin' out of her doll. Once in a while she'll pet Digger or Cookie, the good-for-nothin' mutts you just saw, but that's all.

"I haven't seen her this excited about anythin' in a long time—not even Christmas. I don't know why, but somethin' about you has caught her attention.

"Hell, I know you don't owe me anythin', Mrs. Stewart, but I'm askin' you to be kind to Sarah. Your visit means a lot to her."

Kate was at once both embarrassed and touched. This rugged man—tall and broad enough to fill a doorway, tough enough to tame a wicked town like Abilene without a gun, and mean as a wounded bear—was worried sick about his little girl. She could understand that. She'd lost count of the number of nights she'd lain awake feeling the same way.

Maybe he wasn't as hard-hearted as he seemed, if he could love his child so much. An urge overcame her to ease the worry lines etched in his face.

To lighten the moment, she grasped the first innocuous subject that sprang to mind. With a smile she teased, "Digger and Cookie? Their names show a distinct lack of imagination. I suppose you named them, Marshal?"

A hint of a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Sarah did."

They looked at each other tentatively, almost shyly.

"I reckon a writer like yourself could think of a great name. Tell me, Cattle Kate, what would you name a dog?"

He was teasing her, but there was no animosity in his voice. Rather than raising her defenses, his question and his slight smile relaxed her.

After a thoughtful moment she answered. "We had a dog once. He was very big and very shaggy, and always coming home with brambles on his fur."

She paused, remembering how proud Teddy had been when she'd been assigned the responsibility of brushing his fur. "Killer was black as midnight and even bigger than Digger and Cookie, but there wasn't a gentler soul alive."

A full-fledged smile, totally disarming, lit McCall's whiskered face. "Killer?"

"My daughter named him. She thought if he had a dangerous name, he'd scare away her bad dreams," she said quietly. Suddenly uncomfortable with the direction their conversation had taken, she avoided his gaze. "I'll do what I can, Marshal. About Sarah, I mean."

From the corner of her eye she caught McCall watching her hand, then realized she was running it up and down the chocolate silk draped over her legs. She stopped abruptly and folded her hands in her lap.

"Look at me, Kate."

The concern in his voice drew her gaze to his. Morgan rose and stood before her.

"Talk to me, Kate," he urged, taking her hands in his. "Did those drunken fools hurt you today? Or is the pain from something that happened a long time ago?"

She yanked her hands free and looked away. She wished he'd never brought up the awful attack. She trembled, remembering the helplessness she'd felt when they'd stripped the gaudy silk from her body. She wanted to weep again at

the mere thought of her scars, and thus her shameful secret, being exposed. She rose and turned her back to him.

Years spent watching for the twitch of a man's trigger finger or the movement of a hand toward a holster had made Morgan keenly alert to the slightest movement. He hadn't missed hers as she rubbed her thigh. He wondered if whoever beat the daylights out of her had left any permanent damage besides the scars. He wondered, too, how badly her legs pained her.

Morgan turned away from the sight of her stiff back, rebuffed by the way she'd turned from him. He didn't trust her worth a spit, especially not when it came to his children. Hell, she'd just admitted that she had a daughter. She'd callously left her own family hundreds of miles away. If she didn't care about her own flesh and blood, why would she care a lick for someone else's?

He couldn't afford to think about her pain. It didn't matter—not when Sarah was crying herself to sleep again. This time the tears might not be over her mama, but it was the same damned story all over again. The selfish woman across the room thought of no one's feelings but her own, just like Mary.

Morgan reached for her so quickly that she jumped. Ignoring her protests, he propelled her out of the kitchen and through the hall. As they ascended the steep steps, he growled, "I'm warnin' you. Don't say anythin' to hurt Sarah's feelings or I'll make what happened in the jail seem like a picnic on the banks of the Smoky Hill."

She wrenched free of him and stood stock still on a step, hands clenched at her sides as if she was trying very hard to control her temper. "Don't threaten me. I would never deliberately hurt anyone's feelings, much less an innocent child's. You truly are a boor, not to mention a genuine bastard."

"Such attractive language, darlin'," he drawled, grabbing her arm again and hustling her up the staircase. "Pick it up at some expensive finishin' school, did you?"

"I learned it on the trail working on a story. Not that it's any business of yours."

"It's my business when you're under my roof. Watch your tongue around Sarah and Matt. If you don't, I just might wash your mouth out with soap." He flashed her a meaningfully wicked grin. "As I recall, you enjoy a good latherin'."

Her cheeks flushed crimson. "Don't you dare threaten me."

Morgan's grin disappeared as quickly as it had come.

"Don't push me, lady. Hurt Sarah and you'll answer to me."

They stopped again at the end of the upstairs hall. Quiet sobs, punctuated by little hiccups, came from behind the last door. Kate recognized the forlorn sounds immediately and they moved her deeply.

Casting a glance at McCall, she saw that lines of tension bracketed his mouth and etched the planes of his tanned face. For the first time since they'd met, it would've been ridiculously easy to guess what he was thinking.

She knew exactly what thoughts spun through his mind and how he felt deep in his heart because the very same

sounds had torn her to pieces countless nights. Silently she vowed to make it up to McCall's little girl for spoiling the ice cream surprise and unintentionally hurting her feelings. Between Celia and Sarah, she had many amends to make in the coming days.

McCall softly rapped on the door before opening it. "Sarah? Honey, it's Pa. I've got a surprise for you."

In the dim light of the lamp, Kate could barely make out the small figure huddled in the bed. She saw only a mass of dark curls on the white pillow before McCall went to the bedside table and turned up the wick, illuminating the room.

From what she could see of the girl, who had the covers pulled up to her nose, she appeared to be no older than four or five years old. Her hair was as raven black as her father's; her eyes huge and blue as a robin's egg.

Kate tugged on her locket as she studied the girl. Struck by how much this beautiful child reminded her of Teddy, Kate forgot the spoiled ice cream and the threatening conversation with McCall that had led her there. She even forgot McCall stood behind her, and saw only the little bundle under the covers.

Something twisted painfully inside her when she recognized a yearning and loss in those wide blue eyes that stared solemnly back at her. How did someone so young and innocent, and obviously loved to distraction by her father, get that frightened, haunted look?

"Are you really Cattle Kate?"

Kate jumped at the tiny voice. She hadn't been this close to a little girl in years. Two long, horribly empty years. She tried to answer, opening her mouth...

No sound came out.

McCall's finger poking at her back nudged her forward, propelling her closer to the bed. She tried again to speak, but this time, too, the effort was futile.

Sarah lowered the sheet and offered a tentative smile. She had her father's dark good looks, but where his face was all shadows, harsh planes, and craggy lines, Kate saw in the girl a pretty, round face with smooth peaches-and-cream skin. Her cheeks were rosy from the warmth of the bedcovers as well as from crying, and her hair was endearingly mussed. She hugged a rag doll to her chest, as if her very life depended on its presence.

"Are you really Cattle Kate? Are you really gonna live here with us?"

McCall stepped forward. "Honey, Mrs. Stewart is just visiting for a little while. A week at most."

His words broke the spell Sarah had cast over her. Kate returned the child's smile.

"How do you do, Sarah?" She held out a shaky hand to the girl, who took it with such wonder and awe an observer would've thought the child was being presented to President Andrew Johnson.

The feel of the soft hand enveloped trustingly in hers, holding on so sweetly, was more than Kate could bear. She backed quickly out of the room as she spoke. "I—I'm sorry.

So sorry about the strawberries and the ice cream, Sarah. I promise I'll make it up to you. I have to go now. Good night."

Kate didn't stop running until she was in her room, the door locked behind her, her back pressed firmly against it.

Suddenly her arms, arms that keenly ached to hold her own child once more, felt emptier and more damned than the gaping pits of hell.

Bitter tears rolled freely down her cheeks. Crushing waves of despair and grief weakened her, as raw and unrelenting now as that long ago day when she'd laid Teddy to eternal rest. Knees wobbling, she slid to the floor in a puddle of chocolate silk, alternately praying and railing at fate. Silently she cursed life's unfairness to Teddy, and death's premature claim on her misshapen body.

Holy Mother of God, why had the terrible wanting and needing for her child returned to haunt her now? Why here, where she couldn't possibly avoid that adorable little girl down the hall?

To shake free of them again—to save her sanity—the only thing to do was avoid that precious bundle named Sarah. She'd have to get her mind on something else, get to work as quickly as possible, and not stop until she was far, far away from the McCall house.

She lifted the heavy silver locket from around her neck and opened it, trying to see Teddy's image through a blur of tears. Swiping at her eyes with the backs of her hands, she studied the tintype for a long time, even though she already knew every grain of the image by heart.

She remained that way, not feeling the floor's chill, until the house once again grew quiet, long after the sound of McCall's angry footsteps had passed her chamber door.

Replacing the locket around her neck, the only thing she felt was the hard, cold shard of grief lodged in her heart.

* * * *

"MAMA!"

"I'm coming, baby." Kate rubbed the sleep from her eyes. Turning her head on the pillow, she noted that the moon gleamed high in the sky, peeking in and out of the wind-driven clouds and through the lacy curtains.

She pushed back the covers and hurried toward the door, then stopped abruptly when her fingers curled around the cut-glass doorknob. With a heavy sigh, she realized it was only the dream again.

She wasn't in Philadelphia and Teddy wasn't in the next room calling for her. She was in godforsaken Abilene, clad in a borrowed nightgown, in the home of a man who despised her.

She was utterly alone. Always alone.

Her shoulders slumped. With a heavy sigh, she laid her forehead against the door's smooth wood. She'd come so far emotionally, traveled so many miles physically, and still she couldn't outrun the dream.

"Mama!"

Kate shivered in the dark. Why did she still hear Teddy calling? She pinched herself and flinched. She was awake, wasn't she?

The child's cry escalated into a high-pitched wail.

Goosebumps danced over Kate's flesh. Maybe she was going mad. She'd heard that it happened to some women—that they never recovered from the loss of a child. Was this it, then? After burying her only child, then her dream of a home and family of her own, would her mind be the next casualty?

"Oh, Mama!"

The piercing cry opened the gates of memory, transporting her back to the mansion on Rittenhouse Square. She heard Teddy's anguish, felt it squeezing her heart as if it had happened just a moment ago.

Kate shook with renewed rage, remembering that day Ian and his mother, Abigail, had summoned her to the library.

The first thing she saw was Teddy's wheelchair, positioned in front of her scowling husband and mother-in-law.

"Oh, Mama, no! Don't let Father send me away," Teddy begged. "I won't be any more trouble. I promise."

Ignoring the girl's plea, Abigail said, "Theodora has such a pretty face. What a pity she's a cripple. She's worthless to the family." She spoke as if Teddy's ears didn't work, rather than her legs.

Though she was barely five years old, Teddy's wide blue eyes reflected that she fully understood her grandmother's words. From the wheelchair's caned seat, she turned to Kate. "Please, Mama, don't let them send me away."

Clenching her hands at her sides, Kate was torn between the maternal urge to comfort Teddy and the overwhelming desire to lash out at her husband and his mother. In that moment, she wanted nothing more than to shove the two of

them out the gleaming, velvet-draped window, but remembering Teddy's need of her, she pushed the vengeful thought aside.

Kate knelt and held her daughter's trembling hands. "Don't worry, baby. Mama won't let them send you away."

Even to her own ears, the promise sounded hollow. She had no recourse against the wishes of her husband or his powerful family.

"It's for the best," Ian said. "Mother is right, of course. No purpose would be served for others to discover your failings as a wife and as a mother."

He placed his hands on Kate's shoulders. She jerked from his touch, repulsed by his callousness and cruelty. She saw the anger flash across his face, pinching his lips, and knew Ian would make her pay for rebuffing him. She straightened her spine, unremorseful.

"It's a personal matter," Ian said. "Nothing would be gained by advertising our tragedy, and that's exactly what we'd be doing if we allowed Theodora to remain here. Our friends and associates would only repeat what Mother has told you all along.

"The girl is an abomination, and her defect is God's retribution on you, Katherine. I won't have the entire city speculating about what my wife might have done to bring such shame down on our heads."

Kate had heard it all so many times, she believed she was immune to it until she looked at Teddy. The child sat with her head bowed and trails of salty tears streamed down her pale cheeks.

"The decision has been made," Ian said. "In time, Theodora will come to accept it, and so will you."

"I will not allow you to put Teddy in an asylum."

Ian lashed out with such speed and force that Kate reeled backward from the open-handed blow, falling to the red Turkish carpet at his feet.

"You have no choice." Ian's calmly spoken words made an eerie contrast to the vicious slap he'd just cracked across her face.

"Pa, please. Bring Mama back, Pa..."

Kate's head snapped up. *Pa?* Teddy had never called for Ian. He frightened her to tears. Furthermore, Ian had insisted that their daughter address him as 'sir,' never 'pa.'

Kate opened the door a crack. She heard Morgan's tender crooning as he soothed Sarah in her room down the hall. Eventually, the child's cries settled down to whimpers.

In her mind, Kate saw the brawny marshal cradling the tiny girl in his arms. She pictured him running his large hands soothingly over Sarah's riot of dark curls, rocking his daughter to sleep. A huge lump formed in her throat.

Shaken but determined, she pulled the nightgown over her head and threw on her brown silk gown. She wrapped her hair in a tight coil, donned her paisley shawl, and retrieved her reticule full of ammunition from the dressing table.

Quiet as a shadow, she slipped out of her room and into the room next door. When she emerged ten minutes later, marveling over how easy it had been to find her derringer in the trunk at the foot of the marshal's bed, she hurried down the staircase to the front door.

Chapter 7

"DARLIN', GET ME another bottle of rye." Leaning back at one of the few non-gaming tables in the Alamo, Morgan closed an eye and cocked his head to one side, taking a bead on Cherry Valleau as she sashayed to the bar to fetch his whiskey. He tipped his shot glass to his lips and watched her return with equal interest. Her hips shimmered in white satin, and he suspected her legs were long enough to ride a man beyond the farthest star to paradise.

Drovers, lost a moment ago in drink, poker, and faro, swiveled their heads to follow the flourish of pearly satin and black lace. Even the locals, most of whom had been visiting her since she'd arrived in town last year, were not immune.

Morgan hadn't noticed Cherry before tonight. That wasn't true, he amended, recalling all the times she'd wriggled on his lap during a card game, or rubbed up against him when she passed him at the bar. A man would have to be blind—more likely dead—not to notice Cherry.

Surely she's woman enough to banish all thoughts of one tiny correspondent for the night.

He just hoped the feel of Cherry in his arms would be enough to blot out the haunting image branded into his mind. The only thing he could think about was Kate, all traces of wealth and pretense washed away as she sat nearly naked in the bathhouse, squirming sensuously as his hands roamed over her glistening flesh.

Morgan again swung the glass to his lips and drained it dry. He needed every last drop to help him forget what he never should have allowed to happen in the first place. Rubbing a hand across his jaw, he struggled to banish the unwelcome sensual images that plagued him.

He managed only to conjure more damnable images of Kate. They swirled through his mind, as cuttngly sharp and quick and colorful as the bits of cut glass in a kaleidoscope: Cattle Kate at the depot in the thunderstorm, skittish as a cat in the middle of a stampede ... her firm, rounded bottom under his palm when he'd swatted her ... defiant and courageous in the jail, then broken and crying ... her horrible scars ... emotionally spent, nestled trustingly in his arms.

Morgan lifted the empty shot glass, then slammed it resoundingly, satisfyingly onto the table. He ignored the curious looks from the other patrons. The bothersome female had been here less than a full day, but already she'd vexed and intrigued and confounded him more than any other woman he'd ever met. He'd protect her all right, but that was as far as it would go between them.

His jaw clenched as he thought of how she'd insulted his daughter. Thankfully, Sarah was too young to recognize the snub for what it was, or to notice how Kate had beat a hasty retreat and locked herself in Mary's old room.

But he'd been all too aware of Kate's coldness toward Sarah. He'd make her pay for the slight as he'd promised her he would. *But not tonight.* He had more enjoyable things to do. Besides, Cattle Kate was probably still holed up in Mary's room getting her beauty sleep. If she was as smart as

everybody said she was, she wouldn't show her face 'til morning.

Morgan sat back, watching Cherry, allowing himself to enjoy the rare night of pleasure. The night was quiet enough so he could forget the town's troubles for a few hours. None of the men who'd caused a stir at the jail would dare approach Cattle Kate in the marshal's own house. Most of the other drovers had just pulled into town and were ready for nothing more strenuous than drinking, gambling, and whoring. Kate would be safe enough if she stayed put.

Like Abilene's nine other saloons, the Alamo was prepared to cater to the whim of men who'd spent months on a dusty trail, all for an inflated price. An array of scantily clad women were propped at the bar or perched atop a cowpoke's lap. With the slightest encouragement, they'd lead their customers to either the curtained rooms off the upstairs gallery, or out the back door to a short boardwalk that led to the best whorehouse in town.

It was generally agreed the Alamo owed its popularity to that private little convenience. Even upstanding citizens, not wanting to be seen visiting a calico queen, made frequent use of it.

Idly, Morgan wondered which way Cherry would lead him—up the steps to the gallery or out back to the boardwalk. It didn't matter, he decided, as long as she worked her magic and made him forget.

A smile lifted his moustache as Cherry wove her way through the crowded room. Long blonde hair couldn't hide the jiggle of her full bosom. As she leaned over to pour him

another drink, the rouged tips of her breasts popped into plain view and nearly spilled out into his whiskey.

From her artfully painted face and the black plume nodding atop her head, down to her long, shapely legs, Morgan regarded Cherry like an art critic enjoying an intriguing sculpture. But Cherry was no piece of cold stone or marble. She was warm and alive, available with no strings attached. She was as far away as he could get from what most folks called a decent woman. She was exactly what he wanted.

Morgan stood and was wrapping one arm tightly around Cherry's waist when the room tilted and the floor rose up to meet him. Hell, maybe he'd had too much to drink this time.

He curled his fingers around the bottle's neck and let Cherry lead him where she would.

* * * *

THE HEELS OF Kate's shoes clicked as she scurried along the narrow boardwalk, determined to make her way to the Alamo before Marshal McCall discovered her absence and tried to stop her.

A distinct squishing sound emanated from beneath her soggy hem, the result of sneaking out of the house without benefit of a lantern. Intent on getting as far away as possible from McCall—and his children—she'd planted both feet squarely in a shin-deep puddle.

Her cold, wet feet bothered her less than the prospect of running into McCall. Shivering, and knowing it had nothing to do with her wet feet, she quickened her step, determined to

write a story about the infamous saloon before the marshal could stop her.

Unfamiliar with the streets, she cast about in search of any landmark she might recognize from the ride on McCall's gray stallion. She scanned the hand-lettered signs lining the boardwalk.

She hurried past The Great Western Store whose sign proclaimed "Jake Karatofsky, Proprietor. Boots, Hats, and Gents' Furnishing Goods." Along the following block, shingles swaying over doorways advertised the services of a lawyer, a blacksmith, and a tinsmith. On another block, she passed the prosperous-looking Henry H. Hazlett's Farmer's and Drover's Supply Store.

Raucous laughter and a lively song hammered out on an out-of-tune piano drew her attention across the street to the Bull's Head Saloon where a painting of a huge red bull stood guard above its carved swinging doors. Not believing her eyes, she stepped into the muddy road and gasped.

On the painted signboard for all the world to see was the bull's member—enormous, engorged, and pointed straight at her.

She whirled away from the vulgar image and ran smack into the hitching rail in front of the jail. She stared at the dark window and locked door, bitterly recalling McCall and his whip, and what had happened to her there.

Clutching her paisley shawl tightly to her breast, as if it could somehow contain the outrage swelling there, she muttered an exceptionally colorful oath. She roundly cursed

McCall for the greatest embarrassment she had yet endured in the pursuit of her profession.

Straightening her shoulders, she stomped off in her squeaking shoes to search for the Alamo, heedlessly splashing mud across her skirt.

The journey took longer than she'd expected, for despite the late hour and the swampy, nearly impassable condition of the streets, foot traffic on the roughhewn planks was heavy. Dismayed that so many men were milling about, and hoping none of them had been among those who'd congregated at the jail and called for a turn with the "new gal," she draped the folds of her shawl over her head. It hid her face so well she nearly passed the Alamo's plate-glass doors.

Huddling to one side of the busy entrance, she gathered her shawl closer. She wished it were that easy to gather her courage; it was more difficult than she'd expected to broach the portal of the males-only establishment. She wondered if anyone inside had witnessed the spectacle she'd made in that gaudy scarlet dress.

The strains of a lively rendition of *The Yellow Rose of Texas* drifted through the humid night air, alternately swelling and fading as the doors swung open and closed. A buzz of male voices drifted outside, punctuated by coarse female laughter.

Drovers in stiff new denims, starched shirts, and brightly colored bandannas sauntered in and out of the saloon, trailing the scents of cheap whiskey and cheaper perfume. Others, respectable businessmen from the looks of their dark frock coats and trousers, also filtered steadily through the doors.

She pressed her nose to the glass and cupped her palms around her face, trying to peer past the glare into the festive room beyond. What she saw sent shock waves rippling through her body. Her eyes opened wide. Her mouth gaped, fogging the pane with her breath.

Crude paintings of Rubenesque nudes hung on the walls, their likenesses repeated in rows of mirrors. The largest one, more blatantly suggestive than the rest, leered down at a string of men crowding the bar from her position of honor high above it.

The mahogany-and-brass bar, which had to be at least forty feet long, ran the entire length of one side of the room. Behind it, row after row of green and brown bottles stood at attention in front of shot glasses and tumblers piled pyramid-style atop one another. An opulent chandelier that looked weighty enough to fall from its ropes at any minute cast its glittering light to all corners of the room, causing the brass fixtures, foot rails, and spittoons to twinkle as brightly as the gold pieces that lay atop the green baize of the gaming tables.

As Kate's shock increased, the circle of fog on the glass grew. She craned her neck and narrowed her eyes to get a better view, then gasped to discover that the nude paintings weren't the worst of it.

Prostitutes.

Around the trail drive's campfires and in the forts she'd visited, when they thought she couldn't hear them, the men talked about these women. They'd used names like calico queens, soiled doves, and *nymphs du prairie*.

She took a long look at the women she'd heard so much about. Perversely, she was disappointed. They weren't nearly as exotic as she'd expected. Their costumes dripped shiny beads and bright feathers, and several sported boots emblazoned with a lone red star, but they were all rather plain of face with figures that were either too plump or too skinny.

There was nothing extraordinary about any of these calico queens, except for one. She supposed some men might consider the tall, buxom blonde pretty in her own fashion. Kate thought the woman looked like a packed sausage in her short white dress as she helped a drunken oaf up the stairs.

She couldn't see the man's face, but he was tall and broad-shouldered. When he bent his dark head to whisper in the blonde's ear, the woman threw her head back with a lusty laugh, sending the black plume atop her head nodding vigorously. As the couple continued up the long staircase, he leaned down again to nuzzle her neck.

Kate must have been breathing harder than she realized because the window was now totally obscured by her warm, moist breath. Losing sight of the couple ascending the stairs, she quickly rubbed a circle in the fog. She stooped slightly and pressed her nose closer to the pane.

"Oooow!" The high-pitched squeal flew from her throat, surprising her as much as the passersby who stopped and stared. Rubbing herself where she'd been viciously pinched, she turned to find a drover and two *vaqueros* directly in front of her. Doffing their mud-splattered hats, they looked her over from top to bottom.

"Need any help, miss?" The man's Texas drawl was as unmistakable as the overpowering smell of whiskey that wafted from him.

Kate shivered. Were these men at the jail earlier, among those who believed her a prostitute?

Realizing she was still inelegantly rubbing the sore spot on her fanny, she clutched her reticule with both hands and ground out a dismissive, "No, thank you."

She'd been around enough drovers that, ordinarily, their presence didn't cause any alarm. She had, in fact, found the vast majority respectful of a lady, but something about these three caused the skin at the back of her neck to prickle. A breeze brought their rancid odor to her nose, making her eyes water.

Of the three men, the Texan was the tallest and dirtiest. When he leered at her, his smile revealed two green front teeth. "Purty little thing like you shouldn't oughta be out here all alone. Lost yore husband or fee-ahn-say in there, did ya? We'll take ya inside and help ya find him, won't we, boys?"

They advanced and Kate forgot her nervousness about investigating the saloon unescorted. She pushed through one side of the double doors and hurried across the threshold. Glancing over her shoulder to make sure they hadn't followed her, she collided with a solid wall of man.

She felt two strong hands grip her upper arms, preventing her from losing her balance. "Pardon me. I should've looked where I was going," she said, glancing at his face for the first time. Kate's eyes grew wide. "Jesse!"

His wheat-colored moustache turned up in a wide grin to reveal even, white teeth. "Lord, woman, but you're a sight for sore eyes."

The delightful surprise of their chance encounter pushed the close call she'd just had from her mind. She was happier than she would have imagined possible to see her old friend's tanned, handsome face.

"What are you doing here, Jesse? I never thought you'd leave the Goodnight Ranch."

"Long story, Kate. You haven't changed, though. Still askin' questions all the time," he said with a wink. "Been almost two years since I laid these sorry eyes on you, and you're still pretty as a picture."

"You haven't changed either, I see. You're still a shameless flatterer. As I recall, you could charm the skin off a rattlesnake, Jesse Place."

He chuckled, and at the pleasant, throaty sound, Kate found herself relaxing for the first time since she'd set foot in Abilene. On impulse, she asked, "Doesn't an old friend deserve a hug?"

Jesse instantly obliged. He planted his battered brown hat firmly on the back of his head and twirled her around. She hugged his neck and pressed an innocent kiss to his cheek.

Presently, after trying to squeeze nearly two years of catching-up into a few short minutes, Jesse looked around the saloon, making her aware for the first time of the attention her presence had drawn. Taking her elbow, he escorted her to a table away from the noisy gamblers. He held out a chair and dusted it off with his hat.

"Maybe we should go someplace else. It's not right—or safe—for a lady to be in a place like this." Jesse looked at her expectantly, obviously hoping she'd agree.

Smiling sweetly, she settled back in the chair and adjusted her skirts. "I'm not leaving."

"Lord, you're the stubbornest female God ever made." Jesse slammed his hat on the table. "You're riskin' your reputation—not to mention your life—just bein' here."

She lifted her chin. "I'm researching a story for the *Journal*."

Jesse remained silent, every muscle rigid as he looked down at her. She placed a hand on his arm. "Please, Jesse, let's not argue. Sit with me awhile. I truly have missed you."

With a sigh, he pulled out a chair and sank into it. "I forgot how stubborn you can be when you get an idea in your head. Guess by now I should know better'n to argue with you, Kate, but Morgan'll have my hide when he finds out about this."

"McCall? What's he got to do with this? He has no say regarding my actions."

"Maybe not, but he's got plenty to say about mine. I'm his deputy now, Kate."

"Oh, no, Jesse. Don't tell me you work for that horrid marshal." She leaned into the table, anxious for an explanation.

"Like I said, it's a long story. Right now, I want to hear all about you. I'll take you to dinner before you leave next week and we'll catch up on everything else. Agreed?"

"What do you mean, 'leave next week'? My work could keep me here for weeks, even months."

"Morgan said you'd be gone by next week."

"Oh, did he? I am pleased to say that McCall is misinformed. I'll be here for quite awhile, if only to repay him for his gracious hospitality," she said, her tone laced with sarcasm.

Jesse laid a hand on her forearm. "Now, honey, you don't want to tangle with Morgan. Deep down he's a good man, but he don't cotton to women like you."

Kate bowed her head and Jesse hastened to explain. "Now, honey, I didn't mean that like it sounded. I know you're a fine, decent woman, but in Morgan's eyes you're just like Mary."

"His wife?"

"That's right. She left him 'bout a year ago, and it seems to me he thinks you deserted your family just like she did." Jesse ran a finger across her wedding band. "From what I can tell, Mary never was the type to be content. She was even more unhappy after the war when an accident in Chicago forced Morgan to move his family here."

"What happened?"

"Not my story to tell, Kate. Think you'd better hear it from Morgan."

"But he'd never—"

"You know by now that out here there are plenty of men with a past. Women, too. They come west to start fresh. It ain't polite to go askin' personal questions. If Morgan wants you to know, he'll tell you."

Feeling sufficiently chastened, Kate looked away and thought about her own dark past. She was grateful when

Jesse's soothing voice filled the uncomfortable silence stretching between them.

"Mary always wanted more'n Morgan could provide. She demanded the finest things money could buy, as if the war had never happened, as if they still lived on a plantation in Virginia."

"McCall owned a plantation?"

Jesse nodded. "War destroyed everything."

Kate's thoughts wandered to the coldly elegant bedroom that was such a stark contrast to the rest of McCall's warm home.

"Mary left Morgan and the kids, chasin' a sweeter life with another man—some actor fella who passed through a while back. She travels with his road show across the country now. In Morgan's mind, you're just like Mary, travelin' the country, leavin' your family behind."

Jesse's fingers gave her left hand a squeeze. "Why're you still wearin' your husband's ring? Did you love him so awful much?"

"I wear it for protection. So other men will leave me alone." She left the second question unanswered.

"Hasn't worked too well here, has it?"

From her neck to the roots of her hair, Kate felt her skin heat and knew she had to be a furious pink.

"In a town like this, a juicy piece of gossip travels fast. I know all 'bout what happened at the jail and the ... uh ... the red dress."

Afraid Jesse would condemn her as the marshal had, she searched his face, noting his sudden discomfort. "I didn't—"

"Hush now, Kate. I know it was all Morgan's doin'. I'm just sorry he's been so rough on you, though now you understand why. In fact, I was just on my way to look for Morgan to set him straight 'bout you bein' a widow and all, and 'bout what fine stories you write."

"No, Jesse. Please, you've got to let me handle McCall on my own. I won't have you jeopardizing your job because of me. I'd never forgive myself."

Silence stretched uncomfortably again between them. Kate squirmed under his perusal. "Please, Jesse. I've got to do it my way."

"I know you well, Kate, and I understand your need to be independent. That's why I'll go along with you on this—for now. But I won't have you mistreated by Morgan or anyone else. You've got to promise me you'll not rile Morgan again. And you've got to do what he says while you're here, for your own safety."

Knowing she couldn't agree to Jesse's last request, and unwilling to lie to her friend, she merely said, "I promise I'll be careful." She avoided the brown eyes that knew her so well.

"Celia said you didn't come down to supper because you weren't feelin' well."

She squirmed again in her seat.

Jesse grinned, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. "Seems you made a right quick recovery."

Her cheeks heated all over again. "Celia told me there was a deputy waiting to meet me. If I'd known it was you, I'd have gone downstairs in a minute. I'm sorry—"

"No need to be sorry." Jesse took both her hands in his, holding them tight. "I know how it gets for you and how you need to be alone once in awhile."

He gave her hands a gentle squeeze. "You never did tell me the whole story 'bout what happened in Philadelphia, but I figure I know you and that's good enough. You're a fine lady, Kate."

She cupped his cheek in her hand as she recalled their frequent late-night talks around a camp fire on the harsh trail drive where they'd met. Kate sighed, feeling as if it all had happened a lifetime ago.

It had been her first assignment for Leland, and Jesse had eased the way for her. On the dangerous Goodnight-Loving Trail, his acceptance of a city-bred young woman, green as grass, did more than anything else to prompt the hard-bitten men to accept and respect her.

"You mean a lot to me, Jesse. I always could count on you." Impulsively, she leaned over to kiss his cheek.

"You mean a lot to me, too, honey," he said, his voice husky.

The trace of sadness in the depths of his solemn, coffee-colored eyes surprised her. "Jesse?"

Abruptly he pushed away from the table, the legs of his chair scraping across the floor. After mumbling something about behaving herself and staying out of trouble, he excused himself to get her some refreshments.

Tapping her foot in time to the music, she took a small notebook and a pencil from her reticule. She draped the cords

around her wrist, then began to record the eye-popping images of the Alamo for her next story.

Without warning, a hairy hand on her right yanked the pencil from her fingers. From her left, long fingers grabbed her notebook. When she looked up, two dirty arms reached around from behind and grasped her middle, lifting and twirling her around all in the same quick motion. Her chair clattered as it fell sideways to the floor, sending up a cloud of sawdust.

Feet dangling in the air, Kate found herself face to face with the green-toothed Texan who'd wanted to help her find her 'fee-ahn-say.' The two *vaqueros* flanked him.

"How is it, missy, that ol' Jesse Place is good enough for you but we ain't?" the Texan said. "The whores here ain't usually so picky. Come on an' give us a kiss, like you did Jesse. I bet you did even more'n that for McCall." He ground his lips painfully down on hers.

His sour breath turned her stomach and she feared she'd lose her supper then and there. She jabbed her thumb into the hollow at the base of his throat. He pulled his mouth from hers with a pained grunt.

"Put me down!"

His hands tightened painfully around her middle. "Somebody oughta teach you some manners. Reckon I'm just the man to do it, too."

The Texan jerked his head toward the staircase. "Come on, *amigos*, let's get her upstairs."

He flung her to one of the Mexicans, who hefted her over his shoulder. She clawed at the *vaquero's* grimy back,

growing dizzy with apprehension. What were they going to do to her? Where was Jesse?

From her upside-down vantage point, she spied a bespectacled little man limping across the room to her aid.

"You, there!" the limping man called out.

Kate heard the deadly click of a hammer being cocked.

"No!"

A shot rang out, so close it nearly deafened her.

All other sound and motion instantly ceased. In the eerie silence, the realization she might have indirectly caused the death of that poor, little man stabbed Kate's heart. She flailed and struggled, beating her fists against her captor's back and kicking his thighs to no avail. Desperate to know what had become of her would-be savior, she raised her head and tried to get a glimpse of him, but couldn't manage to turn around.

Suddenly a broad expanse of chest covered by a coarse work shirt filled her vision. "P-please. Please p-put me down. That poor man needs—"

The Texan's open palm cracked across her cheek. "It don't matter if'n yore awake or out cold when we take you."

He yanked on her hair, putting a crick in her neck and forcing her to look up at him. "I know who you are. You're that gal the marshal drug through town today. McCall ain't worth spit when it comes to controllin' a woman. Too bad he ain't here to see how it's done."

Chapter 8

KATE'S EARS RANG from the forceful slap, and the smell of gun smoke pinched her nose. Thick, warm fluid filled her mouth with a coppery taste.

Fear thudded in her breast, urging her to play possum. She let her limbs go limp, groping with trembling hands inside the reticule still dangling from her wrist. When her fingers closed around the derringer's cold grip, she allowed herself a deep breath. Suddenly, she was very glad she'd overcome her qualms about searching for it in McCall's room. She'd felt like a thief in the night, but it would've been sheer lunacy to venture out alone without it, as her situation now proved.

"Put her down. Now."

The *vaquero* released her immediately, none too gently plopping her on her feet.

Dazed, her shawl trampled in the sawdust, Kate stumbled to where Jesse stood like a golden avenging angel, revolver drawn and aimed, hammer cocked.

"Get over behind the bar, Kate."

She aimed her two-shot at the Texan. "No, Jesse. I can take care of this myself." She cocked the derringer, and the click of metal against metal was the only sound in the cavernous room.

"Do as I say, Kate. Now!"

"But, Jes—"

"Don't argue. Go."

Seeing the anger on Jesse's face and the merciless way he eyed the Texan, she finally did as he told her. The men crowding the saloon parted like the Red Sea to allow her to pass. She scanned the room in search of the one man who'd tried to come to her aid, but he was nowhere to be found.

As she crouched behind the bar, she cursed the dearest friend she'd ever had for treating her as if she were just another helpless female. He of all people should know better.

Torn between worry for Jesse's safety and a desire to dress him down for ordering her to hide like a mouse scurrying for its hole, she popped her head up. Before her chin cleared the bar, she heard an explosion of gunfire.

* * * *

"COME ON BACK to bed, Morgan," Cherry purred. Dressed in only a sheer white wrapper, she stood behind him and twined her arms around his waist. "You don't have no cause to be embarrassed, sugar. It happens to lots of fellas. You just had too much whiskey is all."

She trailed her nails from his shoulders to his waistband, interrupting his attempt to button his pants. "We'll try again in a bit. You won't be sorry, sugar. I promise. I'll make you real glad you finally came to see me."

Morgan turned and took Cherry's hands in his, putting her away from him. "You're probably right, it's just the whiskey."

Looking at her voluptuous curves outlined so clearly by the filmy cloth, he wondered why the ministrations of a hot, experienced whore like Cherry did nothing to stir his blood.

Feeling empty and immeasurably older than his thirty-five years, he buttoned his pants and pulled on his boots. "All the same, I'd best be going."

Cherry wrapped her arms around his neck and rubbed her breasts against his chest. "Sugar, you can't go now. It took me a whole year to get you up here. Between your job and tendin' your young'uns, I reckon you were just too tired before. But you're here now and you just can't leave!"

Cherry's soft fullness continued to glide seductively across his bare chest. The full, barely-covered orbs should have been sexy as hell. But when he closed his eyes, the erotic image he saw wasn't of the blonde whore, but of the auburn-haired spitfire who had already gotten under his skin and fired his blood to the boiling point.

His britches tightened painfully at the memory of how arousing Kate had looked and how soft she'd felt, all but naked beneath his hands. Morgan groaned aloud.

Evidently encouraged by the sound, and by the hardness rising between them and pressing into her belly, Cherry stepped back and slowly untied her wrapper. She slipped out of the garment one shoulder at a time, then tossed it on the floor.

She cupped her full breasts and raised them in offering, squeezing their tips.

"Touch me, Morgan." Cherry's breath on his cheek was as soft and seductive as the discarded silk now lying at his feet. She took his hand, drawing his fingertips across her breasts, letting him feel the peaks pucker and harden beneath his touch. "I can make it good for you, sugar. So good."

Dropping his hand, Morgan sighed, closed his eyes, and let his head fall back. Sinking to her knees, Cherry expertly flipped open the first two buttons at his waist.

Gently he restrained her hands in his. Then he raised her up, avoiding the question in her eyes. Cherry didn't deserve to be treated this way. Even if she did make her living by pleasuring men, she was honest and friendly, and more than once had supplied him with information leading to the capture of a wayward drover or a wanted desperado.

He dug into his pocket, pulled out twice her usual fee, and pressed it into her palm.

"Sugar, I don't want—"

"Take it, Cherry." He picked up her wrapper and draped it across her shoulders before turning away. He shrugged into his shirt and started to button the placket.

Midway through the task, he discovered he'd mismatched the buttons and holes. Swearing low, he tugged the shirt open again, realizing with great annoyance that his inability to do up his shirt, and to bed Cherry, had nothing to do with the rotgut he'd poured down his throat.

Morgan's hands stilled when he felt Cherry's warm breasts glide across his back. Her arms encircled his waist, her nimble fingers undoing two more buttons on his britches. The denim slid past his hips and he felt the curls of her womanly vee cup his behind as she stroked him.

"Will you come visit me again, Morgan?"

Not wanting to hurt her feelings anymore than he already had, he stalled for time and the right words. Just as he opened his mouth to answer, an explosion of gunfire erupted

from downstairs. The scream that followed turned his blood cold.

* * * *

KATE RAISED HER head above the sturdy bar. As the smoke cleared, she had a clear view of the room. Most of the customers had fled while several gamblers had taken refuge behind overturned chairs and tabletops, their gold coins and playing cards scattered about the floor, forgotten.

She looked around the room. The gory sight brought a scream to her lips.

Three men were down, sprawled in shining crimson pools that enlarged by the second. Fear was in the air, carried on a bitter stench of gun smoke and blood.

The man who'd tried to limp to her rescue lay in the middle of the floor, unconscious, possibly dead, his steel-rimmed spectacles resting beside his head.

The still body of the drover who'd slapped her draped the staircase railing, evidently flung there by the force of a bullet.

Then she spied him.

"Jesse!"

"Katie," he groaned. "Stay back." He lay sprawled on his back. Blood poured from a wound high on his arm. He struggled to rise, to grasp the revolver sitting just beyond his grasp.

She didn't know whether to obey Jesse's command or to run to his side. She made a swift decision when she spied the two Mexicans advancing. One of them, his face hidden by the brim of a sombrero, held a long-barreled gun to Jesse's

throat. The other stomped on his injured arm, grinding the wound beneath his muddy heel.

Her heart hammered in her throat. She curled her fingers tighter around the cold grip of the two-shot she still held cocked and ready. Stepping around the bar, she took aim.

* * * *

MORGAN SNATCHED HIS whip from the bedside table and ran out of Cherry's room. He raced down the stairs, taking in the unfolding scene in the barroom below.

Two Mexicans he recognized from the Flying W outfit loomed over Jesse. One held a revolver to the deputy's throat. The other ground his heel into Jesse's shoulder.

At the bottom of the staircase, where a third man lay flung across the railing, unmoving, Morgan drew back his whip. It unfurled with an explosive crack.

Just as the *vaquero* howled out his pain and dropped the revolver, another shot sang out. Immediately the *vaquero* let go of his injured hand and clutched a spot high on his thigh. He fell over, his sombrero crushed beneath him as he rocked back and forth, more blood pooling in the sawdust.

The other *vaquero* turned and fled. Morgan cracked the whip again, letting it curl around the retreating man's throat. The lash dropped him to his knees. Stunned, and most likely wondering how he was going to draw his next breath with the rawhide wrapped around his windpipe, he keeled over, gasping and clawing at the noose-like whip.

With the situation under control, Morgan studied the faces surrounding him. *Which bastard from the Flying W had been fool enough to fire that first shot?*

Despite his ordinance forbidding firearms within the town's deadline, every season at least one Texas hard-ass insisted on wearing a revolver. Most others respected his proficiency with the whip too much to cross him.

Townsfolk and drovers alike had taken to calling his whip Medusa. Like its mythological namesake, one glimpse of the braided leather had been known to stop men stone cold. Word had spread that his rawhide was as swift and deadly as the hundreds of serpents on the old girl's head combined.

None of the fearful faces ringing the saloon could belong to someone who'd dare to deliberately cross Medusa's path. Unless it was a crime of passion involving a woman, none of these men could have done it.

Then it hit him. Instinctively he knew who was behind the deadly fight.

He had to be mistaken. She wouldn't dare leave the safety of his house, not after all she'd already been through that day, and especially not after the stern warning he'd given her.

Morgan eyed the room again. Whores peeked from behind upended tables and from the curtained gallery. None was a looker like Cherry, and he couldn't imagine any one of them inspiring emotion strong enough to spark a gunfight.

Then his gaze locked on her. Not twenty feet away, she held a derringer in her hands. It was still smoking.

His hands clenched and unclenched around Medusa. He bit back an oath. What the devil did Kate Stewart think she was

doing? A woman like her had no business in a place like this. Or, more precisely, only one business in a place like this.

Apparently she hadn't learned her lesson yet. This time the lesson would be harsher. He'd damn well make sure she learned to keep her fanny where it belonged, or he'd install it in a room upstairs and personally show her how a woman like her should be used.

He strode toward her. She raised the derringer and held it in both hands at arm's length. Pulling the hammer back, she aimed it directly at his head.

He reached for the gun. Before he could grab it, Cattle Kate pulled the trigger.

The bullet whizzed past his ear, freezing Morgan where he stood. Behind him there was a heavy thud. The sickening sound reverberated in the ensuing silence.

Morgan yanked the derringer out of Kate's trembling hands, and with a tight grip on her upper arm, turned to find the motionless body of the weasel around whose neck he'd wrapped Medusa. The *vaquero*, who'd evidently meant to shoot him in the back, was sprawled on the floor with Jesse's revolver still clutched in his hand and Kate's bullet in his chest.

Morgan kicked the weapon out of the *vaquero's* hand. He whirled on Kate, holding her arms in an iron grip. "Of all the reckless ... stupid ... foolhardy ... I ought to—"

"Let go of me!" She pushed at his chest. "Jesse needs help. He'll bleed to death if you don't let me go to him."

Morgan glanced at Jesse. His hands began to tremble. He wasn't sure whether he clasped her more tightly to still their

shaking or because his anger was quickly slipping out of control.

"Is this how you expect to 'do the town a lot of good?' By getting my deputy shot?"

She tried to hide a wince, but he caught the pained look. He released her, so furious he was afraid of what he might do to her if he didn't.

Immediately she ran past him, but to his great surprise, she didn't try to run from him and out the plate-glass doors. Instead, she raced further into the chaos of gun smoke and blood to Jesse's side.

Kneeling down, she lifted the hem of her brown dress, raised her snowy petticoat to her mouth, and tore several long strips off with her teeth. She bunched the material into a ball and pressed it to the gaping hole in Jesse's arm.

She worked a long while, but the bloody surge refused to cease. She turned and gazed up at Morgan, a wild, imploring look in her eyes. Wordlessly, he knelt opposite Kate and ran his fingers under Jesse's arm. When he pulled them out, they were covered in blood.

"There's another hole in the back," he said, just loud enough to be heard above Jesse's half-conscious moans. "Bullet must've torn clean through. He won't make it if we can't stop this bleeding."

Before he'd even finished speaking, she'd torn more strips from her petticoat. Morgan felt the weight of her gaze on him as he took the pieces of cotton she'd thrust into his hand and used them to apply pressure to the exit wound.

"Hang on, Jess," he said. "You're gonna make it."

"He'll be all right? Truly?" Kate's voice was a mere whisper as she applied more clean strips to the entry wound.

Even if he'd had an answer, he'd have been speechless for the emotion that strangled him. His gaze met hers for a moment across Jesse's too-still, too-quiet body.

The snowy cloths quickly turned a vivid crimson, and Morgan and Kate exchanged the saturated strips for clean ones. Finally, the bloody flow abated and Kate fashioned a temporary bandage. With great care, she took Jesse's golden head into her lap, ignoring the blood that stained the expensive fabric of her skirt.

Jesse's eyes fluttered open. She clasped his hand to her cheek. "Oh, Jesse ... I'm sorry ... so sorry. McCall was right. It's all my fault."

Jesse offered her a weak smile. "Hush now, honey. It's gonna be all right. If I knew I would've gotten this kind of attention from you, I would've stepped in front of a bullet years ago." He started to laugh and a coughing fit overcame him.

"McCall, send for a doctor," Kate said as tears streamed down her cheeks. "Please, he needs more help than we can give him here."

After checking Jesse's bandage, Morgan rose and sent a young boy who worked in the back room for old Doc Pettibone. The wound itself didn't appear all that serious, but Jesse had lost an awful lot of blood. He'd seen men die in similar circumstances.

When he returned, Morgan stood behind Kate. Even standing so close, he had to strain to hear what she whispered next between her sobs.

"It's all my fault, Jesse. I never should've come here. Just hang on. I'll make this up to you. I swear I will. I'm no good, just like they always said. But you're the best, Jesse Place."

The way her shoulders shook told him she was crying harder now. She hugged Jesse tighter, clasping him to her bosom. "Oh, Jesse, don't you dare go and die on me."

Her words shocked him so completely that a sigh could've blown him over. Kate and Jesse knew each other? By the looks of things, she probably cared even more for him than for the husband she had back east. Not that he could blame Jesse for falling for her. She sure was a looker, even in all those dark weeds and hair pins.

Her words filtered back through his mind. What had she meant when she'd said, 'I'm no good, just like they always said?' *Who said that?*

Everyone he talked to, including Celia, Mayor Henry, and Joe McCoy—three of the most level-headed people he'd ever known, and usually the best judges of character, except in this instance—had done nothing but sing her praises ever since they'd heard she was coming to Abilene. She'd managed to fool the three of them and evidently Jesse as well.

Morgan shook his head. Here she was falling apart over Jesse while her poor husband probably didn't have a clue his faithless wife was spreading her charms—as well as her shapely legs—around the west. Seeing her hold her lover so

intimately, and hearing her anguish at the thought he might die, was just proof that the woman was no damned good.

The first thing he intended to do when Jesse recovered, if he did, was have a long talk with him about Cattle Kate. His friend deserved better than to be made a fool by a lowdown adulteress. He knew from experience that it would hurt, but it would be better now rather than later. He just hoped he wasn't already too late to save Jesse from a broken heart.

After handing Kate's derringer to the bartender for safekeeping, Morgan checked the two men from the Flying W. As he'd suspected, the one draped over the railing was dead. The one Kate had shot once in the thigh and again in the chest was writhing and grunting in pain, but he wasn't going anywhere..The bartender and the others had already tied up the third no-account, who still had Medusa dangling around his neck like a noose. He unwrapped the rawhide and slung it over his shoulder

Across the room, beginning to come to, Warren Hedgepeth moaned from the flesh wound at his temple. Unfortunately, it looked as though the nosy piss-ant would pull through.

Doc Pettibone ambled in and Morgan directed him to care for Jesse first, then the surviving men from the Flying W. Still annoyed that the telegraph clerk's gossip had started tongues flapping over Kate Stewart, Morgan debated whether to instruct the doc to check out Warren Hedgepeth as well.

Realizing that no matter how much he disliked Hedgepeth, he couldn't in good conscience deny him medical attention, he was about to instruct Pettibone to look the clerk over when

Cattle Kate did it again. The woman stuck her two bits in where they didn't belong.

"What about that man over there?" she demanded, pointing to Hedgepeth with one blood-stained finger. "Aren't you going to help him? He was injured coming to my aid. I insist you instruct the doctor to care for him. Any honorable man would've done so by now."

Her gaze swept over the black thatch of hair revealed by his open shirt, then to the dark arrow that dipped into his gaping waistband. "Obviously you were preoccupied with other needs," she said, her pale cheeks flushing a heated pink.

Her gaze darted to Cherry, who had come to stand beside Morgan, then settled contemptuously on him. "If you won't instruct the doctor to care for him, I'll do it myself. Just what kind of man are you, McCall?"

She rose and started to bustle toward Hedgepeth, but Morgan caught her arm. "Apparently I'm no good. Just like you," he growled, unable to resist throwing back at her the words he'd heard her utter to Jesse.

The pain in her eyes seared him and almost made him wish he could take his words back. Almost.

He couldn't afford to think about her pain, not when his vision was filled by the horror of his friend bleeding to death. All because of her recklessness.

"This here arm of Jesse's is gonna have to come off," Doc Pettibone said.

"No!" Kate shrugged free of Morgan and ran to kneel again beside Jesse. She ran her hands carefully, lovingly over Jesse's arm and shoulder.

"There's no reason to amputate," she said. "Marshal, surely you can see for yourself. I'm not sure, but I don't think the bone is shattered, and it hasn't broken and pierced the skin. Can't you hear how this doctor is slurring his words? He's drunk, McCall. He doesn't know what he's doing."

"And you do?"

Her red-rimmed eyes pleaded with him. "Listen to me. Not for my sake, but for Jesse's. Don't let this butcher touch him."

"Pettibone's the only doc for sixty miles. Why should I listen to you and not him?"

"My husband practiced as a surgeon for many years. I know what I'm talking about." She made a visible effort to control herself, clasping her hands and taking a deep breath, before adding more calmly, "Don't allow your dislike of me to color your judgment. Not if you really care about Jesse. You'll only hurt him if you do."

They studied each other, measuring, for a long, silent moment. Finally, Morgan knelt. Kate took his hand, unintentionally smearing more of Jesse's blood across the back of it as she showed him how to feel for broken bones.

"Please," she said. "Jesse has a chance to keep his arm if we can keep him alive and keep it from festering."

Morgan turned to the doctor. "Hold out your hand." His lips twisted in disgust as Pettibone's limb shook like a leaf in a storm.

After checking Jesse's bandage again, satisfied that the bleeding had eased considerably, Morgan called for volunteers to round up the sturdiest buckboard or wagon they could find and deliver the dead and injured—including Jesse—to Pettibone's home, which doubled as his office.

"No!" Kate pushed to her feet. "Please listen to me," she appealed to the men gathering around Jesse. They ignored her, too busy rushing to carry out their marshal's orders.

Spying Del Hart, one of the more reliable men in town, Morgan instructed him to accompany Jesse and the others in the wagon and to stay at the doctor's house for as long as necessary.

"If Pettibone so much as looks at a saw, shoot the bastard," he ordered. He picked up the dead man's gun and tossed it to Del, who acknowledged with a barely-perceptible nod. "Get word to me of Jesse's condition as soon as you can."

As two men used a table top as a litter to carry a now-unconscious Jesse out to the street, Morgan instructed the barkeep to pump a couple of gallons of black coffee into the doctor before letting him go. With a firm grip on Kate's arm, he ushered her toward the door.

She dug in her heels, glancing over her shoulder at Hedgepeth. "Are you going to help that poor man? Or doesn't he merit care because he's lame?"

Morgan glared down at her. "That little son-of-a-bitch would probably be an even bigger pain in the ass if he did have two good legs." He wondered how much faster the clerk would be able to spread gossip then.

"You'd better remember this, Mrs. Stewart. Everyone in this town would be a whole helluva lot better off if it was Hedgepeth who'd been injured instead of Jesse Place. I wish to God it had been." Practically hurling her onto the boardwalk, he called over his shoulder, "Doc, tend to Hedgepeth, too."

"I intended to, Marshal," Pettibone responded with an inebriated laugh. "I intended to."

Once outside, Kate spun away from him and tried to edge over to the wagon where several volunteers were settling Jesse. "Get out of my way, McCall. Jesse needs me."

He planted his feet wide. "Darlin', you're the last thing a man like Jesse needs. Why don't you leave him be and use someone else to cuckold your husband?"

Before she could answer, he hustled her over to the hitching rail, keeping her at his side with a hand on her arm. Untying Silverheels's reins, he studied the crowd congregating in the street. No longer were he and Kate surrounded merely by itinerant gamblers and drovers whose interest was simple curiosity. Men like that would be satisfied by just the sight of blood and the sound of a woman's screams.

He worried about the others filtering into the street—the upstanding merchants and farmers who had a stake in Abilene's future. Down to the last man, they looked about as stiff as a Baptist preacher on Sunday morning. Their faces were clouded with concern for the woman at his side, her dress bloody, her face streaked with dirt and tears, her jaw purple with the bruise he himself had put there.

"Get on that horse," he growled down at her.

"I'm going with Jesse."

"Doc's wife'll take good care of him."

Jesse's wagon began to pull out, the spoked wheels sucking noisily at the mud.

Her gaze followed its progress and he was struck by the desperate, wild light in her eyes. He had no more than a second to puzzle at the odd look before she dodged to the left. He groped for her, but she went to the right, hell-bent on catching up with Jesse.

Her slippered feet churned up a river of mud. The dainty kid slipped and slid so much kicking up the sodden hem of her brown skirts, he was surprised she remained upright. His long, quick stride closed the distance between them and finally, half a yard from the wagon, he was behind her, wrapping an arm around her waist. He hauled her back, surprised by how hard those little slippers felt as they kicked back at his shins. He ignored the sting of those dainty, bloodied hands as they slapped at his arms.

The crowd pressed closer. He could feel them like something evil breathing down his neck. Any one of the men surrounding them could be armed; could be a friend of the dead Texan and looking for revenge.

He set her down beside his horse. Silverheels skittered and snorted, his nostrils flaring at the scent of blood. "Get up in that saddle."

The look in her eyes grew more desperate.

"Come on, Kate—"

"Or else what?" She tapped her cheek with an index finger. "Hmmm, let's see ... You can't shoot me. Too many witnesses. And besides, you don't carry a gun."

He kept an eye on her, but he could feel the crowd's agitation as they listened to her prattle. The wind chose that moment to pick up, sending the loose strands of her hair lashing against her lips, wrapping around her throat. The rain came again with fat, warm drops that plopped against her cheek and her blood-stained hands, sending up a fresh coppery odor. He blinked against the wetness, then spied the horror dawning in her eyes as the stains on her fingers moistened and began to drip. *Like the blood on Pontius Pilot's hands*, he thought.

"I know," she said with a demented giggle, never taking her eyes from those reddened, dripping hands. "You'll make me take a bath again. Oh, the horror of it all."

He caught a flash of metal glinting in the lamplight that streamed out of the Alamo. It could be anyone, even the man he was supposed to protect her from. Was Thorne hiding in the crowd, waiting for his chance at Kate?

She snapped her fingers. "I've got it. You'll borrow another dress for me from that blonde friend of yours—that *nymph du prairie*. That'll teach me a lesson, won't it?" She giggled again.

The high, sad sound tore at his heart. No woman had ever worried over him the way she did for Jesse. He reached out to her.

She jumped back, bumping into a grinning cowpoke who looked way too eager as he put his hands on her hips to steady her.

The glint of metal flashed brighter and closer. Morgan pulled Medusa from his shoulder, poised to strike.

She clung to the drover. "Don't whip me! Not again!"

The very real terror in her eyes froze his heart in his chest.

A loud murmur rippled through the crowd. The suspicion on the faces of the shopkeepers and farmers told him they were as upset for Kate as he was—with one big difference. While their eyes reflected the sympathy they felt for Cattle Kate, there was also something darker, something far uglier, and it was directed at him. As impossible as it seemed, he knew each man there believed what she'd said—that he'd whipped her.

The crowd's murmur quickly escalated into an angry rumble. If he didn't move and move fast, he'd never be able to reach his horse. If something happened to him, whoever was sending those threats to Kate would finally have his chance.

He flicked Medusa above the heads of the men pressing in on them.

At the whip's low hiss, she bolted. Men moved this way and that, looking as if they wanted to help, but not knowing exactly what to do. In the confusion, he thought he saw another flash of metal. First in one spot, then another. Then again, closer to Kate.

His heart pumped hard and blood rushed to his head. He took off after her. Cowpokes and farmers stood in his path.

The Lawman
by Lily Sorren

He pushed them aside. This time when he lifted her off her feet and hauled her back, he flung her face down across his saddle. The saddle creaked and his horse snorted in protest. The odors of leather and blood swirled in the air as he mounted up behind her.

His hands tightened on her hips, fighting her efforts to free herself. Morgan's muscles, every last, blasted one from his jaw to the soles of his feet, tightened painfully. He held his breath, waiting for the slash of the blade he was sure would strike any second. His heels nudged the gray stallion, sending him into a run.

Chapter 9

KATE KEPT SILENT and narrowed her eyes, taking the full measure of the man before her, weighing whether he meant to carry out his threat to lock her up. She'd go mad if she had to listen to the clank of the cell door and the scrape of the key closing her in, locking her away.

She needed to go to Jesse, to know if he was all right. She needed her freedom. Her heart started to hammer, beating out the word like an Indian's drum. Freedom...

She stood in the middle of the dark, damp jail and stared into McCall's stony hazel eyes for what felt like the longest time, though she knew just a minute had passed since he'd locked the front door behind them.

"You were foolish back there, Mrs. Stewart. Very foolish." His jaw tightened as he clenched the coiled rawhide whip in one hand. The muscle twitching along the side of his neck told her of the tremendous effort he was making to retain control of himself. "You're makin' it easy for whoever's out to harm you."

She felt hysteria bubbling up inside her again and she pressed a hand to her throat to try to stifle it. "Marshal, listen to me..." The words wouldn't come. What could she say? How could she persuade him? "I must go to Jesse. I need—"

"What you need—" He ground out, his jaw growing more rigid by the second. "—is jail. I'm sure even you know that shootin' a man is against the law."

"I shot that man to save your life."

His expression didn't change and she had no idea if he saw the situation her way or not.

"You'll be safe enough in my jail for awhile, Mrs. Stewart. Leastways, 'til I decide what to do with you."

Her stomach tumbled over at the thought of being locked up again. She pressed both hands to her waist, willing the sick feeling to subside. "I didn't do anything wrong."

"The hell you didn't. You got my deputy shot ... maybe killed. None of this would've happened if you'd stayed put like I told you to."

A part of her grew quiet, ashamed of her recklessness. But another part, the part that bristled at his arrogant 'I told you so,' demanded she respond. "Jesse will kill you for locking me up again," she whispered furiously.

"If he lives. He might not, thanks to you."

Her heart began to hurt, a deep down break-into-little-pieces hurt. *Jesse might die*. Her best friend could die and she'd never know. Not sitting in that tiny cell all alone.

McCall took her by the elbow.

"Please, Marshal..."

His fingers tightened on her arm as he stared down at her.

"I promise, I won't be anymore trouble. I'll step peacefully into your cell, but only under one condition. I want to be informed of Jesse's condition the minute word arrives. The very minute."

Morgan's jaw would've dropped if it hadn't been clenched tight. He held all the aces, all the power over her, yet she demanded to set the terms.

"Agreed, Marshal?"

He looked down into those haunting lavender eyes, all too aware of her as a woman. Keenly aware, too, that she had the power of a siren to lure men like Jesse and himself to their destruction—to possess them body and soul—and he didn't like it one damned bit.

He nodded once, but the incongruous picture she made stopped him cold. Her hands were still clasped at her waist, but he detected their trembling. She looked like a fragile, frightened girl, but there was strength and spirit in her regal bearing and a shining light in her haunting, haunted eyes.

"Unpin your hair," he said.

Her trembling worsened. She didn't move or so much as blink.

He reached out to remove the hairpins himself. He'd no more than raised his hand when she shied back and shielded her face.

"I don't hurt women," he said, his gut twisting. He reached out to her again. She retreated a step and he let his hand fall to his side. "I admit I might've been a mite rough on you, but I was only tryin' to keep you safe. You don't have anythin' to fear from me. I have never in my life hit a woman..."

His gaze fell to the small purple bruise at her jaw. "That there was different. I had to keep you from hurtin' yourself."

Her fingers traced the discoloration on her pale skin. "So you did do this to me."

"Don't you remember what happened?"

She sent him a wary glance.

With a muttered oath, he ran a hand along the stubble on his cheek. "Look, you don't have to be afraid of me. The law

says I have to lock you up tonight, but you'll be treated right. And fair."

She held his gaze and he felt the weight of her scrutiny. He slowly drew close, raised his hand just as carefully to a curl. God help me, he thought as he removed a pin and auburn waves cascaded loose and wild about her shoulders and down to her hips.

He offered her a small smile. "I know firsthand how good you are at pickin' a lock." The reluctant nod she gave him felt like a small victory, dearly won.

Looking for more pins, he ran his fingers through the silken strands of her hair. She felt good, so damned good, even disheveled as she was. If he was honest, he had to admit that touching her like this, when she wasn't fighting or fearing him, made him feel damned good, too.

Feeling suddenly awkward, he cleared his throat and led her to his desk chair. After pouring water from a pitcher into his empty tin cup, he propped a hip on the edge of his desk, removed his bandanna, and dipped the blue cloth into the water. Gently he dabbed the cut at the corner of her mouth. "Did those drovers in the saloon hurt you?"

She flinched as the soft, cool cloth made contact. "No."

"Liar." He wondered if she heard the grin in his voice.

"Tell me, Marshal," she asked between swipes of the bandanna. "Do all your prisoners receive such personal care?"

He grew still at the feel of her lips moving against his fingers. "Not all," he managed to reply, but he was the first to look away.

* * * *

MORGAN SLAMMED HIS boots on the desk top, grinding his teeth until his jaw ached. Weak morning sunlight poured through the open window as the world outside his office came to life. Wagons creaked along, their wheels sucking at the muddy ground. Boots clomped across the boardwalk. Farther away, cattle bawled low and steady.

The sun had been up barely an hour, but already he'd had more interruptions than he normally had in a whole week. Do-gooders—among them members of the city council—demanding he release the famous Cattle Kate. Women dropping off hearty breakfasts and baked goods for her. More women, hearing from their men folk how she'd been bloodied in the shoot-out after behaving so bravely, had brought plain but clean gingham dresses for her to wear.

Every one had looked at him as if he were the lowest bastard ever to walk the earth, whispering together behind their hands and clucking their tongues, careful not to let even the hems of their dresses so much as touch him as they passed.

He sipped his coffee, then winced at the sour feeling in his gut. It was bad enough he could no longer pick up a gun, now he had to have his back covered by a woman! As if he'd needed any reminder, a handful of old codgers, witnesses to the gunfight, had come forward a few minutes ago to confirm that Cattle Kate had saved his life.

A battle was brewing over his prisoner. Public sentiment was on her side and so, probably, was Celia. He was sure to get an earful when he went home. People just didn't

understand what sort of woman this Kate Stewart really was. Not like he did.

He took another sip of coffee and tried to complete a report. He couldn't concentrate past the pictures in his mind—pictures of his hands in her hair, her lips moving against his fingers as she spoke to him...

Hellfire and damnation, he should've bedded Cherry when he had the chance. He slammed down his cup, sending the contents sloshing over the rim to puddle on the unfinished report. What in blazes did Kate Stewart do to men like himself and Jesse?

He shook his head and groaned. Visions of what she'd looked and felt like in the bathhouse assaulted him. He swore he could still feel the silk of her hair between his callused fingers.

For his own peace of mind, he had to keep his distance from her. Cattle Kate had ways of getting under a man's skin, and he wasn't sure he could control it.

* * * *

THE SOUNDS OF spurs jangling and heavy boots striking the floorboards alerted Kate to McCall's presence. She clutched the blanket tighter against her breast and rose from the cot, but hung back from the door as he opened it. "Has Mr. Hart sent word of Deputy Place's condition?"

The marshal met her gaze, but ignored her question as if she'd never spoken. "You can thank Mayor Henry and the city council for your freedom. They've dropped the charges—for

now. But if there's anymore trouble, you'll land back here so fast it'll make your pretty head swirl."

"Is that the council's promise or yours?"

"Mine." His green-gold eyes glittered. "Come on out now. Coffee's made. I'll take you home after you've eaten and freshened up." When she didn't move, he added, "I don't bite."

She wasn't too sure about that considering the way he was staring at her face and unbound hair. His clothes were ridiculously rumpled. The whiskers shadowing the planes of his face were thicker this morning and the lines at the corners of his eyes were more pronounced. Clearly, he was as tired as she. Throughout the night she'd heard him in the outer office, whistling, making coffee, shuffling papers. She thought she'd heard him leave once or twice, but never for very long.

McCall's striking eyes were still locked on her tousled hair. She edged past him, hoping he would just leave her be. After the night she'd spent wondering and worrying over Jesse, she wasn't up to sparring with him this morning.

"Not so courageous without your derringer, darlin'?"

Kate started at his mocking voice. She wrapped the blanket more securely around her shoulders. "How ... how is Deputy Place?"

"What's wrong? Did all that spit and vinegar you're so famous for suddenly leave a sour taste in your mouth?"

"Is Jesse still alive?"

He nodded. "No thanks to you."

She swallowed hard. "I ... I don't know what you mean."

"Course you do. The only reason you're so worried about Jesse is 'cause it's your fault he got shot."

He sank down in the desk chair and stretched his long legs out. "Anybody with a lick of sense knows the only women in places like the Alamo are soiled doves. Some people wouldn't blame those drovers for thinkin' you were just another body for sale."

He flashed a wicked grin. "You never did say exactly what your price is, darlin'. Whatever it is, I'd say the price Jesse's payin' is way too high."

Her stomach knotted. Dumbstruck, she stared down at him. It helped not at all that Jesse had explained McCall's twisted reason for disliking her. She didn't care what his reason was.

He flashed that awful smile again and what little composure she'd managed to retain snapped. She lashed out and tossed a pile of papers at his head. She reached for another pile and McCall subdued her easily, his arms closing solidly around her middle. He pulled her down onto his lap.

Her world suddenly narrowed. She was aware only of the hard arms restraining her. The hot breath fanning her cheek. Saw only Ian holding her back, holding her down. The tide of potent images rose up, swirling inside her head...

Then the image of Ian was gone. As swiftly as the memory of her husband had risen, it faded.

McCall was looking at her strangely, his grip loosening. "Kate? You all right?"

Her breath puffed in and out, shallow and fast. She pushed at the solid arms wrapped around her middle. She squirmed

and wiggled for release. Ian or McCall, it made no difference. One jailer was as bad as another. Any jailer was one jailer too many.

He tightened his hold. "Simmer down, hellcat, and I'll let you go."

Unshed tears burned her throat. "Get ... away ... from me!"

"You gonna kick me or slap me? Maybe bite me again?"

She twisted around and glared at him.

"Assaulting a marshal would only land you back behind bars." He loosened his hold a bit.

Sanity crept back to her, along with rational thought. McCall wasn't Ian. He couldn't hurt her—not the way Ian had. Not deep down to her soul. She wouldn't let him.

She couldn't gauge how long they stared into each other's eyes, weighing and measuring. Kate looked away first, but she could feel the heat of his gaze on her face and hair, feel it trailing down her throat. His warm hands came to rest on her shoulders.

"You're one helluva woman, Kate."

The words hardly mattered. She lent them no credence. Yet his honeyed drawl soothed her and his deep voice warmed her.

"Does Jesse know you're a married woman?"

Immediately, the fragile warmth dissolved as if those brief seconds of calm were nothing more substantial than wisps of smoke. She felt as if she were watching them waft upwards and disappear before her eyes, leaving her to wonder if there

was any smoke or any warmth ever really there in the first place.

"My marriage is no concern of yours," she said.

"How many other fool men have you taken in? Other than Jesse, I mean?"

"My husband, Ian ... I-I'm sure you've heard of him. He was ... is ... a very powerful man." She couldn't think or speak anymore, could hardly breathe. Her masquerade as a married woman was supposed to protect her from harassment and wicked talk, not cause it.

"Sorry, I don't follow news of the idle rich. I'm a hard-workin' man, darlin'. And I don't appreciate women who take up with men other than their husbands." His words were hurtful, but he'd spoken them softly. "You know, I truly do feel sorry for the poor bastard who put that band of gold on your finger."

Kate froze. His hand was in her hair, gently stroking.

"What did you do to Jesse," he questioned softly, "to make him step in front of a bullet for you? To make him want you so bad?"

His gaze fastened on her lips. "Then there's that Thorne fellow. What did you do to get him so riled at you? Did you write that story about him and have him discharged from the army just to prove how little he meant to you? Were you just toying with his affections?"

"I have never 'toyed' with anyone."

He grabbed her left hand and shook it in front of her face, glaring at her wedding band. "I don't believe you."

Beneath his thick moustache, his lip curled. As if he were holding a leper, he suddenly released her and put her away from him. He rose and put half the length of the room between them.

From a peg on the wall he plucked several dresses she hadn't noticed before and held them out to her. "If you don't want to cause another ruckus in the streets, you'd better change out of those dirty rags."

"Change? Here alone with you? Absolutely not."

"You don't have much choice."

"And I say she does."

She and McCall both swiveled their heads to identify the intruder. A man in a finely tailored suit stepped into the jail, slamming the door behind him.

Chapter 10

EVEN IN HER surprise at seeing her brother-in-law step through the jail's front door, Kate recognized the barely-controlled rage vibrating beneath his patrician features. She thought steam would surely start to spout from his ears at any moment.

"What is going on here?" Charles demanded, his purposeful stride carrying him to her side.

Her shoulders sagged with relief. She wasn't sure how much of her confrontation with McCall her brother-in-law had witnessed, but she was so grateful for his protective presence just then that she didn't care.

In the silence reverberating throughout the small jail, she took comfort in every familiar, civilized detail of Charles's countenance, from the top of his perfectly brushed light-brown hair, to his finely sculpted nose, right down to the shimmering gems on his manicured hands.

"Thank goodness for a friendly face!" She tried not to gush as she tried very hard to maintain her dignity exactly as the Stewarts had drummed into her that she must. She willed herself not to immediately lean on Charles either physically or emotionally. "What are you doing here?"

Ignoring the question, Charles wrapped a protective arm around her shoulders. "What is it, my dear? What has this barbarian done?"

Charles glared at McCall. The marshal glared back. The temperature in the room rose dramatically.

"He—"

"No, let's not speak of it here. The entire town is gossiping about the trouble you've managed to get yourself into again. I could hardly credit what they said, that you spent the night here, alone with him. Come, gather your things and I'll escort you to my suite at the Drover's Cottage away from this sordid business."

"Hold it," McCall said, laying a proprietary hand on her arm. "Just who in the hell are you?"

"I am Charles Stewart, of the Philadelphia Stewarts, and I demand—"

"This woman is my prisoner. Unhand her." McCall yanked her away from Charles.

Feeling like the shuttlecock in a game of badminton as the two men argued and tugged her back and forth, Kate erupted, "Stop it, both of you. What are you up to, McCall? You said the charges were dropped."

"They are, but there's one important condition. You don't go anywhere without me or my deputy along. Since Jesse won't be up and around for awhile because of his injury, you and I are goin' to get to know each other real well. And like I told you before, stayin' at the Drover's is out. Until I put your fanny on a train, you'll stay at my house."

Charles puffed out his chest. "We'll see about that, Marshal. My father would never hear of it. Katherine will stay with me until arrangements can be made to transport her home."

"Listen up, Chuck," McCall said, looking adolescently pleased with Charles's open-mouthed reaction to the

nickname. "Leland agreed to my terms when I telegraphed him last night. Your sister-in-law here can either accept them or skedaddle her fanny back home. In fact, it would be better for everyone, her included, if she packed up and left today."

Kate bristled at the way they discussed her as if she weren't even in the room and as if the decision to stay or go wasn't hers at all.

McCall had been trying to tell her what to do from the minute she arrived. Now Charles was doing the same. She clamped her hands on her hips. "I'm staying."

She glared at each man in turn. "As for my lodgings, if a room becomes available in town, I may take it. For the moment, though, I'd like nothing more than to check on Deputy Place's condition."

Charles cast a contemptuous look at her bloodied dress and the strip of torn white petticoat that peeked out from beneath her hem. With narrowed eyes, he studied the deep scratches she'd scraped into McCall's jaws the night those drovers had attacked her.

Charles gently clasped her hand. "Katherine, has the marshal harmed you in any way? Has he ... compromised your honor?"

"Charles, please!" She pulled free of him. How could she possibly admit all the horrible things that had happened to her since she'd arrived? It would only reinforce what Abigail Stewart had convinced her two sons of long ago—that she was no good. "I'm fine. Truly I am. Nothing happened."

"Well then, if you won't share my suite, at least you can dine with me. It's been too long since we've seen each other."

Anxious to see Jesse, exhausted from her night in jail, and still annoyed at how he'd tried to take over, she declined.

"I don't think you understand," Charles said. "We must speak. Now, and in private."

With a weary sigh, she rubbed the spot on her forehead that had suddenly begun to pound with a ferocious rhythm. "Perhaps another time."

Charles took her elbow and led her away from McCall, hopefully out of earshot. "We were friends once, Katherine. There was a time when I was practically your only friend. I want to take care of you now, if you'll let me."

"I can take care of myself. You're behaving just like your father and Marshal McCall. If you're really my friend, you'll let me handle this affair my way."

"There are things you don't know. Issues from the past that we must settle—"

"There's nothing about the past I wish to discuss with you or anyone else," she whispered furiously. "Even though you're my friend, you have no right to bring up the past. I think it's cruel of you—worse than cruel—to dredge up that period of my life after all the time I've spent trying to bury it."

"But you misunderstood. I only want to tell you about how I—"

"You'd better leave now, Chuck," McCall said, evidently having overheard the last part of their conversation.

The marshal's interference surprised her, but she was grateful for it nonetheless this time. At the moment, Charles reminded her so much of Ian that it was unbelievably difficult

to retain her composure. She flashed McCall a look of gratitude.

Charles grabbed her by the arms with such force that a gasp of surprise escaped her lips.

"If you won't speak in private, you'll hear what I have to say right here in front of him," he said, nodding at McCall.

She winced as Charles's fingers dug into her arms.

"Your behavior is intolerable. I thought you'd learned a lesson from your past transgressions, but obviously I was mistaken. What has become of you, Katherine? There was a time when you never would've shamed the family, and now I find out you've been in a saloon, of all places. You're in jail, bloody and dirty, looking like something even a cat wouldn't drag in."

He cast a contemptuous glance at McCall before turning his disapproval back on her. "Obviously, the two of you are on more than friendly terms."

At her wide-eyed shock, he nodded and shook an accusing finger in her face, nearly tapping her nose with it. "Your sins shall haunt you as you well deserve."

Hot shame burned her cheeks. "Release me, Charles. It's not what you think."

She hid her face in her hands. Hadn't she worked long and hard to leave the label of sinner behind? Why did Charles have to bandy it about here, where no one knew about what she'd done to her child?

Her righteous anger grew, giving her strength, and she lowered her hands. "You have no right—"

"I have every right!" Charles yanked her arm so hard she almost fell to her knees.

He didn't move to break her fall, but she caught herself before stumbling. Reminding herself that McCall stood nearby, witness to their entire exchange, she dredged up every bit of willpower she possessed in an effort to hold her head high.

Her legs grew weak at the thought of Charles repeating aloud the sordid details of her past. "I won't discuss this now," she said, aghast at the tremor in her voice. "Another time, in private."

Charles pulled her close and his scent wafted to her nose. When she identified the expensive, cherry-laurel cologne, panic roiled in her belly. She'd once found the sweet-smelling tonic pleasant when Ian had worn it, and it now brought her husband's memory vividly to life. She choked on the scent.

Charles shook his head. "I've been your brother-in-law for a long time ... your friend for even longer. You disappoint me sorely."

"That's enough, Stewart." McCall stepped forward, Medusa clenched in a fist by his side. His voice was deadly quiet, but she thought it sounded more threatening than any of the times he'd shouted at her.

Charles jerked his head around as if just then remembering they were not alone. His grip loosened, then his fingers fell away from her arm.

Kate rubbed at the soreness where his fingers had been. Glancing at Charles, she saw that rage twisted his features. In

his fury he so reminded her of Ian that she couldn't help backing away.

McCall stepped between her and Charles, as if he were offering her a protective shield. "You've got your answer, Stewart. Be on your way."

"You haven't seen the last of me, Katherine. I'm sure the marshal would be interested to know the kind of woman he's been dirtying his hands on." Charles turned on his heel and slammed the door behind him so hard it rattled the frame.

Kate swayed, fighting against the sharp pain in her legs that was the legacy of Ian's whip. It always worsened when she was upset or overly tired, and now it was worse than ever.

Unsure what McCall would make of her brother-in-law's tirade, she turned to face him. Before she could speak, her knees buckled.

He caught her in his arms and set her gently onto the desktop. He stared down at her, his unsettling hazel eyes unreadable. "You all right?"

"I'm fine." Kate bowed her head in embarrassment, her gaze practically boring a hole into the chocolate silk of her skirt.

"Even a blind man could see otherwise. What is it? Your legs givin' you pain again?"

"What do you mean, 'again?'"

"You were doing that—" He said, gesturing toward her hand as it eased an aching thigh. "—back at the house in the kitchen. It may not be any of my business, but who hurt you? Did Thorne give you those scars?"

Kate's head snapped up. "You're absolutely right. It's none of your business."

"I only meant ... What I meant was, if I'm to protect you, I have to know exactly who and what—"

"Thank you for what you did just now. With Charles, I mean." Extending her hand, she ended the discussion politely and expertly.

After a moment's hesitation, he enveloped her hand in his. "No thanks needed."

"You helped me. Why?"

"Forget it."

She pulled her hand back and studied him, trying to understand why he'd bothered to come to her aid when he disliked and disapproved of her. Suddenly she realized he was staring at her as well. Feeling like a lone doe whose jugular stood exposed to a winter-starved wolf, she watched his searching gaze travel to her throat, then to her lips and eyes and back down again.

She raised a trembling hand to her throat. "Why did you defend me? What exactly do you want, McCall?"

"Did ol' Chuck strike a nerve?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, and I don't understand you at all. One minute you insult me, the next you rescue me."

McCall wrapped his hands around her shoulders, and she realized that she was still shaking from the encounter with Charles. She felt the pressure of his long fingers, hard enough to keep her from pulling away and hopping from the desk top, but not hard enough to cause discomfort.

Unsettled by the marshal's touch, she looked up at him. "I know you don't like me," she said, her voice growing tremulous as his fingers kneaded the tight muscles at the base of her neck. "I would think you'd have enjoyed watching Charles berate me, but you didn't. Instead you came to my defense. Why?"

"Let's just say I pay my debts."

"What debts?"

"You saved my life last night. I owed you at least that much."

He was quiet a long time. He searched her face, held onto her as if he thought she would flee if given the chance. The strange thing was, at that moment, she knew he wouldn't hurt her and she wasn't the least bit afraid of him.

Finally he spoke, his voice thick and low. "You're a strong woman, and brave. I didn't think anybody could frighten you. God knows I gave it a helluva try and I didn't succeed. But Chuck did, didn't he? Why?"

Kate swallowed hard and looked away. No one except her father had ever taken a stand against the Stewarts on her behalf. After his death, she'd learned not to expect help from anyone, especially against Ian and his wealthy family. She couldn't help feeling a grudging respect for McCall. His chivalrous actions raised her opinion of him more than a notch or two.

"Answer me, Kate. Why?"

How could she tell him what she was and what she'd done? His startlingly beautiful eyes were full of concern; perhaps even a spark of tenderness. She blinked rapidly, trying to halt

the tears that threatened to spill from her lashes as his concern warmed the cold, dead places deep in her heart.

She shied away, but he pulled her into his embrace. He held her to him, his grasp firm yet tender, and she heard the strong, reassuring beat of his heart beneath her ear. His wonderful scent, a mixture of tobacco, leather and virile man, warmed her further. She trembled as his callused fingertips trailed softly along her temple, down her cheek, lightly across her lips.

Surely she was a grave sinner and past redemption if she could allow a man she hardly knew to take such liberties. Unshed tears, borne of loneliness and shame, formed a tight knot in her throat. Swallowing hard, she stiffened her spine and shrugged out of his embrace, then slid from the desk.

When she presented her back to him, it was as hard and straight as a rifle barrel, and twice as cold.

* * * *

CHARLES STARED DOWN at the *vaquero* who'd just entered his suite. Slowly, deliberately, he raised his scalpel and backed the Mexican into the green-and-gold striped wallpaper. The *vaquero* shook so hard, the rowels of his spurs were jingling.

"Ignorant greaser." Charles spat at the man and brought the scalpel up to trace the angry welt that encircled his convulsing throat. "I told you and Frank to wait until Marshal McCall was occupied upstairs so I could arrive at the Alamo and rescue Katherine myself."

Beads of sweat popped out above the *vaquero's* lips. Charles smiled, savoring the pure pleasure that began to throb in his veins. He brought the gleaming blade up to rest at the base of the Mexican's dirt-streaked throat. He pressed the tip into soft, tanned flesh. Crimson droplets trickled through the sweat and dirt.

"Because of you, Frank is dead, Arturo's leg is shot to hell, and I still don't have Katherine." He traced the welt again, applying more pressure than before. "How do you think I should punish you, Luis?"

The *vaquero* raised his hands, palms out. "*Por favor, señor—*"

"*Por favor*, my ass. I wanted my sister-in-law to trust me again. I should've been the one who rescued her. But you and those two other fools couldn't even follow simple instructions."

"It was Frankie. He saw the woman kiss the deputy. He wanted—"

"I know what he wanted. It got him dead. Remember that next time. The woman is mine. If you dare forget that, if you fail to do exactly as I say, there'll be no more gold coins sliding across your greasy palms. Try satisfying your taste for women and whiskey on the thirty dollars a month Webb pays you."

Charles teased the *vaquero*, randomly poking the gleaming tip into the ugly welt. He let it rise to nick the Mexican's earlobe. "Maybe I should carve a set of earbobs to match this necklace McCall gave you. You'd like that, wouldn't you, Luis?"

"I will do as you say. Anything! Speak the words and it will be done."

Charles grunted. "Bring me back a woman. She'll have to do until I can get my hands on Katherine."

The Mexican ran from the room, but Charles hardly noticed as he anticipated the singular rush of pleasure that would be his when he administered a long-deserved punishment to his dear sister-in-law.

* * * *

WEARY AND BEDRAGGLED, Kate barely managed to hold her head up as she preceded McCall and Mr. Hart up the front steps and across the wide porch of the house on the outskirts of town.

The ride to the McCall homestead, with Mr. Hart driving Jesse in the buckboard and the marshal holding her in front of him on Silverheels, had been almost as trying as her time in jail.

During the past hour, she'd been so upset by Jesse's worsened condition she'd have given almost anything for a few words of decent conversation to divert her thoughts. Neither man, though, would oblige her. Del Hart, a weathered, older man with silvery blonde hair and a crop of white whiskers, had spoken only when spoken to and even then to say only what was absolutely necessary.

At the top of the porch steps, Celia met them at the door, mouth agape and pale blue eyes flashing sparks. Her gaze darted from Jesse to McCall to Mr. Hart to Kate, finally settling on McCall and virtually nailing him to the spot.

Kate barely noted the housekeeper's expression of outraged disbelief. She didn't care how dreadful she looked or how much gossip had already flown to Celia's ears. At the moment, she wanted only one thing.

"Jesse needs a warm room please, Celia. He's been injured."

Following Celia's directions, she hurried through the house, not waiting for anyone to show her the way. Purpose reviving her, she strode through the front parlor, past the staircase, and down the hallway to the homey kitchen.

The room Celia had directed her to stood on the other side of the kitchen. She crossed the threshold and went to the narrow bed. She pulled down the soft blue coverlet and smoothed the cool white sheets.

She retreated to the doorway as the men carried Jesse into the room and placed his too-still body on the bed. She looked away when a pained moan escaped Jesse's bloodless lips, her heart stricken to see him endure such pain because of her.

Kate looked up to find Celia studying her and she was unsure if the pale gaze glued to her face contained censure or compassion. She got her answer a moment later when Celia patted her shoulder in a motherly fashion.

"Fresh coffee comin' up," the housekeeper said, shoos the men back to the kitchen.

Kate lingered just inside the doorway, solemnly looking at Jesse's large, still frame. Jesse, who'd always been so strong and filled near to bursting with the joy of living and boundless, infectious laughter, now appeared lifeless. His blonde hair was limp and dark with sweat on the snowy

pillowcase. He looked smaller and more vulnerable than she ever would have imagined possible.

She wrapped her arms around her waist in an attempt to hold her paralyzing fear at bay. Gulping several deep breaths, she shut her eyes and leaned back against the doorframe. Long moments later, she'd regained enough composure to look at Jesse again, but not yet enough to approach him. Instead, she looked around the clean, cozy room.

The boards of floor-to-ceiling shelves sagged beneath the weight of a plentiful supply of tins and jars of preserves. A huge metal tub was propped on its side beneath a small window draped by buttercup-yellow curtains. The bed where Jesse rested shared a wall with the kitchen, just this side of where Celia's stove sat. That would account for the room's warmth, she thought, belatedly realizing that the room was a combination pantry and sick room or birthing room. Never having been in one before, she studied it curiously.

The Stewarts, high on tradition, always gave birth on the Rittenhouse Square mansion's uninviting second floor on a massive cherry bed where every previous Stewart born on United States soil had entered the world. She decided the birthing room was far better suited to welcoming a newborn babe than the cold master bedchamber where she'd borne Teddy. It was warm and comforting, within easy calling distance of loved ones.

Loved ones ... Fear clawed at her insides again as she gazed at Jesse.

Kate listened to the sound of the buckboard creaking as it rolled away from the house, then the heavy fall of footsteps

behind her in the kitchen. As she went to Jesse and pulled up the coverlet, Celia's and the marshal's angry voices carried into the sick room.

"Land sakes, Morgan, did you think I wouldn't find out? The whole durn town's buzzin' 'bout how you locked that lovely woman up, even after she probably saved your worthless hide. I swear, sometimes I don't know how you manage to sleep at night."

McCall swore colorfully, but the rest of his reply was too low to hear.

Celia's voice rose a pitch. "No, I won't mind my own business, you mule-headed coot. I know how that thick head of yours works, and I won't let you punish Cattle Kate for Mary's sins."

Kate tried to recall the little bit Jesse had told her about the marshal's wife. If McCall had treated his wife in a manner even half as high-handed as he'd treated her these past two days, Mary was probably a saint for putting up with the black-hearted devil for as long as she had.

Where's Mary now? Whatever the woman's sins had been, they could never approach the severity of her own. Didn't McCall realize what a heavenly, precious gift his Mary had given him in their two healthy, beautiful children?

In the stony silence, she heard the sounds of water splashing and metal clanging. An angry sizzle followed as if someone, most likely Celia, had set a pot on the cookstove to boil.

Refusing to dwell on McCall's contemptuous behavior toward her or his argument with Celia, especially now when

Jesse needed her so badly, Kate checked her emotions. Sinking into a hard, straight-backed chair next to the bed, she smoothed a limp lock of hair off his forehead as she studied him.

Tears stung her eyes and she furiously blinked them away. In one terrible night, her beautiful, golden avenging angel, the man whom she loved like a brother, had been transformed from a rugged protector into a helpless victim, pale and still as death.

If only he would open his warm, coffee-colored eyes and give her one of those playful winks that usually accompanied his lopsided smile whenever he teased her. Only then would she let herself believe he'd truly be all right.

For now, she had to make up her mind to forget about Marshal McCall, Charles, her work for the newspaper, and the silly threats Thorne had been making against her. None of it was important. All that mattered was Jesse's recovery.

Placing one hand on his cheek and the other against the side of his neck, she noticed his skin didn't feel as cold or clammy as it had the last time she'd seen him in the sawdust on the saloon's hard floor.

She pulled back the coverlet. With an ear to Jesse's chest she discovered that his heartbeat sounded steady and strong. Somewhat relieved, she continued her examination.

Doc Pettibone had cut away Jesse's shirt, leaving him bare-chested. A large splotch of dried blood covered the dirty bandage high on Jesse's arm. Recalling Mr. Hart had said the doctor hadn't been sober one minute since the shooting, her apprehension grew.

The Lawman
by Lily Sorren

Kate riffled through the drawer of the bedside table, letting out a thankful sigh when she found a small pair of sewing scissors. She carefully cut away the bloody bandage.

Oh, God. No ... no ... no ... "Celia! Celia, come quickly!"

Chapter 11

THE AROMAS OF cinnamon and fresh-baked bread floated into the room with Celia, a sharp contrast to the coppery odor of blood that had begun to permeate the small room.

Kate glanced over her shoulder at the housekeeper. "Something's terribly wrong. That good-for-nothing doctor never stitched up Jesse's wound. It's started to fester."

Celia hovered at Kate's side, wringing her apron in her hands.

"Do you see the greenish discharge coming from the wound? There are red streaks here and I don't like the look of it," Kate said, pointing to Jesse's upper arm. "His skin feels terribly warm. We've got to do something quickly or Jesse will surely lose this arm. I'm not going to let that happen, but I need your help."

She took Celia's hands in her own, effectively stilling their anxious wringing. "A man like Jesse deserves better."

"I believe I already said that."

At the bitter sound of McCall's voice, Kate whirled around. "Get out of my way, Marshal. You wouldn't let me care for Jesse before, but I'll be damned if I'll let you stop me now. I'm going to see to it that Jesse recovers. If you can't do better than to sling more mud my way, then get out."

Morgan, stunned speechless by Kate's vehement expression of concern for his deputy, watched her fuss over Jesse. He didn't know what he'd expected from her during this crisis, but it certainly wasn't this. Truth be told, he

thought she might hole up in her room until the dirty work was done. Or maybe, as Mary would've done, rave and rant and threaten to shoot the poor bastard again for bleeding all over the house and her clothes, and making more work for everyone.

"Oh, Jesse ... Jesse," he heard her murmur. She leaned over to press a damp cloth to her patient's brow.

So great was his shock at her selflessness and at her lack of distress over the blood marring the expensive silk on the front and cuffs of her gown, a soft wind could've blown him away like so much smoke on the wind.

When she turned to pluck something from the table, he noted the efficiency of her small hands and tapered fingers. Every movement she made was economical and efficient with nary a moment wasted. In the room's warmth, a fine sheen of perspiration broke out on her forehead and her cheeks grew rosy. Morgan marveled as she continued to work tirelessly, more concerned with Jesse's needs than her own comfort.

"Hold on, Jesse. You're going to be fine. Just fine. I promise."

Morgan heard the tremble of uncertainty in her voice along with the worry that made her words thick. As he watched her work, he took in the familiar details of a sick room—sounds and smells that would've sent his ex-wife to her bed for a week with the vapors.

Kate plopped a cloth into a steaming bowl of water whose warmth lent the air a damp smell of its own. She wrung out the excess, drizzling back into the bowl. She wiped the grime,

sweat and blood from Jesse's skin, and the water turned pink, then red. The sickly sweet odor of decay filled his nostrils.

"More sheets, Celia?" Kate called into the kitchen.

Morgan silently noted her steely efficiency as she handled the odious task of cleaning the ugly wound. Her hands were stronger than they looked as they tore his clean linen into strips. A loud, quick r-r-rip momentarily blocked out the sounds of Jesse's labored breathing and the drone of bees just outside the open window. Then, once again, there was only the swish of Kate's soiled skirts and Jesse's harsh breathing.

She impatiently brushed several wisps of hair off her neck, making sure the tight bun at its base was secure. Morgan couldn't help smiling to himself as he recalled how flustered she'd become when he'd returned her hairpins before riding home. He could still feel her slender hand shaking as he deposited the pins there, one by one. When she would've pulled her hand away, he held tight, giving in to the impulse to rub the sensitive, fleshy pad at the base of her thumb.

She'd yanked back her hand as quickly as if he'd held a lighted hellstick to it, her nose so pinched he would've sworn she could smell the sulfurous fumes. She'd avoided his gaze, concentrating instead on counting out her pins, working furiously to trap away her enticing auburn waves in that hideous knot. She'd made quick work of the task, and it was as if she'd donned a mask along with the tortoiseshell pins.

Quickly, she'd buried all trace of the passion that had arced between them. Her delicate features, once soft and vulnerable, had turned cold and unreadable. Her sweet-

smelling, free-flowing tresses, so much a symbol of the passionate woman within her, had meekly retreated behind their prison bars of tortoiseshell.

He realized now what a damn fool thing he'd done, touching her that way.

His smile faded, then turned into a full-blown frown. Instead of the solid sense of satisfaction he'd expected to feel at his ability to intimidate her and come one step closer to getting rid of the shameless baggage, he only felt ... *What?*

He didn't even know. That's how confused the damned woman made him.

He pressed his back into the wall farthest from the corner where she worked, gathering Medusa into ever smaller circles, and then releasing it. He repeated the motion again and again.

Unbidden, an image leapt into his mind of the two of them alone together in the jail. The force of it struck him in the gut full force like a poison-tipped arrow sinking its tip deep into a bull's-eye.

He closed his eyes, but it was useless. He still saw and felt his hands wrapped in those silken auburn strands. He'd wanted to taunt her, to make her run home to her family with her tail between her lovely legs, but he'd only managed to tease himself into wanting more of her.

Morgan clenched his fists until his hands hurt. His plan had seemed so easy with several benefits to recommend it, not the least of which was giving the adulteress a little taste of what she deserved.

Now, though, he felt as if he'd shot himself in the foot. Or, more accurately, dead center in a more sensitive part of his anatomy.

He still felt the fiery swell in his britches that hit him whenever he was near enough to reach out and touch her, and now it was worse than ever. Hell, ever since that morning when she'd sat cradled against his thighs on the ride home, he hadn't been able to keep his mind from analyzing his fantasies from every blasted angle.

His mind conjured up pictures too compelling to ignore. Kate in her fancy clothes, his hands arousing her responsive flesh through the rustling layers of silk, bunching them up around her waist, baring her shapely legs for his eyes alone ... Kate without a stitch on, her bare bottom wriggling on a crumpled pile of her hastily-discarded finery, writhing with need beneath him ... Kate, her back pressed to a wall as his hands guided her hips and her limbs hugged him close, urging him closer still as her full breasts crushed against his chest...

He could see them together in a soft bed, on a hard floor, in a sweet-smelling haystack, in a steaming tub...

The haunting vision of her coral-tipped breasts peeking out at him while she'd bathed on the night she'd arrived returned to tease him. Just then, Kate turned. The objects of his attention stood in jaunty profile as she reached up and back to smooth stray wisps into that God-awful bun.

Suddenly he wondered what it would be like to have her poised like that astride him, and that same fiery swell returned to set his britches aflame.

He tore his gaze from her and looked at the scene beyond the window. Try as hard as he might, he couldn't see the wooden swing hanging from the yard's lone willow tree, or Celia's vegetable patch greedily soaking up the last of the muddy rain water as it stood in the harsh sun, or the small barn that he'd built with his own hands.

He saw one thing only and that was Kate, astride him and wild with the same passion he knew she possessed since the time she'd bitten, slapped, and kicked him.

Would all that glorious hair feel like sun-warmed silk flowing across his bare chest when she leaned over to offer him a taste of her apricot-and-honey breasts? *Would she be as sweet in taste and touch and sight everywhere?*

Morgan groaned inwardly. He gripped the sill. The little taste of her that he'd gotten told him she would. Devil take him, that one tempting taste wasn't anywhere near enough to satisfy him.

He glanced over his shoulder and watched her minister to his deputy, his friend. Once Jesse was well, he had to get her out of here before he made the worst mistake of his life. Hellfire, she didn't need protecting half so much as Jesse and he did.

Once a lying, conniving, disloyal woman like Kate Stewart got under a man's skin, she could break him if she didn't outright kill him.

* * * *

MORGAN TRIED TO hide his smile as Kate hiked up her skirts an inch or two so she wouldn't trip over Digger and

Cookie flopped on the sick room's floor. When she tried to shoo them out the back door, they lifted their shaggy heads in curiosity, then apparently deciding she wasn't as threatening as Celia, plopped back down at her feet. She tried to dislodge the huge red and black beasts again, but the results were the same. She simply began working around them.

She folded down her high lace collar against the room's warmth. She unbuttoned the long rows of jet at her wrists and pushed her sleeves to her elbows. All the while, she issued polite requests to Celia for several more items from around the house and garden, including more hot water and sprigs of fresh yarrow.

In his quiet corner, Morgan watched the women make a decoction with the fern-like yarrow plant. They applied it to Jesse's shoulder, cleansing the wound and also trying to stem the fresh flow of blood that had begun during their bumpy ride home. All the long while, his friend remained still and quiet as death.

Finally, the red tide ceased. Celia removed the basin of bloody water and a large pile of stained cloths. When she returned, Kate asked her to fetch a mortar and pestle from the kitchen, and several cloves of garlic.

Morgan pushed forward. "Garlic? What the hell are you goin' to do with that? He needs real doctorin', not a cook. I'm goin' back to town for Pettibone."

Jamming his hat on his head, clutching Medusa as if it were a lifeline, he stalked through the kitchen and down the

long hallway toward the front door. Digger and Cookie yapped at his heels, wagging their tails.

He heard the quick patter of Kate's footsteps behind him, and the rapid swishing of her skirts as she raced down the hall after him. She caught up with him in the front parlor and planted herself in front of the door, blocking his path. Her chest heaved from her sprint, and thoroughly winded in her fancy corset and stays, she pressed a hand to her throat. After a few deep breaths, she spoke.

"Returning to town will only be a waste of your time and good horseflesh. I won't allow that drunken doctor anywhere near Jesse. The old fool was so inebriated, he didn't even notice the wound had begun to fester."

She pressed her shoulders back against the door, as if she really thought she could stop him if he was ready to walk out. "I've seen so-called doctors like him before. You know why they call them 'sawbones,' don't you, Marshal? At the first sign of infection—when they're sober enough to see it, that is—they take the limb. But I can save it."

She leaned forward and laid her open palms on his shirt front. "Please, Morgan. Let me try."

It was the first time she'd reached out to touch him voluntarily, if you didn't count the slaps and punches and kicks. Morgan felt the searing heat of her clear through to his skin. He looked down at her hands, then into those smoky lavender eyes that searched his face.

"Please."

There was a catch in her voice and her hands trembled. She was a proud spitfire, bold as the devil's daughter, yet she was begging him for time, for a chance to help Jesse.

How much did she care for his deputy? *Enough to give herself to another man if that was the only way to save him? Or enough to refuse?*

A glimmer of an idea swirled around in his brain. When a plan finally formed, it held more than a mite of appeal. The more he thought on it, the surer he was that he could force her into a devil's bargain—one she'd never be able to win if she truly loved Jesse. If she cared for his deputy even half as much as he suspected, she'd agree to pretty much anything right about now.

The plan was a bit underhanded, but it was the quickest way to get her out of Abilene under her own steam and back to Philadelphia where she belonged ... where she'd be safe.

Where he could get her out of his thoughts.

Morgan offered her his most insulting, leering grin. "You really love him, don't you?"

She dropped her hands from his shirt front. "Why is that so hard to believe? Jesse Place is one of the finest men I've ever known. I'd do anything for him."

"Anything?"

Pleased she'd caught his meaning, Morgan watched a deep blush creep up her neck and fan across her cheekbones.

"I've got a bargain for you, Mrs. Stewart. I'll let you treat my deputy with your witch's potions. In return, you'll give something to me. And to show you I'm not the snake you think I am, I'll even give you a choice what it's to be."

His grin grew wider. "You can either leave town as soon as Jesse's out of the woods, or you can spend a night in my bed. One night. The whole night."

At her wide-eyed look of incredulity, he took his hat off with a flourish and pressed it over his heart. "Before you answer, be warned. I intend to collect."

Her shoulders came away from the door so fast he almost thought it was afire. "You horse's ass! You don't care about Jesse at all. You ... you mangy dog. I'll see you in Hades before I'll let you run me out of town."

"Are you sayin', darlin', you'd rather come to my bed?"

Kate fumed and sputtered. She shook as his gaze roamed over her curves before coming to rest first on her firm, rounded breasts, then her eyes, alight with a violet fire.

"Time's a'wastin'. Jesse needs attention. Will he get it from you or Doc Pettibone?"

She lifted her chin a notch and retreated a step, a protective hand on her bodice. "Neither choice is acceptable. Furthermore, I don't need you to let me do anything. With or without your say-so, I'll remain here and care for Jesse, then proceed to pursue my profession in this town. I'm not a member of your household, nor am I a citizen of this town. I don't need your permission for anything."

"'Fraid that's where you're wrong."

She was on him in a flash, waving her finger in his face. "That two-bit tin star on your chest doesn't give you the right to bargain with people's very lives. Who do you think you are?"

"You'd best not forget I'm the law here."

"Not a law unto yourself. You must answer to your superiors. I'll appeal to Mayor Henry if I must. To Mr. McCoy and the town council—"

"And tell them what? That I want you in my bed? That I want to spread your creamy thighs and bury myself deep in the folds of your sweet, precious body?" Morgan threw back his head and laughed. "Hell, honey, the mayor and Joe McCoy and every other man in long pants wants you, too. They're just too gentlemanly to say so. I don't think you'll get much help there."

She gave him a dainty little sniff. "Certainly Celia wouldn't approve."

His smile died. "This is my house, not Celia's. She has no say in the matter."

A cough from the direction of the hallway made them both whirl around.

"Celia!" Kate turned an even more vivid shade of red than Morgan thought was possible. "Has Jesse worsened?"

The housekeeper's eyes were moist and the tip of her nose was red, but her back was rigid. She clasped her hands together at her waist. "It don't look good. You'd best settle your business and come back quick as you can."

Celia lingered in the doorway. Her timing couldn't have been worse. He almost had Cattle Kate where he wanted her.

"Is there something else?" he asked, teeth clenched.

Celia nodded.

"Well? Speak up. Is something wrong with Sarah or Matt?"

"Your young'uns are fine. It's you what's got somethin' wrong. I can't believe you'd do this to a fine woman like Cattle Kate. I knew you'd changed since Mary left, but this—" "Enough!"

"You're a cold-hearted man, Morgan. I thought I knew you, but all that bitterness has changed you into somebody I don't even wanna know."

"Stay out of this, Celia. It's no concern of yours." Morgan glanced at Kate. She'd managed to squeeze a few tears into her eyes and he applauded. "Very good, Mrs. Stewart. You're a better actress than I would've given you credit for. You should make your living on the stage."

Celia wagged her finger at him. "You can't do this. Of all the mule-headed—"

"Mind your own business, Celia. I'm not paying you to worry about Kate Stewart. Go tend to Jesse and the children."

"So, you're goin' through with it? You're goin' to hold this lovely woman to your jackass's bargain?"

He eyed her coldly in response.

"I pity your poor young'uns havin' to grow up with a mean-spirited, black-hearted man like you for a pa."

"Just a minute, Celia—"

"No, you wait a minute. Mary surely done you and your babies wrong when she up and left with that actor fella—"

"I will not have that woman's name spoken in my house." Somehow he managed to keep his voice steady, but the cloud over Celia's expression told him she was aware of the murderous rage filling his heart.

He clenched his fists at his sides, trying to control the temper he felt perilously close to losing. In all the go-rounds he'd had with Celia, he'd never once let her see him this close to losing control. It was just one more bad thing he could attribute to Kate Stewart.

Celia took a step forward. "Whatever your wife did—" "Ex-wife."

"—don't give you the right to do wrong to someone else. I won't be a part of this. I won't stand by and watch you wring payment for Mary's sins from Cattle Kate."

"Before you start throwing orders, you'd best remember who pays your salary. That is unless you've got other means of support."

At Celia's stricken look, Morgan clenched his jaw, feeling the muscles tense and flex in his cheek. He'd never before threatened his housekeeper. He owed her. She'd held his family together, caring for the kids like they were her own and doing it better than their own mama had. He let his breath out on a heavy sigh. "Leave us now, Celia."

"Please," Kate said. She put a hand on Celia's shoulder. "Don't walk away from your livelihood because of me. I appreciate your support, but I can fight my own battles. It won't be the first time."

Celia started wringing her hands. "I can't live with what he's forcin' on you."

"It's between me and Marshal McCall. Please, don't jeopardize your position on my account. The children need you—especially Sarah."

The housekeeper shook her head. "I dunno. I ain't makin' no promises. And neither are you. Not as long as I'm drawin' breath."

"Tend to Deputy Place. I'll be there in a moment. And thank you, Celia. You're very sweet to look out for me as you have."

Celia patted Kate's arm before leaving the parlor. With a quiet command, she took the dogs with her.

Morgan harrumphed. "She's about as sweet as a crab apple."

Kate whirled on him. "She's a good woman and better than you deserve."

"I may not get what I deserve, but I'll get what I want." He stepped up to the door, hand poised on the cut-glass knob. "If you can't help Jesse, say so now."

The trembling hand at her throat and the quiver of her chin made his stomach lurch. He turned away and stepped halfway out the door, unable to look at her any longer lest he lose his resolve. "It doesn't have to be Pettibone. If you want, I'll ride to Fort Riley for an army surgeon. All you'll have to do is keep Jesse alive 'til I get back. That way, Jesse will have a good doctor and you can go home with a clear conscience. The choice is yours."

"Jesse doesn't have time to waste! It's either me or that lush you call a doctor. Please, Morgan, don't ask me to make that choice..." Her voice cracked, then trailed away.

Lured by the torment in her voice, he cast a glance over his shoulder. Immediately he wished he hadn't. Her eyes

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were misty and the tip of her nose was all pink. Holding her splayed fingers across her bodice, she looked close to broken.

A cloud shifted and buttery sunlight streamed through the open doorway. The circle of gold on her finger glinted and winked up at him, reminding him of what he had to do.

Morgan set his jaw and flung the door wide. "The choice is yours. Make it now."

Chapter 12

KATE FELT MORGAN'S gaze boring into her back as she leaned over to wipe Jesse's fevered brow. He'd been watching her for hours—always watching—like a hungry bear about to attack.

"What makes you think you can save that arm?" he asked from a chair by the window. "What can a few cloves of garlic do that a good surgeon can't?"

Even the tone of his voice was a form of attack. Well, he could go straight to Hades and grow horns and a forked tail before she'd let him upset her again. All that mattered now was making sure Jesse didn't either bleed to death or die from infection. That and deciding which way to pay for the incredible, awful bargain she'd made.

Not living up to her word was out of the question. She'd never gone back on her word in her life, and she wasn't about to start now. She had her honor, after all, even if that was all she had left. Besides, how would it look if word somehow got out that Cattle Kate couldn't be trusted? No one would believe a word she wrote ever again.

She had two choices: leave or submit.

Should she leave Abilene after Jesse recovered? She'd almost rather burn in Hades herself than let another man bully her and tell her what to do.

On the other hand, could she submit to McCall's touch? She'd been with only one man in her life, and in the end, it had been more pain than pleasure. From the gentle way the

marshal had caressed her in the bathhouse and again in the jail, she could tell he wouldn't hurt her physically.

But there were other ways to hurt. To be forced into one man's bed to save another man's life was morally reprehensible. How could she possibly go through with it? For Jesse's sake, how could she not?

Even if she could bring herself to McCall's bed, she couldn't risk a pregnancy. Not after what she'd done to Teddy.

She'd heard women talk among themselves in hushed tones about using a pessary, or a 'pisser' as some of them had called it, and how they'd used it to avoid becoming with child.

Would such a thing be available in a mostly male town like Abilene? Surely the nymphs du prairie used something...

Kate shook her head. Her thoughts were running away with her. There was no way she would give herself to McCall as some kind of payment. As much as it put a thorn in her side, she'd prepare to pack up and leave once Jesse was well enough to leave in Celia's care.

She wrung out a cloth, her concentration on washing away the fevered sweat that glistened on Jesse's forehead, neck, and chest. She ignored the sting of tears behind her eyes and swallowed hard around the lump in her throat. All she had left in this world was her work, and now an arrogant bully who had everything in the world that truly mattered—two loving, beautiful children and a warm, happy home, a place to belong—was taking away the little bit of her life she had left.

She inhaled sharply. Her eyes scanned the shelves sagging with tins and sacks of supplies, the heavy metal tub, the

curtains fluttering in the breeze. She had to focus on anything but the devil's bargain McCall had forced her into.

Her thoughts strayed to the virile marshal and how gentle his large hands had felt in her hair, his touch reverent ... Her breasts grew heavy and aching full as if they, too, anticipated his touch.

"What's so magical about garlic?" he said in that lazy drawl of his, drawing her out of her thoughts. "Tell me, Mrs. Stewart."

She drew herself up to stand straighter under his scrutiny. "I'm rather busy now, Marshal. If you still want to know, I'll explain it to you later. The herb has a long and distinguished history in the art of healing."

He leaned back in the straight-backed chair, long legs stretched out lazily and crossed at the ankles, arms crossed over his chest. "Keep talkin', darlin'. I've got all day. Just remember, Jesse doesn't, so make your little speech convincin'. Too much is at stake to let myself believe in a liar again."

* * * *

STANDING AT THE small bedside table, Kate crushed the garlic, smashing the cloves with so much force her shoulders shook and her hips swayed. She pictured McCall's smug face at the bottom of the mortar as she ground the pestle down mercilessly into it. It was childish, she knew, but she couldn't help deriving great satisfaction from the act.

It was almost as satisfying as when she'd told him to go to Hades after he'd all but called her a liar. That was almost an

hour ago and they hadn't spoken since. Now the tension was so thick between them, she could cut it with Celia's sewing shears.

Idly, she wondered if he could read her mind now as he had at the bathhouse and decided it would serve him right if he could. She risked a glance over her shoulder, not really expecting to have her curiosity satisfied. To her chagrin, McCall ran an open palm along the strong, whiskered line of his jaw and over his cheek.

"Ouch." Amusement tinged his deep voice. A corner of his moustache tipped up and his shoulders shook slightly as if he were trying to suppress not only a full-fledged grin, but a hearty belly laugh as well.

"Blast you, McCall."

The other side of his thick moustache lifted and he did laugh then. The warm sound filled every cranny of the small room, instantly dispelling some of the tension. For that, at least, she was grateful. She couldn't take another argument, not with Jesse doing so poorly.

The deep throaty sound of his laughter echoed in her body, soothing her, and she relaxed and let out a quiet laugh herself.

"That's much better, Kate."

"What is?"

"Your smile. Now I can see why you're so successful at wrangling information out of folks. That smile brightens up your face like a rainbow after a storm."

Flushing, Kate looked away. If he could make an effort at peace—for Jesse's sake, of course—so could she. "I had no

idea you had the soul of a poet," she said, glancing over at him.

"You should smile like that more often. You look about as fresh and pretty as Celia's roses with the dew still on."

Embarrassed by the compliments, thrown completely off guard by his unexpected charm, she didn't hear him walk up behind her until it was too late. His arms twined around her waist before she realized what he was doing.

He pried the mortar and pestle from her fingers. "I think my face will be safer if I finish this."

She stepped away and wiped her hands on the cloth tied around her waist, careful to avoid any further contact with him. Weariness seeped into her bones and she sank gratefully into the chair by the window. Warm sunlight drifted across her neck and shoulders, putting her in a languid, hazy mood. His comments about her smile drifted through her thoughts.

"There really hasn't been much to smile about lately," she said, more to herself than to him.

"Then maybe you should've stayed home."

The second the words left his mouth, Morgan wished he could rope them, stomp them and stuff them back in. The fragile truce they'd managed to attain for Jesse's sake was instantly shattered.

He supposed the goading words slipped out because he resented her kind so much, and had for a long while. Now, disgusted by his lack of self-control when she was near, he was even starting to hate himself.

Her presence ripped open all the old wounds, all the memories of Mary that should've stayed buried. He was

willing to concede, at least to himself, that maybe—just maybe—Kate wasn't quite as bad as Mary.

Morgan looked down on his deputy, so still and pale that it scared him. Sickness and injury of any kind, even in her own children, had always repulsed his ex-wife. All she'd grumbled about was the extra work it caused. Most likely, Mary would've shot Jesse again and put him out of his misery rather than let him sweat and bleed all over her clean sheets. It was plain to see Kate had a spark of goodness and warmth in her, leastways as far as Jesse was concerned.

Morgan turned and studied her. Kate glared back at him. Wordlessly, she shot across the room and shooed him away from the table and resumed the grinding with a vengeance.

* * * *

DETERMINED TO PRETEND the marshal wasn't there, Kate dipped a fresh cloth into the bowl of hot water and cleansed Jesse's wound again. The garlic's aroma rose to sting her eyes and nose as she fashioned a fresh poultice. She placed a strip of cloth over the wound, then began scooping out the contents of the mortar. She placed the crushed garlic atop the thin strip of material, careful not to let any touch Jesse's skin directly.

Celia entered lugging a large, ungainly basin of fresh, heated water. Morgan came forward to carry it, gracefully stepping over the dogs and sliding past Kate to place it on the table. When his muscular arm brushed against her shoulder, an odd shiver danced through her.

Was it only annoyance at his nearness, a heightened awareness of his solid strength and virility, which he'd used so effectively against her time and again? Or was it the way he made her belly flutter, sending an unwelcome surge of heat to her most private places? Suffused by shame, she grew as hot as if she'd been slaving all day over Celia's cookstove.

Could what Ian had accused her of so long ago be true? Was her soul so black her body would welcome the lecherous attentions of a brutal lout who regarded her with the same lack of esteem he did the calico queens and *nymphs du prairie*?

She bowed her head, hoping Celia and Morgan couldn't read her true reaction. She hurried to finish the poultice.

"Isn't that clever?" Celia murmured, intently watching from the foot of the bed.

"Celia, if for some reason you must change the poultice, always remember to place the garlic atop a strip of cloth, never directly on the wound itself. Otherwise, the garlic's strong juices could blister Jesse's skin."

Morgan speared her with a look. "You sure you know what you're doing?"

"Garlic has been used to heal since the time of the pharaohs," she replied in a strained voice, as if explaining something to a particularly annoying child. "In this part of the country, even your own Indians have long made use of it."

"They are not," he ground out, "my Indians. Who the devil taught you this nonsense?"

"My father was a doctor. I sometimes assisted with his patients. He wasn't above using folk medicine if it could help someone, unlike most of the other city doctors," she said, not even trying to hide the pride she felt for her father. "It earned him a fair amount of ridicule from his peers, but it also saved many lives. His patients were quite grateful."

Morgan folded his arms and turned his back on her, and she noted the rigid set of his shoulders. His feet were planted wide apart, as if he were about to do battle. Apparently Celia saw it, too, because she retreated quickly to the kitchen.

"Most writers learn to keep their stories straight," he tossed over his shoulder. "Don't you think you ought to at least try to remember the facts of yours?" He turned to pierce her with a flinty look. "Last night you said your husband was a doctor. Now it's your father. Well, which man taught you about healing, Mrs. Stewart?" He was shouting at her now. "Which was it?"

He took a menacing step toward her. "Speak up. If Jesse's condition is as bad as you say, he doesn't have time to wait while you figure out which lie suits your needs today."

The fury in his voice and the contempt in his eyes were so forbidding she would've welcomed even Digger and Cookie as allies, but they rose then and deserted her. The click of their nails across the planked floor ticked off the silent seconds as McCall stared down at her, clearly waiting for some kind of explanation.

She turned away from the burning fire in those hazel eyes. "Last night I only said I was a doctor's wife, not that I learned

anything about healing from him. That wasn't a lie! Ian treated me more like an ornament than a helpmate."

She went to the window, breathing greedily of the fresh air and sunshine. Her hands came up to the frame, gripped its edges. She ignored the splinters digging into her palms. "I learned most of what I know from my father, Benjamin Franklin Shaw, who was also a doctor. He was one of my husband's university instructors."

She felt his gaze boring into her again as he spoke. "If you can't stop that infection, the arm has to come off or Jesse will die."

"I know that, McCall. I'm no fool, regardless of what you think of me."

"I still think we should fetch a surgeon from the fort. Or at least sober Pettibone up and drag him out here."

She turned to face him, fisting her hands at her sides. She wouldn't go to him and beg for the right to save Jesse's arm, not like the last time. She wouldn't. "The man's a butcher and you know it. That's why you told Mr. Hart to keep an eye on him. Stop hating me long enough to think about what I'm saying."

Morgan didn't answer and Kate jumped into the silence with both feet. "You fought in the war, didn't you?"

It was a long moment before he answered. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"It was a bloody, brutal war. Obviously, you were lucky enough to come home with your body in one piece. Try to imagine, Marshal, what it was like for the men who returned home and weren't able to hold their pretty wives in welcome,

or to twirl their children in the air because they had to hold themselves up on crutches instead. Many of them couldn't hold themselves up at all because, thanks to some butcher like your Pettibone, all they had left were stumps where two strong limbs used to be."

She stepped up to him, the easier to look him in the eye. She was careful not to touch him. "Imagine yourself in their place. Do you think that blonde in the white dress at the Alamo would've given you the time of day, let alone taken you up to her room, if you weren't a 'whole' man? If you didn't have the money to pay her, she wouldn't have. And no decent woman would, money or not."

"Watch your tongue, Mrs. Stewart." His tone was quiet, threatening, warning her to back off.

She swallowed hard and made herself stare back at the deadly green fire in his eyes. "How would you feel if you lost an arm or a leg without ever being given the chance to save it?" Those eyes were burning her, devouring her. She finally turned from him.

She felt the heat of his stare for a long while before she heard him begin to pace the length of the room. He still hadn't given her an answer by the time Celia returned a few minutes later with more clean cloths.

"More water is heatin' on the stove," Celia said. "Should be ready soon." She looked from Morgan to Kate and back at Morgan again before retreating to the kitchen, all the while muttering under her breath about mule-headed fools.

With a deep breath, Kate screwed up her courage and crossed the room to stand before the marshal. She stiffened

her spine, straightened her shoulders, and dared to look him in the eye. "You said I could treat Jesse. We made a bargain, damn you, and I expect you to stick to it."

When his only response was to stare silently down his nose at her, she poked a finger at his solid chest. "I know what people like you think of that poor Mr. Hedgepeth, the little man with the limp. Admit it—you don't see him as a whole man. Do you want a life like that—full of scorn and ridicule—for Jesse? I thought you cared about him, too."

He sauntered away to pull the chair over to the far corner of the room, sat down, and never took his eyes off her. "Do what you have to. But remember, I'll be watching you every step of the way."

As if she could forget. "Don't you have anything better to do? Like whipping a few drovers or tripping a cripple?"

She went to the bed, deliberately ignoring the marshal. She finished wrapping the garlic poultice to try to stem the infection, praying all the while that it wasn't already too late.

* * * *

MORGAN SLOUCHED IN the hard chair, feigning sleep. Hat pulled low, legs propped up on an overturned crate, he studied Kate.

She'd been bustling around in the hot sick room for hours with a dish cloth tied around her tiny waist, a wet patch slowly spreading across her bodice between her breasts and down to her belly. She hadn't taken a moment to care for her own needs except to quickly re-knot her glorious hair, tying a strip of cloth around it for good measure.

She'd declined Celia's offer to sit with Jesse so she could eat her evening meal and rest a spell. Morgan had finished several cups of coffee, and Kate's sat cold on the table behind all her witch's potions while she whispered soothing words to his deputy. He couldn't hear exactly what she said, but there was no missing the love and worry on her face. He let his boots fall to the floor with a thud, taking great satisfaction when she jumped.

She turned to him, her eyes wide and startled as she wiped her hands on the makeshift apron. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't."

"Jesse's fever spiked a few hours ago, but I managed to get it down again. He's much more comfortable now." She gestured at his chair. "I'm sure that can't be very comfortable. Why don't you go upstairs and rest?"

Even after three grueling nights, the first two in his jail and the third in this room, she still looked soft and innocent. Her worry for Jesse made her appear vulnerable, but underneath he knew she was about as vulnerable as a rattler. He'd do well to remember that fact, especially now with Jesse on the mend. "Only if you'll go with me. Wouldn't you like to minister to the needs of a man who's conscious?"

There it was—the mask of softness and vulnerability cracked.

"You are a genuine bas—"

"Thank you, darlin', but you really should watch your tongue." He stood and slowly crossed the room.

She backed away until her shoulders pressed against a wall. With a steady hand, he stripped away the cloth that bound her hair. He dropped the scrap to the floor at his boots. Threading his fingers through the thick auburn mass, he set it free and wild and tipped her head back, forcing her to look him in the eye.

"Now that Jesse's doin' better," he said, "I want some answers. Tell me what ol' Charlie was talkin' about and why you've got those scars on your legs."

Her gasp was audible, the only sound in the sleeping house. Even Jesse's breathing was quiet and peaceful. She tried to look away, but he wouldn't allow it as he cupped her face in his hands. If she'd had her little two-shot, he was certain she'd aim it at his head for real this time.

"What're you hidin' that's so all-fired awful your blood sank to your toes when you thought Charlie would repeat it in front of me? What in hell is he holdin' over your pretty head? I want to know, darlin'."

He deliberately kept his tone intimate, his drawl silken and persuasive. "Tell me, Katie. Now, before Jesse wakes up. There's no one to hear but you and me." He ran his hands through her tresses in that way he'd come to enjoy. "Tell me about the sins of Katie Stewart."

She shoved him away and ran, her skirts whipping at her ankles. Halfway to the other side of the room, she stopped cold.

"Pa?" Sarah stood framed in the doorway, rubbing the sleep from her eyes, her toes sticking out from beneath the hem of her white cotton gown. "I heard a noise, Pa."

When the child noticed Kate, she ran up and threw dimpled arms around her knees. "Cattle Kate! You came back. I knew you would. I just knew it."

Morgan felt his jaw grow tight as he watched Kate's shoulders stiffen the instant Sarah touched her.

"A sick room isn't really the place for a child," Kate said, her lips thin. "There's no need to upset her."

"Don't concern yourself with my children, Mrs. Stewart. Just stick to your doctorin'."

Until then, neither Sarah nor Matt had been aware of Jesse's presence in the house. Throughout the day, Celia had managed to give them enough chores in the garden and the barn to keep them occupied.

Sarah turned questioning eyes to her father. "Pa? Why is Unca Jesse sleeping here? What's wrong with him, Pa?"

Glaring at each other, neither adult had noticed when Sarah padded over to Jesse's bedside to touch his warm cheek with her little fingers. Now, seeing where she was and hearing the hiccupping sobs threatening to burst from his little girl, Morgan strode past Kate and scooped the tiny bundle of dark curls up in his arms.

"Honey," he said, smoothing her hair from her forehead, "Uncle Jesse is hurt, but we're takin' real good care of him."

"You're the Marshal, Pa. Make him be better. Please." Her hands on his whiskered cheeks, she looked solemnly into his eyes. "I love Unca Jesse so much. He promised to whittle me a new dolly, an' teach me to dance before the picnic, an' take me and Matt fishin'..." Tears streamed down her round

cheeks as she glanced again at Jesse's large, still body in the small bed.

"It'll be all right. Cross my heart." With a forefinger, Morgan drew an X over his chest. "Cattle Kate and Celia and I are doin' everything we can to make sure Uncle Jesse gets well. Why, Cattle Kate just now told me he'll be up and around in time to give you those dancin' lessons before the Independence Day frolic."

He looked pointedly at Kate. "Isn't that right?"

"You really shouldn't foster false hope—"

"I said," he repeated with more force, "isn't that right? We'll be callin' Uncle Jesse ol' twinkle-toes before you know it."

"As you say," Kate ground out, glaring right back at him.

Morgan smiled down at Sarah. "See there, honey? Cattle Kate and your Pa wouldn't fib to you. Would we, Katie?"

Refusing to answer a question like that with a lie, she turned to leave. Before she could take more than a few steps, a frantic pounding erupted at the back door.

"Marshal! You in there? Open up!"

Morgan, with Sarah's mop of curls resting on his chest, flung open the door to a clearly agitated Del Hart. Del rubbed his silvered whiskers as the men traded several tense, hushed words.

Morgan strode back into the room and thrust Sarah into Kate's arms. "Don't let anyone into the house." He pulled her two-shot from his pocket and pressed it into her palm. "It's still loaded. I guess you know how to use it if you have to?"

She nodded, a hundred questions swirling in her head. Only one made it to her lips. "What happened?"

"No time to explain. Remember, no one enters this house 'til I get back. And you don't leave it. That goes for Celia and the kids, too."

In the space of a few minutes, Kate thought, Morgan had transformed before her eyes. Gone was the man against whom she could hold her own in any argument, the one who could easily soothe a crying child. The hazel eyes she'd often thought startlingly beautiful, even in anger, were now shuttered and cold. She thought that if she'd been aware of even half as much power emanating from his massive arms and shoulders when she'd met him as she was now, she just might have turned around and left.

"W-what am I to do with Sarah?"

"Tuck her in. If she has a nightmare, sing to her."

"Sing what?"

Following Mr. Hart out the door, he called over his shoulder, "Whatever you know."

He stopped in his tracks as if suddenly remembering something important. He turned and flashed her a surprisingly comforting grin.

Kate's breath caught at the sight, as much from the flutter it triggered in her belly as from the shock induced by the handsome transformation of his features.

"On second thought," he drawled, "don't repeat any songs you learned on the trail. Just sing whatever lullabies you sang to your own daughter."

Over Sarah's head, Kate stared at him. She was so stunned by his mention of Teddy, he might as well have asked her to stand on her head and whistle "Goober Peas."

"You do know how to sing a lullaby, don't you?"

She could only nod once in reply. The realization it might be necessary to sing to a little girl and rock her to sleep again—filling her own empty arms with reminders of all she'd lost—caused a thick knot of dread to form in her throat.

Kate gulped hard, twice. "Morgan, wait! I ... I can't—"

"I've got to go," he called over his shoulder as he strode away from her toward the barn and his horse.

"When will you be back?"

"Soon as I can. Just remember what I said."

She watched his confident, long-legged stride until the shadows swallowed him up and the only thing she could hear was the barn door creak open and his spurs jangle, scaring away a pair of mourning doves who'd been hiding in the willow's upper branches.

Glancing down at Sarah, she was surprised to find the child was already peacefully asleep. Kate swallowed hard again around the lump in her throat and wondered how she was ever going to protect her heart against such a loving, trusting child.

It would be far too easy to open her arms and her heart to the girl. From there, she'd be just a heartbeat away from wanting a child of her own again. She couldn't allow those dangerous feelings to stir. She'd never survive the awful pain—the desperate, stabbing sorrow of wanting what she couldn't possibly ever have.

The Lawman
by Lily Sorren

Allowing herself one last, lingering look at the precious bundle on her shoulder, she whispered, "Come on, pumpkin. Let's get you tucked into bed."

Chapter 13

KATE FOUND HERSELF relaxing more with each of the six days that passed in Morgan's absence. In spite of the snail's pace of Jesse's recovery, it was a surprisingly pleasant time. The greatest pleasure of all, she thought, was not having Marshal McCall around as a constant reminder of their bargain.

It did wonders for her spirits, too, to be free of the dark devil's constant perusal. He'd been like a guard dog waiting for her to make one wrong move so he could pounce and draw blood. Other times, when those gold-flecked hazel eyes studied her, he reminded her more of an inscrutable cat. A cat who held a supremely amusing secret.

She'd frequently caught him studying her, and the smoldering look in his eyes might as well have been a branding iron, blistering her skin with its heat, reminding her silently that he expected her to soon be his, at least for one night.

Today, as she stood by Jesse's bedside preparing fresh bandages, the children's laughter floated to her ears from the kitchen. A warm breeze swayed the buttery yellow curtains and stirred the long strands that had slipped free of the ribbon at her neck. They tickled the sensitive spot at the back of her neck, reminding her of the sensuous feel of Morgan's hands in her hair and on her flesh.

A flutter erupted low in her body, like a bird taking flight. She pressed the flat of her hand over her belly to still the

wild, sweet feeling before stuffing the loose strands of hair back into place. Her imagination must be playing tricks on her again, for Morgan's touch couldn't have felt as good as she remembered. She'd just been working too long on too little sleep and too little nourishment. That was all.

She forced her attention back to the soft, white strips in her hands. Trying to banish the oddly tender feelings that had crept up on her, she shook her head.

"Does it look so awful bad?" Jesse asked.

She jumped, startled, then smiled down at her patient. "I thought you were still asleep."

"You were shakin' your head. The wound must look awful bad. I'm sorry you had to see a thing like this. I want you to know, Kate, I truly do appreciate all you've done."

"Actually, your wound is coming along very well. And there's no need for thanks. Not between friends."

"I'm awful glad you knew a trick or two to save my arm. I'd like to shake your father's hand for teachin' you 'bout healin'."

"Unfortunately, Jesse, my parents passed away a long time ago, even before I buried my husband and daughter." She turned away from the pity in his eyes and made an effort to sound cheerful. "But I have you, don't I? A woman couldn't ask for a better friend."

When Kate heard the creak of springs, she turned to find Jesse rising from the narrow bed. "Oh, no, you don't." She pushed on Jesse's bare chest, taking care not to jostle his injured shoulder as she eased his large frame back against the pillows. "You wouldn't want me to use one of those fancy

roping knots on you that you taught me back on the ranch, would you?" At the scowl that clouded Jesse's face, she laughed.

"It's a heck of a thing to have you turn on me," he said.

Jesse's scowl deepened as her laughter swelled.

"Tarnation," he bellowed up at her. "I want out of this infernal bed." He started to rise again.

Kate tsked her best motherly tsk and again pushed him back. "Shush! The children will hear your shouting. What a poor example you're setting for Sarah and Matt."

She settled into the chair and sent him a teasing smile.

"My, my. I've never before heard you raise your voice to a woman. This is a whole new side of you, Jesse Place, and I'm not entirely sure I like it."

Jesse stubbornly folded his arms over his chest. "I want to get out of this sick bed and go back to town. Back to work."

"They say doctors make the worst patients, but I think deputy marshals deserve that dubious honor."

Jesse's scowl, hilariously out of place on such a normally even-tempered man, caused her laughter to erupt anew. She tried to hide it behind a hand.

"Pouting does not become you, Jesse. You look just like Matt when Celia smacks his hand away from the cookie jar," she said between giggles.

Jesse, apparently beginning to see the humor of the situation, broke down and gave her a lopsided grin. "I'm sorry, Kate, but I'm just not cut out for bein' penned in. I feel fine and I'm ready for somethin' more than lyin' abed."

He took her hand, his mischievous wink warming her heart. "Tell me, sweetheart, have I been all that bad?"

"Oh, no, not at all. You've been a model patient. Except for the fact you don't eat unless I spoon feed you myself, and I practically have to sit on you to keep you in that bed." She returned his wink.

Jesse tightened his hold on her hand. "I'm sorry for all the trouble I put you to. Even sorrier that you had to tend such an ugly wound."

"Don't be silly. You've nothing to apologize for. You know you're like a brother to me."

Jesse's face clouded over again.

She searched for a way to reassure him. "Your arm will be almost as good as new very soon if you take proper care of it. For a while, until those stitches come out, you probably won't be able to do any heavy lifting or fire your gun very accurately, but you'll be ready to dance with all the pretty young girls at the Independence Day frolic that Matt and Sarah have been chattering on and on about."

Jesse shot her a dark look she couldn't decipher. He swung his legs over the side of the mattress and stood.

"Jesse, please! You're worse than a child. Return to that bed right now—" She pointed a finger at the spot he'd just vacated. "—before you split your stitches."

He retrieved his gun belt from the bedpost and started to strap it on, grimacing all the while against the pain the effort caused him.

She decided to appeal to his strongest weakness. If she knew anything at all about Jesse, she knew he had a sweet

tooth twice the size of Texas. With a smile she said, "If you give me three more days, I'll whip you up a batch of my mama's famous sugar cookies."

His fingers paused in mid-buckle. "One day."

"Make it two and I'll ask Celia to prepare her strawberry ice cream for you, too."

"Deal—but only if you make it yourself."

"But, Jesse, I don't know where the wild strawberries grow. Besides, it's Celia's receipt."

"Celia won't mind, and Sarah can show you where the berries grow."

She fidgeted with her apron. "But I can't go alone with—"

"You won't be in danger. Morgan or I'll watch over you."

"No, it's—"

"Deal's off." Jesse finished strapping on the gun belt.

"You don't understand—"

"Never mind. I been wastin' away here long 'nough as it is."

"This is blackmail, you know." Applying the same term to Jesse's friendly coercion that she'd applied to Morgan's vile methods didn't seem right, but at the moment she couldn't think of a better word. Especially when she was faced with the unsettling prospect of spending even more time with Sarah.

Jesse gave her another crooked grin. "So long as we understand each other, there's one more condition." He plopped down on the bed, head tilted at a cocky angle, and tried to hide the wince all the movement had caused.

"Oh, no. You've wrung enough concessions from me as it is." With a sinking feeling she'd lose this round, she watched him struggle to rise from the mattress again. "All right, all right. Well, what is it?"

"Go to the Independence Day frolic with me ... uh ... with us, I mean. With Morgan and Celia and me and the children. It'll do you good to have some fun after takin' care of me for so long. Besides, it'd give you a proper look at the town and make a real fine story for your newspaper."

"I'm not sure I'll still be here then. I ... I'm afraid I'll have to leave Abilene soon."

"Nonsense, Kate. The picnic and dance and all of the contests are less than a week away. Why, my stitches won't even be out by then. You've got to stay."

She nibbled her lip. How could she argue with him now, when he was just beginning to regain his strength? Neither could she bear to lie to him, but she would die before telling Jesse about her bargain with Morgan. She could never let Jesse know what it had cost her to save his arm. Besides, he'd kill Morgan if he found out, and she wanted that pleasure all for herself.

With a sigh, she inclined her head. The gesture of capitulation seemed to satisfy him, and the fine lines around his mouth relaxed.

He leaned back, one hand beneath his head, a satisfied grin splitting his face. "Lady, you sure do drive a hard bargain. Man don't stand a chance 'round you."

They looked at each other for a moment, then erupted into peals of laughter.

"I'm not fond of your methods," she said. "But you're certainly good for my spirits. I haven't laughed like this in a long while ... certainly not once since setting foot in this town."

"We'll have to work on that. Meanwhile, long as I'm stuck in this bed, pull up the checkerboard and let's have us a game like we used to."

Despite realizing she'd just been out-maneuvered by a master, she smiled in response to his familiar, boyish grin and smooth, calming voice. She let the pleasant feelings flow over her and warm her, savoring the moments, taking in every sight and recording in her mind each nuance of feeling that passed between herself and Jesse.

There were so few happy times in her life that she wanted to remember this one especially. She wanted to be able to pull it out like the oft-read letters from Charles that she'd saved over the years, and let it bolster her spirits when she most needed it. After the heated exchange she'd had with Charles in the jail, she doubted there'd be any more friendly letters to look forward to.

She fingered her locket, watching Jesse as he studied the checkerboard. Once he was completely well, she would leave Abilene; maybe head up to Nevada to write a series of articles on the amazing silver mines springing up around Virginia City. As soon as she could get into town, she would telegraph her change of plans to Leland.

For now, she'd forget her foolish agreement with Morgan and let herself enjoy the moment. In truth, that was all she had anyway. The past was dead and buried. The future held

nothing worth looking forward to. She would grow older and lonelier with each passing year.

She slid a red game piece diagonally over the black squares. She swallowed hard, fighting off the sorrow that threatened to engulf her. Determined to savor the little time she had left with Jesse, she plastered a smile on her face and returned her attention to their game.

* * * *

"HOW ABOUT A GREAT big hug?" Kate looked to Sarah and Matt.

The cookies she'd promised Jesse were baking to a golden brown in Celia's oven. The aromas of sugar, cinnamon, and other spices gave the kitchen a cozy feeling.

Arms stretched out in front of her, fingers encrusted with gooey white dough, Kate chased the children around the long, scarred table. Sarah squealed with delight when she managed to sidestep Kate and keep the game going. Matt, who initially wanted no part of their 'childish' game, soon smiled and got into the spirit when Kate rounded on him.

After several spirited laps around the room, she was no closer to catching him. He stood grinning at her from the opposite side of the table. Pausing to catch her breath, she bent over and rested her hands on her thighs.

"Told ya so!" Matt crowed. "No girl can catch me."

Spurred on by his challenge, Kate drew a deep breath and sprinted around the table. Matt turned to flee again, only to run smack dab into Cookie. The shaggy mutt stood on her hind legs noisily licking spilled sugar off the table top.

"Caught you!" Kate wrapped her arms around the squirming boy and hugged him close, smearing the glop from her hands onto his cheeks.

"Hey! No fair. Cookie was in my way." He made a half-hearted attempt to pull away.

Kate tugged him closer. "Oh, no, you don't. I caught you fair and square, and now I get my hug." She was gratified by the smile he had to try so hard to hide.

When she finally released him, he looked like a little white goblin, and it was her turn to try to hide a grin as she raised a hand to her mouth. She should've known better. These children were as quick and sharp as their father.

"Don't be laughin' at me," Matt said.

"I'm not laughing, Matt. I'm smiling because you look so adorable."

"Aw, that's sissy stuff. Boys aren't supposed to look adorable."

She smiled outright at his male posturing. There was no way she would ever forget the feel of his arms wrapped tightly around her waist when he'd hugged her back. Clearly he, like Sarah, missed having a woman in his life. True, they had Celia, who was patient and loving, but all the housework and cooking and mending she was responsible for didn't leave much time for play.

"Besides," Matt said, scuffing the toe of his boot on the floor, "don't need a kiss from no girl. 'Specially not one who looks like that." He scrunched up his nose and pointed a finger at Kate's hands smothered in a floury paste and

appearing twice their normal size. "You sure look different from the day you got here."

Kate glanced at her fingers, then at the white splotches covering her bottle-green dress. She giggled. "Right now, I don't care how awful I look. I haven't had this much fun in ages. This is the last good dress I brought with me and now it's probably ruined, too, but it was worth it."

Matt gave her a funny look.

"What's wrong? Do I have flour on the tip of my nose? A bug in my hair?" She raised one hand to wipe her nose and the other to feel around in her drooping bun, purposely spreading more dough everywhere she touched and prompting a fresh fit of laughter from both children. Lord, it felt good to hear a child's laughter again.

Sarah pointed a chubby finger at Kate's face. "You look funny."

"I may look funny, but watch out. I'm still faster than you two." She hiked up her skirts and sprinted after them, scattering more flour and sugar in her wake. A fine dusting of flour shot into the air and drifted softly around them, turning the kitchen into the picture of a snowy wonderland. "Come back here, you monkeys!"

She heard Matt call a greeting to Jesse as he raced into the sick room, not even slowing down while interrupting Jesse's and Celia's checker game. Sarah tried to follow her brother, her little legs churning.

Kate scooped up the girl and tickled the side of Sarah's neck with the tip of her nose until Sarah's delighted squeals

filled the air. She clamped her arms around Kate's neck and squeezed.

Immediately, Kate sobered. The child's innocent gesture caused a lump as thick as the cookie dough to form in her throat. She tried to swallow around it, reminding herself for the hundredth time it wasn't wise to become too attached.

It had been far too easy these past six days to pretend that this family, these children, were hers. To pretend she belonged.

The little daily rituals Sarah and Matt insisted she participate in—tucking them in, singing to them, reading them bedtime stories—had thoroughly seduced her. She was perilously close to losing her heart to the children.

What would it hurt to pretend she truly belonged here, a mutinous little voice from deep inside her demanded. What would it hurt to pretend, just for these few precious days, that she was worthy of a child's love?

The niggling voice of reason quickly pointed out what she knew all long. She'd only get hurt if she allowed herself to care again.

Fearing it was already much too late to protect her heart, she sank into one of the kitchen chairs with a heavy sigh and settled Sarah on her lap.

"Thank you, pumpkin," she whispered against the girl's dark curls.

"But I didn't do nothin'."

"Anything," she corrected. "And yes, you did, too, do something very special."

Sarah settled herself more comfortably in Kate's lap, then rested her head back against Kate's chest. "What?"

Kate pressed her cheek to the top of Sarah's head. "You let me hold you, and hug you, and play with you. I can't tell you how good you make me feel. Thank you, pumpkin." Softly she added, "I haven't held a little girl in a long, long time."

Minutes passed in silence. She thought Sarah might not have heard the last part of what she'd said until the girl looked up with somber blue eyes and said, "My ma hasn't held me in a long time, too."

"Oh, honey, I know it hurts sometimes, doesn't it?"

Sarah nodded, her curls tickling Kate's chin. The child's innocent honesty caused the lump in Kate's throat to spread to her belly. Offering comfort the only way she knew how—to both of them—she began to rock the girl gently to and fro. For a long time, Sarah sat still and quiet in the warm embrace.

When a loud rapping sounded from the front of the house, Sarah jumped down and raced toward the parlor. "I'll get it!"

Struck by Sarah's resiliency, and remembering Morgan's warning not to let anyone into the house, she ran after the girl and scooped her up in one arm before she'd reached the front door.

* * * *

CHARLES SMILED POLITELY when a woman with a child propped on one hip opened the front door of the McCall house. He introduced himself and asked to see Katherine.

"Charles, don't be silly," the woman said, casting him a curious glance. "It's me."

The woman's voice and tinkling laughter sounded familiar, but it would be impossible for the harridan standing before him to be a Stewart. *By God, Ian had taught Katherine better than that. She had the scars to prove it.*

"Close your mouth before you let the flies in, Charles."

The child giggled, and Charles snapped his mouth shut with a plop. He looked closer. The woman was covered with some kind of white powder, including the tip of her nose. The child didn't look much cleaner. Steaks of white ran through the woman's hair, but underneath he detected a distinctive shade of auburn.

"By God, it really is you, isn't it?" He steeled himself against the shock of seeing how far Katherine had let herself slip from the Stewart standard of perfection and plastered a smile on his lips. He forced himself to lean down and kiss her dirty cheek. "How good to see you again."

She made no move to permit him entrance to the house.

"May I come in? I'd like to talk to you?"

"I'm sorry, Charles. I can't invite you in just now. You see, the marshal—"

"Never mind, Katherine." He forced himself to keep smiling despite the slight. He brought his hand from behind his back and presented a package wrapped up in brown paper and a gay red bow. "I remember how much you and Teddy enjoyed sweets." He pressed the package into her free hand. "The finest French chocolates."

Katherine's smile faltered at the mention of Teddy.

His heart gave a triumphant leap. He would hurt her with more than words by the time he was through. "Please accept them in humble apology for my terrible behavior the last time we met."

He thought he detected a hint of skepticism in the look she gave him. He rushed on, "With each sweet bite, remember how sour the taste of regret has been in my mouth. I've regretted my churlish behavior and the horrid words I said to you at the jail. Instead of coming to your aid, I only made matters worse. Hardly the behavior of a man raised as a gentleman."

Charles bowed deeply. "Though I could never forgive myself for failing you, could you find it in your heart to ease my deeply troubled soul and say that you forgive me?"

It was bad enough he was forced to grovel to his sister-in-law, but he hadn't counted on an audience. That urchin in Katherine's arms hadn't taken her eyes off him.

Katherine touched his cheek and drew him up. He tried not to cringe at the patch of white stuff she'd spread on his face.

"Of course, I forgive you," she said. "I value our friendship too much not to." She put the girl down and the child skipped back into the house. Katherine leaned over and hugged him, pecking his cheek.

He steeled himself against the arousal of her touch. His chance would come and he'd get more than a paltry kiss.

"Oh, my," she said, eyeing the mess she'd made of his face and clothes. She pulled a lace handkerchief from her sleeve and wiped the goo from his cheek.

At the feel of her soft ministrations and the smell of her perfume, his body started to swell. She swiped at the spots on his frock coat.

Charles wrapped his fingers around her wrist. "There are women, my dear, one employs for such menial work. A Stewart, especially one as lovely as you, is meant for finer things."

He continued holding her, long past the time when he should have released her. "Are you truly well, Katherine? You haven't been in town for close to a week. Father said you haven't contacted him, either."

"I have a story ready for him. I'll mail it when I get to town."

"I could mail it for you."

"Thank you, but I'd like one more night to polish it." She tried to take back her hand.

"Katherine..."

A loud clang and much giggling from the back of the house caused them both to start.

"What mischief has that little monkey managed to get into now?" Katherine muttered to herself. She looked up at him. "I have supplies set out to bake Deputy Place some cookies—"

Another loud clang sounded. Again she tried to pull back from him. "Charles, you must excuse me."

"Will you be in town for the Independence Day celebration?"

"Of course. But right now I must—"

"Promise me we'll spend time together then?"

"I can't yet say."

"It's important, Katherine."

"I'll be working, you see ... writing about the festivities." She sniffed the air. "My cookies! They're burning!"

"Promise me at least an hour of your time and I'll release you." Charles smiled innocently at her.

"You're as bad as Jesse. I hadn't thought blackmail was your style."

First that son-of-a-bitch marshal and now the deputy. His fingers tightened on her wrist. "What's that deputy got to do with anything?"

The smell of burning cookies grew stronger and Katherine looked like she was about to burst her buttons. "Damn it, Charles, release me."

Charles swallowed his surprise at her use of the profanity. She certainly had changed. Maybe in the two years since he'd last seen her, she'd have learned a few surprises in bed for him, as well.

So caught up in the thought of what she might be like when they were finally alone together, at first he didn't notice the large figure looming behind her in the doorway.

"Let 'er go."

At the sound of the deep, rumbling voice, Charles looked up to find a blonde, bare-chested brute with a wide bandage on his shoulder. Charles's fingers tightened briefly on Katherine's wrist, then eased and fell away. He lifted an eyebrow, waiting for an explanation, but she ignored him.

She turned and patted the brute's arm. "It's all right now, Jesse. Charles was just leaving."

"Not until you promise," Charles said, flashing his best smile at Katherine and ignoring the broad shoulders behind her.

"We'll see," she called over her shoulder as she hurried toward the wisps of gray smoke curling out from the back of the house.

When the half-naked man slammed the door in his face, Charles's smile dissolved. He thrust a hand into his pocket and stroked the scalpel's wooden handle. She would pay, and by God, he was going to make it worth the wait she'd put him through.

* * * *

MORGAN TUGGED ON the reins as he approached the banks of the Smoky Hill River, hidden in shadow now as the moon scuttled behind a cloud. The air was heavy and thick as he dismounted, and it felt clammy, like a dead man's hand pressing against his neck.

He would allow Silverheels only enough time to drink his fill before moving on. The gory sight he'd viewed in town haunted his thoughts, and he didn't want to waste any time getting home. Though they probably were asleep now, he needed to see with his own eyes that all was well with his family.

And with Kate.

Something scuttled in the brush, splashing as it made its way into the river. Overhead an owl hooted, an eerie and lonely sound. He slipped the red bandanna from his neck and knelt beside the giant gray. He shoved the square into the

gurgling water, not bothering to wring it out before wiping the dust and sweat from his face and neck.

The horse slurped noisily at the river. Morgan retied the bandanna around his neck and dried his hands on the grass, then leaned back on his haunches and rolled a cigarette from the makings in his shirt pocket.

What he really wanted was a bottle of rye to ease his taut nerves and settle his rolling stomach, but for now the weed would have to do. It had taken all his willpower to keep from losing his dinner when he'd seen how that girl had been cut up a week ago. Del Hart and a few others had lost theirs.

Dora, if that was really her name, had been in town only a month or so. She was small and kind of pretty—fifteen years old at the most. Not too old and used up that she couldn't have maybe turned her life around one day and left the cribs behind.

"Damned waste," he muttered. He drew hard on the cigarette. His stomach clenched as he recalled the sight of Dora's white throat slit clear to her gaudy earbobs and her slim legs carved up like a side of beef.

Was the same sick bastard who scarred Kate responsible for that poor girl's torture as well? He couldn't ignore the similarity, especially with that Thorne fellow doggin' her.

After taking one long last drag, Morgan flicked the cigarette into the shallows. He vaulted into the saddle and aimed his horse toward home..It was time for a long-overdue talk with his stubborn, secretive houseguest. Lives were at stake, including hers, and he was responsible for all of them.

Chapter 14

MORGAN CIRCLED THE house and barn, studying every shadow and pocket of darkness. Finding that all appeared as it should, he headed toward the small crop of cottonwoods where he'd left Del Hart six nights ago to keep an eye on Kate. A sloughing wind rustled the cottonwoods' leaves, and on it floated a low, salty chuckle.

He peered into the shadows. Finally he spotted one hunched shoulder holding up a thick tree trunk and he rode over. A grin like an idiot's split Del's normally impassive face.

"You gone loco?" Morgan said. "What in hell is so funny all the way out here?"

"Just thinking 'bout somethin' I seen today is all, Morgan. Kinda funny. Cute, too."

Cute? "You are loco. Shoulda known better'n to send an old man out in the woods alone."

Del cackled and slapped his thigh. "Damnation! You woulda laughed, too, if'n you coulda seen Cattle Kate in the strawberry patch with them kids o' your'n today. By the time they was done pickin', they was wearin' more juice'n they had berries in their baskets. 'Specially Cattle Kate."

Del paused and stroked his salt-and-pepper whiskers. "Damn fine woman there. Yessiree, damn fine. Puts me in mind o' my dear ol' maw. Had a way with the young'uns, my maw did. The way Cattle Kate sang and laughed with them kids, you'd'a thought she was one of 'em."

At Del's dotty laughter, Morgan's irritation got the best of him. He dismounted and quickly closed the distance between them. He hauled Del up in one fist by the front of his faded blue shirt. "Listen to me, you old coot, and listen good. There's a killer loose. I trusted you to guard my children. To keep Kate safe. Now I find you drunk—"

"Hold on there." Del raised his hands, palms forward. "I wouldn't let nothin' happen to your loved ones, 'specially your woman—"

"She's not my woman." Morgan's fists tightened on the shirt.

"Okay, so she ain't your woman. I still wouldn't'a let nobody hurt her." Despite Morgan's grip on his shirtfront, Del puffed out his chest in indignation. "Carried out every one o' your orders when I rode under your command in the cavalry, didn't I, Cap'n? Still a crack shot, too. Almost as good as you. Takes my duty seriously, I do. I ain't had a drop."

"Then you're loco. There's no way in hell that woman would play with Sarah and Matt, let alone roll around in a patch of strawberries in her fancy dress. She wouldn't spend one minute more with a child than she had to. Ran out of the damned room every time Sarah came near."

"I ain't loco and I ain't drunk! I know what I seen. I swear it's all true." Del held his right hand up in the air. "She even spent a whole afternoon pushin' Sarah in that there swing hangin' from the willow. Gave Matt a turn, too. But what you sent me out here for—to protect 'em from whoever killed Dora—well, it just weren't a problem. Nobody came near the place. 'Cept that Stewart fella, that is."

Morgan leaned over to smell the other man's breath. Slowly, he released his grip on the blue fabric. With a sigh of relief, he absentmindedly smoothed out the fresh wrinkles he'd added to the ones already there. "It just doesn't sound like her," he said, more to himself than Del. Morgan's head snapped up. "You say Charles Stewart was here?"

"Yep. Real dandy, that one. Brought her a present, too. But he left in a huff right quick. Reckon Cattle Kate can handle herself."

Morgan thought about how she'd 'handled herself' at the Alamo by inciting a near-rape and a shooting, but he kept his thoughts to himself. He extended a hand.

"Much obliged, Del."

Del pumped Morgan's hand with enthusiasm. "Like I said, ain't been no problem." He ambled over to a blood bay tethered to a cottonwood. "Guess I'll head on home unless you need anythin' else. All of 'ems safe and snug as a coupla bugs in a rug." Cackling at the worn turn of phrase, he rode off toward town.

More anxious than ever to discover what had gone on in his absence, Morgan spurred Silverheels toward home. He could see a pale light shining in the kitchen and the sick room, while the rest of the house was dark. Kate was probably tending Jesse, so they'd be able to talk privately without upsetting the children or Celia.

His curiosity running wild, he led Silverheels to the barn without sparing time to unsaddle him or brush him down. "Sorry, boy," he said, taking just a moment to rub the gray's nose. "There'll be time for those things in a bit."

He strode from the barn and across the wide expanse of his yard, then took the steps to the porch three at a time. He paused with a hand on the doorknob. His racing heart had to be from Dora's murder and the strain of the last few days, as well as from Del's curious report. He shouldn't be that glad to see Kate again. Hell, he'd done nothing but try to get rid of her since she'd arrived.

Morgan flung open the door, surprised to find Celia sitting beside Jesse's bed. He grinned at her soft snore and took a moment to study Jesse's peaceful features. Relief washed through him at the healthy pink color in his friend's face, and the steady rise and fall of his chest. *But where's Kate?*

He charged through the doorway to the kitchen, then stopped as abruptly as if he'd been roped and hog-tied.

Not again. He hadn't recovered yet from the last time he'd seen a tub of hot water lapping at Kate's delicious body.

* * * *

A COOLNESS STOLE OVER Kate's skin, tickling her awake. She started and jerked upright in the metal tub, arms and legs sloshing water noisily over the rim onto the wide-planked floor. The bath water was no longer steaming. It wasn't even comfortably warm. She was unsure if the chill had awoken her or if it had been a noise somewhere in the house.

The huge kitchen was as tidy as she'd left it after cleaning up the mess she'd made earlier baking with the children. On the rag rug at the foot of the cast-iron stove, Cookie pressed her fuzzy red jaw and paws against Digger's black haunches.

Neither of them seemed to have moved since she'd stepped into the tub. How long ago had it been? An hour? Longer?

The kitchen, as well as the rest of the house, was dark now and eerily quiet. An uneasy feeling settled over her and she shivered. *Was Morgan home?* Or did her disquiet stem from the danger he'd warned her about? The news Del had brought him almost a week ago had been so urgent, he'd left without giving her any details.

The doors to the sick room and the front parlor were both closed, just as she'd left them. Nothing appeared amiss, yet something was. *Most likely, she reasoned, the mere thought of Morgan's eventual homecoming is enough to set my nerves on edge.*

Determined to turn her musings elsewhere, she hunched over and hugged her knees. She laid her head there, gratefully recalling Celia's mother-hen ways. The housekeeper was certainly sweet, but when the occasion warranted it, she could be as stubborn as an army mule.

Celia had been adamant when she'd caught Kate massaging her painful thighs after she'd mopped the floor. The housekeeper had heated water and filled the old tub, insisting that she bathe and rest. "You'll be no good to Jesse or anyone else if you collapse," she'd argued.

Then, evidently realizing Kate had ruined the last good dress she'd brought with her, Celia had offered to scrub away the stains. But they'd both known the bottle-green silk had seen its last day.

A slow smile came to Kate's lips as she pondered Celia. That efficient ball of energy could have probably had the

transcontinental railroad completed by now, if only someone had been wise enough to put her in charge.

"You take as long as you like," Celia had said, patting Kate's shoulder. "The young'uns are asleep and Morgan's still in town. You jest relax before you drop. I'll watch over Jesse tonight."

Now, as goose bumps erupted on her flesh, Kate stood and reached for the white wrapper that hung from the back of a straight-backed chair. A strange, faint noise caught her ear. Her muscles tense, she paused and cocked her head, the wrapper still clutched in her hand.

Releasing a pent-up breath, she shook her head and laughed quietly at her foolish reaction. She'd become so spooked by Morgan's constant watching, as well as their damnable agreement, that she was as skittish as a new bride on her wedding night. Surely even a louse as black-hearted as McCall wouldn't accost her in a house where his own children slept, while Jesse struggled to recuperate.

The night was still. No sound reached her ears now except the hoo-hooing of an old horned owl from the backyard. Warmth from the cookstove lingered in the kitchen, but the surrounding air's relative coolness caressed her skin. The ends of her wet hair tickled her bottom, and she closed her eyes enjoying the evening's coolness as it crept into the house by degrees.

She pulled on the wrapper and cinched the silk cord tight at her waist. Sticking her head into the sick room, she found Jesse resting comfortably and Celia snoring as she nodded in the chair.

Hoping to dispel the jittery feeling that had caused a ringing ache in her head, she tiptoed to the back door and slipped outside into the sweet night air. Satisfied Morgan was nowhere to be seen, she sat on the top step, chin in her hands. To her left, the climbing roses, as lush and orange as a fuzzy peach in the light of day, were splotches of pale pink in the night. To her right, a basket of lavender petunias reflected the light of the half moon.

A soft breeze ruffled the leaves of Celia's flowers. Their heady fragrance drifted on the air and she closed her eyes, the better to catch their perfume. The scent of wild honeysuckle floated by.

Feeling lazy and content for the first time in weeks, she let her eyes drift open and scanned the yard for the tangled honeysuckle vine. Its strong scent evoked a precious childhood memory and made her mouth water.

She could still vividly taste the honeysuckle's sweet nectar on her tongue after all these years. Melancholy tugged at her heart as she recalled following her father's example and placing the base of a trumpet-shaped blossom to her lips. In turn, as years went by, she'd taught Teddy to do the same.

She found the blossom-heavy tendrils curling through the steps toward her toes. Reaching down, she plucked one of the flowers and raised it to her lips. It tasted even sweeter than she remembered, and brought to her mind's eye the smiling faces of her father and daughter.

Kate closed her eyes in appreciation, savoring the precious drops of nectar. Her smile grew wide when she opened her eyes and caught the faint yellow sparks of the season's first

fireflies. In the soft breeze, a wooden swing swayed from the branches of the lone willow, keeping time with the old owl's hoots.

Her thoughts strayed to the children upstairs. Letting her imagination fly, she pictured Sarah on the swing and Matt working in the barn, then both of them giggling and flitting around the yard trying to catch elusive fireflies. This peaceful patch of land was a good place for them despite its proximity to town. Grudgingly she accepted that Morgan had provided well for his children. *They'd grow up strong and happy here*, she thought, idly twirling a length of vine between her fingers.

Aware suddenly of a sticky wetness beneath her, Kate rose and twisted around to view her bottom. A large splotch of mud covered the white silk. "How on earth..."

With her forefinger and thumb, she delicately pulled the stain away from her body. *Where had the mud come from?* Dumbfounded, she paced the length of the porch and shook her head. Something dark on the sun-bleached planks caught her eye.

"Footprints," she whispered. *Rather large footprints at that.*

She thought she'd heard something before, but no one had entered the house. She was sure of it. Anyway, everyone was already inside ... except the marshal.

"That loathsome wretch." It was bad enough he'd clothed her in a soiled dove's costume and paraded her through town provoking a bunch of drunken drovers into attacking her. He'd insulted her at every turn, called her a liar, and antagonized

her every chance he got. He'd even tried to force her into paying for Jesse's arm with her honor. Now he'd stooped to spying on her as if she were nothing but a side of beef hanging in the butcher's window.

Her stomach twisted. Anger sizzled through her veins. She looked around and found the remains of a hand-rolled cigarette crushed into the wooden boards. Her gaze followed the path she assumed he'd taken, down the steps, past the flowers and the vegetable patch and the swing, across the yard to the barn. She gasped.

The dark devil stood in front of the barn, silhouetted by the light pouring from a lantern that hung just inside the open door. She couldn't make out his expression, but she was sure he was laughing at her. An image of his full, masculine mouth curved in a mocking smile tweaked her pride.

She clenched her hands into tight fists, tamping down the urge to storm across the yard and pluck the black hairs of that moustache one by one until the dirty scoundrel begged for mercy.

The tip of his cigarette glowed in the darkness, an eerie orange circle that floated upward like a disembodied ghost from one slim, cocked hip to his lips. The circle grew bright and faded, grew bright and faded again as he puffed on it.

Arrogant as ever, the marshal leaned a shoulder against the door jamb and doffed his hat in her direction. The night was so still, she thought she could actually hear the low rumble of his laughter.

With both hands she hoisted a heavy pot of petunias and flung it across the yard. It fell miserably, maddeningly, short

of its goal. Dozens of shards lay beside the swing, scattered among severed blossoms and finger-like roots.

"Oooh!" She whirled, hiked her wrapper above her ankles, and charged up the porch steps, reminding herself just in time not to slam the door and wake Jesse and Celia. It was bad enough the wretched man had found a way to embarrass her again, but the entire household didn't have to know about it.

She raced through the sick room and kitchen as quietly as possible. She stopped just long enough to snatch up a cloth and the largest clove of garlic she could find.

"Your time is coming, McCall," she muttered. "Then it'll be my turn to laugh."

She stomped through the hall and front parlor, then took the steps to her room two at a time.

* * * *

THE CUT-GLASS KNOB felt cool in Kate's sweaty palm as she stood, as she had for the last ten minutes, with her ear pressed to Morgan's door. No sound came from the other side, and hadn't since she'd heard Morgan's bed creak when he'd fallen into it an hour before. She withdrew the soft cotton cloth from her pocket and unwrapped the large clove. She raised the garlic to her nose and inhaled, smiling at its biting odor. She felt exactly like a mischievous child about to perpetrate the naughtiest prank.

She decided the feeling was appropriate because what she was about to do to the marshal was indeed childish. It was not undeserved, however, and she hoped there'd be no end

to the embarrassment her prank caused him. She might not be able to repay him—yet—for the many underhanded things he'd done to her, but what she was about to do would be repayment enough for his voyeurism. Maybe then the brute would learn some manners.

Lighthearted at the prospect of the predicament Morgan would find himself in the next morning, she all but giggled aloud as she pictured his reaction. She opened the door a crack and stuck her head into the darkness. Straining her ears, she heard the steady, even rhythm of his breathing. She tiptoed into the room, pausing just inside the threshold to allow her eyes to adjust to the inky blackness. Pressing her back into the hard wood, she heard the soft click of the door closing behind her.

A flash of motion caught her eye. She jumped, then brought a hand to her chest to steady her racing heart when she realized it was just a pair of pale lace curtains fluttering above a wide window seat.

She shuddered and pushed aside the thought of what Morgan might do if he caught her sneaking around his room in the dead of night. If only she'd had the foresight to retrieve Jesse's Colt from its holster downstairs.

She glanced around, seeing again the simple, masculine furnishings she'd noticed the first and only other time she'd been in Morgan's room, when she was searching for her derringer before her ill-fated excursion to the Alamo. Seeing everything was as it should be, she inched her way to the foot of the massive four-poster bed that hugged the far wall. She couldn't help thinking about the beautiful Colts she'd

discovered in the battered trunk at the foot of the bed, and she wondered again why they were hidden under an old quilt rather than strapped to Morgan's hip.

Her knee banged a corner of the trunk. She stifled a mild oath, bending down to rub the sore spot. She remained silent and still for several long moments to gauge whether she'd awakened the man in the bed. Finally, holding her breath, she edged over to him.

"Oh!" Her breath rushed from her body, and she grasped a thick bed post to steady herself. She was uncertain whether it was merely the lack of oxygen in her lungs or the impressive sight before her that had caused her knees to buckle.

Morgan lay atop the snowy sheet, gloriously naked and unashamed. He was as handsome as the devil himself, and twice as tempting. A small, mysterious smile played at the corners of his mouth. He appeared younger and more carefree than she'd ever before seen him.

With a start, she realized she was wondering what it might be like to be the recipient of one of Morgan's warm smiles, instead of all his growling and barking. Looking at him now, she could almost believe he had a heart—one that wasn't festered and black to its very core.

Her gaze lingered on his engaging half-smile and the rakish whiskers covering his strong jaw. She studied his powerful shoulders and the dark hair liberally sprinkled across his broad chest and arrowing lower. Her gaze came to rest on the long, tanned fingers resting on his flat belly. They pointed downward, and she struggled mightily to keep her gaze from

following the path they suggested, dangerously lower toward his lean hips and muscled thighs.

"Oh, my..." she breathed, hardly daring to give sound to the words. She was sure her thundering heart was already making far too much noise.

Forcing herself to look up from his nakedness, she was again struck by the warmth of the smile that peeked out from his dark whiskers. She recalled the prickly, tickly feel of those whiskers on her cheek and her belly fluttered wildly. Quite curious what it would be like to feel them elsewhere on her body, she felt the heat of shame suffuse her cheeks.

Mother of God, what could she be thinking? If just the sight of Morgan did this to her...

Unbidden, her traitorous thoughts returned to the times she'd been alone with him. She recalled the warmth of his body when he held her close. The gentleness of his large hands skimming over her flesh.

She found it damnably hard to reconcile the appealing face and form in front of her now with the stone-hearted man who'd tried so hard to bully and intimidate her. It was funny how only a few short days ago, she'd have given anything to not have to look at him every time she turned around, and now she couldn't pull her gaze away from him.

Hidden by the black cloak of night, she gave in to the urge to study Morgan more closely; to try to make sense of such a contradictory man. His rugged features were more handsome in this relaxed state than she'd have imagined possible. She could plainly see the man who'd raised two fine children—the man who'd won the friendship of good people like Jesse and

Celia. This was the honorable man who had stood up to Charles on her behalf; the brave man who had saved her from being raped by those three horrid men in the jail.

Oh, evidence remained of the unfeeling brute who could just as easily cut her down where she stood as look at her, and probably enjoy it. The cynical lines at the corners of his eyes ... the dark moustache and the hard, menacing line of his jaw ... the large hands that could crush her as easily as they'd lifted that drover off her back ... all were reminders of the other Morgan whose temper was like a shotgun blast and whose dislike of her, maybe even hatred, was just as destructive.

But all of these reminders did little good as she stood there, entranced by his masculine beauty. A good woman shouldn't enjoy looking at a naked man so much, she was certain.

She gulped, wondering if her behavior was another sign of her sinfulness. Had Ian somehow known how bad she was when she hadn't even been aware of the failing herself? Certainly she was no better than those painted women in the saloons.

"What a fool you are, Kate Stewart," she whispered. She went to the window, allowing the fresh air to clear away the vestiges of the anger she'd felt for Morgan. She hurled the clove of garlic out the window. How could she ever have found such a childish prank amusing?

The peaceful patch of land was bathed in a pale white light. The small stream gurgled and shimmered like a silver ribbon. She breathed in the sweet night air and willed

strength back into her trembling limbs. A soft breeze cooled her fevered skin as it molded her wrapper to her body. Staring up at the twinkling sky, she inhaled deeply and let her head fall back on her shoulders. She was unsure whether it was for good or bad, but for the first time in years she felt an acute awareness of her body, of the purpose of its womanly curves straining beneath the soft silk, of the heat singing through her veins and the moist warmth flowing to that most private place between her thighs.

It was torture. Sweet damning torture to feel so totally alive and yet know so thoroughly that it was all for naught.

She realized then just how great a mistake she'd made by coming to Morgan's room. She had to leave this room, this house, this place.

A deliciously naughty little voice inside her, though, demanded one last look. One last memory to treasure during the empty days, weeks, years that lay ahead.

She tiptoed to the side of the bed. As she stood beside Morgan, she found her arm outstretched and fingers extended, as if they ached to touch him and she would have no say in the matter.

She looked down, and despite all her virtuous intentions, she smiled. The thick blanket of black hair did, indeed, extend from Morgan's broad chest and arrow down past his flat belly. It swirled around a shaft whose length and thickness reminded her of the painting she'd seen hanging from the Bull's Head Saloon. But instead of running as she had from the sign dangling in the street, she felt sinfully intrigued. A delicious warmth curled around her belly and lower.

Kate studied Morgan's powerful thighs. Were the thick black hairs that studded them as soft as they appeared? Would they tickle a woman's thighs, as she suspected, if he was mounted above her? Or would they abrade a lover's soft skin the same way his whiskers had scraped her cheek? Did the gaudy blonde at the Alamo already know the answers to these intimate questions?

An unexpected pang of wild, white-hot jealousy seared Kate's middle. She hugged herself, and despite the darkness that hid her, hung her head in shame.

When she looked up, Morgan still rested with one large hand beneath his shaggy hair and the other on his abdomen.

She was suddenly glad that she'd acted so childishly tonight and snuck into his room. The impulsive act had rewarded her with something she'd missed, even if she'd never admitted it to herself before. It was something more than the easy friendship she shared with Jesse. It was a hard-to-define something, an intimacy shared by a man and a woman in the dark hours of the night.

Her lips curled up in a sad, little smile, and she felt moisture well in her eyes with the realization that this moment, when she stood like a thief in the night in the bedroom of a man who probably despised her, was the closest she would ever come to an intimate moment with a handsome man. She didn't deserve any man's loving touch.

Torture. Sweet, damning torture. With a shaky breath, she squared her trembling shoulders and resolved to return to her empty room across the hall.

The Lawman
by Lily Sorren

She'd taken just a step when strong fingers clamped around her wrist. Suddenly she was flying, sailing through the air above the bed. Her back landed atop the mattress with a soft thud. She felt the heavy weight of a powerful thigh pressing across her hips and pinning her down.

She squeezed her eyes shut against the fright shooting through her. When she dared open them again, she stifled a gasp, suddenly afraid to look anywhere but straight ahead as crisp black hair tickled the tip of her nose.

Chapter 15

"DARLIN, YOU DIDN'T have to sneak. I invited you here, remember?" With a thigh draped across her abdomen, Morgan pinned Kate to the mattress. He trapped her small fists in one hand, holding them immobile above her head.

He figured she'd have wanted to box his ears for the way he'd thrust Sarah at her the night he went to Abilene and left her alone with the girl. He hadn't reckoned she'd be mad enough to attack him in his sleep over it, though. Searching for her weapon, he trailed his fingers along her hip and down along one leg.

Hellfire and damnation. That scrap of silk was all she had on. He could feel no chemise or night rail underneath. No drawers, either.

"Where is it?" he growled.

"W-what?"

"Your weapon."

She struggled for release. He felt her soft curves tremble as his hands roamed up and down the filmy silk. He found no evidence of a derringer or blade, but he felt the heat of her sweet body, smelled the faint scent of her perfumed soap. His hand went to the tightly cinched sash at her waist.

"W-what are you d-doing?" she said on a breathy gasp.

He grinned down at her. "If you're not here to slit my throat, there's only one other reason for you to be sneakin' in here." His grin grew broader as he looked her over and the

truth became more firmly rooted in his mind. "'Specially dressed like that."

With the knot untied, his hand snaked around her waist, flesh on flesh.

"No!" She started bucking in a wild frenzy. "That's not why I'm here."

He heard the little catch in her voice. It would've made him feel like a complete bastard if he didn't already know she wasn't as innocent as she liked to pretend. But if it would ease her conscience some, he'd play along. He drew his hand back.

Her sweet fragrance pulled at him, reminding him of how she'd looked earlier sitting on his back porch. The sight of her pouty pink lips pursed around a pale honeysuckle blossom had made him wonder what her silken tongue was capable of doing to a man's body. The thought had driven him damned near crazy for hours.

She looked up at him with wide, innocent doe-eyes. Damn her, she could torture a man.

After nearly a week of little rest, he'd expected to fall asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. If anything should've kept him awake, it should've been the gory memory of that pretty new whore from the Pearl sliced to bits and the stench of blood, rather than the spoiled, married woman lying beneath him now smelling like flowers.

Morgan closed his eyes, inhaling the intoxicating scent of her. "Ah, Katie, you smell like a field of wildflowers. Fresh and sweet and oh, so good. So damned good, darlin'. Good enough to make a man forget a lot of things."

He drew a lazy finger across her collarbone. "I can feel the heat—" He dipped his finger into the deep valley between her breasts. "—here on your skin. It's warm, as if the sun kissed it. Or maybe it was the moon when you were lookin' out my window."

"Morgan..."

He liked the breathy way she said his name.

"Ah, Katie, sweet Katie..." He dipped his head, savoring her fresh, clean scent. His lips brushed her ear. "You didn't sneak in here to keep our bargain?"

"No," she said softly.

Still clasping her hands above her head, he studied her and found what he sought. She was as easy to read as one of her blasted newspaper articles, all black and white with no gray in between. From the look in her eyes and the stubborn set of her chin, he knew she was unwilling to say what needed to be said; to explain her reasons for coming to him. It was a look that spoke volumes, telling him there was more to why she was here than she was willing to admit. What in blazes was she hiding?

"No!" she repeated, louder this time.

At her emphatic denial, a keen disappointment squeezed his chest. A rush of self-loathing quickly followed when he realized that, at that moment, he wanted, more than anything he'd ever wanted before, to bury himself deep inside her.

Right or wrong, he wanted to take her and keep on taking her until the rays of the early morning sun washed over their

naked bodies; until neither one of them could move so much as a finger.

Until he wiped every thought of her husband and Jesse from her mind.

Morgan searched the smoky violet eyes gazing up at him, mirroring the heat in his blood. If he was going to scare her off, it had better be damned soon. In a minute, the house could burn down to ashes around their heads and he wouldn't be able to let her go.

"Tell, me, Mrs. Stewart, do you expect me to believe you strolled in here—half-naked in the dead of night—just to tell me that you prefer to keep our bargain by leaving, rather than spend a night in my bed?"

"This has nothing to do with our arrangement." Breathing hard, she strained against his hold. She opened her mouth again, as if wanting to say more, but something—shame? embarrassment?—held her back.

Her movements drew his gaze to where the silk parted and to the swell of her pale breasts. If she didn't get on with it...

"Well?" he demanded. The word sounded like a shout in the stillness of the night.

She hesitated, the tip of her tongue darting out to moisten her lips. She squirmed some more. "Please, Morgan. I can explain."

Hellfire. She was surely the devil's own mistress. And he sure as hell wasn't a saint.

"Speak up, woman." He drew back and searched her face. The sparks in her violet eyes pleased him. It was easier to deal with the hellcat when she was prepared to fight him

tooth and nail. God help him if she should ever turn all soft on him. He wouldn't know how to handle her at all. "Why're you here if not to settle accounts between us?"

She lowered her lashes. Her tongue darted out again to moisten her full pink lips. "Morgan..."

The husky way she said his name gave his heart an awful twist. Her voice was low, but he clearly heard it in the quiet darkness surrounding them. He could feel her breasts rise and fall, pressing against his chest.

When her trembling intensified, he released her hands. He raised himself on his elbows, intending only to search her face to make sure she was really all right. But the movements of their bodies caused the silk to sway and dip open further. A groan escaped him. He splayed his fingers over her bare, quivering belly and gently massaged the warm flesh. He heard her sharp intake of breath.

"Morgan, please." Her words were a moan, full of need and longing.

"Sure, darlin'," he whispered. "Whatever you want."

Moonlight set her delicate features aglow. Lacy shadows danced across her breasts, daring him to find their dusky tips. It didn't take long to discover they'd puckered and hardened in the cool night breeze drifting over their bodies. Even if he hadn't been able to see them, he could damn sure feel them rubbing against him. An inferno ignited in his blood.

Kate's soft fingertips touched his cheek in a shy, silent plea. The feel of her cool hands on his heated flesh, asking him to look at her, to love her, was more than he could bear. With great care he settled himself above her, his muscles

tense, ready to stop should she protest, almost wishing she would. He began to rock against the cradle of her thighs. They inched open to welcome him and he was lost.

Suddenly he wanted—needed—to hear her admit she came to his room to be with him, and him alone. He needed to know she felt the unbelievable passion arcing between them as keenly as he did. That it wasn't just payment for a debt.

He nuzzled her neck. "Tell me, Katie."

When she didn't answer, he slowed the rocking of his body to a softer, almost non-existent rhythm. She shifted, pressing herself to his hardness.

"Why?" he asked.

As if awakening from a deep sleep, her eyes were unfocused, liquid, damning him with the naked passion in their depths. "Morgan?"

"Tell me why you're here. Say it."

He spread her thighs farther apart with his knee. He rocked steadily against her body.

"Oh!" Her lips parted invitingly.

"Hell, darlin', I guess I know why." He claimed her lips in a possessive kiss.

She felt better than he'd imagined she would, and his imagination had done a helluva job tormenting him with a thousand moments just like this one. It would be so easy to give in to the tremendous surge of desire coursing through him. Why should it matter to him that she belonged to another man?

His muscles tightened as the insidious thought pricked his conscience. He rolled from her onto his side.

The phrase 'a woman scorned' flew into his mind. He braced himself, expecting the worst kind of scene. But for a woman whose business it was to string words together, she remained oddly silent. She was still for a long moment before she began to edge her way to the foot of his bed.

Let her go.

She reached the edge of the mattress. Her foot was poised over the side, inches above the floor. He snaked an arm around her shoulders and drew her back, holding her beside him despite her half-hearted attempt to push him away.

What was it about her that made it so hard to watch her go? The soft way she looked? The passionate fire in her eyes? The vulnerable way she'd opened herself to him?

When he looked down at her, his questions weren't important anymore. All that mattered was that she was here, alone, with him.

All of her struggling had further disheveled her wrapper. She tugged the two sides closed.

Morgan wondered if her slight attempt at modesty, coming much too late, would relieve her of a guilty conscience. It wouldn't be the first time a 'lady' had given herself to a man as long as she could fool herself into thinking it was all the man's idea.

"Forget the damned bargain," he said. "If you'll agree to go home, I give you my word of honor that I'll let you leave my bed. Now. Before this goes any further."

So vivid he could see it in the pale moonlight, a blush flooded her cheeks. Her small fists slammed into his chest, catching him off guard. "You don't have any honor," she said,

and he felt the words like a physical blow. "I hate you. I didn't come here for ... for this. I only came here to ... I came here tonight to ... to..."

She was so intent on berating and pummeling him that she'd stopped trying to clench the sides of her wrapper together. Her charms—every blasted, beautiful, bare inch—were now displayed. Was it really, then, all just an act?

When her fit of temper played itself out, she sagged against his chest. "You won't believe me," she said, sounding small and unsure of herself.

"Mmmm." Morgan was so taken by the sight of her that it took a moment for her words to register.

"It's so childish," she said. "But it's the truth. I..." She grew quiet when his swelling arousal pressed into her hip.

"Oh, my. I ... That is, I came here tonight to ... to play a trick on you. To get just a little bit of revenge for all the horrid things you've done. And for your spying on me tonight." Her words spilled out and rushed together, forcing him to listen hard to understand all she was trying to explain.

"I wasn't spying, Katie. How could I have known you were bathing?"

Their gazes met, held, and locked for an interminable time. "Should I take my revenge now," he whispered, "for how you spied on me while I was sleepin'? Or for how you're temptin' me now, teasin'—"

"I'm not a tease!"

His fingers splayed higher on her rib cage. "Why then, darlin', are you naked in my bedroom in the middle of the night?"

"I am not naked."

"Close enough." Morgan took a nibble of her neck.

"If you must know, I had nothing left to put on after Celia made me bathe—"

He took another nibble.

"Ohhh..."

He couldn't decide if the word was a whisper or a moan. Whichever it was, he liked the breathy way she said it. He thought he'd like it even better if she'd say his name like that again.

"You—" she said, her breath coming fast in little gasps. "You ruined my traveling suit in the mud and my brown gown was bloodied—"

He took another nip of her flesh and another. He ran his tongue along her skin, which felt very warm and tasted very, very good.

"I've nothing left to wear," she continued. "I ... I ruined my green silk baking cookies for Jesse."

Morgan's world tilted. A wave of possessiveness for the beauty in his arms rocked him. He drew her closer.

"Celia's trying to mend it, but—"

He raised his head, watching the shock return to her face when she noticed the direction his hands were traveling. Her gaze darted to his. He glanced lower, making her realize just how much of her was bared to him, highlighted in the silver-blue moonlight.

The breeze caressed their skin and shadows danced across their bodies. The dusky centers of her breasts were puckered

up tight. He wondered if it was from the coolness or from his fingers splayed across her belly, reaching slowly toward them.

Kate tugged her wrapper closed. She held herself proudly, if stiffly. "My night rail is missing. Before my bath I put it on my bed, but it's gone now. This is all I have left to wear until Celia returns my green silk."

He nibbled on her earlobe, working his way lower. "Digger," he mumbled.

"Excuse me?"

Morgan dragged himself away from her delicious neck. He forced himself not to laugh when he caught the insulted look on her face. She probably wasn't even aware of it, but he was gratified to know it would bother her if his thoughts had centered on a mangy mutt while he'd been nibbling on her neck.

"Your night rail. Digger took it," he said. "Probably buried it out back. Whenever somethin' turns up missin', that's usually what happened."

Her mouth hung open at his explanation. Before she could formulate an answer, he covered her lips with his and invaded the sweet recess.

Devil take him, he swore he could taste the honeysuckle nectar on her lips, lips that greeted his in hungry response and shook him to his very soul. How could he keep pretending that every time he touched her, every time he kissed her, he was merely collecting on their bargain?

He broke the kiss, pulling back enough to see her face, but not so far he couldn't still smell her arousing lilac-and-honeysuckle scent. He tried to concentrate on something else,

anything else, to stop his mind from thinking about the lips he'd just tasted. The only thing that came to mind was another picture of those sweet lips wrapped around a flower blossom.

Morgan rolled away from her. There was no way he could trust himself not to reach for her again, not to hold her and kiss her senseless. He laid back against his pillow and shoved his clenched fists beneath his head. "What're you really doin' here, darlin'?"

When she didn't answer, he glanced over and found that she looked as dazed as he felt.

She blinked several times like a man just coming to from a knockout punch, then finally said, "I'm here to write my articles."

"That's not what I mean. What're you doin' here, in my room? Tonight?"

"I ... I was going to ... to play a trick on you."

Morgan raised an inquiring eyebrow.

Her small hands fidgeted with the sash of her wrapper, but she didn't remove herself from his side. "It's true. I wanted to embarrass you, as you did me. I was going to wrap some garlic to your foot. Whatever properties give the herb its terrible smell would have seeped through your skin."

She surprised him then by giggling. His heart lurched at the innocent, girlish sound. It almost made him want to believe her.

Heaven help him, he wished her reason for coming to him was something as silly and harmless as that. He'd rather not

think he could be attracted to an adulteress who would come to his bed in cold payment for a debt.

"It'll make your breath smell terrible for days and days," she said in between a fresh fit of giggles, from behind the palm she cupped over her mouth.

She glanced at his unsmiling face and sobered. "I'm truly sorry. It was a most childish thing to do. I just don't care to be spied on and you made me angry one time too many. I'm not even sure it would've worked. My father told me about how, in his youth, he'd used that trick on a friend."

She studied his face. "You don't believe me, do you?"

He started to turn his head because he couldn't bear to look at her anymore. She stopped him with a hand on his chest, her fingers cool on his bare flesh. "I'll prove that I'm telling the truth," she said. She stuffed a hand into her pocket.

In an instant she grew still and grave, her eyes wide and shining in the moonlight. "I forgot. I threw it out the window. I don't have any proof, but I swear what I've said is true."

Morgan eyed her soberly, and she let out a nervous laugh. "I should return to my own room," she said, inching away from him, looking more self-conscious than she had the whole time she'd lain in his arms. "I've got a story to finish before I go home. Jesse is recovering nicely and so, by the terms of our agreement, that means I'll be leaving soon."

Morgan's muscles tightened again. He clenched his fists against the tide of jealousy that swept through him at the mention of Jesse. He pulled her to him, weaving his fingers through her hair, and drew her mouth to his.

Chapter 16

WHEN MORGAN FINALLY lifted his head, a sigh of pure pleasure escaped Kate's lips. There was no question in her mind that she'd been thoroughly kissed.

In an agonizing rush, all of the womanly feelings she'd thought were forever lost to her returned. The overwhelming need she'd believed long-buried, and had mourned as she'd gazed out the window a little while ago, returned to her now and more. *Oh, so much more.*

She was vaguely aware she'd twined her arms around Morgan's neck. Like her lips that kissed him back and her breasts that pressed against him, every part of her body reacted to him of its own accord.

She pressed her thighs together, trying to ease the ache Morgan wrought there. She heard his answering groan deep in his throat, felt the evidence of his mounting arousal as he rocked above her, increasing the delightful agony.

Despite her earlier protestations, she could no longer deny the pleasure of being in Morgan's bed enfolded in his powerful arms. Her body fell into rhythm with his and nothing else mattered. The magic between them was enough to wipe away all thoughts of her painful past, her empty future, and her original purpose for coming to his room.

"Tell me, darlin'," he said in a ragged, insistent whisper. "I want to hear you say it."

Kate tensed. She'd already told him why. She'd explained it all in embarrassing detail.

He ran his hands through her hair, smoothing and caressing, arranging it about her shoulders as if he couldn't get enough of touching it, touching her. She closed her eyes, savoring the feel of his rough fingertips trailing softly across her temple, down her cheek, lightly across her lips.

A lump formed in her throat. She swallowed hard around it. Surely she was a sinner past redemption if she'd allow a man like Morgan—a man who wasn't her husband—to take such liberties.

His callused forefinger glided down her neck and dipped between her breasts. It swept leisurely from one straining bud to the other.

A thoroughly distracting tingle coursed through her. All thoughts of self-condemnation fled. Magically relaxing at his touch like a kitten curling around its master's stroking hand, she briefly wondered how one long, tanned finger, barely touching her, could cause such wondrous sensations.

Morgan leaned over her, his handsome face so close she could smell the pleasant, mingled scents of tobacco and coffee on his warm breath as it fanned her cheek. It was so unlike the sweet-smelling cherry-laurel cologne Ian had worn. She inhaled the scent, savoring it.

She wasn't sure how much time passed as they remained that way, Morgan rocking above her, his hands igniting a fire everywhere they touched, his scent enveloping her. The only thing she was sure of was that this intimate and unexpected truce should not be happening.

Morgan rubbed his whiskered jaw across her bare shoulder.

When had her wrapper come undone again?

His teeth grazed her skin, nipping a path from her shoulder to the sensitive spot high along the side of her neck. The abrasive whiskers sent wild sparks caroming through her belly, and down lower, lower...

In a minute, she promised herself, she'd put a stop to it. She had to before he saw the ugly proof of her shame.

Morgan continued to kiss and nibble. He drew his tongue along the curve of her neck, tracing a path to her other shoulder, which to her surprise, was also bare. His tongue and moustache dragged over her skin, raising goose bumps in their wake. The cool air kissed her damp flesh and she shivered.

A moan escaped her, surprising her as much as Morgan. He raised his head and looked down at her with a question in his eyes.

His first kiss was tentative, as if he wanted to give her a chance to refuse him. Yet it was also firm and seeking, as if he was compelled to taste her, telling her he wouldn't be denied.

God forgive me, she thought, allowing the sweet exploration. The gentle pressure of his lips on hers produced another exquisite spiral of sensation to erupt in her belly and travel lower to her most private parts.

His tongue parted her lips and dipped inside her mouth. It darted in and out in an erotic dance, shocking and thrilling her so at first she didn't realize what he was doing.

"No." Her protest was a barely audible gasp. She pressed her thighs together against his gently exploring hand and

tried to push him away. She wondered if he realized how half-hearted her attempt was; if he could tell how her body yearned to be held and touched.

The heat that burned between them flared in Morgan's eyes—eyes that now searched hers. Their gold-green gleam told her as well as any words could that he knew she received pleasure from his touch, and she wanted more.

"No," she repeated in a shakier voice. She shook her head in wild denial. "You let me care for Jesse. I thank you for that, Morgan, but I won't pay for it this way. I'm not the loose woman you think I am." Lowering her lashes, she whispered, "I'm not a whore."

She twisted out of his embrace. He reached for her, his warm fingers brushing the back of her hand as she jumped from his bed. "I can't," she sobbed.

In her desperation to flee, she wasn't aware until her fingers curled around the cool cut-glass of the doorknob that she stood naked, swathed in moonlight. Her breath stopped, then started again as her heart pounded hard in her chest. Realizing his hand must have snagged the wrapper when he reached for her, she kept to the shadows and grabbed the nearest thing at hand, an old shirt flung across the top of a bureau. Before she could cover herself, she heard Morgan's soft footfall directly behind her.

"Don't." It was a gruff, odd sound—a command and a request mixed together. "Look at me, Katie. Turn around and look at me."

Sweet heaven, not now. Not after he'd awakened all of the womanly feelings she'd kept locked inside for so long. She

couldn't bear to see the revulsion in his eyes when he spied her scars, when only a moment ago he'd reminded her of what it felt like to be alive.

Hot tears of humiliation stung her eyes. She blinked them back and swallowed hard around the lump in her throat. She wouldn't survive if she had to see those hazel eyes filled with disgust, or worse, pity. She flipped the shirt around her shoulders. The soft, worn cloth mercifully grazed her knees.

"Katie, don't hide from me."

She hung her head, glad for the thick shadows. "Please, Morgan, please, just let me go." She felt the warmth and weight of his hands on her shoulders.

"It's been a long time, darlin', since I've seen anythin' so beautiful." His fingers dipped beneath the shirt collar, skimming, caressing.

"Please..."

He moved to relieve her of the shirt.

She stepped deeper into a corner, into the heavier pockets of shadow, and swallowed a sob. "I don't want you to see me."

"Why, Katie?"

When she couldn't answer, she felt the heat of him at her back. He placed his hands on her shoulders again, tentatively this time, and spoke against her ear. "I've always wondered how much you remember about that night in the jail. Did you forget I've seen you naked before? All of you, sweetheart, and I haven't been able to forget it."

Her heart tumbled. Something inside her shriveled and died as she realized her worst nightmare had come to life.

She held her breath, waiting for his scorn, his ridicule, his inevitable questions.

She waited what seemed an eternity, but they never came. She started to turn around, anxious to end the agonizing wait and get the embarrassing confrontation over with.

He stopped her with just a word. "No."

His fingers brushed against the backs of her knees as he started to bunch up the shirt's hem. Cool air skimmed across her limbs when he raised it to her waist. She tugged at the soft cotton, trying to pull it down.

His free hand caught hers and held it. She tried to pull free of him, but he pulled her back against him. She struggled but couldn't budge him or break free, and finally she stood, rigid and still, praying she'd be strong enough to get through the next few minutes.

He released her hand, but before she could do more than wonder what he was up to, he reached around her and pressed a palm to the private place between her thighs. The warmth of his other hand, strong and steady, burned into her hip as he held her tight, steadying her trembling.

Her confusion turned to disbelief as she felt him kneel down, his body gliding against hers. The tip of his tongue met the back of one wobbly limb, high on the back of her thigh.

"No, Morgan, no," she pleaded with a shake of her head.

"Hush," he crooned. "Let me, darlin'. Let me."

A part of her wanted to shout at him. To tell him she knew her scars were awful and she was ugly because of them. But then his warm lips were on her thighs, slowly pressing a trail

of reverent little kisses from the backs of her knees to the tops of her limbs.

"Dear God," she breathed. Her knees grew weak at the loving ministrations of his lips and tongue. She reached out to the wall for support, but found herself cradled in Morgan's powerful arms, held tenderly against his broad chest.

He carried her to his bed and stretched out beside her. His breath was warm—so warm—as it fanned her flesh. He drew her close, stroking her thighs while he lowered his dark head to her breast.

Desire pulsed in the ever-hardening nipple beneath his suckling lips and laving tongue, and throbbed mercilessly for release between her legs. She pressed her thighs tighter together in an attempt to still the insistent throbbing at their apex.

He must have felt her movement for he chose that moment to rise above her. His long, iron hardness pressed against her and she trembled, grasping his shoulders to keep her hands from shaking.

She felt his muscles bunch and shift under her palms as he tightened the embrace. A moment later, an unmistakable ripple of pleasure shivered through him, reverberating under her hands, and she couldn't deny the wonder of it, the feeling of excitement, of life, that she felt in his arms.

His amazing hands advanced and retreated from their seeking journey along her hips, her bottom, coming close—but not close enough—to the throbbing core of her femininity, a fraction of an inch at a time. The sweet, teasing torment was almost beyond bearing.

"Admit it, Katie. It feels mighty good."

His seductive drawl, low and husky, moved her deeply. She wanted to believe that by some miracle he still found her desirable, yet the nagging doubt remained he was somehow making fun of her disfigured body.

"Don't fight it, darlin'." His lips brushed against her ear.

She didn't answer. She couldn't answer for the knot of confusion in her belly. He kept up the sensual assault, massaging her flesh with one hand, teasing her with the other. His long fingers traced the curve of her shoulder, then dipped lazily to her side, traveling tantalizingly lower toward her hip, then around to the curve of her bottom. He lingered where the curve of her hip started to flared out, drawing little circles on her skin.

"Oh, darlin', you are a beauty."

Disbelief washed over her and she squeezed her eyes shut. Her hands clenched on his shoulders.

Encouraged by her hands pulling at him, Morgan dipped his head and delicately nipped the swell of her breasts. The bristles of his moustache teased the sensitive flesh that had gone so many years untouched.

Stunned, she looked at him. The sight of Morgan's dark, shaggy head next to pale skin sent an unsettling heat coursing to her very core. Unable to tear her gaze away from the erotic sight, she continued watching, too late realizing she was wriggling in brazen delight, drawing his mouth lower as she twisted from side to side.

"Come with me, darlin'," he murmured.

Her heart started to thrum. Oh, how she wanted to feel alive again, truly alive, even if it was only for one night, or even one hour. She drew a deep breath and pushed her fears aside, then inched her limbs apart.

Morgan groaned at her invitation. With great gentleness, he captured her lips in a slow kiss of possession and eased himself inside her warm, welcoming body.

* * * *

MORGAN RODE SILVERHEELS hard for hours across the flat, sprawling countryside until both man and beast were drenched with sweat beneath the high noontime sun. He drank in the unblemished sights and clean, fresh scents of the colorful wildflowers and tall grasses. He followed the winding route of the Smoky Hill River, tilting his face to better feel the warmth of the sun's rays.

Damn his soul. He felt dirty, so cold and dirty, inside and out.

He hadn't been a prayin' man in a long time. His last prayer had crossed his lips during the war as his fellow cavalrymen had fallen all around him, God-forsaken and alone, facing unimaginable horrors and painful deaths. But now his need was overwhelming, and his lips moved in a silent plea for forgiveness directed to the serene, blue heavens above. Morgan poured out the misery lodged in his heart, seeking solace for one of the blackest wrongs he'd ever committed.

Damnation, but a man had to live by certain rules he held inviolate if he were to have any dignity or honor. His own

personal code was short and simple, but had served him well. He always kept his word. He never cheated a man. He didn't use a gun when Medusa or his fists would do. And he never, ever bedded another man's wife.

Spurring Silverheels into a faster run, Morgan willed the wind racing over his skin to somehow enter his soul and blow away the dirty feeling that gnawed at him, and to lift the guilt deep inside his heart that made his shoulders feel so heavy.

When he realized his horse was lathered and he himself felt ready to drop from despair, he slowed Silverheels to a walk. They took it slow and easy until the horse's flesh cooled and dried and his breathing became regular.

Morgan dismounted and led Silverheels over to a cottonwood, where he tied the reins to a low-hanging branch. He ran a soothing hand over the gray's neck. "Easy, fella. We'll rest now."

He ambled down to the riverbank and squatted down to scoop up water in his hat. He drank his fill, wishing it were that easy to assuage a different kind of thirst that ached deep in his gut. But what he thirsted for, hungered after, couldn't be found here.

Devil take him, he ached for a woman. Not just any woman, but the one whose sweetness he'd tasted just a few nights before. The one who'd come to his bed in payment for a debt and who'd snuck away before he'd wakened at dawn.

The one who belonged to another man.

Rubbing a hand over his fuzzy jaw, Morgan snorted with disgust. "You really are a bastard, McCall," he muttered as he plopped the damp hat back on his head. He ambled back to

his horse and settled down comfortably in the grass to think some more.

Silverheels's ears perked up. The horse nudged Morgan's hat off his head. When it landed in his lap, Morgan shook his head in disbelief. "Now she's got me talkin' to myself, and even you know there's somethin' wrong with me."

If only he could stop thinking about her. During those precious hours she'd spent in his bed, Kate had somehow managed to claim a part of his very soul.

He didn't know how she'd managed to get under his skin in such a short time. Hell, yes, he did, too, know how she did it. "She's a witch," he said, stuffing his hat back on his head. Silverheels knocked it off again and turned his head away.

Morgan rolled and lit a cigarette, drawing on it as pictures of his one night with Kate played through his mind. He stuffed his hat back on and tugged the brim low over his eyes, seeing and listening again to the sound of their lovemaking.

"Oh, no," Kate had said as he'd begun loving her a second time. Her protest had been more of a moan, and a delighted moan at that. A chuckle had formed deep in his throat and he pressed his lips against her warm, perfect breast, nibbling through the white silk wrapper that she'd shyly insisted on covering herself with.

His tongue dipped inside the wrapper's folds and found her creamy flesh at the same time his hand inched up her thigh toward her hip, an agonizing flick at a time.

"Good Lord, Morgan," she breathed, writhing in his arms. "You don't know what you're doing to me."

"I know, darlin'," he'd told her. "I know. It feels so good. Better than I ever dreamed." Better than he had a right to feel with another man's woman. But he couldn't stop.

His mouth and hands had continued to tease her, summoning her passion to the surface, making her squirm with unabashed delight. He'd never known a woman with such fiery depths of passion.

Damn, but he didn't need this kind of complication in his life. He knew all about women like Kate and the hurt they could inflict with their selfishness. About the harm that would be inflicted on innocent children—his and hers—if their adultery were ever discovered.

Morgan stared out at the green expanse across the river as if he could find his answers there. He narrowed his bloodshot eyes against the harsh rays. "Yep, no doubt about it. You are a true bastard, McCall."

He took one last, deep drag before rising and tossing the half-smoked cigarette into the water. A weary sigh escaped him that seemed to come from the very depths of his soul. "And it ain't gonna get any better."

Maybe it was the innocent way she'd opened herself to him, or the vulnerability he'd sensed when her trembling hands whispered over his cheeks.

Maybe it was the way she'd gentled at his touch. Obviously afraid of his reaction to the scars on her thighs, she'd allowed him to kiss her. Jesus, allowed him to do it right there on her thighs where she'd been hurt so badly.

Even now, his breath caught at the memory. It was as if she'd allowed him to touch her heart and soul.

The Lawman
by Lily Sorren

"Ah, hell." He had to face her sooner or later. He swung into the saddle and headed for home, an odd mixture of anticipation and wariness washing through him.

Chapter 17

THE SICK ROOM'S butter-yellow curtains fluttered in a soft breeze. In the fading heat of early evening, the interior of the house was quiet and still. Through the open window, Kate could hear Sarah laughing with Celia as they weeded the vegetable patch. A tune Matt was whistling floated from the barn where he was finishing up his chores.

She hadn't seen Morgan at all that day, and that suited her just fine. His presence served only to remind her of her own wanton behavior in his bed.

At the bittersweet memory of how he'd tenderly loved her, even after viewing the evidence of her shame, her stomach flip-flopped. Thank goodness she'd come to her senses and left his room before she'd had to face him again in the harsh light of day.

Morgan had been avoiding her as much as possible anyway, acting like she wasn't even present in the same house or the same room. The few times he did acknowledge her, it was with a black look and an even blacker mood. No doubt he regretted that night as much as she. But, Lord, how she would treasure the memory of those few stolen hours in the empty years that lay ahead.

Resolving to act as if nothing was amiss, she played checkers with Jesse until the sun began to set and she was forced to light the oil lamp. She and Jesse took turns winning as long shadows danced across the walls. They talked of nothing of consequence, their banter light yet reassuring. She

couldn't recall a time when she'd smiled so much or enjoyed herself more. Evidently, it showed because Jesse remarked on her good humor.

Unfortunately, when the front door slammed shut and they heard Sarah following Morgan into the front parlor, squealing in delight at his homecoming, Jesse also noticed the exact moment her good mood fled.

"What is it, Kate?"

"Nothing." She stood and paced, kneading the sudden stiffness out of her neck. "I just need a moment, that's all."

The tinkling sound of Sarah's laughter mixed with Morgan's deep drawl. Irresistibly drawn to the happy sounds, she tiptoed to the kitchen and peeked through the doorway to the front parlor where she saw Morgan and Sarah cuddled on the floor, their backs against the sofa. The child clutched a large bouquet of small white flowers.

Between Sarah's delighted giggles and Morgan's throaty laughter, Kate could hear only a few of the words they exchanged. She thought she heard Morgan say, "Pussytoes." She clearly heard "darlin'," but Morgan's loving murmur bore no resemblance to the insulting tone she'd become so familiar with in recent days. The sound was heartbreakingly warm and sweet. It set her heart to pounding so, she thought the entire house had actually begun to pulse with the strength of the love that flowed between father and daughter.

Aware of a gnawing emptiness that clawed deep within her, she hugged her waist with one arm, her other hand nervously twisting the cord of her silver locket.

"Kate?"

Jesse's whisper at her ear caused her to start. Turning, she found that he'd put on his brown denim pants, but he was still shirtless and barefoot.

She shooed him back to his bed and tucked him in. "You shouldn't have gotten up, let alone struggled into your trousers."

"Aw, now, Kate..."

She wagged a finger at him. "Don't you 'Aw, now, Kate' me, Jesse Place. That wound is taking longer to heal than it should. Why, the way it kept festering, I couldn't even stitch you up until yesterday. You're to stay in that bed, do you hear?"

"Yes, ma'am." Jesse smiled up at her with his engaging half-grin and with his good arm gave her a sharp salute.

She wagged her finger harder. "Don't you mock me. I waited a long time to sew those stitches into you and I won't have you splitting them."

She tucked the blanket to just under his shoulders, then closed her eyes and sighed. Her thoughts were miles away, and as close as the front parlor.

"Kate, what is it?"

"It's nothing, Jesse." *It's everything I'll never have.*

"Talk to me, honey." He took her hand and pulled her down to sit in the chair beside the bed, careful not to upset the checkerboard that sat between them. "You know you can."

Unable to resist, she asked, "What sort of game are they playing? I thought I heard Morgan say pussytoes."

"Morgan sometimes brings Sarah flowers. Nothin' fancy, mind you, just whatever he finds on his ride home. He always makes up a rhyme to go with the flower's name. Today the flowers are pussytoes. You know, something like, pussytoes on your nose. Sarah always thinks it's the funniest thing she's ever heard."

He looked down at their joined hands. "It all started when Morgan's wife left 'bout a year ago. Matt handled it all right, I suppose, but it broke Sarah's heart somethin' fierce when her mama never came back, and Morgan's right along with it to see his baby girl so torn apart. He tried everythin' to draw Sarah out of her shell, even brought home Digger and Cookie as a surprise."

He raised his gaze to hers again. "For the longest time, nothin' worked. Nothin' 'til the flower game, that is, and even then only for a little while. The real change happened when you came."

He paused, watching for her reaction, she supposed. She tried harder to keep any emotion from crossing her features.

"Anyhow, they've been playin' their flower game ever since. I've never seen anythin' make that girl smile so much, 'cept when you came to town."

With shame, she recalled her poor behavior toward Sarah when she'd first come to the McCall home, and her stomach lurched. Morgan was a fine father, trying to help his child through a most difficult period. And she'd done nothing but avoid Sarah, finding flimsy excuses to run from the room every time the girl so much as poked her head through a doorway. Kate raised a trembling hand to her lips and wished,

not for the first time, that she had allowed Sarah and Matt into her heart much sooner than she had.

Jesse reached out and took her trembling hand into his own. He held on tight, as if he thought she would bolt at any moment. "I don't mean to pry, Kate, but is it Morgan or the children?"

She pulled her hand free. "Let's finish our game."

Avoiding Jesse's searching brown eyes that knew her so well, she studied the game board so hard she was sure she'd still see the checkered pattern on her eyelids if she were to shut them.

"Tell me, honey," Jesse pressed. "Is it Morgan or the children?"

"Is it Morgan or the children what?" She sounded more snappish than she'd meant to, but Jesse's ability to see to her core was making it awfully hard to keep her emotions in check.

"Which of 'em has you so coiled up inside?"

"I'm not!"

"You look like you're gonna run away again."

"I've never run from anything in my life, and I'll thank you to remember it."

Jesse recaptured her hands. "Yes, you have." His voice was soft and reassuring. It was the voice she remembered him using out on the Goodnight Ranch when he tried to gentle a particularly spirited horse, or when he sang a calming tune on the trail to the restless, frightened cattle late at night.

Looking away, she said, "I don't know what you could be implying."

"I'm not implyin' anything. I'm sayin' it straight out. You're a leavin' kind of woman, but I don't want you going away again. Not now. Not ever."

She shook her head. "You're wrong, Jesse."

"Hear me out, then you can tell me I'm wrong."

He drew the callused pad of his thumb back and forth across the back of her hand. "Way back when we first met on your first trip to Texas to write about fall roundup at the ranch, I saw it in you then. Later, I saw it again on the cattle drive to Colorado. You get upset 'bout somethin', it eats away at your insides, then before anybody knows it, you're gone. You take off for a piece. It's like you need time in private to stitch yourself back together before you can be 'round other folks again, so's you don't fall apart."

He gave her hands a gentle squeeze. "Don't do it now."

Shocked by the sternness in his voice, her head jerked up and she finally looked at him.

"Don't take off by yourself. It's too dangerous, what with the threatenin' letters you got, and whatever happened in town the other week that kept Morgan busy for so long. I know you're upset 'bout somethin', but don't do it. Don't go anywhere without Morgan or me along."

She swallowed once and slid her hands from his, trying to feign indifference. Without knowing all the details of her past, he'd still managed to hit too close to home. "Of course I'm upset. You would be, too, if I were winning as handily as you seem to be." She thrust out her chin and pointed a finger at

the checkerboard. "Most of your pieces are on my side of the board, and I suppose you expect me to king them all. Well, you win, Jesse. I forfeit."

She started to gather up the game pieces, but her hands shook so badly she only managed to upend the board. The smooth, whittled pieces flew across the bedcovers, and several bounced to the floor in a loud clatter. She jumped up to gather them.

Jesse struggled to sit up higher, sending the blanket falling to his waist. He caught her arms, forcing her to be still and face him. "Nice try, honey, but I know it's not the checker game. I've seen that look on your face before. On the trail, when you wandered away thinkin' nobody noticed, I always thought you looked so unhappy you'd crawl right outta your own skin if it were a'tall possible."

"Oh, Jesse..." Unshed tears, held back far too long, gathered in her throat

"Talk to me, Kate. What is it, honey? Let me take care of whatever's ailin' you. Let me help you."

"No one can help me," she whispered.

She was unsure if Jesse heard her, for as soon as her tears started to fall, he reached out and pulled her onto the bed and into his arms, muffling her words. He cradled her tear-streaked face on his good shoulder, rubbing her back with a gentle hand.

"I know this ain't proper, me holdin' you like this an' all, but I don't care," he whispered fiercely. "You need a friend right now and I'm here for you, honey. I'm here now and I always will be."

Jesse's ragged whisper fanned over her cheek. He sounded as if his own heart were cracking in two, right along with hers, and it made her cry even harder.

"Whatever it is, it's crushin' you. I care too much 'bout you to let that happen." He wrapped an arm around her shoulders. He caressed her cheek, his thumb wiping away her tears. "Let it out. Let it all go."

She clung to his finely muscled arms and pressed her cheek into his warm, comforting shoulder. Jesse was a good friend—the best she'd ever had. He was like family. She'd draw on his strength for another minute or two. Then she'd be fine, she told herself, willing herself to believe it.

"Isn't this a touchin' scene."

At the sound of Morgan's rumbling voice, Kate jumped from Jesse's embrace. All too aware of what Morgan thought he'd just witnessed, she felt the heat of embarrassment scorch her cheeks. She quickly wiped the moisture from her eyes, surprised she hadn't heard his heavy footsteps or the jangle of his spurs.

Jesse's body, so warm and comforting a moment ago, now looked as rigid as stone. He eyed Morgan, and there was a coldness in his eyes she'd never seen before. "You better weigh your next words real careful-like," he said.

Morgan's gaze never left her as he said, "Stay out of it, Jess."

"Hell, no, I won't stay out of it! I heard from Del and the others how you pranced her through town in Cherry's clothes. Christ, you even locked her up. It didn't sound like you, but I

thought I knew you well enough to figure you had your reasons, so I held my tongue."

Kate watched, her eyes growing wide, as Jesse rose unsteadily from the bed. "Jesse, no. It's not necessary to—"

"The hell it ain't." Jesse cast a murderous glare at Morgan, who still stood in the open doorway.

Morgan, a tiny muscle twitching along his jaw, remained stern-faced as he stood clasping a coiled Medusa in one large fist. He watched Jesse strap on his gun belt, then flicked a cold look over her.

"If you'll excuse us, Kate," Jesse said, keeping a deadly gaze trained on Morgan. His face was ashen and grim lines etched the corners of lips that now appeared bloodless.

She wrung her hands. "Jesse, it doesn't matter. I don't care what Morgan thinks. Please, get back into bed."

"Oh, you'd like that, wouldn't you, Mrs. Stewart?" Contempt laced Morgan's drawl. "Maybe you'd like to hop in there with him."

Jesse lunged at Morgan. She tried to hold him back, her palms straining against his chest, careful to avoid injuring his arm further. Jesse was probably weaker than she thought because it didn't take as much of her strength as she'd expected to keep him away from Morgan.

"Let me go, Kate. I've heard some of the things Morgan's said to you, and the way he's said 'em. I've held my tongue long enough. I won't have it, I tell you. I won't have him insulting you any longer!"

Morgan's eyes smoldered as he watched her with Jesse. At the moment when she'd reached out to Jesse, he'd looked

positively ready to burst into flames. His gaze flicked to Jesse's hand hovering above the revolver in his holster.

"I know about your God-awful bargain," Jesse spat out. "You had Celia so upset, she had to talk to somebody." It took all of Kate's strength to hold him back now. "Thank God nothing's happened between you yet."

Kate couldn't help it. She looked over at Morgan, whose gaze flicked over her. She swore she saw a trace of pain in his hazel eyes.

Jesse looked at her first, shock and disbelief written all over his face, then at Morgan. "You bastard. How could you? She's a real lady, Morgan. You had no right—"

"She gave me the right the minute she nearly got you killed. Can't you see she's just like Mary?"

"Kate's not a'tall like your wife. She's a virtuous woman."

"Then what was she doin' in a saloon?"

"Please! Stop!" Kate cried out, guilt and shame over her night of loving with Morgan eating her alive.

"Stay out of it, Kate," Jesse ordered. "Apologize now to the lady, Morgan, or step outside."

"She's no lady, Jess. I won't apologize, and I won't fight you while you're in this condition."

"Damn your hide!"

Jesse deftly sidestepped Kate's restraining hands and lunged at Morgan. His swing was awkward, but his large fist managed to slam squarely into Morgan's jaw. A sickening crack sounded as bare knuckles connected with their mark.

Kate screamed. Unable to look away, she watched as Morgan staggered backward from the blow, but Jesse was the one who fell to his knees.

Jesse's head hung down and his clenched fists rested on his thighs. "She ain't ... like Mary," he panted. "She's ... a widow."

Morgan rubbed the spot on his jaw where Jesse had punched him. His chest heaved in a rapid rise and fall as he appeared to struggle for control. "The hell she is," he breathed at last.

He looked down at Jesse now face-down on the floor, then back at Kate. "The thick-headed fool used his last ounce of strength to defend you again. You won't rest 'til you kill him, will you?"

His ragged voice lashed at her as she tried without success to lift Jesse's large frame back into bed.

"Step aside," Morgan said, a trickle of blood rolling from the corner of his mouth. He looked down at Jesse, a sadness beyond measure in his eyes.

Her chest tightened painfully. Not only had she shamed herself and proved true all of Ian's accusations about her sinful nature, but she'd come between two men who were as close as brothers.

Morgan wiped his mouth on his sleeve then, with great care, lifted Jesse and laid his still body on the mattress.

Unable to say anything for the shame and sadness that formed a huge lump in her throat, she looked down at her hands and cried out. She held them in front of her face and stared, open-mouthed, at the bright red drops of blood

dripping through her fingers. With a look at Jesse, she saw a scarlet stain spread across the mattress, flowing out from beneath his injured arm.

Strangely, she had no tears left. There was just a hard, cold knot of grief where her heart used to be. She whirled on Morgan, wild and dry-eyed in her pain. "Why couldn't you leave him be? He's split his stitches and passed out from the pain. Damn you. Damn you to everlasting hell." Her voice was strained, the sound of it echoing in the deathly silence that hung between them.

Morgan's eyes mirrored her pain. "I'm already there, darlin'. Believe me, I'm already there."

* * * *

"COME TO ME."

From across the room, his voice caressed her in the darkness. He sounded drowsy and drugged with sex even though she hadn't touched him yet. She lit a candle and glanced at the man who lay sprawled across her bed, one hand resting beneath his head. His bare chest looked strong and inviting. Dark hair peeked out from his unbuttoned trousers. The gent held out his arms, beckoning.

At least, she thought he was a gentleman when they were downstairs. His eyes looked different now. Harder somehow, and colder, they made her want to cover herself. With nervous fingers, she played with her hip-length hair in an attempt to cover her nakedness.

Berating herself for her silly jitters, she flung her hair back over her shoulders and was instantly gratified by the flare of

desire that lent a brief warmth to his eyes. Encouraged by the sight, she reminded herself that the gent was just like any other man she'd been with, except for his wealth. Again she noted the large gems that glittered on his clean, manicured hands. She glanced at his gaping trousers. Probably clean down there, too.

He'd paid her well, more than Cherry ever got for a poke, she assured herself with a quick look at the gold coins stacked on her scarred bureau. Maybe, if she pleased him well enough, he'd tell the others about her. Her name would be as well-known as Cherry's among the ranchers, drovers and buyers, and they'd seek her out. Finally she'd be able to save enough money and move on.

"Come here," he said.

She sashayed to the side of the bed and curled her fingers into his waistband, pulling it lower. "Mercy, sugar, you're even finer than I thought."

"Mmmm," he replied, closing his eyes. "Come to bed, Katherine."

"I done told you before, mister, my name's—"

"Shut up!" He leapt from the mattress and slapped her, putting all his strength behind the open-handed blow. She reeled backward and fell against the door, then slumped to the floor.

Pain set her jaw afire. She glanced back at him. He advanced on her.

It wasn't fear of another blow that made her heart slam against her chest and brought her to her feet. It was the look

on his face, all red and twisted with a rage worse than any she'd ever seen on a man's face.

Without a care for her nakedness, she flung open the door and ran into the hallway. His fingers caught the long strands of her hair, yanking hard, forcing a yelp from her throat. He flung her backward onto the floor. Pain shot through her shoulders and back.

She looked up just as he slammed shut the only means of escape. But before the door closed, she caught a brief glimpse of Cherry out in the hallway. There was a question in the blonde whore's eyes, and a young drover's hand groping inside her bodice.

"Help me," she whimpered.

Even as the words left her lips, she knew it was hopeless. He'd bought her and could do with her what he wanted, much the same as his horse or his dog or his wife if he had one. No one would lift a finger to help her, she knew from experience. She had the broken tooth to prove it. She hung her head and hid behind a curtain of brown hair.

"Tell me your name." He yanked hard on her loose tresses, forcing her head up. A whimper died in her throat as the wild light in his eyes dared her to defy him again.

The candlelight glinted off something in his other hand. It had a blade like a knife, yet it wasn't like any knife she'd seen before.

He brought the cold, sharp tip to her throat. "Tell me."

She gulped. "I-I'm Katherine. I'll be K-Katherine for you."

"Good girl. You're smarter than you look." He twisted and pulled on her nipple, wringing a cry from her lips.

He continued twisting until she knelt at his feet, blinded by tears of pain. "Tell me you've missed me, sweetheart. Tell me how much you want me."

She tried to stammer out an answer that would please him, but the words died in her throat.

He gave her nipple another sharp twist until she cried out. "It's time you learned who your master is, sweet Katherine."

With a firm hand behind her head and the blade's tip poking into her throat, reminding her that he held her life in his hands, he ordered her to pull down his trousers. With one quick, brutal thrust, he plunged his swollen manhood into her mouth.

She reared back, away from the blade, struggling against the strength of his hand. "You're hurtin' me, mister."

He impaled her again. He swelled within her, enjoying her fear and her pain.

"Ah, Katherine, I've missed you so." He pushed himself into her, harder and faster, until his manhood beat against the back of her throat.

Moments felt like hours. She fought to draw breath and inhaled his sweet cologne instead. Blackness closed around her. The last thing she felt was his manicured hand closing around her throat, dragging her toward the bed.

Chapter 18

LYING IN BED amid the tangled sheets, Morgan held his throbbing head and gazed through bloodshot eyes to the window. The lace curtains hung motionless in the heavy, predawn air. Outside, the blackness dissolved by degrees into a muted gray as he forced himself to rise.

He shrugged into an old cotton shirt and dark denim trousers. Tucking his boots under one arm, he left his room and descended the staircase in his stocking feet, careful not to wake the rest of the house. In the kitchen he started the coffee, then sank into a chair and bent to tug on his boots.

"Damn," he muttered, closing his eyes tight against the rush of blood that went to his head. He straightened slowly, avoiding all quick and unnecessary movements. It didn't help.

"Need a touch of the hair of the dog that bit me," he said, raising his fingertips to his temples. He rose and reached for a bottle of rye he kept behind some supplies on a high shelf. He took a slow sip, and when the coffee was finished, he added a generous dose to the steaming brew in his cup.

Taking a seat at the scarred table, he took a sip and grimaced. Even aided by the whiskey, his coffee sure didn't compare to Celia's, but he didn't have much choice. His housekeeper hadn't spoken to him since his argument with Jesse the day before last. He wondered not if, but how, Celia would kill him if he spat the thick, brown liquid out on her clean floor.

His stomach spasmed and rumbled, forcing an oath from his lips, making his head hurt all the more. Trying to grab a home-cooked meal had been damned near impossible. Celia wouldn't even look at him, let alone feed him. Normally she left a plate warming on the stove in case he came home late. Last night, there hadn't been so much as a crumb waiting for him. He'd drunk his dinner instead.

A man could starve to death in his own home, and all because he stuck to his guns when he was right. Hell, he'd only tried to keep Jesse from getting hurt worse than he already was.

He should've known better. How could he blame Jesse for falling for the witch when he'd done the exact same thing himself, and after just one night in her arms?

But there was one big difference between himself and Jesse. The deputy was soft-hearted and too blinded by lust to believe Kate was married.

His stomach clenched again, but this time it was from the vivid picture that came to mind when he recalled those two together: Jesse, bare-chested, holding Kate close, rubbing his hand up and down the delicate curve of her back. She'd looked willing enough, too, as she'd returned the embrace and pressed herself to Jesse.

Morgan ran a hand over his jaw and swore into his cup. He hadn't thought it would be possible to feel any worse about bedding another man's wife than he already did. But he'd been wrong. Dead wrong. Losing Jesse's friendship, and over a woman who wasn't even worth it, more than doubled the pain.

But damn his soul, he still wanted her, ached for her, no matter how hard he tried to forget what she'd felt like in his arms, in his bed.

A muffled grunt of pain came from the sick room. He pushed aside his cup and made his way to the next room. When he caught sight of his deputy, Morgan stopped short in the doorway.

Jesse was sitting up in bed, shirtless and bending from the waist toward the floor.

"What the hell?" Morgan exploded, stepping into the sick room. He stopped and held a hand to his forehead when the pounding there grew worse. He crossed the room and planted his feet directly in front of his bent-over friend. Taking a deep breath, he lowered his voice to an angry whisper. "What the hell do you think you're doin'?"

Jesse grunted. "What the hell does it look like?" Beads of sweat broke out on his back and shoulders as he pulled on first one scuffed boot, then the other.

"Where's Mrs. Stewart? Thought she was tendin' to your needs." Too late, Morgan heard the sneer that had crept into his voice.

Jesse sat up, huffing from the exertion of putting on his boots. The coffee-colored eyes that had always been warm and full of merriment were stone cold.

"Damn it, Jess, I didn't mean it like that. I just meant Mrs. Stewart hasn't left your side since she re-stitched your hide. Where the hell is the blasted woman anyway?"

Jesse grunted again as he reached for his gun belt that hung from the post at the head of the bed. He pulled his Colt

from the holster and opened the chamber, making sure it was still loaded. "I warned you not to talk 'bout her that way, Morgan. Don't make me tell you again."

Morgan ran a hand down his face. Damn, but Jesse had it bad for her. "Get back into that bed, you fool. Celia's not talkin' to me now. Hell, she's not even feedin' me. Both them women'll have my hide if anythin' else happens to you."

Jesse clamped his jaws tight and rose from the bed, aided by a hand on the mattress. He looked pale as death and none too steady as the sweat rolled down his forehead. "Leave me be, Morgan. You done enough already."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you took advantage of a decent, lovin' woman, that's what it means."

Morgan held a hand up in defense. "She came to me willingly, Jess. Hear me out. I—"

"You forced her with that devil's bargain of yours. And you used me to do it, you son-of-a-bitch. She had to give herself to you so I could keep my arm. My arm, for Chrissakes!" Jesse winced at the pain his outburst had cost him.

Morgan stepped forward, but Jesse waved him away. His movements awkward, Jesse donned his shirt, leaving it draped over his shoulders and unbuttoned. He strapped his gun belt to his hip.

"You gonna shoot me, Jess?" The soft-spoken question hung between them, charging the air.

Finally Jesse turned to face him, and Morgan rushed on, "She didn't have to come to me like she did." He felt as taut

and strained as his voice. "She had a choice. She could've left Abilene instead. Hell, I wanted her to leave."

Jesse said nothing, but the look in his eyes spoke of a deep sadness.

"Hell, I know you care about her, but is she really worth shootin' a friend?"

"That and more. But I ain't gonna shoot you, Morgan." Jesse walked slowly to the back door.

"Then what're you doin'? You're not strong enough to walk, let alone sit a saddle."

"Gonna take Kate away from here. From you. Gonna take her back East, back to her home, where she'll be safe from that Thorne fella. And if she'll have me, I'm gonna keep her safe the rest of her days."

"You mean marry her? She's already married. She belongs to someone else."

Jesse's eyes flashed a warning. "I told you before. She's a widow."

"She's married. Think about it, Jesse. She wears a weddin' band. Her father-in-law told me she's his precious son's wife. She even admitted to me that she's married."

"That's only to keep men away. Some of 'em can be real bastards around a single woman, sniffin' 'round her like a dog in heat. Some don't even respect a married woman, do they?" He shot Morgan a meaningful look. Jesse's brown eyes grew darker. "I never touched her. Never laid so much as a finger on her. I was just holdin' her that night 'cause she was cryin'. Sobbin' her heart out and wouldn't tell me why. Guess it had somethin' to do with what you done to her."

Morgan looked away, unable to meet Jesse's pained gaze. "You can't go runnin' off to Philadelphia with her. What about your job? The town needs you. You weren't strong enough before, so I didn't tell you about Dora. She was killed ... murdered. I think it has somethin' to do with Mrs. Stewart."

"Well, I'm sorry 'bout Dora, but that don't change anythin'. What could a whore have in common with Kate?" Jesse held up a hand, palm forward. "No, don't answer that. I don't care what you think."

"I'll explain it later when you're thinkin' clearer."

"Forget it, Morgan. You worry 'bout the town. I'll keep Kate safe."

Morgan clenched his hands into tight fists at his sides. "Damn you, Jess. She's not yours to worry about. That responsibility belongs to the poor bastard who married her."

"Her husband's dead," Jesse said quietly. "Dead and buried a long time ago. I stood at the man's grave. 'Ian Stewart,' the stone said. 'Beloved husband of Katherine, loving father to Theodora.' There was a marker for Theodora next to his, with dates for two other babies, too."

Morgan stared at his deputy, speechless.

"Ol' man Goodnight insisted I escort her home after she wrote about his outfit a coupla years ago. Before I went back to Texas, she asked me to take her to the cemetery—Lavender Hill, I think it was called—to visit her children."

Jesse squeezed his eyes shut. "I'll never forget how it felt, watchin' Kate cry over her babies' tombstone."

Morgan's gut wrenched. He'd never known his friend to lie, and his words, the emotion behind them, held the ring of truth. *God, if what Jesse said was true...*

His sharp intake of breath seared his lungs. Could what Celia had accused him of be true? Had he changed so much, been so blinded by bitterness since Mary left him, that he didn't know a good woman when she was standing right in front of him?

It was too awful to think about. He felt like hell, but not as bad as when he thought he'd bedded another man's wife. Bedded another man's wife and been pleased by it as nothing he'd ever done before.

Morgan paced the room rubbing an agitated hand across his jaw. He stopped abruptly and pierced Jesse with a hard look. "Then why did she come to my room in the middle of the night? Dressed in next to nothing? If she's as decent as you say, explain that, Jess. Explain the way she wrapped her arms around my neck, the way she let me hold her, let me love her again and again—"

He didn't see the swing coming until it was too late. This time, it was Morgan who fell to his knees. Jesse wasn't far behind him.

"Damn you," Morgan muttered as he pulled himself up and saw his friend out cold on the floor again.

After a quick examination to make sure Jesse's stitches were still intact, he lifted the deputy and laid him on the bed. "I'm gettin' mighty tired of tuckin' you in, friend."

Jesse's only answer was a pained moan.

* * * *

"WORDS AIN'T ENOUGH, Morgan. You got to see it fer yerself." Del Hart stood on the back porch, tugging on Morgan's sleeve like an excited five-year-old.

Morgan wiped his brow with his bandanna and squinted against the noontime sun. "Is Doc sure it was Squirrel Tooth Sal?"

Del shrugged. "Body was in her room at the Alamo. Hard to say, though, what with all the sick bastard done to her. Doc Pettibone won't move her 'til you come see fer yerself."

"You think it's the same one who killed Dora?"

"Looks that way."

"How?"

"Doc says the backs of Sal's legs were cut to ribbons. Done a right good job on her face, too."

"Anythin' else?"

"Yeah, but you don't wanna know what the bastard done to her tits. Didn't know Sal had such big ones 'til Doc—"

Morgan cleared his throat and adjusted the slant of his hat against the harsh light. "All right, Del. I'll head over to the Alamo. First, though, I need you to do somethin' for me. I'm sendin' Sarah and Matt out to the meadow to pick berries. I want you to drive them in the wagon. Make sure whoever this bastard is doesn't get near 'em."

"Aw, Morgan. Berry pickin'? That's woman's work."

He ignored the whine in Del's leathery voice. "Celia and Jesse will be all right in the house, and I'll take Mrs. Stewart with me. But I need someone to guard my kids, Del."

"Cain't they get the durn berries tomorrow or when you git back later?"

"Nope. And don't go scarin' my kids with talk of the killin'. Now go on in and grab a cup of coffee before you head out." Morgan grinned to himself. A mug of that black sludge he'd made earlier would serve the whiny old coot right.

As Morgan descended the porch steps, a cloud drifted across the sun, casting the yard in shadow and echoing the darkness that had started to seep into his soul. The body count was growing and Thorne was still on the loose.

A new sense of urgency gripped him as he started for the barn and Silverheels. He cupped his hands around his mouth and called out for Matt as he went.

"Coming, Pa." Matt emerged from the small barn and ran to his father.

"Hitch up the wagon, son."

"We goin' to town for Celia's supplies, Pa?"

"Maybe tomorrow."

"Then where we headin'?"

"After your chores, Del's gonna drive you and Sarah to the far meadow to pick berries. Feels like a good day for berry pie, don't you think? Should we have strawberry ice cream to go with it?" Morgan chuckled at the grin that split the boy's face.

"Yes, sir, Pa. Is it somebody's birthday?"

Morgan hooked his thumbs into his waistband and shook his head. "Nope. Nobody's birthday."

"Are we celebratin' somethin' else?"

"Nope. Nothin' special."

Morgan started across the yard, inhaling the heady scent of Celia's roses and petunias as he went. He had some fences to mend with Jesse, and today was as good a day as any to start.

When Celia had come downstairs and checked on Jesse, she'd declared he'd be all right with the proper rest. Good thing the damned fool hadn't injured his shoulder further. A murderer was on the loose and he needed a man like Jesse. Someone he could trust, who would do whatever needed to be done. Besides, what kind of friend would he be if he let Jesse throw away the entire year he'd spent earning the town's respect, just for a woman like Katherine Stewart?

There'd be time enough to change Jesse's mind. His deputy wasn't going anywhere, not weak as he was. Jesse would be staying a little while yet, longer if Morgan could manage to talk sense into his rattled, love-soaked brain.

Matt padded along behind him in the soft dirt. "Well, why we havin' pie and ice cream?"

Morgan turned and waited for his son to catch up. "You sure do ask a lot of questions, don't you, boy?"

"Cattle Kate says there's no such thing as a dumb question. Why, if I don't ask questions, how'm I supposed to learn anythin'? That's what she says."

At the mention of that Stewart woman, Morgan felt his moustache start to twitch. "She does, does she?"

"Yes, sir, she does. She says I'll make a good correspondent some day, just like her, cause I got 'natural curiosity.' That's just what she said." Matt's head bobbed up

and down for emphasis and he turned a beaming smile on his father. "How 'bout that, Pa?"

Morgan unclenched his jaw long enough to reply. "Yeah, that's somethin', all right. Cattle Kate come downstairs yet?"

"No, sir. Celia said Cattle Kate didn't feel so good. So, why're we havin' pie and ice cream?"

The boy was like a bulldog with a bone once he got a thought in his head. Seeing there was no way around the question, Morgan drew a deep breath and hoped a short, sweet explanation would satisfy Matt's natural curiosity.

"They're for your Uncle Jesse."

He should've known better.

"Why?" Matt looked at him, waiting patiently for an answer.

Morgan turned to continue his walk through the yard, his gaze fixed on the ground. "Because he's got a sweet tooth as big as you, that's why."

"But you always say too many sweets ain't good for us."

"Isn't, not ain't. And they're not."

"Well, why then—"

"Because I said so!" Damn, he felt foolish enough trying to repair his strained friendship with Jesse by first appealing to the man's sweet tooth to soften him up. He sure as hell wasn't about to try to explain it out loud.

He clenched his jaw. It was bad enough he'd had to cajole Celia into making her special recipes, especially when she was mad enough at him to chew lead. He'd had to bribe the stubborn woman with a raise.

"Menfolk are fickle, you know," she'd said, giving him a cold once-over. "Woman's got to take care of herself."

Morgan put a hand on Matt's shoulder. "Just hitch up the wagon, son."

"All right, Pa." Matt ran off, kicking up a cloud of dust in his wake.

He followed at a slower pace, peering through the still-swirling dust as he went. The toe of his boot kicked something. It rolled beneath a rose bush. Assuming it was one of Sarah's toys, one she'd howl for later when she couldn't find it, he hunkered down and pawed through the dry earth at the bush's base.

A few moments later, he pulled out something small and held it up in his dirt-streaked hand. Whatever it was looked awful, but it appeared to have once been white, and maybe almost round. Whatever it was, it stank to high heaven.

A twinge of hope flared to life and fluttered in his chest. His jaw dropped as, all at once, he realized what the item he held at arm's length between a forefinger and thumb had to be.

He still couldn't believe it was true. Just to be sure, he brought it to his nose. "Garlic..."

Kate claimed she'd brought a clove to his room that night to play a prank on him. This had to be the one she'd said she'd thrown out his window. The one he hadn't believed she'd ever had.

"Hell and damnation." A wave of relief swept through him and he fell back on his haunches. With a thumb, he tipped his

hat back and stared at the herb in his hand. Looking up, he found he was almost directly beneath his bedroom window.

Kate had told the truth about why she'd come to his room. He stood up and swallowed the bitter taste of crow in his mouth.

Morgan tossed the garlic as far as he could, his worries about Thorne and Squirrel Tooth Sal pushed aside for the moment. He had only one thought in that moment: Kate hadn't lied, and she didn't belong to another man.

With a grin as wide as the side of his barn, he whipped his hat off his head and tossed it in the air with a whoop.

"Hot damn." He strode back to the house and took the steps to the porch in one giant leap.

Chapter 19

KATE SAT ON the bed and ran her silver-backed brush through Sarah's dark curls one final time to make sure all the tangles were gone. She rose and went to the dressing table, returning with a long length of shiny red ribbon. She knelt in front of the girl and held it out to her. "Would you like to wear this, Sarah?"

"You mean it?" Sarah, her blue eyes shining, looked from the ribbon to Kate. "For real? You'll let me?"

The girl's excitement over such a small thing tugged at Kate's heart. "It's yours. A little present from me to you. Here now, turn around and I'll tie a pretty bow in your hair."

When the task was completed, Sarah turned back around. The eager look on her face begged for approval.

Tears stinging her eyes, Kate snatched the child into her arms for an impulsive hug. It'd been too long since she'd brushed a young girl's hair, tied a bright ribbon in it, held a child to her breast. She pressed a kiss into Sarah's soft, sweet-smelling cheek. "You look wonderful, sweetheart. Just wait until Celia and Matt and your father see you."

"Don't forget Unca Jesse."

"Of course. And your Uncle Jesse."

"I'm gonna show 'em right now." Sarah started to run off.

"Not so fast, pumpkin." Kate caught Sarah before she ran through the open door. "I've got another surprise for you."

Sarah fairly bounced in her boots. "For me? What is it? Can I see it now?"

Kate laughed out loud at the child's infectious enthusiasm. "Yes, you may have it now. But I want to show you something first."

She took Sarah by the hand and led her back to the bed. Kate sat on the edge of the mattress and settled the child on her lap with an arm around her waist. In her other hand, she held up her locket. The catch opened with a soft click.

Sarah's eyes grew wide at the tintype inside. "Oooh, she's so pretty. Is that you when you were little?"

"No, sweetheart. This is my daughter, Teddy. What I'm about to give you belonged to her. It was very precious to Teddy and I want you to take good care of it for me."

"What is it, Kate? Won't Teddy miss it?"

Kate swallowed the sudden lump in her throat. She hurried to answer before she couldn't. "I think Teddy would've liked a nice girl like you to take care of Annie for her."

"Annie?"

"I take Annie everywhere I go, but she's getting tired of traveling. She wants to settle down and have a home of her own."

She led Sarah across the room to her carpetbag. Kneeling, she flipped open the clasp.

Suddenly, she felt his presence behind her. He hadn't said a word, hadn't made a sound, but she knew just the same. The feeling was as certain and strong as the warmth of Sarah's hand enveloped within her own.

Her belly did a wild flip-flop and her heart beat a faster rhythm. A surge of heat curled through her as memories overcame her of the last time she'd been in a bedroom with

Morgan. All of the tender, arousing ways he'd touched her, kissed her, held her, loved her.

It didn't matter they'd tried to avoid each other for weeks, or that she'd refused to speak to him at all since he'd argued with Jesse..Nothing eased the peculiar sensations that assailed her whenever he was close by.

Forcing herself to remain as she was, to act as if he had no effect on her whatsoever, she removed a bundle from the carpetbag and unwrapped it.

"This—" She placed a lovely china doll in Sarah's waiting arms. "—is Annie. You'll take good care of her, won't you?"

Sarah wrapped an arm around Kate's neck and squeezed, all the while keeping a protective hold on her new treasure. "Oh, Kate, thank you! Thank you! I never had anything more beautifuller. She looks just like you."

Overcome by emotion, Kate couldn't have corrected the girl's grammar even if she'd been so inclined. She wasn't, though, since the love in those chubby arms spoke eloquent volumes.

Sarah drew back, worry clouding her features. "What about Teddy? She'll miss Annie, won't she?"

Kate swallowed hard. How could she explain about Teddy? About a child who never really had a chance to live? She turned and lifted her gaze to Morgan. He stood in the doorway, feet planted wide apart, hazel eyes gleaming with a soft look.

"We'll talk about it later," he answered for her. "Why don't you go downstairs and show Celia your new dolly?"

Clutching Annie, Sarah nodded and rushed off.

Morgan crossed the threshold and removed his dark hat. He twirled the brim around his fingers. He looked as strong and confident as ever, yet there was an odd discomfort about him.

"That was mighty nice of you. Thank you," he said as Sarah's footsteps echoed down the hallway.

He looked so sincere, so appealing. She couldn't bear to acknowledge the dangerous longing flowing through her veins. She turned away and started to close the carpetbag. "No need for thanks, Marshal. Sarah's happiness is thanks enough."

"I need to talk to you, ma'am."

Ma'am? Kate whirled around, not so much from what he said as from the new respect she heard in his voice. As welcome as it was, a sharp sense of loss pained her because he hadn't called her 'darlin' as he usually did. Keenly aware he'd never want her if he knew the whole truth of her past, she silently berated herself for the silly reaction.

Still twirling his hat in his hands, he cleared his throat. "There's trouble." He looked at her long and hard, and the silence echoed between them.

Sensing his reluctance to tell her more, she prompted, "What happened?"

"I have to go to town and check it out. Please come with me, ma'am."

It was a statement, not a question. She wondered what he'd do when she refused, and braced herself for another confrontation.

"Ready yourself," he said. "I'll be downstairs waiting. Don't take too long, ma'am." He turned to leave, but halted at the sound of her voice.

"I'm afraid I'm unable to go. Jesse still isn't well enough for me to leave him. Besides, if he were, I'd have to leave town, wouldn't I? Those were the terms of our bargain, were they not?"

Morgan swore under his breath and stuffed his hat on his head. "Don't make me lose my temper, Mrs. Stewart. I'm tryin' to ask you polite-like and all—"

"Why? You've made your disdain for me plain enough over the past weeks. Why change now?"

He swore again and muttered something.

"I'm afraid I didn't catch what you just said, Marshal."

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "I said I was wrong, Mrs. Stewart."

"Wrong?" It wasn't exactly an apology, but it would do. Pleased he was the one squirming for a change, she didn't even try to hide her grin. "About what?"

"I believe you now—about the garlic, about bein' a widow woman, all of it."

Her grin grew broader.

"I wouldn't smile just yet. There's been a murder and it's got somethin' to do with you. I want you with me at all times for your own protection."

Her smile died. "Who was murdered? What connection does it have with me?"

He refused to meet her gaze.

"You've got to tell me, Morgan. I won't go with you if you don't."

His whiskered jaw rigid, he slapped his hat against his thigh.

"Well?" she said.

He stuffed his hat on his head again. "Whore from the Alamo named Squirrel Tooth Sal. Del said her thighs were cut up pretty bad." He looked at her, his eyes full of concern and compassion, and she knew he understood what the prostitute's disfigurement meant to her.

Lost in thought, she walked slowly to the window. Blindly looking out at the sunlit landscape, she felt a cold shadow cross her soul. She jumped when she felt his hands on her shoulders.

He removed his hands from her, then with great gentleness laid them on her upper arms, lightly rubbing them up and down. "Katie," he whispered against her ear. "I won't let him hurt you. I swear it."

"But who ... why ... I don't understand." She drew a deep breath and clutched the sill with trembling hands.

Morgan turned her around in his arms and cradled her head against his chest. Listening to his steady heartbeat, inhaling the familiar scents of leather, sunshine, and tobacco that clung to him, she drew comfort from his strength. He tightened his gentle embrace and it soothed her.

She drew back a space and looked up at him. "It doesn't make sense. No one knows about my scars ... except you."

He cupped her cheek. "Someone knows, Katie. He knows and he's sendin' you a message. A warnin'."

Kate read the promise in his steady gaze. She knew Morgan would protect her with his life if necessary.

"The sooner we get to town," he said, "the sooner we can find out what's goin' on. Meet me downstairs?"

This time it was a request, and grateful for his supportive presence, she nodded her reply.

"There's one other thing." He crossed the room and pulled a trunk from beneath the bed. He flipped open the lid and pointed to the contents, a breathtaking array of jewel-toned gowns and a wealth of accessories in coral, ivory, and tortoiseshell.

"They're a mite wrinkled and a little musty. When Mary ran off, she left behind the gowns I had made for her. They're probably not as fine as what you're used to, either."

The pain in those wonderful hazel eyes when he spoke of his wife's rejection plucked at her heart.

Morgan rushed on. "You and Mary are 'bout the same size, but they might be a bit snug here and there. You're curvier in spots than she was." He shot her a look that told her he was afraid he might have offended her.

He gestured at the ruined bottle-green silk she'd been wearing since she'd begun caring for Jesse. "A lady shouldn't have to go to town in a stained gown. Feel free to pick anythin' that strikes your fancy."

Rendered speechless by his thoughtfulness, she sat on the bed and stared after him as he left. The door closed behind him with a soft click.

Not trusting her shaking legs to support her yet, she remained seated. She twisted the folds of her skirt in her

hands, echoing the way her insides twisted and knotted into a messy jumble. Fear began to churn in her belly, but it wasn't provoked by anything Thorne had done. She doubted he'd have the nerve to approach her again after what she'd done to him the last time he'd bothered her.

What truly frightened her were the tender feelings blossoming in her heart for Morgan. She wasn't at all sure she could stop them now that they'd started. Just thinking of him now, of the way his arms had enfolded her in a protective embrace, hot and sweet desire curled through her body.

She groaned aloud, feeling even worse when she thought about Sarah and Matt and Celia and Jesse. She'd been foolish to allow them to become so dear to her. If they ever found out about her past, about the awful thing she'd done to her own daughter, they would hate her. She didn't think she could bear it if that happened.

She squeezed her eyes shut against the longing that swept through her, a longing she believed buried long ago. Mother of God, how she ached with need. The need to raise a family, the need to feel the warmth of a child's embrace every night, the need to feel the comfort of a man's strong arms. Morgan's arms.

And that need frightened her more than anything else in the world.

* * * *

KATE PEERED AROUND Morgan, her shoulders sagging with relief as the town's bustling streets came into view. The ride had been a short one, but not short enough.

Sitting atop Silverheels, so close to Morgan she could smell the mingled scents of tobacco, rye, and man drifting back on the wind, she'd realized soon after they'd mounted that such proximity was a terrible mistake.

Her nerves were badly frayed, and she was unsure just how much longer she could maintain her resolve to keep a safe emotional distance from Morgan, especially with her arms wrapped around his waist and her front pressed into his solid back. As each step of the giant gray's hooves carried them closer to the center of Abilene, she was keenly aware of his chest moving under her palms, the sway of his hips against her thighs, and the intriguing play of muscles rippling across his back.

A small, traitorous part of her began to wish the ride would never end. Just as she began to think it never would, Morgan reined Silverheels to a halt in front of the Alamo and brought his long leg over the stallion's neck to dismount. She slid from the saddle under her own power, ignoring the hand he offered. It was a long way from the gray's back to the ground and she stumbled when her feet met the dirt. Morgan reached for her, but again she forced herself to rebuff him.

He stepped close. "Somethin' wrong, ma'am?"

She stepped back, avoiding his gaze, concentrating instead on wiping the dust from her skirts. "I'm fine, Marshal."

His spurs jangled as he drew even nearer. All other sounds from the street—harness clinking, wagon wheels creaking, horses whinnying and mules braying—faded away. Kate heard and saw nothing but Morgan, felt nothing but the firmness of

his fingers under her chin, the gentle pressure as he forced her to look at him.

"Don't be afraid," he said, so softly she knew she was the only one on the busy street who heard the reassurance. "I won't let anythin' happen to you. I promised, remember?"

She nodded once, torn between her desire to draw closer to Morgan and her need to keep her heart safe. Even now she could feel it thumping hard, and slowly but surely beginning to crumble to pieces in her chest.

"What is it, ma'am? You still afraid?"

Oh, God, yes. "Nonsense, Marshal McCall. I've told you before. Thorne doesn't frighten me. I can handle him."

"Look, I can tell somethin's wrong. Talk to me."

Lord, how she wished she could. "Nothing is wrong."

"The hell it ain't. You do that—" He pointed at the locket's cord twisting in her hands. "—whenever somethin' worries you. What is it?"

Taken back by his perception, it took her a moment to respond. "I'd appreciate it if you'd stop acting like my keeper."

She looked past him toward the saloon, not wanting to know if her sharpness had hurt him since it couldn't be helped. The sooner she learned to live without him, the better. "Shall we proceed? As long as I'm here, I might as well report on the series of murders for my readers. You said one of them occurred here at the Alamo?"

Brushing past him, she made her way to the plate-glass doors that were as busy this morning as the night she'd stood in the rain peeking through them.

Morgan's fingers closed around her wrist. "Hold it."

She drew back as if his touch had burned her, feeling the heat of his nearness clear down to her toes.

"I'm sorry, but you can't go in there."

"Nonsense." She took another step toward the entrance.

Morgan stepped up to block her path.

"I've been in the Alamo before," she said.

"Don't matter. No ladies allowed."

Kate's pulse skipped a beat. Finally, in an unguarded moment when he wasn't trying to be 'polite-like,' he had referred to her as a lady. Until that moment, she hadn't realized just how very much his respect meant to her.

"Besides," he continued, "it's no safer durin' the day than it was that night."

He gave her a smoky look that was slow and appreciative. "That peach-colored dress suits you better'n those dark weeds you're partial to. With those coral ear-bobs and matchin' do-dads in your hair, you look sweet enough to eat."

He gave her an outrageous wink and a wicked smile that made her knees weak. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm not the only man who thinks so."

She ignored the admiring looks from the men who passed them on the boardwalk, but she tucked Morgan's compliment away in a small, private place in her heart.

She nodded at the lethal-looking whip clenched in his fist. "You have Medusa, and I have my derringer. I'd say I'm safe enough. Besides, how do you expect to keep an eye on me, 'protect' me I believe you said, if you're in there and I'm out here?"

She held her breath as a variety of emotions played across Morgan's tanned face. He was thinking so hard on it, she could almost hear his thoughts tumbling as he tried to formulate an answer that would satisfy them both. His hand began to clench and unclench around Medusa. He opened his mouth—

"Katherine? Is that lovely vision in coral really you?"

Kate turned. If she were the type to shoot first and ask questions second, she would've gladly shot Charles for his untimely interruption. As it was, she forced a smile to her lips and called out a greeting in return, ever aware of Morgan's fingers closing protectively around her arm.

"What a lovely surprise," Charles said. "Perhaps if you've finished your business with the marshal, you'll allow me to escort you to your next appointment. We could share a small repast afterward and catch up on old times."

Morgan shifted his body slightly, and she was certain he wanted to afford Charles a better view of his hand on her arm. "Afraid not, Charlie," he said, possessiveness in every syllable. "The lady and I have business inside. Together."

Inside? Together? She slid a glance at Morgan, her puzzled frown melting into a knowing grin. Was that jealousy she saw glittering in his eyes? "Marshal, I'm quite capable of answering for myself."

Turning to her brother-in-law, she saw his face was set in a rigid mask of self-control. It was one she knew from experience would soon give way to rousing fury if she didn't separate the two men.

"Charles, please," she said, forcing a placating sweetness into her voice. "I'm working on a story right now."

"Surely you don't mean to enter this ... this—" Charles gestured at the saloon. "—den of iniquity, again?"

She ignored the censure in his eyes, praying he wouldn't bring up the issue of her own sinfulness in front of Morgan again. "Will you be at the Independence Day frolic in a few days?"

Charles nodded a grudging reply and she rushed on, "We'll have a grand time and catch up on everything then, shall we?"

The slight softening of Charles's mouth told her she'd succeeded in easing the sting of her rejection. She knew, though, she'd still have some fancy explaining to do when she was finally alone with him. Morgan's possessiveness would've been all too obvious even to a stranger.

With a dark look and a bit of tugging, she managed to disengage her arm from Morgan's grasp. She stepped up to her brother-in-law and squeezed his hand in farewell. "Until then?"

With a slight bow, Charles raised her hand to his lips. He remained rooted to the spot until she and Morgan passed through the Alamo's wide doors.

As they stepped into the darkened interior, a cacophony of sounds assaulted her ears. But even the raucous laughter and the tinny sound of the piano couldn't drown out the nagging question in her head. Had a spark of jealousy convinced Morgan to allow her to accompany him into the rowdy saloon?

A giggle bubbled up inside her, but one look at his stormy expression forced her to suppress it.

Despite her determination to hold herself aloof from the marshal, her heart suddenly felt lighter. She could've raced back outside and hugged Charles for provoking Morgan into showing he cared about her as a woman, even if it was only a little bit.

With a determined step and a protective hand at her elbow, Morgan led Kate through the smoky saloon. Heads turned to follow their progress. The music died, and the clink of gold on green baize was conspicuously absent.

His fingers tightened on her arm. Glancing at him, she was struck by the severity of his expression, and by the first trace of uncertainty he'd ever revealed. Halfway through the room, she stopped, suddenly uneasy. "Morgan?"

"You can't go upstairs, Katie."

"But I must. How can I write about a murder if I don't know what's happened?"

"I'll tell you everythin' you need to know. Later."

"No." She pulled free of him. "My readers need to see what I see. Feel what I feel."

She searched his face for some sign he understood. "Don't you see? The fat banker reading his paper after supper, the clerk struggling to put another coin in his purse ... I have to make them care about Dora and Sal before they can care about their deaths. And they won't, not if I give them only the cold facts."

He shifted impatiently and glanced at the roomful of men watching them.

"I need to see everything for myself," she said. "I must talk to the women upstairs—"

"No."

"But—"

"You don't belong in the same room as a whore." His lips thinned and disappeared beneath his moustache. He took her arm again and started to usher her toward the gleaming bar. He stopped abruptly. "More damned drovers in here than on Saturday night," he growled.

"So?"

"I was goin' to leave you with Billy, but he's got his hands full tendin' bar."

"What about that nice Mr. Hart?" Kate eyed the faces jamming the saloon, but none belonged to Del.

Morgan hissed an oath and urged her up the steps.

"I may talk to the women after all?"

"No, but I can't leave you downstairs and I can't take you back outside. Not with someone gunnin' for you. Damn, I wish Jesse was here."

They rounded a corner on the landing and nearly collided with a tall, curvy calico queen. A black ostrich feather bounced atop her blonde curls.

Morgan's fingers closed around the woman's bare arm to steady her. "Cherry, I was just lookin' for you. Say hello to Mrs. Stewart."

The blonde ignored Kate, but her kohl-rimmed eyes softened as she gazed up at Morgan. Her voluptuous body, clad in a scrap of white satin, melted seamlessly against him.

Kate stiffened as a sharp stab of jealousy ripped through her insides, and she no longer found Morgan's reaction to Charles earlier the least bit amusing. She suspected that if Morgan had felt toward her brother-in-law even half of what she now felt for the woman in his arms, he'd shown remarkable restraint in not slicing Charles to bits with his whip.

"Cherry, darlin', you still have that pepper-box stuffed in your garter?"

Her garter? How in blue blazes did he know about that?

"Loaded and ready to go," the blonde said. "Just like me."

Morgan chuckled low in his throat. "Would you take Mrs. Stewart to your room 'til I'm finished in Sal's room?"

Her curves pressed deeper into Morgan, and Kate suddenly realized it was no longer an act of seduction. Cherry's eyes were now red and misty.

"Was Sal your friend?" Kate asked softly.

The woman's eyes grew cold and hard. The animosity in their depths made Kate step back.

Morgan rubbed soothing hands over Cherry's naked arms. "You want Sal's killer caught, don't you?"

Cherry's emphatic nod set her plume bobbing.

"I'll catch him, honey, I promise. But I need you to help me now. Take Mrs. Stewart to your room. Lock the door. Anybody but me comes in, use that pepper-box, y'hear?"

Cherry clung to him like bindweed and whispered in his ear.

"Easy now," he said. "Later, all right?"

The Lawman
by Lily Sorren

Kate's heart lurched. Her knees wobbled and she grabbed the railing for support. She'd been so sure there was more between herself and Morgan than a mere dalliance. Suddenly, she longed to be anywhere but here, with anyone but Morgan's paramour.

Chapter 20

MORGAN'S FOOTSTEPS ECHOED down the passageway until he disappeared into a room. Kate had no choice but to follow his lover into another room farther down the narrow hall. The blonde locked the door behind them and deposited the key in her swollen cleavage.

Kate spun on the woman, determined to hold on to her pride. "It isn't necessary to keep watch over me. I can take care of myself."

"I think I'll just stay anyway." Cherry slanted her a sly, cat-like smile. "I'd do whatever Morgan asked."

Kate fumed in silence, unable to stop her imagination from taunting her with visions of the shapely blonde twining her limbs around Morgan's body, doing 'whatever Morgan asked.'

"Oh, dear." She clasped a hand to her mouth, unprepared for the wave of nausea sweeping through her. The floor tilted suddenly and she reached for a brass bedpost to steady herself.

Cherry's hand felt cool against her forehead. "No fever, but you don't look so good."

Had Morgan found his lover's touch as soft, as appealing? Kate's stomach rolled over again and she lurched away from the bed, desperately searching for a basin or chamber pot.

Too ill to protest, she allowed Cherry to guide her to a basin and hold her head as she thoroughly disgraced herself. Mortified beyond bearing, she let Cherry lead her back to the

bed and press her down onto the garish red satin counterpane.

She closed her eyes, grateful to feel the blonde's cool hands a moment later as they held a damp cloth to her forehead. A sharp odor stabbed the air beneath her nose, and she started. Levering herself up on an elbow, she found Cherry hovering, waving a small brown bottle in her direction.

"Billy'd skin me alive if he knew I filched his best brandy," Cherry said with a small smile. She held it out to Kate. "Here, have a sip. Good for female problems, know what I mean?"

"No, thank you." With a sigh, Kate sank back against a mountain of gaudy pillows. "I don't drink spirits."

"Suit yourself." Cherry bent to stash the bottle beneath the bed and her plunging neckline fell open further to reveal an embarrassing amount of her curvaceous figure.

A figure Morgan obviously knew well. It was a body he'd mapped most likely in the very bed she now laid upon, with his hands, his lips ... hands and lips that had brought her to heaven's gate.

And deposited her squarely in the middle of perdition. What a fool she'd made of herself. "On second thought, I will try some brandy, if you don't mind."

Several long swigs later, Cherry held the half-empty bottle to the light. "Feelin' better?"

"Not ... not really." She made a beeline for the basin.

"Maybe that wasn't such a good idea after all," Cherry said as she helped Kate back to bed.

Mortified down to the tips of her toes at having to lie in a bed where Morgan had probably been with Cherry, and at

having to rely on his lover for anything, she struggled to sit up. The room kept spinning.

"Sure you're all right, Miz Stewart?"

Kate reached for her reticule and pulled out her notebook. "I'm fine, but I'd like to ask you something."

Cherry's eyes narrowed. A veneer of hardness crept across her features.

Kate silently acknowledged that the woman would be very pretty without the heavy application of kohl and rouge. "I want to know about Sal. And Dora, too. Tell me about their lives, won't you?"

"Why? So's all your upstanding readers can learn about the wages of sin and shake their heads over us fallen women? You wanna tell them all the sordid details of how Sal and Dora got what they deserved?"

Kate put down her pencil and notebook and folded her hands in her lap. "I'm sorry for what happened to your friends. Nobody deserves to die like that, no matter how they've lived or what they've done."

Cherry's eyes softened the slightest bit.

"Please, Cherry. Whoever killed them is after me. Marshal McCall can verify that if you don't believe me."

Suddenly the hard veneer cracked and Cherry's face crumpled. With a sniffle, she perched on the edge of the bed. "Nobody cares about a whore. The women hate you. They cross the street to avoid you if you dare leave the Devil's Addition. And men only want you for a ready poke. Morgan, he's different..."

Kate ignored the jealousy roiling again inside her at the dreamy way Cherry said the marshal's name, pushing it behind her writer's instinct to get at a good story. She laid a hand over Cherry's and offered her a handkerchief, and it was as if a floodgate opened. The words spilled out of the other woman as fast as she thought of them.

Kate's pencil flew across the paper, keeping pace.

"Morgan don't gawk at us every Sunday mornin' when we skinny dip in the Smoky Hill. He's a real gent, though sometimes I wish he'd come by." Cherry let out a low laugh, almost like a purr. "You'd be surprised how much business I do when church is done. Sometimes durin' service, too. But no siree, Morgan ain't like that at all—"

"Can we forget about Marshal McCall for a moment? Tell me a little about Dora and Sal."

Cherry sniffled again. "Yeah, well, nobody knows where Dora came from—some dusty hole in the ground I never heard tell of. Sal was from Chicago. I heard Morgan lived there once—"

"Cherry, please."

"I worked in Chicago once, but not in the kinda place Sal did..."

Kate wrote it all, every word, knowing the details would bring the murdered Squirrel Tooth Sal vividly to life once again in print.

"Sal's employer had certain rules," Cherry continued. "He took every stitch of the girls' clothes. They had to walk around stark nekked all the time so's they couldn't run away."

Kate gasped, her pencil still.

Cherry raised a hand in the air, fingers heavenward. "True, I tell you. Every word." After a long swallow from the brandy bottle, she talked on and on.

Kate felt her eyes grow wide and her anger increase for the injustices Sal and the other women had been forced to endure just to keep a roof over their heads.

"That was at the better houses," Cherry said. "The cribs were even worse. Your eyes would pop right outta your head if you could hear some of the stories the others could tell you..."

"I'd like to hear them, Cherry."

Disbelief stole over Cherry's face.

"Truly, I would. Imagine if everyone could understand what you and the others must endure just to make a living. You don't want to live like this forever, do you?"

"Would you?"

Cherry's vehemence gave Kate pause, but she forced herself to press on. "Wouldn't you want people to know about Sal and Dora? To remember their lives for something important and not merely for how they died?"

Cherry studied her a long time, most likely, Kate surmised, to determine the depth of her sincerity.

"We can make their deaths—their lives—count for something, Cherry. Help me."

Hesitantly, the blonde gave the barest nod, not even enough to disturb the feather on her head. "How?"

"Convince your friends to talk to me. Let me hear their stories in their own words."

"What will that do?"

"You women need a better life, better jobs. Training, maybe, or husbands—"

Cherry's eyebrows rose. "One of your stories can do all that?"

"Not right away and not all by itself. But you have to start somewhere, and my article is a good place, better than most. You heard what one of my stories did to Captain Thorne?"

Cherry nodded, this time more vigorously.

"I can help, but I've got to know more."

Cherry paced to and fro, obviously debating what to do and whether to trust her or not.

"It's been a long time since I've trusted, too, Cherry. I promise you, my article won't hurt your friends, and I'll understand if you say no."

Kate's stomach wrenched again. She pressed a hand to her middle and swallowed hard against the rising tide of nausea sweeping through her. "I've got to know more."

Cherry halted suddenly, then she turned and left the room without a word. From the other side of the door, the key clicked softly in the lock.

Soon after, Cherry returned with a handful of scantily clad women. Painted and wary, they floated into the room on a thick cloud of cheap perfume that made Kate's eyes water. A few piled onto the bed with her, and the others pressed close forming a small, glittering circle of beads and bright feathers. Cherry spoke first and the others slowly opened up.

When they finished telling their stories, each more horrific and outrageous and demeaning than the last, Kate knew she had the details she needed to paint a vivid word picture of the

nymphs du prairie. Thanks to these women, her article would tug at any jaded reader's heartstrings.

Thirty minutes later, she closed her notebook with a snap. "Thank you," she said, taking each woman's hand in turn before they filed out of Cherry's room. She started to put away her pencil.

"Wait, Miz Stewart." Cherry jumped up, her eyes bright now at the prospect of the changes she and the others might effect. "Alice wants a turn to talk with you. She's been busy with Old Hank, but he don't take but a minute."

In her excitement and haste, she left no time for Kate to reply. Kate waited, listening for the turn of the key in the lock. When she failed to hear it, she went to the door and paused, a hand on the knob. Sorely tempted to remain and hear what Alice had to say, she probably would've stayed at any other time. But not now. Not when Morgan was investigating two murders that were somehow linked to her.

Slowly, she opened the door and looked both ways to be sure the hall was empty before she tiptoed across the threshold. She made her way to the room she'd seen Morgan enter. With an ear to the door's smooth wood, she heard his velvet drawl resonate on the other side. Voices she didn't recognize, raised in anger, alternated with the inebriated slurrings of Doc Pettibone. She cracked the door and slipped inside, unobserved by the men as they glared at each other.

"Whad'ya care if whores get killed?" A mustachioed man dressed entirely in brown poked a finger in the direction of Morgan's face. "You got Cherry and Cattle Kate."

Morgan's hand shot out and closed around the finger, nearly snapping it off, forcing the man halfway to his knees. "Don't you ever let me hear you talk about Mrs. Stewart like that again." His calm tone added a dark, dangerous edge to the threat.

A tall, prosperous-looking gentleman separated them. "You've got to do something, Marshal," he said.

Morgan turned a steely look on the man. "And what do you suggest, Mayor?"

"Hell, you're the one with the star on your chest. All I know is, those drovers are gonna turn this town inside out if we lose one more whore. There wasn't enough of 'em to go around before."

Kate held a hand to her stomach, sickened again, but differently this time, and worse. Those women in Cherry's room had spoken the truth. They were nothing but a commodity; somehow less than human to these men.

"I'll find the bastard who did this," Morgan said, stooping to pull the blanket back from the prone body on the floor.

Kate let out a cry of alarm.

"What the devil—" Morgan dropped the blanket and descended on her. "I told you to stay put."

The blood rushed from her head as she stared at the warning that had been carved for her into those lifeless limbs. She swayed.

Morgan scooped her up in his arms. "Kate?"

One look at her pale face and quivering lips confirmed Morgan's suspicions. He held her close, trying in vain to ease

her body's violent trembling. "Where's Cherry? Why were you alone?"

"May I be of assistance, Marshal?" Pettibone extended a hand toward Kate's forehead.

Kate shrank from the man and curled herself into Morgan. He felt a wetness above his collar and knew she was crying now. He had to swallow hard before he could speak, but even then he felt a catch in his throat. "No thanks, Doc."

"If there's anything at all I can do..."

The rest of Pettibone's offer faded away as he shouldered past the men and through the doorway, then headed back to Cherry's room. Childlike, Kate clung to him as he tried to deposit her on the bed. As he gently pried her arms from around his neck, his heart twisted at the fear in her eyes, and at the way her pale face grew even paler against the flaming quilt.

He left her just long enough to pour water from the pitcher. He returned and sat beside her, holding the cup to her lips. He stroked her cheek and found it so cold, a finger of fear slid down his spine.

Her lips quivered in a tremulous smile as she silently thanked him. He saw the tears sparkling in her eyes, and behind them, trust. He knew then, with a certainty, that he'd give his life to keep this woman safe.

"That was mighty foolish, Kate," he said softly. "You can't wander around alone. There's a killer loose."

"And he really is after me, isn't he?"

"I'll keep you safe, darlin'."

"Oh, Morgan," she said, a hitch in her voice. She was in his arms before his next breath.

"Hush, sweetheart. Hush now." He crooned whatever words of comfort he could think of, rubbing her back all the while. She was breathing fast and hard, and he feared at any minute she would faint on him.

"Morgan, she ... she was—"

"I didn't want you to see."

"—Cut up ... like me ... her legs."

"I know, darlin', I know. You gotta tell me now. Was it Thorne who did that to you? Is he the one who killed Sal and Dora?"

She shook her head violently and he supposed the whole incident had been too much for her. Trembling even harder than before, she burrowed deeper against him, trying, he figured, to hide from the horror of what she'd seen down the hall.

"Thorne never saw my legs." Hugging him tight the way she was, her voice sounded small and far away. "He doesn't know about my scars or what they mean."

What the hell did they mean? He had to know, and yet now wasn't the time to push her for answers. She was damn close to falling apart. "Maybe he spied on you. In your bath or as you dressed for bed."

The thought of another man looking at her that way brought a rush of fury racing through his veins. He strove for a calmness he was far from feeling. "Let's get you home, darlin'."

He picked her up, wondering if she could possibly take as much comfort from his embrace as he felt just holding her, just feeling the beat of her heart echo against his chest and the silk of her hair slide along his throat.

At the head of the stairs, she called out to him. "I'll walk the rest of the way," she said. "We don't want anyone to think Cattle Kate is just another weak female, do we?"

His heart swelling with pride, he set her down. She squared her shoulders and lifted her chin a notch. The sight reminded him of when he'd first seen her at the depot in the middle of a thunderstorm. She'd carried herself the same way then, gathering her courage to face any and all threats, seeming to grow taller before his eyes. She gave him a little smile, and his heart tumbled over.

"A weak female? Nobody'd ever believe that." He placed her hand in the crook of his arm.

He watched her as they descended the stairs, admiring the regal way she carried herself. Nobody'd guess that she'd been frightened half to death just minutes ago. If he hadn't seen it with his own eyes, he wouldn't believe it himself.

As they entered the saloon, he felt the slightest hesitation in her step. Her fingers tightened on his arm. "I'm here, Katie," he whispered. "It's all right."

"Thorne..."

The word was a ragged, breathless whisper, and he might've missed it altogether if he hadn't been watching her intently. Following her gaze, he honed in on the man Kate was staring at.

* * * *

ONE WHOLE NIGHT and two lousy days. That's how long he'd been holed up with this piece of shit, and he was no closer now to discovering the truth than when he'd started.

Seated at his desk opposite Thorne, Morgan rubbed the weariness from his bloodshot eyes. "One more time. What're you doin' in Abilene? Why were you in the Alamo?"

Thorne grunted and slouched further down in the hardback chair, hanging his manacled hands between his thighs. "You ain't fed me nothin' but scraps fer two danged days. I ain't sayin' another word until I get some decent grub. She ain't worth me goin' hungry—"

Morgan lunged across the desk and grabbed his prisoner's throat so hard and so quick that Thorne's backside squeaked across the seat of his chair. "You'll talk, because if you don't, I'll be feedin' you your tongue for supper."

With his free hand, he squeezed Thorne's cheeks, forcing his mouth open. "After I rip it out."

Thorne gurgled and nodded his head, and the marshal released him. As his prisoner rubbed his throat and sputtered and gasped for breath, Morgan demanded, "Again. From the beginning."

"The story don't change none with the tellin'. Like I told you, I just got to town three nights ago. Been ridin' drag for three months for some Texas outfit. All that time, I didn't see nothin' but the south end of three thousand northbound longhorns. Didn't breathe or eat nothin' but dust from sun-up 'til we made camp every night." Thorne strained against the

shackles. "Didn't even know the bitch was here. Had enough of her at Fort Riley to last me a lifetime's worth."

He smiled then, a chilling smile that turned Morgan's stomach. He wanted to stuff the man's rotten teeth down his miserable, worthless throat. But he couldn't afford to do that. Not 'til he knew for sure. "Had enough of her? How?"

"Guess the stories I heard about Abilene's marshal are true then. If you were any kinda man, you'd know what it means when a man says he had a woman. She liked it, too. Said it was the best she ever had." The oily smile widened and Thorne, like a serpent, flicked his tongue in and out while a gleeful light showed in his beady eyes.

Morgan pulled a bottle from his desk drawer and shoved it into Thorne's hands. Then he stood, clenching his own hands into tight fists to prevent himself from wrapping them around the man's thick, dirty throat and squeezing the life out of him. "Tell me more. What was she like?"

"You like to watch, too?" Thorne said. "Or just like to hear about it?"

"Talk!"

"Sure thing, Marshal. I'll tell you all about her. I had her goin' real good, all right. That's why she tried to ruin me, y'know. 'Cause I wouldn't give it to her no more. Got tired of her right quick."

The bottle clinked against Thorne's teeth. What a damned shame to waste all that good rye on a pig. He felt like swigging the whole bottle himself, but settled for making and lighting a cigarette instead.

"Hey, can I get one of those?"

Morgan propped a hip on his desk, releasing his pent-up breath on a cloud of gray smoke. It was always in the eyes. He would see the truth in Thorne's beady eyes, one way or another. "What's Cattle Kate look like?"

Thorne let out a wild hoot. "Look like? Hell, they're all the same with the candle blowed out, ain't they?"

Thorne grinned up at him, then spun a tall tale about his love-making prowess that the greenest, most gullible kid would have trouble swallowing. He figured his prisoner could have made a better living by writing dime novels than riding drag. Finally, Thorne got around to a description of Kate.

A thatch of red curls between her thighs, rather than dark as night.

Small nipples, brown as cherries, instead of large, luscious coral ones.

Legs smooth as a looking glass and as unmarred as the sea on a windless morning.

Hell and damnation.

* * * *

HE'D NEVER SEEN her so happy, Morgan realized. Surrounded by his children, cooking alongside Celia in his kitchen, Kate looked like a pretty, little hummingbird flitting happily from flower to flower.

She was even humming now as she filled a large basket with the meal they'd take to the Independence Day games that afternoon. The sound of her happiness filled his heart to bursting. It had been a long time since he'd felt such contentment. Despite his better judgment, he was loathe to

let the feeling pass yet. Even as he warned himself not to, he couldn't help wondering if she felt it, too, and if she'd consider staying...

He pulled himself up short. It would be dangerous to let his thoughts go all soft. After, maybe. When it was finally over, when she was really and truly safe, he would ask her then.

"I'll be in the barn," he said, coming up behind her. "Call me when you're ready to lift that basket."

She turned then, and stood practically within the circle of his arms. She looked so happy, so lovely, she took his breath away, despite the shadows under her eyes and the paleness of her cheeks. They only made her more precious to him.

He wished he had a horseshoe to tie to each of his wrists and weigh his arms to his sides to stop them from rising and pulling her into an embrace. As it was, it was all he could do not to pull her to him when she looked up at him. Her eyes shone with excitement for the day ahead of them, but not enough to blot out the wariness he saw there. It was the same look she'd had every hour since the night he'd left her in Cherry's care at the Alamo.

A shy smile touched her lips. "You won't forget your promise?"

"No, ma'am." He drew an X over his chest, atop the heart laden down with worry for her. He forced a grin. "I'll take you wherever you want to go today just like I promised, and I'll introduce you to whoever you want to talk to. You'll have enough after today to write ten stories, if that's what tickles

your fancy." Enough to keep you here for ten lifetimes, he wanted to say, but didn't yet dare.

"That's what I want, Morgan. Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet, darlin'. Day's not over yet." Though he wished to God it was.

Although he knew he shouldn't, he needed to and firmly intended to do it anyway. With a quick glance to make sure everyone else in the kitchen was still busy at their own tasks, he leaned over and planted an all-too-brief kiss on Kate's smiling mouth.

"Mmmm..." she murmured against his lips. Pulling her close, he felt her heart beating wildly like a hummingbird's wings. He longed to pull her even closer, to lift her in his arms and carry her up to his room and keep her safe and smiling and murmuring like this forever.

With his hands on her shoulders, he set her away from him.

Her smile faltered the tiniest bit. "Cold feet, Marshal?"

"Not on your life, darlin'. There's plenty more where that came from." He wiggled his eyebrows in lascivious suggestion.

Kate's soft laughter stayed with him long after he left the kitchen. It warmed him clear through the whole time it took him to retrieve the bundle from the trunk at the foot of his bed and carry it out to the barn. But it wasn't enough to prevent the chill that gripped his heart when he unwrapped the oilskin and laid his Colts on a workbench.

With great care he took the revolvers apart, piece by piece. He readied them, cleaning and oiling, and all the while

wished he had more time to hone his skill. Like any other skill, shooting required practice, and he'd had none the past two years. Not since Chicago—

He shook his head to rid himself of the bloody memories. He couldn't afford the slightest distraction today. He just prayed there were no children nearby this time when the shooting started. Taking a small leather thong from his pocket, he set to work.

"Tying the trigger down?"

Morgan whirled, the gun in his hand level and aimed. "Jesus, Jess. You know better'n to sneak up on a man."

Gesturing at the revolver, Jesse said, "Made it a thumb buster, I see."

Morgan turned back to the workbench. "Yeah, well..." He tied the narrow leather strip tightly around the Colt, freezing the trigger back. "Do you really want me to take a chance on Kate's life by not tyin' it back?"

Jesse was silent a long moment. His boots made a shuffling sound as he came up behind Morgan. "You're not just takin' up the gun again for her, but riggin' it up like a gunfighter's. You've come a long way, leastways as far as she's concerned."

Morgan's hands stilled on his task. He looked up at Jesse. "Plan on makin' her my wife, if she'll have me."

Jesse gave a long whistle. "Quite a turn-around."

Morgan smiled. "Yeah, guess it is at that."

Jesse returned the smile with a grin of his own. "I aim on givin' you a run for your money."

"You do that, Jess."

Morgan sobered, bracing himself for the argument he knew would come. He hesitated, wondering how best to tell Jesse, then decided to say it straight out. "Kate doesn't know. She still thinks Thorne's the killer."

"Damn it, why didn't you tell her the truth? She has a right to know she's still in danger."

Morgan reached for a cloth and wiped the smudges from one of the revolvers. A shaft of sunlight, streaming through the rafters, glinted off the eight-inch barrel now readied to draw blood—as ready as he wished he was to put a piece of hot lead in another human being again.

Then he thought of Kate. He recalled the dark smudges under her eyes that morning, the worry lines that etched their corners, her wary glances when she thought he wasn't looking. He slipped the revolvers into the holster at his hip.

"It's been rough on Kate ever since she got to Abilene," he said. "At first I made it difficult for her to do her job, then she spent weeks nursin' you. And all that on top of bein' afraid somebody was out to kill her. She deserves to have some fun, to feel carefree. Help me give her that, at least for this one day. She's a good woman—"

"'Bout time you saw it that way."

"She deserves a little happiness for a change. One day is all I ask."

Jesse pinned him with a hard stare. "You give me your word you'll tell Kate first thing in the mornin'? And we'll stick close to her today?"

Morgan nodded. "One of us'll be at her elbow the whole time."

Jesse swore and began to pace the length of the barn. He finally stopped directly in front of Morgan. "I still don't like it, but I'll do it. For Kate, mind you. And I'm gonna do everythin' I can from now on to win her."

"Well, now we know where we both stand, at least." Morgan put out his hand, and Jesse clasped it. "I swear I won't let anythin' happen to her, Jess. And I'll watch her like a hawk on a mouse."

"That's what worries me." Jesse thumbed the brim of his hat, pushing it back on his head. His face finally relaxed in a grin. "I think I'll just keep an eye on you while you're watchin' her."

Morgan smiled back and pumped his deputy's hand, knowing that whichever man won Kate's hand and heart, their friendship would survive.

"Thorne still locked away?"

Morgan nodded. "I thought it best. That way, the killer won't suspect we're onto him. Maybe he'll even get a little careless."

"One thing worries me. What if we don't catch him?"

"We will. One of us'll be with Kate all day. All night, too, or as long as it takes. Nobody's gonna get a chance to hurt her ever again. You'll help, Jess?"

"You don't even have to ask." He clapped a hand on Morgan's shoulder as they left the barn. "Believe I'll take the night watch, though," he said with a low chuckle.

Morgan smiled as the red ball of the sun rose higher in the sky, glad for the camaraderie he felt between them. His smile grew as he helped Kate into the wagon. Her yellow hair

The Lawman
by Lily Sorren

ribbon fluttered in the warm breeze. The faint, fresh clean scent of her, all honeysuckle and lavender and sunshine with a hint of Celia's cinnamon thrown in, teased his senses.

As he joined her on the wagon's seat and took up the reins, a feeling of foreboding climbed up his neck. He felt for the revolver strapped down to his thigh, running his hand over the carved ivory and cool metal, as if it were some kind of magical charm that could ward off the evil they were surely rolling toward.

Chapter 21

THE CITIZENS OF Abilene—year round as well as seasonal—loved nothing more than a holiday, and they turned out to celebrate Independence Day with gusto. It was Christmas, Thanksgiving, and New Year's Day all rolled into one great fire-spewing, whiskey-loving, lead-spitting blow-out.

Seated between Morgan and Celia on the hard bench of the wagon, Kate thought she had never seen anything like it, not even in Philadelphia, the birth place of liberty. She could hear the almost constant explosion of gunshots even before the wagon passed the town's deadline. Anxious, she looked to Morgan for an explanation and was surprised by his calm smile.

"It's all right, darlin'. I expect it's just some of the boys at shootin' practice."

Confused, she asked, "I thought there was an ordinance against the carrying or shooting of firearms within the town's boundaries?"

"Not today. There'll be a shootin' contest, among other things. A mite noisy, but I wager you'll get used to it before long. There'll be dancin', games, contests, and a picnic, and I want to do it all with you." He gave her a broad wink. "Along with a few other things I been itchin' to do."

Her heart fluttered wildly, and she was secretly grateful the shooting hadn't stopped so the whole town couldn't hear its beating. A glance at Celia, then at Jesse riding high in his

saddle alongside them, reassured her they hadn't overheard Morgan's intimate remark. It was unlikely the children seated in the wagon bed had heard it, either.

Morgan guided the wagon past waving flags and gay bunting and banners of red, white, and blue, and Kate found she was as bad as Sarah and Matt, whose necks swiveled this way and that so as not to miss any of the excitement.

She pulled out her pencil and notebook and scribbled hastily, determined to leave nothing out: grizzled old men smoking cigars on the boardwalk in front of the saloons; calico queens perched in windows and on balconies like exotic, fancy-colored birds; rugged drovers—freshly shaved, hair slicked back with Macassar oil—kicking up puffs of dust as they roamed the streets like swaggering bantam roosters; workmen at the far end of Texas Street, their hammers ringing as they erected a wooden platform for the dancing planned for later.

One young family drew her attention like a magnet. She watched as the father hoisted his little girl high on his shoulders, and the child wrapped her arms around his forehead and giggled with delight. A slim woman, whose features very much resembled the little girl's, dipped her handkerchief in a barrel of water that had been set out for the revelers and bent to wipe chocolate ice cream from a small boy's round cheeks. When she straightened, she and the man exchanged a private look of pure devotion.

"Morgan, look," she said.

He glanced to where she pointed. "The Logans. Nice family."

There were dozens more like the Logans all around, Kate realized, and yet the Logans' small family stood out, and suddenly Kate knew why. They didn't have much, judging by their mended clothes and worn boots, but they were happy. They were secure. They were loved.

For the first time since she'd buried Teddy, she wasn't made sick by such a warm, familial scene. As she gazed at the children, she realized her stomach hadn't tightened painfully this time, and she didn't feel hollow and empty anymore.

It wasn't a conscious decision, but she allowed it to happen; welcomed it even. As Morgan's hand, steady and warm, left the reins and slipped over hers, it simply happened. It felt as right as the Logans' happy faces, as sure as the sun after the rain, and just as natural and unstoppable. Kate felt as if she belonged, and she let herself pretend Morgan's family was hers.

For this one day, believe, a persistent little voice in her head instructed.

Without needing so much as a nudge, she squeezed Morgan's hand and believed with all her soul.

* * * *

IT WAS BETTER than any cotillion or ball in Philadelphia or New York, Kate mused as she tapped her slippers in time to the music, better than anything she'd experienced elsewhere during her travels in the west. And best of all, Morgan had been as attentive as a beau with his first love, never leaving her side for a moment.

Evidently, he was taking his promise to her quite seriously because he sat with her through the interviews she conducted with Joseph McCoy and Mayor and Mrs. Henry, never straying or looking bored, even when she spent an hour interviewing the town's dressmaker.

They picnicked with the children and Celia and Jesse on cold meats and cheeses, cucumbers and pickled peaches, buying small cakes and ice cream for dessert. Then, no longer able to hold the children back, they strolled through the crowd of merrymakers, past drummers hawking patent medicines and boys rolling hoops, to the games of skill and chance.

Now, sitting with Morgan on the sidelines for the first time in hours as sunlight faded into the intimacy of twilight, Kate listened contentedly as a fiddler and banjo player launched into *Buffalo Gals*. As that song faded and *Camptown Races* began, she couldn't seem to stop her feet from moving or her knees from jumping.

Morgan handed her a cup of lemonade. "Thought your feet were hurtin'. If they're still tappin', maybe they've got one more dance in 'em for me."

"I very much doubt it," she said with a laugh. "I feel just like Cinderella at the ball, and now I know why she lost the glass slipper. Her feet were too swollen and it popped off."

She groaned as he helped her to stand. "No, really. I couldn't take one more step."

"Forget the dance, then. Allow me, Miss Cinderella."

Before she knew what he was doing, he'd scooped her up and stood cradling her against his chest, much as he had

when they'd first met. But from the gleam in his eye, she doubted very much if she'd end up sprawled in the street this time.

"Morgan! Put me down. All these people—"

"Let 'em get their own woman."

"What will people say?"

"They'll say I'm holdin' the belle of the ball, and if I'm a smart man, I won't let her get away." He carried her far from the crowd, deep into the seclusion of a tree-lined meadow blanketed by shadows. Their music was the gurgling of a nearby stream, their song the cooing of a mourning dove high in a cottonwood's leafy branches, their only light the twinkling stars overhead. The air was filled with the heady perfume of wildflowers.

She braced her hands on his shoulders. "Morgan..."

He gazed down at her and slowly shook his head. "Can't let you go, darlin'."

He sank to his knees in the damp grass, then managed to rest his back against a thick tree trunk. He settled her onto his lap, wrapping his arms around her waist.

"We'd better get back." She pushed on his shoulders again, attempting to rise.

He held her a little tighter. "Stay a moment, Katie. I've thought of nothing but bein' alone with you for days. Just sittin' and holdin' you is all I want to do, darlin'. Please."

He stroked her cheek—such a simple gesture—yet it rekindled all the desire she'd felt the night she'd snuck into his room and found him lying naked atop the sheet. "It's not a good idea," she said.

"Why? I've seen the wariness in your eyes when you look at me sometimes. Are you afraid of me, Katie? I'd never hurt you, darlin'. Never." He bent to kiss her, stopping a mere breath from her lips.

All her perceptions slowed, then stopped. It was as if the stars had stopped twinkling, and the moon had stopped shining. The wildflowers that had smelled so heavenly a moment ago could have been weeds for all she knew or cared just then. The only thing she knew—or wanted to know—was the man holding her in his arms in the sweet, dark summer night. She looked at his mouth, warm and full and giving as it descended slowly on hers.

Suddenly the image of Cherry popped up between them. She couldn't forget the taunting, tormenting picture of the blonde wrapped in Morgan's arms. They'd looked so cozy, so familiar with each other.

She pressed her palm to his chest and inched back. "We'd better check on Sarah and Matt."

"They're fine with Celia." He bent closer and drew his lips back and forth across her mouth, feather-light.

"We've been gone so long, someone's bound to notice."

He kissed the corners of her mouth, this time playfully. "I find it hard to believe you really care what anyone thinks, 'specially after the way you charged into Abilene, then stormed the saloon..."

She lowered her lashes.

He heaved a sigh. "All right, darlin'." He released her. "If you want to go back, we'll go. Just stay with me a minute first. Please?" He stood and pulled her up with him, then

pulled a package wrapped in plain brown paper from a knot hole in the tree he'd been leaning against.

The paper bunched and crackled as he placed it in her hands.

"What on earth?"

"Been savin' it for the right time. I hid it here, hopin' tonight would be it."

When she made no move to open it, only stood staring wide-eyed at him, then the package, he said, "Go on, now. Open it."

With great care she untied the string and peeled away the paper to reveal an exquisite beaded, blonde lace shawl. It shimmered in the light of the rising moon. "Oh, Morgan, it's lovely. I don't know what to say."

He stuffed his hands in his pockets and chuckled. "That's a first. Just say you'll accept it. It's my way of makin' amends for buttin' heads with you when you first came to town. Celia was right. In my mind, I got you all confused with Mary. I suppose I tried to punish you for her sins—"

"Sshhh." She pressed a finger to his lips. She couldn't bear to talk of sins, not on the most wonderful night of her life. Replacing her finger with her lips, she kissed him softly. "Thank you."

He'd given her so much—his protection, his home, even the love of his family—and she had nothing to offer in return. In truth, she was sure he'd want nothing from her, not even her friendship and most definitely not her love, if he were to learn of her past.

When she left Abilene, she'd be taking so many wonderful memories with her—the desire in those wonderful hazel eyes, the passion that made his nostrils flare slightly, the feel of those talented lips and hands ... She knew he wanted her, desired her, cared for her even.

He also cared for Cherry. And the calico queen or someone else would have him one day. But not tonight. For this one night, sinful or not, she would make a memory with Morgan by making him hers here under a canopy of summer stars.

"Let me see how it looks on you." Morgan moved to help her put it on.

She shook her head playfully and was delighted by the confusion that crept into his features.

"You mean you won't forgive me?" he asked with a frown.

"Only after you make me a promise."

His frown eased the slightest bit. "Anythin', darlin'."

"Remember me always."

Morgan thought his heart actually stopped beating.

"Sounds like you plan on leavin'."

"Soon, maybe. My work here is almost done."

His heart did stop then, and fell to his feet. *Don't go*, he wanted to tell her. But he couldn't—not yet. If he couldn't figure out who was carving up the women in his town, working his way to Kate, she'd be a helluva lot safer back east.

"Will you remember me, Morgan? When you're old and gray and warming yourself by the fire? Will you think of me and smile, even then?"

He couldn't help chuckling. "Darlin', I hope I'm a long way from old and gray just yet." He tugged her close. "Let me see you in the shawl."

She shook her head and slid from his embrace, a mysterious little smile curving that beguiling, kissable mouth. "Not yet. I want to be sure you'll never forget me." Then, in a voice so low and serious it made him suddenly afraid she would disappear into the mist beginning to rise off the stream, she added, "I'll never forget you, Morgan. Not ever."

Then, her mood playful again, she flashed a mischievous grin. Overhead, as if set off by the beauty of that smile, the fireworks in town began. He heard them, little pops at first, bursting in the distance, no brighter than the spark of a firefly.

Before he could stop her she turned and ran away, weaving through the trees, further into the darkness. He thought maybe she meant to leave him there, that night.

"Wait," he called out. Either she didn't hear or she was ignoring him. She continued on, and he followed her as the fireworks grew stronger and brighter, allowing him to catch a glimpse of her here and there. He thought she looked like a wood nymph as she flitted in and out of the trees.

He found her yellow hair ribbon fluttering from a low tree branch, and then her slippers dangling from a bush, then more of her clothing as he went deeper into the pockets of darkness. The sky lit up in a seconds-long fireball of breathtaking color, but it was the sight several yards ahead beneath the low-hanging branches of a leafy cottonwood that made him stop and remind himself to breathe again.

She was a spellbinding vision in the alternating light and darkness of the fireworks display. One second she was there, untying her chemise, then slowly she melted into the night. When another fantastic eruption lit the sky and he could see her again, her hands were at the ribbons of her petticoats. He stood transfixed, beguiled, amazed by the vision.

Finally, in an explosion of blue and white light, she stood like a glorious angel, shimmering in the beaded shawl.

And not a stitch else.

It was the most erotic sight he'd ever seen in his life. Quickly closing the few yards separating them, he took Kate by the shoulders. He felt her shiver beneath his palms, though the air around them was hot. He'd swear it even seemed to crackle.

She gazed up at him, and he thought her smile alone could bring him to his knees. It was definitely getting harder to concentrate on his duty.

"Will you, Morgan?"

For a moment, struck dumb by the precious gift she was offering, he could only look at her.

She laughed softly and enfolded him in the large shawl, wrapping him in her shimmering angel wings, pressing her nakedness to him. "Remember me, always?"

On tiptoe, she kissed him, a kiss that was soft and warm and startlingly pure. For an instant, his mind reared, reminding him that danger still hovered close by. He shook his head and opened his mouth to speak.

With a trembling hand, she brought his hand to her breast. "Let me have tonight. Just tonight, to take with me for

always." Slowly she unbuckled his gun belt, letting it fall to the grass.

He couldn't help it—he groaned with pleasure, with pain, with the overwhelming need to silence her talk of leaving and remembrance. He sank down in the damp, fragrant grass, taking her with him, and rolled to the darkest corner of shadow, away from any prying eyes. When they stopped she was astride him. He cupped her breasts and leaned up to taste a honeyed nipple. It swelled beneath his tongue and she arched her back, offering him more, and he knew somehow, offering all that she was.

She moaned softly when his mouth deserted her, leaving her glistening and wet, the bud straining for more. "Is it only a memory you want, Katie? I can give you more. So much more..."

She hugged the shawl to herself and gazed down at him with passion-clouded eyes. Despite how tantalizing she looked, covered and yet uncovered by the lace, he lowered it from her shoulders.

"There's to be nothing between us, darlin'. Flesh to flesh, heartbeat to heartbeat..." He rolled her over and poised himself above the angel he was afraid would surely dissolve into the night at any moment.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and tried to tug him close.

It took all he had, but he hung back. "Understand me, Kate. I want more than just one night with you."

She shifted beneath him, closer to his hardness. The look in her eyes told him she knew exactly what she was doing to

him, but he couldn't fight her. He could no more hold back from loving her any longer than he could voluntarily stop breathing.

With a guttural moan that was equal parts arousal and determination to make her forget her talk of leaving, he plunged into her, determined to take his angel to the threshold of heaven, then bring her back to earth and hold her firmly by his side. Forever.

* * * *

A LONG WHILE LATER, Morgan settled Kate on his lap, beneath what he'd come to think of as their tree. He smiled as he slipped the long row of buttons on her bodice through their tiny loops, kissing each bit of flesh before he covered it up, all the while chiding himself for being such a foolish romantic.

Her hands brushed his body as she slipped his shirt over his head, then pushed the buttons through their holes. It took all his willpower to keep from laying her down in the sweet-smelling grass and taking her again.

Gazing at her now, even without benefit of the pyrotechnic display that had ended long ago, she still seemed to be his own personal angel, glowing with an inner light he was proud to know she'd allowed him to put there.

He draped the shawl across her shoulders. "You look beautiful, Katie."

She ducked her head with a shy smile, then picked up his gun belt, hesitating before handing it over. "I never saw you wear this before."

"Yeah, well..." He held his breath, concentrating more than was necessary on strapping the guns on, praying she wouldn't ask why he needed them now.

"Why did you stop wearing them?"

His let out his pent-up breath. The question was a tough one, but better than the one he'd expected.

"Jesse told me you had an accident in Chicago—"

His gaze flew to hers. "Then you know?"

"No, not all of it. He said if I wanted to know, I'd have to ask you."

Morgan stood and pulled her to her feet, brushing the leaves and grass from her hem. He held her hand as they strolled slowly back to the streets of town.

"It's not a pretty story," he said. "'Fraid I'm not much of a hero in it."

She was quiet as he spoke of moving his young family from Virginia to Chicago after the war, when everything he'd loved or owned or dreamed of had been razed or killed. "I still felt blessed, fool that I was, because I had my wife by my side, unlike a lot of other men."

He spoke of his experiences in the cavalry, of the expert marksmanship that had enabled him to secure a fine position with the police force in Chicago.

"But it was never enough for Mary," he said. "Not after she'd lived on one of the most prosperous plantations in Virginia. I knew she was unhappy, and I tried to make up for it by workin' more hours with the department and findin' extra work elsewhere whenever I could."

"You bought her all of those beautiful things in the upstairs bedroom, didn't you?"

He nodded. "With all the time I spent away from home, I suppose she felt neglected—"

"But you were doing it for her and the children!"

"Mary didn't think so. She was a spoiled Southern belle. All she knew was her husband wasn't there to take her to all the fancy events she wanted to go to. So she found someone who would."

"Morgan, no..."

He let out a hard, bitter laugh. "That wasn't the worst of it. I caught them together. In a public park, for Chrissakes. I wanted to murder the man, but somehow I found the strength to walk away. But not before I told him to take Mary with him."

He closed his eyes and rubbed them with his fingers, as if that could erase the sight from his memory. "The son of a bitch laughed and said that even if he didn't already have a wife, he wouldn't take Mary on a bet. Said he'd never marry a rebel's whore. I nearly lost control then. I didn't care where Mary went as long as she stayed away from the children."

A low-hanging branch blocked their path. Morgan held it aside for her, and she stopped a moment to take his hand and give it a reassuring squeeze. "How terrible for you, Morgan. I'm so sorry."

They resumed their walk, hand in hand. He held on tight to her soft hand, taking comfort and strength from her nearness. "I turned to go, ready to leave her, and that's when I heard it. A baby was cryin'. She'd left Sarah in a basket in

the bushes while she lifted her skirts for her lover. I found out later that a neighbor had Matt."

He let out another bitter laugh. "I didn't know it at the time, but the man had his boy with him. When I saw my baby girl neglected in the bushes, I plain couldn't see straight. All I remember is that I was still in uniform. I said somethin' and Mary's lover pushed me down. He pulled a revolver. I pulled my gun and fired. They told me later the boy rushed over to protect his father. He was the same age Matt is now. I didn't mean to kill that boy. I swear I didn't even know he was there.

"There was a scandal and we left Chicago. With my record as a marksman, no one would believe I hadn't hit exactly what I'd aimed for." Morgan struggled to take a calming breath as the familiar ache in his gut worsened. He looked at Kate and found that her eyes were glistening.

"I swore I'd never pick up a gun again." He started to turn away, but she drew him into her arms. For the first time in years, the lump that strangled him whenever he thought of that night started to ease.

* * * *

JESSE LOOKED FROM Morgan to Kate, as hand in hand, they turned the corner of Texas Street and nearly collided with him.

Jesse plucked a blade of grass from Kate's hair. "You son of a bitch." His fierce whisper drew curious stares from passersby. He grabbed Morgan's shirtfront.

"Jesse, don't," she said, tugging on his arm.

He shrugged her away. "Of all the low down, sneaky—"

A sudden commotion down the street drew their attention. Men scattered to fetch their women and children, throwing them into wagon beds and on the backs of horses.

"Not now, Jess." Morgan placed Kate's hand in Jesse's. "Take care of her for me."

With a murmured "Soon," he strode away into the heart of the commotion, leaving her alone with Jesse.

The deputy led her in the opposite direction. "Wanna talk about it?"

"What?"

Jesse halted and pulled another blade of grass from her shoulder and nodded at it. "This."

Unable to meet his gaze, she felt her cheeks heat with embarrassment.

With a finger under her chin, Jesse forced her to look at him. "I don't stand a chance, do I, honey?"

"Oh, Jesse..."

"I'd treat you right, Kate. I swear I would, 'til my dyin' day. I'd make you a fine home. We'd make beautiful babies together."

"Oh, Jesse..."

"I believe you already said that."

"I had no idea you felt that way."

"I guess I had idea enough for the both of us." He clasped her shoulders and she felt the fine tremor in his hands. "Tell me I have a chance to win you. Say it's not too late."

She shook her head. "I can't—"

"Don't answer now. Take time to think it over. Just dance with me now, Kate. One time." He took her by the hand and led her toward the music.

Kate stumbled through the steps, feeling as if Cinderella had been returned to rags and ashes. She had no idea what to say as Jesse twirled her in his arms at a safe, respectable distance. As she followed his lead, the crowd of dancers shifted. She caught sight of something on the other side of the wooden platform, and her heart dropped to her toes.

"Stop, Jesse! Stop." One hand flew to her roiling stomach, the other to her mouth, and she feared she'd disgrace herself in front of the whole town.

"Honey, what is it?" Jesse asked. He followed her gaze. She knew he understood when he slipped a reassuring arm around her trembling shoulders and led her away from the dancers to a cool, shadowy corner of the street.

He dipped his bandanna in a barrel of water, much the same way the Logan woman had for her child earlier that day. He held it to her forehead. "All right now?"

She shook her head, numb from the sight of Morgan pressing money into Cherry Valteau's hands. Morgan had held the blonde close to his side, an arm wrapped across her bare shoulders as he walked her to the Alamo. The meaning of it all couldn't be plainer.

"Stupid fool," she whispered.

"He is at that."

"Me, me!" she said, thumping an open hand on her bodice. "I'm the fool. I knew it would come to this, but I never imagined it would happen so soon."

Her head began to spin and she buried her face in her hands. She heard the crunch of dirt as Jesse knelt in front of her. His hands were cool on her wrists as he tried to pry her hands from her face.

"Jesse! Kate! Quick!"

Kate and Jesse looked up to find Celia, frantic and red-faced, racing toward them, tugging Matt beside her.

Jesse grabbed the housekeeper by the shoulders. "What's happened?"

Huffing, Celia held a hand to her breast. "Oh, my ... Oh, Lordy ... Jesse ... Kate..."

"Take a deep breath and tell me what's happened."

"It's all my fault," Celia said. "I shoulda been watchin' her better."

"Who?"

"Sarah. I can't find her anywhere. I been lookin' near an hour."

Matt tugged on Jesse's sleeve. "I seen her."

Jesse hunkered down to Matt's level. "Where, Matt?"

"Some man gave us chocolates before. Said he could get us more if we wanted. I told her not to go. I told her, but she never listens." Matt looked ready to burst into tears.

Jesse stood and gave Matt a man-to-man pat on the back. "You did right by comin' for me, Matt, but we've got to get your pa." He turned to Kate and helped her to her feet.

She jerked away, sick to her stomach, barely making it to a horse trough in time. When she was through embarrassing herself she said, "You go on. I'll just slow you down. Hurry, Jesse. Find Sarah."

He hesitated.

"Go on, I said. I'll be fine."

Jesse looked around, his gaze finally settling on the gaily lit Drover's Cottage. "Celia, take Kate on over to the hotel. Tell McCoy not to let anyone near her, and don't let her out of your sight."

Jesse watched the women start off before sending a young drover to fetch the marshal. Turning back to Matt, he said, "Take me to the last place you saw Sarah. And tell me about that man with the chocolates."

Chapter 22

MORGAN CURLED HIS fingers around Cherry's palm, closing it around a fistful of money, all that he had with him. "You have someplace to go?"

Cherry nodded. "Yeah, sure, for a little while."

"Good. Then I want you on the next stage or train out of here."

Cherry pressed herself to him, hugging his neck. "I'll pay you back soon as I can. Wish I didn't have to ask you for it, but I'm scared, Morgan. I can't stay here. He knows I saw him. I'm next, I just know it." She put her head on his shoulder and he felt her body shake as she started to cry.

"Hush now. It's gonna be all right." He rubbed her back, and lowering his head, whispered in her ear, "You say Alice is still alive?"

Cherry's black feather tickled his chin as she nodded. "Doc's with her now."

They walked arm in arm back to the Alamo, back to the scene of another brutal slashing. As his boot landed on the boarded walkway in front of the double doors, someone frantically called his name. Turning, he spied an ashen-faced Jesse barreling down on him, and his heart rolled over.

"Where's Kate?"

Jesse shook his head. "She's fine. It's Sarah. She's missin'."

"She's with Celia and Matt—" He caught sight of his son, running at a gallop to catch up with Jesse.

Grim lines of worry etching his face, Jesse said, "Celia couldn't find her. Matt says she took off with some man. Damn it, Morgan, I told you we shoulda told Kate and the others the truth."

Morgan felt the blood drain from his head. Visions of his innocent daughter caught in the grip of a madman assaulted him. He looked hard at Matt. "Think, son. Real hard now. You ever see this fella before?"

Matt shook his head. "But Sarah sounded like she knew him. She said he was nice. Said he brought her and Kate chocolates before. That's why she went with him now—to get more. Sarah said he was a friend of Kate's."

"What'd this fella look like?"

Morgan listened to Matt's description of the man. With each word, another icy talon of fear gripped the back of his neck. It sounded uncannily, almost word for word, like the same man Cherry had seen earlier in Alice's room.

The worst part, though, was that the description could fit dozens of men. Any northern buyer or southern cattle baron cleaned up pretty much the same.

"And he had a big ring on each hand," Matt went on, looking up expectantly, waiting for him to go and rescue his little sister. "Sissy-like. I ain't never seen no man wear stuff like that."

"God, no." Morgan froze, but only for an instant.

He turned to his deputy. "See if you can get anything out of Alice, Jess." With a hand on his holster, his stride quickening like the fever in his blood, Morgan headed back across Texas Street, determined to find the only man he'd

seen all season who was ostentatious enough to wear such gaudy gems.

* * * *

KATE WAS CROSSING the sitting room of the suite Joe McCoy had graciously provided for her and Celia's use when a rapping sounded at the door. She glanced into the adjoining bedroom, assuring herself that Celia still rested. The poor woman was overcome with worry. Guilt, too, Kate supposed. She'd heard the housekeeper's sniffles as she'd cried herself to sleep with a little help from the brandy Kate had insisted she take.

Before whoever it was could knock again and wake Celia, Kate threw open the door. "Charles! Oh, I've been frantic. Have they found Sarah?"

Charles closed the door behind him. "I'm afraid there's been no word yet." He led her to the settee, where he waited for her to sit before joining her. "I knew you'd be upset when I heard about the poor girl's disappearance. You're trembling, darling. You must calm down."

Kate jumped up and began to pace. "I don't want to calm down. I want to find Sarah."

Charles rose and took her by the arms. "Will you let me help you this time?"

"Oh, Charles, would you really? Yes, oh, yes. Let's go. Now. Sarah's probably lost and so frightened." She grabbed her shawl and turned to go.

Charles held the door open for her. She crossed the threshold and started off with a determined step.

He grabbed her arm. "First, we need to stop by my suite."

"Not now, Charles. We have to find—"

"It will take but a moment."

She tried to pull free, but he yanked her close. With the shawl Morgan had given her crushed in her hands between them, he planted a hard, wet kiss on her lips. Stunned, taken completely by surprise, she could do nothing for long seconds but try to breathe before she caught her wits again and pushed him away with all the strength she could muster.

He stumbled back. His lips curved in a peculiar smile.

"Have you lost your mind?" She cast an embarrassed glance about the dimly-lit corridor, hoping none of the hotel's other patrons were around to see Charles's odd display of affection.

The only sign of life was a long shadow on the carpet, creeping behind its owner. She waited a moment until it disappeared around the corner toward the staircase before speaking again. "Really, Charles! Have you been drinking?"

Completely ignoring her question, he quickly hustled her along the hallway. "Ah, here we are." He unlocked the door to his suite and she stumbled when he thrust her across the threshold. He locked the door, pocketing the key.

Another funny smile spread across his lips. "Do you like the flowers? I sent all the way to St. Louis for them, just for you."

The cloying aroma of roses pressed in on her. As her eyes adjusted to the suite's darkness, Kate spied the vases, dozens of them, lining every table and hugging every wall.

An odd tingling ran up her spine. "I insist you open the door, Charles. I don't know what's gotten into you, but I must leave. Now." She started forward, ready if she must, to take the key from him.

"You promised we'd be together today," he said in a whiny, childish voice. "I've made so many preparations. Besides, I think you'll want to stay when you see what else I've brought you." He reached down and pulled something from behind a cushion on the settee.

"Annie! Teddy's doll—I gave her to Sarah. Wherever did you find her?"

He remained silent as he eyed her intently and Kate was reminded of Ian at his worst. She pressed her hands to her belly, trying to quell the sick feeling of dread that had suddenly taken root there. "Charles, what's going on? Do you know where Sarah is?"

"Nooo ... I don't think so. At least, not yet. Disrobe, darling."

"Charles!" Her heart beat faster at the menace so clearly showing in his features as he waited, she knew, for any sign of her submission or fear.

She'd be damned if she'd fold now when Sarah's life might be at stake. The Stewarts had hurt her once, but they wouldn't harm Morgan's child. She wouldn't allow it.

She clutched the beaded shawl tighter to hide the trembling of her hands. "Stop playing games and tell me where Sarah is," she said in her best no-nonsense voice.

"Just think, the poor child might be lying somewhere ... hurt ... the life bleeding out of her. You really should cooperate before it's too late."

Charles took her by the arm and dragged her into one of the suite's bedrooms. He tossed her onto the bed. "You wouldn't want to end up like those whores. What were their names? Sal and Dora? At least, not before we've had our own private reunion."

"You?" Kate struggled to urge her voice past the lump in her throat. "You killed those poor women?"

His cruel laughter assaulted her and made her sick with the realization that she'd placed her trust in a madman. How gullible she'd been.

She scrambled to her knees on the mattress and hugged her shawl tighter to her breast. "Damn it, Charles, where is Sarah?"

"Profanity? Defiance?" He chuckled. "Oh, I do love some of your new ways, sweet Katherine. I hope you've learned some new tricks for the bedroom as well."

"I won't let you hurt her. If I have to, I'll find Sarah on my own." Kate jumped from the bed and tried to push past him, but he tossed her back onto the mattress. She landed flat on her back.

He pulled something from his pocket. It glittered in the lamplight. "I wouldn't do that again."

As Kate eyed the expensive instrument, she realized what he held. She'd cleaned and packed it in her husband's black bag hundreds of times. "Ian's scalpel. You cut those girls! You must be mad."

She scooted back until her shoulders pressed against the headboard. She repeated to herself, again and again, that this man wasn't the Charles she'd known. She couldn't count on the years of their friendship to save either herself or Sarah. She had to be very, very careful if she was going to get him to tell her where Sarah was before it was too late.

"Actually," Charles said, coming closer, scalpel in hand, "I think I'm being quite civilized. I merely asked you to disrobe, darling. After all, we were almost betrothed once. If you'd rather, I could behave like your belated husband and rip the clothes from your back."

Kate held her breath. How much did he know of what had gone on that night in the mansion's master bedchamber? Suddenly, she felt the blade's tip at the back of her neck and his hand was crushing her throat. She struggled for air as Charles sliced the ribbon from her hair.

"I like your hair loose. So wild..."

He released her. She collapsed, hands at her throat, gasping for breath.

"That night, I did so wish Ian had let your hair down for me."

She couldn't help it. She had to know. Kate panted, dragging in great gulps of air. "What night?"

"The night my drunken brother gave you something to remember him by. Or was it to remember your sins? I never can remember exactly what he said he was doing when he whipped you. I was too taken by the sight of you tied spread-eagle to the bed."

Slowly, the scope of what he'd just admitted dawned on her. Her breath caught, then died in her throat. "You spied on me? You knew ... you saw ... and did nothing to stop him? To help me?" Her voice sounded like she hadn't used it in years, and too late she saw Charles's delight grow as her shock and shame increased.

"You were supposed to be mine, remember? Mine!" He pounded his chest with a fist. "But you chose Ian. Poor, stupid fool that my brother was, he thought he'd won a great prize in you." He threw back his head and laughed so hard that tears rolled down his cheeks.

She was afraid to even blink as Charles closed in on her again. He bent over her and dragged the tip of the scalpel back and forth across her chest. "How fortunate only your legs were scarred that night. It would be a pity to suffer more of the same, don't you think? Now, disrobe."

She shook her head. "No," she croaked.

"Oh? Should I take pleasure instead with the girl, Sarah? She's a bit young, I suppose, but she has to learn sometime." He turned to leave.

"You sick, sick bastard. How do I even know you have Sarah?"

He turned back to her, his hand on the doorknob. "Your last chance before I go to the child. Disrobe."

Kate hesitated, but when all of a sudden she heard small whimpers as if from far away, she knew the truth. He had Morgan's daughter.

She rose to her knees. With trembling fingers she removed her clothing, stopping at her chemise and drawers.

He gestured with the scalpel at her underclothes, eyes agleam as he waited for her to continue.

"Charles, don't do this. Please, let Sarah go first. You always admired Ian. He hurt me, but he would never hurt an innocent child."

"Ha! Ian did worse than hurt children. He killed them. Well, at least two. Poor, dumb Katherine. You never figured out what really happened to your other babies, did you?"

She began to shake. Lowering her lashes, she shook her head. Too many memories, too much pain and hurt rushed in. She was drowning in them. "I don't want to know."

He ignored her. "Ian couldn't bear the thought of your giving him another crippled child. Before Teddy was born, he thought you were so perfect."

He laughed heartily, more tears of mirth filling his wild eyes. "My brother, the physician ... At the time, I thought he was quite clever. He served you tea laced with an herbal abortifacient, darling. The mere thought of your bearing anymore children like Teddy was so abhorrent to my brother, he killed them before they could even draw their first breath."

"No! I lost those babies ... I wasn't good enough ... My body wasn't strong enough..." Ian had told her these things.

Swift and terrible, the years of heartache and regret washed over her. She hunched over against the violent pain that ripped through her insides, hugging her belly tight, as if the motion somehow could protect the little ones who'd taken sustenance from her body—the babies who were dead and buried these many years.

Oh, dear God. Fed by the hurt and pain of years, a guttural cry wrenched itself from deep within her body.

She was barely aware of Charles looming above her on the mattress, holding the scalpel's glittering tip under one thin strap of her chemise. As if it were happening to someone else, she watched the blade slice through the pale material, heard the quick, clean rip.

Numb, mindless, lost in an inner world of pain, she didn't even move to cover herself as the cool night air washed over her breast, puckering the tip. The only thing that finally pierced the veil of awareness was a wrenching pain as Charles twisted her breast in his cold fingers. Fresh tears stung her eyes. Bewildered by the cruel sensations attacking her body from within and without, she raised questioning eyes to Charles.

"Take off the rest. I used to love watching you as you dressed for bed. You were always so graceful, so lovely. Even flawed as you are."

* * * *

STILL CLUTCHING HIS drawn Colt, Morgan rested his forehead against the hotel's rough wall and squeezed his eyes shut. Even as he reminded himself he couldn't afford to doubt now, beads of sweat broke out all over his body and a cold foreboding swept through him.

Just a moment ago, he'd felt as if he were standing in that wooded park in Chicago all over again—watching his woman enfolded in the arms of another man.

He didn't truly doubt Kate, not now, not after what they'd shared that day, but he couldn't help questioning. Why hadn't she protested when Charles Stewart planted that kiss on her lips? He'd been poised to rush forward, to at least speak up, but he'd only been able to watch for a second before retreating around the corner out of sight.

Did all men feel so stripped and dead inside at the thought of a woman's betrayal? Or was it some weakness in him that made him stand there, unable to leave, unable to move forward, as he imagined what was going on behind that door down the hall?

Just as he moved to holster the revolver, a heart-wrenching scream pierced the air.

"Kate." Fear unlike any he had ever known tore at his gut.

He hardly remembered moving, then he stood outside Charles Stewart's room. A scream went on and on, then suddenly died. With one fierce blow, he kicked down the door.

Morgan stood, gun drawn. *From which bedroom had the scream come?* The main room of the suite was dark and empty. From his visits with Joe McCoy, he knew that a bedroom stood to the left, and another to the right.

He strained his ears, listening for a clue. Small whimpers came from the left. The pitiful sound tore at his already frayed heart.

"Sarah, honey, is that you?" He tried the knob. The door didn't budge. "Sarah, it's me. It's Pa. You all right?"

"Pa! Let me out."

Another cry of terror pierced the darkness from the bedroom on the right.

"Sarah, hold on. I'll be back for you, honey."

"Pa, no—" The rest of Sarah's words were drowned out by a woman's scream.

Morgan followed the sound. Unsure of what he might find or if it was some kind of trap, he stood to the side and tried the bedroom's knob. The door floated open a crack. He peered into the soft lamplight, sick and immobilized by the scene on the bed.

His beloved Kate, silent tears running down her cheeks and her trembling chin tilted at that defiant angle he'd come to know so well, was making a valiant effort to be brave. From the looks of things, Charles, whose back was to the door, was ready to pounce on her as soon as he was through watching her remove the rest of her clothing.

Morgan stepped into the doorway. Kate spied him, her relief visible, almost palpable, and the rigid set of her shoulders relaxed a bit. She seemed to draw strength from just knowing he was there in the shadows.

"Ah, yes, Katherine. That's it. Relax," Charles coaxed in an oily voice. "You'll enjoy it so much more."

"I ... I could relax much more without the scalpel," she said. "Why don't you put that down and I'll make it like you always said it should be between us." She licked her lips and Morgan was sure her mouth was as dry with fear as his own.

Charles eased her back on the bed and said, "You're finally where you belong. You're about to pay your debt in full."

Morgan watched as Charles slipped a hand between their bodies and unbuttoned his trousers. Sick at the thought of

that son of a bitch's flesh touching Kate, he forced himself to remain detached, to remain professional in his duty.

Stark terror came into Kate's eyes. It froze her like a rabbit in front of a rattler. Morgan could hold back no longer. Holstering his Colt, realizing the danger to Kate even as he sprang forward, Morgan lunged for Charles.

With one arm around Charles's neck and the other grasping the hand that held the blade, Morgan rolled Charles off Kate's body. They landed on the floor with a hard thud. They grappled for the blade, and Morgan felt cold metal slice into his flesh. A sticky warmth spread across his belly.

He struggled to hold the weapon away from him as pinpoints of rainbow-colored light danced in front of his eyes. The light began to fade. He heard Kate scream.

"Run, Katie. Get out of here!"

Instead, he saw her pick up a vase full of roses from the bedside table. He must've blacked out after that. The next thing he knew, Kate was cradling his head in her lap. She hadn't even taken the time to cover herself, but had used the bed sheets to bandage his middle. His blood stained her flesh, standing out like poppies on cream.

"Where is he?" Morgan struggled to rise, but sank back down as a searing wave of pain tore through his middle. "Son of a bitch."

"Sshhh. It's over." Kate stroked his brow.

With a deep sigh of relief that she was safe, that it was finally over, he gazed up at the woman he'd come to love more than life itself. He thought if he died and went to heaven just then, it all would've been worth it. He reached up

and brushed away the tears that spilled from her lashes.

"Where's Stewart?"

She nodded to a spot nearby on the floor. "I hit him pretty hard. He hasn't moved at all, but I don't think he's dead."

Morgan grunted. "He should be."

He tried to ignore the pain as he reached up and stroked Kate's bloodied cheek. "Hate to admit it, but for once I'm glad you have a mind of your own. Hate to think what woulda happened if you'd left when I told you to." He tried to laugh, but it came out like a strangled cough.

He struggled to stand with Kate's help. "Let's get you dressed and outta here. The sooner we lock him up, the better I'll feel."

She gazed at him, at the blood oozing from his wound. He wobbled and she eased his arm around her shoulder, taking his weight. "Morgan, I think Sarah's here, in the other room. Charles took her. I don't think he hurt her—just used her to get to me."

Too furious to speak, Morgan just nodded, afraid he'd kill the bastard—unconscious or not—just for touching his little girl, let alone what he'd done to Kate.

While she dressed, he leaned against the wall, every movement bringing fresh waves of agony slicing into his middle. He let his eyes slide closed against the nausea roiling inside him; against the thought of all he could have lost that night.

"You bitch!"

Morgan heard Charles's snarl a fraction of a second before a white-hot pain sliced into his leg. He fell, trying to position

himself to shield Kate as he went down, but she was too far away.

He looked up in time to see Charles lunge. Kate raised her arms to ward off the attack. With growing horror, Morgan watched the tip of the scalpel slice through her sleeve.

There was no time to think. He drew his Colt. He fired—three times, four, five—emptying every last bullet into Charles Stewart's twitching body and sending the bastard on his way to hell.

Chapter 23

BETTER THAN ANY medicine for what ails me, Morgan thought, was having Kate warm his bed each night and listening to the tinkling music of her laughter.

He watched the rays of the rising sun steal through the lace curtains at his window, then turned his gaze to the sleeping woman by his side. Kate's only covering was the sheet twisted around her calves. Sunbeams cast a rosy glow across her naked body, making him want to reach out and run his hand along the smooth curve of her hip.

Sweet Christ, would he never get enough of touching the woman? It was almost as if, deep in a secret place in his heart, he was afraid she'd disappear. His stomach twisted and he quickly banished the thought.

He smelled the musky scent of their lovemaking that clung to the sheets, heard the soft sounds he'd become so familiar with, the kitten-like mews with which she'd wake each morning by his side. Suddenly he had to touch her; had to reassure himself that she was still there, that she was really his.

At the mere thought of touching her again, a strong ache grew deep inside him, and he felt his body growing hard again. The tortuously sweet ache made the nagging stab wound in his thigh feel like nothing more than a scrape, even though it had plagued him like the very devil since he'd gotten it three weeks ago and had left him with an annoying limp.

As Kate pressed herself against his side, Morgan tugged her close. He was instantly rewarded by the warmth of her smile, and taken aback by her lusty burst of laughter.

He rolled her onto her back, and with one hand, pinned her arms high above her head. "A laugh like that, darlin', can make a man feel a mite inferior, if you know what I mean." He bent to nuzzle her neck, tickling her with his tongue and moustache. "And what exactly is so funny?" he asked with mock seriousness.

She gazed up at him, looking at him as if he'd hung the moon and stars. She tugged her arms free and draped them around his neck. "I was thinking about last night, and the night before that ... and the night before that ... and that afternoon in the barn..."

Her laugh was wicked and provocative as hell against his neck. "I doubt any two maimed people could be more acrobatic than we've been these past three weeks. Believe me, Marshal, you have absolutely nothing to feel inferior about."

She ran her fingertips over the bandage wrapped around his middle, lovingly along the one on his thigh. He responded in kind, tracing the snowy linen around her forearm with one finger. Her touch sent delicious ripples of pleasure and anticipation coursing through his veins, just as it had every time she'd touched him since that horrible night at the Drover's.

He couldn't help thinking that God was making it up to them for all the fears and heartaches they'd each endured. It

was a fanciful notion, he knew, but it gave him pleasure to think it.

After he'd explained away Kate's fears about him being involved with Cherry, they'd been like newlyweds. As soon as he could walk down the aisle without the help of his damned cane, he intended to make it real.

He wanted to do the wedding up right. But first, he wanted to ask her proper. In a day or two, when he could ride again, he planned to go to town and pick out the best gold ring the mercantile had for sale. Then, he'd take her to their tree, and he'd make sure she brought her beaded shawl along...

His smile spread from ear to ear. For now, he had to content himself with holding her by his side in the balmy morning breeze, tasting her sweetness, loving her 'til she begged him to stop, and praying she never would.

When she pulled him close for a most intimate kiss, mating her tongue with his, he set out to show her just how acrobatic an injured fella could be with the right woman in his arms.

* * * *

THE NEXT MORNING, before Morgan woke, Kate dragged herself back from the backhouse. Despite the horrid queasiness turning her stomach inside out and upside down, she smiled a weary smile. She supposed she ought to expect tiredness. She hadn't exactly been spending her nights sleeping. She stumbled up the back steps, the soreness in her breasts and between her thighs reminding her of the energetic evening she'd just passed in Morgan's bed.

In the kitchen, she poured a cup of coffee for Celia and one for herself, setting a third on a tray to bring to Morgan with his breakfast. Celia took the offered cup, then turned to drop a slab of bacon into a fry pan. The meat browned and sizzled, its aroma drifting to Kate's nose. She clapped a hand over her mouth and raced from the room and down the back steps again, barely reaching the backhouse in time.

When she returned long minutes later, she cursed the influenza, or febrile catarrh, or whatever it was that was making her feel so ill. She concluded she probably looked even worse than she felt when Celia took one look at her and hurriedly guided her to a chair.

The housekeeper fetched a cool, damp cloth and pressed it to Kate's forehead. "You can't keep a secret like this forever, Kate. If'n you don't tell Morgan soon, he's bound to figure it out for himself."

Kate cast a puzzled glance up at the housekeeper. "Celia, if you have something to say, I'd appreciate it if you would simply say it outright. I'm too ill for riddles this morning."

"This morning and just about every other. I thought we was friends, Kate."

Regretting her snappishness, Kate sighed and reached out to take Celia's red, rough hand in her own. "We are, Celia."

"Then you know you don't have to hide it from me. I won't think no less of you for it."

"Hide what?" She released Celia's hand and brought her cup to her lips, trying to tamp down her irritation. Friend or not, she had no patience this morning for Celia's talking in circles.

"The babe."

Coffee spewed from her lips. Kate coughed, nearly choking. "What baby?"

"This here one." Celia leaned over and patted Kate's tender stomach.

Kate stood so fast, the chair clattered to the floor. Eyes wide, she backed away from Celia as if the housekeeper had suddenly grown wings and a forked tail. "No..."

Celia eyed her, incredulous. "How could you not know? The signs are there plain as the nose on your face."

Kate felt as if she were trying to hold a conversation under water, so muddled did her head feel just then. Her mind managed to hammer out one thought only. *It couldn't be. It just couldn't.*

"You been losin' your breakfast every day now," Celia said. "Dinner, too, sometimes. Why, I been watchin' when Sarah hugs you, you jump 'cause your bosom is so sore."

"I thought—" Her cheeks grew warm. What could she possibly say? That she'd thought Morgan's loving had been too thorough?

Kate shook her head. "I had no idea. The other times, I never had the morning sickness."

Celia shrugged. "Hits some women that way."

Kate began to pace. "Well, it can't hit me that way. Not now. Not with Morgan," she cried, despair ripping at her heart. "Oh, Celia, what am I going to do?"

Celia led her back to the chair. "You're goin' to have that babe, that's what you're goin' to do. Morgan's always wanted a houseful of young'uns. He'll be so happy—"

"No." Kate clutched Celia's arm, wild in her desperation to make it be a mistake, a dream, an illusion.

How stupid she'd been not to protect herself somehow. Now, as easily as she'd found bliss in Morgan's arms, it would be snuffed out. Finally, completely, forever over. It had to be, one way or another. Morgan's love would wither and die in a flash of revulsion if he ever found out about the kind of babies she was capable of bearing.

Kate sucked in a breath, feeling as if there was no air left for her in the confines of the cozy kitchen. The memory of Charles's last words struck her full force. "Ian killed your babies ... abominations..."

A violent foreboding swept through her and cold sweat drenched the back of her neck. She swayed and found herself steadied by Celia, who now knelt at her side.

Maybe Morgan would be different—No, she couldn't take that chance; couldn't risk another child's life. Especially considering the way Morgan had treated that poor, lame Mr. Hedgepeth. No. Morgan would never accept a crippled child.

He was a good man, she knew. Ian had once been a good man, too, but something in him had snapped and broken when Teddy was born.

She didn't dare take that chance again—not with her baby's life at stake. What if Morgan tried to hurt the baby just as he'd tried to refuse medical care to Mr. Hedgepeth? She couldn't picture it, but still, she'd never thought it of Ian either.

What if, by some miracle, the child was born healthy and whole? Morgan had never even said he loved her and had

never so much as hinted he wanted her to stay with him. Would he try to take the baby from her, as was his legal right?

"If you're truly my friend, Celia, you must promise not to say a word about this to anyone. No one must know. Especially Morgan."

Celia wrung her apron in her hands. "It's the marshal's babe. He's got a right to know, Kate."

"Let me handle this my way, at the right time," Kate said. "But for now you must give me your word. I'll do what's right for his baby, I swear. Now promise me, Celia."

The older woman gave a slow nod, and Kate let out her breath in a rush.

"Thank you." Kate hugged the housekeeper, trying hard to blink back the tears of relief that threatened to spill from her lashes, trying even harder not to dwell on everything and everyone she must now walk away from.

She had to do it, she told herself, to protect the precious life growing now beneath her heart. Leaving would be the most difficult thing she'd ever done, but she was convinced it would be better to have Morgan hate her for leaving than to have him despise her for what she did to babies.

With a heavy step and a heavier heart, she went upstairs to pack.

* * * *

IN THE FRONT parlor, surrounded by her valise, carpet bag, and hat boxes, Kate bade a tearful farewell to Sarah, Matt, and Celia. She even reached down and ran her hands

over Digger and Cookie one last time, scratching them softly behind the ears. Morgan hung back from their tiny circle, but she was all too aware of his rigid stance and the set of his jaw.

She longed to smooth the angry lines from his brow. She yearned to soften the hard line of his mouth with a kiss—the mouth she'd come to know as sensual and generous. She fought the urge to go to him.

Feeling awkward and self-conscious, she pulled her shawl tighter against her body. Her belly was hardly any rounder than when she'd arrived in Abilene all those weeks ago, yet the black look in Morgan's eyes made her feel exposed, as if her every secret had been laid bare.

"Morgan..." she ventured, needing him to at least say good-bye.

* * * *

MORGAN TURNED AND pretended to look out the front window. He was afraid if he stood there one minute more, he'd make a complete fool of himself by dropping to his knees and begging her to stay. Why in hell was she leaving?

He had the feeling she would've left, if she could have, without even saying good-bye to him. The only explanation she had given was her work. There was a pressing assignment, she'd said, and Leland needed her.

He heard Jesse carrying out her things. Unable to help himself, he turned for a long, last look at the woman who had turned his town upside down, along with his life.

He knew he shouldn't, but he couldn't help asking. His voice was hoarse, scraping across his vocal cords like coarse grains of sand. "You'll be back?"

He held his breath, dying inside as he waited for her reply. The look in her eyes said it all.

"Morgan, I'm sorry—"

He cut her off then. "Good-bye, Mrs. Stewart," he said, and strode from the room.

* * * *

PROPPING UP HIS bedroom wall, staring blindly out the window, Morgan took a long swallow from the half-empty bottle of rye. It had been full an hour ago. When the bottle was empty, maybe he'd be able to blot out the hated sights and sounds, but not yet.

He squeezed his eyes shut, but still saw Kate's cornflower blue eyes darken to lavender as she'd said farewell. He still heard the creak and jingle of the harness as Jesse had pulled up the wagon to take her away.

A soft rap sounded at his bedroom door before it creaked open. "Morgan?"

He drank deeply of the whiskey. "Go away, Celia."

"Oh, Lordy. I was afraid of this. Kate wanted me to—"

"Never," he said sharply, "mention that woman's name again in my presence. Ever."

He dropped to the bed, pressing his back against the headboard. Tilting the bottle to his lips, he drained it.

"Just leave me in peace, Celia," he said, more gently this time.

* * * *

MORGAN HUDDLED DEEPER into his upturned collar. He could smell the Delaware River as the wind swept down the deserted cobblestone street. Fat snowflakes melted on his cheeks as he gazed up at the light in the second story window.

It was January now—five months since Kate had left him. Five long months of burying himself in work and drink just to prevent himself from following her. Five long months spent trying to convince himself that Kate had never loved him.

Every day he told himself to follow her, haul her back, and stand with her before the preacher. Each night in the dark of his room, thoughts of Kate had plagued him, leaving him cold and empty inside with nothing but pride to keep him warm. And every night he died just a little more inside.

He took a long drag of his cigarette and blew the smoke out on a sigh. He studied the house across the road—Kate's house. He'd never seen it before, yet it was just as he knew it would be. It was taller than it was wide. Three stories of red brick with a dark green door and shutters, a gabled roof and an intricate wrought iron gate. It suited her—small but elegant, reserved and yet inviting. The light in its windows was the only sign of life at this late hour.

He'd studied the grounds earlier. He approved of the gentle hills that sloped off into the river. Did Kate hear the tide lapping, he wondered, as she drifted off to sleep each night? Did she intend to rock their baby in rhythm to the water's music?

His baby. Christ almighty.

He swallowed hard. Damn her for trying to keep his own child from him. He sure as hell wasn't as rich as her husband had been, but he could give a child—a wife—a good life.

At the thought of his child nestled in Kate's body, probably being born soon in that house, his heart twisted something awful. It was the same ache he'd tried to deny all these past months, all those miles ago in Abilene. Now, on the outskirts of Philadelphia, with Kate and his unborn child so close, the feeling became an almost unbearable, physical pain.

He threw his cigarette into the snow and pulled his collar higher against the force of the whistling wind. He slipped a hand inside his duster, his anger increasing when his fingers made contact with the piece of paper in his pocket.

He still didn't know what to say to Kate after all this time. He couldn't just walk up to her and say, "Hello, how've you been? I heard you're havin' my baby."

The paper in his pocket crackled as he fingered it, more for reassurance than anything else. He'd read it so many times, he could recall it word for word:

Still waiting Stop Child as stubborn as father Stop Will notify Stop

When the telegram had fallen out of Celia's apron pocket one morning, he'd noticed there was nothing to identify the sender. He'd questioned Celia, only to have her swallow and stammer, looking about as guilty as a body could get without a smoking gun in her hand. But the old coot wouldn't tell him what the telegram was about, or even who had sent it.

His housekeeper had acted more and more curiously, until finally he could stand it no longer. In fact, the whole town had been acting mighty queer.

"Congratulations, Marshal," Joe McCoy had said one morning, pumping his hand before stuffing an expensive cigar in it.

Morgan had lit the damned thing and continued on his morning rounds. He didn't get far. At every corner, someone had stopped him to offer their congratulations.

Even Doc Pettibone had slapped him on the back. With a sly wink, the old lush had said, "Attaboy, Marshal."

Despite the fact he was standing in a swirling snowstorm, his toes frozen inside his boots, Morgan felt his neck heat at the memory.

"What in blue blazes are you talkin' about?" he'd demanded of every well-wisher. Every single man had grown wide-eyed, then scurried away.

After he'd confronted Warren Hedgepeth, he'd realized they'd all been afraid to tell what they knew—and rightly so. He wouldn't want to be the one to tell a man he was about to become a father, either, if the man's woman had left him high and dry to go traveling clear across the country.

Morgan's shoulders stiffened and he grew hotter as he recalled the puny telegraph clerk's glee. Hedgepeth would have jumped up and down on his one good leg, if he could have, when he'd broken the news of Kate's delicate condition.

Kate had never understood his dislike for Warren Hedgepeth. After being the subject of the telegraph clerk's gossip herself, maybe now she'd finally understand. The little

piss-ant had told everyone in town about Kate's impending motherhood after piecing it all together from the several telegrams she'd sent Celia.

Morgan listened to the ice ping against Kate's windows. He sucked in the cold air, welcoming the sting in his lungs and the calmness it forced on him. She'd never agree to marry him if he stormed into her pretty house like a bull in a china shop.

He tried to picture Kate's reaction, the emotions that would play across her delicate features if he walked into her home and demanded that she marry him. First, her eyes would widen in disbelief. Then they'd get all stormy and lavender, and her chin would shoot out in defiance.

Morgan chuckled to himself, his breath rising like steam in front of his face. At least in her present condition she would be too big and round to sneak off and shimmy through a window as she'd tried at the bathhouse. Most likely she'd get her drawers in a twist and fight him every step of the way, just as she had when they'd first met in the spring. It seemed so far away now, all the fight and fire, all the warmth and loving they'd shared.

And it was loving they had shared. He was convinced of that. So why had she run off and run away from him? None of it made a damned bit of sense.

After one last look up at the second floor where one corner window remained lit, Morgan strode across the street, unlatched the creaky wrought-iron gate, and wrapped on the brass door knocker.

Ice crusted on his moustache as he waited. He pounded hard on the door with his fist. Finally a bleary-eyed butler appeared, his mouth pinched in annoyance.

"I need to see Mrs. Stewart," Morgan said. Drawing on every shred of his willpower, he curled his hands into fists and forced himself not to push the man aside.

The butler eyed him with suspicion. "If you'll leave your card, sir, I'll see to it that Mrs. Stewart gets it in the morning." He started to tip the door closed.

Morgan's hand shot out, forcing the heavy door wide. "I haven't seen her in five months. I've traveled hundreds of miles."

"Then surely a few more—"

Morgan shoved past the man. After a glance at the elegant, empty rooms on either side of the vestibule, he started up the wide oak staircase to the left. "Kate! Damn it, Kate, where are you?"

The butler, hurrying after him, tugged at his arm. "Sir, please, I must insist. Madame is unwell this evening."

The words stopped Morgan faster than a loaded gun between the eyes. The cold fear that gripped him reduced his flaming anger to ashes. He grabbed the butler by his tidy little lapels. "Not well? What's wrong? Is she sick? Answer me."

The butler's eyes widened and he tried to shrink back, but Morgan held tight. He realized how mad he must look, barging into Kate's house in the middle of the night, assaulting her butler, but he couldn't help it. Kate was his life. If anything had happened to her or the baby and he'd wasted

the last five months because of his stubborn pride, he'd never forgive himself.

He should've come sooner. He should've been here to take care of her, no matter how mule-headed she'd behaved; no matter how angry she'd made him by leaving him.

Morgan tightened his hold, nearly shredding the man's coat. "Where is she? Now, damn you."

Kate's servant sputtered, but no coherent answer left his mouth. Morgan yanked him close, ready to do anything to find out what was wrong with Kate.

"Wells?" Kate's voice, a weak version of what it once had been, floated to Morgan's ears. "Is there a problem, Wells?"

The little man's gaze darted to the head of the staircase. Morgan released him and rushed up the steps. The heavy thud of his boots echoed the pounding of his heart.

On the second floor, suddenly afraid of what he might find, Morgan halted outside the one door that stood ajar in the long hallway.

"Wells? Is something wrong?"

The weak and worried tone of her voice plucked at his heart. His own worry, as well as a good dose of shame for not being there in her time of need, felt like a bull sitting on his chest, squeezing the air from his lungs.

Inexplicably, the anger returned now, too, hot and throbbing in his veins. Why the devil had she left him and kept their child a secret? Was she so damned ashamed that a small-town marshal had fathered her child?

He tipped the door open further, barely noticing how badly his hand shook. He peered into the firelit room and gazed for the first time in almost half a year at the woman he loved.

He could see only her shoulders and the back of her head. Unaware of his presence, she sat in a rocker by the marble fireplace, watching shadows dance across the green-and-gold striped wallpaper. Even in the dim light, it was easy to see Kate came from wealth far beyond anything he was capable of offering her. He hesitated, fighting the urge to turn and leave.

Then she turned, and he was lost in the blue depths of her haunted eyes. They held him to the spot as surely as if she'd ordered her servants to nail his boots to the floor.

She caught sight of him, and Morgan's heart lurched crazily in his chest when he spied the hint of gladness that seeped into her features. The flicker of light in her eyes, the tiny smile that pulled at a corner of her mouth, warmed him clear through. Suddenly, he was no longer cold and wet, but as warm as he'd been last Independence Day when he and Kate had made love in that quiet meadow wrapped in her beaded shawl.

Barely a second later, he almost thought he'd imagined it all. The light left her eyes, and she regarded him as if he were an unwelcome intruder. Maybe he was.

Chapter 24

HE'D UTTERED NO sound, made no movement to give himself away, but suddenly, instinctively, Kate was aware of Morgan's presence at her back. As strongly as ever, her traitorous body was attuned to him. And why not? she thought wryly. A part of him, a very precious part, was growing inside her. She belonged to Morgan, heart and body and soul, even if she could never tell him so. Even if she could never let him know how very much she wished things could have turned out differently.

She slowed the rocker, then stopped it completely and turned, clutching the blonde lace shawl tighter to her body. She prayed the delicate material would be enough, if she remained outside the small circle of firelight, to hide her swollen belly.

"Morgan." The word was nothing but a rasp, and she cleared her throat. She couldn't quite bring herself to meet his gaze, afraid his hazel eyes would flash with hatred now, rather than with simple anger as they had the last time she'd seen him. Or, worse, perhaps she'd see a spark of his regard for her. Either way, she knew she'd be unable to bear it. Instead, she watched the ice on his boots melt and puddle on her red Turkish carpet.

"What a surprise," she said, forcing a lightness into her voice. "You should've let me know you were coming. I'd have made arrangements for your accommodations. That's the least I could do to return the hospitality you showed me."

What brings you this far from home, Marshal? Are the children well? And Celia?"

She realized she was rambling, not even giving him time to answer one question before throwing another at him, and she clamped her lips together. She felt the weight of his gaze as he studied her. Long, silent seconds ticked by. He didn't say a word, only stood there like a ferocious, immovable statue. Her hands began to shake. To hide their tremor, she clasped her fingers tightly around the book lying open in her lap.

To further steady her nerves, she reminded herself there was no way Morgan could know about the baby. Celia had given her word and no one else in Abilene knew of her condition. She tried to catch her breath, which had grown shallow more and more often as the child inside her womb grew bigger and bigger, pressing against her lungs.

When Kate finally forced herself to look at Morgan, she realized he was indeed very angry. She'd seen that look on his face often enough to recognize it. But there was something more, something incongruously like tenderness mixed with his fury.

"What are you doing here, Marshal?"

Morgan slowly walked through her sitting room and made his way to the warmth of the fire. He rested a shoulder against the marble mantle, not knowing how to proceed.

His heart thudded heavily. She was a mere shadow of her former self, eerily breathless and pale. There was no joy in her eyes, and he wondered if she was unhappy because he'd

come to her, or because his child was growing within her body.

Morgan turned away, taking longer than necessary to warm his hands at the flames licking over the grate. He needed hardly any warming at all; his whole body had thawed and heated considerably at his first sight of Kate in five months, and his first sight ever of her round with his child, despite how hard she was trying to hide it.

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw she was looking again at her precious carpet and at the muddy puddles beneath his boots. He felt more out of place than he ever had in his life. Even Mary's nagging had never made him feel so ill at ease.

"Don't worry," he drawled, slowly turning to face her. "I don't intend to dirty any more of your house—or your life—than I already have."

"What do you want, Morgan?" She still wouldn't look directly at him, and he was struck by how tired and sad she sounded.

He tried to rein in his temper and call on whatever patience he could find. The only sounds besides his heavy breathing were the fire's occasional hiss and the creak of her rocker; the only movement from a log as it fell in the grate and sent sparks spiraling upward.

This wasn't at all how he wanted to start. Desperately he looked around the room, hoping to find something to help him begin again. Almost immediately his gaze fell on the open scrapbook in her lap filled with what looked like newspaper clippings.

Slowly, self-consciously, he crossed the room to kneel at her feet. He thumbed through the pages, noting Kate's byline on every sheet. One clipping, though, was more worn than the rest, as if someone had read and reread it many times over the past months.

"So, you've been reading about me." A chuckle rumbled through him, along with a small measure of relief. She'd missed him after all.

He read the headline aloud. "*The Devil of Abilene*. Well, here I am, darlin'. In the flesh."

He was stunned when her face paled even more. The weight of worry that hit him then practically knocked him on his rump. Her eyes grew wide, and she looked more frightened now than she had the night Jesse'd been shot in the Alamo. Her hands clutched the scrapbook to her bosom like a shield. She had missed him, damn it. Why did she still refuse to open up to him?

"Your butler said you been feelin' poorly. What's the matter, Katie?" He reached out and stroked the back of her hand with his thumb.

She jerked from his touch. "Please, Morgan, just go away. There's nothing for you here. Go home to your family."

They were the same words he'd said to her when they'd first met all those months ago. She hadn't listened to him then, and he damn sure wasn't going to listen now.

Pushing to his feet, he braced his hands on the rocker's arms and bent over her until she had no choice but to look him in the eye.

"I can't believe you're afraid of me." He kept his voice low and soft, trying not to spook her. "I never hurt you before, darlin'. I don't aim to start tonight."

He gently pried the book from her rigid fingers and let it fall to the floor. "I'm worried about you, sugar. Tell me what's wrong."

A look of indescribable sadness filled her eyes.

"Damn it, Kate, you're startin' to scare me." He placed a palm on her forehead and grew alarmed at the heat rolling off her.

She swatted his hand away. "It's nothing. Leave me be. I'm fine."

"Have you seen a doctor?"

Not waiting for her answer, he scooped her up in his arms. In two quick strides, he carried her to a velvet settee where he gently laid her down and placed a plump pillow beneath her head. She popped back up, but he forced her back with a firm hand on her trembling shoulder. He inched the shawl down her arms and tried to unwrap it from her feverish body, but she only held on tighter. Small drops of perspiration beaded on her forehead, and he swore he could feel her fever grow hotter.

Morgan harrumphed. "And you had the nerve to call me stubborn." He bent down, his face mere inches from hers as he slipped the three pearl buttons at her throat through their loops, loosening the high neckline.

Kate stilled. "I'm sure I don't know what you're referring to. I have never called you stubborn."

"Maybe not to my face." He pulled the telegram from his coat pocket. The paper crackled as he took his time unfolding it and held it in front of her face. Watching her scan the message, he knew the exact moment when she got to the part about "child as stubborn as father." He'd never seen anyone sputter quite like that before.

"Is the baby all right?" he asked.

"The baby is not your concern."

"Not my concern?" he roared. "It's my child. Everything about that baby is my concern. I want to support him, love him, guide him as he grows up. Damn it, Kate, I'd be a good father to your child."

The hell of it was, Kate thought, he would be a wonderful father to her child, just as he was to Sarah and Matt. She had no doubt that, if circumstances were different and she could allow herself to live like a normal woman, she'd be proud to have Morgan raise her child. But the sad, pitiful truth was, he could never be proud of her. She was the black-hearted sinner Ian had always said she was. Because of her, there was a good chance their child would never be normal or healthy, if it lived.

She felt the tears sliding down her cheeks, but made no effort to hide them. She was so tired, just plain worn out with worry.

"Katie, what is it? What can I do?"

"Go away."

"Is something wrong with our baby?"

"Leave me be." Her voice trailed away into an anguished sob.

She felt him watching her, but she couldn't seem to stop and pull herself together. She didn't have the heart to tell him her secret, and she didn't want him around to see her past repeated when the baby was born. "Go away," she cried, refusing to meet his gaze. "It's better that way."

She felt rather than saw him finally break his stare. She listened to his boots thud heavily, slowly across the floor. They were followed by a soft click as he closed the door behind him.

He was gone. Finally and forever gone.

Kate huddled deeper into the cushions, forcing herself not to call him back. Morgan deserved a happy life, and that was one thing she could never give him.

He was better off without her.

* * * *

"NO, CHARLES! IT'S not true!"

Kate struggled, twisting and turning to cast off the hand clamped on her shoulder.

She pushed deeper into the settee's cushions, trying to pull away. Another hand grabbed her other shoulder. Large hands, and strong ... Ian's hands ... holding a china cup full of warm liquid to her lips...

"Kate!"

"No, no..."

"Wake up, darlin'." A familiar voice. Warm and safe.

She struggled to open her eyes and shake off the deep sleep that held them closed.

"It's just a dream." That voice again. So safe, so reassuring. "Charles is dead, remember? He can't hurt you anymore. No one will ever hurt you again, I promise."

She felt cold, so cold and alone. Desperate now, she tried hard to open her eyes, to reach for the comfort she felt just beyond the blackness.

Her eyes fluttered open. Two long and muscular denim-clad legs filled her field of vision. "Morgan," she breathed.

With gentle hands, he drew her against his chest. "Sshhh, it was just a bad dream. I'm here now."

"But I sent you away. You left."

"Not without you, darlin'. Never again without you."

The fire in the grate must have burned low. She pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders. She looked up at Morgan, cleaned up and refreshed and handsome as ever. He smiled, gesturing to a tray of tea and biscuits on the side table.

"I thought you'd gone," she said, rubbing her eyes.

"You should know by now that you can't get rid of me that easily. Come on, darlin', sit up." He offered her his hand.

Still groggy, she felt the cushions shift as he adjusted his weight to give her room to sit up. Her body drifted into his, and he curled an arm around her shoulders and drew her even closer. Leaning over, he poured a cup of tea and brought the steaming cup to her lips.

Brutal memories rushed in on her, suffocating and frightening in their intensity. The dream of moments before hadn't been a dream at all, she realized, but a horrible replay of her life. Charles spitting out the truth about her

miscarriages ... the abortifacient ... Ian holding the cup to her lips ... the faceless children she'd lost and buried...

She lashed out, flinging the delicate china cup away from her. It sailed through the air, spewing its contents all over the velvet settee and Morgan's clothes.

Morgan jumped up as the hot liquid soaked through his trousers. "Damnation, what the devil was that for? You'd think it was poison or something!"

Horried by what she'd done, she stared up at him.

He dragged a palm across his rough beard. "Katie ... honey. I know women get crazy sometimes when they're expectin'. I don't know, maybe that's why you're so contrary right now. Look, let me change. Your butler let me stow my gear in a room down the hall. When I get back, we need to talk."

While he was gone she paced the room, stopping now and then to gaze at the black night outside her window. She wished it could somehow swallow her up and make her disappear so she wouldn't have to lay her soul bare to Morgan.

But it would have to come to that; he wasn't going to leave without an explanation. It might not be the whole truth, but she owed him part of it at least.

Before she knew it, he was back, along with a fresh pot of tea. She took one look at it and turned back to the window.

"Look, Katie, I'm just tryin' to take care of you—to help. I love you, sweetheart." The warm, sweet sound of his voice, saying the words she most longed to hear, almost undid her.

He deserves better.

She heard his footsteps behind her. His fingers closed gently around her shoulders as he turned her to face him.

"Marry me, darlin'."

She tried to pull back, but he held tight.

"Marry me," he said, softer this time.

She shook her head. "No."

Morgan let his hands fall woodenly to his sides. "The thought is pretty awful for you, isn't it?"

"No, it's not that at all." She wrung her hands.

His shoulders stiffened and his jaw grew rigid. "You didn't even take a second to think about my proposal, just rejected it outright. I'm not worthy of a second thought, is that it?"

"No, Morgan, no. You don't understand."

"Oh, I understand just fine. I knew it the first time I laid eyes on you, and seeing you here in this house makes it clear all over again. You are just like Mary. A dirty, small-town marshal can't compete with money in the bank and a big ol' mansion like this one, can he? Damn it, Kate," he growled his lips curling with disgust. "I was good enough to sleep with, but not good enough to marry, right?"

Then, like a whirlwind, he was gone.

In that moment, she couldn't let him go. Not like this. She couldn't let him leave believing he was unworthy of her. Not when it was the other way around.

"Morgan! Morgan, wait." As fast as her swollen body would allow, she hurried after him.

* * * *

BY THE TIME Kate caught up to him, Morgan had already packed his saddlebags. She watched in silence as he shrugged into his duster and jammed his hat on his head. He was about to step out into the hallway when he saw her.

She took a hesitant step into his room. He cast her a frigid look, then strode past her, heading for the stairs.

"What you said before," she called out to his retreating back, "it wasn't true."

He didn't stop, didn't even slow down. He began to descend the oak staircase.

"If you really want the truth, come with me." She turned without waiting to see if he would follow. She grabbed a candlestick from a hall table to light the dim corridor, cupping a hand around the flame as she hurried on. Would she feel worse if he left, or if he stayed and learned her secret? It made no difference since she'd lose him either way.

On trembling legs she continued on to the opposite end of the hallway where another flight of steps, much steeper than the first set, led to the third floor.

Halfway up she slowed, huffing heavily. She drew great gulps of air, trying to catch her breath. Her belly was so large these days, it interfered with the simplest tasks.

She heard the creak of his leather duster a moment before she felt his strong arms scoop her up. "Hold on," he said.

A pent-up breath escaped her, and she realized how glad she was he hadn't yet left. "Thank you," she said, wrapping an arm around his neck as they continued up the steps. She held the candle aloft to light their way. "Not just for helping me up the stairs, but for staying to hear me out."

They passed the jeweled windows that, during the day, transformed shafts of sunlight into wondrous shades of green and rose. Tonight, though, there was only blackness behind them, echoing the way she felt.

She fought against the coward rearing inside her, urging her to disentangle herself from his arms and send him on his way for good this time, none the wiser about the kind of woman he'd fallen in love with.

He kicked open the door at the top of the staircase. She could see by the look in his eyes that the only reason he set her on her feet so gently was because of her condition. What he probably wanted to do was plop her down hard enough to shake loose her teeth, and she didn't blame him.

He stared down at her, no trace of warmth in his hazel eyes. "Get on with it, Kate."

She placed the candlestick on a dusty old breakfront. The flame dipped and swayed, casting dancing shadows across the walls. She forced the simple words past her lips. "Look around you, Morgan. What do you see?"

His mouth tightened. "What am I supposed to see? It's an attic like any other. The items are a little older, a little finer than most, but an attic just the same."

"Morgan," she said softly, pleading for understanding with her eyes. "Take a long, hard look. You'll find the truth."

He swept his hat off his head and slapped it against his thigh. "Jesus, Kate. It's an attic like any other—full of the usual things. Trunks. A dressmaker's mannequin. Frilly old hats. Stacks of books. A broken down rocker."

He lifted a shoulder in a frustrated shrug. "This isn't gettin' us anywhere. Of all the lame ways of trying to tell me something—" When he stopped in mid-sentence, she followed his gaze to the child-sized wheelchair. His voice was hoarse as he demanded, "Whose is it?"

"It belonged to my daughter. I've had Wells clean it up. Most likely, our child will need it one day."

Morgan stared at her in shocked silence. She could almost feel the panic bubbling up inside him. Or was it revulsion?

"What're you sayin'?"

She drew a deep breath. "I am saying that—because of me—our child will not be 'normal.'"

"What happened? Did you fall? Take sick? What?"

She raised a hand to silence him. "Please, Morgan. This is hard enough for me as it is, so all I ask is that you hear me out."

He studied her a moment, then nodded his agreement.

"Our child will be lucky to walk with merely a limp, like that poor Mr. Hedgepeth you so despise. I left Abilene," she said in a voice as calm as she could manage, "to spare you that."

"I don't need sparing, damn it. Did you think I couldn't love a child just because it didn't walk pretty? Christ, Kate, we're talkin' about my own flesh and blood. What kind of monster do you think I am?"

She shook her head. "Not a monster, Morgan. Just a normal man. A strong, virile man who holds men like Warren Hedgepeth in contempt because they don't walk as straight or tall as you."

"Hell, that's not why I can't stand the man. Hedgepeth's nosier than an old biddy. For your information, the whole of Abilene knows about our soon-to-be blessed event, thanks to him."

Heat crept up her neck to her cheeks as Morgan explained how the telegraph clerk had pieced together information from all the telegrams she'd sent to Celia.

"He couldn't wait to tell me about my impending fatherhood."

His hard gaze pierced her. "I shouldn't have had to learn about the baby from the town gossip. And that," he exploded, slapping his hat against his thigh, "is why I can't abide the little piss-ant."

"But the night Jesse was shot, you weren't going to have Doc Pettibone look at Mr. Hedgepeth's wound—"

"I won't deny the thought crossed my mind. But I was gettin' around to tellin' the doc to look at him when you jumped in with your two cents' worth. So, if that's all this is about—how I treated Hedgepeth—then it's settled. We're gettin' hitched tonight."

"No."

"Don't you see, Kate? You misunderstood. Anyway, how can you be so sure this baby will have the same problem as your little girl?"

"You're the one who doesn't understand, Morgan. What happened to Teddy, and most likely will happen to our child, is all my fault. I'm a horrible person."

"You're not—"

"I am! I took a vow to honor and obey my husband, but I did neither. I tried to please Ian, in my fashion, but it wasn't enough. I never truly fit in with the Stewarts. He said I didn't try hard enough. He said I was sinful—" She stopped, aware of a wetness on her cheeks. She brushed the tears away with her fingertips.

Morgan stared at her. Tenderness gleamed in his eyes, as well as a dampness that matched her own. "You can't believe that."

"It's true. I was stubborn and headstrong—"

She stopped when he wrapped his fingers around her shoulders and pulled her close. "Darlin', darlin'," he whispered against her hair, "don't you know that's one of the things I love most about you? You can vex me beyond belief sometimes, but I wouldn't have you any other way."

She pulled from his embrace. "I don't deserve to have you comfort me. Ian said I had a black soul, that I was sinful—"

He gripped her shoulders again, but this time there was no tenderness in his touch. "I don't ever want to hear you talk about yourself that way again."

Disengaging herself from him, she turned away. "Remember my scars?"

"I'll never forget them," he said in a ragged whisper.

"I never told you how I got them. They weren't from Captain Thorne. They were Ian's punishment for my sins."

She heard him come up behind her. If he touched her now, she wouldn't be able to continue. "No, don't, Morgan. There's more. I became pregnant twice more. For years, Ian let me believe that some weakness of mine was responsible for my

miscarriages. Charles finally told me the truth the night he died."

She told him about the herbal abortifacients Ian had given her. "I sickened my own husband," she said. "Because of me, he hated his own children before they were even born."

Morgan heard the jagged edges of pain in her voice and they tore at his heart. Despite her protests, he picked her up and carried her to the old rocker. Settling into the worn cane seat, he cuddled her against him and felt the wetness of her tears on his neck. He wondered how long she'd been holding them back. Too damned long, he reckoned.

"No more tears, darlin'. Those days are over. If I have my way—and I will—the only tears you'll cry from now on will be tears of joy."

He kissed the top of her head. "I love you, darlin'. And I'm gonna love that little life growin' inside you, no matter what."

He felt her rigid shoulders relax the tiniest bit, heard her sniffles slow down.

"But ... but Ian loved me once, too. He changed after Teddy. His love turned to hate for me and my babies. He killed them," she said quietly.

Suddenly she pushed against his chest and sat up, a wild look in her eyes. "I'm not even sure if he killed Teddy or not. Ian took her sailing one day after months of ignoring her. There was a thunderstorm and so much lightning. The boat capsized. I don't know what happened..."

He stroked her disheveled hair. "There are some things we'll probably never know for sure. I do know that if that

bastard of a husband of yours was alive today, I'd bury him all over again."

"I won't let our child grow up in a house full of hate."

"I'm not Ian, Kate. I'll never be like him. No matter what, I'll always take care of you and the baby. I swear I'd never harm either one of you."

She was quiet a long while, the silence broken only by the creak of the old rocker as he tipped it with his boot.

She spoke against his chest, the words muffled. "I can't believe you still want me—want us—after everything I've just told you."

"Look at me." She sat up, and he cupped her face in his hands, wiping the tears from her cheeks with his thumbs. "There is nothing sinful about you. I understand now why you ran, considering what Ian did. You only wanted to protect our child from harm. A woman who would risk everything—even losing the man she loves—to protect her unborn child, I don't see how she could ever be a sinner. That's the most unselfish act I ever heard tell of."

He kissed her softly, tasting the salt of her tears. "If I have to, I'm gonna spend the next fifty or sixty years showing you in every way I can think of just how much I love you."

He saw a glimmer of hope flicker in her eyes. She was finally starting to believe him.

"I know how hard it is to believe after so many years of somebody tellin' you how awful you are. I had Mary tellin' me pretty much the same thing for years. But then you blew into Abilene, and damned near changed my life the first day I met you."

She lowered her lashes shyly at his compliment. He tipped up her chin, holding her gaze. "Make no mistake," he said. "You'll be my wife before I leave this house."

She shook her head and opened her mouth, probably to argue with him some more. He silenced her the only way he knew how. As his lips covered hers, he felt her tremble. He grasped her shoulders, deepening the kiss, drinking her in.

Finally he drew back, breathless from the joining. "I'm sendin' for a preacher first thing in the morning. This isn't how I would've wanted to have our weddin'. I wanted to do right by you, darlin', but you left me no choice. You're marrying me tomorrow."

He placed a hand on her belly, spreading his fingers wide. "Before my child is born."

She opened her mouth again, no doubt to object to his high-handedness. He slanted his lips over hers, silencing her with a soft, sweet kiss. She still felt warm, still so unbelievably good.

Much to his regret, the kiss ended. He consoled himself with the thought that soon she would be his to kiss and to hold and to love—and to argue with—all night long, and all the rest of their lives.

Epilogue

Abilene, one year later

KATE WATCHED AS her husband's boots wore a path in the carpet. "For heaven's sake, Morgan, will you stop pacing? He promised he'd be here."

Morgan opened the front door, admitting a welcome breath of warm spring air into the house. He stared out at the greening plains beyond the yard. "It's not like Jesse to be late."

"Maybe the train is simply running behind schedule. Here," she said, rising from her chair and proffering a squirming child into his arms. "Hold your daughter a while. There's so much excitement today, I can't seem to settle her down. Maybe you'll have better luck."

Kate's heart swelled with joy as she watched her husband and toddling daughter hold hands as they walked out to greet the guests assembled beneath the shade trees. She was happier than she'd ever thought she'd be, settled into Morgan's house with Celia's warm companionship and her children clinging to her skirts.

She grinned, watching Morgan's face darken with a frown as the child by his side stomped straight through the middle of the deepest puddle in the yard. Mud splattered the little girl's socks and marred her pretty white dress. Digger and Cookie, catching sight of the fun, romped over and joined in. Morgan let out a most inventive oath.

Kate tried to hide her smile behind a hand as her husband approached, but a giggle gave her away.

"Very funny," he said. "Here." He tried to thrust the child into her arms. "You can change her now."

Kate hid her hands behind her back and sidestepped him. "Oh, no, you don't. I'm in my party dress." She skipped down the porch steps and slammed into a solid wall of man.

"Whoa, there. Don't run off before you see the christening gift I brought for my goddaughter."

"Jesse!" Kate wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him tight. She cast a sidelong glance at her husband, gladdened by the jealous scowl on his face, especially now her waistline was beginning to thicken again.

"Damn it, Jesse," Morgan said, putting his daughter down. She promptly toddled back to the puddle. "We put off the christening a whole year and you're still late. Where have you been?"

"It was hard to get away. Foreman on a ranch is always busy."

"Jess," Morgan said, "you could've stayed on here as deputy. You didn't have to leave."

Jesse winked and flashed Kate a crooked grin. "Couldn't stay once my best girl married somebody else."

Jesse glanced over his shoulder at a pretty chestnut pony he'd left tied to the fence. "I brought Jessica a present. I can see how good my namesake walks, but is she ridin' yet?"

Kate sent him a horrified frown. "She's much too young to ride."

"Nonsense. Tell 'er, Morgan. Out here, most boys learn to ride same time as they start walkin'."

Morgan, looking happy and harried all at the same time, nodded his agreement as he strode past them to remove Jessica from the mud. "Leastways she'd be clean then and the pony would be the muddy one."

"Jessica's not a boy," Kate said.

"No, ma'am," Jesse answered with a grin. "She most certainly is not. She's as pretty as her mama."

Morgan, having handed the squirming child over to Celia, returned and placed a possessive arm around his wife's shoulders.

"Married life must agree with you two," Jesse said.

"And parenthood," Morgan replied. "Another little blessing is due the end of the year."

Morgan grinned. Kate blushed. Jesse smiled broadly and hugged Kate before he slapped Morgan on the back.

"My hands are kinda full these days," Morgan said. "I could use you around town again, Jess. Will you consider coming back as my deputy?"

Jesse winked at Kate. "I'll think on it. A batch of your wife's sugar cookies might help me make up my mind, though. A batch a month, that is."

"It's a deal," Kate said with a smile. A short while later, she watched her daughter toddle out of the house, clean and fresh, navigating the steps on her bottom. Jessica squealed with delight as Kate hoisted her onto one hip.

Flanked by the two most important men in her life, holding the healthy child she'd thought she would never be able to have, Kate gave silent thanks for her blessings.

As they approached Sarah and Matt and the revelers huddled around the food-laden tables, a fiddler started playing and someone joined in with a harmonica. Jesse took Jessica from Kate and twirled her around the yard, freeing Kate's arms.

Morgan promptly wrapped her arms around his neck. He held her waist and danced her across the yard, leading her away from the party, around the side of the house.

The sun's rays shimmered on the gurgling stream. The branches of the backyard's lone willow whispered in the breeze. The sounds of the harmonica and the fiddle faded away as Morgan lured her, with nibbling kisses and intimate caresses, into the coolness of the dark barn.

From a hook on one of the back stalls, he pulled out her blonde lace shawl. As he draped it around her shoulders, its intricate beadwork winked in a shaft of sunlight that squeezed through the wall planks.

The gleam in Morgan's eye was one Kate never tired of seeing. Giving in to his unspoken request, she pushed the buttons of her bodice through their loops and lay with her husband in the sweet-smelling hay.

Lily Sorren

Lily Sorren always knew she wanted to be a writer, but it wasn't until she picked up a western romance that she discovered where her heart lies. Before making that discovery, she aimed for a career in journalism. She currently covers a beat for a weekly newspaper in New Jersey.

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