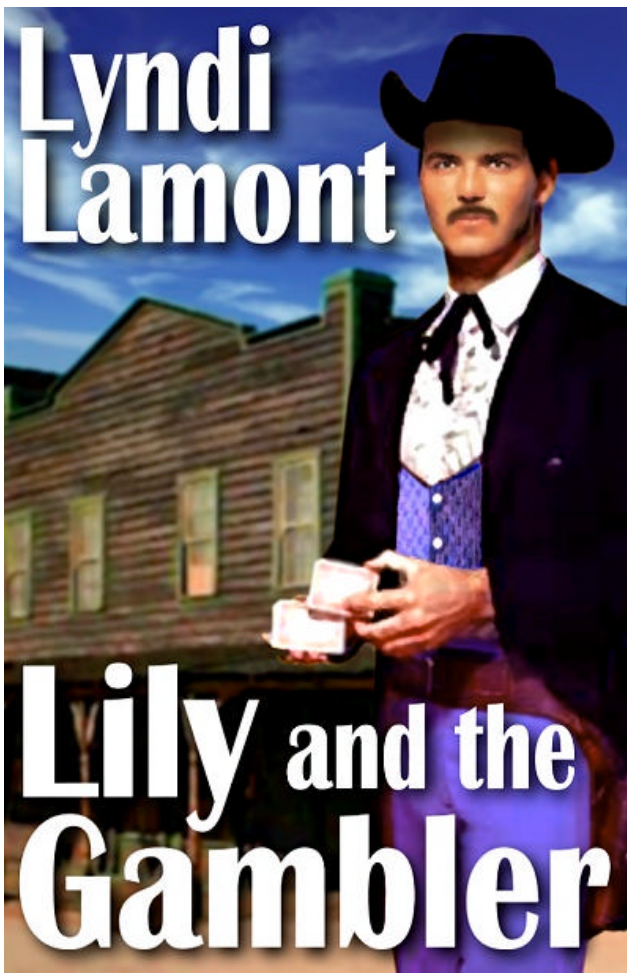


**Lyndi
Lamont**

**Lily and the
Gambler**



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...He studied his bed partner. Her face was flushed, her blue eyes bright. Her breasts heaved above the tightly laced pink corset. He reached across the bed and ran a hand up her torso, cupping her breast through the lace and silk.

“Beautiful corset. French?”

“English.”

“Take it off.”

She fumbled with the hook-and-eye opening, so he helped her remove the constricting garment. She was going to need every breath she could get before he finished with her. Free of the constricting garment, her breasts thrust toward him, firm and full. The outline of her nipples showed through the sheer cotton of her camisole.

He pulled her toward him and covered her hot, responsive mouth with his, all the while running his hands over her torso, her back, sides, then her breasts. The peaks hardened under his touch.

He moved his mouth to a nipple and slid his hand down her flat stomach. When he found the slit in her drawers, she spread her legs to give him better entrance. He parted the soft black curls, seeking her pleasure center. He stroked her nether lips, glorying in her soft moans of pleasure.

He lay her on the bed, grabbed the pillow and placed it under her hips. Kneeling between her spread legs, he nuzzled the soft cotton covering her inner thighs, moving upward until he reached her female core. He blew a soft breath across the heated flesh. Then he kissed her...

ALSO BY LYNDI LAMONT

Painting Penelope

LILY AND THE GAMBLER

BY

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LILY AND THE GAMBLER
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PROLOGUE

London, 1867

Dear Lord, a duel.

Lily Penhallow snuggled deeper into her shawl. For the last half hour she had stared down at the street, trying to will the carriage to appear. Early morning fog veiled the street, almost obscuring the buildings opposite. The wind rattled the drafty window, bringing the November chill into the room.

She turned from the window and paced the small parlor of their rented rooms. Why couldn't men solve their differences amicably? Nigel had called it a matter of honor, but Lily thought it folly. Still, he had a point. Since he made his living at the gaming tables, he could hardly afford to be labeled a cheat.

She thought back to the day they'd met. He and his friend Paul, both resplendent in their scarlet regimental coats, had ridden into the

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small Cornish village where she'd grown up. Nigel had caught her eye at once, with his blond good looks and blue eyes that crinkled at the corners when he smiled. She had been mesmerized by his stories about his adventures in the army. She'd been only eighteen at the time, a naive country girl with a head full of romantic notions, longing for love and adventure. And what was more romantic than a wounded hero? She'd left town with him and never looked back.

Stopping at the desk, she picked up a letter from her Uncle Arthur in California, urging her to join him there, but quickly set it aside. She was much too nervous to concentrate on her correspondence. Perhaps a cup of tea—no, not with the way her stomach was churning.

With a sigh, she went to stare out the window again. Her reflection stared back at her—black hair framing a pale face, tiny frown lines marring her forehead. She forced her facial muscles to relax. Nigel wouldn't want her to look old before her time.

The duel couldn't have come at a worse time. Nigel was on a winning streak and had promised to marry her. She touched the sapphire engagement ring he'd placed on her finger just last week.

The sound of wheels on the cobblestones caught her attention. Looking out, she spotted a carriage careening around the corner. It came to an abrupt stop in front of their building. Two men climbed out, one carrying a black bag. The doctor. Her heart began to race.

A third man emerged from the carriage and almost toppled into the arms of the other two.

Nigel.

She spun around and rushed from the room, down two flights of stairs, meeting them on the first floor landing. Paul Beacon, Nigel's second, shook his head.

"Oh, Nigel," she said with a sob.

He raised his head, his blond hair falling on his forehead. A makeshift bandage swathed his chest. He coughed and blood trickled

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from the corner of his mouth.

“I’m sorry, Lily,” he gasped. “So sorry.”

CHAPTER 1

San Francisco
September 1868

Lily stood at the rail of the steamboat, *Chrysopolis*, hemmed in by other passengers as the crew prepared to leave San Francisco's Embarcadero for the trip up the Sacramento River. The city was only twenty years old and looked it. Unlike London, there was no centuries-old patina of soot to smudge the buildings. And to judge by the boisterous crowd gathered on the wharf, the mood of the inhabitants was one of hope and optimism.

It looked like the entire town had turned out to watch. She saw a few women and children, but the crowd was mostly male. Men in business suits, no doubt on their way home from work, dock hands, sailors on shore leave and other, rougher-looking fellows, some with guns strapped to their waists. Would she ever grow used to that?

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A shiver ran through her and she pulled her black wool shawl closer. The weather was cooler than she'd anticipated, reminding her of Cornwall. A slight haze to the west promised fog later in the evening. She stared out at the Pacific Ocean, remembering the long journey around Cape Horn. If only Nigel could have been with her. When she'd first met him, he'd promised to take her to exotic places, but instead they'd wandered between London and the more fashionable watering holes—Brighton and Cheltenham plus one season in Baden-Baden—where Nigel separated wealthy invalids from their money. It was ironic that she'd faced her greatest adventure only after he was gone.

She smoothed a hand over her black silk skirt. She'd spent the last ten months preparing for her new life as the widow Albright. Nigel would not object to her appropriating his last name, though he'd hate seeing her in black. He'd always insisted she wear bright colors like rose, green, and his favorite blue to match her eyes.

Nigel. How she missed him. His charm, his humor, his arms around her in the night, his clever hands and lips arousing her passion.... She had never been so lonely before. Or so frustrated.

On that last, cold November day, his greatest regret had been that they'd never married.

But he had named her his only heir. And thank God he'd been on a winning streak, or she'd have inherited a mountain of debts instead of the tidy sum that had allowed her to travel halfway around the world.

She still had doubts about the wisdom of marrying a man she'd never seen. But when Uncle Arthur offered to arrange a marriage for her to a prosperous mine owner, it had seemed like a good idea. Ever since, she'd been trying to forget the old saying about the road to hell being paved with good intentions.

At long last the boat's steam engine roared to life and the side-wheeler began to move, backing down from the landing, then swinging around until her bow was pointed north. The crowd on the dock set up a

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cheer and the passengers waved good-bye. Lily's heart began to race.

The last leg of her journey had begun.

She walked to the stern rail and watched until San Francisco faded from view. Now she was so close to her destination, she was eager to see her new home.

A letter from her Uncle Arthur in a place called Grass Valley had led her to California.

He'd said that this was a land of opportunity, a place where what a person did counted for more than birth and upbringing. A good place to start over. She'd soon find out whether or not that was true.

She had traveled a long way on a dream.

* * *

He hated water, and traveling on the damn stuff was even worse.

Creighton "King" Callaway leaned against the window of the steamboat's dining salon and watched the lone woman standing at the stern rail. Didn't she know how dangerous it was? The river was high with the spring runoff from the mountains. Didn't she know how easy it would be to fall in? To be sucked down by the current like a leaf caught in an eddy. Down into the cold and darkness, fighting panic, holding your breath until your lungs ached.

He clamped his teeth on the unlit cigar in his mouth. When he walked ashore in Sacramento, he'd light it. Not until then. More than one river steamer had gone up in flames. Be damned if he'd be the cause of another. In the meantime, he needed a drink and a distraction.

There would be a poker game later, but for now a little feminine company would fill the bill.

He'd spent the last half hour observing the lovely widow, debating whether to approach her. He had tipped his hat in greeting earlier, and received a fleeting smile in reply. Why he was drawn to her, he couldn't say. He usually steered clear of respectable women. But there was something in the way she moved, an unconscious sensuality, that

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intrigued him.

Finally, she turned and walked into the dining room, her black skirts swaying provocatively. King pocketed his cigar and followed at a discreet distance. With luck, he could position himself nearby.

A man hurried past him, then skidded to a halt.

“King, is that you?” he called out.

King stopped and turned around. “Turner.”

“The big game’s about to start,” the man said with a grin. “Wouldn’t be the same without King Callaway. You ain’t gonna miss it, are you?”

“I thought I’d have some dinner first, then I’ll sit in for a few hands later.” But only if the lady proved unresponsive.

“Oh, sure,” the other man agreed, bobbing his head up and down.

King opened the louvered door and strolled into the narrow room that made up the eating area for the passengers. Doors on both sides led to private cabins. King never bothered to reserve one. He wouldn’t sleep again until he was on dry land.

He was always astonished by how elegant the riverboats were. Gleaming brass lamps swung from the ceiling and the chairs were upholstered in red plush. Several long tables were set with linen tablecloths, fine china and sparkling glassware. The clink of silverware on china punctuated the murmured conversations of the diners.

He noticed a few empty seats at the end of the far table. When the widow sat down, King ambled to the other side where an empty place waited across from her. A far more pleasant view than the treacherous water outside. Now that he was closer, he noticed her eyes were blue and her skin white as porcelain. Her hair was black as the shining jet necklace and earrings she wore. That and her black dress heightened the translucence of her skin. Her dress was cut a bit lower than was proper, revealing an intriguing hint of cleavage.

Before sitting down, he removed his hat and set it under his chair.

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“Evening,” he said, nodding at the diners at the other end of the table. He included the woman in his smile, but tried not to single her out. No need to make her nervous.

The other diners mumbled greetings, then went back to eating. They’d gotten a good head start while King had been outside watching her.

He gestured to a Chinese steward who brought the coffee pot and the first course of oversized oysters. The riverboats were known for lavish meals that could satisfy even the largest appetite. King ordered a bottle of wine to go with the meal and two glasses.

When the steward arrived with the wine, King turned to the woman seated across from him. “May I offer you some wine, ma’am?”

“No, thank you,” she replied in a cool tone and asked the steward for a cup of tea.

King took her rebuff in stride. Any respectable woman traveling alone should be cautious. He sipped his wine and waited patiently for another opening. Her accent had sounded English to him, but he wasn’t certain until the main course of beef, potatoes and fresh green beans arrived.

The widow cut a piece of beef and, leaving the fork in her left hand, took a bite.

“Are you from England, ma’am?” King asked her.

She looked up, her blue eyes wide. “How on earth?”

King chuckled and forked up a piece of meat using his right hand. “By your accent. And by the way you eat.”

She looked down the table at the other diners and smiled. “If I’m going to be a good American, I guess I’ll have to learn how to eat like one.” She lay down her knife and transferred her fork to the other hand.

“Are you sure you won’t have a glass of wine?” he asked. “I can’t drink it all myself.”

Her eyebrows quirked, as if to say, “Oh, can you not?” Then her

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mouth curved in a slight smile that sent his heart racing.

"Perhaps a small glass, thank you, Mr...." A rose tint suddenly suffused her cheeks. "Dear me, I don't even know your name."

"Creighton Callaway, ma'am, at your service."

"How do you do, Mr. Callaway. My name is Lily...Albright."

King held up his glass. "A toast to new beginnings."

She hesitated before touching her glass to his. For a second his hand brushed hers, raising his hopes, and his pecker.

"New beginnings. How appropriate." She took a sip of wine, then applied herself to her dinner.

They ate in silence for a few minutes, until King asked, "Did you come all the way from England by ship, Mrs. Albright?"

"Yes," she replied. "It was quite an adventure. Especially rounding Cape Horn."

He raised his eyebrows. "All that way by yourself? What a brave soul you are." Far braver than he, that was a sure bet. He had all he could do to tolerate the half-day trip from San Francisco to Sacramento. It helped if he thought of the boat as a smooth-running train.

She smiled and raised one eyebrow. "I find that I rather enjoy a bit of adventure."

"Really?" King drawled. Perhaps she wasn't as aloof as she'd seemed. "Are you planning to stay in California, Mrs. Albright?"

"Yes. I'm going to join my uncle."

"Then he's meeting you in Sacramento?"

"No, in Grass Valley."

What a coincidence. "Is that your final destination?"

"Yes. Are you familiar with the place, Mr. Callaway?"

"I've been there," he replied vaguely. He decided not to mention that he owned the largest saloon in the town. Not until he determined how straight-laced she was. She leaned forward eagerly, a slight smile on her face. Lord, she was lovely with that black hair and creamy

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complexion.

"Perhaps you know my uncle, Arthur Penhallow? He's a miner."

So, her uncle was a Cousin Jack, as the Cornish miners were known. "I don't believe I've ever met your uncle."

"Could you tell me more about Grass Valley?" she said. "Uncle Arthur's letters tend to be on the short side."

"I'd be delighted." While they had been talking, the sun had set. It was easier to ignore the river after dark. And the widow Albright had proven to be a delightful distraction. "Would you like to take a stroll on deck?"

"Yes. I wouldn't mind walking after that huge dinner. But could I have a few minutes to freshen up first?"

"Of course," he said. "Let's meet by the stern rail in, say, fifteen minutes."

"Very well," she agreed.

He watched as she left the room, her black skirts swaying ever so slightly. King poured himself another glass of wine and tried to calculate the odds on whether the lovely widow would show up as agreed.

* * *

Lily entered her luxurious cabin, removed her hat, sat down at the marble-topped dressing table and studied her reflection in the mirror. The pale woman who stared back seemed like a stranger—the picture of respectability from her neatly coifed hair to her black dress.

She hoped this wasn't a mistake. A proper widow would have refused Mr. Callaway's suggestion outright, but Lily had rarely done anything proper in her life.

And, at this point, she was sick and tired of her own company. On the long voyage around the horn, she'd forced herself to remain aloof from the mostly male passengers. From the start, she'd seen the speculative glances cast her way and decided it best not to encourage

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any of them. Her newly invented reputation as a respectable widow was at stake.

That had left her with only her maid, Molly, for company. They had shared a cabin on the long voyage around the Horn.

But Molly wasn't with her any longer. That meant Lily was free to indulge herself in the company of a charming and handsome man. And Creighton Callaway qualified in both categories with his dark curly hair, hazel eyes and a ready smile. Though he dressed like a gentleman, in a black suit and frilled white shirt, she suspected he was a rogue at heart.

He appeared to be the complete opposite of Nigel. He was dark, the shadow of his beard giving him a manly aura, whereas Nigel had been fair and blue-eyed with a light beard. But like Nigel, Callaway had the devil dancing in his green-gold eyes.

After tonight she would never see him again, so why not enjoy herself? She wasn't just tired of her own company; she was tired of pleasuring herself quietly while Molly slept. One's own hands were no substitute for a lusty tumble with a virile man.

Leaving her hat behind, Lily slowly strolled from her small cabin on the texas deck on her way to meet Creighton Callaway. He was waiting for her at the bottom of the stairway to the main deck. He flashed her a smile and offered his arm.

Lily placed her hand in the crook of his arm, enjoying the feel of his strong muscles, and they began to stroll along the deck. She caught a whiff of bay rum, the scent she had always identified with Nigel. It had been a long time since she'd been this close to an attractive man, and she felt both giddy and guilty. After all, it had only been ten months since Nigel's death. Was it so wrong for her to enjoy some masculine company? Nigel would certainly not have waited had she been the one to die.

"Now, Mr. Callaway, you promised to tell me about my new

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home.”

“What would you like to know?”

Lily thought for a moment. “What kind of place is it?”

“It has a lot in common with the other mining towns in California, with one exception. The gold is down deep, so hard rock mining is required. That’s why so many Cornish miners have ended up in the area.”

“Are you a miner, Mr. Callaway?”

He chuckled. “No, ma’am. I’m a gambler.”

Lily stopped momentarily. No wonder she was attracted to him. He and Nigel were cut from the same cloth.

After a few moments, Creighton Callaway spoke. “Have I shocked you?”

“No, not at all. Captain Albright enjoyed the occasional card game.” As did she.

“I am very sorry about your husband’s death,” he said softly.

“Thank you.” Lily felt a flush creeping up her face. She strode to the rail and stared out at the river, listening to the soft thunk, thunk of the paddle wheel and the hissing of the steam engine. A welcome breeze cooled her heated cheeks. Mr. Callaway stood back and gave her privacy.

“Your husband was a sea captain?”

“No, a cavalry officer,” Lily replied.

“Then he and I had something else in common.”

She turned to look at him. He was lounging against the wall of the main cabin, a few feet away, his arms crossed over his chest. The light from a hanging lamp illuminated his face.

All traces of amusement were gone, replaced by a somber look greatly at odds with his earlier lighthearted manner. Perhaps he had his own ghosts to deal with.

“Are you saying you were in the army?” she asked.

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"I fought for the South in the War Between the States."

"Ah, Nigel followed the news of your war with great interest. When we met, he was thinking of offering his services to the Confederacy."

Callaway straightened and dropped his arms to his side, but stayed by the wall. "You should be very glad he didn't. A lot of good men died. Too many."

"Yes," she murmured. But Nigel had died anyway, and in a most dishonorable manner.

Perhaps she should have encouraged his plan to join the American rebels. But she hadn't been able to bear the thought of being alone.

Callaway looked at her curiously. "Were you married long?"

"We were together for five years," Lily said. That was true as far as it went. She hoped Mr. Callaway wouldn't ask too many questions about her "husband." It still astonished her that she had told more lies since she became "respectable" than in her entire unconventional life.

"You must miss him."

"Yes," she said, swallowing the lump that suddenly lodged in her throat. Unwelcome tears sprang to her eyes and she groped blindly for a handkerchief.

King Callaway pulled out his own and dabbed at her face. "Better now?"

"Yes. Please forgive me for breaking down. I'm usually not weepy."

He gave her a reassuring smile. "No apology necessary. You suffered a terrible loss. I admire your strength and determination."

"Do you?"

"Yes, ma'am. And your pretty blue eyes."

Color heated her cheeks, but a smile played on her lips. "Are you flirting with me, sir?"

"I'm giving it my best shot," he said with a grin that quickly faded. "Mrs. Albright, I know this is none of my business, but I don't think it

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wise for you to travel alone. I doubt your husband would've approved."

Lily turned back to stare at the sea of stars that seemed to hang over the river, seeming almost within reach. Would Nigel approve of what she was doing? Yes, she decided. He'd been the consummate adventurer. He wouldn't have expected her to live the rest of her life wrapped in cotton wool. And Nigel's death had given her greater freedom than she'd ever known. It was both frightening and exhilarating.

Creighton Callaway seemed to take her silence for agreement. "Please, at least allow me to see you safely on the train."

Lily spun around to stare at him. "And in return?"

He spread his hands. "I expect nothing in return but the pleasure of your company. I have a widowed mother and an unmarried sister. If either one was forced to travel alone, I would worry."

Ah, so he thought women were too weak to take care of themselves. A typical male notion. "I've gotten this far on my own, Mr. Callaway, and my journey is almost over."

"Mrs. Albright, you're not in England any more. I grant you that California is more civilized than it was twenty years ago, but it's not what you are used to."

Lily thought about the men she'd seen wearing gun belts and suppressed a shudder.

Perhaps she should accept his offer. Once she reached Grass Valley and Uncle Arthur, she need never see the man again.

"I suppose you have a point. Very well, Mr. Callaway. I place myself in your capable hands." The image of his hands on the more sensitive parts of her anatomy sent a shiver through her. "And now you may escort me to my cabin."

He offered his arm again and they strolled to the stairway leading to the upper decks and her lonely cabin.

Lily stopped at her cabin and stared at her companion, his

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handsome face illuminated by the lamp burning above the door. Should she or shouldn't she?

Before she could decide, he slowly withdrew her hand from his arm and brought it to his lips. "The evening is still young," he said lightly.

"What did you have in mind, Mr. Callaway?"

Cupping her chin, he stared at her, his eyes full of half promises. "Oh, hell, I may get my face slapped for this, but..." His hand moved to the back of her neck as he lowered his head and captured her lips in a kiss that stole her breath and banished any inhibitions she had left.

Lily grabbed hold of his lapels and gave herself up to the kiss. When it ended she gazed at him through glazed eyes and asked, "Would you like to come inside, Mr. Callaway?"

CHAPTER 2

“Are you sure, Mrs. Albright?”

“Call me Lily.” Hands trembling slightly, she pulled the key from her handbag and unlocked the door, then walked inside and lit the lamps.

He walked up behind her and put his hands on both shoulders. “Don’t be nervous, darlin’. I’ll take good care of you.” His hands stroked down her back to her waist and his mouth nuzzled her neck, sending shivers down her spine. She tilted her head to one side to give him better access.

His hands spanned her waist. “You’re a tight lacer,” he said. “I find that so erotic.”

He stroked upward to cup her breasts, running his fingers over the tips. Her nipples hardened as the muscles in her crotch tightened. He rubbed against her backside and she reached back to caress his thigh, feeling the strong muscles under his wool pants.

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“Let me help you with this.” He undid the top button of her bodice, fumbling a bit. “Why are women’s buttons always so tiny?”

She laughed. “To make life difficult for men.”

He chuckled. “Do you enjoy being difficult, Lily?”

“Of course,” she said lightly. “Men have too many advantages. We women have to complicate their lives whenever possible.”

“There’s nothing wrong with a little complication now and again.” He helped her remove the bodice, then trailed his lips over her shoulders, nuzzling the straps of her camisole aside. His mustache tickled her sensitive skin.

She undid the hook and eye and let her skirt drop to the floor, then unfastened the waistband of her crinoline.

King chuckled as he helped her out of it. “The contraptions you women wear to be fashionable.”

She flashed him a smile. “Anything to attract the attention of the gentlemen.” Her petticoat followed, leaving her in her pink corset and white drawers. She turned and unbuttoned his jacket. “You’re wearing entirely too many clothes.”

He shrugged out of his jacket and pulled off his tie as she unbuttoned his waistcoat. The black-and-gold striped satin was smooth under her hands, but she sensed the heat of the man underneath. Turning her attention to his shirt, she undid the studs. With impatient hands, she pulled it free from his pants and ran her hands over his chest, enjoying the texture of hair-roughened skin. He pulled the shirt over his head and dropped it on the growing pile of discarded clothing.

His muscular chest was lighter than the tanned skin of his face and hands, with a silky mat of black hair that tapered down to his waist. She’d forgotten how much she loved the male body’s clean planes and angles. And the one standing before her was a fine example of a man in his prime, from his broad shoulders to his slim hips.

The evidence of his desire pressed against the front of his pants.

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With a smile, she unfastened the buttons and pushed his pants down around his legs, then worked on the drawstring holding up his drawers until she freed his hardened shaft.

King sucked in a breath as she caressed the length of it with one hand. Did she have any idea what she was doing to him?

“Holy hell,” he said with a shuddering breath. “You don’t waste time, do you?”

She smiled enigmatically. “Have I shocked you?”

He grinned back. What a delightful surprise the English widow had turned out to be. “Lady, you can shock me any day.”

She placed both hands on his shoulders and pushed him backward. “Lie down,” she ordered.

He rushed to obey, but tripped on the clothing tangled around his ankles and fell backward onto the bed.

She knelt beside him and lightly trailed her fingers along his shoulders and arms and down his chest, stopping short of his groin. Then she turned her attention to his legs, stroking upward. She returned her attention to his chest, tracing circles around his nipples. When he groaned and reached for her, she put her hands on his arms and whispered, “Not yet.”

She stretched out on top of him, one leg nestled between his, her soft stomach cradling his aching shaft, and kissed him. Long, slow, wet kisses with the promise of forever. Her fragrance, soft and sensual, like lilies, intoxicated him. He cupped her buttocks, tugging her closer, but she pulled away.

Using her mouth and hands, she again traced a trail of fiery sensation down his chest to his loins. His cock twitched with need. Slowly and gently she caressed the length, then lowered her head. She licked the hardened shaft, finally taking it into her mouth, sucking the

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sensitive head. He groaned and thrust himself upward. She stroked his shaft with one hand, while the other cupped his testicles. He tried to control the urge to spill his seed into her mouth, but he was aroused beyond the point of control. He climaxed hot and fast.

When his breathing slowed, he opened his eyes to see her sitting beside him, a satisfied smile on her face. He grinned at her sheepishly. He hadn't lost control like that in years. What was it about this woman?

"My turn now," he said, determined to please her as she had pleased him. But first he had to free himself of the clothing tangled around his ankles. He sat up and yanked off his boots then rid himself of the rest of the clothes.

He studied his bed partner. Her face was flushed, her blue eyes bright. Her breasts heaved above the tightly laced pink corset. He reached across the bed and ran a hand up her torso, cupping her breast through the lace and silk.

"Beautiful corset. French?"

"English."

"Take it off."

She fumbled with the hook-and-eye opening, so he helped her remove the constricting garment. She was going to need every breath she could get before he finished with her. Free of the constricting garment, her breasts thrust toward him, firm and full. The outline of her nipples showed through the sheer cotton of her camisole.

He pulled her toward him and covered her hot, responsive mouth with his, all the while running his hands over her torso, her back, sides, then her breasts. The peaks hardened under his touch.

He moved his mouth to a nipple and slid his hand down her flat stomach. When he found the slit in her drawers, she spread her legs to give him better entrance. He parted the soft black curls, seeking her pleasure center. He stroked her nether lips, glorying in her soft moans of pleasure.

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He lay her on the bed, grabbed the pillow and placed it under her hips. Kneeling between her spread legs, he nuzzled the soft cotton covering her inner thighs, moving upward until he reached her female core. He blew a soft breath across the heated flesh. Then he kissed her.

Lily almost came off the bed when King tongued her feminine core. Heat rippled under her skin as she recognized the flush of desire she hadn't felt for months. She grabbed his head and spread her legs wider as passion pounded the blood through her heart, chest and head. Writhing under his expert touch, her body throbbing with waves of ecstasy, she cried out for release. It came quickly, exploding in a downpour of fiery sensations.

He moved to lie beside her, holding her as she slowly relaxed. Gently he stroked the damp curls from her forehead. Light smoldered in his gold-flecked eyes.

His head lowered until his lips brushed hers in a tantalizing invitation, then settled on her mouth, warm and demanding. His mouth moved over hers in a sensuous exploration. Parting her lips, she let him possess her mouth, tasting him with a renewed hunger. Wrapping her legs around his, she clung to him, wanting the kiss to go on forever.

When it finally ended, she was hot and breathless. Sitting up, she tugged at her damp camisole, and he helped her pull it over her head, baring her breasts to his gaze. His stare was bold and admiring. He cupped one breast in his hand and ran his thumb over the rosy nipple. It hardened to his touch.

"Lovely," he murmured and turned his attention to its mate.

She sighed in pleasure.

He trailed kisses down her throat and bosom. Shivers of delight followed his touch, and a spurt of hungry desire for more spiraled through her. When his lips closed over one aching nipple, a wild surge

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of pleasure rose in her and she murmured her appreciation.

King raised his head to study the lovely lady lying under him. Her responsiveness was primitive... exciting.... His cock was half erect again already.

“Like that, do you?” he asked, grinning.

“Don’t stop.” Her voice was urgent, breathless, and she used her hands to guide his head to her other breast.

Dutifully, he took her nipple in his mouth, using his lips and tongue to tease it to a pebbled hardness, while his hands explored her soft skin. His own desire was growing rapidly, but he took the time to arouse his partner, worshipping each breast until her breathing quickened.

Lifting his head, he ran his hands down her ribcage to her waist, noting indentations where the corset had pressed into her flesh, and frowned. Maybe tight lacing wasn’t such a good thing, however enticing it made a woman look.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

He smiled at her. “Nothing. I was just noticing what that corset does to you.”

She sat up quickly. “Shall I put it back on?”

He cupped her breast again. “No. I prefer you naked.”

When he untied her drawers, she lifted her hips so he could pull the white cotton off. Her legs were long and shapely, her calves covered in black stockings. He removed them, then studied her. She was a study in contrasts with her porcelain skin and black hair, the only points of color being her blue eyes, pink lips, rosy nipples, and the thatch of black hair hiding her woman’s mound. She exuded a sexuality and a heat that heightened his desire.

She returned his stare. “What are you thinking?”

“How beautiful you are.”

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A pleased smile curved her lips. "I'm glad you think so."

"How could I not?" he asked, lightly. Surely the lady knew how lovely she was. Or were all women unsure of their own attractiveness? It often seemed that way.

He ran his hands up her legs and inner thighs to her female core and her hips lifted in a sensuous invitation. He parted the soft, curling hair to stroke her. She was soft and wet and ready for him.

Lily reached for him. She could take no more teasing. "Now, King," she commanded.

He flashed her a grin. "Yes, ma'am."

He pulled her buttocks higher on the pillow and settled between her legs. Spreading them wider, she welcomed him into her body. She moaned softly as he entered her, slowly at first, giving her time to adjust to his engorged cock. She wrapped her arms and legs around him, pulling him closer, and tipped her hips upward. The rhythmic thrusting sent involuntary tremors of arousal through her body. She gasped in sweet agony. For those blissful moments, her world narrowed to the man in her arms and the sensations flooding her body.

His breathing grew harsh and ragged in her ear, and she rose to meet him in a moment of uncontrolled passion. One last thrust and he stiffened in her arms, calling her name. She felt the tremors of his climax and held him tighter.

He supported himself on one elbow and used his other hand to stroke her sensitive core, sending her over the edge. As she yielded to the searing need that had been building for months, her breath came in long shudders and tears leaked from the corner of her eyes.

When the last tremor subsided, she let out a sigh of delight and looked at him.

He wiped a tear from her cheek. "Are you all right, Lily? I didn't

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hurt you, did I?”

“No.”

His brow was still furrowed and she smoothed it with her fingers.

He kissed her hand, then gathered her close, her head nestled on his shoulder.

She rested a hand on his chest and played with the silky black hairs. For the first time in months, she felt content. She wasn't the kind of woman who was happy alone. That was the reason she'd agreed to marry a complete stranger. Too bad it wasn't this stranger. She wouldn't mind spending more time with him.

He trailed his hand lightly over her back. “You shouldn't be traveling alone, darlin'. You're entirely too trusting.”

She lifted her head to smile at him. “Oh, and what makes you think that?”

He smiled lazily. “The fact that I'm here, naked in your bed, is proof.”

“Regrets? From the gambler?”

“Not at all.” His expression turned sheepish. “I just don't like the idea of some other man being here instead of me.”

Oh, dear, he isn't going to turn possessive, is he?

Lily sat up. “There's something you need to understand. Tonight was wonderful, but it won't happen again.”

“Why not?”

“I'm traveling to meet my future husband.”

“Husband? What the hell are you talking about?” His tone was outraged.

“My uncle arranged for me to marry the gentleman he works for.”

His black brows drew together in a frown. “Then what am I doing in your bed?”

She smiled. “I couldn't resist the chance for one little fling before tying myself to a respectable businessman.”

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“A little fling,” he repeated, standing up and grabbing his clothes. “I wish you’d told me the rules before inviting me into your game. You’re not at all what I expected, Widow Albright. Did your husband like being cuckolded?”

“I never!” she exclaimed, jumping off the bed. “Nigel was the only man I ever slept with... until tonight.”

He stopped dressing to stare at her. “Why me? Why tonight?”

The anger drained out of her and she bit her lip to stop its trembling. “You men are free to indulge your passions whenever you wish. It’s different for women. If you knew how lonely I’ve been these last ten months, how I’ve longed for a man’s touch...”

“Lily.” He reached for her, but she stepped back.

“I don’t want your pity. Just your promise you’ll say nothing of what happened here tonight. And that you’ll forget it ever happened.”

He raked a hand through his hair, mussing it even more. “I promise I won’t say anything, but this is one night I’ll never forget.”

While he finished dressing, she stared at him, etching his face into her memory, wishing he would say something. But he only turned on his heel and left the cabin, leaving her alone and confused.

She sank onto the bed, still rumpled and smelling of sex. Tonight had been wonderful, but inviting King Callaway into her cabin had been a mistake. She should not have succumbed to him just because he was handsome, charming and attentive. Just as she had succumbed to Nigel. Not that she regretted that. They’d had a good life together, but she was older and, she’d thought, wiser now. Had she learned nothing in the last five years?

Apparently not.

Once again she’d given in to her impulses instead of thinking things through. She was promised to someone else, a man Uncle Arthur said was sober and conventional. A man who would no doubt expect a proper bride.

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And look who he was getting.

A laugh broke from her throat, but there was no amusement in it. What a bad bargain Mr. Ogilvie had made. And what a mess she'd made for herself.

King was an exceptional lover. What if her intended husband fell short in that area? Could she live without passion? She doubted it. Even though she'd promised herself no regrets from tonight, the thought of a life without passion held no appeal for her.

CHAPTER 3

Damn all lying, cheating females, King thought as he lit his cheroot, took a puff and blew it out in a rush.

He glanced around the Sacramento waterfront. At least he had solid ground under his feet again. He squinted in the too-bright morning sunlight, keeping an eye on the roulette wheel the dockhands were loading on the train car. He owned one of the most successful gaming houses in Grass Valley. And with the addition of a roulette wheel, he had every hope of the Crescent City Saloon becoming the premier gambling spot in the entire county.

Thanks to Mrs. Albright, his head ached and his wallet was badly depleted. He, King Callaway, expert poker player, had lost last night, only because he hadn't been able to keep his mind on the game. Lily Albright's image kept interfering. Her delectable figure. Her passionate, responsive body. And those lying blue eyes.

He chomped down on the cigar. What an actress she was. One

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minute she'd had tears in her eyes, and the next she was coolly telling him to get out of her life.

After losing his stake, he'd gotten drunk on fine whiskey, but even that hadn't erased her image, or her cool dismissal from his mind. He shook his head and immediately regretted it.

What the hell was wrong with him? It had been a long time since he'd let a female get to him. Not since Marie, that cheating jade.

Lord, he hadn't thought of her in years. He bit down harder on the cigar. Marie's betrayal still rankled, reminding him that only a fool trusted a woman. They were born fickle, and he never should have assumed Lily Albright any different.

That didn't mean he'd had his fill of her. He'd never met a woman like her—warm and passionate yet refined—unconventional, but not a hussy. He didn't know who her intended husband was, but chances were the man wouldn't know what to do with her.

He, on the other hand, had some very good ideas of what to do with her. Lady Luck had brought them together last night, and he was not ready to say good-bye.

When his cargo was safely stowed, he tipped the hands and headed back to the depot waiting room. He'd left Lily in the room set aside for ladies. She thought he was only escorting her as far as the train. He hadn't yet told her that Grass Valley was his home. If she thought she was rid of him, she would soon find herself mightily mistaken.

He grinned, remembering the fireworks they'd generated last night and hoping for more to come.

* * *

Lily shifted in the narrow seat, careful not to brush against the man sleeping next to her, his broad chest moving up and down. King had nodded off almost the moment the train pulled out of Sacramento. In repose he looked younger, but then it was his boyish charm that had first caught her attention.

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But from now on, she could not afford to let herself be charmed by any man other than her new husband-to-be. Too bad, as her night with King Callaway had been even better than she'd anticipated. A hint of bay rum teased her nostrils, reminding her of their lovemaking. How impatient they'd both been, how eager. Just thinking about it made her body ache for his touch. She squeezed her legs together and squirmed in her seat. As much as she would like an encore, it couldn't be so.

Especially after the unfortunate argument that had him storming out of her cabin. She knew she had shocked him, perhaps even hurt him. How had she miscalculated so badly?

Lily stared at the vista from the window of the train as it chugged its way eastward.

Somehow she'd expected California to look more like England, green and cozy. The view that greeted her eyes was anything but. She watched mile after mile of wide open spaces pass by, all bathed in brilliant sunlight. In the distance, clusters of dark green trees dotted a hillside, standing out in contrast to the sere yellow-brown of the grass. Wispy white clouds, without a hint of rain in them, streaked the sky, separating shades of blue ranging from pale turquoise to bright azure. This country had a wild, vast beauty all its own that she found exhilarating already. Perhaps it would be easier to face the future in this place so different from home.

She opened her fan and waved it in front of her face. Her black widow's gown was too warm for this weather, but it was the price of her newly created respectability. She shifted on the seat, trying not to bump King's elbow. He was a large man, tall and broad-shouldered.

She glanced at her escort from the corner of her eye. He sat slumped beside her, his arms crossed over his chest, his head nodding to the rhythm of the train. He looked tired...well, no wonder, he'd probably had little or no sleep last night. She certainly hadn't slept well after he left.

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His head jerked and he suddenly awoke, blinking his eyes. When he saw her looking at him, he grinned sheepishly. "Guess I'm not very good company today."

"Did you get any sleep last night?" she asked. It had taken her a while to drift off after their lovemaking and argument.

"No, but I never sleep on the boat."

"What did you do all night?"

"I decided to indulge myself further by sitting in on a poker game."

"Did you win?" she asked, her tone light.

"No," he said with a scowl, as if it were her fault.

She smiled. *Serves him right.* "I suppose every gambler has a losing streak now and again."

He straightened in his seat. "I lost because I couldn't keep my mind on the game. Poker is a game of skill, not luck."

"I thought all gamblers believed in luck."

"Oh, I believe in Lady Luck. She saved my life once." He reached into the breast pocket of his jacket and pulled out a deck of cards with a jagged hole in the middle.

"What happened?"

He handed her the cards. "That's my lucky deck. It stopped a Yankee bullet during the war."

The cards were tattered, obviously well used. Lily thought about Nigel. He hadn't had a lucky deck the day of his duel. "You're a very fortunate man," she said, passing the deck back to him.

He grinned, his green-gold eyes crinkling at the corners, and pocketed the cards. "Lady Luck has been good to me, but like all ladies, she can be fickle. So I don't like to depend on her. When I sit down at the poker table, I decide on the size of my stake. If I lose it, I fold."

Lily studied him intently. For a man who gambled, he seemed to possess an unusual amount of common sense. "I wish Nigel had shared

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your philosophy.”

Callaway cocked an eyebrow. “What happened to your husband, Mrs. Albright?”

Lily bit her lip. She had revealed too much, but she hadn’t confided in anyone since leaving England, and her memories were eating away at her. It might help to talk about it, and she had a feeling King would understand.

“Nigel was on a winning streak. Another ‘gentleman’ accused him of cheating. Nigel was offended, of course. When the other man refused to apologize, Nigel challenged him to a duel. He was mortally wounded and died in my arms.” She swallowed the lump in her throat and blinked back the tears that welled in her eyes. She refused to cry for him any more.

“I’m sorry, Lily,” King said, his voice gruff.

She took the linen handkerchief he offered and dabbed at her eyes. It smelled of starch and tobacco and man. Comforting scents. How many times had she snuffled into Nigel’s handkerchief?

King placed an arm around her shoulders. Lily was tempted—oh, how she was tempted—to lay her head on his shoulder and give vent to a good cry. Then she remembered it wasn’t proper to weep on a man’s shoulder in public, so she wiped her eyes, straightened her back and stared out the window.

Oh, but she was tired of pretending to be proper. Tired of playing the grieving widow. Not that her grief wasn’t genuine, for it was, and inclined to sneak up on her at inconvenient times like this. But holding in her emotions was becoming a strain. She wanted the freedom to sob, to laugh out loud, to sing and dance again. To make love with abandon. Like last night.

Maybe even to give her heart to another man.

That realization almost made her gasp. Were her emotions thawing out in the California sunshine? What else could have brought that on?

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Or was it the presence of the man sitting next to her?

She looked at his handsome face and felt an unwelcome premonition go through her. Had she made a mistake in tying her future to man she'd yet to meet?

* * *

When the train stopped at Colfax, Lily climbed stiffly down and let King escort her to the stagecoach.

"It's been a pleasure, Lily," he said.

"Thank you for your escort, Mr. Callaway."

He tipped his hat. "My pleasure, ma'am. Maybe we'll run into each other again some day." He said the words tentatively, as if testing the idea.

"Perhaps," she murmured, knowing it would be best if they did not. She watched him walk away, a slight swagger to his step. Brash, with an untamed quality, he seemed to belong in this new land.

A few moments later Lily squeezed into the stagecoach with four other travelers and silently endured the jostling, bone-jarring ride.

At one point a rider passed the coach, hunched over the saddle. The width of his shoulders in his black coat reminded her of King. She shook her head. She had best get the virile gambler off her mind as soon as possible.

The closer she got to her destination, the more barren the landscape became. Evidently, the hills had been lushly forested at one time, but nearly all the trees had been cut down. No doubt for building materials for the town, but also for timbers to shore up the mineshafts. Uncle Arthur's last letter had said there were dozens of mines in the area, many leading deep underground.

Like the mine that had killed her father.

A shiver passed through her as she remembered that awful time. On the day of her father's funeral, she had vowed never to marry a miner.

Perhaps that was why she'd been so susceptible to Nigel. Had he

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been a miner, she'd not have given him a second look. When the dashing half-pay cavalry officer had promised her love, adventure and a chance to escape her past, she'd turned her back on her home with no regrets.

As the stage pulled to a halt, she peered out the window, squinting in the bright sunlight, but she was unable to spot her uncle in the crowd.

The driver opened the door and helped her out. "There you go, little lady."

Lily murmured her thanks then turned when she heard her name. Arthur Penhallow pushed his way through the crowd. His hair had turned gray since last she'd seen him, but there was no mistaking the Penhallow eyes, bright blue under bristling black brows.

Lily threw herself into his arms for a hug. "Oh, Uncle Arthur, it's so good to see you again."

He held her at arm's length. "Let me get a good look at you, girl," he said gruffly. "You've grown into a beautiful woman. You'll knock Hugh Ogilvie on his arse, even in those widow's weeds. Good thing you're promised already. I'd be beating men off with a stick."

"Uncle Arthur, really." She glanced around, but saw no one paying any attention to them. "Speaking of Mr. Ogilvie...."

"He wanted to meet your stage, but he had business at the mine."

"Just as well," Lily said, brushing her wrinkled skirt. "I'm hot and rumpled and worn to a nub. I'd rather he didn't see me like this."

"About those widow's weeds, it's been nearly a year since Nigel died."

"Ten months." Lily was longing to throw off her blacks and wear colors again, but her year of mourning wasn't quite over yet.

Arthur looked around. "Where's your maid? You promised me you wouldn't travel alone."

"She accompanied me as far as San Francisco then the silly creature

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ran off with one of the sailors. I came the rest of the way alone.”

Her uncle frowned. “No one bothered you, did they?”

“No,” she assured him, though that was not entirely true. Thoughts of her romp with King Callaway had disturbed her sleep. But that was something she had to stop dwelling on. “Everyone has been unfailingly polite, but it is rather disconcerting to see so many men walking around with guns strapped to their waists.”

“Welcome to the Wild West. Are you sorry you came?”

“No...it’s just not at all what I imagined. Everything and everyone is so rough. So unfinished.”

Arthur chuckled. “America is a country still inventing itself. Any man with determination and a willingness to work hard can better his lot.”

He arranged for two sturdy fellows to bring Lily’s baggage, then offered her his arm.

They strolled up a hill to a large, three-story wooden house. It was plain in style, but looked to be newly whitewashed.

“I’ve arranged for you to have a room here until the wedding,” Arthur said. “Nell Trelawney runs a respectable boarding house. I’ve roomed here for several months now.”

A tall, well-padded woman with graying brown hair greeted them at the door. “So this is your niece, Arthur. And a fine specimen of Cornish womanhood she is, too.”

“No finer than yourself, Nell,” Arthur said, eyes twinkling.

Lily held out a hand. “How do you do, Mrs. Trelawney.”

Nell squeezed her hand. “Welcome to California, dearie. I hope you’ve had a warm welcome.”

“Yes, indeed,” Lily murmured, trying to quell memories of the charming stranger who’d shared her bed last night. Warm didn’t begin to describe that encounter.

Nell waved her inside. “Come in and sit a spell. Would you fancy a

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spot of tea?"

"No, thank you. I'd just like to unpack and rest a bit."

Arthur hid a yawn behind his hand. "I could use a nap myself. I switched to the night shift, so I'd be free to meet your stagecoach."

"Go," Nell urged. "I'll show Lily to her room and help her get settled in."

After Arthur left, Nell gave Lily a brief tour of the boardinghouse. "This is the parlor."

Lily peeked in to find a large room with a billiard table in the middle and a few small tables and chairs by the windows. "Billiards?"

Nell smiled. "I know it's unusual, but that way the men have something to do here when they're not working instead of heading for the nearest tavern. Mining is a dangerous occupation and requires a clear head."

"Very true," Lily murmured.

Across the hall, the dining room held a large rectangular table and a dozen chairs. On one side of the room sat an immense sideboard.

"In the morning I set out chafing dishes and let the boarders serve themselves."

"How do you manage all by yourself?"

"Oh, my daughter-in-law helps out."

"So do we," a little voice piped up from behind them.

Lily turned to see two of the most adorable children she'd ever beheld in her life. One was a boy of about five with straight black hair and round brown eyes. A little girl with black curls and almond shaped eyes peeked out from behind him.

"These are my grandchildren," Nell said proudly. "Jem and May, this is Miss Lily, Mr. Arthur's niece."

Lily smiled at the two children staring solemnly at her. "It's very nice to meet you, Jem and May."

She held out her hands. After a nod from Nell, the children ran to

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her side and each latched onto a hand.

“You’re pretty,” Jem observed.

“Thank you. How old are you?”

“Five,” the boy answered.

She turned to May “And you?”

The little girl gave her a shy smile and held up two fingers.

Lily studied the child. With her curly hair and slanted eyes, she was enchantingly exotic, like a pixie, or one of the tommyknockers of Cornish legend.

Nell showed her the rest of the house, Jem and May tagging along behind them. Besides the parlor and dining room, the first floor boasted a good-sized kitchen with an enormous wood stove and a spacious bedroom for Nell.

The second floor had two large bedchambers and a bathroom on one side of the hall and three smaller rooms on the other. The third floor had one large dormitory-style room with six beds, and three small rooms, which were occupied by Uncle Arthur, the children and their mother.

Nell insisted Lily occupy the huge front-facing bedroom on the second story. Jem and May watched as she unpacked and hung her clothes in the armoire. After Nigel’s death, she had packed her things and moved into a smaller room. Now, for the first time in nearly a year, she unpacked her trunk of brightly colored gowns. Rose, blue, lavender and green.

“Pretty,” May exclaimed when she saw the glowing silks and ran over to touch the rose ball gown.

“Yes,” Lily agreed. It was one she had worn to parties she’d attended with Nigel. He had moved on the fringes of society and they were sometimes invited to gatherings that usually consisted of gentlemen and their mistresses. Those days were behind her now.

After hanging the gowns in the armoire, she looked at the children

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who had fallen asleep on her bed. She covered them gently with a blanket, brushed a strand of Jem's hair off his face, and removed May's thumb from her mouth.

The urge to capture this moment seized her, so Lily pulled her sketchbook from her carpetbag and sat down to draw the sleeping children. When she was finished, she turned the page and kept on sketching. Soon the face of King Callaway appeared, a sardonic grin on his face.

Drat it all, why couldn't she get him out of her mind?

CHAPTER 4

King reined in his hired horse in front of the Crescent City Saloon. The freight wagon carrying the roulette wheel stopped behind him. All he wanted to do was get the wheel set up and grab some shut-eye before the evening crowd came in.

He vaulted off his horse and tossed the reins and a coin to a young boy standing in the street. "Take him to the livery for me, son."

Glad to be home, he grabbed his carpetbag from the freight wagon, walked into the building and surveyed his domain. A long mahogany bar with a polished brass foot rail stretched along one side of the rectangular room. Stag heads decorated the wall above the bar, and a painting of a well-endowed woman draped in a transparent veil graced another wall. Toward the back sat several circular tables and the potbellied stove that warmed the place in winter. Though it was still afternoon, five men sat around one table, no doubt engaged in a game of draw poker.

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Gus, the barman, rushed over to him. "Glad you're home, boss. We had a little problem last night."

King sighed wearily. "What kind of problem?"

Gus sent him an apologetic look. "Mr. Ogilvie was in. He started drinking, then lost a bundle at faro. He got real upset when I refused to give him credit. Said he wanted to win back what he'd lost."

"Damn," King muttered. His cousin George was the world's worst card player, especially when he'd been drinking. When would he learn to stay away from the tables?

"You did the right thing, Gus. I'll talk to George. For now, tell the teamsters outside to unload the roulette wheel and set it up next to the faro table."

King hurried past the bar, climbed the stairs, walked through his upstairs office and into his bedroom, dropping his carpetbag beside the brass bed.

He wandered back into his office to check the mail Gus had left on his desk. There was another letter from his mother, no doubt asking when he was coming back to New Orleans. He sent her money every month, but knew that wasn't enough. With a sigh King glanced at the photograph of his mother, sister and niece he kept on the desk. Three generations of women, two of them widowed by that stupid, bloody war.

Maybe he should bring them to California, away from the memories of war and loss. God knew he was glad to be away from it all. Maybe soon, when the promised transcontinental railroad was done. He'd have to go home to provide escort for them. He doubted his mother and sister were as brave as Lily.

He could hardly believe she'd traveled all the way from England with only her maid for protection. What an amazing woman she was. And what a delightful armful. And if she thought he was going to stand by and idly watch her marry a stranger...

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“King?”

At the sound of his name, he turned to find his cousin, George Ogilvie

George shook his blond head ruefully. “I guess you heard what happened.”

King nodded. “Sam told me you lost at faro last night. I warned you—”

“I know. Faro’s a fool’s game. But what’s done is done. King, you’ve got to help me out here. I’ve got a payroll to meet day after next. Pa will kill me if he finds out.”

“You gambled the payroll money? What were you thinking?”

George flashed him a boyish grin, one he’d perfected over the years. It was calculated to soften the heart of whoever was angry at him. It had worked with his mother, but he had yet to figure out it didn’t work on anyone else. Especially his father.

“Guess I wasn’t thinking. I won’t do it again,” he promised, sincerity ringing in his tone.

But King had heard that promise too many times before. “I can’t give you any more credit. You already owe me a bundle. Maybe you can get a bank loan.”

“Can’t. Pa would find out. You’ve gotta help me, King. You owe me...you know you do.”

King clenched his fists. It was an old obligation, but one George had no intention of letting him forget. As if the memory of his near drowning would ever leave him in peace. He’d been a lad of five when his ten-year-old cousin had saved his life by pulling him out of the Mississippi. He’d never forget how it had felt when the dark muddy water closed over his head. George had hauled him out, coughing up river water, and been proclaimed a hero by King’s grateful mother. He shook off the memory. George had been collecting on that debt for years now.

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"I guess I could lend you the money."

George broke into a smile that creased the corners of his blue eyes.

"Thanks—"

King held up a hand. "Not so fast. This time I'm going to need some collateral."

"What kind of collateral?"

"Gold will do," King said with a smile. "That should be easy enough to find in a mine."

"If I had gold, I wouldn't need to borrow money from you."

King shrugged. "Then I guess I can't help you."

George paced the room for a moment before speaking. "I could put up my shares in the mine."

"That'll do. Bring them tomorrow and I'll see you get your cash."

"There's one more thing. Can we keep this quiet? You know how Pa is."

"Of course," King agreed reluctantly. He hated going around Uncle Hugh's back, but if he knew that his son had gambled away shares in the mine, he'd disown his only son. So far, George had been able to hide his losses from his father, but if he failed to meet a payroll, the whole town would know what he'd been doing. "But no more gambling."

"Agreed. I've learned my lesson."

King doubted that, but kept his thoughts to himself.

"Thanks, King. I owe you." George left the office and clattered down the stairs.

You do indeed, King thought. He went back into the bedroom, hung his jacket in the wardrobe and stretched out on the bed. He sighed as he sank into the feather mattress, intending to take a short nap, but sleep didn't come easily. George and his problems occupied King's mind.

Think of something more pleasant, he told himself. The widow from the steamboat came readily to mind. Lily Albright. What a night that

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had been. The thought of her hands and mouth on his cock had him hard in an instant. He'd rarely met such an enthusiastic bedmate. Or such a lovely one.

Her husband had been a fool, King decided. If he had a wife who looked like she did, he wouldn't spend his evenings at a gaming house. No, King could think of more pleasant things to do in that situation. Very pleasant things, indeed.

* * *

Early the next morning King was jolted awake by someone knocking on his door. It was George, the mine shares in hand. He waited impatiently while King shaved, swearing when he nicked himself. He dressed quickly, eager for the first eye-opening cup of coffee.

King unlocked the safe in his office and counted out the money, then exchanged the cash for the mine shares before locking them in the safe.

"Are you leaving them in there?" George asked.

"For the time being," King said. "I guess this makes me a partner in the St. Charles mine."

"Silent partner," George stressed, an annoyed look on his face. "Very silent."

"Of course," King agreed, amused by his cousin's discomfort. "Just let me know when you're ready to redeem the shares for cash. Or gold."

"I'm starving," George said. "Let's get some breakfast at the hotel."

"If you're buying," King said, grabbing his hat off the rack.

He hoped this would be the last time he had to bail out his cousin. It was past time for George to learn how to handle his affairs. King doubted George would ever be a good money manager, but maybe the threat of his father finding out what he'd done would keep George on the straight and narrow. King hoped so, for George's sake.

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* * *

Lily walked into Carver's Dry Goods store, closed her parasol and looked around.

Wooden counters ran along two sides of the room and the shelves behind them were crammed with goods of all kinds. Dozens of smells mingled in the air, foremost among them the scent of new leather goods and the aroma of tobacco.

There were six such stores in Grass Valley, but Uncle Arthur had insisted she patronize Carver's. The Cornish stick together, he'd told her.

Spotting bolts of fabric, she went to investigate, stripping off her gloves. She needed something cool and practical for this warm California weather. Her eye was drawn to several bolts of calico in shades ranging from bright yellow to a soft lavender. With longing she gazed at the red and yellow, before deciding on the lavender, a color more appropriate for a widow coming out of mourning.

The shopkeeper, a gray-haired woman who looked to be in her fifties, walked up to her. "May I 'elp you?"

"Yes," Lily said. "I need to make myself a new dress. I'll need seven yards of the lavender calico."

"Do you need a pattern?"

"No, but I will need matching thread," Lily replied. Then she remembered how May had admired her rose silk. "Do you have patterns for little girls?"

"Yes, indeed," the woman said, pulling a pattern book onto the counter. "What age is your daughter?"

"Oh, I don't have any children." Lily paged through the book of somewhat outdated styles. "It's for a friend's granddaughter. She's only two." She pointed to a pattern of a simple yoked dress. "This one will do. I'd like two yards of the red calico." She couldn't wait to see May in her new dress. She hadn't spent much time around children, had

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never been particularly interested in them, but Jem and May had her wondering now if she might not want some of her own one day.

"You're new in town, aren't you?" the shopkeeper asked as she cut the cloth.

"Yes, just arrived yesterday. I'm Lily Albright. You may know my uncle, Arthur Penhallow."

"Oh, yes," the woman said with a smile. "I'm Jenny Carver. Mr. Penhallow 'as an account here. 'E mentioned 'is niece was arriving soon."

"Oh, good," Lily said. "Then you can add the pattern and material to his bill."

"Is there anything else?" the woman asked as she measured the material.

"Not at this time."

Mrs. Carver folded the material, wrapped it in brown paper and tied the package with string.

Lily pulled on her gloves and headed out of the store, package in her arms. Laying it on the bench outside, she opened her parasol then picked up the material again.

Turning toward home, she saw two men standing outside the hotel and immediately recognized one of them.

King Callaway.

* * *

After steak and eggs, fried potatoes and biscuits, King followed George out of the hotel when suddenly George stopped.

"Who is that?" he asked.

King looked up to find Lily Albright walking toward them, and his heart started thudding like a drum. He hadn't expected to see her again so soon, if at all. A tiny black hat perched on her head, and she carried a parasol to shade her face from the intense sunlight. She was wise to protect her porcelain complexion. It could easily freckle and burn in

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this climate, and that, he allowed, would be a shame. She wore a high-necked blouse that was only a shade whiter than her flawless skin and a black skirt that swayed seductively as she moved.

Was she wearing the pink corset today? The memory of her lying naked, legs open to receive him, had his cock starting to harden, and he banished the image.

He tipped his hat and waited to see if she would acknowledge him.

She slowed when she saw him. "Mr. Callaway."

He relaxed and smiled. "Good morning, Mrs. Albright."

Lily's face flushed a becoming shade of pink. Was she remembering their night together?

Or was she worried he might not keep his promise?

"Albright?" George interrupted.

"Mrs. Albright traveled all the way from London to San Francisco on her own. She and I took the same steamboat to Sacramento," King said by way of explanation.

"Mr. Callaway was kind enough to see I arrived safely."

"Well, in that case, I guess I'll have to thank him," George said. "It'd purely be a shame if something had happened to my future stepmother."

Stepmother? A chill passed through King. "What the devil are you talking about?"

George turned to Lily. "You are Mrs. Lily Albright, aren't you? The woman who agreed to marry my father."

Lily's face went whiter than ever. "Hugh Ogilvie is your father?" she asked in faint tones.

George nodded. "None other. Didn't your uncle mention me?"

"No. I knew Mr. Ogilvie was an older gentleman, but...."

King suppressed the urge to shove his fist down his cousin's throat. Not that he was to blame for Lily's marital plans, but the urge to punch someone was almost overwhelming.

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He should have put two and two together. He'd known Uncle Hugh was thinking of marrying again, but when Lily said she was promised to someone else, he'd never thought... His uncle was almost old enough to be her grandfather. But he was wealthy and powerful. If she was like most women, that was enough. Like Marie, who had preferred a Yankee captain to a Confederate private. King pushed that memory aside. Was the present repeating the past?

"I understand you're to have dinner with us on Sunday," George was saying to Lily. "Father can't wait to meet you and show you our new house in Virginia City."

"That sounds lovely."

"Good, then it's settled."

Nothing was settled as far as King was concerned. He wanted to be there when Lily met her aging bridegroom. How could he wangle an invitation to dinner?

He snapped his fingers. "I've got an idea, George. I'll rent a rig from the livery stable and bring Mrs. Albright with me. That'll save you a trip into town." King smiled at the annoyed look on his cousin's face. Under the circumstances, King doubted he was welcome, but George wouldn't say so in front of Lily.

"Fine," George snapped. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have work to attend to. Good day, Mrs. Albright." With another glare at King, he strode off down Mill Street.

"May I escort you home? I'm headed in that general direction myself." King took her package, then offered her his arm. She hesitated, then placed her hand in the crook of his elbow.

She said nothing, just walked stiffly by his side looking at the buildings they passed. Her light floral scent teased his senses.

How could she be so calm? How could she be so indifferent to him after what they'd shared?

He wanted her, badly, and found it difficult to believe she didn't

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reciprocate his desire. Despite her insistence she was going to marry a stranger, she hadn't struck him as the mercenary type of woman. She had none of Marie's wiles. And the shock on her face when she'd met George could not have been contrived.

He still couldn't believe she was going to marry his uncle. Not that he blamed him for wanting to marry a younger woman. No doubt he was thinking of starting a second family. George had to be a disappointment to his father. Unless King missed his guess, his cousin was on the path to destruction and liable to take his father and the mine down with him. Maybe Lily wasn't getting such a great bargain after all.

There might be a chance of talking her out of this disaster and into his bed after all.

* * *

Lily hadn't expected to see King Callaway, but even less had she expected to meet a grown man calling her his stepmother!

George Ogilvie reminded her of Nigel, with blond curls and pale blue eyes, though he wasn't nearly as handsome. She wondered what his father looked like.

She reined in that train of thought, suddenly reminded of the "Spanish Lady" Molly's sailor sang about. The song told of a haughty lady who spurned her wealthy but plain suitor because all she wanted was a handsome man.

Five years ago Lily had let herself be tempted by Nigel's good looks and easy charm. She had fallen in love with all the passion and impetuosity an eighteen-year-old girl could muster. But she was older and wiser now. Wasn't she?

Oh, yes, that was why she had invited King Callaway into her bed on the riverboat. Let him kiss her all over, touch her body in the most intimate places, let him take her to paradise. More than once. No, she had no regrets about their encounter, but she realized now how unwise

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it had been.

And they were all going to Sunday dinner at the Ogilvie's. *Won't that just be lovely?* She fumed at the way King had invited himself and offered his escort. He was entirely too encroaching! It wouldn't do to be seen constantly in his company. But, for the moment, she had no choice, and it was nice not to have to juggle the package of material and her parasol.

"Will you be in Grass Valley long, Mr. Callaway?" she asked.

He slanted a glance at her. "Yes, ma'am, I expect so. It's been my home for a few years now."

She frowned. Why hadn't he mentioned that on the riverboat? "I didn't realize you lived here." If she had, she'd never have invited him into her cabin. This complicated matters enormously.

"Didn't I say that?"

"No, you did not," she snapped.

"Then I apologize. I wasn't sure a *lady* would want to consort with the owner of a gaming saloon."

Her lips tightened, but she said nothing more about it as they continued to walk, an uncomfortable silence between them.

"Is the shortage of wood the reason for so many brick buildings downtown?" she finally asked, just to make polite conversation.

"That's only one factor," he said. "Grass Valley has seen a number of destructive fires, though none recently. Brick is more expensive, but less flammable."

"Should I be worried?" she asked, as they arrived at the wooden structure that was her new home. She let go of his arm and folded her parasol, glad for the chance to put some distance between them. It would be all too easy to get used to his company.

Callaway smiled reassuringly. "I wouldn't. Your boardinghouse is far enough from the center of town to be relatively safe."

He held the door for her. Lily led the way inside. She should offer

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him a glass of lemonade, but hesitated to encourage him to call.

"Which room is yours?" he asked, starting up the stairs.

She hurried after him. "What do you think you're doing?"

He turned his head to grin at her. "Delivering your package."

"Oh, very well," Lily said, pointing out the right room.

He entered and laid the package on the bed, then turned to stare at her.

Lily stood beside the doorway, hoping he would leave immediately.

"Thank you, Mr. Callaway. Now if you'll excuse me "

"Are you really going to marry my uncle?"

She gasped. "Your uncle?" *Oh, good Lord, no.* "Hugh Ogilvie is your uncle?"

"Yep. If I'd had any idea..."

She closed her eyes. What a mess she'd gotten herself into. "Are you going to tell him?"

"No. I promised I wouldn't, but I think you should. Uncle Hugh deserves to know what kind of woman he intends to marry."

His words stung, but she knew they were not entirely undeserved. "I told you I was faithful to Nigel."

He advanced toward her, his intentions clear. "But are you going to be true to Uncle Hugh?"

"Yes," she said, backing away from him. She could be faithful. If only this man would stay away from her.

"You could tell him you've changed your mind. That you've met someone else." His voice was low and seductively husky.

"And if I don't?"

He stood close, his body pressing into hers, the whisper of his breath caressing her cheek.

"It's your choice. What do you want out of life, Lily? Money and social position? If that's what you want, then go ahead and marry Hugh Ogilvie. But remember this—money won't keep you warm and

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satisfied at night. Not like I can.”

A jolt of desire forced her to look away. She clenched her fists to keep from reaching for him. What did she really want out of life? When she left England she had thought she knew the answer to that question, then this charmer came into her life. Why did he have to turn up everywhere she went?

She made the mistake of looking at him. Light smoldered in his gold-flecked eyes as he lowered his head. His mouth covered hers hungrily and she returned the kiss with helpless abandon, lost in sensations she was powerless to control.

He took her hand and guided it to his groin. He was hard and ready for love. She caressed his shaft through his wool pants. A groan tore from his throat as he pulled back, breathing hard.

“Lily, let me love you again.”

“I can’t,” she whispered and pulled her hand from his. “It wouldn’t be right.”

He clenched his fists. “Damn it, Lily, marrying for money isn’t right either.”

“Is that what you think I’m doing?” she asked, taken aback.

“Why else would you marry a stranger, if not for money?”

“Maybe I’m tired of worrying about what the future will bring, about whether I can support myself. It’s much easier for a man to be alone than a woman. Now I think it’s time you left.”

Before he could respond, she turned and started down the stairs. King Callaway was forced to trail behind her. When she reached the hallway, Jem and May ran in the front door.

“Miss Lily, you’re home,” Jem said as he and May ran to greet her. They stopped when they saw she wasn’t alone.

King gave her a quizzical look.

“These are Mrs. Trelawney’s grandchildren, Jem and May. Children, this is Mr. Callaway. He was kind enough to help me home

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with my package.”

King faced the children, hands in his pockets and smiled. “Hey, there, Jem, what’s that you have behind your ear?” Quick as lightning, he reached out and pulled a coin from behind Jem’s ear and handed it to the boy.

“Two bits,” Jem exclaimed.

“Let me see,” May said. When Jem showed her the coin, her lower lip pouted and she reached behind her ear. “Me want one, too.”

“That’s the wrong ear,” King said, producing another quarter for her.

She squealed in delight and grabbed the coin in her tiny hand.

Lily smiled warmly at King who winked back at her. Not every man would take the time to pay attention to small children. She wondered if his uncle was as kind.

“Can you do that again, Mr. King?” Jem asked.

“Jem,” another voice exclaimed.

Lily turned to see Jade, the boy’s mother, standing in the doorway. Like many Chinese women, she was petite and flowerlike, with almond-shaped eyes and straight black hair. Her expression was gentle as she looked at her son. “It is not polite to ask people for money.”

“But it’s my money,” the boy said. “He found it behind my ear.”

Jade pressed her lips together as if trying to keep from laughing at the boy’s stubborn expression. “Did you put it there?”

“No,” he admitted, avoiding her gaze.

“Then perhaps it wasn’t your money to begin with.”

Jem frowned and stared at the coin.

“He’ll have to think about that for a bit,” King said.

Lily laughed and introduced them. Jade instructed the children to thank him, then ushered them out of the room.

Lily smiled at him. “That was quite a trick, Mr. Callaway. Do you tell fortunes, too?”

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“As a matter of fact, I do. Is the lady interested?”

“Perhaps,” she said, aware he was flirting with her again and that she was enjoying it. “There should be a deck of cards here somewhere.”

“No cards required. Just let me see your palm.”

Unable to stop herself, Lily stripped off her gloves and let him take her hand. He held it in his left hand, and with his right index finger, traced the lines on her palm. Shivers ran up her arm at each caressing touch. His scent, a mixture of bay rum, male musk and a faint hint of tobacco, overwhelmed her.

“What do you see?” she asked, her voice suddenly breathless.

“Health and long life.”

“What, no handsome stranger?” she joked.

He raised his head and stared into her eyes. “Oh, yes, I see romance ahead for you. With a dark haired fellow. But he isn’t a stranger.”

For what seemed an age, she stared into his green-gold eyes while her pulse quickened and warmth stole through her veins. It would be so easy to surrender to the feelings he evoked. So easy. All she had to do was lead him upstairs where bliss awaited.

“I also see a fork in the road ahead,” he added softly. “You have a decision to make. A very important decision.”

She snatched her hand away, knowing she couldn’t afford to be distracted by erotic memories. It wasn’t as if he had made her any promises. “I think you need to practice your fortune telling skills, Mr. Callaway.”

He chuckled. “Guess I’d better get going.”

Lily walked him to the front door. He turned, held her eyes for a moment, then left.

She sighed and leaned against the doorjamb. Was she making a mistake in letting him go? They had fallen into an easy intimacy from the beginning. Just as she had with Nigel. Lord, she missed him. It

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wasn't just the carnal aspects of lovemaking that she missed. She longed for the emotional intimacy she'd had with Nigel. There was a good chance she could share that with King, too, but what to do about the man she was supposed to marry?

Lost in thought, she watched as King walked off. She hadn't expected someone like him to be so kind to the children. Nigel wouldn't have given them a moment's thought. King Callaway seemed a decent man, for a gambler. But she had to stop thinking about him. For better or worse, she was going to marry Hugh Ogilvie.

Unfortunately, between King and George, she was beginning to suspect the situation might be far worse than she'd anticipated. And she hadn't even met her bridegroom!

CHAPTER 5

When Sunday arrived, Lily debated about what to wear to meet her intended husband. She longed to wear one of her more colorful gowns, but finally decided to wear her blacks and look the proper widow. Hugh Ogilvie was an older gentleman who might expect her to observe the niceties of mourning etiquette.

After donning her best black silk gown, she wandered downstairs to the porch to await King Callaway's arrival. Her heart rate increased at the thought of the good-looking gambler. A wave of warmth spread through her at the memory of his hands and mouth on her body, doing wonderfully naughty things to her.

Drat him, why couldn't he leave her alone? He knew she was promised to another and had still invited himself to dinner. Something no gentleman would do. But then, she was no lady, as she'd proved that night on the riverboat.

She turned when she heard footsteps.

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Nell Trelawney appeared in the doorway. "Well, don't you look nice. Off to dine with the nobs, are you?"

Lily studied the almost-hostile expression on the face of her normally genial landlady. "Do you not approve of me marrying Hugh Ogilvie?"

"That's none of my business," Nell said brusquely. "I got nothing against the old man. He was good to us when my Jemmy was killed. It's that Mr. George you got to watch out for."

"Yes. I met him the other day and got the impression he didn't want his father to remarry. Especially a woman so much younger. It's bound to be awkward."

Nell folded her arms across her ample bosom. "Well, if you go through with this, make sure your bedroom door is locked when Mr. Hugh ain't around."

"Surely you don't think George would hurt me," Lily exclaimed.

"Talk his way into your bed, more like," Nell muttered. "Wouldn't be the first time he's done it. He's a charmer, that one, but up to no good."

Lily just stared at her. George, a charmer? She certainly hadn't seen that side of him.

Nell went on, "No wonder Mr. Hugh wants a young wife. Probably wanting another son since the one he's got is such a wastrel."

Lily's heart sank. What kind of situation had her uncle got her into?

The arrival of King Callaway pulled her out of her gloomy thoughts. As always, he wore his black jacket and tie and white frilly shirt, but today his pants and waistcoat were blue to match the brilliant California sky.

He walked up the steps, doffed his hat and bowed to her and Nell. "Ah, two lovely ladies to brighten my day." He winked at Nell who giggled like a schoolgirl.

"Good day, Mr. Callaway," Lily said.

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“Ma’am, you are a sight for sore eyes. It ought to be a crime for any woman to look so good in black.”

Lily fought a smile. “Flattery will get you nowhere, Mr. Callaway. Shall we be off?”

He gestured toward the street where a buggy pulled by one black horse waited. “Your carriage, Cinderella.”

She laughed. “Will it turn into a pumpkin at midnight?”

“I’ll have you home well before then. Unless you have something in mind....”

She turned her head to look at him and saw desire in his hazel eyes. Again, images of their night together invaded her mind, but she fought to banish them. It was beastly of him to be constantly reminding her of that night. How often this last week had she lain awake wondering where he was, what he was doing, who he was with?

Though she had no hold on him, the thought of him with another woman filled her with unreasonable jealousy. If only she were free to go to him, lose herself in the passion he aroused in her. What bliss that would be. Her nether regions grew wet just thinking of it.

Angry at herself, she turned and flounced down the steps to the waiting buggy. She wished she had never met this man who tempted her with his charm, his virility, and his skilled lovemaking, inflaming her senses, making her come, not once but twice.

He followed and helped her into the buggy, then walked around and climbed in beside her. She fussed with her skirts, avoiding his gaze as he picked up the reins and clucked to the horse.

By the time they had left town, the silence was becoming strained. She cleared her throat. “Tell me about Hugh Ogilvie. Uncle Arthur has said so little.”

“Uncle Hugh’s a good man,” King said.

“Unlike his son?”

King glanced at her sideways. “Has someone been talking to you

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about George?"

"Nell. She said he's not to be trusted."

King turned his attention back to the road. "Well, she has her reasons."

"What reasons?" Lily asked. "If I'm going to marry into the family, I need to know—"

"The family secrets?" He turned to look directly at her. "Listen to me, Lily. There are things about George that Uncle Hugh doesn't know. Unpleasant things."

"Like what?"

King hesitated. "His gambling, for one. He owes me a lot of money."

"What does Nell know that you're not telling me?"

They drove in silence for several moments. The sky was a brilliant blue, but a breeze kept the heat somewhat at bay. Still, Lily began to feel perspiration beading on her forehead. She pulled a handkerchief from the pocket of her gown and dabbed at her hairline. Was it the warm weather or her nervousness at the meeting to come?

"Have you met Nell's daughter-in-law?" King asked finally.

"Jade? Yes, I have."

"She used to work for the Ogilvies before she married Jemmy Trelawney, and again after he died. There is good reason to think that little May is George's child."

Lily bit back a gasp. "How is that possible?"

"The child was born almost ten months after Jemmy died. If you look at May closely, you can see a resemblance to George. Especially the curly hair."

"So, that's why Nell warned me about keeping my door locked when George was about. He must've forced himself on Jade. What a despicable creature." How was she going to remain civil to him at dinner?

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She felt King stiffen beside her. "There's more to the story than that, but I'm not at liberty to speak of it."

"Why do you protect him?"

King turned toward her, a troubled look on his face. "He saved my life once when we were boys. I owe him."

Lily eyed him shrewdly. "And I suspect he never lets you forget that fact, does he?"

"No."

The rest of the ride passed in silence. They arrived in Virginia City, a hilly town with streets lined with wooden houses. King stopped in front of a large white home with a huge porch and a plethora of gingerbread trim painted in a soft blue. It was beautiful, the kind of house she'd once dreamed about living in. Then why was she beginning to feel like a wild bird being enticed into a cage?

He helped her down. "Why don't you go on in? I'll take the rig around back and join you inside."

Slowly she walked up the path to the house. If she married Hugh Ogilvie, this would be her home. *If.*

She was no longer sure that marrying him was a good idea, but what else could she do? She'd already spent most of the money Nigel had left her just getting here. What was left wouldn't last much longer. How would she support herself? No, there was no choice. She'd made her bed and now she'd have to lie in it. The question was, with whom?

* * *

Hugh Ogilvie was sixty years old if he were a day, with steely gray hair and twinkling blue eyes. Dressed in a perfectly tailored gray suit, he looked the respectable gentleman she had expected. What would he say if he knew she'd lain with his nephew on the riverboat? She glanced nervously at King who smiled and raised an eyebrow.

"Uncle Hugh, may I present Mrs. Lily Albright?" he said easily.

Hugh Ogilvie greeted Lily with a warm smile and a kiss on the

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hand. "Your picture doesn't do you justice, my dear. You are much lovelier in person."

Lily smiled and withdrew her hand. "Thank you, Mr. Ogilvie."

"Please, call me Hugh. We don't stand on formality here, do we George?"

George stepped out of the shadows in the hallway. "No, Father." He sketched a mocking bow. "Mrs. Albright. Or should I say, Mother?"

Hugh frowned at him before turning to her. "I think Lily will do nicely, don't you agree, my dear?"

"Yes, indeed." If she heard George call her "mother" one more time, she would not be responsible for her actions.

Dinner was an awkward affair with George sulking and drinking too much wine. Hugh Ogilvie sat at the head of the table with George on his right and Lily on his left. King moved his plate setting to her side of the table and sat beside her, a little closer than necessary.

His leg touched hers, the lightest of touches, but one that set her heart to racing. Suddenly she wished they were alone, as they'd been on the boat. How could she crave his touch while sitting next to the man she was going to marry? She glared at King and shifted to put some space between them. He gave her a deceptively innocent smile.

A stout gray-haired woman who kept casting black looks at Lily served the meal. Lily eyed her warily. It looked as if there was yet another person who had doubts about the wisdom of this marriage.

"This is Mrs. Jones," Hugh said by way of introduction. "She's been our cook and housekeeper since my wife's death, and she's done a fine job."

"Of course, after the wedding, I imagine you'll want to take over her duties yourself," George replied with a smirk.

Lily stared at him. Now she understood the problem. Mrs. Jones was worried about keeping her position. "Oh, I wouldn't think of depriving Mrs. Jones of her livelihood," she stammered. What did she

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know about running a household of this size?

For the first time, Mrs. Jones smiled at Lily. "I'd be right happy to stay. If Mr. Ogilvie agrees, that is."

"Of course," Hugh Ogilvie said in a genial tone.

Lily glared at George, who was scowling at his plate. No doubt he was the one who'd told Mrs. Jones she'd lose her job when her employer married. Lily picked at the food on her plate, her appetite suddenly gone.

Now she was glad King Callaway had invited himself along. During the rest of the meal, he kept her and Hugh entertained with the local gossip.

As they lingered over dessert and coffee, George spoke up. "Well, tell me, Father, when are you and Lily going to tie the knot?" He almost sneered as he said her name, and Lily shuddered at the loathing in his voice.

King, slumped lazily in his chair, sat up straighter and gave George a pointed look. "Watch your manners, cuz."

Hugh turned to Lily and smiled his gentle smile. "My dear, I'm afraid I invited you here under false pretenses."

Her heart lurched in her chest. Was he going to back out of the marriage after meeting her? Had the gambler said something? She glanced at King, but he appeared to be as puzzled as she was. She took a sip of water to moisten her suddenly dry throat. "What do you mean?"

Hugh sat back and steepled his fingers. "What I mean is that I never intended to marry again. I asked you to come here hoping to make a match for my son."

George's face turned a mottled red and he jumped to his feet, his chair clattering to the floor behind him. "How dare you? I think I'm old enough to choose my own bride."

"Then why have you not done so?" Hugh asked coolly. "I know

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about your gambling and womanizing. Don't you think it's past time for you to settle down?"

When George cursed and stormed out of the room, King squeezed her hand under the table before rising to follow George.

Lily stared at the empty doorway, her stomach roiling. She couldn't marry George, not under any circumstances. What was she to do now?

Hugh reached over to take her hand. "Please forgive me, Lily. I see now that I've been unfair to you."

"Why did you let everyone think you were going to marry me?"

He sighed and released her hand. "I knew George would say no if I suggested he send for a bride. I've been at my wit's end worrying about the boy. When Arthur showed me your photograph, I thought your obvious beauty might appeal to my son. The boy may come 'round yet," he said, a hopeful look on his face.

Lily touched his hand briefly. "Even if he does, I could never agree to marry him. Aside from the fact that we took each other in dislike almost immediately, I fear his affections are engaged elsewhere."

Hugh's face fell. "You mean Jade."

"Yes."

He rubbed his forehead. "Perhaps I was wrong to discourage that relationship, but it would make for a difficult marriage. Most folks around here won't approve, and neither will they hesitate to say so. I was just trying to protect my son."

"That is understandable, but George is a grown man. You have to stand back and let him make his own decisions, even if you think he's making a mistake," she said gently. "And perhaps he'll settle down once he's married."

Hugh took her hand again. "Thank you for helping me see sense. I'm an old fool, my dear. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Of course," she replied. Hugh Ogilvie had complicated her life, but she liked the older gentleman.

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“What about you, Lily? Are your affections engaged?”

“What... what do you mean?”

Hugh smiled. “I saw the way my nephew looks at you. And you at him.”

Her heart lurched. Was there a chance that King’s feelings went beyond physical desire? The possibility filled her with hope, but she feared to trust that elusive emotion.

“Time will tell, I suppose. In the meantime, I have to support myself. Perhaps you could do me a favor. It appears I’m going to need a position. Do you have any suggestions? Perhaps one of the local shopkeepers needs an assistant.”

“Of course, if that’s what you really want. Is it, Lily?”

What she wanted was to run screaming into the street. The walls of the house seemed to be closing in on her. The secure future she’d expected had just disappeared before her eyes.

“I really don’t know,” she replied truthfully. The only thing she wanted right now was to get out of this house. As soon as possible.

* * *

King followed George outside and offered him a cigar. They smoked in silence for a few moments. When King thought his cousin had calmed down some, he asked, “Well, are you going to marry her?”

George ran his hand through his hair. “Hell, I don’t know. She’s a beauty, but...” He took a long drag on his cigar and let the smoke out slowly. “I have to do something. Pa will skin me alive when he finds out about the mine shares. Maybe he won’t disown me if I marry his little widow.”

King clenched his fists. How could he stand by and watch the woman he desired above all others marry a man who obviously despised her? “Lily deserves better than that. Is there any chance you could learn to love her?”

George stared at him, sadness clear in his eyes. “There’s only one

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woman I've ever really loved."

"Jade?"

George let out a breath. "Yes, but how can I marry a Chinese woman? Pa will disown me for sure."

King looked at him through narrowed eyes. "And if he does? Do you think Jade would refuse you if you're not the rich man's son any more? You're capable of earning a living."

"Yes, but I'll never get out of debt that way. The smart thing is for me to marry Lily."

"I have a better idea," King told him. "I'll give those shares back to you and cancel your debts. But I have three conditions."

"What?"

"One, no more gambling. If Jade is foolish enough to have you, she'll need a responsible husband."

His cousin nodded. "No more gaming. I promise."

"Two, we're even. No more talk of me owing you favors because of what happened when we were boys."

"Done," George agreed. "And the last condition?"

"I want the widow."

* * *

The drive back to Grass Valley was nearly as difficult as the dinner. George joined them, riding his horse alongside the buggy and smirking at Lily at every opportunity. *What a horrible man*, she fumed. Nothing would induce her to marry him. Nothing.

"What's the matter?" King asked quietly.

"It's that awful man," she hissed back. "I can't stand him. Why won't he leave me alone?"

"That's no way to talk about your future husband," he said.

"Over my dead body," she muttered.

King grinned. "I doubt it'll come to that. George is going to visit Jade. If she doesn't send him packing on sight, there might be a

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wedding in the family yet.”

“Oh.” Lily was relieved to hear that. At least something good might come of this mess. But what it meant to her future was another matter.

* * *

That evening Lily stood on the balcony outside her room waiting for the sun to set. This awful day couldn't end too soon for her. She stared pensively at the sky, almost oblivious to the fading light turning the clouds shades of rose and orange. The beauty of the sight made her feel more alone than ever before.

How on earth was she going to provide for herself? She had no skills outside the bedroom and what that suggested was a fate she refused to contemplate. Uncle Arthur would be furious when he learned what Hugh Ogilvie had done, but what recourse would a mere miner have against his employer? And in any case, she herself had begun to question the wisdom of marrying a stranger.

She leaned on the balustrade to search the street. King had said he might drop by if he wasn't needed at the saloon, and she longed for his company. He was the only person she'd met with whom she was completely comfortable. She knew he wouldn't judge her past as harshly as most people.

Her wretched thoughts were interrupted when someone called her name. She turned to find him standing in the doorway. When he opened his arms, she ran to him, wrapped her arms around his waist and buried her face against his shoulder. A sob rose in her throat and she fought it down.

“You've had quite a day, haven't you?” he asked in a low voice.

She drew back to look at him. “To say the least. Oh, King, what am I going to do? The money I inherited from Nigel won't last forever.”

“I may have the answer to that.”

“Do you need another serving wench at your tavern?” She couldn't keep the bitterness out of her tone. “It would be no more than I

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deserve.”

“Why do you say that?”

She stepped back and heaved a sigh. “I wasn’t truthful either. The fact is, Nigel and I were never married. I just pretended to be a widow when I learned Mr. Ogilvie was looking for a wife.” Despite her misgivings, it felt good to tell the truth.

An arched eyebrow indicated his surprise. “Really? And here I’ve been worrying about asking you to live above a saloon.”

“So, you do need a serving wench.”

His mouth curved with amusement. “How well do you play cards? It strikes me that a woman dealer would draw a lot of business.”

She cocked her head to one side. “I’m a fair card player, but sadly out of practice.”

He pulled a deck of cards from his jacket pocket. “Then how about a few hands? Are you familiar with poker?”

“No, I mostly played whist and *vingt-et-un*.”

“Now there’s a thought, a female blackjack dealer. Still, if you’re going to stay out West, you’ve got to play poker.”

“Very well,” she said, leading the way into her room. Perhaps a few hands would take her mind off her troubles.

She pulled out a small table and King set chairs on either side, then set down the pack of cards. He looked at her speculatively. “Would you like to make a little wager on the outcome?”

She smiled. Once a gambler, always a gambler. “No, I can’t afford to lose any money right now.”

A devilish glint came into his eyes. “How about this? Whoever loses the hand has to remove an article of clothing.”

Lily folded her arms. “That works well for you, doesn’t it? Since you clearly have me at a disadvantage.”

“I’ll spot you five games,” he said, removing his coat, vest and tie. He sat and pulled off his boots and stockings.

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“All right,” she said, amused. She glanced at her bed. It was clear where this game was going to end up, but that was fine with her.

He explained the rules of draw poker then dealt the cards. Predictably, Lily lost the first hand. She unbuttoned her bodice and pulled it off. She was wearing her pink corset again, the one he had admired. Perhaps that would distract him from the game. She smiled at him and leaned forward, her arms on the table.

King swallowed hard as he stared at the soft ivory flesh she'd revealed. His cock hardened. Perhaps this hadn't been such a good idea. Playing cards would needlessly prolong the inevitable.

As he shuffled the cards, she raised one hand and traced a path down her neck to the vee between her breasts. For the first time in his life he fumbled the cards, a few falling onto the table. With a muffled curse, he grabbed the errant cards and shuffled again, keeping his focus on what he was doing.

When he won the next game, Lily asked for help with her shoes. He took the opportunity to kneel beside her and run his hands up her leg before unlacing the shoe and removing it. His need for her was growing, but he'd started this contest, and by God, he'd finish it.

His concentration held through the next four games. Lily was down to her camisole, drawers and stockings. She stood, placed one foot on the chair and proceeded to roll the stocking down her shapely calf before pulling it off. Then she repeated the action with her other leg.

He let his gaze roam over her curved figure. The outline of her breasts with their dark aureoles showed through the fine cotton camisole and he longed to taste them. He wasn't sure how much of this sweet torture he could take. He wanted to grab her, push her down on the table and sate his need in her soft flesh.

She smiled knowingly and reached up to pull the pins from her hair.

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He stared mesmerized as the long, raven tresses fell around her white shoulders. She tossed her hair behind her shoulders and sat again.

“Aren’t you going to deal the cards?” she asked, her voice husky.

He shuffled and dealt the cards despite the blood pounding in his brain, pumping through his veins and pooling in his loins. Barely able to think, he discarded a two that might have made part of a straight and lost the game to her three fives.

Lily flashed King a triumphant smile, rose and walked over to him. Her plan to distract him finally seemed to be working. Kneeling down, she unbuttoned his shirt, running her hands inside to caress his chest, feeling the drumbeat of his heart. She loved touching his firm body.

He cupped her head and pulled her mouth to his for a searing kiss. His tongue entering her mouth sent shivers of desire racing through her.

She broke off the kiss and tugged frantically at his shirt, pulling it out of his pants and pushing it up and over his head. “Enough gaming. I want you inside me now.” She reached down to unbutton his pants, but his hand stopped hers.

“One more hand,” he said. “Winner take all.”

She rolled her eyes. “If I must.”

While he shuffled the deck, she sat and stretched out one foot under the table and ran her toes along his foot and up the inside of one leg. He pushed his chair back from the table, out of her reach, and calmly dealt the next hand..

Lily glanced at her cards with impatience, then looked at them more closely. It was possible she could have another winning hand. However, her three tens were trumped by his flush.

Accepting the loss, she stood and removed the rest of her underclothing. He watched every move, his gaze lazily seductive.

“Come here,” he said, holding out a hand.

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She moved toward him, impelled by her own passion, and stood by his chair. Her heart pounded an erratic rhythm in anticipation of his touch.

He put his arms around her, pulled her closer and kissed her breast. Her nipples firmed instantly under his touch. His lips brushed each peak, then closed around one, his mouth suckling on the hardened nub, sending a wave of warmth along her pulses.

With one hand, he stroked her lower back and buttocks, down her thighs then back up toward the throbbing center of her need. She parted her legs, silently begging him to touch her sensitive core. Finally he did, circling the sensitive nub. The stroking of his finger sent jolts of pleasure through her. He inserted one finger in and out of her vagina, sending fire through every nerve in her body. Her limbs quivered, her knees weakened, and she grabbed his shoulders for support.

His double assault on the two most sensitive areas of her body continued. His tongue continued its onslaught on her sensitive nipples as his fingers stimulated her feminine core. Her breathing quickened, ragged whimpers of need escaped her lips and her climax came in a heated gush.

When the tremors stopped, she slumped into his lap, her arms around his neck.

He held her close and kissed her tenderly. "Glad you enjoyed that."

"Um," she murmured, nuzzling his neck. She squirmed on his lap, feeling his response through his pants.

He groaned. "If you don't stop..."

She laughed and stood, pulling on his arm. When he joined her, she unbuttoned his pants and pushed them down. With one hand she reached to caress the length of his shaft.

He moved her hand. "Enough, Lily."

He kicked off his pants, then sat and pulled her toward him. She straddled the chair and slowly lowered herself onto his hardened shaft,

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letting her body adjust to his size. His tormented groan was a heady reward.

She gazed into his eyes. Desire smoldered in the green-gold irises. Her lips found their way to his and she closed her eyes to savor his slow, drugging kisses.

Her sensitive nipples brushed against his hair-roughened chest. How wonderful this man made her feel. How badly she wanted him. How much she loved him.

She stiffened and pulled back, opening her eyes to stare at him. Was it possible? Could she have fallen in love so quickly?

“Is something wrong, darlin’?” His voice was low and husky.

She gently caressed his face. “No, love. I was just thinking how much I want you.”

“Then have your way with me, wench. I’m all yours.”

She laughed and lifted her hips, moving up and down, first slowly, then more quickly as their desire mounted. His hands on her hips guided her, encouraged her. When she sensed he was nearing the edge of control, she touched herself, triggering the involuntary tremors of her climax.

His breathing grew labored, he thrust one more time and shouted her name. She held him as he came.

When his breathing quieted, she stroked the damp hair from his forehead. “That was magnificent.”

He smiled, his eyelids half closed. “You’re a wonder, Lily. I don’t know if I can survive without you.”

“You won’t have to. After all, I’m going to work for you.”

“No, Lily, I don’t need any more workers.”

She climbed off his lap. “But you said—”

He stood, cupped her chin and looked into her eyes. “What I need is a partner. Will you marry this no-good gambler?”

Her mouth opened, but no words came out. Unexpected joy filled

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her bosom and tears threatened to engulf her.

“Well, Lily, will you play Queen of Hearts to my Jack?”

She smiled at him tenderly. “You’ll always be the king of my heart, Creighton Callaway. Yes, I’ll marry you.”

He whooped and swung her in a circle. She was just a little dizzy by the time he put her down.

“But, given my past, are you sure you’re willing to take the chance?” she asked.

“Ah, Lily,” he said. “I know a winning hand when I see one. I knew you were the woman for me that night on the riverboat. It was Lady Luck that brought us together. You can bet your life on that.”

LYNDI LAMONT

Lyndi Lamont is the racy alter ego of author Linda McLaughlin, who writes historical and Regency Romance. *Painting Penelope* is her first published short story, but she hopes to pen more.

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* * *

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