



# Midnight Showcase

Erotic-aah Digest ISSN 1555-5496 Vol. 07-02ED

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Meanwhile,  
Back at the Ranch  
Bridghid Parkinson

Do You Believe in Magic?  
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Femme Fatale  
Olivia Lorenz

Castleblanca  
Mae Powers

Reel-to-Real  
Mila Ramos

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Blue Noir

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## **Blue Noir**

### **Do You Believe in Magic, Jewel Adams**

When Ali plays a wishing game with her god-daughter nothing could have prepared her for the trip back in time, where arrows fly and men are as large and powerful as the great wild west!

### **Meanwhile Back at the Ranch, Bridghid Parkinson**

Charlene's modern life hustle and bustle becomes the skirts and a bustle of a Wild West saloon girl. Wil can make her dreams come true.

### **Castleblanca, Mae Powers**

Sila searches for her missing friend, but a strange ticket leaves her in a parallel realm, much like the alternate-world games she programs, only this place is very, very real.

### **Reel-to-Real, Mila Ramos**

A curious invitation mystifies acclaimed movie critic Moira Castle as she returns home to face hidden memories and answers she's not ready to hear or feel.

### **Femme Fatale, Olivia Lorenz**

When Sophie discovers her sister has been framed for murder, she hires PI Kit Renard – but will he prove to be help or hindrance?

## **Do You Believe In Magic**

**By  
Jewel Adams**

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## **Do You Believe In Magic?**

**By  
Jewel Adams**

### **Chapter One**

“Come on, Ali. Pleazzz come with me.”

“Evie, I have so much to do, can’t we stay here and watch a movie?”

“It isn’t the same, this is in a theater. Besides, you will really liked the movie, Ali. The Captain is handsome and everyone rides horses.”

“Good looking, huh?” She ruffled Evie’s blonde curls, swallowing down her agitation that she’d have to be in her eighties just know who the actor might be. Watching an old, black and white movie about the old west just wasn’t in her plans for the night. Neither was babysitting her godchild, Evie. “How do you know he is handsome?”

“Oh, my friend told me.”

“One of your friends went to see this movie?”

The girl nodded her head.

What kind of parents give their ten year olds tickets to a rundown theater, to watch old movies? Ali picked up the tickets and looked at them. They looked as old as the movie probably would be. “Are you sure your mom gave you the tickets, Evie?”

“Oh yeah, she got them from some charity event.” Evie’s little girl face lit up as she looked at Ali and took hold of her hand. “You will like it, Ali. It is so nice back in the old days.”

“I am sure I will.” God, she sounded like a kid, herself. It must be babysitting that did this to her, a grown woman just didn’t do this anymore, even if Tracey was her cousin. If Ali were honest, she would admit what she just didn’t like about the situation.

Evie wasn’t just hungry for attention, she must be starved for it to

want her godmother as company. Ali didn't think most kids would want to go see an ancient movie. "Where did you say she got these tickets, Evie?"

"I think she said a 'silent auction' or something like that."

Now that, Ali could believe. Tracey carried the *charity event queen* label, along with her other activities. So many that she had no time for little Evie. Like tonight, another class or other. "Alright Evie, but after this movie is over I need to get home and do the work I brought home."

"Oh, it won't take long, you'll see"

"I need to change first."

Evie followed her into the bedroom.

"You better start thinking about the place."

"Why?" Ali slipped out of her work suit and kicked off her heels, half listening to the girl.

"The movie is in this small town, what would you want to be back then?"

As she walked past Evie to the dresser, she twisted Evie's pigtail. "Don't push your luck, Evie. I'm going, and right now all I want to see is some good looking dude on that screen."

The giggling Evie fell back on the bed.

When she pulled on her sweater, Ali looked at the girl. "What's so funny?"

"Oh Ali, you have Chet."

"Hmm, he's definitely good looking, but forget the *have* part." Ali recalled their conversation from last night, he certainly didn't agree with her standards.

"Ali, *your ideas are archaic.*"

"*I don't think waiting until we're married, to go to bed with you, is an ancient philosophy.*"

"*The is the twentieth-first century Ali, wake up!*"

Ali closed her eyes over how hard he slammed her door, "It's how I feel..."

"What is Ali?"

She brought her attention back to the girl. "Nothing, honey. Where were we?"

"We are going to the movies."

"Right." Ali held up the tickets before slipping them into her jean pocket

"We should live in the old west."

She gave Evie a rueful look. "Oh sure and what could I be?"

"My mother?"

Ali rolled her eyes up to the ceiling.

"Sister?"

"You've no imagination Evie, but sister does sound better."

"You could be a teacher. In the movie the lady is a school marm."

Ali conjured up the image of a spectacled spinster. "It doesn't sound very flattering."

"You are prettier than she is and she gets the cowboy."

"He better be tall, dark, and extremely handsome if I have to teach a room full of kids."

Ali reached out and started tickling Evie. "Come on, we better get to this theater of yours."

\* \* \* \*

"You have to sit here, Ali."

Ali followed the girl down the dimly lit aisle, glad that she stopped half way. Leaning back to see any movie wasn't something Ali wanted to experience. Seeing as the place was empty, they could have any seat they wanted.

On the drive here, Evie never stopped talking. She explained to Ali that they needed to do a wishing game at the theater. Ali just nodded, deciding she'd play along with the girl.

Ali lowered herself down into the seat beside Evie.

"Now we have to think together about the same thing."

"Set the stage?" At the girl's questioning look, Ali took the lead, trying to make the evening fun for Evie. "I see blue sky all around."

Evie chimed in, "And mountains, big ones."

"Green grass and rolling hills."

"Looks pretty, Ali."

"Now what do we do, Evie?" The girl's attention was on the movie starting to play.

"We close our eyes and wait."

Ali wondered how they would watch the movie. "What about the movie, Evie?"

The girl asked for the tickets. When Ali held them out, Evie took hold of them, but didn't take them.

"It is starting, Ali, so we need to begin our wishes."

"Pretend we are there and the movie works its magic." Thankfully, Evie was still too young to hear Ali's sarcasm.



“See, it’s easy, Ali.”

Maybe Evie’s game wasn’t so bad. The girl needed the escape it lent from her rocky home life. What with Tracey and Bob always at each other, Ali couldn’t see the harm.

“You have to close your eyes, Ali.”

“Right. I forgot, sorry.”

It proved hard to play along, the movie was beginning, and Ali kept thinking about all the work waiting for her at home. She watched the opening credits roll by and wondered why Evie would want to watch an old western.

“Ali, you aren’t playing.”

“Yes I am, I was just wondering how we will know when it works.”

“Oh, you will know.”

Ali took a deep breath and forced her eyes to shut. She tried to clear her mind, whispering to herself “Blue sky, mountains and green rolling hills...”

She let her mind go with the imaginary scene, she could hear gunshots and racing horses from the movie. Ali began to relax under the spell’s silent peace. A strange feeling of calm washed over her as if she were floating on a cloud. Snow capped mountains encircled the expanse of countryside. Wild flowers covered the open slopes of the hills moving past. A rocking sensation rolled over her, she smiled and wondered how Evie was doing.

Ali sighed, letting the tranquility block out reality...if only for a little while.

But a sudden lurch jarred Ali out of her peaceful dream.

She blinked furiously against the glaring sunlight. “What...sunlight?”

Ali bit her lip to silence what she didn’t want to hear, but her senses betrayed her efforts.

The changes came at her like arrows. The assault’s speed left her breathless as one reality slipped pass and became replaced by another foreign one.

“Evie?” Ali didn’t like the fear she heard in her voice.

Shaking her head against what she felt and still refused to let her mind comprehend, Ali flatly refused to let this go any further!

She took a steadying breath and silently laughed at what she almost allowed herself to believe. Old theaters and movies didn’t make the imagination come alive. She forced her eyes open to seek

out the old row of seats...

What came made her denial strengthen against the frightening reality taking hold of her. She squeezed her eyes shut, and forced them to reopen, sure she'd been overcome by Evie's game.

"No!...it can't be real." *The stage coach...Oh God, it really is one.* Another rut sent the coach swaying and she bounced all over the seat. Automatically her hand reached out to grip the open door frame. Ali couldn't breathe over what shouldn't be there to hold.

"Evie?"

Ali turned against the swaying, thankful that she found the girl beside her. She reached for her, "Evie?"

The girl looked up at her with the same confusion Ali felt. "Come here, honey."

Evie needed no coaxing to accept Ali's embrace.

"Lady, get down!"

Her mouth opened more from the realization that a man sat across from them than his shouted order.

The curse he directed at her was nothing compared to the blast of the gun in his hand that cut loose.

Ali instinctively fell over Evie to shield her. "What is going on?" She shouted over the blasting noise.

"Are you blind?" He cursed and kept shooting. "Damn Easterners. Stay down or those arrows the redskins are shooting will give you the answer!"

"Indians?"

Ali's gasps drew Evie's frightened whimper. "Ali, I don't want to be here anymore."

"I know, Evie." The swish and thud above their heads confirmed all the man's threatening words. The arrow wasn't imaginary, neither was the fear it instilled.

"Hush, Evie, it will be okay."

"Ali, it's not right, what happened?"

"I don't know, honey, I don't know." The arguments waged inside her head that none of this could be happening. A stupid old movie couldn't make something this crazy happen. Could it?

Another bone jarring jolt of the stagecoach made her teeth bite down against the answer.

Arrows kept flying, she could hear the war-hoops of the attacking men, yet all she could do was look at the clothes on Evie and then herself.

“Calico?” The tiny flower print dress looked a far cry from her jeans. Her hand rose and touched the bonnet secured by the satin bow under her chin. A light, short traveling cape fell about her shoulders. Ali truly wished it could shield them from the danger.

“Ugh!”

She looked up at the man’s cry. Ali swallowed her scream over the arrow protruding from the man’s chest.

“Ali!”

“Don’t look, Evie.”

The sideways lean of the coach stole her transfixed gaze from the dead man. A bare arm and hand moved about the open door panel, followed by the painted chest.

“Oh, no way!”

Looking to the man for help, she groaned. She tried to look away, catching the site of the gun still clutched in his lifeless hold. “I’m not really doing this...” Ali kept repeating the lie as she pried his fingers away from the weapon.

It took both hands for her to hold the heavy gun up and point it at the Indian now fully in view, clinging to the door. His eyes went to the weapon, then her. The vicious sneer that crossed his face sent ice through her veins. When he raised his arm, she saw the knife, the gun in her hands fired as if it held its own agenda.

The horrible scream filled her ears. Dropping the gun, she tried to block it out with her hands, but Evie demanded her attention. Cradling the child in her arms, Ali heard the reassuring words she spoke to Evie, while she silently demanded that they be brought back!

Ali gave up the effort over the new sound of a bugle and the slowing of the stagecoach.

“Where is it?” She scrambled about the floor with her hands, searching under the folds of dress material for the gun, nearly crying when she finally felt the warm metal.

“Evie, stay behind me.”

She held the gun before her. Ali waited for the next savage to appear. Her only thought was to protect Evie, nothing else mattered any more...

## Chapter Two

“Buck! You alright?”

“Crazed my shoulder, Cap. I’ll make it. Better check the passengers.”

Clay looked back to be sure none of the Indians evaded the patrol before sliding off his mount. He kept a watch out to be safe as he walked up to the coach. He reached out and pulled one of the arrows out of the wood. “Comanche?”

Clay reached out to open the door. The flash of shiny metal caught his attention just in time to move as the bullet whizzed past his head and he fell back against the coach. He cursed over his own lack of caution, along with the fool inside that almost killed him.

“Hey, inside! I’m Captain Clay Banyon of the US Army, put the damn gun away!”

The sudden silence became infuriating. Under his breath he muttered, “Probably some half crazed greenhorn.”

He took a deep breath to control his temper. “The Indians are gone, you can come out now.”

Ali’s only problem was she didn’t want to come out or even be here! Just seeing anymore than she already had might be more than her mind could handle. “I almost killed him.”

She sank back against the seat, her hand rose and squeezed the small arm that encircled her neck from behind.

“Is it over, Ali?”

“I don’t think so, Evie.”

“Listen to me! You in the coach, no one is going to hurt you, see for yourself, they are gone!” Remembering the scene he and the troops came upon, he could well imagine the fear the passengers suffered.

But nothing prevented the shock Clay suffered over the vision that emerged from the coach. Hair the color of polished topaz floated

about the tiny figure of beauty. The blue bonnet hung down her back and did little to tame the wild wisps of her auburn hair. Her eyes were a deeper shade than her hair, but not quite brown. Right now they were wide with fright, snapping him out of the trance she threw him into.

“Ma’am...” Walking up to her, Clay tried to control his mounting reaction. She truly was the loveliest lady he’d ever set eyes on.

“Are you okay? I didn’t hit you, did I?”

Clay realized he should be the one asking her that, he cursed his unusual behavior. He reached up to help her down. He could feel every tiny tremor racing through her, making him wonder how she managed to survive the assault. “How are you? Are you hurt?”

“No...Evie?” The man moved before she could, the release of his hand on her waist made her feel as though she would float away.

Clay smiled at the small bundle waiting at the door. “Twin angels, it must be my lucky day.”

He lifted the little girl up in his arms and returned her shy smile with his own. “Your daughter appears to be fine.”

“She’s my big sister, Ali. I’m Evie and you’re tall, dark and...”

“Evie!” Ali looked from the girl to the man now staring at her. “She’s in shock, you’ll have to excuse her, always rattles off gibberish when she is scared.”

Clay felt proud that his face remained a mask over the woman’s scolding look and the impish one she got in return. The pair were enchanting.

“I hope you aren’t frightened too often?”

Evie spoke up. “No sir, this is the first time it was real.”

Clay’s brow rose over the child’s straight forward answer.

“I told you, she jabbers.”

Smiling at the lady, his questions would have to wait. The shaking he felt in her before, now became very visible.

He set the girl down and tried not to be too obvious as he moved towards her. “And what do big sisters do when they have been frightened?”

His husky voice had a soothing effect on her nervous state. “I’m not sure.”

“Maybe you would like to sit down for a while. I need to check on some things before we head to the fort.”

“Fort?” Ali bit her lip to stop any more questions from popping out.

“It is closer than Whispering Springs.”

“I see.”

She probably didn’t, but Clay would agree to anything right now. His concern over the precarious hold she maintained on her composure seem to be failing. Those slim fingers couldn’t hold themselves still for all the her wringing attempts at trying. Like the desert sands, her eyes were mirroring the turbulent emotions she hid from view.

The arm about her waist, leading her to the shade tree felt strong, lending the support she wanted so to lean into.

“Will you be alright here?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Through half lidded eyes, Ali watched the man move away. The military stance went deeper than the uniform as the saber slapped his powerful thigh. Seeing him at a distance only emphasized the capable physique he carried with ease.

When his steps slowed and his head turned to look back at her, Ali jerked her gaze away from his telling smile.

“Handsome, there I said it.”

She looked down at Evie, it proved impossible not to give in to the girl’s determined pout. “You are absolutely right, Evie.”

“Did the magic make him too?”

Ali swallowed hard over the innocent question. “Come here, Evie.”

She pulled the girl up into her lap. “Evie, listen to me, we must be very careful not to tell anyone here where we are from or what happened.”

“Why, Ali?”

“Well, most people don’t believe in magic, they would think we are...strange.”

“Daddy would say crazy.”

She sighed over the truth. “That too.”

“When are we going home?”

Ali wished she could give her an answer. “Evie, your friend, did it happen like this for her?”

The girl’s head shook. “Nope, it was all pretend, like in a story book.”

What changed the game to reality? Denials didn’t change the fact that they were both here and a living part of the fantasy!

She saw the concern in the brightening of Evie’s eyes. “Well, this

isn't so bad, the only difference is—we are a part of the story. Right?"

"Are you going to win the Captain's heart like in the movie?"

"Evie, you shouldn't speak of it. The movie will be our special secret, no one else can know. Promise?"

"Promise, Ali."

She hugged the girl. "So do I."

\* \* \* \*

"How's the passengers, Captain?"

Clay helped Buck unharness the injured horse. "The man is dead."

"Miss Becker and the girl?"

"Shaken up, but not hurt."

"A might poor welcome for the new school teacher."

Clay looked over at the woman holding her sister. "Yeah, why don't we see if we can get them to the fort without scaring her away."

"I'll have the horses ready in a jiff."

"The patrol is returning. I'll go and help the ladies back in the coach."

He heard the gruff laugh at his back. Clay cursed under his breath. It would be damn hard not to be obvious where she is concerned. Sharing her with his men wasn't something Clay could rightly tolerate.

Ali wasn't quick enough to prevent Evie from jumping up to run and meet the Captain. She watched the easy way he swung the girl up in his arms. Her own went about her waist over the volatile memory of how they felt.

Clay regretted giving her time enough to fix her hair. All that beauty trapped under her bonnet. The horses drawing nearer made him decide it would be better to hide the temptation from the men.

She took the hand he offered, failing to hide her relief that her legs held her up. The shock must be wearing off, unfortunately the worries felt like an avalanche.

"You look better, Miss Becker."

So, she did have a name. "At least I've stopped shaking."

She waited for his smile, knowing he'd been watching.

"I hope this hasn't scared you away?"

If only it would, "It isn't what I expected."

"Whispering Springs is a good town. I know how long they have waited for a school teacher."

Ali swallowed her nervous giggle...the movie comes to life. At

Evie's look, Ali shook her head. "Then I must not disappoint them."

"I hope you won't mind spending the night at the fort. Tomorrow I'll escort you into town, it will be too late today."

"That will be fine, Captain Banyon."

When they reached the coach, Ali unconsciously stepped back.

"It is alright, I took care of the problem."

She looked up into his concerned gaze. "Thank you."

He took her arm to assist her inside. Clay was amazed at how small and delicate she felt. A teacher? Damn if he ever met a school marm like her, he never would have grown up.

When he touched her and then left, she wanted to call him back. His presence seemed to shield her against the strange world now holding her prisoner.

"It's just like the movie, Ali."

Evie pulled Ali's attention away from the departing figure. "What is it, honey?"

"Look." She followed Evie's pointing finger.

The mountains encircled them like a grand fortress. Ali remembered seeing this scene at the beginning of the movie. "The Rockies..."

Sitting back, the stagecoach lurched as the horses pulled out and she wished she could lose her thoughts to the rocking motion. She possessed a name, a profession and she felt ridiculously grateful that the movie made it up before they came here. Ali didn't want to think how it could have been for them. "I'm glad you didn't have tickets to a pirate movie, Evie."



### Chapter Three

Fort Willis looked as dismal a structure as Ali always believed these types of historical buildings to be. There was nothing remotely romantic about the sparse living quarters that Captain Banyon led them to. Ali faced a difficult time camouflaging her troubled thoughts, wondering what they still needed to face in Whispering Springs.

“I’ll come back later to see if you need anything.”

“It’s fine, Captain.”

The man fought his own discomfort over having to point out the “convenience” out the back door. Ali’s guarded gaze followed the boardwalk set through the muddy yard to the outhouse. A sad laugh bubbled up in her throat over the modern bathroom she left behind. Regretfully, the memory released her guard and the Captain quickly picked up on her lapse.

“Can’t be what you are used to.”

Bringing her attention back to the man, she decided she could get lost in his dark eyes, so intense... “I’m sorry, I am grateful, really.”

Clay wondered why someone like her would ever come out to such a hostile land. “Where are you from, Miss Becker?”

His eyes fell to the trembling in her lips.

“Boston.”

Rough timber houses were hardly a fit substitute for red brick with picket fences. “I’d best be going, the Colonel will want a full report.”

Speaking out, she stopped him at the door, “Captain, thank you for giving up your quarters.” She wanted to say she’d return the favor, but wasn’t sure she’d be around long enough. *Damn, why couldn’t he live in her world!*

His formal leave only added to the loss she felt over his absence.

Pulling her thoughts back around her, she tried not to let herself be affected by the Captain. Under her breath as she watched him walk

away, “We are worlds apart, you and I.”

She heard Evie’s laughter and moved out onto the small porch to find her playing with a girl about her age. She marveled over the girl’s resilience. All this must be like an adventure to Evie. Ali prayed it remained that way, she didn’t like her feelings over how Evie would react when the novelty wore off.

How long would the movie’s magic last?

She felt very afraid of the answers. Knowing there was nothing she could do to change it back, Ali forced her courage up to face what ever came their way. “I’m an intelligent lady, I’ll cope.” She looked at Evie, the hard truth left a lump in her throat. “I have to.”

\* \* \* \*

Ali tucked the covers up around Evie’s shoulders. Her hand cupped her sleeping face. “Sweet dreams little one.”

She settled back into the large cushioned chair, leaning into the side. Unconsciously, her nostrils flared over the heady scent, a permanent part of the worn material. “Captain Banyon, hmm you do fit the fantasy.” She felt foolish for saying it, but Ali let his lingering essence sooth her strained nerves.

Her gaze went to the clothes she set out for the morning. She shouldn’t have been surprised over the trunks the troopers delivered. Full of clothes that fit both herself and Evie, it seemed the movie thought of everything.

Biting her lip, Ali couldn’t dismiss the obvious lack of personal possessions among the garments, books and household items. She kept wondering why there weren’t any letters, pictures or diary. Surely, a school teacher kept a journal, but there didn’t appear to be anything written by the woman’s hand, nothing to tie the absent Miss Becker to the trunks. “Maybe she never existed?”

Was all this part of the fantasy?

What really bothered Ali is the lack of answers that her search revealed. If there were nothing of the woman, did it mean she and Evie were safe from exposure?

She said a silent prayer it would be so.

Ali closed her eyes over their failed attempts to try and return. After dinner, she decided they needed to try. She treated it as a game in order not to upset Evie. Ali set the *stage*. Describing in detail her apartment, Evie never questioned the fact that the theater and movie were missing, Ali took her acceptance that the girl wanted to return.

But, their efforts were useless. She feared continuing would only

upset Evie, so she called the game off and turned Evie's attention back to the marvelous adventure they would face in the morning at Whispering Springs.

“Being only ten isn't all bad, Evie.”

A sad smile came over Ali as sleep overtook her, wishing she possessed the girl's innocence. “An adventure, that's all it is...soon we'll go back.”

## Chapter Four

“It’s lovely country.”

Clay managed not to look at her and keep his attention on the team. It was at least the fifth remark she made over the mountains, hills and wildflowers. He didn’t expect her to be jumpier today than yesterday after the Indian attack.

“I think you will like Whispering Springs, Miss Becker.”

“Will I...I mean, of course I will.” God, everything she said this morning sounded awful. She deserved to be a nervous wreck, what she couldn’t afford to do is let anyone else see the state she found herself in.

“Having second thoughts?”

*He noticed.* She doubted he missed anything concerning her. Her own awareness of him became unnerving. “Maybe, everything is so different.”

“Why did you leave Boston?”

So, he finally asked, she expected the question sooner than this. Sitting beside him on the seat of the buckboard, her questions about him turned into a list. But, Ali didn’t feel right to carry this acquaintance beyond casual. Captain Banyon wasn’t the kind of man not to want answers. Rising hours before dawn she worried herself into a fine state over how she would answer his and other’s curiosity. “I guess I wanted a new life. Why did you come, Captain?”

The grin he turned on her sent a fiery heat up to her cheeks.

“I can see your students are in for a surprise.”

Deciding she’d accomplished her goal of diverting his attention, even if he caught her, Ali felt their topic ended on safer ground.

“Really, how so Captain?”

Clay laughed, he’d let the lady get away this time. “Oh, I’d say you are too smart to let them pull things over on you.”

“It sounds as if you have prior knowledge of tricking the teacher.”

"I know I would have had more fun with one like you."

Knowing her mouth opened in surprise, Ali snapped it shut. When did she ever get the idea the Captain was all military? Oh yes, a spring of humor existed beneath that stiff exterior.

"You have a lovely smile, Miss Becker."

"And you are a very perceptive man." She kept her smile in place. "I'm sorry I haven't been very good company."

"It's understandable, actually you've held up better than most women would have."

The Indian attack remained too fresh in her mind not to ask, "Is there a lot of trouble with the Indians?"

"Seems like more lately. Those were Comanche."

"That bothers you doesn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess it does, they aren't usually up this far. The Lakota have their reservation near here and have been peaceful."

"But the Comanche would change that?"

It was Clay's turn to be surprised by the woman's rather matter of fact attitude. Most women he knew wouldn't take the possibility of Indian trouble very calmly.

Realizing she made a mistake by the thoughtful frown on his face, Ali tried to help smooth over her knowledge gained by history. "I may be from the east, but I'm not ignorant of the problems that exist out here."

Properly put in his place Clay reminded himself that for all her beauty she was also an educated lady. Beauty and brains were a rare combination. Did it also make for a level head on her prim little shoulders?

"I owe you an apology."

"Unnecessary, but I accept."

Smiling, he certainly didn't lack in gallantry, maybe he was misplaced in time, he could easily fit a knight's role. Prince Valliant's double?

Unconsciously, Ali looked back at Evie. The doll little Amber gave Evie was getting a work out.

"How is she doing?"

"Evie?" Ali didn't do well hiding her concern. "She's adjusting." Maybe she gave too honest an answer.

"How'd she come to be with you?"

"Our parents died some time ago." *The lies start now.*

"Quite an age difference between you two."

Ali worried over this, almost wishing she'd agreed to be Evie's mother. "My father remarried."

Seeing how uncomfortable his question made her, Clay regretted asking such a personal one. Damn, but he wanted to know her. The truth wasn't setting very easy with him.

The sight they came upon as they rode down the next hill ended all conversation. "Whispering Springs."

The lovely sheltered town in the valley boosted her spirits. Neat white buildings lined the main street. From their decent, she could see houses set about in the trees and along side streets. The town looked friendly and she prayed it wasn't only her wishful hoping.

As they entered the town, the Captain sent his men ahead to take care of various errands. "I think Mayor Green should be our first stop."

His announcement brought her attention away from the people she watched on the board walks.

"Where is the school?" It felt like the right question for who she must be, but Ali knew her curiosity made her ask.

"I believe it is at the outskirts of the town."

The Captain brought the buckboard to a halt before the largest house on the block, off the main street. The tree lined lane proved a catching sight with its neat fences and large treed yards.

"Wait here and I'll see if Doug is in."

Ali watch him jump down and felt glad for the time to compose herself. "This is it Ali. You'll either pull it off or..." No, she couldn't put words to her fears. The new teacher, Miss Becker, is obviously expected, only Ali wasn't her. Would they know? She couldn't bring herself to contemplate where the real Miss Becker might be.

Seeing Captain Banyon and the tall man walking beside him, she stiffened. Mister Doug Green isn't exactly what Ali pictured as the town mayor. Where was the aged, balding man she expected?

Cautiously, her gaze followed the thick thighs and muscled forearms coming at her. Were all the men out here made to fit this wild land? Mr. Green looked about the same age as the Captain, but blonde to his darkness and not really handsome, but ruggedly impressive.

Accepting the Captain's offered hand Ali found little choice but to leave the safety of her high perch on the wagon.

Having two men of their statue looming over her became a disadvantage she didn't need at the moment.

“Mayor Green, may I introduce Miss Ali Becker, your town’s new school teacher and her sister Evie.”

Accepting the man’s hand Ali found it difficult not to lower her gaze from his penetrating stare.

“This is a pleasant surprise, Miss Becker.”

She didn’t like the underlying meaning and it had nothing to do with her questioning identity. “No more than I am in being here at all, Mayor Green.”

As she hoped, her remark detoured the Mayor’s thoughts and eyes from her. She wanted to kick Captain Banyon in the shin when he took it upon himself to fill the major in on the raid, she rather enjoyed the mayor’s worry over losing the town’s teacher.

“I hope you won’t let the incident change your mind, I can assure you the town is safe.”

*Except from the head wolf.* Thankfully, Ali kept her smile in place and her nasty thoughts to herself.

“I am anxious to see the school house.”

“And your own new home, no doubt. It’s not far, the house is at the end of the street. The school house is within walking distance. Shall we?”

The last thing she wanted was to be left alone with this man. But then he seemed determined to have his way.

“Clay, why don’t you drive the buckboard up with little Evie?”

Through lowered lids, Ali saw the Captain’s shoulders tighten, but his face remained under perfect control over his dismissal.

“Miss Becker?”

The man’s hold on her elbow felt like a pin sticking into her independent hide. Of all the obstacles she confronted in the dark of the early morning, she missed one very important milestone between centuries...women’s independence!

The chauvinistic males of her time were babes in the woods compared to Mayor Green.

“You are not at all what I expected.”

Ali’s concentrated on her feet in order not to stumble. Keeping her gaze moving as if she were interested in their surroundings, she answered him. “Oh, and why is that?”

“I guess I expected someone much older.”

She feared her wits weren’t steady enough for coy games with the man.

Stopping, she turned to face the man whose blue eyes never left

her. "I can assure you Mayor Green that my age doesn't have any bearing on my abilities to teach. But if it bothers you..."

"You can pull in your spurs, Miss Becker. Personally, I find the revelations I'm facing a welcome delight."

Subtlety failed as one of the man's traits. If she hoped he would let her go, her ploy missed its target.

"And please call me Doug, as the liaison for the citizens, you and I will be keeping quite a bit of company in the future."

She held a good mind to step all over *Doug's* intensions concerning *their* future. Thankfully, the Captain's interruption prevented her temper from ruling her good sense.

"Sorry to disturb your conversation, but which house is it?"

If the team and wagon could have fit between the trees, Clay would have enjoyed breaking up the couple.

Taking the opportunity to separate herself from the mayor, while Clay obtained directions, Ali went to the back of the wagon to check on Evie. "How are you holding up?"

"Can I get down Ali?"

"Sure, come on."

It may have been shameless of her to use a child as a shield, but necessary considering her opponent.

Evie, never an easy child to ignore, came through with her endless stream of questions. Though Ali caught the mayor's tempered look over Evie's head at her, she did admit that the man exhibited patience.

Clay wasn't as amused as Miss Becker appeared to be, but he admired her for seeing through Doug as quickly as she did. He'd have to remember the lady kept a sly side to her nature. But Doug wouldn't be so easily put off. Clay caught the man's glaring gaze light with determination, one he didn't even use for Mary Cook.

Now that lady knew how to handle herself. Seeing as she ran the town's only saloon, it did come with the territory.

Mary wasn't in Ali Becker's league, maybe that's what really bothered him. Clay didn't think Doug Green knew the difference.

Riding past them, Clay reminded himself that he did have responsibilities waiting his attention. A long time passed since he cursed his commission, but right now he hated the distance it placed between him and Miss Becker. Funny, how one day and one lively lady made a man look at his life in a new light. "Maybe it's time for some changes."



## Chapter Five

“It’s beautiful.”

“You can thank the women’s league, they have been in and out of here getting it ready ever since your last telegram.”

“I’ll be sure to do that.” *Telegram? No Letter?* Ali pushed the questions back.

The house looked lovely and she wished the man would leave so she could explore. She envied Evie’s freedom to run from room to room and up the stairs.

“Mr. White informed me just last week that your funds transfer arrived at the bank.”

*Funds? Another piece of magic?*

Though she didn’t show her intent interest over his every word, Ali felt as though she were a spring wound too tight.

She felt his gaze on her and wanted to keep him talking. “When does the school open?”

“I thought you might like to wait until Monday after next, it would give you time to settle in.”

“I’d like that, thank you.”

Doug wondered why she didn’t acknowledge it as one of her requirements, stipulated during their negotiations, like the house. “Your first month’s salary has been deposited to the new account...as you asked.”

Her brow rose slightly over the change in his tone. Turning to face him. “It appears, Mayor, you are very efficient.”

“Just following your orders, Miss Becker.”

So, that is where the problem came from. Being in the dark so completely proved a major disadvantage in his company. “I never doubted you wouldn’t.”

“You were quite explicit.”

Her chin rose, knowing she didn’t misunderstand the touch of irritation he harbored.

"I suspect, Mayor, that any woman leaving her home, to come to parts unknown, would take similar precautions."

The slight nod of his head would probably be the closest she would get to a truce. Stopping where she stood, when he went to the door to leave.

"I'll give you some time to freshen up, say two hours, then I'll return and we will go to the school house."

"I'll be ready."

Looking back at her he gave her the first smile she'd seen come from the man. "But are we ready for you, Miss Becker?"

Without giving her time to recover, he left.

Ali's foot stomped in belated frustration. "Add infuriating to your glowing ego Mayor Green!"

The prospect of having to suffer his presence again today, made her shake in dread. Not even the lovely house could take away her apprehension.

She turned around in the room and tried to banish the disagreeable image from her mind. The house certainly proved more than ever expected. The matching cherry-wood furniture shined under the polishing she believed the good ladies gave the place. The pink and white brocade chair and sofa, with their lion claw foot stands, drew an appreciating smile over her ire. In the corner, between the two windows, stood a large roll top desk with a circus of cubbies waiting to be filled. Flowery globe lanterns stood on the various tables.

She walked out of the living room and entered the small, but adequate, dining area. Six chairs fit comfortably about the table. A large open hutch centered the inside wall. She loved all the windows now opened, allowing a gentle breeze to flow through the house. The lace valance let the filtered light in, casting the room in cheery brightness.

Right away, she knew the kitchen would be the favorite room in the house, with its large open room that spanned the back of the house. A huge iron wood stove dominated one area. It would probably keep the whole house warm. She remembered the pot bellied stove between the living room and the dining area, making her wonder how cold it did get here.

Odd, she wondered for the first time what the date might be. Her hand absently ran over the work counter under the kitchen cupboards. "There is so much to learn."

Tomorrow she would start; for now, Ali needed all her thoughts to handle the mayor. She took the back stairs off the kitchen to find Evie upstairs and the bedrooms.

“Ali, can I have this one?”

“I don’t see why not. It is very pretty Evie.”

Was it possible? No! Ali refused to consider Evie’s delight as being anything more than her enjoyment of the room. Enough with the magic!

But the pink satin and white lace bedroom looked as if it were designed for a little girl Evie’s age. One wall held built in shelves and Ali could imagine them filled with girlhood treasures. The crocheted bedspread beneath the sheer silk canopy cried for a frilly dressed doll to set on the pillows.

Ali’s gaze fell to the trunk at the foot of the bed, the one containing Evie’s clothes. Did the Captain put it there?

Sucking in her breath, she turned to find the other bedroom and confirmed her thoughts.

Directly across the hall she entered the room. There, at the foot of the bed were her trunk and cases. “He’s seen my room.”

The truth warmed her and set off an excited quiver deep inside her stomach. Why did this stranger affect her so? She actually felt sad when he left and she didn’t have a chance to say goodbye or thank you for all his help. “Damn that Green!”

Taking an instant dislike to someone wasn’t normal for Ali, but in his case she felt it justified.

She needed to get ready, but how she wanted to linger in the room and put her things away... “As if they belonged here, Ali?”

She hugged herself and squeezed her eyes shut, wishing with all her might for whatever put them here to take them back. “Right now!”

Every minute they stayed here seemed to have its effect on her. Ali grew afraid of the feelings beginning to form and the pain she knew would follow if she remained too long, only to leave.

Opening her eyes she scolded her foolishness. “There is no control over it, get that through your head, Ali!”

“What’s wrong Ali? Don’t you like your room?”

She spun about to face Evie and see the tears ready to spill over her dark lashed lids. “Oh no Evie, I love the room and the house. How couldn’t I, it is perfect.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

Evie's arms wrapped around Ali's waist. Stunned by the strength of the girl's hold, it took a moment for Ali's hand to come to rest on Evie's head. Holding her, Ali couldn't keep her thoughts from forming over Evie. "Honey, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm happy you like it."

Ali's fingers combed through Evie's hair. "What about you, Evie, are you happy?"

The small head nodded against her stomach. "Oh yes, Ali."

Ali's head shook to deny the suspicions starting to take form. Evie couldn't possibly have caused all this, could she? Didn't Evie seem as shocked as she in the coach? She said it never happened like this, it was only pretend before.

But, the thoughts wouldn't be silenced. Evie wasn't a happy child, Ali knew this. Did the girl dream this up for a new life? "It's not possible..."

"What isn't, Ali?"

Looking down at Evie's innocent brown eyes. "For me to get ready before that man comes back. Do you know how much trouble all these new clothes are to put on? And there are these shoes..." Ali lifted her skirts to expose the high buttoned boots. "It is going to take a lot of practice to get used to hooking all these up everyday."

Hearing the girl's laughter, Ali refused to contemplate the ill thoughts any longer.

Together they explored Ali's room. Dark to light, shades of blue dominated the room. Ali's bed was the old fashion brass bed, with its large headboard of shining columns. Across it laid a beautiful patchwork quilt, done in varied shades of blue on a white background. The dresser stood as tall as she, with triple rows of small drawers at the top and five large ones going down. The vanity and the small dressing table were skirted in a dark blue print as were the Pricilla curtains with large white bows for tie backs.

Outside the windows swayed a large tree, the limbs reaching the panes.

She sent Evie off to unpack her things. Ali regretted having to postpone the chore on her own room. After opening the trunk, she picked a cool day dress for the walk ahead of her. To fend off the mountain wind, she found a mauve shawl to accompany the white lawn dress.

Free of the heavier traveling dress she enjoyed the lighter garment. The full petticoats flared out beneath the missing weight,

giving her a feeling of complete femininity. She also released the tight chignon, she pulled up the thick mass of waves, securing them with a dark rose ribbon. It felt nice to feel her hair hanging loose again.

Turning before the vanity mirror Ali freed her giggle over the transformation she saw staring back at her. No garment existed in her prim business wardrobe to equal the feelings of these lovely gowns.

She came down the stairs in time to hear Mayor Green's knock. Ali decided she wouldn't allow even his oppressive company to dampen her newfound good mood. She even accepted his open perusal, rather surprised at herself, for enjoying the admiration she saw from the man.

"If ever I become impatient, madam, please feel free to remind me what it could cost."

Not used to men being so open in their compliments Ali couldn't reply. Returning his smile, she decided, would be sufficient. The last thing she wanted to do was encourage the man. She couldn't help but wish it were Captain Banyon standing before her.

She called up to Evie to join them. The girl bounded out the door running on ahead.

"She appears to be a handful."

She decided to ignore the irritation she heard. "She is just excited over being in a new place. Evie loves an adventure."

"And are you excited?"

Walking beside him to the front gate, "I am not quite as adventurous, but I am looking forward to the children."

Following his lead to go to the left and away from the house lined street, they soon came to a small path through a stand of woods. She looked back, more in question over the distance from town of the schoolhouse, than to memorize the way. Ali didn't realize he stopped until she walked into him. "Oh, I'm sorry."

A few moments passed before his hands let go of her waist. Ali felt her heart starting to race over the look in his darkening gaze.

"You seem troubled...Ali."

She couldn't stop from stiffening over his use of her first name. She didn't want him to know how much his familiarity bothered her, she didn't correct him.

"I am just wondering why the school is out this way and not closer to town."

His hand took hold of her elbow, directing her to the right where the path forked.

“Someday it will be in town. Whispering Springs is growing and there are many families that live on their farms outside of town. I think once you see the location, you will approve.”

Having to suffer his confident smile made her pick up her pace.

They followed the path through the woods for what she felt like at least fifteen minutes. Ali made mental notes of the largest trees and rocks. Thoughts of marking the trees didn't seem like such an outlandish idea to keep from getting lost. She made another mental note to buy a small ax.

All thoughts of the worrisome trail ended when they came out of the trees. On the top of the hill before them stood the school house. A long windowed building with its bell tower above the entrance.

All her misgivings fell away with each step that brought her closer to the building.

Walking away from the mayor, Ali stood and turned full circle to survey the entire view. The valley stretched out beneath her, from her spot she could see the patchwork of planted fields in the distance. To her right, the town spread out below. Looking further, she saw the hill the captain brought her over this morning. The only thing she couldn't really see, except for the chimney tops, is the lane her house stood on.

She did see that the direct line of the wood's path to the schoolhouse. To walk through town and around would be much longer.

“Ali...”

Turning to face the man standing at the door, she joined him.

Stepping inside, she felt her heart beating in excitement. Rows of benches beneath long slanted desktops faced forward. Her desk stood before the large slate board. A potbelly stove stood at the center of the room, there were wooden pegs and built in cubbies along one wall.

Doug watched the woman walking through each line of desks. He became as enraptured by her as she appeared to be by the schoolhouse. For the first time Doug found justification for the money this place cost him.

Telling her he put it out this far for spite, wouldn't set well with the lady. Nor would he tell her the house and this place were built at his expense, to insure he remained in control of the grumbling populace. That he'd make back his investment, ten fold, when the railroad came through, seemed insignificant in light of the vision he somehow obtained as a bonus.

Smiling to himself, Doug wasn't even furious any more over the

demands she made and won. A five-year contract that Miss Becker made, giving her the house in place of half her wages, did come as a bargain.

Having the woman's presence in his own mansion felt like a more intriguing prospect. "Well, what do you think? Does it pass inspection?"

Staring down at him with his massive arms folded over that brick chest as he leaned against the wall, Ali thought he looked too pleased with himself. She wondered if she should be worried.

"You know it does."

"Good. I'll have the books and supplies brought up here tomorrow."

"That will be fine."

His half smile told her she just came across another of Miss Becker's requirements.

"What are the winters like here?"

The woods—she didn't like that one bit. At the time Doug meant it as a pay back for all her obstinate demands. Now, he found himself worrying over the idea of her walking through them, especially in winter and with the reservation so close. "You won't be walking here, if that is what you really want to know."

"Yes, that is exactly what I want to know." Walking past him. "Of course it is my fault for not stipulating the matter up front." Looking back at him and the smug way his gaze roamed over her. "Thank you for the concession, Mayor Green."

Standing there Doug's jaw worked. Miss Becker would prove to be a challenge. He pushed off the wall, deciding she'd be worth the aggravation. Besides, he already had a stake in the lady's future.

She felt his presence directly behind her, Ali forced herself not to move away. "Don't you think this tree will be perfect for a couple swings." By the man's deep breath, she knew swings hadn't been included.

"Shall we go and sign the papers?"

Swallowing her denial, Ali masked this new problem well.

\* \* \* \*

The town and its friendly inhabitants appeared to be all that Ali could hope for. Smiling again to a gentleman and lady's greeting, she felt her confidence rising that she and Evie could fit in here.

She looked for the girl and wasn't surprised to see her talking to another little girl. Evie would never be considered shy. She reminded

herself that the modern dangers didn't exist in this town.

"The bank is this way."

The touch of his hand on her elbow made Ali pull her attention back to Mayor Green. "Just a moment please." She stepped away from the hand poised to retake possession of her again and went over to Evie.

"Evie, I will be inside the bank, it is right over there."

"This is Ruthie, she is eight."

"Hello Ruthie."

"Are you going to be our school marm?"

"I am your teacher. I hope you are as excited as I am for school to start, we are going to have so much fun."

The open questions in the little girl's face drew out Ali's laughter. "School can be fun Ruthie. Right Evie?"

"Sure it is, especially with Ali teaching us."

Ali's brow rose, but Mayor Green's impatient call prevented the question from forming. "Evie, you promise to stay right out here."

The girls barely looked at her. "Promise, Ali."

Shaking off her worry, Ali reluctantly rejoined the Mayor.

Doug held back from telling her she should take a stronger hand with her sister, now wasn't the time.

The introductions were made by the Mayor, taking the seat he held out for her, Ali managed to keep her hands still in her lap. She just wanted to get this over with.

"Miss Becker, I think you will find everything in order. Here is the teaching contract."

When the bank manager moved it to the side of the desk, Ali's business sense wouldn't allow the slight. "May I?"

She didn't miss the man's questioning look at the Mayor, who gave him a nod of consent. To her, he gave her a nodded smile. Ali held a strong feeling that Doug Green took his title beyond civic duty.

Accepting the contract from the manager. "Thank you, I'll only take a moment."

Never in her life did she sign anything without reading it first, she wasn't about to start now. Knowing Green had his fingers in all this, made her even more wary.

The contract proved to be straightforward and well thought out. She felt her admiration for Miss Becker take off when she came to the clause concerning the house and its exchange for part of her salary. If \$50 a month could be considered a salary. She hoped the transfer of



funds he mentioned were adequate to offset the remaining \$25.

That the house was hers regardless of the contract's outcome, made it difficult not to smile with the pleasure she felt. It seemed Miss Becker drove a hard bargain. No wonder the Mayor faced a difficult time hiding his anger.

Unconsciously, Ali glanced at the man. Finding his hard gaze staring back, she shifted away from the intensity.

"Do you also have the house's title prepared?"

"Why yes, it is right here."

Ali waited for the man to place it in her hand. Hiding her uneasiness over seeing that the title transferred from Mr. Douglas Green to Miss Alice Becker, wasn't an easy accomplishment. Ali wanted to ask why the house didn't come from the township, but feared it might be a detail she should already know about.

She felt Green shift beside her. Delaying any longer wouldn't be possible. "Everything appears to be in order Mr. White, I only have one change."

"A change. But madam..."

"Please, it's an additional item that Mayor Green is aware of."

Doug leaned forward. "Add on that a sleigh or carriage will be provided for the lady during poor weather."

"But you said..."

Ali wished the Mayor wasn't so quick in stopping Mr. White's outburst. She would have been very interested in the revelation.

"Miss Becker pointed out the problems I failed to take into consideration."

She didn't and her brow rose over the man's excuse. Thoughts of the woods kept her silent, besides, she needed the transportation a lot more than the pleasure of correcting Mayor Green.

Satisfied with the additional item Ali signed both documents after Mayor Green.

Retaining the deed to the house. "I believe this is mine."

"Of course."

"Thank you." Turning to face Major Green, she automatically offered him her hand, not realizing her mistake that women didn't shake hands in business dealings. She wasn't fast enough to pull it away before he captured it.

The size of his hand swallowing hers made Ali doubly aware of the volatile man involved so deeply in her new life. Suffering his lips against her flesh as he kissed the back of her hand, became almost

more than she could tolerate.

When she pulled her hand away, the satisfied smile he gave her made her clutch her fist to her stomach.

"I've never been so pleased with a business arrangement, madam." Doug deliberately dropped his gaze to the agitated rise of her breast. Being a lady did have its disadvantages, he could actually feel the woman's fury building for release.

"If you will excuse us Mayor, I have personal matters to attend to with Mr. White."

The flash of anger lighting his eyes caused Ali's back to straighten.

"I will wait outside."

"Thank you, but that won't be necessary, I have shopping to do."

Ali got the feeling she would never survive this man's fury, should it ever escape his control.

Turning back to Mr. White, once Green left the office, the man actually paled over the confrontation he just witnessed. "Mr. White, I'd like to go over my funds?"

It took a moment and a lot of paper shuffling before the man regained his composure. "Of course, Miss Becker, if you will excuse me a moment. I need to fetch your records."

"Certainly."

She shielded her gaze as she watched the man through the glass. As he walked through the bank more than one employee made a remark that Mr. White nervously shrugged off.

Pulling her attention away, she saw enough. She couldn't help but wonder if these people were afraid of Doug Green? Why would they be? True, he was a formidable man and probably a bully. Could he also be dangerous? She didn't like the growing evidence concerning Mr. Green. Worse, Ali didn't think the man would stay at a distance where she was concerned.

There were some bright spots in the clouds gathering around her. Owning the house came as a huge relief, as did the sizable bank account Miss Becker transferred to Whispering Springs. The amount went well beyond a meager teacher's salary. Though she felt relieved to know they could live here comfortably, even if she lost her job, Ali couldn't help but worry over where the money came from. Or, why the woman or herself should sign a five-year contract to teach. She could have bought the house outright, so why all the elaborate stipulations?

## Blue Noir

She refused to think all this came down to magic. Even if it were, she felt from this day forward it would all be up to her to make it work.

## Chapter Six

Ali nearly groaned over how flustered Mr. White became from the sizeable withdrawal she made. Her excuse that she needed to make many purchases for the house finally calmed the man down. She decided he was a prime candidate for a heart attack or stroke.

Her small purse felt ridiculously heavy with all the bills she stuffed in it. Once outside of the bank, she finally began to relax. Thankfully, Evie remained where she left her, but her following grew to more girls. Meeting them all, Ali felt relieved that Evie would have friends to play with.

Their first stop turned out to be Walker's General Store. She couldn't get over the wonderful items she found on the shelves. She wished she had days to explore it all. She made more purchases than she could carry and Mr. Walker turned out to be very obliging, to say he would deliver everything. He also told her where to find the other items she felt they needed.

"An ax, Miss Becker? You know, John Taylor would be glad to bring firewood out to you, he's very reasonable."

"Do you see him?"

"Comes in most everyday. I'd be glad to send him over."

"Thank you, and I still want the ax...the woods are so close." It sounded like a sad excuse, but the man accepted it.

She learned that this John Taylor also did odd jobs. She had a feeling he'd be a busy man; her mind filled with all the plans for the schoolyard.

The prices and distance to the stores told Ali there were more than a few adjustments to make in her new life. A person just didn't run to the store for bread, eggs or milk, every time they ran out. Remembering the trunk of books, she hoped there would be a cookbook among them.

Ali regretted not exploring the house and grounds further. She

remembered there were sheds in the back yard. She decided to wait on purchasing chickens until she inspected the yard.

The town wasn't very large, but everything they saw turned into a new experience, extending the walk back to their home.

The sun was low when they finally reached the house. To her surprise, Mr. Walker already came and set all the purchases on the kitchen table. Shaking her head, she realized there wasn't a lock on any of the doors.

Tearing away some of the brown wrapping paper from one of the boxes she started a list of the things she still needed, bolt locks at the top.

After putting away the can goods, they explored the back yard.

"Evie, I think this is a smoke house."

"What's that?"

"For meat."

They both looked warily at the small building. The next one was larger and she felt sure that with a few shelves added and a wire enclosure, it would be perfect for chickens. "At least we'll have eggs."

Ali shuddered, thinking about what she'd have to do to get fried chicken.

"And we could put a garden in here."

"I don't like carrots."

"Well, how about corn and beans?"

"And peas, I'll eat those."

They found a small stack of wood at the side of the house, with Evie's help they stocked the wood box beside the kitchen stove.

Her list grew, looking at it, Ali didn't think two weeks would be long enough to complete everything. She wanted things built for the school and hoped John Tyler would be available and as good as Mr. Walker boosted. It was obvious she would have to take care of some things herself, like the garden and chicken coop.

"Ali, can we get a cow?"

"Maybe, there's no building for winter."

"You mean barn."

"I don't think we need something that big. A smaller version, but it will have to wait a while."

"Well, I'm hungry now."

"Dinner? I completely forgot." She turned to look about the kitchen, stopping at the huge stove. Ali swallowed her unspoken

promise it would be ready in a jiff.

“How do you turn it on, Ali?”

“I’m not exactly sure.” Using the odd looking handle tool that’s end matched the indentations on the iron lids, Ali lifted them up to see inside.

“Get me some of that paper from the packages, Evie.”

Together they crinkled up enough for her to place into the hole with small pieces of kindling on top, then a few larger pieces of wood. Using the long match stick she cautiously lit the back first, moving the burning stick forward as each section caught. Replacing the iron cover when the fire took off, she stepped back and watched with Evie.

“Ali?”

“Oh dear!” Dark smoke started seeping out from under the stove lids.

“Fix it Ali!”

“I don’t...”

“Is there a problem...Holy!”

Spinning about both girls stared open mouthed at him, but the smoke filling the room demanded Clay’s attention. Moving to the chimney pipe Clay fiddled with the flue latch until it opened. “The flue was shut.”

Waving her hand in front of her face to ward off the offending smoke, her hand slowed over his condemning glare. “What?”

“You don’t know what a flue is, do you?”

She didn’t, but the admission stuck in her throat. “Will you stay for supper?”

Folding his arms over his expansive chest. “I wouldn’t miss it.”

Refusing to cringe before the laughter she spied in his eyes. “Evie, I think you will find the silver in the wood box in that crate.”

“I saw dishes in there too.”

Ali smiled at her. Moving past the Captain to the crate were she remembered the pots being in.

“Here, let me help you.”

His large capable hands reached from behind her to take the heavy skillet.

“I’m afraid it won’t be much, just bacon and beans, the store was limited in its selections.” Ali was rambling, trying not to fall prey to his nearness, but how she wanted to lean back into that solid, strong chest.

“I doubt I’ll notice the fare.”

His breath was warm as coals against her flushed cheek. She needed to move away from him before her resolve faltered, she busied herself with the food. Hearing the commotion he made with the pots, she stole a sideways glance at him. He actually looked triumphant when he pulled the coffee pot from the crate.

“Did you buy...?”

“In the second cupboard, bottom shelf.”

Clay went to retrieve the coffee, only halting when he realized neither of them spoke the word *coffee*. Looking back at her he waited as her head turned and she met his waiting stare.

Together they spoke. “Coffee.”

She broke their smiling gaze with a shrug. Shaking himself, Clay realized he’d only begun talking to himself where she was concerned. Right now, he felt glad he won the last argument and came back to town. He still blamed his horse for bringing him to her house.

Seeing all the unopened stocks in the cupboard. “You’ve been busy.”

The bacon demanded her full attention, only sparing her a quick glance at him.

Evie took it upon herself to answer. “We went shopping and Ali bought the store out.”

“Evie!”

“Well, that’s what I heard Mr. Walker tell Mrs. Walker, when you went back for the ax.”

Clay couldn’t let the girl’s last revelation pass. “Ax?”

“Sure, Ali needs it for the...en...en-coaching...”

“Encroaching?” Clay helped her.

“Yes that’s it, for the damn bushes.”

“Evie Mitchum, you mustn’t use such language.”

“Oh all right, Ali, but why can a grown-up cuss and kids aren’t allowed?”

But, she didn’t hear Evie over the way the Captain was staring at her, even though he gave Evie his attention.

“It is a privilege that goes with getting older.”

Clay heard Ali’s smothered laugh, making it hard to keep his attention on the girl, certain that he’d heard her use of Evie’s last name of Mitchum. There was only one way he knew for sisters not to share last names and the reason held the tag *marriage* affixed to the older one.

He remembered that she did say it was their father that remarried

and she did have Miss attached to Becker. Seemed to Clay there may be some explanations due from Miss Becker.

\* \* \* \*

Ali felt him watching her again. The bacon wasn't burned and the beans tasted fine, she gave up trying to find the reason for Clay's sullen mood change.

"More coffee?"

"Hmm."

Why should he be angry? He barely said one word to her since dinner started, hell he'd only met her yesterday. Her past wasn't his affair.

*Damn if it wasn't!* Everything about *Miss* Becker concerned Clay or he wouldn't be sitting here. The kind of thoughts she provoked didn't allow any leeway for lies!

The warm softness she came to expect from those dark eyes of his disappeared. What bothered Ali more is why they appeared steeled against her. Keeping her own from falling away at the confrontation their glare silently promised took all of her remaining strength.

She felt as if jet lag fell down on her. She realize that only a day passed since they'd arrived here.

"Evie, it is bed time."

Her weak protest told her the girl felt it too. "Go on up, I'll be there in a minute to tuck you in."

"All right, Ali."

For all the animosity she felt coming from the Captain, he showed nothing but warmth for the child hugging him goodnight.

Ali felt herself starting to shake over what she heard the girl whispering to the Captain.

"I wish you were..."

"Evie, don't...forget to hang up your clothes."

Kneeling down she held out her arms to the hurt look her hidden warning caused in Evie. Hugging her, Evie crawled into her lap, against her ear Evie whispered. "I'm sorry, I forgot."

"Hush, sweet heart, its all right, you better get to bed."

Clay's hand closed about the hot mug over the scene he witnessed, not liking what he started believing. When the girl moved safely out of hearing range, "You love her very much."

Turning back to him. "I do."

Why would he state the obvious?

"I was just realizing you must be more like her mother than



sister, she's so young."

Ali felt a coldness running through her over the way he seemed to look through her. "I guess I am in a way."

She instinctively knew something happened to bring this on, but what...? Did she say something?

Turning quickly away from him at the thought. "I need to tuck her in."

"I'll wait."

She stopped herself from looking back. Leaving him, Ali didn't release the tight hold she kept on herself until she reached Evie's room. Leaning back against the door, Ali's head rolled against the wood over what she now remembered. "Mitchum. How could I be so reckless?"

But, her answer rested in the man downstairs, wanting answers. Being near him again, she knew she let her guard down. Knowing he wouldn't go away, she forced herself away from the door.

Evie already fell asleep. Blowing out the lantern, she stood in the darkness watching her. Why had she feared the wish that almost passed her lips tonight?

She heard the chair scrapping across the floor downstairs, Ali sucked in her breath to brace herself for what she still faced with Clay. Earlier, using his name, left a funny chill inside her. Pushing all other thoughts away she told herself she must rid him of his suspicions.

The table was cleared as her heavy steps entered the kitchen.

"You didn't have to do the dishes."

Clay folded the towel, laying it on the counter. "I don't mind. Is she asleep?"

"Yes, it has been a long day...for both of us."

He wanted to tell her she couldn't get rid of him that easy, but seeing her shoulders fall, he felt she already knew. And she probably knew what kept him standing in her kitchen.

"The coffee is still warm."

Shaking her head Ali watched him fill his cup. He moved like a panther, all dark and sleek. Was she his prey? Chewing the inside of her cheek, she waited.

"Where's your husband, Ali?"

He didn't think those russet eyes could get any larger.

"You are mistaken. I've never been married. What ever gave you that idea?"

“When did your father die?”

“Am I on trial?”

He felt the pride she called on to face him was enough for ten women. “Are you afraid of answering or is it just the question that bothers you?”

“Neither. I just wondered why all the sudden interest?”

She was trying to put him off again, but Clay wasn’t having any of it. The smile he gave her didn’t reach his eyes. “When did your mother die?”

Crossing her fingers within the folds of her dress, she decided this would be an Oscar performance if he bought it. Tossing her head back she fixed his stony stare with an equally angry one. “If it’s so important to you...” He nodded. “My mother died in childbirth, Evie’s, my father died twelve years ago.”

“Your step-father.”

“He was never that, in fact I detested the man. He took off when mother became pregnant, by then he’d gotten everything he wanted.”

“So now you teach. It must have been hard for you with Evie to care for.”

Clay made the mistake of looking at the stove. A woman left to fend for herself and a baby, would certainly know how to work a flue.

Ali felt very proud that she didn’t let on seeing him stare past her to the stove.

“Oh please Clay, my mother may have been played for a fool, but I am not her. I had and still have my inheritance from my father. And yes, I used a considerable amount when Evie was first born. Becoming a teacher was a natural choice with my schooling behind me. I felt it was also a wise one. We now have this home. Evie can grow up in a suitable environment and the half of my salary left, after the house, will keep us from depleting the remaining funds.”

Giving him a rueful look. “I think that brings you up to date.”

“Do you, now? There’s only one point you missed.”

Having those gorgeous eyes of his, leveled against her, she could see why he would be giving orders and not taking them.

“You told me it was your father that remarried.”

She really hoped he’d forgotten that mistake. Damn, she hated lying, especially to this man. “If I said father, which I doubt, I apologize. I could see where the error could be confusing.”

“You’re good Ali Becker, but I don’t believe one word you have spoken in the last five minutes.”

She made herself stand in place as he started walking towards her.

“In fact, I’m beginning to doubt anything I know about you is the truth.”

Denials failed her. All her senses flooded with the man now standing only inches from her. A sane part of her mind told her to send him away, that he could destroy her. But Ali was beyond listening.

“Why aren’t you telling me I’m crazy, Ali?”

His gaze fell to her lips.

“Maybe I can’t.”

“Do you always lie?”

“No...I never have...” Sucking in her breath she prevented the admission ‘until now’ from spilling out. Her gaze rose to his in question, wondering how he held such power over her. Truth wasn’t allowed, not even for him. She needed to protect herself for Evie’s sake.

Clay’s hands cupped her face, tilting her head back. His eyes devoured every delicate feature from the smooth brow and half lidded lashes of gold, sheltering her bronze orbs, to her dusky rose lips. “What is it you are scared of Ali? What are you hiding?”

Her gaze was hesitant in rising. There waited such sadness in those reflecting pools, Clay felt his insides tighten. “Why can’t you tell me?” Didn’t she realize he couldn’t hurt her?

His hold tightened to stop the denying shake of her head. Desire and anger drove him to take the lips refusing to surrender their secrets.

Did magic make her feel his invasion to the tip of her toes? Like a wild storm he moved through her, leaving her senses scorched in his wake. So commanding, she let the power lead her.

Clay’s fingers drove in the satin coil of hair at her neck, refusing to let her escape, he deepened the kiss. Once touched there was no retreat from the battle he waged to win all that was Ali. Sweet passion is what he held, honeyed ecstasy is what she promised.

“Ali! Ali, where are you?”

Evie’s cry stilled them both.

She was the first to slowly pull back and separate from the lips she just discovered. His mastering dark gaze refusing the surrender she sought.

“I’m coming, Evie...” Her hand rose and she placed her finger

over his lips. "I need to go to her."

But Clay reached out and caught her arm, pulling her back against his chest. Holding her upper arms in a grip that rocked them both. "You will tell me, Ali...the truth, I want it all, and I have every intension of getting it, any way I have to."

When his lips took hers this time they held only the fierce promise to seal his vow before releasing her and leaving her to sway under the impact.

Holding herself, Ali stood there trying to catch her breath over what just transpired. The sound of departing hoof beats pounded against her racing heart.

Ali ran from the empty room, fearing she already lost her will to deny Clay Banyon anything!

## Chapter Seven

Placing the nail against the wood Ali gently tapped it with the hammer into the frame. Pulling the chicken wire tight, her gloved fingers strained to loop the wire mesh over each protruding nail, down the post. Working from the bottom up she hammered over each nail, bending the head down across the wire, securing it in place.

With one last hit she finished the last nail. Ali straightened and admired her handiwork. The chicken pen was finished. She rubbed her back and thought she was too. A look about the yard told her the aching muscles were worth the results.

She watched as Evie poured water into the watering can from the well bucket. Evie surprised her by taking over the garden, everyday she watered the long rows they planted. She was proud of the girl's determination. Of course, Evie said it more bluntly, telling Ali she was plumb tired of beans. Ali hoped all their work on the neat rows produced plants. "I'm sick of them too, Evie."

Thinking about food turned out to be a mistake. In fact, every time she entered the kitchen she felt Clay's absent presence. "I may be ignorant about wood stoves, but I'm darn good with a hammer and hoe."

Pulling off her gloves she tried not to think of Clay. It had been four days since he left that night, he would be back, she never doubted it. Sighing, she didn't want to know how she would avoid giving him the answers he wanted. She needed to find a way.

"Evie, I'm going to go up to the school house."

"Can I come?"

"No, you better stay here. Tyler's son Jimmy is bringing over the chickens."

"And goosey?"

"Yes, and the goose."

"Yippee!"

Shaking her head, Ali started to wonder about the changes in herself. "I'm turning into a farmer with a goose, no less. What good is

a goose?"

"Jimmy says they are smart."

"Good, maybe goosey will let me know why I agreed to buy her."

"Bigger eggs?"

Tugging on Evie's ponytail. "Right and more feed." She reached for the small ax. "I'll be back in about an hour. Will you be okay alone?"

"Oh sure, Ruthie is coming over to play."

"Stay in the yard."

"We will."

\* \* \* \*

The path to the fork was wide enough that she could see the house and didn't need to mark the trees. But once she turned to the right, the forest grew dense, even under the noon sun the light became dim beneath the canopy of trees.

Ali took the ax and began cutting into the thick trunks. One swing down, one up, left a neat notch large enough to be seen from a distance. Using trees on both sides of the path she went twenty steps between markings, being sure she didn't veer from the path before using the ax on the thick trunk. Both sides bore her marks, head high, she silently hoped the snow line wouldn't come close to the marks.

"The wind is known for its contrary ways."

Ali raised her head about to confront the softly spoken voice. Ali could never have prepared herself for the man attached to it. Staring wide-eyed at the older man, she didn't have to imagine how foolish she looked to him over the rather half-hearted humph he issued.

She dropped her arm and buried the ax in her skirt, but his clear grey eyes never left the crimson blush flaming her cheeks. Neither of them moved and Ali decided they equaled their examination of each other, sizing up the enemy?

There was no doubt she confronted an Indian older than the ones on the stage and thankfully lacking the gruesome war paint. She still felt her skin chill.

"Your marks will be covered by the snow."

It took a moment for his meaning to sink in. Raising her gaze to the mark, she swallowed hard, not caring for what he just told her. "That is a lot of snow."

She decided he must be laughing at her behind his clouded expression. Feeling the need to defend herself. "I've never been in the mountains during winter."

Insane, yes, she must be that and more to be talking to an Indian in the middle of the woods. But then, her whole existence here could be considered crazy. She quelled the fear that should have sent her running when he suddenly moved.

His agile movements as he beat and pulled a sapling from the ground, belied the age written across his dark features. When he pulled a lethal looking knife from his belt and began hacking off the tiny limbs, Ali felt proud she didn't flinch a muscle. That he watched for her reaction wasn't obvious, but she knew he did.

While he whittled at the stick she forced the tension to release in her back and shoulders. Deciding that if he intended to harm her the deed would be done. She saw no harm in moving closer to him.

"My name is Ali, I am the new teacher."

"We know."

"Oh." Maybe she was beyond being shocked any more. After all, a movie put her here, what was one Indian's awareness of her?

Keeping her own mounting curiosity over his silence became a larger concern. When he took a flat rock and began digging a hole beside the trail, it went beyond her not to move closer to see what he would do next. Kneeling down beside him, he motioned for her to pass him the stripped sapling. Putting it in the hole, she held it as he buried the end, moving the dirt around the base.

"When the snow comes this will stand above the drifts as a guide." He looked back at her marks on the pines. "The wind will cover that with snow."

Their gaze held, hers lighting with new understanding. "Thank you."

"Umph, only a foolish woman would be out here in a storm."

Holding her eyes level for the abrupt hardness penetrating her. "It is a precaution."

His slight nod was as close to acceptance as she figured he'd allow.

He rose so quickly she almost fell back before righting herself to his retreating back. "What is your name?" His steps away from her never faltered.

"Your people call me...Red Cloud."

Ali stood there never really seeing when he faded from her sight. Giving herself a mental shake, her hand reached out and touched the protruding stick as if to confirm his presence to herself. "Thank you again, Red Cloud."

She headed back to the house, Ali thought over the odd meeting, chalking it up as another experience to ponder.

Still deep in thought over Red Cloud and the number of sticks she would need to gather for the trail, the commotion coming from the house didn't really penetrate at her approach.

The agitated honking wasn't to be ignored, neither were the wings flapping wildly from the goose charging her from around the house. Standing her ground Ali and goosey were face to face. The geese's neck stretched out low and menacing at her. Ali fought off her laughter. "I hate to spoil your welcome, Goosey, but this is my home, so back off."

As if weighing her declaration, the goose did a little dance in place before turning and strutting regally away.

"Goosey, shame on you, that is Ali!"

Ali felt Evie's reprimand was lost on the self elected Queen of the yard. "She'll learn Ali, I promise."

Seeing Evie's toe dig guiltily into the ground. "Okay Evie, what else has your goose done since arriving?"

"She ah..."

"Come on?" Evie's words rushed out at Ali's prodding.

"She chased Mayor Green half way down the block!"

It would have been shameless of her to laugh. Forcing down her hysterical outburst over what happened. "Well, I guess we have our own watch dog, excuse me, goose."

Eying the goose now strutting around them, under her breath. "Good job, Queeny."

Ali headed for the stairs before she lost her control in front of Evie, She wished she'd been there.

"Oh, Ali, Jack brought us a cow!"

Swinging about. "But Evie, I thought we would wait until..."

"He said, she will stay on the rope until he builds her shed. Please, Ali, she's so beautiful and we can get milk from her, Jack showed me how. I'll do it, I promise, you won't have to milk her. Real milk, Ali."

Shrugging in resignation, Ali let Evie pull her around the house. There staked out in the yard was a cow.

"She is pretty, Evie."

"I named her Rosie."

The large brown head rose from the grass as if already knowing her name as cream colored jaws ground lazily back and forth.



"She is due to drop her calf next spring, Miss Becker. She is used to being staked out."

Looking from Jack to Evie, to the large brown eyes of the cow. "Why not."

"Yippee!"

"I'll have the shed up before it gets cold."

"Better make it big enough for the two of them."

Looking about her, the yard was certainly becoming active. The chicken coop stood full of clucking hens and one prancing rooster. Jack told her to leave them inside for a few days, and then they can roam during the day and return to the coop at night. She hoped they would keep the bugs under control in the garden.

Seeing a crow land atop one of the neat rows, she smiled when Queeny raced off after the bird, nearly taking flight chasing the intruder. Evie's smile went from ear to ear.

"I guess she'll take the place of a scarecrow, too."

"No doubt, Evie. We'll be lucky if she lets us stay around."

\* \* \* \*

The afternoon proved to be very productive, Ali managed to gather enough saplings for marking the trail. Evie helped by tying on scrapes of bright colored material to the tops.

Ali stood in the middle of the yard smiling over all that they accomplished the past few days. "My, but it is truly good."

"What is Ali?"

She placed her arms about the girl's shoulders. "All of it, Evie. The whole place. We're really doing good, Evie."

Through her yawn, Evie nodded her agreement.

"Come on, we still need that bath. The water should be hot by now."

"Ahh, Ali, can't I do it tomorrow?"

"fraid not. We are both filthy." Ali managed to drag Evie toward the house. Of course, every animal needed to be said 'goodnight' to.

"Ali!"

"What is it Evie?" The girl's outburst had Ali running back to her.

"I can't find Queeny!"

"Is that all." Ali turned the girl around and pointed up. "She's on her throne."

"How did she get up there?"

The goose eyed them from the smokehouse rooftop.

“I think she used those hay bales.”

Evie studied the stack of bales. “She’ll be safe up there.”

“Hmm and so will we. She’ll be able to see anything coming in any direction into the yard.”

The truth brought a smile to both of them.

“Come on Evie, let’s call it a night.”

Ali couldn’t remember feeling as good as she did ever before. She’d nearly killed herself the last few days and she felt aches where she didn’t know she could hurt, but she felt good.

The two worked together to get the metal tub set up in the kitchen and filled. She brought the dressing screen down from her room and set it up around the tub. With the stove at the back of the tub, Evie was nice and warm.

She wished she had more time to learn how to cook some dishes from the food supplies on hand. Smoked meats and cheese weren’t things she held much experience cooking. There would be time later for experiments, for now the grilled cheese sandwiches and milk from Rosie were a wonderful dinner.

“My goodness, Evie, you look squeaky clean.”

“I smell good too.”

“Be sure and thank Ruthie’s mother for the bath salts.”

“I will.”

\* \* \* \*

It seemed like hours since she put Evie to bed and finally stopped putting more things away and organizing the cupboards, before she stepped into the bathtub. It felt a little strange taking a bath in the kitchen. The doors were locked tight with the new slide bolts now in place. All the curtains were drawn.

She forced herself to relax and settle back against the tub. The water felt like a cloud, but Ali’s mind refused to stop working. She made a mental checklist of all the projects that still needed to be done around the house and school. Tomorrow Jack would start working on the playground. The barn for Rosie could wait. She would be fine in the lean-to he put up beside the chicken coop.

“I’m all for fresh milk and eggs in the morning. I can make pancakes for Evie.”

She closed her eyes and wished the thoughts would stop when they turned to the past. Neither of them mentioned the movie, magic or going home. Ali felt a twinge of sadness and yet this place felt so right, so special. She hoped they still felt this way after a couple of

months.

“If it’s going to end, do it now!” Everyday they fell deeper into this life, this world.

Evie hadn’t mentioned her parents once. Every so often, she would catch the girl deep in her own thoughts. She’d listen at night to see if Evie might be crying, but no sounds came from her room. Ali could only surmise that the girl found, being here, what she lacked back at home.

Ali could honestly say she’d never seen Evie so full of energy and just enjoying life. If she were sad or missed her parents, she hid it well. The thought that it might have been Evie’s wish that held the magic, kept repeating itself to Ali. Regardless, they were here now and Ali didn’t have time to worry every minute over the reason or if it would end. No, she needed to keep them safe and make a home for Evie.

The knock on the door shattered Ali’s thoughts into a thousand shards of glass.

## Chapter Eight

“Who...who’s, there?” The towel wasn’t cooperating with Ali’s efforts to gather it around her.

She stepped out of the tub, trying to listen to the answer. Looking around, she grabbed the butcher knife off the table. Clutching the knife and holding the towel, she slowly approached the door. “Who is there?”

“Ali, it’s me, Clay. Are you all right?”

She felt the tension falling away. “Wait a minute before coming in, promise?”

“Sure, but...”

“No buts, just wait until I tell you to come in.”

She unlocked the bolt and then scooted back to hide behind the screen. “All right, you can come in.”

Clay opened the door as if a great bear stood behind it. He couldn’t imagine why Ali just didn’t open the door. Once he saw the screen set up by the stove he knew the answer.

“Turn around for crying out loud! I’m not dressed, yet.”

He hid his smile, for as he turned he caught the very shapely reflection of what the drying cloth didn’t hide. The image of her bare back down to her hip would stay with him forever. She started talking and he tried to focus on what she said.

“...and he said his name was Red Cloud.”

The hands moving the screen away made the breath catch in her throat. “What ever is wrong, Clay?” She couldn’t mistake the angry concern she saw on his face. Her fingers were shaking, but she managed to push the last button through the hole near her neck.

“What in the hell were you doing talking to that savage?”

She studied him a minute, wanting to argue his pointed use of

‘savage’ and that she doubted it fit this man, but Ali also realized her thoughts and attitude came from a very different perspective. “I met him, while I was marking the trail to the schoolhouse. He was kind enough to show me a better way to mark the trail.”

“You shouldn’t be alone or near him, ever again.”

If she didn’t realize it was concern on his part that drove his words out, Ali would be upset over his attitude. “I don’t plan on it, Clay.”

When she moved past him, he wanted to grab hold of her and shake her, make her understand the danger.

Ali could feel his gaze boring into her back as she filled the teakettle. Moving past him once more, she worked on getting the fire restarted for tea. She didn’t turn when she heard him getting the cups down out of the cupboard.

Neither of them spoke as they worked to set the table. Once seated she finally looked across the table to meet his waiting stare. “Clay, really...”

“No Ali, I know you are an educated woman, but you have no idea what they are capable of doing.”

She could argue, but then he did have a point. “I doubt if I’ll ever see him again.”

“I should hope not.” His hand covered hers to gain her attention. “If you do see him or any other of his tribe, I want to know, Ali. Promise me.”

She wanted to look away, but he was relentless, refusing to let her escape. “All right, I promise I’ll tell you.”

It seemed like minutes before he finally relaxed. Ali just realized that Queeny didn’t honk, so much for a watch goose. “I think I need a dog.”

“Why?”

She gave him a small laugh and explained about the goose.

Clay listened to her tale of the day, it appeared that she accomplished quite a bit since he saw her last. He wondered if she were deliberately pulling him away from her first revelation.

The silence finally broke through his thoughts and he couldn’t help but smile at the knowing grin she gave him.

“I am okay, Clay. Evie and I are settling in very well.”

“I heard that.” He looked about the room, noting all the little feminine touches in the kitchen. “The house looks lovely, Ali.”

She smiled, knowing he meant the compliment. “It is beginning

to feel like home.”

The tea and cookies were about gone, Clay realized he needed to do what he came to do. “Ali, I wanted to ask you to the dance we are having out at the fort. There are some dignitaries coming through, it will be this Friday night. Evie can come too, the children are always there as well.”

“I’d love to, Clay.” Ali’s mind raced, wondering if the pretty pink gown would be appropriate for the dance. “Is it formal?”

“Yes.”

She felt relieved to see the smile on his face. “Good, I’ve not been to a dance in a very long time.”

He pushed away from the table and came around to help her with the chair. Clay knew he needed to leave now or make a mistake and act on the feelings she drove him to. “I’ll pick you both up around 4 o’clock then.”

“Perfect, it will be a wonderful way to end the week.”

Without questioning the properness, Clay pulled her into his embrace. She looked up at him and her lips parted in wanting as she leaned closer. His lips covered hers and he never felt as hungry as he did at that moment. His hands couldn’t get enough of every loving curve and he silently cursed the dress that kept her bath scented flesh from him.

When her fingers delved into his hair, he groaned low and wild, devouring her lips, demanding entrance to her mouth. The battle she gave him felt like a marvelous skirmish, one he refused to lose and he tasted the sweetness of Ali. His hands moved lower over the soft curve of her hip and buttock, pressing her into the growing evidence of his craving desire for her.

He reminded himself he must stop, but it proved difficult. Her own desire grew as wild and wanton as his own. With great resolve he pulled back, slowing their kissing until their hot breaths mingled, fighting to regain sensibility. “Dear, sweet woman, you are a danger to my senses.”

“You flood my own.”

He kissed her truthful lips very gently. Her hands lowered to rest on his chest. “I don’t know if I can wait to see you until Friday, Ali.”

“Hmm, you are always welcome here, Clay.” She looked up at him to see how he took her admission.

“Good, I may come back by then.” He gave her one last, quick kiss and forced himself to leave her before he lost the battle.

It took some moments for Ali to walk to the door and relock it once he left. She could hear the hoof beats fading in the distance. “I sure hope you do come back, Clay.”

## Chapter Nine

“Oh dear!” That damn goose was after something and Ali couldn’t help but hope that it might be big enough to take out Queeny. “I didn’t mean that thought, honest.”

As she ran around the corner of the house, the arms that caught hold of her caused her to let out a small scream of surprise. When she realized who held her, she felt her temper flare. “Put me down!”

“Now that would be a wasted effort, Ali.”

The smile he gave her looked positively evil. “I said, put me down, Mayor.”

Whether it was the cold deliverance of her request or Evie’s call and imminent presence that made him lower her feet to the ground, she didn’t care. She pushed away and out of his hold once her feet hit the ground. Ali decided he needed to know she didn’t appreciate his advances. She looked up and into his confident gaze and wondered why anyone would ever like this man. He expelled danger.

Ali took a deep breath and didn’t care if the girls and Jack heard her. “Don’t you ever do that again! If I want your hands on me, I’ll let you know, but right now I suggest you keep them to yourself, Mayor Green.” She started to turn away from him, noticing he did look rather surprised. “And another thing, my name is Miss Becker to you, not Ali or Alice, but Miss Becker.”

Doug watched the whirlwind of skirts fly past him and he resisted the urge to pull her back and set her straight. The fact she called him out for his behavior didn’t really upset him, he enjoyed her spirit. He wanted nothing more than to break this woman, beneath him, in a hold she could never deny again.

Remembering why he came here, he started to follow her into the back yard. The activity about the place amazed him, he’d laughed at the talk about town over what all Miss Becker had been up to. Taking in all the improvements and additions to the yard he decided he did need to see what was going on up at the schoolhouse as well.



She felt his presence before turning and finding him studying her. She silently swore that if she were a man she'd deck him. When she realized her thoughts and all the western slang that crept into it, she needed to swallow her humor, not wanting the mayor to mistake her stance with him. She detested the sight of him, wishing there were another man that she would need to deal with and not him.

With great determination, she walked up to him. "Did you come for a reason, Mayor Green?"

She wanted him to leave, and the only way would be to hear what he came for.

He took his time to look her over, she was a tempting package, even with the work gloves and apron. "Yes, I wanted to ask you to the dance out at the fort on Friday."

"Thank you, but I already have a date for that night." She didn't miss the surge of anger inside him, thankful that he got it under control. She could see Jack watching them and knew he moved closer to act in her defense if necessary.

"Then I regret being tardy in asking you. It won't happen again."

With that the man turned and left, taking his regal air with him. Ali didn't realize she held her breath until he disappeared around the side of the house. Queeny let loose with a horrible honk and display as she rushed down the side of the house. Ali didn't worry. The goose wouldn't go after the Mayor, she just showed her own dislike for the man.

*Funny*, Ali remembered that Queeny didn't make a sound over Clay's arrival or departure.

Shaking off her thoughts and ill feelings over the Mayor, she turned to get back to her task with Jack to get the cow's shed done. She smiled and gave the man a slight nod to ease the concern she saw in his gaze for her. They went back to work on completing the wall.

Jack proved to be a marvel, she hoped his sons were as good at building as their father. They were up at the school working on the playground she designed for the children. Jack promised her it would be completed by Monday morning when school started. She actually felt excited over the start of school. Ali wasn't sure what would happen or how she'd cope, but she knew she would.

She needed to go up to the school house this afternoon to sort through the books and get the desks ready for the children. Everything she could remember about the period, through movies and reading, came into all her decisions in regards to the schooling. She expected a

wide range of ages to show up, it would take a week or so to figure out how far along many of them were in the basics. One thing she didn't expect were too many of the children to even know how to read, let alone write and do math. No, that's what she was here to do, teach and she would, she would teach the basics to get through life as it stood today, not the one she left.

Another board went up, she waited for Jack to lift the next one in place so she could hold it while he did the hammering. Having her help him was a huge concession on his part, but he knew she wanted him at the school house working, so they came to this arrangement.

Ali checked the sun's position and figured she had another hour here before she left for the schoolhouse. Evie and Ruthie were going with her to help her get it set up. She could tell how excited the girls were about school starting.

Ali tried not to watch Evie, it proved useless. The girl didn't seem fazed by the change in her life, if anything she loved what happened. If Ali were honest she'd have to say that she too loved being here. Her throat did tighten for the people she left behind, but there was nothing she could do to change anything. She no longer worried about going back, something, a feeling or instinct, told her they weren't ever returning.

\* \* \* \*

"Ali, how many pencils in each desk?"

She looked up to see the girls waiting for her instructions. "One on each side, two children at each desk."

"Got it."

She smiled at Evie's authoritative attitude with her helpers. Seems the word got out that they would be at the school house all afternoon. A couple more girls showed up and two boys around twelve years old that were helping her with the heavy books.

"Miss Becker, where should we put these?"

"Let's see, those are the math books. You can stack them up on that middle shelf." Thankfully, Jack's sons built her a bookcase for the school books. She hadn't asked for one and felt glad that they decided she would need one.

She took a minute to look around the room. Every desk had a paper booklet for writing and pencil. Inside the split desktop were the spelling and reading books. The math would come once she figured out where they were in their skills as she had two levels in books for math. About the room were all the letters, large and small case, along

with all the numbers up to twenty.

Sunday, she would pick a large bouquet of wild flowers for her desk. She still had no idea how many students to expect.

Digging through the last box, "I found the chalk."

The girls laughed and she caught the boys smiling, she didn't think she was what anyone expected for a school marm either.

Along with the chalk, she found the board erasers and a pointer. There at the bottom of the box laid a spanking board. Ali frowned over it and when she pulled it out she could see all the children look at her. Only Evie's face lacked a worried expression. Ali walked to the door and called to one of Jack's sons.

"Yes Miss Becker?"

"Would you please take this and chop it up for the kindling pile?"

Jack's son was too old for school, but he gave her a wink. "Sure you won't be needing it?"

"Well...no, my students are too special to ever be spanked."

"Kindling it is."

She could hear the collective sigh behind her. The playground looked ready. She felt so pleased to see the teeter-totter, slide, swings and jungle bars. Ali made a mental note to buy enough rope for a jump rope. "I think the playground needs to be tested, how about it? Want to give it a try?"

The whoops and hollers could probably be heard in town as they raced to the playground. Ali followed them and took a seat on one of the swings, giving herself a gentle push. She laughed and cheered them all on as they played.

The sudden pull on her swing earned her gasp of surprise. When she saw Clay's uniformed arms holding her swing's rope she leaned back against him. "Hi there, soldier."

"Looks like you have been busy."

"I hope the children will like it."

"Oh, Miss Becker, I think you will win their hearts."

With that, he gave her a wonderful swing and Ali's laughter could be heard across the valley.

After a few swings, she insisted he stop so she could show him the school house. She watched him walk around the room, fingering every article on the desks. "Did I forget anything?"

His attention came back to her, "Not a thing, they will be thrilled. I doubt if many of them have ever been to school."

"I thought as much, myself. I figure we'll take it nice and slow."

He smiled at her and started walking towards her. Ali caught the predatory gleam in his eyes and wondered where all the kids were when you needed them. She actually took a step back when he came up in front of her, but his arm around her waist prevented any retreat.

“Hmm, Miss Becker, I wouldn’t mind being one of your students.”

She fingered the brass buttons on his uniform, “Maybe I shouldn’t have thrown the paddle away.” Realizing exactly what she said, her gaze flew up to his to find that smoky look of wanting. Her lips parted in invitation.

She didn’t give any battle when his tongue demanded entrance and Ali let herself feel every inch of his powerful body press against her own. When his hands cupped her hips and lower, she groaned as he moved her over the evidence of his desire for her. Her arms tightened about his neck and Ali wished they were home.

When he pulled back, she wanted to cry and let her forehead drop to his chest as she fought to control her erratic breathing. “Clay...”

His lips kissed her ear. “I know.”

She forced herself to move back, knowing neither of them wanted anyone to see them. She smiled up at him, knowing she was blushing. “Would you like to come to dinner, tonight?”

“That is a date, Miss Becker.”

“Good.”

“I have some business in town, I should be over before dusk.”

“I’ll be there.”

He gave her a gentle kiss in parting and she wanted so much to pull him back, delay his leave. Once he disappeared from the school, she straightened her hair and dress, knowing how rumpled she must look.

The next hour she finished with the unpacking and straightening of the room, enjoying how it all came together. She called for the children and told them it was time to head home.

She still marveled over the playground and how wonderful it looked. Jack’s boys would be back tomorrow to paint the equipment and the schoolhouse a bright red.

The walk back to the house, through the woods, didn’t seem that long now that she was used to it. She eyed each pole with its cloth tag, feeling much better over having them there for the winter. Evie counted the poles as they passed them, Ali noted that Ruthie made it to thirteen before she stopped counting. It would be this way with

most the children, hopefully they would have some learning, but she wouldn't expect too much.

## Chapter Ten

“Ali, I need help!”

“I’m coming Evie.” She took one final look in the mirror, swishing one way then the other. Pleased with how she looked, she smiled and left to go help Evie with her dress.

“I can’t get the buttons, Ali.”

“Here, let me try.” She made quick work of the buttons over the high collar. She looked at Evie, adjusting a curl at her brow. “You are beautiful Evie.”

Evie glowed under Ali’s compliment. “How are your shoes?”

The girl lifted the dress’s skirt, “I think I got them all, you were right, they are a pain.”

The two of them laughed together. “We are doing real good, Evie.”

They both stopped and looked at each other. Ali held her breath, knowing how Evie took what she said. When the girl smiled and hugged her, Ali finally relaxed. “I love it here, Ali.”

She didn’t press the girl for more, knowing she couldn’t change anything and it was better that they both adjust to their new lives.

“Where is the captain, Ali?”

“He will be here, we are ready with time to spare.”

“Can I go check on the animals?”

Ali bit her lip, “I don’t know Evie, you can’t get dirty.”

“I won’t, promise. I won’t even pet them.”

“Okay, go ahead, I need to check the stove and lamps.”

After fetching her small purse, Ali went downstairs. As she descended, her gaze rose to meet Clay’s.

“My, my, what a beautiful sight you are Alice Becker.”

She stopped a couple stairs from the bottom, blushing over the heated look in his eyes. “And you sir, look dashing. I will need to

fight the women off.”

“Would you fight for me, Ali?”

The serious tone in his voice made her look at him. She realized he asked for so much more and nothing could stop her from answering. “I would fight them all and more, Captain Clay Banyon.”

His hands came to her waist, lifting her off the steps and against him. He held her there and kissed her with a depth they’d yet to allow themselves to go. Ali didn’t know how long his kiss lasted, she didn’t care, all she wanted was to stay in his arms...forever.

When he did pull back, they both tried to recapture the other in sweet, loving kisses that slowly cooled their embers. But the fire he lit deep inside her refused to be extinguished.

His hands cupped her face and kissed her again with longing. “I really need to learn not to start this when we can’t finish it.”

She smiled at him, “I so agree.”

Ali kissed his pouting lips before stepping back. She hooked her arm in his. “Shall we go?”

“We better.”

His laughter soon joined hers and by the time they reached the carriage, they were all looking forward to the evening ahead.

Evie barely remained silent long enough for either of them to talk. Ali’s heart felt right, she loved that Evie was so happy and she couldn’t stop looking at Clay. He certainly fit the requirements of tall, dark and handsome, he was all that and so much more. He possessed a kind heart, Ali realized she never felt the way he made her feel with anyone else. She wondered if she were falling in love with Clay Banyon.

“A penny for the lovely, school teacher’s thoughts.”

She smiled at him, “Oh, I’m thinking of so many things, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be, what were you thinking of?”

“You.” The word popped out before she realized what she said. She could feel his gaze on her and forced herself to look at him. Her mouth opened over the warming light he held her in.

“I am so glad I fill your thoughts, Ali. I know you have captured my own from the moment I saw you.”

“Really?” There she went again, just blurting out her deepest feelings.

“Oh yes, there isn’t a minute that goes by that I’m not thinking of you.”

“Me too.”

His laughter filled the early night air. She couldn't believe she just said that, she felt like a schoolgirl herself. His finger came under her chin and raised her face up to look at him.

“Sounds like we feel the same, Ali.” He pulled up on the reins, stopping the carriage. He turned to look at her after first winking to Evie, who suddenly became quiet. “I have something to ask you, Ali.”

She couldn't imagine what could be so important that he'd stop the carriage. “I'm listening.”

He smiled at her as he took both her hands in his. “Alice Becker, will you marry me?”

Ali felt herself sway over the impact of his words, she couldn't stop the smile that captured her lips. She raised the hands holding her own and kissed his knuckles before laying her cheek against his hand. She took a steadying breath and raised her face to look at him. “I would love to marry you, Clay Banyon. I think I fell in love with you the second I tried to shoot you.” She bit her lips over his huffed laugh at the memory. She prayed the fates would remain kind and let her stay here and have a life with him.

“I love you, Ali.”

He pulled her to him and kissed her like a man that just won a war. Her heart felt like it would explode. There was so much they needed to talk about, but for now Ali only cared that he loved her. Never in her life did things ever move as fast as they did here in just a couple weeks.

The one thing Ali felt sure of, is that she did love this man.

Evie's yippee filled the night air and they pulled her between them and hugged her.

\* \* \* \*

The dance felt like a dream. Ali thought she rode on a cloud, one of love for Clay Banyon. He took her for another spin about the room, making her feel like a princess.

“Are you happy, Ali?”

“You know I am, like I've never been in my life.”

“Good, I'm busting to tell the world. Would you mind?”

“No, how could I mind something so wonderful.”

Clay stopped in the middle of the dance floor holding her as if they were ready to lead into a waltz at any second. The waltz of their lifetime? Yes, he believed it to be so. He took the largest chance of his life tonight and right now, he swelled in pride over her acceptance.



“I have to tell you, Ali.”

“I am listening Clay.”

He returned her smile, one that seemed a permanent part of her since she accepted his proposal. “I bought a farm today, for us, Evie too.”

“Wow.”

“I take it that means you approve.”

Ali laughed at herself. “Yes, I approve. Where is it?”

“Well, it actually is all the land from your property up to the reservation and over to the hill where the school building is. There is a nice farm at the bottom of the school house hill. It has a two-story house, with a huge barn and other buildings. There are about a hundred acres under seed right now, the corn is almost ready to harvest.”

“Oh Clay, it all sounds so wonderful.”

“I hope you don’t mind that I did this before asking you, but I wanted you know that I wouldn’t stay in the army, I could never ask you if I didn’t have a home to offer to you.”

She couldn’t restrain herself any longer.

Clay twirled her around in circles when she flung her arms around his neck. He didn’t care that the whole room was staring at them. She loved him and that is all that mattered.

Once they slowed and stopped, Clay kissed her then smiled down at her as he moved to stand beside her and face their onlookers. He saw her blush take over those beautiful cheeks. “Ladies and Gentlemen, I want to announce that Miss Alice Becker has accepted my proposal to marry me.” He squeezed her hand as he raised it and kiss her fingers. “She will be my wife.”

\* \* \* \*

Doug pushed away from the door, leaving the crowd around the couple. His angry cuss hissed out between his tense lips. “It won’t happen, I’ll see to it.”

A meeting with the general and the railroad dignitaries would insure the captain missed his own wedding.

“Then I’ll make sure he doesn’t return.”

Even knowing he would stop the captain from marrying Ali, his anger still burned. He saw how Clay held her, he should have been the one making that announcement. He should be the one kissing her!

“I will be.”

\* \* \* \*

“Sir, you know I have resigned my commission...”

“I can’t accept that Captain, you are needed to take this expedition into the territory. You are the only man that can do it and not get everyone killed.”

Clay’s fists clenched at his side, he knew the General could force him into accepting it or face a court-martial. He hated the position he found himself in, Clay didn’t want to leave Ali. “I am getting married, Sir.”

“I know that, Captain, you have two weeks before the expedition. I suggest you take care of this marriage. I’m sure your wife will survive without you for a couple months.”

It was unfair and asking more than Clay thought he owed the army. He would be lucky to get back before winter and he wasn’t sure how Ali would take the news. “I ask to take my leave.”

“As long as your butt is back here for this expedition. Three days before they leave should give you plenty of time to take care of personal items.”

Clay saluted, “Yes, Sir.”

Once outside his hand slammed into the porch railing. Two weeks were going to go too quickly for him and Ali.

He mounted his horse and didn’t waste another minute leaving the fort and reaching her. All the questions bombarded him, would she go through with the marriage became the most important one on his list.

\* \* \* \*

She drove the pitchfork into the mound of hay, bringing out a large mass at the end of the fork. With all her strength she slowly moved the hay around her to dump it into the new stall for the cow. As she swung back for another load, two strong hands came from around the back of her, taking hold of the pitchfork.

“Actually, I’m good for some things around here.” Clay kissed her neck as he took over the task she shouldn’t be doing.

Ali moved back and let Clay finish filling the stall with hay for the cow. She moved the hay around the stall to even it out as she watched him. She liked how his muscles moved beneath his shirt. The line of sweat forming between those wide shoulders. She moved up behind him and ran her hand up the full length of his spine. He stilled and she felt the tension beneath her fingertips.

Moving closer she placed both hands on his back and moved them around his waist and over the corded muscles of his stomach. “I

love how you feel under my touch, Clay.”

He placed the pitchfork to the side, he reached back and pulled her around in front of him, holding her within his embrace. Her hair smelled like wildflowers as his lips kissed the top of her head. “I have to tell you something, my love.”

She stiffened in his hold, when she looked up at him, she reached and laid her palm against his cheek. When he turned and kissed it she smiled. “Clay, you can tell me anything and I’ll listen. I may get mad, but I’ll listen to every word before yelling, screaming or just kissing you madly.”

“In that case...” He pulled her down with him into the hay stack. His lips captured her own and she groaned as his hand moved up her thigh beneath the skirt. Every nerve came alive at his touch, burning with a fire of desire that only he could quench. Breaking the kiss, “You’d best tell me now, while I’m still able to listen. If you knew what you do to me, Clay.”

“Oh lady, I know what you do to me and it is hard to remain a gentleman in your arms.”

“Then marry me quick, before we both burn in fires of desire.”

“Would you mind not having a big wedding?”

She knew by the change in his tone that he was serious. “I don’t care about a wedding, marrying you is all that matters, Clay.”

The way he looked up at the rafters made her fingers close about his shirt and tugged his attention back to her. “Come on, Clay. I’m a big girl, I can handle it, tell me what is bothering you, please?”

“The General is forcing me to take an expedition of Railroad men into the territory.”

“But, you resigned?”

“It doesn’t matter, he can still call me to duty, if I refuse, he can court-martial me.”

She didn’t have to ask what that entailed. She hugged him to her as if it would take away all her fears and his. It took a huge effort, but she managed to pull back and look at him. “Then you must go. How long do we have?”

“Two weeks, then I’ll have to return to the fort and organize the expedition.”

“This mission, how long will you be gone?”

“Two months is what it is called for.”

“But it could go longer?”

“Ali, I swear it will be shorter if I can do it.”

Smiling at him, she knew he was trying to make her feel better. “I think we need to get married right now.”

“Really? Is it all right?”

She loved him, that was all that mattered. “Yes, it is fine. Who can marry us?”

“The Chaplin at the fort can perform the marriage.”

“Then let’s go get married. I need to change and get Evie.”

Before she could leave his side, he pulled her to him. “I love you, Ali.”

“And I you. We will have our whole lives together, Clay.” She prayed fate didn’t make her vow a lie.

## Chapter Eleven

*I now pronounce you man and wife.*

Ali replayed those words over in her mind as she blew out the lantern in Evie's room. Such an exciting day. They were married and Clay's men threw them a dinner party. They really surprised Clay and it warmed her heart to see the high esteem they held her husband in. She still marveled over the fact that every one of them swore they would get him home in one piece.

They made so many decisions today, like, Evie and she would remain in this house until his return, she already figured out that if winter set in before he returned they would all be here through the winter.

Clay contracted Jack and his sons to harvest the corn crop and store it at the farm. She didn't know much about farming, but Ali knew she would try to learn. It amazed her that Clay did know farming. He told her on the ride back to the house that his family were all farmers back east. There were so many things for each of them to learn about each other. For now she felt he told her everything he could think of, down to the balance in his bank account, which was actually two times her own. She in turn told him of her finances and the house. Monday afternoon they would go to the bank and join their accounts.

Ali stalled at the top of the stairs, she instinctively knew that Clay still wanted answers from her about her past. She wanted to tell him the truth, but all the warnings told her to remain silent. Then she'd argue that she should tell him the truth, what if Evie said something that proved her story a lie, what would Clay do or think?

As she started down the stairs she still lacked any decision on what to tell Clay. When she entered the kitchen, she watched as he put away the last of the dishes. How many men of this era would help in

the kitchen? She didn't think there were many around and she wondered how she got so lucky.

School would start Monday, they only had one day together. Would it be enough?

"You look beautiful, Ali." Clay wondered what held her away from him. Did she have wedding night jitters? If he believed Evie was her daughter, she shouldn't have any fears of going to bed with him.

"Clay, whatever you want to know about me, now is the time to ask."

So, she knew what he felt. "You know I want you to tell me Ali, but I want you to be the one to tell me, when you are ready."

Should she let it go, not give him the answers he sought of her past. She feared his reaction if she didn't tell him, and in the same breath, she realized he probably wouldn't believe her if she did tell him the truth.

"Tell you what Ali, let's worry about the past tomorrow. For now, we have our marriage to begin."

Dare she let it be that easy? When he reached out for her hand, she placed hers in his. Just touching him took all the worry away.

"Come on, Ali."

She let him fold her in his embrace, burying her face into his shoulder. "I love you, Clay."

"That's good to hear, I love you too."

When he lifted her in arms and headed for the stairs, Ali wrapped her arms around his neck and smiled up to his questioning gaze. He carried her over the threshold of their bedroom. She'd already put his clothes away in the drawers beside her own.

Her feet were slow to reach the floor as he held her to him, letting her move slowly over the length of his body. He never released her gaze from his own.

"I want you Ali, I want to love every beautiful inch of your precious body."

She thought her heart would stop beating over the way he looked at her. She never realized that a man could be so sensitive, show his feelings for a woman the way Clay allowed her to see.

His hand reached for her hair and pulled the combs out of the bun she wore. The thick lengths of hair fell down her back. He liked the satin feel of it as he raked his fingers through the thickness. "So lovely."

Ali started to unbutton her collar, Clay brushed her fingers away

to do it himself. She felt every small brush of his fingers against her throat then her chest as he continued down the line of buttons. Her own fingers were not idle as they worked on his uniform buttons, the large metal buttons being much easier than her own tiny mother of pearl buttons.

She felt the material at her waist loosen as the skirt fell around her ankles. The ribbon at her waist released the petticoats. She stood before him in her drawers and chemise. He stopped there to help her with the gun belt at his waist. She realized there were no zippers and wondered when they would be invented. She remembered seeing pictures of men's underclothes as her gaze scanned the one piece outfit. She stopped looking any lower than his waist.

Clay watched her cheeks turn a bright rose color as her gaze flashed back up to his own. He didn't want her to become nervous with him. The coy look she gave him, made him suck in his breath. He couldn't pull his gaze away from her fingers as they pulled the ribbon at her breasts. It seemed as if their fullness immediately pulled free of the restraint. When she pulled the ribbon at her waist, Clay felt himself hardening over his need for her. He wanted to hold her forever, keep her safe in his embrace and never let go.

His hand closed around the soft flesh of her arm and he stepped to her, he swallowed hard over the way she came to him, so open, so trusting. Loving Ali became the easiest and the hardest thing in his life. She felt like fine porcelain in his hold, making him fear that she'd break if he moved wrong or held her too hard. How could he love her without hurting her?

"Clay?" She waited for him to look at her, really see her. "I want you to make love to me, Clay, I want us to make love to each other...show me how."

He cupped her face in his palms wondering how he became so fortunate to have this beautiful woman as his wife, his lover. The taste of her lips sent his blood pounding through his veins and with each thrust of his tongue, his penis hardened with wanting. "Ali, my love, I want you so much."

He heard her groan in his arms as his hands moved over her lush, tempting curves. Each rising mound became a tantalizing memory that he would cherish and pull out to keep him going when he wasn't with her. She tasted so sweet, soft as a kitten as he nuzzled her neck. The way she moved against him, pressing against the length of his hard-on, completely overtook his thoughts. He suckled her ear lobe

knowing full well he wished it to be her breasts.

Ali felt sure she would fall to the floor if he weren't holding her up. The way his hands moved over her body made her weak. She could feel his hands traveling up her ribs and she held her breath until he cupped her breasts. When his thumb rubbed over her nipples, they grew so hard they hurt in ecstasy. Her head fell back, giving herself over to his kisses as they trailed down her neck. She buried her fingers into his hair wanting to press him on, guide him to the all feeling nubs calling to him.

The warm, wet kisses that covered her nipple drew a wanton moan of passion from her and she held onto his shoulders to stay standing. His tongue played over the nub, lathing the sensitive areole until she cried for him to suck it. When he did she felt her knees give out.

Clay scooped her up in his arms, kissing her sweet lips as he walked them to the bed. She must have pulled the quilt down, he laid her out over the sheets. An angel couldn't be lovelier. He rid her of the drawers and then removed her chemise. She laid there watching him and he could see the love in her eyes for him. He stood there and rid himself of the underwear. Her gaze moved down his body as if touching him, she seemed to burn his skin with each glance. When her eyes enlarged, just slightly over his growing erection, Clay knew he needed to go slow with Ali.

She scooted over to make room for Clay, not sure where to place her hands. She looked up to see him watching her and she started to laugh, a nervous laugh that he joined her in as she fell back into the bed.

"I will stop whenever you tell me to. I love you, Ali, and I would never hurt you."

Her fingers reached up and covered his lips. She smiled, seeing so much love in his eyes for her. "Clay, I am all right, honest. It is just, well, I have never seen...a...you know." Her eyes looked away, until his hand brought her back to look at him.

"I understand, Ali." He kissed her lips gently. If he carried any doubts about her status, he didn't any longer.

Without delay, he rekindled desire's fire in her and himself. Clay couldn't get enough of her breasts as he lathed first one than the other. She came alive in his hands, moving with the passion he evoked in her. His hand ran down her thigh coming back up the inside, where he covered her silken sex. The heat filled his grasp and she pressed up



against the pressure of his hold. Clay moved as slow as possible, his finger entered the damp folds, finding the nub of her passion.

*Oh Ali*, she groaned over the sensations he gave her. Just a touch and she was going crazy, she wanted so much more and she pressed up to capture his hand. “Clay, I want to feel you inside me.”

He didn’t stop from inserting his finger just enough inside her to start the flow of her sexual fluids. She was ready and Clay knew he was, wondering why he continued to delay their joining.

The touch of her hand, grasping his sex, made him suck in his breath. “Ali...”

“I want to feel every part of you, Clay.” She looked deep into his eyes hoping he understood. Yes, she feared this part of him, the one part that would rule her, but she wanted it all, refusing to think on how he would fit inside her, he felt so large.

He could see how brave she tried to be and his heart swelled in love for her. “Ali, you know it will hurt at first, but only for a little time, then it won’t hurt at all, you’ll become lost in the pleasure of feeling me make love to you.”

She didn’t want to know how he knew all this, her only thought stayed on him and becoming his wife. “Show me the passion I feel and see in your eyes.”

He sealed her request with a deep kiss. The way she moved against him became a turn-on that even his good intentions couldn’t contain. Loveliness in motion, that is what Clay saw in her.

Ali turned her self over to him in mind, body and soul. She moved where he wanted her to be and felt all the sensations he gave to her. His lips were a fire she couldn’t quench. His hands, a fine music and she an instrument he played so well. She felt the head of his sex press at the entrance of her vagina and she tried not to think about it, not to feel what would come when he pushed it in and broke her seal. She almost wished she’d already done this in her life and could just enjoy the moment with him. She held him to her, wanting to let him take away all the fears she carried since becoming a teenager.

In deliberate slowness, he moved his cockhead over her entrance, drawing out her fluids to make way for him. He played with her, driving her further into the heat of passion. She clutched at him, Clay knew she was close to a climax, he pressed himself deeper into her. Watching her, she licked her lips, coaxing him closer and Clay drove himself deep into the warm, wanton folds of her sex. He felt her

contract and he forced himself not to move, letting her get use to his presence. He kissed the sweat from her upper lips and cheeks, trying to help her to breathe through the shock. She tried so hard not to show him it hurt, his hands combed her hair back from her face. "I love you, Ali."

She kissed him back, long and deep, then moved her hips, raising against him and groaning over the pure power of sensations that flooded over her. He started to rock, slowly at first, drawing his cock out a bit at a time, then re-entering until she started to match his movements, meeting him half way.

He drove into her, loving the way she called his name. Every cherished movement became a memory and Clay knew he wanted to make many wonderful memories with Ali.

They rode the crest of passion, he could feel how tight she started to become. He drove harder into her, wanting her to feel the height of passion. Her cries grew louder and held her to receive him, letting himself burst inside her as she came around his cock. He wanted to fill her, wanted to claim this special woman, wanted to love her...forever.

## Chapter Twelve

Ali rolled over and stretched out her hand, moving over the empty space in the bed. She tried to open her eyes, but they quickly closed against the sun shining into the room. The noise from the kitchen filtered into the room and she smiled. She could hear Clay and Evie talking.

“Smells like coffee is on.”

She started to get out of the bed and froze, not realizing her shriek of surprise rushed out over the blood stained sheets until Clay rushed into the room.

“Ali? What is wrong?” He followed her sight to the sheets, realizing what she was staring at. “It’s okay honey.”

He moved cautiously to her, wrapping his arms around her and turning her away from the evidence of their night of loving. “Shh, calm down Ali, it’s all right.”

She kept her face buried against him, knowing he was right, knowing she should have expected this. “I’m okay.”

He kissed the top of her head. “Sure you are. Coffee is waiting downstairs.”

She stepped back and let him go, smiling at him as he backed out of room. Once the door shut, she pulled the sheets off the bed and threw them in the corner, knowing she’d burn them later.

Why she smiled, she couldn’t say, but the memories of their all night lovemaking flooded her with wonderful feelings. She realized there should never be any shame in what they shared. “I love you, Clay Banyon.”

The water in the pitcher was warm and she smiled, knowing he must have filled it for her. She let the sheet fall away and wondered if her body changed somehow, now that she was a woman, *a married woman*.

\* \* \* \*

Her stomach fluttered as the children drifted into the schoolhouse. Many were still outside, playing on the swings and other equipment. They still had a few minutes before she called them in for the first day of classes.

After a few moments of settling in the young children, she took the small hand bell and walked to the door to ring it. All of them stopped playing and came running inside. "Take a seat, we will figure out who goes where in a couple days."

She took her time walking up to her desk, giving them all time to get settled. The excitement seemed to buzz in the air. When she turned to face them all, she was surprised to see only a couple seats empty. "Good morning children, I am your teacher, Mi...Mrs. Banyon."

So many changes in such a short time, she wondered how she coped. The thrill of the day took away any doubts she might have held over succeeding.

"Let's start by telling me your names. We will start here and go in turns around the room."

All the very young children were up in the first row and she decided they would need to stay close to her. She could already tell that she would need to separate them into groups, by their knowledge of the basics.

The day seemed to have flashed by in a blink as Ali watched the last child disappear over the hill. Even Evie left with Ruthie.

She heard the approaching carriage just as she was about ready to enter the schoolhouse. Her smile came instantly when she saw Clay, she waved and walked back down the steps to go to him as he tied the buggy to the rail.

He took her up in his arms and spun her around, her laughter filling the breeze.

"How is my school marm? Were the children good? I can always make you that paddle..."

She giggled and tossed her head back, loving it when he nuzzled her neck. "They were great. I had an excellent first day."

"Hmm, I'm so jealous." His laugh was muffled against her neck.

He helped her lock up the school so they could leave for their appointments in town.

\* \* \* \*

"What do you mean, Banyon bought it!" Doug held the bank manager up against the wall by his scrawny collar.

“He purchased the old Wilkes place a couple days ago.”

“That land was mine!” He growled into the frightened man’s face.

“But you never said that, I wouldn’t have sold it if you had told me.”

Dough flung the man away from him. “You are an idiot, White, you know damn well that is the land where the tracks are suppose to go.”

“No, no, you never told me that! You never said a word about that place...”

The man’s nervous ramblings infuriated Doug. First, the marriage news this morning, and now this. He hated Clay Banyon, and it seemed the man was determined to beat him at every turn.

He pointed his finger under White’s nose. “Don’t you breathe a word to anyone and if you value your life, don’t sell any more land without checking with me first.”

“Yes, yes, of course, I’ll check first.”

Doug stormed out of the bank, planning a certain man’s demise. “It can’t come soon enough for me.”

\* \* \* \*

Ali sucked in her breath over seeing the angry looking Doug Green leaving the bank. She knew Clay heard her and wasn’t surprised by his next words.

“You don’t like him much, do you?”

“He’s a tyrant and his ego is too big for his body.”

As he came around to help her down from the carriage. “Remind me never to get you mad.”

She looked down into his dreamy eyes as he lowered her to the ground. “You could never anger me like that man. I detest him.”

She realized she should have kept that last thought to herself by the way Clay’s brow furrowed.

“Has he done something to offend you, Ali?” He refused to let her avoid answering.

“He is just obnoxious, Clay, and he’s far too sure of himself. I just know that the man doesn’t know when to back off.”

“Then, I think I may need to explain to him the finer points of his professional relationship with my wife.”

She gave him a lopsided smile. “I don’t want you fighting with him, Clay.”

“No fights, unless he swings first.”

Her mouth opened to protest, but closed, knowing it would do no good to say anything more. She needed to accept the difference in this time. It didn't help that she feared Doug Green. "Just, don't trust him."

"Women's intuition?"

"Call it what you want, he is bad news."

"I will remember that piece of advise, Ali. Never did like him, myself."

She placed her hand around the arm he offered her and she realized how wonderful she felt, knowing he stood beside her. Safe? Was she? She still fought with her decision about telling Clay.

Mr. White seemed more nervous than usual and Ali figured it was due to Doug Green's visit. Even Clay picked up on the man's shaking mannerism. Ali stayed back and let Clay handle everything about joining the accounts. She didn't even read the papers, which did cause Mr. White's brow to rise. She would have told him she trusted Clay, but figured the man knew the reason already.

They completed the paperwork at the bank and Clay told her they had one more stop, Clay's attorney, Mr. Blanchard.

She admitted to herself that Clay surprised her with all that he accomplished in such a short amount of time. Again, she noticed how the other man held Clay in high esteem. She decided they all knew that he was leaving and needed to get all this done before he left.

The will that he drew up was for both of them. It covered their deaths, giving each full rights of all assets, and should they both die it all went to Evie or their children and Evie equally.

When she read it she failed to keep her tear from falling, Clay's thumb caught it.

"Just to be safe, Ali. That's all this is for, just to be safe."

She nodded, but before she signed she needed to clear up Evie's status. She prayed Clay would understand. "Clay, Mr. Blanchard," she looked into Clay's eyes and kept speaking. "Evie is my god-daughter. I want it made clear in the papers please."

Clay's smile eased the vise about her heart. Mr. Blanchard assured her that he would change the wording to daughter. Ali signed under Clay's signature. Her new name came so easy to her, it surprised her when she signed the papers. But then she didn't really have much time to get used to Becker and Banyon felt so much better to her.

Clay also gave Clyde Blanchard the deeds to the properties to

hold in safe keeping for them. On their parting it was Mr. Blanchard that surprised Ali.

“Mrs. Banyon, I’ve known Clay a long time and I couldn’t be happier for his fortune to marry such a wonderful lady. If you need anything, and I mean anything, while Clay is away, I want you to come to me without hesitation.”

“Thank you very much, Mr. Blanchard, I will, though I hope I won’t have call to use your invitation.”

Clay hugged her to his side and shook the man’s hand in gratitude.

Once he settled her in the carriage and started out, he asked her. “How would you like to see the farm house?”

“Oh, can we?” He didn’t mention Evie, she didn’t expect him too. He knew if he asked she would tell him, when he did she would face it at that time.

“It needs some work, but I’m very happy with the shape it is in. Jack and his boys are going to make repairs to the buildings and house. I hope that once I get back we can move in there.”

“I probably could move everything before you get home.”

He smiled at her. “I think that would be too much Ali, with school and all. Besides, there is the harvest.”

She wanted to ask him about that and decided now was a good time. “Clay, one of the older boys, Jimmy Clark, he asked me if the school would be shut down for harvest. I didn’t know how to answer him. What do you think?”

That she asked his opinion warmed Clay’s heart. “The harvest is what keeps these people alive, it takes about three weeks. Many of the families rotate from farm to farm to help each other out and get the crops in on time. The freeze can ruin a crop, so it must be in before that hits.”

“Then the school must close for the harvest.” She thought a moment. “You know, what I could do is offer to watch all the young children during the harvest. That way the mothers could help without worrying about the children.”

The surprised and pleased look on Clay’s face made her hold her breath.

“Now, that, Mrs. Banyon, is one heck of a good idea.”

She leaned over and kissed his cheek. “Good, I’ll make up notices and put them up around town and to be sent home with the children.”

"I am sure the parents will appreciate it."

"Well, this way the school won't actually close and I can still teach the little ones some basic things."

His laughter rang out. "Oh Ali, I can see it won't be dull with you in my life."

\* \* \* \*

The dishwater felt warm as she finished up the last of the dinner dishes. She could hear Clay saying goodnight to Evie, upstairs. Her thoughts went back to the farmhouse and all that happened this afternoon.

The farmhouse looked really wonderful and twice the size of this place. There were five bedrooms upstairs, it seemed that Clay wanted to fill them all. Ali felt all warm and fuzzy inside when he told her how he would love to have a large family. A farm certainly needed a large family.

She didn't think the house needed too much repair. There were a couple leaks, nothing major. The huge fireplace in the living room cried out for a braided rug. Decorating ideas were already taking her over. Bright yellow curtains in the kitchen were a must and she so wanted the stove here to be put in the new house. Clay didn't see any problem in moving it or the pot-belly stove. He told her he already order a couple new heating stoves for the bedrooms upstairs.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Clay wrapped his arms around her from behind, nuzzling her neck and nipping at her ear lobe.

She leaned back against him and wiped her hands with the towel before covering his own with hers. "I was just thinking about the stoves for the farm house." She wanted to tell him about a heating method she heard about. "I remembered that they were experimenting with corn cobs for heating. They wrap the dried cobs in a bundle and they will burn for hours and hours in the stove."

The way he went still around her, she knew he was listening. She added, "It might be something to try."

"It would save a lot of chopping wood for the fires. Though, I do have about ten acres I want to clear next spring for planting and pasture. But, I like the idea of using the cobs, Ali, the wood could be used for so many other things."

"I just thought I should mention it." She closed her eyes over the sensations he created inside her.

He turned her around in his arms to face him. His lips kissed her brow. "I'm glad you did." He smiled down at her. "Any other good



thoughts I should know about?”

“Only that I want to do the kitchen in yellow, and we need a huge braided rug in front of the fireplace, and I think a window seat...”

He started tickling her and she couldn't stop laughing. “I shouldn't have asked, but I like the ideas.”

“Oh, my husband, I have many more ideas.”

“I bet you do.”

“Like having a few sheep for wool.” Clay was a cattle man and it seemed that sheep and cattle didn't mix well.

“Can't promise that addition.”

“I know, but maybe later on.”

Her lips opened for his kiss, his tongue explored her mouth and she wished it were his cock pulsing inside her warm, damp folds. Her hand covered the bulge in his pants, gripping the harden length. His deep moan of desire sent her spiraling in wanton heat. Her fluids began to flow and she pushed herself against him. “Love me, make love to me, Clay.”

“My pleasure, Ali, my love, my wife.” Clay scooped her up in his arms and wished he could stay with her. He pushed off the dark thoughts of leaving her alone. Clyde and Jack would both be looking out for Ali and Evie in his absence, the fact eased the heaviness in his heart just a bit.

He felt her impatient fingers working away at his shirt and he wished they were already naked. As he entered the bedroom he pushed the door, shutting it gently in order not to wake Evie. The farmhouse's master bedroom sat at one end of the hall and children's rooms at the other side of the stairs. He remembered Ali's smile over the discovery and knew they were both impatient to move in to the large house.

He set her feet down on the floor and kneeled in front of her, undoing the laces of her shoes, all the while his one hand moved up and down, then behind her knee and thigh. Her breathing grew heavy over the sensation he deliberately caused. He helped rid her of the dress and petticoats. Kissing her pussy beneath the thin layer of cloth from her drawers. His hands held her hips as he teased her sex, drawing out the sexual responses that he so loved to claim from her. The way her fingers played in his hair drove him crazy, he buried his lips against the heat of her velvet folds,

Ali pulled the ribbon to release the drawers, wanting to truly feel his lips against her hot flesh. She pushed the material down, groaning

when his hands blocked her from dismissing the garment. His large hands covered her own at her hips as his tongue licked over the damp material, she felt his teeth nip at her clit and she swore she would melt to the floor, thankful when she felt him lower her back across the bed. She watched as he slowly pulled away the drawers, loving the hunger shining in his gaze.

His fingers reached down, ever so slowly he pulled the laced ribbon thru each opening across her chest. The chemise opened a small bit with each release until her breasts were exposed and her nipples hardened in expectation of his touch. For when it came, when both thumbs and index fingers rolling her nipples between them, her hips rose, searching for what she couldn't find, what he kept from her.

She closed her eyes and arched back as his tongue licked over the inflamed nipple before sucking it deep within the warm recesses of his mouth. When he went to the other, raking his teeth over it before sucking, she cried out in breathless ecstasy, begging him for more.

His lips moved down the center of her belly and she couldn't breathe over the tightening in his wake. His arms moved under her thighs and lifted her pussy up to his bidding. She wondered if she'd faint when the tip of his tongue entered her slick folds to roll in wanton wonder over her clit, all barriers gone, flesh to heated flesh. He held her still, rising to receive his administrations and suffer the pure erotic stimulus he gave her as he suckled her clit like a hungry man. She could feel her fluids race to her entrance, smoothing the way for his pulsing cock, one that he deliberately dragged over her swollen clit as he made his way back to her waiting lips.

"I'm so hungry for you, Ali. I want to cherish every beautiful inch of your body."

"Yes, oh Clay, yes, it feels so wonderful, I'm so alive."

The palm of his hand covered her pussy, pressing down, but it was the head of his cock sliding over her juices and up against her clit, then back down as if tasting her sex that delivered wonderments of feelings through her. She wanted him deep inside, touching her where no other man would ever feel her. Fill her as only Clay could, she wanted that huge thick cock buried to its hilt, driving against her, pushing in, demanding entrance.

When she rose, he drove himself into her heavenly folds, the warmth flooding in and around him as she tightened about his enlarged cock. He pulled back slow and sure, wanting to feel every minute aspect of her sex holding him. But Ali demanded more,

wanted more than he was giving and Clay smiled, knowing he wanted to answer her call. When he thrust deep, he pulled right back and drove in again, and again, until she gloried in the rhythm that he set. Her hands held his forearms, holding on to stay grounded as he rode her to ecstasy, pleasuring her as only he could.

“Let me feel you come around me, Ali. Crush my cock with your climax!”

She groaned in wanton power as she rose to meet his lunge and she held him there, within the depth of her sex, milking his own violent climax as he ejected his seed, pulsing inside her until he filled her with himself. He held her hips to his and ground down against that tiny nub of passion that drove her over the edge again, throwing her into the throes of a climax like no other.

Clay held her to his chest until she slowly calmed, kissing away the sheen of her exertion. And as he pulled her into his embrace, held her to him, he watched her fall into an exhausted slumber with a smile on her lips. “Forever Ali, you belong here at my side, for all time.”

His lips sealed the vow he swore would hold her to him.

## Chapter Thirteen

“She isn’t a problem, honest.”

Ali adjusted the small bundle in her arms. “I am sure Susie will be fine, Mrs. Clark.”

The lady called back as the wagon was pulling away from the school house. “I’ll be back by dark.”

“But...” There was no sense protesting that all children were to be picked up at least an hour before dusk, they were out of hearing range. Ali, scooted into the schoolhouse and shut the door behind her to keep the warmth in the room. She scanned the room, doing a quick head count, making sure all twelve youngsters and Evie were accounted for. She was into the second week of watching all the little ones during harvest.

The baby in her arms stirred. Ali looked down at the pretty, little girl with the large blue eyes. “We’ll do just fine, won’t we, Susie?”

Ali placed the little baby in the cradle one of the mother’s donated. This was the first time anyone dropped off a baby. The Clark’s farm must be on the schedule for harvesting the crops today. She looked outside at the dull grey sky and hoped the weather held off until the crops were brought in. The drop in temperature worried everyone that it could freeze, or even snow.

“Stay safe Clay.” He left over a month ago on the railroad expedition. They’d not received any word from him since he left. Not that she expected any when he told her they were going into an unsettled area.

When one of the little girls tugged on her skirt, she smiled and pushed her worry for Clay away. “Yes Jane?”

“Can we play button, button?”

“I think that would be a lot of fun. Evie can hide the button.” She smiled at Evie as she told them all to put their heads down and no

peaking. Ali wondered what she would have done without her help.

While Evie played the game with most the children, Ali got the very young ones to draw on the papers she gave them.

Ali felt good over watching the children. It may not be a conventional contribution to harvesting crops, but she knew it relieved the mother's mind to know their children were being watched and having fun in the process.

Their own crops had been harvested a few days ago. Jack told her that the yield was very good. They would have enough corn and hay for the cattle that Clay purchased before he left. To her surprise, he even bought her four sheep, all female and all due in early spring. Clay told her they could be kept close to the house, keeping the grass cropped and that there was enough room in the barn for them this winter.

Ali already had a list of questions for Clay, concerning the farm. Her main one being the chickens. She did think that she could possibly make money from the eggs and chicken for Mr. Walker's store. He already agreed to take her extra eggs to sell. It wasn't much, but the pennies would add up and help offset items she needed to buy, like a spinning wheel and loom.

She thought it funny that one of her passions, weaving, could now be a part of her life. It made her wonder if the night classes she took at the local community college, weren't all part of the plan that put her here.

Little baby Susie soon became a permanent fixture in her arms. The baby seemed to know if she screamed that someone would pick her up. Ali didn't mind, letting a two month old cry, just to cry, wasn't possible. She figured she couldn't spoil her anymore than Mrs. Clark already did.

The parents started trickling in to collect their children. Ali felt as if she were perpetually tired, blaming it on the lack of any days off since harvest began.

Mrs. Clark was the last parent to arrive and even though she apologized for being late, Ali couldn't get past the fact that it was completely dark out.

"Come on Evie, let's see how long it takes us to get home."

"You have the lantern?"

She heard the worry in the girl's tone. "Sure do, we planned for days like this, remember?"

Ali made a point to smile at Evie as she lit the lantern, then they

put on their gloves, hat and scarf. "We should be nice and warm."

"Queeny is going to be upset that we are coming home after dark."

"Well, she'll just have to let us in." Evie finally joined in Ali's laughter as they started down the path. Ali wondered why the carriage didn't show up, but she never asked as it would have meant seeing Doug Green, something she would rather avoid.

The woods were dark, she held Evie's hand as they walked within the circle of the lantern's light. One of Ali's largest concerns is exactly what they were going through now. She did feel good that Evie and herself knew the path home, but when a large shadow started coming at them, even Ali felt her fear escalate.

"Ali?" Evie's grip on her hand tightened.

"It's okay, Evie." Ali prayed she wouldn't be made a liar. "Who goes there?"

"It is me, Doug."

Ali hissed out her displeasure. "Damn..."

The man came within the circle of light. "I thought you might need some help."

She stared at him, not caring if he saw her anger. "What we needed was the carriage you promised."

"I do apologize, it won't happen again."

She walked pass him with Evie in tow, "No it won't, because I don't need to rely on it. You are off the hook, Mayor."

"Ali..."

Abruptly stopping she turned to face him, making him stop short. "My name is Mrs. Banyon to you, Mayor Green. We are fine, thank you for your concern, but as you can see we don't need it."

Doug stopped and watched her march up the steps to her porch, never once looking back as she slammed the front door. "You will eat those words...Widow Banyon."

For now, he smiled and walked away, savoring her annoyance.

\* \* \* \*

The last day of harvest and the last day of watching the little ones came with a much needed long weekend for Ali and Evie. They waved to the last parent driving away. "Come on Evie, let's go home."

The two of them hurried to close up the schoolhouse and get home, looking forward to the five days before school reopened. Ali and Evie worked to harness the horse to their carriage as Jack taught

them to do the day after their walk in the dark.

Ali felt proud that she avoided Doug Green as well, by sending his carriage away when it showed up the next night over two weeks ago.

As they pulled out of the school yard, “Ali, look!”

“What, Evie?”

“Is that snow?”

The girl’s awe struck question made Ali pulled up the horse. She leaned forward to see what Evie pointed at. “Oh my, yes that is definitely snow. Thank goodness all the harvest is in for everyone.”

“Can I go sledding?”

Ali laughed and told her she could once there was enough snow for it. As the snowfall thickened they both decided there would be enough snow. For the evening ahead, all Ali cared about was getting the livestock put up and getting the fires started to keep the house warm. Thankfully, Jack and his son stayed at the farmhouse for now and would see to the livestock on the farm. Ali knew she would be relieved to move into the main house.

As the evening wore on the snow turned into a blowing storm, one Ali was sure must be a blizzard. All the animals were safe in their homes and she and Evie were warm and snug in the house.

She went to the window again and looked out at the howling blanket of winter blowing past the house. She could make out deep drifts forming in various areas in the yard. “Stay safe, Clay.” With luck, he and his group were nowhere near this storm. He’d been gone over two months now and she failed to keep the worry away.

Her hand went protectively over her lower stomach. She closed her eyes and hoped she guessed right that she truly carried his child. Just the thought of telling him brought a smile to her face. Clay wanted children more than anything and she knew he would be ecstatic to hear her news. “Come home to us, Clay.”

\* \* \* \*

The snow whipped around him, blinding him, he forced his legs to move through the waist high drift. In his head he held to one thought, one beautiful picture of the woman that held his heart.

Bitter cold, his body shook under the freezing wind that cut through his clothes. He kept his hands buried under his arms to save any heat left inside. He stopped as if he could hear her calling to him... “I’m coming, Ali.”

His jaw clenched down, he couldn’t let his thoughts drift. No, he

needed to stay focused. Each step took tremendous effort, nearly more than he possessed. The pain that seared through his shoulder, drew out his anger as he fought away the fog trying to steal him away. "I won't give up, Ali."

Another step through the snow took all his attention. Clay thought again on the ambush that nearly cost him his life when they murdered everyone in the expedition. He couldn't allow sorrow to interfere with his goal to reach Ali. The men of the ambush party dressed as Indians, but they were nothing but imposters. From what he overheard them say, thinking he was dead, Doug Green would feel the wrath of his anger. He swore he would survive to see that justice was done for the men he murdered out on the plateau.

"I won't die out here, Ali. I can't..." He kept thoughts of his wife in his head, she was the only thing that kept him going. The danger she faced now made him push through the blizzard. He refused to believe he would never see her again.

He tried to see through the swirling snow, he knew he must be close to home. The promise of seeing her kept him moving. "I love you, Ali..."



## Chapter Fourteen

Ali pushed up on the bed and listened, wondering what woke her. The wind still blew around the house, but something else woke her... "God, yes, I hear it."

She pushed the covers back and pulled her robe on as she rushed from the room and went down the stairs. When she reached the bottom, she tried to hear the scrapping noise again, wondering where it came from. It came once again from the kitchen. The darkness didn't stop her. Once in the kitchen she wasn't sure what drove her to the door, but she threw the lock and flung it open.

Leaning against it was a snow covered mass that didn't resemble anything, but she still reached for it, something...a feeling, made her grab at the ice-caked material. She could feel the effort it made to move to her. "Clay?"

She sensed the frozen mess was "Clay, it's me, Ali."

"Ali..." She could barely hear him, she pulled with all her might to get him inside and shut the storm out.

Nearly carrying him, she got him over to the stove, dragging one of the chairs over she shoved him down into the seat. She couldn't understand any of his mumbling and she feared looking at him as she swiped her tears away. Turning, she started stirring up the coals in the fire, getting it to blaze up until the heat started filling the kitchen.

She worked at getting the frozen coat off him, running back up stairs she dragged the quilt off the bed. When she got back to the kitchen, she groaned over seeing that he nearly slid out of the chair.

As she worked to get the cold, wet clothes off of him she talked to him. "It's all right Clay, you are home now. Can you feel the fire blazing, I know how to work the flue now." She managed to put some hot water on to boil and she dipped a cloth in and started to wipe the ice from his eye brows and lashes, making sure the quilt stayed

wrapped around him. “Oh my love, are you getting warm yet?”

She wished he would talk to her, she pressed a hot cup of tea to his lips, noticing they weren’t as blue as before. She didn’t force it on him, but silently cried when he did try to take a sip. After a few she set the cup down and added some hot water to the pan that she’d set his feet in to warm them up.

She couldn’t think of anything else to do, but when she finally started removing his damp shirt, she didn’t notice the dark warmth on her hands, at first. When she reached into the basin with the cloth and saw it turn red with his blood, she paled. “Clay?” She barely voiced his name under the fear overcoming her.

Her hands shook as she pulled his shirt back, exposing the horrible gash in his upper chest, beneath his collar bone. She never saw a bullet wound, but she could think of nothing else that would look like that. Her hand went around to his back, feeling she knew, for an exit hole. When she pulled her hand back and there was no blood, she bit her lip, knowing the bullet must still be inside. Whether it was all the movies she saw, she couldn’t say, but she knew the bullet needed to come out, or it would fester and poison his blood.

Without any real thought she moved with purpose, clearing off the table, while putting the sharpest knife and a clamp tool in a pan and set it on to boil. As he sat there, just staring and shivering, she gathered a needle and the heaviest thread she could find, and scissors. Setting it all up, she laid everything out across a clean sheet on the table and cloth for bandages. “That should do it.”

She looked at Clay and wondered if he could move enough to get on the table.

“Clay, my love.” She came and stood before him, lifting the warm cup with tea to his lips again. “Clay, I need to get the bullet out. I’m sorry, it will hurt, but I know it has to come out.”

At first she didn’t really know if he heard her. She could see the effort it took for him to raise his eyes to look to hers. “Can you get through this, Clay?”

He closed his eyes then reopened them. With all the gentleness she possessed she lightly kissed his frost-split lips. “I’ll be careful.”

She didn’t think he had much more strength left in him, she helped him lay back on the table, his groan of pain squeezing her heart. She covered him with the quilt, restocked the fire in the stove to keep the heat up. Ali realized there was nothing left to keep her from going after the bullet. She stood there staring down at him and not

seeing anything until his hand came and clutched her arm.

Her hand covered his and she smiled down at him. "Yes, Clay?"

"You can do it, Ali."

She wanted to deny his confidence in her, but stopped herself from shaking her head. "I...I don't want to hurt you."

"You could never do that, Ali."

His hand slipped from her arm and she realized he passed out. She fought to control her tears, knowing now was the time.

Ali picked up the rope and threw it over Clay, rushing to the other side, she threw it back under the table. She did it twice more securing the knot around the table leg. If he did wake, she hoped he would understand that she had to tie him down in case he moved.

The time of indecision was over, Ali picked up the knife. She gripped her wrist with her other hand to stop it from shaking while she opened the wound. She took a deep breath and started digging for the bullet with the knife. The sweat poured off her forehead and she brushed her face against her sleeve to keep the droplets out of her eyes. He started groaning in pain and trying to move, thankfully she found the bullet and put all her concentration on bringing it to the surface.

With great care she gripped the bullet and dropped it into the basin. She worked quickly to clear the wound and stitch it up with the thread and needle she had ready. Once she knotted the stitches she untied the ropes around his good arm, so he wouldn't feel trapped, but she left the rope about him to keep him from moving or falling off the table.

Ali watched and kept the fire going, she put the stew from dinner to heat, hoping he would eat some once he woke. When she did all she could, she pulled up a chair and rested her head on her arm at the table, refusing to leave his side.

\* \* \* \*

More times than she counted, Clay cried out for her. His delirium seemed as fierce as the blizzard outside. Evie and Ali spoke in whispers all day and Ali wasn't sure why. Clay's fever didn't seem to break and she didn't dare move him from the table. The only time she left him was to make her way out to the barn to feed the cow, Queeny and the chickens. She couldn't believe all the snow that fell, though it proved hard to say how much as the wind kept blowing it all around.

More than once, he spoke out about the ambush and that Doug Green sent men dressed as Indians to kill them all. She wrote down

everything he said, knowing once the storm broke that she would go to Mr. Blanchard. He could take care of Doug Green.

She was shaking the snow off her coat and boots when he called out for her, again. When Evie called her over to the table, she wasted no time in getting there.

“I think he can see me this time, Ali.”

She smiled at Evie then looked down at Clay. The smile he tried to give her warmed her heart, she felt his forehead and smiled over the break from his fever. “I think you are right, Evie. How are you feeling, Clay?”

“You don’t want to know.”

She could feel the pain just talking cost him. “Let me get you some tea.”

She also grabbed the camphor oil for his lips. “This may sting, but it should help.” She rub the oil over his lips, sucking in her breath over the face he made as she put it on. “Sorry, take some tea, it might help.”

He gulped down the warm tea, she motioned for Evie to untie the ropes. They carefully took the rope away as he drank down another cup of the tea.

“Was I that bad?”

She looked at him in question before understanding that he meant the rope. “No, not at all, just didn’t want you to fall off the table.”

He looked around as if just realizing he laid in the kitchen. When she looked back at him, he smiled up at her and she swore it was the best thing she’d ever seen. “I love you, Clay Banyon.”

“You were my guiding light, Ali.”

She knew he meant the storm and she couldn’t help crying over having him here with her. “Mine as well, Clay, always mine.”

It was Evie that surprised them both when she piped in. “Like I told you, Clay, you’re Ali’s dark, tall and handsome cowboy.”

The End

**Meanwhile Back at the Ranch**  
**by**  
**Bridghid Parkinson**

Charlene's modern life hustle and bustle becomes the skirts and a bustle of a Wild West saloon girl. Wil can make her dreams come true.

<http://bridghidparkinson.blogspot.com>  
or <http://www.myspace.com/dbparkinson>

## **Meanwhile... Back at the Ranch**

**By  
Bridghid Parkinson**

The Twilight Marquee Theater retained the charm from when it originally started. The sconces on the wall were cleaned off and new light bulbs put in, but whether the lights complied with modern electrical code became a point of contention as the girls sat down. Making hasty note of the exits, the people situated themselves in the center seats, several rows away from the front.

The nagging sadness of her failed relationship ebbed as the loneliness gave way to a new sense of independence. *I want to enjoy a night out with friends, popcorn and chocolate!*

Charlene enjoyed the chance to soak in the environment of the old theater that she'd seen only in old photos.

The foam in the chairs smelled musty but even the stiff springs felt better than seats in modern theaters, which were hard and crowded. Charlene moved her cell phone to the sweater pocket just to make sure she didn't hit a speed dial key when she sat down. Settling into the chair, she looked around the walls.

This old theater would close its doors forever. Rumors from the City Council indicated efforts to have it declared a historic site with possible plans for renovating the theater to a stage for community stage productions and an auditorium. The theater management had to raise revenue to keep the doors open and specialty parties became a local feature. Not every theater could envelop the participants in an old movie atmosphere and for the weekly 'girl's night out', this was the perfect choice to go see an old movie.

During the opening frames and credits of the special feature, she saw a stagecoach, a horse and buggy, and a man riding down a long winding road on a horse.

Charlene flinched when the blue light came. She thought there were special lights coming up in the auditorium until the whole theater disappeared around her.

\* \* \* \*

*Every beautiful woman,  
Has a beautiful dream to follow.*

\* \* \* \*

Charlene first noticed her popcorn tasted odd.

When the light settled, she looked around and she now stood in the middle of a small field. The reason her popcorn tasted funny was that she now held a bucket of cracked corn chicken feed.

*Something isn't making sense here,* she thought.

She looked down at her dress. What caught her attention first were the boobs that were suddenly sticking out in front of her body like missiles. *Oh, God,* she thought, *I had never hoped to have a rack like this without plastic surgery.*

The dress felt tight around her waist but the long skirts hung full and lacy around her feet. The dress might be red but she couldn't be sure because all of the colors around her seemed strange. She felt her hair. Her short curls were gone and she had a sausage curl hairstyle piled on the top of her head, and hair-sprayed so hard it could have withstood a hurricane. She felt the tight corset that hugged every detail from under her arms to her waist. She discovered metal bindings sewn into a heavy fabric, with lace that barely covered her nipples. The costume felt comfortable, but it was snug, to say the least. *Lordy, if I sneeze, I will pop out of this outfit and there will be no secrets.*

She ran her hands over the skirt. She could feel the lacy, satin underskirts and from the feel on her legs, she knew she was bareback. She didn't even have a thong under the skirts but she could feel the strap from the bottom of the garter belt, down to the top band of the stockings on her leg.

"You better get cracking," the old black woman said from the porch. Charlene turned and found the enormous old house and a barn nearby with the sounds of horses and sheep. "We've got a heap more chores to do!"

She looked at the ground and there were chickens all around her pecking at the feed on the ground.

"Miss Laura's in a bad mood today," another woman said.

"Should I be worried?" Charlene asked.

“Oh, yeah! You can tell *she’s* new here!” several of the other women laughed. Everyone started clapping to a rhythm.

Charlene heard the guitar starting to pick up the rhythm with an old tin sounding, honky-tonk piano. Looking around the yard, she couldn’t see any musicians, but the girls sang around her.

-----

*Watch your mouth, don’t swear, and please sit up right!  
The customer likes a lady that’s bright!  
We start up the chores at the break of daylight!  
Those are Miss Laura’s Ranch rules!*

-----

*Dress like a lady when shopping downtown!  
Hold your head high and don’t wear a frown!  
Don’t worry your head with gossip in town!  
These are Miss Laura’s Ranch rules!*

-----

*Men come to find a special little thrill!  
We have to be sure that they get their fill!  
Then come back again, the gentleman will!  
These are Miss Laura’s Ranch rules!*

-----

Surrounded by all the singing women in old-time costumes like Charlene’s, they pushed her from one group to another. They wore layers of lace peeking out from under the skirts flaunted like an old style Vaudeville can-can show and they paired outfits with corsets, fishnet stockings and high heels. The women kicked up their heels and began singing about the ranch like it was an old barn dance.

Charlene didn’t know the words to the song, but just watched. She felt tempted to add a ‘Yee-ha!’ but restrained herself. The others finished scattering the chicken feed while they were singing and the women started pushing her to the front porch so she tossed the feed from her bucket and followed them to the steps.

The girls introduced Charlene to Miss Emaline, the middle-aged black woman who wore a crisp apron and a tightly buttoned dress. She rang the dinner bell on the front porch and started singing,

-----

*Talk to me, honey, and I’ll never tell!  
But follow her rules or you’re gonna catch hell!  
Come to the table when I ring the bell!  
These are Miss Laura’s Ranch rules!*



-----

*Mind your manners if the men talk to you!  
Say 'Yes, Sir and No Sir', 'Please' and 'Thank You'!  
But if you get rude, it's a day you'll rue!  
Follow Miss Laura's Ranch rules!*

-----

All of the music came to a discordant stop with the bang of the door on the front porch. An older woman came out wearing a saloon costume and dark makeup. She said flatly, "You will mind my rules or pack up your bags! We don't have time to sing and lolly-gag! We have work to do, or I'll be a nag! Follow my little Ranch Rules!"

She turned, walking back in the front door and everyone looked somber. Charlene thought how much fun that song could have been if she not stopped it, but even Miss Laura's own words were still in the beat of the original music.

Everyone quietly walked inside and Miss Emaline escorted the group of costumed women to the dining room.

\* \* \* \*

***Meanwhile... somewhere in California...***

\* \* \* \*

"Where's our steamed producer?" one man asked in the darkened screening room, a sushi buffet spread out on the table.

"The word is *esteemed*..." another man corrected.

"Not from what I saw this morning! Something in costuming really got him hot under the collar!"

A woman's voice cut in, "Don't know. Like, he doesn't walk in the door until the first frames roll."

"Yea... it's not like he hasn't seen this before!"

"Well, he sent Sushi for us... Hey, you are hoarding the eel?"

"That is so revolting! How do you eat that stuff?" a second woman asked in disgust. She pulled out a stick of gum from her purse and began chewing.

"I put it in my mouth and chew, baby."

The lights went down in the studio.

"Roll it," a voice said and the door closed blocking light in the screening room.

"Told ya," the other woman said.

\* \* \* \*

***Meanwhile... Back at the Ranch...***

\* \* \* \*

Miss Emaline gathered the girls around the breakfast table and I waited for the others before Charlene took an empty seat. She folded her hands and looked around the table to make sure everyone, including me, followed suit. "Dear Lord, we thank you for another day. This is sacred work, whether or not the townsfolk believe it, and we hope you will guide us along the way. Amen."

"Amen," everyone said in unison.

"Did you girls get everything explained to Charlene?" Miss Laura asked as she pointed squarely at me.

"That's what we were doing when you came out." One of the women said, with a tone of disappointment in her voice.

"We still have to get the work done, and all the fancy singin' and playin' isn't gonna happen on my time!" All of the women could see her expression as she sat at the head of the table. She didn't kid around but she seemed to be enjoying the early morning conversation. Miss Laura didn't present herself as harsh, or unfair, but she did have a strong business side. Charlene contemplated the older woman and it struck her that Laura seemed lonely and stuck in her work.

"Yes, Ma'am!" several women said.

"Who is going to the saloon today?"

"Me, Charlene and Kitty," one girl answered.

"Charlene, Kitty and I will go to the saloon," Miss Laura corrected. "Please, Tillie, speak properly. Charlene, you need a chemise under that corset becuz any man lookin' at you could see all the way down to China!"

"Miss Laura? Wouldn't that help?" one girl asked.

"No, ma'am, it will not!" Miss Laura said flatly. "You want him to hand you cash before he gets a peek like that! Why buy the cow, if you can get the milk for free?"

"This is why we're here!" a perky little voice picked up from the end of the dining table. "Why buy the whole load of bull, when all you want is a little beef?"

Charlene didn't see the girl that said it, but everyone giggled.

"Sarah, that smart mouth has earned you the privilege of washing the linens today... alone." Miss Laura said flatly. "Watch your mouth! I'm glad a customer didn't hear somethin' that foul!"

"Yes, ma'am," she answered softly. The other women at the table remained quiet.

Charlene kept her head down and looked at the food on her plate. Scrambled eggs, potatoes, bacon and biscuits were piled high but all

of the color looked off. In fact, all around her the colors looked like an old dull comic book or an old colorized movie. Charlene lifted a forkful of eggs to her mouth, but stopped when she tasted the heavy salt and pepper seasoning.

“Is something wrong with the food Miss Charlene?” Miss Laura challenged.

She looked up, but one of the girls gave her a wide-eyed stare and a barely perceptible shake of her head.

Charlene quickly swallowed. “No ma’am,” she answered.

She continued to eat, but all of the food bore the overwhelming salt and pepper seasoning. The biscuit dripped with butter, it brought back memories of her grandmother that made her smile. She ate, but she could not finish the potatoes.

“Alright... no time for lolly-gaggin’ this morning. I expect all the linens changed and the rooms clean by ten o’clock when I inspect. We’ll come out and finish the rest of the house. After lunch, you three girls will go over to Doc’s. We have three rooms because it’s Friday.”

“Yes, Ma’am!” everyone said, almost in unison.

“Well, go on... get busy.” Miss Laura had her hands on her hips but she smiled.

In a low tone, the girls started singing another song to pass the time while they worked at shaking out the rugs and neatening the upstairs rooms.

-----

*Gotta hustle, gotta bustle,  
Gotta get the chores done  
Gotta wring, gotta swing  
Gonna have a li'l fun*

-----

*I left my Ma and Pa  
And I headed out West  
Doing chores all day  
But the nights are the best*

-----

Charlene didn’t hear the other verses after she went into the bedroom they pointed her to, she looked around the room and found an enormous bed fluffed up with a feather mattress over two thick mattresses. The old wood and iron headboard had an old time curl in the bars that reminded me of an old garden gate. All of the dark wood glistened with high luster reddish polish. She wiped off the small

crystal figurines and perfume bottles. Squeezing the bulb of an old atomizer, she smiled when she saw it worked. Charlene playfully squeezed the bulb several times. It spritzed perfume into the room and a scent of roses drifted up. She replaced the bottle on the tiny lace doily and tidied the stack of linens.

In the corner of the room stood an old claw foot tub with a large stack of fresh towels and washrags. Somehow, she knew the men coming to ‘call’ were always given a bath.

She opened up the old armoire and found two dozen skirts and dresses, all old style with full skirts and ruffles, bustles and lace. On the bottom shelf sat a stack of corsets in several different colors and another stack of puffy sleeved chemises. Charlene slowly unlaced the corset she wore, and watched her reflection in the mirror. Although beautiful, her breasts seemed three times their normal size but it looked natural.

She pulled the chemise over her head and the garment had little puffy sleeves, but the top part stayed around the shoulders with a ribbon. The corset easily laced back into position and it did give just enough cleavage to inspire and keep a mound of breast peaking up at the top of chemise.

She finished cleaning up the room, putting fresh linens on the bed. Miss Laura complimented the work when she inspected and even noticed the fresh spray of perfume.

Everyone cleaned the front parlor, dining room and the hallways. Sadly, they didn’t sing but everyone got the work done quickly, although some of the girls hummed to themselves.

“Ladies!” The girls heard the holler from Miss Laura followed by a dainty bell. “We are starting a bit early this morning. We can’t govern what time the *rooster* rises.”

\* \* \* \*

*Working early never hurt a soul.*

*Sometimes...it can be fun!*

\* \* \* \*

Charlene walked to the foyer near the base of the stairs and found an older man with an old tattered hat in his hands and a long beard. He stood with a young man that looked like his son, and they wore their finest suits. He nudged the young man forward with a nod as the girls all gathered around him. The older man kept looking at Miss Laura, indicating that she would be his pick, until she winked at him.

The young man looked around the parlor and the front entrance

as everyone lined up. Like a kid in a candy store, he looked at every one of the dozen or more women that lined up in front of him. Charlene thought *He's cute, farm work has done him a few favors... he might be twenty years old, give or take a year.*

She was relieved when he picked one of the little redheaded women who said, "Come on, honey," as she grabbed his hand and led him upstairs. There was no mistaking the smile on his face.

The loud bell on the front porch rang for lunch and everyone gathered around the table for thick pork chops, rice with carrots, and a salad with big chunks of cucumber and tomato. A tall pitcher of tea stood in the middle of the table with a basket of biscuits. Miss Emaline led grace when the older man joined in at the table.

"Charlene you look nice, I like your choice of chemise with the lace. That eggshell white goes very well with the red skirt and corset." Miss Laura said.

"Thank you, Miss Laura," she answered. All of the colors still looked odd, white looked dull and the reds were the color of dried blood. She scraped the thick flour coating from the pork chop and ate quietly.

"There are some new books in the parlor that were brought by Mr. Hanson at the mercantile. I have a thank you card on my desk that you girls can sign for him," Miss Laura said.

"Yes, Ma'am," several people said in unison.

The meal passed quietly as Miss Laura talked about the new books in the parlor and the books she liked to read of poetry and short stories. Everyone talked politely with a customer present at the table and excused themselves at the end of the meal.

\* \* \* \*

*At the same time...*

*A train rolls through Nevada...*

\* \* \* \*

Wil lifted his head up, but his hat obscured his vision. He remembered the strange blue light during the screening, but held the hat down and kept his eyes closed.

"It's about time you woke up there, boy!" the voice of an old man sitting next to him sounded harsh.

Wil's head spun. He remembered the train rolling through Las Vegas. He thought about it carefully. *Wait. No. The train will break down outside of Vegas. One car jumps the track but it's OK.* He cracked his eyes open, the strange blue light disappeared and the train

lumbered along the track.

“You shouldn’t a drunk so much,” the voice next to him said. He spoke gently but obviously the man didn’t approve.

Wil’s stomach lurched and he thought, *God, I hate boats, trains and long car rides*. He pulled the old hat down to his lap and held it tight in his hands, his hair pressed flat against his head.

“You should read the Bible, sir! It warns of excesses in food and drink. I think the passage is in...,” the Reverend started thumbing through an old tattered Bible.

Wil’s mind reeled because he knew the man. The Reverend Taylor in the movie portrayed only a transient character to enlighten moral aspects for the hero in the movie. It was a play on the aspect of loving others, and a lesson for the brusque hero before he found the beautiful lead character in the saloon.

Wil looked up to the face he knew well. Steve Godowsky looked up in return but his eyes held no recognition. As Reverend Taylor, he knew his role well and he stuck to the script.

Wil wanted to scream, but he couldn’t make the words come out, *Damn it, Steve, it’s me... Wil!* Wil couldn’t act on his inclination to scream and Steve couldn’t help. His stomach turned again and he bolted to the back of the rail car and out the door. He leaned over the tiny rail protecting the doors between the train cars. He clutched the wall, praying for the train to stop and closing his eyes against the sight of the rail ties as they whizzed under his feet.

\* \* \* \*

*Wil needs to be careful...*

\* \* \* \*

The conductor tapped his shoulder and handed him a flask. “This may help,” he said. He unscrewed the top of the flask and the features of his old face showed genuine concern.

Wil didn’t ask any questions, but he tilted the flask and knocked back a large gulp of the liquid. At first, it felt like he had taken a swig of gasoline. The firewater he swallowed burned his mouth and throat and kept burning in his belly because he hadn’t eaten any food since breakfast. He sputtered against the rage of the fermented concoction in his belly and his windpipe felt like he snorted fire.

“Easy there young fella,” he said.

“Sure, easy for you to say,” Wil gasped for air against the fumes burning his nose and throat.

“You’ll be alright.” The rotund conductor checked his pocket

watch as if her were on a schedule for other duties. “You youngsters get used to it quick enough.”

*Youngsters... I am 33 years old and I feel like a teenager all over again.*

The old man smiled and screwed the lid on the flask tightly before tucking it into the pocket of his vest.

“I need to get some sleep,” Wil offered as an apology.

“The sleeper berths are behind us,” he answered.

*The back is good,* Wil thought, remembering the engine car would suffer when the train experienced the failure. The fire boy and the engineer would be fine.

No sooner did he enter the back car that Wil started hearing the horns of the train. He grabbed for a handrail inside the sleeper car when the brakes of the train applied in a long metallic screech.

The metallic ringing seemed to go on forever and his heart began pounding in his chest even though he knew what would happen. *Great dramatic effect, guys!* The train slowed to a mere five miles an hour—at best—and he knew about the damage to the rails but it doesn’t make it any easier knowing the outcome.

Thump! Clang!

His grip on the handrail saved him from tumbling to the floor like a couple other passengers. The noise at the front of the train sounded like a car wreck and the train stopped suddenly.

Wil watched the scene unfold and thought the stuntmen did great work because he worried whether this scene would be believable to a modern audience. He thought, *OK, I’m convinced.*

One woman lay on the floor, sobbing. Wil ran to her and saw the tears and fresh blood dripping from a cut near her hairline as he helped her to her feet. The nasty gash didn’t look like a latex prop and Wil swore under his breath because he could see this gash might require six to eight stitches and would likely result in an expensive claim. He pulled the handkerchief from his pocket.

“Thank you, sir,” the woman said as he helped her into one of the seats. She immediately accepted his handkerchief and began blotting near the cut.

“Careful!” Wil cautioned her he took the hanky and applied pressure to the wound. “You’ll want to get that looked at in town.”

“What town, sir?” she asked. “We are out in the middle of nowhere!” She fretted and seemed too melodramatic.

“There is a town not to far from here, I’m sure they have a

doctor. They'll send buggies and cars out here for everyone and they will have an inn in town where you can rest until the train is fixed," Wil answered.

Now that the train stopped and the commotion settled in the area, the passengers began leaving the cars and standing outside the train along the tracks. Several women worried about their hair or their baggage still on the train.

The conductor checked passengers along the back of the train to make sure of everyone's safety. "Yes, ma'am the front of the train came off the rail... I'm afraid it could be a couple days to fix it, but there is a town right up ahead." To another man he said, "Yes sir, our signalman is on it now, he's calling for cars and buggies. Oh! Yes sir! Some of the rich folks have a few cars out here already! Don't worry, the train company covers the hotel rooms."

\* \* \* \*

*Wil decides to walk to town...*

*However, Back at the Ranch...*

\* \* \* \*

As lunch wrapped up, a young man came to the door of the kitchen and signaled for Miss Laura's attention. With his hat in his hands, he appeared to be one of the workmen. "The car is started, Miss Laura, and ready when you are."

"Thank you, Jed." Miss Laura answered formally. "Charlene, Kitty and Caroline, are you ready to go to town?" Miss Laura asked after the meal ended.

"Yes ma'am." Charlene answered, but they spoke in unison.

"We ride with the top up when we are going to Docs, just in case that wasn't explained for you." Miss Laura said, while they walked to the front door. "We ride with the top down if we ride to the dry goods store and everyone is in nice suits and hats."

"Keeps the townsfolk tongues from waggin'," Kitty answered.

"Please do not speak ill of the townspeople!" Miss Laura said firmly. "They are good folks and they mean to make sure that the town doesn't have any bad influences. I have the same plan, even if they don't believe it. If any of them gets out of hand or gets rude with you, please ask them to come and speak with me."

Charlene appreciated having a way to dodge the town folk. It appeared that Miss Laura had things under control.

Miss Laura and Emaline passed out heavy lace shawls to cover their heads and shoulders. They were large triangles of fabric with



lacy ruffles at the edges, and if it were windy, it would hold their hair in place like an old style scarf. They walked outside into the hot sun and used the shawl to shade their eyes.

\* \* \* \*

*Charlene can't believe her eyes!*  
*Under the tree is a roadster...shining like a new penny!*

\* \* \* \*

Charlene saw the old black roadster with the dark convertible top firmly clamped into place. The polished paint had a layer of dust from the dirt road, but it sparkled in pristine condition. The exhaust smelled unusual, like an old kerosene heater. Charlene realized this wasn't a normal car. The driver seat was on the right side of the car and the controls looked strange until the pressure valve became visible and she realized that this was an old steam car.

The other girls had jumped into the back of the car and Charlene took the front seat. Miss Laura placed her closed parasol under the seat and raised her skirts so the old boots showed with fishnet stockings. "I need to make this quick. Mr. Thompson is waiting on me, but young Jacob gets plenty of time. He sure did want to get down to business, I even offered him lunch!"

Charlene had to laugh. "I know how some men have a difficult decision to make when offered a choice between food and sex."

"Don't worry, I had Miss Emaline make up plates for them and hold it in a low oven."

"Sometimes, the most dangerous place in the world is standing between a man and his food. Sometimes they need a snack, first." Charlene pointed out.

Miss Laura smiled and then she laughed. "I like the way you think, Charlene. If you take care of his basic needs, he'll pay more attention to you?"

"Yeah," she answered. "It could be more fun all around."

"Maybe we ought to have a Thursday night special and have a pancake dinner or a bar-b-que for everyone that comes."

They both giggled and Charlene stopped to think whether people used that kind of slang or language in the old days, but it likely wasn't something Miss Laura realized. "It sounds tasty to me," Charlene told her with a smile.

Charlene played along because she still didn't know what was happening. She had a theory that involved the bleach or super strength chemical fumes used to clean the old theater, combining with fifty-

year-old dust particles to produce hallucinations.

The drive wasn't long into town and they passed several old homes and farms before reaching the streets of town. Charlene looked out the window and saw the townspeople staring as they pulled onto the main road. Smiling men were on horses and they doffed their hats, but some dour women in plain clothes stopped the wood walkways with glares that could kill.

"Don't let them ladies get to you," Miss Laura explained. "They are jealous because we aren't afraid of a little fun, they just mistake it for morality. Reverend Dickson has them terrified of hellfire and brimstone if they even think about 'earthly pleasure', but that hasn't hurt my business a bit." She laughed in a way that made Charlene smile, too.

It did make sense that if the women in this town would loosen up just a tiny bit and enjoy themselves, then there would be little need for Miss Laura's ranch.

All three girls stayed respectfully quiet for the remainder of the ride to town.

\* \* \* \*

*Doc expects customers to keep the peace at the saloon. He has a shotgun to make sure it stays that way.*

\* \* \* \*

Miss Laura pulled the car onto a little side street next to a building with a painted sign for Doc's Saloon and Inn.

The girls kept the shawls tight around their heads as Miss Laura held open the door at the side entrance of the saloon. Kitty, once inside, let the shawl drop and it draped behind her, supported on her arms with the ruffle reaching almost to the floor. Charlene followed her lead and they walked into an open saloon full of men. There were a couple card games in progress on the tables by the door and several men just talking, but silence fell on the room when the girls entered. The men stopped and stared appreciatively.

An old style piano beat a happy toe-tapping tune but Charlene stared because she never thought she would see a real player piano in her life. She found the small upright piano against the back stairs. No one sat at the bench, but the keys still dipped rhythmically and a sheet of music scrolled through large spindles with large holes bored into the thick paper. The music sounded like an old ragtime piece that motivates everyone to tap their feet. The polished wood glistened and the keys sparkled like new. Charlene watched it, mesmerized by the

music and the keys that moved without help.

\* \* \* \*

*Miss Laura and the girls are unaware...*

*Trouble is brewing at the Sheriff's office!*

\* \* \* \*

"Reverend, we now have the Sheriff involved!" A prudish woman sat heavily on the hard bench in the Sheriff's office. The woman turned to face the sheriff again after greeting the Reverend. "There is a house of ill repute in our county and you mean to tell me you have no intention of stopping it?"

"Well, ma'am...I didn't say...I mean...it's the oldest profession in the world. Those young ladies are not hurting anyone." The Sheriff answered. "I've never had to break up a fight, they never pulled a gun or hurt a soul in this town."

Reverend stammered, too, "Mrs. Clark, the Bible teaches many things, including tolerance. I hoped the sermons would simply keep any of the townsfolk from visiting such an establishment. I did not intend for the townspeople to get riled and form a lynch mob! I thought that if there were no customers, these saloon girls would simply leave the community."

"They are sinning against God!" another woman exclaimed. The women gathered around angrily stomping their feet to their song.

-----

*They are doffing' their hats  
And then shuckin' their clothes  
It's a house built on sin  
They're going out in droves.  
So what are you gonna do?*

-----

*Laura plays Ms. Upstanding,  
But she's crossing the line  
Now it's behind closed doors  
But they do it all the time!  
Just what are you gonna do?*

-----

"Ladies, please..." the sheriff raised his hands to stop the foot stomping singing and commotion.

"They are pulling good men away from our community!" one woman screamed out. "We have *the milk* at home, and they are still goin' out for the *whipped cream*!"

The Reverend appeared nervous. “Now, ladies. We can discuss this further, let’s sit down. I hear that the train broke down outside of town and there are people that will need the help of good charitable, and God-fearing ladies to fix up a good meal at the church. I was just talking with another preacher that came here on the train. They will be in town long enough that I may be able to get him to do a sermon.”

The women stood staunchly, with their arms crossed. They were not going to be easily distracted from their mission.

\* \* \* \*

*Doc’s Saloon was crowded that day...*

\* \* \* \*

Charlene saw the large man approach in the corner of her eye, “Hello, beautiful. My name is Wil.”

Charlene spun around, almost startled, and found gorgeous blue eyes looking at her under a crown of soft, dark curls.

“Can I have a dance before I carry you away upstairs?”

She glanced over to the bar at Miss Laura who smiled. She held up folded bit of money to indicate that the man had paid, and she smiled to show that he paid well. She held three fingers up, to show that he wanted three hours, with all of the courtesies.

“I’d like that, sir,” she answered but the handsome eyes she saw seemed out of place. His athletic build made his clothes hug tightly against his chest and arms. He extended his hand to Charlene as they walked to the center of the saloon.

The bartender, with a thick full moustache, wore a collarless white shirt and a ladies thigh garter around his upper sleeve. He stopped the sheet music in the piano and inserted a new roll of music, which he started with a fresh crank.

Charlene simply decided to follow his lead. She had to tie her shawl around her waist because it fell when she reached up around his broad shoulders. She didn’t know what to do next but the most awkward parts of getting a man to bed were unnecessary. There was no doubt about what this man wanted.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

She felt a little awkward at first but once she got her clothing under control, she felt comfortable. “Charlene,” she answered.

“Pretty name,” he said as they started a waltz step.

Charlene discovered a mild smell of bourbon that he must have downed when he saw them walk in the door. She thought, *he’s a nice looking man, clean-shaven and possibly far from home*. She asked,

“Where are you from originally?”

“I started in Texas. I am on my way to California and made a stop for a few days in Nevada because the train broke down. I can do business and catch the next train.”

“What kind of business do you work in?”

“Entertaining,” he answered. “Have you seen any of the new fangled movies that have sound? Talkies?”

She almost laughed. “Yes, sir.”

“I work in the movie studios. I am what they call a producer in the movies.”

“That is fascinating work,” she told him. “I always thought when I was a little girl that I could be on stage, or in the fancy picture shows.” Charlene worked to turn up the charm. She had thought of being on stage since she was in school, but lost the fascination for acting and turned her talents to journalism. They chitchatted for a bit, but she couldn’t think of much to discuss.

\* \* \* \*

*Maybe she should try talking about the weather?*

\* \* \* \*

Wil explained that he had no girlfriend or wife because he worked too much, “...and I don’t normally pick up the first pretty face that walks through the door,” he said bashfully.

“I’m sure you could have your pick of girls in California,” she said to him. She honestly intended to be flattering. “Why would you want little ole me in this tiny country town?”

“You are a stunning lady,” he said. “When I figure out why I took a fancy to you, I’ll let you know.”

In one sense, she worried about the appearances. In the old movies, she never saw the saloon girls onscreen with the men in a sexual manner. Some western remakes hinted at stronger activity. The scene confused her because it seemed like a bunch of people playing dress up. Wil didn’t seem to be at home in the old west.

*Maybe, as soon as I hit the door to the room, I will be swept back into my reality,* Charlene thought.

She looked up into Wil’s hopeful eyes and her skin tingled. The first thought that crossed her mind was, *God, I hope not. Maybe I could enjoy his company because I need it.*

Even by modern standards, this man looked great. He stopped our dance and extended his arm to me for escort upstairs.

\* \* \* \*

*But Wil was thinking...*

\* \* \* \*

*Damnit, you dolt! She's going to think you are some kind of drunken redneck. You act like the lead hero in the movie!*

The bartender heard him gasp and toss down a whiskey, but the character with the thick moustache just pointed out the older woman said, "There's the lady you need to see first. They're from the No-Holes-Barred Ranch."

Wil had no doubt in his mind that these saloon girls were the classier versions of prostitutes in the old days, but Charlene, a stunning woman, seemed out of place. *Too Beautiful.*

He felt compelled to dance with her and knew that at least he wouldn't seem like a caveman. Without pretenses about what he planned to do, they enjoyed a bit of small talk. Wil tried to be honest with her about what he did for a living and the home he tried to reach when the train broke down.

*I hope she believes me,* he thought. He couldn't ignore the ache in his groin that started the instant he laid eyes on her and he felt relieved to see her smile as they turned to walk up the stairs.

\* \* \* \*

*Tillie and Kitty giggled...*

*The new girl got swept upstairs...*

\* \* \* \*

Wil extended his arm to Charlene. She started walking toward the stairway up to the hall of the rooms when Kitty held up three fingers and mouthed the words 'room three'.

Charlene found door three, marked in dark paint, and opened it, seeing a room like the bedrooms at the ranch.

When she closed and locked the door behind them, Wil spun her around and kissed her. His mouth first caressed her jaw but the kisses became more passionate and his arms drew her in as tight as the corset. It sucked the breath out of Charlene and left her knees weak with goose bumps over her upper arms. She had to pull back from his mouth, remembering Miss Laura's mandate that all of the men get full, scrub-down-everything baths before anything happens.

She pulled his buttons open and laid his clothes on the old leather chair. He watched intently. Even his plain under shorts looked like a simple pair of hand-stitched boxers that did nothing to hide his erection. As she untied the string and pulled them down, she got a surprise. His penis began to rise, but he had not reached his full

standing. The rod in front of him was perfect and thick.

To keep from staring, she led him over to the bathtub and found the tub already full with a layer of soapy bubbles. He stepped in and sat down.

“Ah... nice and hot,” he said.

\* \* \* \*

*Wil, something else in that room is hotter...*

*But, we think he's already noticed.*

\* \* \* \*

Charlene took one of the cleaning cloths with a bar of soap and started to lather it up. He let her wash him completely and even stood so that she could get his backside and groin. She used a bucket to rinse him with fresh water before he stepped out and let her nervously towel dry his body.

Wil finally grabbed her wrist gently to stop her.

The air hung thick with the tension. Charlene thought, *Maybe I'm not being a very convincing saloon girl, but the bubble might burst at any second and I will be back at the theater drooling on the shoulder of one of my friends.*

He pulled off the shawl and tugged on the sash around her waist, releasing the bow, and the ruffled skirts fell to the floor in one piece. Wil kissed her and then unlaced the corset but left the little garter belt in place with the fishnet stockings and heels. He lifted the chemise over her head and whispered, “Beautiful...”

The fresh air on her nipples let them immediately get hard and the skin around the nipple puckered. He bent down further and sucked on each one. His mouth felt hot against her skin and the entire breast felt warm.

Wil scooped her up and laid her gently on the bed. He kissed over parts of her body that she never thought could be so sensitive. He crawled into bed and he used his hand between her breasts to gently push her back down. He started sucking on the stiff nipples again before he spread her legs. He used his fingers to part the folds of skin, but he found her clit quickly.

Charlene's heart had been pounding ever since she locked the door and she wanted to enjoy every second.

Her arousal let his fingers push deep inside, while his thumb flicked over her clit. She felt brazen and if the men in this town only wanted a little fun, she could relax and give it.

Wil nudged the inside of her thigh with a mischievous grin.

Charlene spread her legs and let him explore with his tongue until the first little shudders came. "Come on, honey," she said. "You're going to get me weak before you get a chance to start."

"That's when it's good," he answered. He pushed his fingers deep, as if he had to prove how he refused to let go.

She knew his dick would be good, but her body didn't give her much of a chance to think about it when she felt an even stronger shudder catch her breath and she pushed her hips against his mouth. Her pulse pounded and she wanted his cock buried inside.

"Good," he wiped his mouth on the top sheet and came up to suck on her nipples again, kneeling between her legs with his penis just out of the reach of her hips.

Wrapping her legs up around his waist, she pulled him closer and he moaned as he thrust his hips forward and buried his cock slowly. The head pushed in and they both savored the way he filled her when he pushed in to the hilt.

"Oh, damn," he said. "Oh, that's sweet." He pulled back and pushed inside again, all the way to the top and then repeating the motion slowly several times.

\* \* \* \*

*Sugar is sweet.*

*She needs a little motion in the ocean.*

\* \* \* \*

"Faster...", she begged. Even in a simple missionary position, he rocked against her clit as he thrust forward. It wouldn't take much for her to lose control once they got a good rhythm.

"You ain't afraid to speak your mind, are you?" he asked, but he started with a quicker rhythm to his thrust.

"No, sir. Not a bit," she answered. "If I can enjoy it, so do you." She felt breathless and the sounds between them were wet and sticky. His gaze fixated on her breasts.

They settled into a good rhythm and a wave of pleasure rippled through her body every time he pushed to the top. She rolled her hips up to meet him, but she started to shake.

"Good," he said. "Keep going."

She reached around his ribs and pulled him a little closer so she could hang on while they rocked together. Her nipples brushed against the hair on his chest. She moaned when she first felt her orgasm starting to build, and then prayed he wouldn't stop or erupt too soon. *We're both getting sweaty*, she thought, *he could be close to*



*unloading.*

“Don’t stop,” he said. “I’ll make sure you make it.”

“Oh, yeah.”

He pushed against her faster until her backside started coming off the bed.

She couldn’t resist any more, her body tightened, and her legs stiffened straight up in the air as the pleasure rose. She let out a long moan.

“Don’t stop.” He kept thrusting with a rapid pace and each thrust sent waves through her as his cock pushed to the limits.

“Oh!” she whimpered.

Wil reared up, but he was trembling. He kept her legs held tight against his shoulders and pushed hard several times before he withdrew from her body, pushed between her thighs one last time. He erupted thick jets of cream over her belly with a grunt.

Neither of them moved until they started to calm down.

“God, I needed that,” he said. He turned and kissed her calf as his breathing slowed and he inspected the seam of the stockings on the back of her leg.

“I guess you did.” Charlene wiped a droplet from between her breasts with her fingertips and held it up. “Considering the yardage you got on that...”

“Let me grab you a towel.” He grinned and got up from the bed. Wil grabbed the washrag from the tub and a dry towel before taking a peak at his old watch on a chain in his pants pocket.

Charlene cleaned up and wondered, *Will my birth control pills work here? Is that going to make a difference?* He did have the courtesy to withdraw before erupting, but she speculated what might have happened in the old days. *Oh, I could have done that for hours.*

Wil reached over and unfastened the hook on her garter belt. “Humor me,” he said.

\* \* \* \*

*The other famous last words are, “Watch this!”*

\* \* \* \*

Wil paid for this time and in modern times, it could be dangerous, but she didn’t sense a threat in Wil. She understood, as if by instinct, she would have time to clean up the room and bathe when he finished. She didn’t have a restriction on the way she dressed or undressed for a customer once the door closed. Charlene tossed the two towels to the stand beside the bed. From the lusty look in his eyes, they’d need

them again before his time ended later this afternoon.

“So...Where are you from?” Wil asked.

“Near Philly,” she answered.

“Ahh...City girl,” he said. “What brings you here?”

“Umm...I got caught up in the lure of the silver screen,” she smiled, because she told the truth. “This is where I landed.”

“I guess it’s good that I ran into you!” Wil smiled and started taking off her shoes, unfastening the garter belt and slowly pulling off the stockings. He smiled as he watched her every movement.

Charlene enjoyed watching him, because it looked like he inspected every inch of her feet and legs. She thought he would ask for something weird, but he just continued to inspect her body. His hands were strong and she liked the way he stroked her legs. It felt almost as relaxing as a massage.

“Keep your legs straight for a second.” He held her legs just below the knees and spread her legs open and then pushed her knees back so that her body curled.

She wasn’t uncomfortable, though he pushed her body into odd positions that could be uncomfortable for sustained periods. “You aren’t gonna be trying something strange with me, are you?” she asked nervously. With her dance experience, she was still flexible, but she didn’t know what he wanted. He let one leg almost lay on the bed and raised the other over her head.

“No, I just love to watch a woman’s body in motion.” He smiled. “It’s just a fascination.”

“What else are you fascinated by?”

“Bouncing nipples.”

“And?”

“Tight wet muscles.” Wil reached down and pushed a finger back into her body.

Charlene could only respond with a moan.

*He knows all the right spots, too,* she thought. It wouldn’t take long for her to get into the mood again.

“I want to watch you,” he said.

“You are,” Charlene reminded him. She didn’t plan on holding back any of the moans, but he might want something a little more theatrical or adventurous.

His penis started to recover. He let her legs fall back to the bed, stopping only briefly as he lay down next to her. With a passionate kiss, he started using his fingers on her clit again.

She reached her hand into his hair and it didn't take her long to heat up. *I've heard the modern professional cautions about not getting involved with a client, but how does a working girl in the old days handle herself?* She focused on his mouth and his hands, ignoring the rest of the world. She needed this pleasure.

Wil pushed two fingers into her. She quickly responded, moaned, and finally said, "Easy."

"On top?" he asked. He shifted position so that he lay on his back and held his hands up to balance her.

"That's a good way to make sure I am quivering," she said. She climbed over his legs and straddled him, making a small shift in position so he slid deep inside.

"Good...that's exactly what I want." He reached up and brushed her nipples with his fingers.

Charlene felt the head reaching inside and all the way up to the top of her channel. He wanted her pleasure and in this position it would be easy, she'd have to be careful not to moan too loudly.

He did exactly what he said he would. He watched her intently, but rubbed her breasts when Charlene reacted to his touch.

She looked into his eyes as she rode up and down, watching the spark in his eyes. When she rocked her hips forward, she loved the electrical feeling as her clit pressed against his pubic bone, sending tingles through her body and she relished his hands on her breasts. She rolled her hips forward and crushed the small bud against him.

He began to react to her movements along his shaft. He let his gaze drift down to watch her hips move against him.

The heat started rising in Charlene and she began to shake. These were the feelings she could get lost in for hours, if he would just let her sit on this perch and ride.

"Good, keep squeezing. I'll tell you before I shoot that pistol."

\* \* \* \*

*Well... more famous last words...*

\* \* \* \*

"I could get into this for hours," Charlene admitted. She kept her hips rocking forward and she balanced herself between his hands on her breasts and her hands on his chest. The natural rolling motion gave her a constant pleasure.

"Sounds like a plan," Wil answered.

Her trembling caused her body to stiffen again. Charlene stopped for a moment to give her a chance to calm down and prolong their

pleasures or she'd peak soon.

Wil grunted and then whimpered. "Keep going...I'm getting into whatever it is you are doing. Something in your body is driving me wild."

She resumed her rolling movements with her hips. His body drove her wild also. Her breathing came in shorter pants along with the way he rolled her nipples, just hard enough to make both her breasts tingle.

"Good," he said. "Keep it going."

She needed to move faster because the sensations tingled inside her hips and were building fast.

"Oh, God, that's it."

She didn't expect a second orgasm but welcomed the rise in her pleasure. All of her pent up frustrations started to boil away and Charlene let out a groan to get it all out. Her body tightened against Wil as the orgasm built, but she found a way to keep bouncing over him and let his rod draw out the pleasures. "Here...I...come..."

"Good...oh, wet...tight."

"Pump...cock."

"Oh, God...yes...your hand...I'm close..."

"Me, too."

"I'll unload...wanna shoot...wanna spurt."

"Good. Pump." She kept bouncing.

"Oh, damn...I...spurt."

"Yes. Shoot it."

"Oh...God...hot...spurt...wet"

"Yes...hot...yes...yes...come..." Her body shook when the orgasm exploded. "Yes..."

Wil grabbed her hips and held her still when his hips arched upward to push his cock to the limits of her body and he spurt every drop deep into her body with a grunt.

When she collapsed on top of him, he welcomed her into his arms and stroked her damp skin. His touch felt comforting and secure.

"You needed that one didn't you?"

"God, yes...I couldn't stop."

He reached up and stroked her face. "Has anyone told you, that you are beautiful?"

Charlene immediately flustered. "Well...um, not like that." She looked up at him and his eyes drew her in, and would not let go.

"You are."

“Oh God, I’m sure I’m a sight, too...”

“That’s not what I am looking at.” His eyes still held her riveted. He lifted her chin and kissed her again, his tenderness held the same passion as the hungry kiss at the door.

\* \* \* \*

*Oh, my! Tillie has her ear to the door on Room Three!*

\* \* \* \*

“Shhh! I’m so jealous. I tried to catch his eye, but he only had eyes for Charlene from the second we walked in the door.” Tillie looked at Kitty. “From the sound of it, she ought to be paying him!”

“I’ll bet you he’s got money, too.” She answered. “He’ll pay some good money just to make sure she stays around.”

“He sure ain’t from around these parts.”

“I wonder...” Kitty started. “Do you think Miss Laura would go for the idea of getting a couple fellas out at the ranch? Maybe some of these local ladies will loosen up a night. They’d find out we ain’t hurting no one.”

“Yeah, but what would stop us from getting them to give us a hand while they are there? She’d have to build a separate house just to keep everyone apart.”

\* \* \* \*

*Meanwhile... Back at the Ranch...*

*Laura has some lovin’ of her own.*

\* \* \* \*

Miss Laura began singing to herself while she straightened her bedroom, but Ed Thompson waited with his hat in his hands, not even making a sound as he stood in the doorway. She sang out loud,

-----

*Oh, I wish I could run away  
From all the heart aches of yesterday  
Around the world I would roam  
But it’s a tough road to get home.*

*Under the bright stars we could dance,  
We have to give it another chance  
We’ll find a way to make it right.  
Just keep me in your heart tonight.*

-----

“What’s that song, yer singin’?” Ed asked. He’d waited patiently for her until she returned from town.

“Something I heard on the Victrola.” Laura closed the door before she walked up to Ed and wrapped her arms around his waist.

“I love when you start singing.” Ed smiled.

“Awe, ain’t nothin’. I just get a song stuck in my head. I’m not even sure those are the real words.”

Ed used his fingers under Laura’s chin to pull her gaze up to meet his. “I missed you.”

“You don’t need an excuse to come over here.” Laura looked flustered. “You and Jacob should come get breakfast with us, you know Emaline makes a stack of food.”

“Well, there is enough talk, you don’t need any more.”

“What?” Laura laughed. “So you would rather have everyone talking that you are just some kind of customer rather than almost part of the family?”

“Tell me you’ll finally marry me!” Ed declared.

“We’ve had this discussion before, Ed.”

“I love you, Laura.”

“Oh, God knows, I love you, too.” Laura kissed him and let her hands creep up the front of his shirt, unfastening buttons.

“I keep telling you, Ed...you need to shave that thing! It’s gettin’ long enough people are going to think you are Rip Van Thompson!” Miss Laura pulled Ed’s beard aside so she could undress him. “I could knit a sweater from this!”

“Nope! Not until you marry me, Laura,” he answered.

“Ed, you’d put me out of business!” she protested. “If I don’t work, I might loose my ranch. It’s been in the family and I can’t raise horses and chickens. I spent that time in New York thinking I should be a fancy actress and pay off this ranch, but all I did was waste my time! If I am going to embarrass myself, flat on my back, I could do it here and get better money!”

“It drives me nuts to think you are with all those other customers when you are *working*,” Ed admitted, but his tone reflected his disappointment.

“I don’t have any other customers! It’s been years! The only one that sees me out of costume is you! That’s why I have the girls here. I just can’t stop running this ranch, and I love my costumes.”

“Wait,” Ed interrupted. “You mean to tell me you don’t go near *any* other men?”

Laura doubted he heard a single word she said after declaring that she didn’t service customers that came to the ranch. “Oh, Ed! Heck,

No! I have my hands full with you!”

“Laura Masters! You mean to tell me that you have dang near every man in a three county radius waltzing up to your door at least once a month, maybe twice, and you don’t go near one of them?”

“No, I don’t.” Laura put her hands on her hips in frustration. “Are you calling me a liar?” she challenged.

“No!” Ed grinned but his gaze dropped to the top of the quilt over the bed. She had not given him an answer he expected but, he took pleasure in her words just the same.

“What’s on your mind?” she asked.

He took a deep breath but struggled to find the words. He finally looked up and admitted, “I thought you were gone when you went off to the big city. I thought it was silly to think you’d be still interested after all these years. After the glamour and flash of New York, I was sure you’d find a wealthy businessman. I even got married, but Jacob’s mamma died after he was born and I just never remarried. Given the nature of this business, I had an excuse to come see you over the last several years and I wouldn’t scare you off.”

“Ed, you *never* scared me off!”

“I toted around a couple bullfrogs in school that gave you a fright,” Ed laughed.

“We were kids, Ed. Bullfrogs were never something my Mamma would have allowed, so the only thing I could do was give a girly scream. I couldn’t tell you I would just as soon pet them, too.” Laura smiled. “That’s not very ladylike, now is it?”

“I know we did our share of hair pulling and punching...”

“Yes. Oh, and I would get mad, too.” Laura smiled, “Then my Daddy started telling me that’s how young fellas express their interest, and it was flattery.”

“So, I was never fooling you by playin’ some hotshot...”

“Not for a minute,” Laura giggled.

“Come here, I’ve got some lovin’ to lavish on you...”

“Are you going to shave that thing?” Laura asked.

“Are you marrying me?” Ed asked hopefully.

Laura laughed, but didn’t answer as she crawled into bed with Ed. The beard tickled and she’d become accustomed to seeing it. She did adore Edward Raymond Thompson but if she married him, she would have to give up her ranch.

Ed’s hands blazed trails over her back.

Laura shivered and said, “I love when you do that.”

"I would like to do it a lot more," Ed grinned.

"I can't give up my ranch."

"I didn't ask you to do that... I asked you to marry me."

*Ka-Bang!*

The door burst open with a crack that sounded like splintering wood. An angry old woman burst into the room, screaming and pointing her finger at the pair in the bed, "Whore!"

\* \* \* \*

*Down in the saloon...*

*Wil wants to take care of business all night long...*

\* \* \* \*

Wil's stomach growled, while he lay with Charlene curled against his body and he sheepishly admitted to skipping midday dinner. "Would you join me for a dinner in the saloon?"

"I wouldn't want to cut into your time," Charlene said.

"I don't care about the money!" he said. Wil jumped up from the bed, naked, and opened his wallet. He started slowly dropping gold coins on the table for her. "I would like to have your company for the remainder of the evening, if you please." He delighted to watch her reaction as he dropped another coin on the table.

Charlene nodded, while he kept dropping the coins one by one. "Oh, that would take care of it, sir!" and she held up her hand.

"I could use some food and we can come back here." Wil dropped two more coins on the table before he picked up his clothes and started to dress.

Charlene still held a wide-eyed expression. "I have to clean up the room," she explained.

"Nah, leave it," Wil told her. "We'll be back soon"

"I'm not allowed to do that." She took a breath and explained, "Miss Laura wants the rooms spotless if we aren't here."

"I understand," he answered.

\* \* \* \*

*Charlene had the room spiffed up quick...*

*Will liked watching her work in the buff!*

\* \* \* \*

Wil and Charlene finished dressing so they could get food downstairs, but a commotion started in the saloon. Several men were yelling and then she heard a pounding on her door.

"The sheriff is trying to shut down the No-Holes-Barred Ranch!" Kitty announced. "Jed is here to pick us up!"



Charlene panicked. She didn't know what to do, but she opened the door to Kitty who had a desperate look on her face.

Wil looked at them, "Go!" He pressed the coins into her hand insistently and told her, "I'll come out to the ranch, I'll find you...we can finish this later tonight."

She nodded and then reached up and kissed his cheek. Leaving him was very difficult. She felt bad that he didn't even get the time he originally paid to enjoy. He certainly didn't get enough time to cover the coins he'd just given her. If the Sheriff shut down the ranch, she won't see any money for a while. Charlene slipped the coins into a pocket on her skirt.

Running down the stairs behind Kitty, she threw the shawl over her head and ducked out the side entrance where Jed waited with the car. She hopped into the front seat again and they flew out to the ranch as fast as the steam engine could carry them.

People paraded on the front lawn and it looked like an angry lynch mob waving their fists at Miss Laura and Miss Emaline, while a deputy guarded the porch with a large shotgun.

"This still is private property!" the deputy stated loudly as the car pulled around the side of the house. "You have to leave!"

Jed pulled to the kitchen door and they found Miss Emaline running up to meet them. "You girls need to get your bags packed. This flared up a little bit ago, they even stormed into Miss Laura's room when she was spending time with Mr. Thompson. He and his son are in the parlor. The sheriff says he'll close the ranch."

"What are we going to do?" Charlene asked.

"Leave me your address and I'll send a telegram when it's clear." Miss Emaline volunteered. She began hugging each of the girls. "I'll call you back as soon as we get this straightened out."

Charlene went to her room. Everything finished before it had much of a chance to begin and, to her astonishment, she felt terribly disappointed. One customer paid well and he might come back, but she lost her only job, with no way back to the time and place she knew as home.

She changed clothes to one of the long dressy suits that hung in the armoire, but during that time, she started to cry. She put the coins from Wil in a small pocket on the suit.

Quickly, she scrawled a note for Miss Emaline to call her at Doc's if things changed. She propped the card on the dainty crystal perfume bottle and used the atomizer bulb to hold it in place. She

washed her face and braced herself for whatever she might find.

With a suitcase packed, she slowly walked downstairs.

At the bottom of the stairs, Miss Laura told her, "Honey, you look so striking in a suit!"

All of the girls could see that Laura wanted to cry, too.

When Miss Laura lifted her open arms, Charlene ran straight to her and hugged her like her mother.

"Hold your head up, honey. This is nobody's fault. Don't let these folks get you upset!" Miss Laura patted her on the back and said, "I'll give you a call as soon as anything changes."

Charlene picked up her hat from the top of the suitcase and it fit neatly on top of the fancy hairstyle with a ribbon to hold it under her chin.

"Chin up!" Miss Laura reminded the girls. "Don't let them think they have gotten to you! They haven't won the war. Jed will bring the car around and start taking you into town. We'll put you up at Doc's and the train will run again in a couple days, so if there is somewhere else you want to go. It's on me."

Everyone nodded, but no one could say what they were thinking. The lingering silence felt like the end of the road and now, none of the girls knew where she was going.

Charlene sat her suitcase on the front porch and balanced herself on the rail around the porch. The town folk finally left, but the deputy stood on the porch still lazily cradling his shotgun. Some of the other girls were ready, too, but no one said a word as they waited.

The low wavering notes of an old harmonica tune came through the open windows of the parlor. She could do nothing but wait for the car and listen to sad lingering notes.

\* \* \* \*

*Wil kept his promise to Charlene.*

*He found a buckboard and ran out to the Ranch!*

\* \* \* \*

Everyone turned with the sound of horse hooves beating out a rapid running rhythm on the main road. When a few of the girls looked up and groaned. Everyone seemed to think more people from town were arriving late to abuse the ranch folks a little more.

Charlene heard Kitty exclaim, "Oh my Goodness!" and the groans turned into gasps of wonder.

The deputy took up his gun and stood at the top of the steps.

Charlene looked up to see a farm wagon pull up, drawn by two

horses. The driver yelled, "Whoa!" and pulled back on the reins.

She couldn't see the driver at first because dust billowed up from the road. The wind cleared the dust and she looked out to see Wil climb out of the little flat buckboard. He walked over the front stepping-stones, tipping his hat when he finally saw her. "Charlene?" he asked with a smile.

She nodded her head and rose to her feet. The other girls started to give a few 'whoops' and 'woos' in jest. She just waved them off, but the screen door opened and closed.

Miss Laura and Miss Emaline came out to find the cause of the commotion. Mr. Thompson came out behind them, freshly shaved.

The deputy just stood on the step with a smile on his face. He didn't stop Wil from coming up, but his presence was enough to keep Wil from climbing the steps to the porch.

"I plan to steal you away, Miss Charlene, if you'll have me." Wil stood, holding his cowboy hat in his hands.

She nodded with a smile and walked toward the steps.

Miss Laura stopped her and gave her another hug, "Do you still want me to call you when this is over?"

Charlene nodded. "I'd like to hear and at least I could tell you the good news about why I wouldn't be coming back."

"You do that, honey. Follow your heart!" Laura looked like she was ready to cry again, but she was happy. "I finally did."

Jed came up and said, "I'll take your bag out to the wagon for you, Miss Charlene."

She nodded, looking to Wil and stepping down to meet him at the base of the steps.

The other girls began cheering. Wil scooped her off her feet and carried her to the front seat of the wagon.

\* \* \* \*

*Wil and Charlene leave the No-Holes-Barred Ranch...*

*And start to ride back into town.*

\* \* \* \*

Wil checked the horses before he climbed up and took the reins, "I don't know the exact details, but the train leaves again in a couple days for California. I hope you might be on it with me and maybe I can get home."

"I think we can do that." Charlene could only smile as he hoisted himself into the cart. She stared into his eyes before he smiled and flipped the reins to signal the horses forward. "Sounds like you've

had a hard time getting to California. I'm sorry 'bout the trouble."

"It would be tougher explaining how I got here," he laughed. "It looks like you're here for the next several days, that's good!"

Charlene giggled. "Everything does work out in the end."

The horses began a slower journey as they pulled through the main gate of the ranch. No frantic dashes, and no more rushing. It was a different life from the modern environment and she wondered why the modern times held advantages. The scenery around her reminded Charlene of the postcards of mid-west farms and ranches that sprawled on for miles. Her mind drifted far away and she still wasn't even sure what year she was living in now. The horse cart rambled on, but the silence with Wil felt comfortable.

*I'm stuck, but I'm in great company.* The slow rhythm of the horse rocked the wagon gently.

"What's your real address?" he asked.

"Charlene at P-T-C dot net," she answered.

"Oh, My God!" He turned to face her on the bench and gave her an astonished look. "You know what a cell phone is... don't you?"

It was her turn to be shocked. "Yes!"

"I knew there was something special about you!"

The blue light flashed over Charlene even as they rode toward town. The buggy disappeared in a flash and she reached out to grab Wil's arm, but he disappeared.

\* \* \* \*

*The End*

\* \* \* \*

*Hey! What happened to Happily Ever After?*

\* \* \* \*

Charlene sat up quickly and found she came back to the theater.

On the screen, a man in a hat and a woman in old costumes rode a farm buggy into a brilliant red sunset.

"Easy, girl!" she heard. "You fell asleep!"

"No... it was an old western..." Charlene tried to explain. "I was a saloon girl in an old western!"

Laughter resounded through the area where her friends sat.

"Get out of here!" one of the girls said.

"We just watched an old western!"

"Hot Nevada Trails... don't you remember the train wreck? You jumped a mile!"

"Oh, and the fella that she danced with in the bar? She took him

up to the hotel room but... oh, Lordy, I would have done him in a minute, too! I just wish the camera had gone behind that locked door! Whew! What a hottie...I bet he was hung like a horse! The other two girls listened at the door and they got a shock.”

Charlene sat up, but her head was still a little fuzzy. She could have dreamt the whole thing but she wasn't sure of what happened.

“Char, you just fell asleep!” Melanie had always been brutally honest with her and it seemed the truth was flashing right in front of her like a movie marquee but parts of the dream were too real.

“You have been working yourself way too hard!”

“No! I'm sure...I'm not lying!” she insisted. She continued to argue, but the girls teased her, saying she worked too many hours and just fell asleep during the movie.

Charlene prayed for some kind of proof to show the girls because it felt so real to her, including the scenes behind the locked door. She rubbed the heel of her hands over her brows to keep from grinding her makeup into her eyes when her cell phone started beeping in the sweater pocket. She reached for it but her change jingled when she pulled it out. The preview screen read, *'New Text Message'*.

Opening the phone, she accessed the Inbox. The girls groaned.

*Please tell me that wasn't a dream! -Wil*

Charlene had to smile. She pressed out the reply slowly. *No, we weren't dreaming. But, my boobs are back to normal.*

He answered quickly, *That's OK. My funny farm thinks I just fell asleep during the screening.*

*No, I know better.*

*How do you feel about California?*

*California? Good. Train? No.* Charlene pressed out her phone number. *Call me. Half hour?*

*Gladly,* he answered.

Charlene reached back into her pocket and pulled out the change. She found proof, but decided not to show anyone.

Among the coins were eight rough gold coins with eagles.

**The End**

**Castleblanca**  
**By**  
**Mae Powers**

Sila searches for her missing friend, but a strange ticket leaves her in a parallel realm, much like the alternate-world games she programs, only this place is very, very real.

<http://www.maepowers.com/>

**Castleblanca**  
**By**  
**Mae Powers**

Sila listened restlessly as the soft music from the old forties movie *Casablanca* filtered through her mind. She yawned. Not that she found the enticing movie boring, but she'd been up restless for several nights, worrying about her missing friend Samantha. The last she'd learned was that Samantha came to this theater to see *Casablanca* on the big screen before the old theater closed down permanently here in town.

It wasn't long before her mind wandered from watching the old flick, and her eyes suddenly became tired. She felt as if she were fighting sleep and invading dreams. As time went by, her eyelids became heavier. She felt a coldness creeping in on her system and everything around her started becoming layered with an unusual looking blue-violet fog. It soon enveloped her.

She became alert enough to know that her body was dissolving, or it felt like it. The old music played on, but the theater was no longer where she sat. Instead, the blue mist of film noir residue swirled over her, bringing her to some eerie, alternate realm.

She found herself sitting on the edge of a bed in this beautiful elegant bedroom with a silky, shiny blue gown laid out on the bed as if just for her. She sat there looking over the room. It didn't look like a regular bedroom or any fancy hotel that she'd been to. Not that she'd been to a lot. It looked like a room in a castle. Not that it made any sense to her either. She finally got her bearings and stood up. However, before she could take another step, a door crept open.

She jerked her head automatically and turned her body in the direction that the sounds came from. The main door to the large room swung open. A strawberry-blonde haired woman with blue eyes and

dressed in a sparkling black velvet gown stood momentarily in the doorway. Samantha entered the bedroom with a tall man dressed in a white evening jacket and black slacks coming hurriedly in behind her.

Sila glanced at her friend in disbelief, not sure if the dream state was real or not. "Samantha, tell me you're part of my dream."

The strange man quickly shut the door as Samantha ran over and flung her arms around Sila. "Oh gosh I'm so glad to see you, Sila. The last two weeks have been crazy."

"Two weeks? You've been missing since early Friday afternoon. It's been nearly two days, Sammie." Sila exclaimed as she tried to balance herself, while hugging her friend.

Samantha was nearly as tall as she was flat-footed, but in the heels, the woman wore to match the evening gown, Sammie matched Sila's five feet eight inches of height. Still, the younger woman almost unbalanced Sila with the fierce hugs.

"Not in this universe."

"Who is your friend, Samantha?"

At the deep voice, Samantha and she broke apart. That's when Sila finally took stock of the man that came in behind her friend. Her lips trembled and she knew her eyes slightly widened with the surprise she felt inwardly, upon viewing the incredibly handsome man. *Incredibly fucking sexy*, she added to herself.

He looked like a taller, more stalwart version of the screen stage idol, Humphrey Bogart, with the suave good looks, and muscle bound, tall body deliciously clothed in an elegant shirt, a white dinner jacket, and black slacks. His feet were encased in a shiny pair of shoes, while his dark brown hair was softly slicked down, making him look like a cross between a vampire and a hard-boiled detective from the 1940s film noir movies.

"Oh," Samantha finally stopped suffocating her and broke away. "This is Sila, my closest friend. She's from the alternate world I told you I came from, Ryk." Samantha pulled Sila closer to the man. Up close she could see his ears were slightly pointed and his brows thick. And those luscious dark eyes of his were compelling her to think highly immoral thoughts. "Sila, this is my host and owner of Castleblanca, Count Ryk deBlanca.

"Welcome to Castleblanca," she nearly creamed when he spoke in that eerily beautiful hard voice. His full mouth with its slight jagged scar tilted into a half snarl, a half smile. "It is my pleasure to meet you finally, Sila. Samantha has told me and my comrade Lazzus



quite a bit about you. She never mentioned how stunningly beautiful you are.”

“We don’t have time for your flirting right now, Ryk. We need to fill Sila in on what’s happening before the Demoniacs get here. And I have to change and get back to the piano before they do. Now go away and find Laz. Give me some time with my friend, while you and he decide the best way to get out of here tonight, like you promised.”

“You are too dramatic, sweet Samantha, but I will take care of you and your paramour, my friend, just as promised. It’s a pleasure, I’ll see you later, kid.” Ryk smiled in Sila’s direction and she could have sworn she saw a set of gleaming incisors, which his delicious tongue flecked teasingly. Then he turned away and quickly left the room.

Sila flopped back down on the bed. “What the hell is going on, Samantha.”

Samantha chuckled. “You should be use to alternate worlds, Sila. You’re a gaming geek and programmer. I got stuck in this realm after visiting that theater we were going to. The ticket felt warm in my hand and I was awake when this blue fog just enclosed me and I wound up here in this room. Of course it is Ryk’s room, and he’s sharing one with Laz right now, but it makes sense I’d go into Bogart’s or the main character’s bedroom. But I would have liked ending up in Laz’s since that was the character I drooled over the most in the movie...”

“Stop rattling, Samantha!” she hated raising her voice to her friend, but sometimes Sammie could just rattle on indefinitely. “Those tickets or that theatre takes people to movieland? This is a castle, not Rick’s Bar and Grill.”

“Rick had a classy club in the movie. Count Ryk has an upscale resort here, kind of a bed and breakfast complete with an elegant film noir dinner club. I am his piano player.” Samantha went on talking as if she wasn’t offended by the curt yell. “I wound up in his room after I was whisked away, but Lazzus was here visiting him at the time and I couldn’t help but fall in love with Laz. Now my poor Laz has to be hidden away from the Demoniacs who are the enemies of the Vamplars and rule this beautifully morbid world, well most of it.”

When Samantha stopped to breath, Sila jumped up and put a hand over her friend’s mouth. “Ok, take a break girl. So, you’re telling me this is a land taken over by some bad group called the Demoniacs and this Lazzus or Laz, is like a resistance fighter or something and Count

Ryk a Bogie-look-alike, sorta, is trying to help Lazzus get away before these Demoniacs catch on to who Laz is or what he's doing? Do we have that right?"

Samantha shook her head. "I promise to speak slower and less...if ya take...oh much better."

Sila laughed as she removed her hand and Samantha sat down with her. "Ok go slow. I just got here. How can it be two weeks here and only two days back home gone by?"

"The alternate time realty thingy. It's a good thing I beta test your games, kid."

"Hey I'm older than you, why does everyone call me kid?"

"You look like a sweet kid with that impish face of yours and that short bob you always have your hair cut in."

Sila ran a hand through her almost white blonde hair. Though near thirty, she guess she did have an impish, almost kid look to her. Though not as full figured as her friend, she still had enough that showed she was a full-grown woman.

"Well never mind, how come he was escorting you here then, and not the guy you are interested in?"

"Half-human, half vamps like Ryk have good hearing. Laz was in the room already, Ryk and I were on our way to meet him when he said he heard someone in here. This room is down the hall from Laz's."

"Oh." Sila blinked her eyes, trying to take it all in. "So, if Ryk's a vampire half-breed, what is Laz?"

"Oh he's as human as you and I...well ok he's part Demoniac. The Demoniacs are trying to take over this free part of their realm, but Laz is a resistance leader. He and Ryk, on the sly, have been trying to find ways to stop them from taking over. You got to admit, this is no worse than the games you write and program for a living."

Sila had to agree with that point. If she could make wild alternate world holographic games that seemed real, why couldn't there be real alternate type worlds not so far off from the games she programmed?

"So they want to imprison Laz for leading a resistance group. I suppose, you have to get him out of this realm or town? Like Laszlo in the movie."

"Oh no, it's Ryk I need to get out, but he won't go. Ryk and Laz are cousins. Laz gets their anger up, but they can't imprison him cause it's against their international laws."

Sila sat on the bed. “Ok this is getting a bit convoluted. Don’t you want to go home?”

“I couldn’t leave Laz, and I have no one, other than you and a few other good friends. And they went to the movie theater too. Did something happen to Keely or Alena?”

“Keely is the one that reminded me you came here, I’ve been looking for you all over. Alena hasn’t called me come to think of it, but Keely said she was with her the other day so I don’t think either one of them are missing.”

Samantha joined her on the bed, her face becoming serious. “I’m happy here with Laz. I am glad you got pelted into here. Maybe you can convince Ryk to get out of town. I don’t know how you’d get him back to our world...”

“Hold on a minute!” Sila stopped her quickly. “I thought I was dreaming at first. I finally realize it’s all real and I want to get you out of here. There has to be some way. And why is it these pesky Demoniacs are after Ryk and not Laz, since he is your resistance fighter?”

“Cause Laz is just a figure head. It’s Ryk who does the real stuff. He uses Castleblanca to hide the beings escaping the Demoniacs. Castleblanca is on the skirts of both countries of the Vamplar and the Demoniac Lands. The Demoniacs have won land in a few skirmishes that is very close to Ryk’s castle. Castleblanca could fall into their hands if they win more skirmishes. We have to find a way to stop them or get Ryk out of here. Laz and I can’t get him to go. Lazzus and I would take care of the castle, but Ryk’s been here for ages so he’s comfortable here.”

“Sounds like a stubborn cuss if I ever saw one.” She pointed to the gown on the bed. “So are you finally getting your wish to play the piano and sing then? You played around with it during our karaoke nights with the old gang and could actually play the piano decently.”

Samantha pulled the gown towards her. “Yeah and I get to wear these lovely things. Neat, hun. It’s still so surreal to me, Sila. I do occasionally miss home, but Laz has stolen my heart and I don’t think I could ever leave him.”

“That bad, huh?” Sila bit her lip. “I’m happy for you, but you are sorely missed. That is lovely. Have you considered how to get back or get Ryk out then?”

Samantha gave her the oddest look. "I knew you were attracted to him the instant you two saw each other. Ryk keeps saying how lucky Laz is, and wished he'd met me first. I think he likes you, kiddo."

"He is a hottie...oh, stop that. We've got to both wake up and get you out of this place, Sammie. You can't really want to stay here."

Sammie got up and paced, but before she said anything, the door opened and two men entered. One she recognized as Ryk, still in the white dinner jacket, and the other dressed in a similar jacket, only black, and he had lighter hair. He reminded Sila of Laszlo from Casablanca. The man went immediately to Samantha and her friend's face brightened immediately as soon as the dark-blond haired man walked into the room.

They briefly touched hands, their gazes were only for each other. Sila darted a look at Count Ryk deBlanca. The man, no the vamp, oozed instant sex appeal and more. Her heart thumped and her most private parts were damp with sudden need. She'd never wanted a male so spontaneously in all her life. She needed to get her and Sammie out of this realm before she made a fool of herself.

"You are needed down stairs to sing and key the piano. You've got to play it again, Sammie." Ryk said.

"The Demon Lords can't think straight with you in the room." The blond said then looked over to Sila. "I'm Lazzus, but my friends call me Laz. Sammie told me a lot about you."

"Well I'm glad to meet her dream-boat." Sila got up and moved to take the hand he held out to her. She shook it readily. She could tell right away that the two really were in love with each other. She almost sighed, wishing she could find such instant love.

She looked over at Ryk who couldn't keep his eyes off her. Sammie broke the tension in the room when she suddenly let out a cry of "eureka."

"What, my love?" Laz said.

"I figured out how to get Ryk out of here."

Ryk groaned, Sila rolled her eyes upwards and Laz's face brightened.

"Oh that's great, Sammie, tell us how. Ryk filled me in about your friend being here. However she might want to change if she's coming down to join us for dinner."

Sila felt only slightly self-conscious in her denim jeans, slouchy blue sweater, and old sneakers. "Hey, I didn't know that of all the Vodka bars in the entire world I'd come into this wild place, so I

didn't expect to be staying for a fancy dinner and drinks. Although, right now I could use one."

As she flopped on the big bed, Ryk went over to a nightstand to pick up a black and silver flask. From the container, he poured a dark plum colored liquid into a clear crystal wine glass. "I'll get that for her and help her to get ready. You two go entertain the guests."

"Shortly, Ryk," Laz said. "Sammie tell us how we can get Ryk out."

"Well, by the tickets I think. If they brought me and Sila here, perhaps they could take two of us back." Sila said. "Mine's in that top drawer there. We can figure this out further after the floor show, Laz."

Laz held his arm out to her. "You're brilliant, my sweet. Come on, we can't keep the guests waiting."

After the two left, Sila shook her head. "Those two were made for each other."

"Yeah they are both a couple of ditzes."

She did a double take as he sat on the bed next to her. "What's that suppose to mean. She is a bit of an air head, and they did act as if we weren't in the room part of the time, and they thought we were...You really don't look like Bogie all that much, come to think of it." She wasn't sure why she blurted that out. Perhaps she was just nervous around this film noir hottie look alike. "Do you always stare at women you've just met so intensely? And are you really a vampire?"

He flashed a big smile and the pointed teeth were all the answer she really needed. "A half-vamplng, my dear. I make you as hot as you make me. I also wouldn't mind getting out of here, if there really is another world outside this one."

Her eyes widened. "You really want to leave? She said you didn't."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I let the two think that. I've been fighting the Demoniacs for a couple of hundred years, it gets tiresome. Still, if Samantha hadn't shown up out of the blue, I wouldn't have met you. Do you believe in love at first bite, er site, Sila? I think I do. I didn't ever think about really, leaving forever until a few minutes ago, when I first sat eyes on you. Of course, right now we're in a bedroom all by ourselves and there's more we could be doing, don't you think?"

Sila nibbled on her bottom lip. Damn this evening wasn't making sense, but here she was, alone with an incredibly sexy paranormal

male and his hypnotic sexuality was taking a toll on her libido. She wanted him and that's all she could think of at this minute. She groaned and threw her arms around his neck.

"Oh shut up and kiss me. Dream or real, I'm not letting this opportunity pass me by."

"Good," he chuckled and pulled her further into his arms.

His lips came down over her trembling ones. He growled beneath his breath just before he deepened the kiss. With a low groan, she entwined her arms around his solid neck, responding hungrily to his kiss.

Then, his kiss deepened and he began to feed her hunger. He enfolded her closer into his powerful arms, shifting their positions around, so that they were more laying on the bed. The evening gown was soon tossed away from them. One arm around her kept her next to him, the other was free to touch her. His big hand leisurely caressed the backside length of Sila, investigating every inch of her. She vibrated with intense, gratifying pleasure, and pressed herself even closer against his firmness.

Then Ryk's powerful arms tightened further, and his lips were like sipping a sweet wine, tempting and tantalizing her palate, making her want more. The universe about her ceased to exist as his kiss exploded with blazing desire over her mouth. She clung to him, bursting with rapture at the intimate sensations he aroused in every inch of her body as he enticed her to explore an entirely new realm all their very own.

Without their lips ever parting, Ryk helped her out of her clothing. His own clothes were quickly removed with her help. Their hands explored each other further, igniting and increasing each other's desires. He shifted and moved between her thighs. As he half-knelt above her, his besotted gaze trailed down the full length of her generously rounded, firm curves, then back up to her beautiful face.

He let out a hoarse gasp at what he saw in her blue-grey, misty spheres. Her eyes reflected desire such as he had never seen before in any woman. He bent closer to her face and softly parted her lips. A cry of victory escaped him as she arched towards him, then he clasped her against his naked body.

Ryk lost what little sanity he had left and became totally engrossed in savoring the delights she offered. He felt the fire within her grow to match his own until they were equally ignited by passion and both of their desires mounted wildly.

Sila pressed his hard body as close to hers as possible, relishing every inch of his virile form. His hands seared her flesh as they explored every curve of her person. She cried out her need for him, returning his fiery embraces with heated passion. Ryk's large hands cupped her breasts, eager for the feel of them over and over again. She emitted further moans of pleasure, which enticed him to caress every part of her body more boldly. His head lowered to her breasts, kissing and stroking them with his sensuous lips. Sila reached up around him pressing his head further against her chest.

His hands and mouth traced tantalizing kisses and caresses over her abdomen and lower. "Never have I wanted to possess one such as you. You could be ten feet away and my body would be scorching with desire."

Her nails burrowed deeply into his wide shoulders as his head lowered over her most feminine parts. Sila let out a loud gasp as he brought her to electrifying heights. No man delighted in loving every inch of her body as he did now! Hell, she could not wait for him to possess her and fill his need within her. She wanted him!

"Come into me," she pleaded, nearly commanding him to do so.

Ryk needed no further prompting. Yet, he leisurely made his way back up to her body, feeling her sweat and agonize as she waited his coming into her. Never before did any woman so wantonly and deeply show her need of him. He needed to be inside her, filling every inch of her moistness!

Her hips arched against his, poising for his entrance and Ryk shuddered as he felt her boldly touching him, guiding him into her. He needed no guidance, but was enraptured at what her hands were doing to him. Her hands came about his buttocks, and he did not hesitate about driving deeply within her.

She cried out frantically, though not in pain, as his movements were wild and firm above her and she met his every thrust with equal fervor. Sila clung to him as tremendous waves of pleasure seared through her and she felt as if he were a shooting star raging fiercely within every part of her body.

His head came down beside her and she teased his neck with her warm tongue, trailing hot wet kisses up to his left ear. Cries of mixed delight emanated from him, mingling with her own as her touch caused him to soar to ecstatic bliss. He knew he could hold back no longer and felt her own yearning for completeness with him.

He once more began unleashing kisses on her neck, her face, and her shoulders. His hands cupped her breasts. Sila arched against him. Ryk groaned as her hands slid up and down his body, inflaming him with her touch and her heated responses. His hands explored her more boldly and he could feel her perspire mingling with the drops of water still left on her body. His left hand gently, but firmly stayed caressing her right breast as his other hand made its way down over her sleek body.

When his hand rested on her private parts, he heard her utter heated words of encouragement. He kissed her deeply again, then once more trailed kisses over her neck and shoulders, trailing down to the hollow between her large breast. Aroused even further by her movements beneath him, he slid down her length, kissing every part of her upturned, desirable form. Both his hands and mouth began to delve towards her lower regions, igniting uncontrollable fires within her. Her hips arched against him and she cried out his name, begging for his nearness.

Ryk slowly trailed upwards, touching her with his hands, his lips, and his tongue. For a moment he pulled back to look deeply into her misty grey eyes. Within them he saw a desire so fierce, that it equaled what he felt. He shivered intensely, then groaned at the invitation he felt her sending out to him. His body came back down to hers. His mouth bore more heavily over hers. His hands once more explored every inch of her, and he shivered as he felt her open up completely to him. Sila's supple legs moved up around his hips. She arched against him, readying for his entrance. Her nails dug deeply into his buttocks as he pressed down over her.

Sila cried out his name as he delved his manhood fully into her moist, inner depths. She moved her legs higher up, allowing him more ease within her. His hips pressed more firmly against her and she felt him shaking almost uncontrollably above her. She brought his head down over hers, probing her tongue deeply into his mouth, enticing him further with her wanton response. Ryk's senses were now almost beyond coherency. His lips bruised hers with burning hunger, as his movements above her increased rapidly.

He called out his love for her, and his need to be complete with her. Though his movements were now more powerful within her, she felt no hurt, only extremely wild, wonderful pleasure. Their bodies shuddered in unison as they felt the waves of flaming rapture wash



over them. The waves flashed higher and higher, until they were washed away to the stars and beyond.

Sila screamed out her burning desires, begging him to bring her to completion with him. Ryk moved more fiercely above her. His head came up and then back down, and he felt as if the world around him were about to explode! A feeling of unity began surging forth from the two of them. It was as if all around them ceased to exist, and nothing lived about them, save their explosive desires!

Then they both shuddered violently against each other, until with a final, bursting bout of pleasure they hit their zenith with universally shattering sensations! Ryk grasped her to him as the final waves of pleasure washed over them. His mouth covered hers deeply and thoroughly once more.

Gently, he brought her back down to the world about them, and softly enfolded her within his arms. His legs stretched around hers, keeping her tightly embraced within the circle of his arms. He pressed her tired head against his wide chest as he turned to cuddle her close. Tenderly he stroked her hair, until she eased against him. He smiled to himself as he heard a deep sigh of contentment escape her, followed moments later by her deep breathing. Her head drooped further against his chest, until she lay slumbering next to him. The contentment of her dozing off brought within him a deep peace. Ryk pulled part of the bed coverings over them, and then minutes later, he dozed off.

Sila wasn't sure how long she lay sleeping beside him, but when she awoke, she found herself still within his arms. One of her legs and arms lay hooked over his body. She turned her head upwards to find him staring down at her. One of his arms was about her, the other behind his head.

"We should make an appearance downstairs, you know," he chuckled.

She grinned up at him. "You are fabulous. Let's take a quick bath and dress. Then you can show me all over Castleblanca. I still feel like it's all a dream in some ways. Except for what just happened between us."

"I feel the same, Sila. I'm not sorry you popped into my life though. I felt an instant connection with you the minute we first met. Tell me that you felt it too."

She nodded. "I did. It's just so uncanny, I thought it must be a dream in reality. But in fact, your lovemaking is so very erotically real."

He leaned over and gave her a quick kiss. "I think this is going to be the beginning of a very beautiful and long relationship."

She gave him a quick hug. "I think I like the sound of that."

\* \* \* \*

Sila washed up quickly by herself, since Ryk threw his clothes on and left the room; he still bunked with Laz and had his other clothing there. After drying off and taking care of necessities, she readied herself in the gown that once laid on the bed. She twirled in front of the full-length mirror, liking the way the shimmering dark blue colored gown fit over her, as if it were made for her body.

She found some sandals to match then pulled her hair back with a clip. Just as she put on the final touch, some one knocked on the outer side of the bedroom door. She went to open it. Ryk stood there waiting to escort her down the stairs.

"You look quite beautiful, Sila. Shall we go to the lounge?"

She nodded, taking his proffered arm. Ryk led her down the beautiful grand staircase which went down to the huge castle foyer. Then from there, he took her to another room. Four huge French-patio style windows, covered by shiny white curtains that went from ceiling to floor, dominated the dreamy-like lounge. A small crowd mingled around the dinner lounge.

About thirty tables were situated around the music-filled room. Some people or beings sat at the tables talking, drinking or eating, or a combination of all. While others were on the dance floor moving to a slow tune played by Samantha on the piano. The whole affair was something out of a classy 1940s film noir movie, albeit a mixed up one.

The closer she looked, she noticed that indeed there were other beings here. Like a Frankenstein wannabe dressed in a tuxedo, non-ugly witches in moon symbolized gowns, and tiny-winged creatures wearing bright red jumpsuits. There were others of various shapes and sizes and clothing. They reminded her of some of the creatures and beings she'd been programming and drawing for years.

Just like the decor from the movie, Castleblanca's lounge area reminded her of the elegant club. Sammie played on a black piano, where a small group stood gathered. Her soft voice rang out sweetly with the tune, "As Time Rolls On."

Ryk led her over to the bar near the piano. Sammie smiled at her as Ryk left Sila to go tend to his guests. She thought him so handsome and he'd pleased her so much earlier. But as the reality of being in a weird reality finally sunk in on her, she wondered if she could stay here with him..

What were they all to do then? Could the tickets indeed take them back to her world? She ordered a drink from the bartender as she pondered her thoughts and questions. The movie theater must have been magical somehow, the different realities joined together there, or doorways were opened when a film was played and someone receptive to an alternate world could get through a mystical gateway or something like that. It's was too much like something she and her friends at Mystic Realms Gaming would think of. So how could she use her knowledge to help Ryk, Sammie, and Laz?

She glanced around the room, and viewed all the beings and creatures carefully. She saw demon-looking creatures, but any of them could be the Demoniacs that the others spoke of tonight. If she were back home, she'd be programming something to happen right about now that would make the player jump and start thinking or doing things.

She chuckled as she looked at everyone again. Then she saw Ryk looking at her intently and his face became more familiar. He reminded her of the projectionist she'd seen lurking around the theater. And Laz reminded her of the ticket booth guy. Sammie liked old movies and always was trying to get her to make a film noir type game played in a holographic environment.

Holographic rooms were not unheard of and she knew slightly how to program those, but was still a computer person. Where had she seen Laz's and Ryk's faces before?

That thought made her become on her guard. She chuckled suddenly. At the gamers' convention on the other side of town last weekend? They were in a booth trying to pitch a new game. Some movie creatures or something. She'd briefly gone by the demo to check it out. She'd told Sammie that it needed something.

Had the two men and Sammie got together to get her attention and input for this alternate reality game? Sammie knew other programmers and Sila thought the woman dated one at one time, but she hadn't met the person.

She turned her attention to Sammie and Laz, where both were watching her intently though they pretended they didn't. She put her

drink down and walked across the room to Ryk. He finished talking to some one and then took her arm. She nodded toward the nearest French door. They went through the open door into a balmy night filled with stars.

“Ok, what’s going on?” she asked him once they stopped near a bench.

“I don’t think I know what you are talking about.”

She chuckled and watched his face intently. “You, Ryk, are more than just a gin joint keeper. Me thinks you also program games. And if this is a holographic game, you’ve got yourself one big money maker. And if it’s a backer you’re looking to help you, I’m in.”

His thick lips widened. “Sammie said you were slick and nothing much could be put past you.” He brought out a small device from his pocket and handed it to her.

Sila took the device from him. It looked like an odd sized TV remote, but with various buttons, she was not sure of what they did. “This isn’t from the 1940s, Ryk. Either I’m in an alternate reality or you’re a damn good programmer and I’m in a holographic setup of some kind. Which is it?”

He smiled devilishly at her. “Are you in a hurry to find out? There’s still more to come. Sammie said to let you adjust a little first. I think you could handle anything, Sila.”

His eyes twinkled with desire and she found herself growing hot again. “This, my dear, Ryk, is indeed going to be the beginning of a fantastic relationship in many ways.”

He drew nearer as she handed the remote out to him. “You can say that again, kiddo. So what do you think?”

She leaned her body in closer to his, liking the way his eyes sparkled up with desire. She was glad he didn’t pretend to be the real Bogie. But she did like this little adventure he and the others pulled her into.

Sila grinned mischievously, licking her lips. “Here working and playing with you, babe.”

**The End**

**Reel-to-Real**  
**By**  
**Mila Ramos**

A curious invitation mystifies acclaimed movie critic Moira Castle as she returns home to face hidden memories and answers she's not ready to hear or feel.

**(Part 1 of the Lianan Series)**

<http://milaramos.xbuild.com/>

**Reel-to-Real**  
**By**  
**Mila Ramos**

**Chapter One**

Five years ago, Moira Castle couldn't tell you her favorite color or the type of food she liked. She couldn't tell you much about anything personal. All she remembered was waking up in a hospital bed on a cold September morning. Nurses stated she had been found unconscious in the Saintark River and stayed that way for well over three years. The only traces of her former life were a battered journal she had in an old purse and a Celtic wedding band with blue sapphire diamonds forming half the infinity symbol. No other forms of identification were found at the time of recovery. Her life was a blank page but at least she knew her name.

She began searching for the life she once had, but without knowing the starting point, it was hard to see the end. During the time of her coma, nothing in the newspapers or the media showed acknowledgement of recognition.

After some time, she gave up and accepted the truth and made way in her new life. She hated the toll the unknown had on her heart. Each search that ended with no answers added new wounds and deeper fears. There were lonely nights ridden with insomnia, she stayed up and watched figures out the window. There were idle fantasies and hopes one of those shadows would materialize into something recognizable but it never happened that way.

Vulnerability in its particular malevolent form of solitude tore at the base of her soul. She tried to deny it, she even tried to suppress the loneliness and the pain, but it was useless. Every uncertain emotion of the unknown sent her heart into rages of tears as her mind screamed with grievance. And that is precisely what it was—injustice; it was unfair that her mind couldn't remember what her heart wished.

The tears came from the hidden placed inside a woman's heart

that saved fanciful dreams and tucked them away when there was nothing left to believe in. No woman should ever have to feel that in her life.

Those moments she looked down to the glittering, and exotically designed ring on her left hand. Who was it that shared the other half of the infinity ring? What type of man was he? Her only link revealed a past that was as mysterious as the circumstances that had led her to Castle Memorial Hospital. It took some time to officially re-establish herself within society.

A new last name, social security number, and driver's license was the first of many steps in the search of familiarity. Adopting the name Castle from the Castle Memorial Hospital, Moira referred to the doctors and nurses, the only people she knew, as her family and friends who had taken care of her. It was through this experience she made friends with Nurse Kasey Newton and Dr. Sean Macat.

Now, here she was, two years after regaining consciousness, and five years after she severed the ties of her previous life. She was living life as a movie editor in Saintark, Georgia, listening to the rambling of her best friend, Kasey, trying to guess her past.

"I've got it Mo! You were the Queen of Sheba!"

Moira chuckled under her breath as she tried to focus on her work. "Is that the best you can come up with Kasey?"

"Well you didn't like the Princess of Wales idea," her friend commented as she bit into her pizza with gusto.

"The Princess of Wales died genius."

"Or so they *think* that's what really happened. Little did they know she was alive and well, living as a movie editor?"

"Here we go again," Moira mumbled to herself as she hid a wave of laughter and pushed up her glasses.

"I heard that."

"So, tell me. How long are we going to play this guessing game?" Moira asked as she continued reading the manuscript before her.

"Until one of my answers is the truth or Matthew McConaughey comes to marry you."

"He's a movie star, Kasey."

"And you're a script editor, amazing isn't it?" She smiled wide.

Shaking her head and leaving her friend to her outrageous thinking, Moira continued with her editing. She usually did revisions on the weekends but exploration was on her mind for the following days. She wanted to venture and discover the areas of the town she

considered her home.

More important matters were on her mind, which geared the exploration, but for now venturing outside of her apartment for leisure instead of work was the goal. As she absent-mindedly twirled her wedding band, once again thoughts of who held the other half of the infinity ring echoed in her mind.



## Chapter Two

For a brief moment, she closed her eyes and pictured herself as she might have been back then. Didn't matter how hard she tried to conjure another image, she would always receive the one currently in her mind.

It was night and that much she knew from the gleaming rays of the moonlight. It was quiet and by a river that flowed as constant as the moon traveling through its phases. The air was cool, but only due to the spraying mists the river gave of itself. The time and location were a mystery but it seemed she knew who was there. And whoever it was never frightened her.

As her long, raven tresses lightly blew in the wind, she bent down momentarily to touch the river below her and smiled at the mirror image of her caramel complexion. The light mists of the water and the moonlit rays added shimmering highlights. She couldn't believe it but the river added elements of ethereal beauty to the sides of herself she considered plain. This dream was more than a search for her identity, it was her salvation. This repetitive reverie gave her some hope to unlock the guarded door in her mind. Yet, for as much as she adored fantasizing it; for as much as she knew her beauty was made almost mythical in appearance, sadness prevailed through the thin seams of this trance. The sadness in her dark brown eyes was reality showing its color—the truth that made her aware she wasn't living in the world her mind had conjured; she was visiting.

It didn't matter to Moira though because she knew he would be there. She could predict just when he would arrive, when he would appear. It was here, in this place, the dewy kissed look of love, that only a woman could feel and express, lived. He, her husband, would then come into sight as her mind imagined.

A tall, handsome man with the physical and emotional strength she depended on in those broad shoulders. The hazel eyes she loved staring at as she talked to him in her mind, eyes that changed colors based on his mood, thoughts and sometimes his clothes. His hair, at first obscure when the dreams started, now chestnut with changing

strands of auburn. Fall leaves, she called his hair at one time; the changing color of fall leaves. His touch was gentle. At first wary, her fear of him lessened over time. Over the two years of having this dream, his touch reinforced the truth in her mind about her husband; kindness flowed in his being. She could still remember and feel his arms around her long hours after she woke.

She didn't know when it started, the throbbing to feel him in her body. Many times she lay in bed and wondered if it was her inner core that dictated her arousing need. A missing piece is what it was; the piece that he fit perfectly. She felt with him whole, but only satisfied that hunger for a moment. The feeling was real and true because she felt the pressure against the walls of her core, her pussy pulsing for completion. The spasms told her he was needed; the other half of the puzzle was needed. That piece to her heart hidden now for years, that held everything she went through, was for a reason.

It was a constant reminder at times. It disturbed her at work, the anxiety and the nervousness. Many times through her day it drove her to frustration and annoyance like a mosquito that buzzed incessantly. But she couldn't put the sensation away as she thought of the man that invaded her dreams. His presence, his being was like a knife cutting into warm butter as he entered her; sure and strong. He slowly spread her legs and his face detailed the etched ecstasy of warmth beyond comprehension. He always bit his lip as he entered the valley heat and it spread across the most sensitive portion of his being. He moaned in relief and shivered ever so slightly. It was a mixture of animalism, carnal and unadulterated.

It was that single feeling of water that poured over her head that singed her nerves in excitement. She wanted that take over, for him to conquer her. She wanted him to take control of her body. To be where he belonged, right where heat and sensuality were carnal and pure. She didn't want him to stop those many moments she dreamt of him, not even when she begged him. Yet before anything was completed, consummated, she awoke drenched in sweat and wracked with need.

Plagued by the questions spinning in her mind, she focused on the one detail, though, out of place, which seemed to hold some type of key. It was half a movie reel that ended with the half of her infinity ring. What did that have to do with her amnesia? She still didn't know, and she still tried to figure it out.

When she first received the job as script supervisor Moira took the opportunity to scrounge through endless reels. She first started with

any reels that were of dreams, and from there she went to the different genres to determine where the reel that flashed in her mind could have actually originated. After a few solid months of searching she stopped hoping. Each time she opened a reel box she stopped saying a little prayer that it would hold an answer, and a clue as to where she should search next. Yet it was hard to stop the hope when it became automatic. Each full reel lessened the chance, but it didn't stop her from searching. What did that reel mean?

Coming back to reality and pushing back her glasses, Moira stood up and stretched her aching limbs. "Hey, Kasey, how about we get lost this weekend?"

"Okay are you telling me to get lost or are you saying we should take a trip?"

Chuckling under her breath, Moira joined her friend on the sofa and grabbed a piece of pizza. "I'm saying we should take a trip. I haven't really ever left the city before and who knows? Maybe going out of town would be a good thing. Take a nice break, do something else to focus our minds as we go sightseeing and do all that other touristy stuff."

"Uh huh and what all of a sudden brought this on?" Kasey said with a raised eyebrow.

Moira shrugged, putting all her attention on the television screen. She needed to keep the truth out of her face. She really needed to get out of town and clear her mind, but mostly she needed to get out of town to start the search.

"It'd just be cool, that's all."

"Quit bullshitting and tell me what's up. I know you're hiding behind those glasses like they were deflector shields. Spill it."

Moira bit deep into her pizza and focused on the television. "No reason."

"I know mobsters that lie better than you," Kasey pestered.

Moira kept her ground and stared at the TV.

"You're going to make me do it aren't you, Mo? You're going to make me call Matthew McConaughey and tell him you're having an affair. Do you know what that means? Your life would make the tabloids and worst yet the paparazzi would be all over you. Can you imagine the horror of it? Cameras are flashing everywhere taking pictures of you at every single moment, wanting to know each and every one of your juicy life details for their insatiable readers. This is horrible...this is...this is...wait I'm getting happy about that idea.

Okay let's try a different angle."

Trying to remain cool and focused, the battle was lost. The smile she knew would state her defeat broke and crept over her full lips. She had originally intended to ask Kasey to join her, but figured with work at the hospital, it wouldn't be possible. Letting out a big sigh, she left the sofa and retrieved the card that started her mysterious search into leaving Saintark for a few days. Letting out another deep sigh, she handed over the card to Kasey. "I hate you, you know that. I can never keep a secret from you."

"See," Kasey said as she took the card and opened it. "That's your first mistake right there. You don't keep secrets from me. I'm going to find out, and if I don't, I'll just pry it from you."

Kasey read silently. Moira waited as her secret for the past couple months came out at last. She knew the words by heart already.

'You are cordially invited to the Hyperion Theater to discuss your expertise in the film industry. The theme is love and infinity. Due to the rarity and sensitive nature of this event, your ring is the ticket of entrance to this exclusive theater. It would be a great honor and privilege to make your acquaintance, and to know your work. Please confirm your answer and any questions with Hyperion Theater's owner, Mr. Toren McCann. Moira watched as Kasey looked up at her stunned face, making a great imitation of blowfish.

"Mo, this is an invitation to the Hyperion Theater in Haliwater."

"Yeah I know."

"Then you know the Hyperion is one of the oldest theaters in the state and is notoriously known to be haunted?"

"I think I heard something about that."

"I'm guessing you also know that the Haliwater River feeds into the Saintark River?"

"Yeah, I found that out too."

"Moira, the Haliwater River is over 200 miles long."

"Found that out too. Amazing what Google can tell you."

"And did Google say you're insane right now?"

Moira began to pace frantically. "I know! I know what you're thinking. I could have been dumped in the Haliwater River and traveled down to where I was found. I know that. I know that somehow I survived, but it is the only lead I have right now. What if he's there? What if my husband is there and he's been looking for me all this time?"

"Yes, what if your husband *is* there? Did it ever occur to you that

maybe he was trying to kill you? Okay let's really think about this, Mo? You could have been trying to escape an abusive husband?"

"I don't think he was abusive. It doesn't feel like it, I just don't get that sense."

"Mo, you have amnesia. Of course it doesn't feel like it," Kasey stated as she raised an eyebrow.

Letting out a sigh and running her hands through her hair, Moira sat down and looked to her friend for support. "I have to find out, Kase. I have to know why I was sent this invitation and who sent it? Do they know me? Do they know my life before? I have to know."

As she stared at her friend for a while, the tone of acceptance finally came, Kasey's indistinct growl, "Okay, we'll go. If we don't find anything will you just accept that you are to marry Matthew McConaughey?"

Throwing her arms around her in a tight embrace, Moira laughed as tears rolled down her face. "Okay, if this doesn't work out and nothing occurs, I'll give Matthew McConaughey a call."

### Chapter Three

Moira turned the map three different ways and tried to figure out if there were hidden meanings behind all the words. There had to be hidden meaning. Especially that word 'Interstate', it was code word for "you are going to get lost and never find me, so you might as well put gas in the car".

Frustrated, and ready to wad the atlas/map/hell sign into a ball, she rubbed her eyes and tried again. The outcome was worse than the attempt and this time she succeeded in discarding the offending object. The fact she didn't have food in her stomach only added to her annoyance, and she threw the map into the back seat. Her passenger woke up. Yawning in contentment from her nap she wiggled her toes that were out of the window, drying her pink nail polish. The irritation ran through her blood, and Moira thumped her index finger knuckles in rapid rhythmic motion on the steering wheel.

"That's right, show that map who is boss," Kasey said from her reclined position in the passenger seat as she wiggled her toes.

"I don't know where the hell we are Kasey. It's like we're driving out in the middle of nowhere looking for a bunch of camels and an oasis." She ran her fingers through her hair, exasperated.

"Well that's just ridiculous, why in the world would camels want to be in Georgia? I mean seriously, we don't have what they want."

Glancing over at the traveler seat, chuckling was the only thing one could do around Kasey. Her friend had a strange and yet at all times positive sense of humor, no matter the situation. As some of the tension eased out of her body, Moira listened to the humming of her friend as she read the map looking for clues of Haliwater.

"The good news is you were right on track. We just have to take I-43 and then that will take us to a rather strange set of interloping mazes where we guess the right road."

Moira kept a straight face but wasn't fooled by that tone.

“Alright, alright, party pooper we just need an hour or so on this road before we hit the main interstate that will lead us into Haliwater.”

“Thank you.” She smiled

Putting the map away and taking out the travel cooler, Kasey split some of the food they packed before they left Saintark. “So how long have you been keeping this secret of Haliwater?” Handing over the slice of turkey and cheese on wheat, Moira took a bite as she thought about the events that led her to this precise moment.

“Two months,” she confessed.

“Why so long?”

Taking another bite of her food, Moira shrugged and thought through the many times she was about to tell Kasey, but never did. “I don’t know. At first, I thought the invitation was a fake, and then I wondered if maybe someone was trying to play a prank on me, and from there the possibilities grew.”

“So why do you now want to go check it out?”

“I need to check it out because of this ring, Kasey,” Moira said as she stared at her wedding ring for a brief moment. She took off the band and handed it over to her friend so she could get a good look at it. “I’ve worn this for five years and have never taken it off until now. I got an invitation saying that this ring is some sort of ticket, some sort of way to enter a theater? I want to know who holds the other end. I want to know what life I could have been living now if things were different. Yes, my life in Saintark is great and I’m grateful for meeting you and everyone else who took care of me. But I had another life before that day Kasey. I started my life somewhere with some man who loved me so much he gave me this ring. I know it’s taken me a little time to get my strength, and to actually start searching again, but I need to know, Kasey. I need to know if he’s still out there. Even if he’s married and has moved on with his life, I need to know why he stopped searching for me, who I was before then and most importantly, what in the world happened to me. I need to know.”

“I just hope you’re right about him, Mo. You know, about him being kind and as wonderful as you say.”

“I hope so too, Kase. I hope so too.”

\* \* \* \*

A tall, lean man with features resembling a youth in his mid-20’s entered a dimly lit room. The soft light casting the glow in the area

added a somber mood as he stopped in front of an intricately designed Celtic mahogany desk. The man behind the desk looked up then returned his attention to the portrait before him. She was meant to be his and only his. Toren McCann would be damned...and soon so would she.

“Highness, our informants have stated his wife is on her way to Haliwater.”

“Has she learned anything else of importance?”

“No sir, but informants have said she is showing signs of remembering.”

After a few moments of silence, the man behind the desk nodded. “Good, let her remember. You may leave.”

The young man left as quietly as he entered; the empty dimness now shadows. The lone man in the room no longer views the portrait but opts to stare out the window instead where the nighttime sky is brightly lit by the full moon. He failed to kill the princess, but he will not fail again. He must come to terms with many truths. He must not fail again, for they will not forgive as they did this first time. His plan must work this time.

The princess was coming home; he must not fail again.

\* \* \* \*

With the car stopped by the side of the road, Moira drank her water and rolled the stiffness out of her neck.

“So what do we do when we get into Haliwater? Does it say we have to check in to a certain hotel, the Hyperion or something?” Kasey asked with her eyes closed.

Pulling the letter out of her purse, Moira opened the envelope prepared to tell Kasey the same thing stated when the letter was first read. Used to the same words she had read several times over the past months, Moira read the letter that accompanied the invitation trying to find any potential clue. Yet the words on the note were completely different from before. Flipping the card front to back, just in case she had read the wrong side, Moira stared at the piece of paper, looked up at her friend and then returned to the changed paper before her.

“It changed.” She said in disbelief.

“What?”

“The letter, it changed. All the information on there, it changed. It doesn’t say that I’m invited anymore; it says ‘All things aren’t what they seem, as memories can lie as well as truth. One perspective may be the leading point to discovery. Turn to Toren McCann for your



answers. The ring and Toren is the key.' And then there are things I need to do, one of them is to speak to this man named Toren McCann. It specifically states that I need to go through the movie reel room in the Hyperion. What in the hell is going on here? How is this possible?"

"That is not possible; letters just don't mysteriously change like they're magic," Kasey said as she took the letter away. She flipped the page back and forth as her eyes widened and her jaw dropped open. Moira stared with the same disbelief as Kasey, looked up and then back to the note. "I can't believe this. The letter actually changed. Did you have another page to this invitation, Mo?"

Shaking her head, she stared at Kasey hoping she would have answers. "No, it just said that I'm invited to go to the Hyperion Theater and speak to Toren McCann." Before she could mention another word, she caught Kasey's smile. The shock of the changed note was replaced with fascination, humor as one side of Kasey's lips curled up in mischievous smirk. A true tell sign, a sassy retort was quickly underway...

"Do you know Toren McCann?" She said as her eyebrow rose ever so slow. "Listen to that...Toren; it sounds so Nordic. Toren McCann, hottie extraordinaire. See, Mo, now he could be your very own Matthew McConaughey right there!"

So began the conversation of the man she was supposed to marry, according to her social coordinator, Kasey Newton. "Kase, I think *you* need to go out on a date with your obsession. Besides, this Toren McCann is probably the buildings' keeper who's been taking care of the place for generations. He has bad breath and slobbers a little bit when he gets really excited."

If it had been a second too late, Moira would have missed the look. She turned just in time though to catch Kasey's 'I'm going to hit you and you will hurt from the wrath I have unleashed' face. With 100% accuracy, Kasey punched Moira's arm repetitively until both women were laughing hard.

"You know, Mo, you can just have a little fun with this possibility and envision. Think about it for just a moment, what if this magic is sending you straight to Toren. Yes, it's freaking weird but hey so was your appearance into Saintark. So, go with this one. Imagine. Do the whole vision thing. Who knows where it might lead you? You never know it could be the opportunity of positive outcomes."

There was the reason she loved being around Kasey. She brought a sense of truth, even though 90% of the time it was mostly humor. Moira let out a deep breath and started the engine. “C’mon lets get this over with and find out what’s going on.”

As she drove down the road leading to the Hyperion Theater, butterflies set off in Moira’s stomach. She didn’t know what to expect but she felt closer to the truth behind her life now than she ever had in the past.

## Chapter Four

He watched from afar as she closed the door to the car and looked at her environment. She bent over and spoke to someone before she turned around and walked towards the Hyperion. It had been five years and she hadn't changed in his eyes. She was still as beautiful and breathtaking as the day they got married. His body roared to life, as the memories flooded his mind.

After five years, the princess, his wife, was home. There was much to make amends for, much to apologize. He should have never left her alone on that dark night. He should have never left her unguarded. Though the night that Moira disappeared was disastrous; losing all his possessions and belongings as well as the love of his life, he managed to rebuild. Through all the damage, and destruction, he was able to salvage the one valuable piece of their lives and their world; a half-piece reel of film and a reel projector.

To those whom had no idea of its importance, they would have merely thought it was just a reel of film. It was rare those who understood why those two artifacts were significant. Only those from his planet comprehended that it was the path to their galaxy. Without the reel or the projector, the gateway to his world could not be unlocked.

Out of the ruin of that night, his trusted aide carried the keys to the projector's custody. With the projector safe, the reel was left in his charge. Going home, though, the reel required two halves to make a link. Their bond was in a ring, the infinity ring. He held one piece and his wife held the other. He hadn't been able to travel home since she had disappeared. He hadn't been able to bring back the help he needed since the night of her disappearance. That night he was forced to watch in horror as she was pushed off the cliff and fell into darkness.

For five years, he thought the light in his life had died. For five years he thought his enemies had bested him and killed the one being that mattered in his existence. Until the day a couple months ago, his

loyal aide, Balthazar, ran into his study shouting the princess was on TV. Of all the ways to discover his love still lived. She went by the name Moira Castle and lived in the city Saintark, Georgia. They were interviewing her for the remodeling efforts of one of the historical theaters in town. Though he didn't know where she acquired her new last name, she was still his Moira. Still in love with movies and wanting in any way to cherish where they played and where they lived. That was the one thing that attracted him to his beautiful princess. Her love for things he might otherwise not bother noticing.

Since finding Moira alive, he did everything in his power to find out exactly what happened to her. He was able to piece together a bit of the information through the town's newspaper articles. She was found 200 miles away downstream in a small city called Saintark. Authorities had no idea how a woman, or in fact any human being, survived the fall and traveled downstream. Doctors stated her survival was just short of a miracle. No human could have survived a fall such as the one Moira had endured. Then again, there was one important fact the doctors did not know about Moira; she wasn't human. Neither was he.

He kept his thoughts focused but seeing that caramel skin did nothing to control those feelings. He couldn't help but think of the many nights where her voluptuous legs would wrap tightly around his waist as he thrust deep inside her. Her soft cries calling out his name, demanding more pleasure echoing in his ears as she arched her back against him. Her agile body pressed up against his as she responded in heated passion to each and every thrust he delivered. The way her breasts would tickle and tease the skin of his chest as her lust and greed for him grew. The tremors that wracked her body as she climbed the hill of her peak and let him know just where to move, just how to touch her, and how to hold her.

The newspapers stated that Moira had lost her memory; stated global amnesia. She couldn't remember anything about her life before, only from the point where she woke up. He remembered everything about Moira. From the moment he first laid eyes on her, to the moment they were married and spent their first moments in each others arms. She was a virgin that night. Though she was first afraid of revealing herself to him, the fear in her wasn't set in her mind. She wanted this; she wanted to be his princess, his wife, his love, his eternal partner.

They were Lianas; the ancient, immortal people who came to

earth from time to time to learn and live with the humans. Moira was half Lianas; her father King Maslan of Ni married a human woman, Isabeau Kramer. Through their marriage the Lianas were able to travel on to the earth to find their future mates.

At first, when news traveled down to his father's kingdom, he didn't understand why a human woman was so important until the day he met Moira. She was young, must have been at least eighteen years old at the time and being presented to the Lianas society. Not only was this presentation important to Lianas but he would get his true first look at his betrothed. His family, Micantias, ruled the other side of Liana, and was family friends with King Maslan. When the invitation arrived at the household, he didn't want to go. As he adamantly stated to his mother, 'Why not just make it a funeral instead? It's the end of my single-hood.' But as royal prince, his absence would have reflected badly upon his family. He had known since he could remember, Moira was his betrothed but had never truly set eyes on her.

He dreaded the encounter and marked it up as another form of torture as he and his aide Balthazar attended. At first Toren contented himself with perusing King Maslan's grounds and avoiding the party by all costs. But when he first caught sight of Moira, his instincts reacted. He watched as she talked to other noble women. Her mouth was a fascination, the way she licked her lips before speaking. Every time she spoke, her tongue would glide and wet her luscious lips. Oh what that mouth could do to him. It sent shots of lust straight to his groin.

She was divine, her body luscious and his eyes wandered south and became focused on her heavily endowed chest. What man wouldn't want to get lost in supple breasts that were as soft and smooth as the clouds? Her smile radiated through the room, her movements sensual and graceful. He would know this woman on a much more intimate level. His body demanded as such but there was something else, something elusive about her. This woman sparked intrigue in every part of his being.

But when he saw her affectionate touches with the King and Queen, he doubted this woman to be just a noble. The lust and desire burned hard in his veins, as speculation continued in his mind. His confirmation as his fate was sealed when she walked down the stairs and was officially introduced as Princess Moira of Ni. He knew from that moment on, he knew she was his.

Their marriage was a year after their courting, and the moments in between were filled with passion, excitement and revelations he had never experienced. Moira approached each new incident with an excitement he had never seen in any being. Even moments of intimacy held a newness and gentle wonder. It was discovered on their wedding night when they consummated their marriage.

Dressed in a sheer gown meant to entice, he had committed to memory every curve and dip on her body. Before he touched her he knew precisely where her hip and birthmark was located. It did nothing for his self control, as he had to hold back his hunger. But when she lay in his arms and unlaced the gown, all he could remember was how the blood raced out of his head. Her soft skin was a luxury as he kissed, touched, delved and tasted every inch of her body. The luxury wasn't only her being but her innocent reactions. Her wide-eyed expressions of confusion suffused with excitement, her moans and whimpers as she became accustomed to arousal at his hands. With each touch, with each kiss, he felt his soul tie to hers as hers was bound to him.

In the midst of her amnesia though, he knew she wouldn't remember anything of their past. Sparking the memory with familiarity was the only way to bring back his Moira, his love. Turning away from the window Toren McCann picked up the phone and called Balthazar.

## Chapter Five

Moira wandered up to the door of the Hyperion Theater, staring at the impressive structure for any clue she was in the right place. Kasey said she would check them into the nearby motel while she wandered and looked for Toren McCann. It took convincing on her behalf to be left alone but Kasey yielded. There was something familiar about the whole city of Haliwater she couldn't place her finger on.

The formidable building seemed a bit out of place in the busy town. With its architectural structure distinctly different from the other buildings, the Hyperion was meant to stand apart. It was meant to be marked as a structure that had stood the test of time. An expansive opening beyond the doors led to a main area of Sicilian Baroque grandeur only seen in the Cathedral of San Giovanni Battista in Rome. With its mixture of Spanish influence and in-laid color marble, Moira felt she was walking into St. Peter's Basilica.

Moira paused at the thought. When had she been at St. Peter's Basilica? The answer came as swiftly as the question she asked. She had been there during her honeymoon. She and...and...she couldn't remember her husband's name were there when they first married. The sensations, the scents, the impressions flooded her mind as the tears fell down her face.

She remembered. She remembered!

This theater was truly a part of her life. It was an unbelievable memory. A memory filled with impressive, unbelievable and out of this world sights. She was meant to be here. Whoever sent her the invitation knew she was meant to be at the Hyperion. The many pictures of stars that passed through its doors, lifted a heavy weight from her heart as the history of the building returned to her mind.

Built in the late 1800's she had heard the many stories that the theater was in fact haunted by ancient beings. The exact name of those beings was unknown but she had read through the different sites and gathered they were human-looking with extraordinary abilities.

Some articles and research stated their abilities ranged from dream walking to regenerative healing to shape shifting. Overall, to the scientific community, the ancient race was speculated to be figments of the town-folks imaginations. It didn't matter to her; she still thought the theater was absolutely gorgeous. As she entered the main doors and stared at the various pictures on the wall, the grin on her face was replaced with surprise when she saw herself standing with two different people in a tight embrace.

She didn't know these people, but she held on to them like they were family. Were they her parents? Wait, this was her home. This theater was the link to her home. She pulled the photo down from the wall, desperate to find an answer to one of the many million questions she had in her mind. Opening the frame, she touched the picture with her fingertips and committed to detail the faces of the couple with her. Turning the portrait over, she recognized the handwriting as her own. 'Mom, Dad and Me' was inscribed with the date next to it.

"Mom and Dad." she said silently and looked at the picture again "Maslan and Isabeau." She closed her eyes as the surge from another memory returned. Bringing the picture to her lips, she kissed the portrait and whispered so low it was more of a prayer than self-talk. "Please still be alive, I need to see you again."

She looked around at the old structure, its tall columns standing formidably as another memory surfaced. It mocked the other buildings for its plain disposition. She was amazed at the architects who constructed such an edifice. A small shiver passed down Moira's spine as she continued admiring the theater. There was another feeling of familiarity. She was small, running through the theater while her mother chastised her loud behavior.

"Beautiful, isn't it, Moira?"

The vision of her dream man with chestnut hair filled her mind as the deep baritone of a memorable voice broke through her thoughts. This man knew her, knew her name. If he knew her name, he could know more about her life. She turned to the voice that called to her. Before her, reality and fantasy blended and came to life. That voice called to her, tapped into the unknown part of her mind that had been locked to her for years. She knew this man standing before her. Somehow, this man knew her.

Judging from the confidence in his stance and the way he handled himself, Moira guessed his age to be in the late 30's. Yet it wasn't his age that seemed to stun her at all, it was his uncanny resemblance to



the man in her dreams that startled her. It was the reality of seeing the dream in flesh. Could it be him?

Taking a quick glance at his left hand no ring or any type of faded mark indicated marriage. The unmistakable and unexplainable smile that touched her lips quickly faded when she remembered she was married. Kasey would have been proud of her for her mischievous thinking.

For the first time in the years since she had awakened from her coma, Moira truly felt what good, hard, edging lust was all about. The flutters started deep in her stomach and spread like wild-fire under her skin. Something about this man burst every rational thought away and she couldn't explain what reached profoundly inside her body and jump-started every hormone within her system. Visions of his body taking hers blazed before her eyes. His strong body pinning hers in many and various positions burned her retinas. She was succumbing to his demands, crying for more and holding on to sanity as he gave it to her. Dear heavens, when in the world did she go in to sex overload? Heat coiled and burned through her veins, rushed into her breasts and hardened her nipples into stiff tips, and started the very leisure journey of arousal.

Backing up a couple steps as the heady rush reached her mind, she had to remember that she was a married woman, and she was in the search of her husband. Though she didn't know how in the world she would find her spouse, the only clue at her disposal was the invitation. Getting distracted wasn't what she needed to do.

"How do you know my name?" She stared at the tall man before her and blinked several times as her dream did indeed step into reality. The man she was more than convinced was mythical was before her. The man that had shared her dreams over many nights was standing before her and knew her name. He was real. Her gaze traveled up his body. Hard and honed muscles tense though they looked relaxed from his pecs to his abdomen. His jeans rode low on his hips, and unconsciously she licked her lips even though she wanted to explore what was hidden underneath. He was gorgeous, with the unruly strands of hair that defied calming as he ran a hand through his hair. His eyes were the kaleidoscopic array of gold, brown, blue and green beautifully combined. Amazing how hazel eyes expressed so much. Strands of auburn, she recalled mentally to herself. It was just like... "Oh my goodness, fall leaves," she whispered.

“You haven’t said that to me in a long time.” He said as a smile broke over his handsome face and did everything she didn’t want a smile to do. His light eyes changed colors while his gaze focused solely upon her. He was...no he couldn’t be that man. She knew that smile, those light eyes that absorbed her very presence. This man couldn’t be her husband. No, he couldn’t be! But his face, shuffled through the many different memories in her mind.

“It’s been a long time,” he whispered as he continued his gaze at her.

“How...how do you know me?”

“Moira, you have to remember to keep thinking. You know me. You know me well.”

“I don’t know where I’ve seen you. Who are you?” She had to deny it; it couldn’t be who she thought. If it was, she couldn’t take the truth. She couldn’t take the actuality of his abandonment. She pulled back from his touch, trying to clear her mind.

“Moira,” the man said as she backed up for air. “Moira, it’s me, Toren.”

“Toren?” She shook her head and tightened her hand on the invitation she carried. “I don’t know a Toren.”

“Moira, love, it’s me...Toren; your husband.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I just came to find out about this invitation. I want to know who knows me. I just came to find out about my previous life.” She declared trying to find a way to escape.

“Yes, you do know me. I can see it in your eyes. I’m Toren McCann. You are Moira. Moira McCann, my wife. You’ve been missing for five years.”

“What—what are you talking about? No, you can’t be him. I—” As the man before her moved forward, Moira continued backing up. “You can’t be my husband. Where have you been all these years? Why haven’t you come for me? You left me all alone!” A flood broke in her mind and recollections of the past surged forth. “If you’re my husband, prove it. Prove it to me and tell me why?”

Pain lanced through her psyche and heart, she couldn’t take this. This couldn’t be him, this couldn’t be her husband. He wouldn’t leave her like this. He wouldn’t leave her and not be as heart-broken and devastated as she was. He wouldn’t be this calm and collected when he found her again. She would be on his waking thoughts, suffused into everything he did. He had to be, or else...or else...she was left for no reason. Or else, he needed to be rid of her. No man would just

leave his wife for five years to fend for her own safety.

There were so many unanswered questions, so many unanswered truths. How did he know she was in theater? How did he know she was in Haliwater? Was he following her? Was he keeping her under constant watch? Why hadn't she known this was a mistake? This wasn't her husband, this couldn't be.

"You left. You just left me to defend myself, in an unknown city all alone. How could you?" She couldn't contain any of the feelings that had haunted her mind for years. The five years she had to deal with the heartache, and the solitude.

Stepping forward, she slapped Toren across the face and pounded his chest with fierce determination. He was going to feel the pain he left her. He was going to feel the heartache and the loneliness that plagued her days and nights. All the years she didn't know where she was, where she came from, he had been here in Haliwater and hadn't raised a finger to find her. All that time she struggled for a light in her darkness, he held all the answers. Her muscles hurt as she clenched and opened her hands. A burning sensation raced through her nerves, the tips of her fingers burned like she stuck them on a burner too long. The skin tingled. She turned her palms over and small bursts of energy emitted from her hands. Shaking, she stepped back as her fingers twitched and shook while energy bursts continued to emit.

"Moira, your gifts, you have to control yourself." Toren said as he stepped forward and encased her hands in his.

She didn't hear a single word he said. The pain was too heavy, too rich. She was too steep in revenge to notice her mind and body were trying to reconnect. "You bastard, how could you do that? How could you?" She beat him with all the strength she possessed. Memories trickled into her mind as fast and changing as a prism. Recollections of her childhood, her home planet Liana, the day of her presentation to society, her parents giving the blessing on her wedding, nights with Toren curled up on the sofa watching movies. Each recall built upon another, promises Toren made, things they did together. "Damnit Toren, you promised me on Liana you wouldn't ever leave me!"

"I didn't leave you, baby. I would never leave you. I thought you died. They told me you were dead," Toren pleaded as he held on to her shoulders.

Silence filled the empty corridor that previously echoed her grief. Now only soft sobbing came forth. "I woke up in a hospital bed and I

had no idea who I was, where I was from. I only had this ring and my name. Why didn't you come for me, Toren? Why didn't you search for me? Why did you wait to send me an invitation to the theater?"

Toren jerked his head confused. "Moir, I didn't send you an invitation to the theater. Balthazar and I just found you; I couldn't have had enough time to send you the invitation. Look at me, baby." He placed both hands on either side of her cheeks and forced her to stare into his eyes. "Look into my eyes and see the truth. You are Liana; you know you can see the truth in my eyes."

"Liar! It's just another lie!" Moira struggled for freedom

"Look into my eyes for the truth Moira!" Toren forcibly said. "Look into my mind!"

\* \* \* \*

He watched as the prince and princess struggled with each other. Prince Toren was allowing her access into his mind. It was a very smart move McCann pulled. It was very smart indeed to let the woman inside your mind; no hassles. Why believe a word when memories were much more convincing?

Isn't love grand? He snorted contemptuously. Her memory would return in no time, this he would guarantee. It didn't matter though, her separation from the prince was enough to put the wedge in their love he needed. She would be distrustful of the over-confident prince, distrust led to many easy opportunities to finish the royal heirs. Liana was not his planet from the beginning, and it was okay. His kind had been forced to give it up to them, but it would be his soon. No half human female, no asinine prince would take that privilege from him. The heirs of Liana would die, oh yes they would.

He'd made a mistake by focusing on the princess. A small error that had worked in his favor for a few years but he'd underestimated Prince Toren's ability to keep the love of his wife alive.

It was alright, just a small change of plans. Something a little bit different from before. Where one attempt failed, two killings would rightly justify it. He would have his moment. How did those humans put it? Oh yes, that infamous human phrase they use, kill two birds with one stone.

## Chapter Six

“Do you believe me now?” Toren searched Moira’s eyes for an answer. Tears stained her cheeks as the night from his perspective filled her thoughts. As every single memory he possessed burned into the synapses of her brain.

“I don’t know, Toren. I don’t know.” she shook her head to gain focus.

“Yes you do, you saw it through your own mind.”

Moira shook her head again and she ran her hands through her hair. “I...I don’t know what to believe. I...it’s too much to take. Why? Why me? Why get rid of me? I don’t know what they want. I just...I just came to find out something about my life and now...now I know less about what is really going on and why it’s happening. All of this grief because of a stupid invitation.”

Toren let out a resigned sigh and took a step back to give Moira room to breathe. “I can let you know if it was anyone here. Does that help?”

Nodding her approval, Moira handed over the skillfully written and decorated envelope. If Toren didn’t send this to her, who would? Who knew of her existence? She needed to talk to Kasey more about this; it was just too much for a person to handle.

Moira lingered as Toren read the letter and closed his eyes to think. Taking the moment to reflect, sexual heat flashed through her body once again, and stole her breath. She closed her eyes for a moment then opened them and softly gasped. She stared at Toren completely different than moments before. This was her husband, she could not deny the memories, the knowledge he let her see. The tall six foot four frame relaxed in front of her was one she knew well. As the heat that hit her body hard moments before coiled and burned, she licked her lips in appreciation.

Her eyes roamed over the hard planes of his chiseled jaw, down his neck, over broad shoulders, down a chest she could without difficulty envision tasting, to arms she knew she held on to many times. Those strong arms that held her close while he devoured her

body with his own yet gentle as silk... It was evident in the way he held the delicate paper, as he continued reading, he would treat and touch her like a rose.

“Jeez, what’s happening to me?” She muttered to herself wiping the beaded droplets on her forehead.

“Your memories are returning, and so are your feelings for me.” Toren replied without looking up. “You’ll be in Lianan blooming heat as your memories come back, and your body and mind remembers things we’ve done together, frankly which I don’t mind at all.” A wicked grin graced his face. “Some of those things were quite nice.”

“What?!”

He didn’t bother to look up but kept his eyes focused on the letter before him as he replied matter-of-factly, “You are part Lianan, your body is very in tune with itself so you will feel the heat of lust and high emotions of our race. You are also part human, so you’ve been suppressing it for too long that your nerves can’t take it anymore.”

“Oh this is just great. Just how bad are we talking about?”

As he finished the letter, Moira softly panted as the distinct difference in the once light eyes she looked into earlier focused on her. She wasn’t the only one affected by the sudden heat. Letting her eyes slowly drift over Toren’s body again, the residing bulge in his trouser told her he was affected in just the same way. Her eyes moved back to his and they were now black. She could have sworn she saw a flash of blue swirl through them as she took a deep breath and tried to center herself...

“By Lianan genetics and law, you are my wife. We bonded during our wedding night and have been separated for 5 human years. Five human years is 20 Lianan years, so you can say that for me it’s been 20 years since I’ve been able to hold you, touch you and do all the things that I have by right to do to you. I can sense no other man on you and you are starting to sense no other woman on me. You and I were made for each other, Moira. In a very blunt and grotesquely human way, you are what I need to survive and I am what you need to survive. When we reunite then, I’ll be able to help you heal mentally and you’ll be able to help me heal...in other ways. You can take a rough guess as to how bad it is.”

“Oh.” she let out another deep breath.

“So now do you believe that I’m your husband?” he asked with his eyes black as midnight.

A part of her believed Toren. Her body was reacting exactly as he

said it would. It recognized Toren as the one that would satisfy not only her emotional needs but physical needs as well. She couldn't think straight in all honesty and that was the hard part of the whole equation. Why did she tell Kasey she would be okay alone?

Timid with the complexity of the situation she just landed herself in; Moira leaned in and placed a soft kiss on Toren's lips.

"I need you to prove it to me." Moira panted again as she blinked her eyes rapidly and licked her lips.

"It would be my pleasure."

A strange smile graced Toren's face as he took her wedding hand and kissed her knuckles with care. Toren took his time and lavished attention to Moira's hand. Dear heavens, she thought on the edge of swooning, if the man is taking this long to kiss my hand, please direct him between my legs!

He pulled her close to him. Moira's lips parted slightly as she panted a bit faster. Every nerve under her skin coiled in hunger as Toren lowered his head and kissed her.

His lips were incredibly soft and warm.

Those were the only two thoughts that Moira could summon when Toren touched her lips. She had to shut her mind from the rushing of images as she gave herself to this moment. He patiently warmed her lips with his until hers softened, parted and she sighed into his mouth. Oh my goodness, this man was hers and solely hers. They had spent five years apart. They had been five human years; twenty Lianan years, physically apart. How could she have survived without a kiss like this? Even though she stiffened in shock when he initially pulled her against him, her mouth remained relaxed, her lips almost expecting this type of surprise. Unable to remember that she was supposedly asking Toren to prove his identity, she moaned when he slid his tongue inside and explored her mouth.

Moira felt something solid against her back. Toren had moved them against the wall as he took his time exploring her mouth with his tongue and she his. She took the rawness she sensed under the strength and the passion Toren had stirred. This man was hellishly talented.

His hands cupped her face, and pulled away slightly. Moira opened her eyes and stared into onyx eyes narrowed on her face. The force that burned within them didn't match the gentleness of what he gave her. Before she could respond, Toren took possession of her mouth once more. This time his lips were rough and hot, plundered

hers until her head roared. Moira could have sworn she heard choirs of angels singing. There was suppressed hunger in Toren's kiss, and an arrogant certainty that it was going to be answered right now at this moment. Even though she tried to focus her mind, her mouth answered.

She whimpered as he nibbled her swollen lips and pulled away again. He raked his uninhibited lusty gaze over her body, and her skin heated further. She wanted more and wrapped her legs around him. It was instinctual, something deep inside she could not stop, even if she tried. She rubbed her body up against his, her hips grinding against his in hopes of relieving the ache deep in her pussy.

"I won't be denied any longer, Moira," his voice deep and guttural; so different from what she just heard. Who was this man that was staring at her now? Her body shivered eagerly. She accepted this man was her husband. Her body knew; there was a link between them that could not be denied. There was no way on this living earth she was walking away without being with her husband again.

"Toren," she moaned.

Leaning her head back she closed her eyes. A strange pull shifted around her body and a slight nausea pushed into her stomach. When she opened her eyes, they were no longer in the lobby of the theater but in a bedroom. She scanned the room quickly to gather her bearings. The bedroom, vast and expansive was decorated with rich Italianate furniture and damask-draped walls. The doors accented with delicate gold inlaid work and painted panels. Rich burgundy walls accented the setting sun in the afternoon and enhanced the room's sensuality. Moira wasn't focused on the remaining intricacies of the bedroom, the only part that held her fascination was the bed. The solid wood frame recreated a sense of romance, far from the emotions she currently felt. The trimmings on the headboard and foot board of the antique bed were handcrafted and highly noted by the intricacies of the designs.

The mattress sunk underneath her a little deeper as he laid her down with himself securely on top. His lips were busy on her neck feasting on her skin. Taking only a quick moment to look around, the nightstands on either side of the bed were pure testament to their lives together. Wedding pictures, individual pictures of herself and Toren in special frames propped on the nightstands. A sharp sting at her neck brought her back from her observations.

"Welcome back," said the hungry voice above her.



“I can’t believe I found you” she said in between moans. “I just...I can’t believe it.”

He smiled sinfully and pulled Moira hard against him as he kissed her passionately, and left her senseless. His mouth left her lips and placed more kisses down her neck as he unbuttoned her shirt and pitched it over his shoulder. With quick work, he removed his own shirt and flung it over his shoulder as well. She laughed as a genuine smile graced his face but it was the strength of his body that held her fascinated. She watched the muscles across his chest move as he helped her out of the rest of her clothes. Fascinated by his shoulders, his biceps and his arms, she wasn’t attentive and didn’t realize he had her completely naked until his hand ran up her thigh. She gasped rapidly and stared up into his eyes. She lay nude to his sight, and every part of her body was screaming for him. When she reached for him he clasped her wrists in one hand and held them tight.

“Not yet. I want you to take a good look at what you’ve done without. I don’t want you to forget this time.”

With his free hand, Toren unzipped his pants. Moira licked her lips as he released the evident bulge pushing against the zipper. She watched as the jeans dropped to floor but her eyes didn’t waver from his masculine form. He appeared strong and confident. She felt his hand let go of her wrist as his thumbs tucked into the waist band of his boxer briefs and slowly pulled them down.

The breath she thought she sucked down exploded in her chest. The cotton slipped past the head of his shaft and slowly revealed a glorious picture of male flesh. Moira couldn’t take her eyes away if she wanted. Her heart thumped hard, her legs trembled, her pussy clenched as the moisture that gathered during their kiss, increased. Moira licked her lips again and saw his length and breadth twitch and swell in reaction

“Oh my,” she breathed out.

Toren chuckled as he once again approached Moira, and laid himself on top of her. His body and cock snuggled deep against her wet folds. He kissed her lips bringing her out of her daze and caressed her breasts. “You said the same thing on our wedding night.”

Before she could respond, he kissed her lips passionately and the temporarily banked desire returned.

“Toren.... more, I need more,” Moira cried out.

She tilted her head up, her gaze once more locked with his. He ran his fingers through her hair and her eyes closed, her skin tingled

under them. There was a moment of tension as her lips trembled and he claimed her lips in a soft kiss. As sweet and gentle as the kiss was, it held leashed passion by a sheer thread. His lips claimed hers again and, once more, his hand gently held the back of her head. Toren's kisses intensified and Moira's world tilted on its axis. A shudder passed through her body as she returned his passion back with equal fervor.

He blazed a trail down her neck as he nibbled and kissed along the way. He adored and sampled the area between her breasts. When he sucked softly and followed with a small bite, she moaned her pleasure. His lips traveled back up her throat then down and over her heaving chest. Her back arched in anticipation. Leisurely Toren licked towards the peaks of her breasts. He made sure to titillate every inch of skin with his lips.

Finally after much teasing, his lips and tongue found her nipple. Moira immediately moaned and arched her body into his mouth. He licked circles around the rose-colored nipples then nibbled the crests, heightened her pleasure before he soothed them with his tongue. Fire raced all over her body and she was sure she was about to die from the pleasure.

Toren's lips left her breasts and took her mouth in a kiss filled with promise of the things to come. His hand traveled gradually downward and teased her breast momentarily before it resumed the original path. His hand lingered on her stomach while he continued his ministrations on her neck and breasts. Moira held on to him, lost to the pleasure. She moved restlessly against him. "Please." was all she could articulate.

His hand drifted between her legs and brushed against her inner thigh. She couldn't keep her eyes open. They were heavily lidded with passion and her lips parted as she breathed in sharply.

He grinned at her and her heart flip-flopped in her chest. Concentrating on his smile and his eyes, she never felt his hand move to cup her pussy firmly. Her hips moved impatiently. She felt the heat of his hand as his fingers traced the outline of her folds. He kissed her as his fingers lazily traced the folds of her pussy. He didn't push to seek more, contented to only touch the outside, and it drove her crazy. She bit her lip to keep from moaning. "Please," she said again and pulled him closer. She needed him. His eyes met hers and she struggled for breath at the heat and fire that flared within him. Her hands tangled themselves in his hair as she arched against him. "I

need you," she whispered brokenly.

Toren slid down and encouraged Moira's thighs apart so he could move between them. He lightly kissed her inner thighs, his thumbs stroked the skin. Moira groaned and rocked her hips. His breath fell warmly on her skin and gave her goose-bumps of pleasure. His hands slid upwards, and his thumbs brushed back and forth against her intimately.

With a ragged breath, Moira reached down and ran her fingers through Toren's soft brown hair. How could a woman forget this? She looked down and watched as he took in her scent, slid his hand beneath her and spread her legs wider. She shook, anxious, waiting. It had been far too long and her body wanted satiation. His tongue licked just at her slit. She felt as he tasted the wetness that had seeped past her swollen folds. He licked her like melted ice cream, long and slow, while his tongue and lips gathered every drop of moisture. With the next pass of his tongue Toren slid in a bit further. His tongue right in between the drenched lips of her sex, but he still refused to touch her clit or her entrance. By the third long lick, Toren was well planted in Moira's pussy.

Heat inundated her senses. She heard his thoughts, felt his arousal in every part of her being and mind. He hungered for her. He was thirsty for her. The taste of her wetness was familiar to him yet it had been too long. His tongue twirled around her clit and dipped into her opening. His hands massaged her buttocks, gripped them to move her closer to his mouth. He wiggled his tongue within her and left no spot untouched. Moira panted and whimpered as his tongue moved upward again. He poked, prodded and licked at her sensitive skin.

When Toren sucked on her clit Moira arched up from the bed and screamed. He kept her right on the edge of climax and slid a finger inside her while he continued to suck and lick her nub.

Moira gasped and gripped Toren's hair with both hands. Her legs trembled around his head. Her pussy gripped the fingers that moved in and out of her pussy rhythmically. The tremors in her stomach fluttered and started to boil inside her. With a few more timely strokes from his fingers and tongue, Toren encouraged her over the edge. She climaxed violently as he pushed her thighs wide and held them down with his hands. His mouth never relented on her clit as he sucked harder. Moira screamed as another orgasm slammed into her and she tugged at his hair. As his tongue continued to circle her twitching clit, Moira panted while her muscles relaxed. Toren moved and her body,

temporarily weak, still hungered for more.

Toren fused their lips together and slid his hard cock into her body. Moira moaned against him when the ecstasy flooded her system. Toren moaned above her. The combination of his sensations and hers pushed her closer to orgasm again. She felt what he felt. She felt eagerness in his body through her thoughts, the sensations of overwhelming ecstasy in his mind. Moira sought out his lips and took them with her own. She whimpered with sheer pleasure of once again intimately being joined with him. The memories never ended as each and every lost question surfaced and was answered.

The taste of her was on his mouth and she didn't care. She enjoyed tasting his unique taste, touching and kissing his full lips. Her hands twined around his neck and rubbed along his back. Her fingertips tingled with the touch of his skin. Toren stroked Moira's face with his hands, his body supported by his elbows.

Only when Moira bucked up and wrapped her legs around him did he move. All thought fled as he began to thrust and she sighed. He started out slow, pulled out until just the head remained then pushed back in. Moira slid her hands on his shoulders and wrapped her legs around his waist as sign of surrender and trust. He groaned softly then began to push deeper.

Toren began a slow withdrawal, and only when he was about to slip out of her did he plunge back in again, grinding his pelvis against hers and filling her deep. He could feel her muscles clutch at him, encouraging him. Her hands moved over his body, along his chest, up around his neck and through his hair. His lips trailed from hers, along her jaw and to her ear where he suckled on her earlobe before fixing his kisses to her neck. He began a rocking motion and each thrust brought him deeper within her. Her gaze never left him. He was inside her now and the feeling of being filled, of being possessed by this man overwhelmed her. Soon he had worked up to a steady rhythm of thrusts. His tongue licked a moist path to her breasts, which he fondled and suckled.

Easily thrusting he picked up the pace, yet he was still careful not to hurt her. His breathing turned harsh and his hips churned faster. Their bodies strained together as sweat mingled and the link inside their minds connected. Her head tilted back and her body met him thrust for thrust.

When Moira opened her eyes, she gasped. Iridescent light flowed through them, around them. She wrapped her arms around Toren

tighter, looked down at their bodies as they moved in unison. The various hues of blue changed to white depending on where she looked.

“Toren?” she asked in a slight panic.

“It’s happening Moira.” He breathed out in her ear as his thrusts increased in strength. “Our life threads are re-connecting.”

“Toren, I’m-” The thought ended on a deep moan. She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. Her nails dug into his shoulders and her legs tightened around his hips. Their bodies were a writhing mass of feelings, pleasure and pain all in one. The pleasure built... and built...plaintive mewls escaped her throat. Toren groaned as he reached down to rub her clit. Moira screamed as she hit one peak and was flung straight into another. She couldn’t take the pleasure as he brought her towards another. She heard his raspy breath in her ear, his touch electric as he gripped her hips tight. With a whine-like screech she came, her body contracting around him.

Toren groaned as her climax triggered his own. His release was swift and hard, every muscle in his body tense as he growled in her ear.

Moira held him tight, her limbs unwilling to release him. They were both breathing hard, their sweaty foreheads touching.

Moira chuckled and planted a kiss on Toren’s neck. “I think I remember you now.”

As a swift smack to her butt greeted their post love-making, Toren groaned and she reveled in the feeling as he stayed in her body, his hips flexed slightly. He kissed her neck and chuckled back, “Still a sweet pain in the neck I see.”

“Toren—”

“You need to see this, Moira.” But instead of continuing, he slid off the wedding band that had forever stayed on her finger. Confused by his interest in her ring, she watched as he pulled the chain that hung around his neck. At the end of this long chain was another ring with the same design that matched hers.

Taking the rings, Toren joined them to complete the infinity symbol. She stared bewildered as the rings fused and expanded in length and size. Within moments, upon Toren’s hand laid the infinity symbol as a movie ticket. Outlined in gold, its delicate iridescence shone as she gently touched it. It was like throwing a pebble into a pond, the image changed briefly; soft ripples but settling after a while.

“Toren, what is that?” She touched the solid object reverently.

Toren moved out of her body and lay by her side as she inspected the symbol in his hand. His hand touched her chin and brought her attention back to him.

“Moira, you’ve been lost to me for five years. I have enemies that have wanted us dead, that have tried to kill you and have failed. Someone is out to destroy us, and more importantly kill you. This is the way home, Moira. If you believe me we’ll return to Liana, where you can see your parents and your family, and I can get a better grasp of just what is going on and why someone wants you and I separated. I can prove to you there that I am your husband but more importantly you will be safe. But you must decide now. Come home to Liana with me, and we will attempt to bring back all your memories, or we stay here and try our best. The choice is yours.”

Moira touched the cool metal at the same time as she considered her choices. “Can I bring a friend?”

“If you must, but upon their own death they will be bound to secrecy,” he flat out answered.

Moira touched the infinity sign reverently, lost in thought. “I don’t think she’ll mind that too much, as long as she can tell me what she really thinks.”

“What is your decision, Moira?” He pushed for the answer.

“I’ll go, but what’s going to happen to us?” She asked still unsure about the rest of her memories.

Wicked temptation flashed through his eyes and the first brutal blow of desire that Toren spoke of hit Moira. She gasped taken by surprised and looked to Toren for confirmation of the truth in his words. Taking her hand, Toren kissed her fingertips and knuckles. “You just got a taste of the Lianan craving and yearning. I don’t think Kasey is going to be with you at all times. I may have to steal you away. You won’t be able to resist me for long my love, once you remember everything about your life.”

“Yes I will,” she said between gritted teeth.

“We’ll leave in the morning. If you wish, we can both tell Kasey about the new...” He raked his gaze over her still flushed state “...development with your memory.”

With swift maneuvering, Toren stole a kiss from his wife. Moira whimpered in want as he devoured her lips, and tasted her with complete confidence and possession. She remembered his kisses and the various ways he liked to give them. The saying was true, the dream paled in comparison to reality. Oh, she was in *so* much trouble.

Pulling her husband into her arms, Moira smiled and sampled the soft lips of the man she was linked to, mind, heart and soul. Toren hands moved down her body and flared the nerves that had exploded with pleasure moments earlier. Though the tempo of their coupling differed this time, she took his hunger with pleasure. Fire flooded her system and the craving and yearning Toren spoke of flooded her mind. Her last thought before she lost herself to her husband's expertise was the recent changes in her life.

A week ago, she was Moira Castle, movie script editor, a woman with amnesia. Today she was Moira McCann, wife to Toren McCann, half human, half Lianan, and wrapped up in something so big, she had no idea where it ended.

She did know where it started; with Lianan, her home and the beginning to this mystery.

**The End**

**Femme Fatale**  
**by**  
**Olivia Lorenz**

When Sophie discovers her sister has been framed for murder, she hires PI Kit Renard – but will he prove to be help or hindrance?

<http://www.triqueta.net/olivialorenz>



**Femme Fatale**  
**by**  
**Olivia Lorenz**

“What the hell just happened?”

Sophie scrambled to her feet, yelping as her bag tumbled from her knees onto the ground to spill out a whole bunch of feminine clutter: lipstick, compact, purse, a spare pair of nylons...

*Nylons? Since when did you wear nylons, Sophie Price?*

Hurriedly gathering the offending items and shoving them back into her bag, she glanced down and saw that she was indeed wearing nylons, and what's more, she'd better be grateful for that spare pair—because what with landing on her ass in the middle of nowhere, she'd just put a run in them.

Last time she'd looked, she'd been wearing a pair of jeans and one of those ironic Hello Kitty t-shirts with a black pullover tied over her shoulders in what she always hoped was a French chic style. Her hair had been tied with a scrunchie because she couldn't be bothered to do anything with it until she'd gone to Sergio's for a cut and touch-up on her roots. She'd hardly been dressed to kill, but she'd only been meeting her sister for a movie-thon at the local cinema.

But now... Now she was wearing a dogtooth skirt suit with a boxy jacket that nipped in at the waist, a pencil skirt that reached to just below her knees, a pair of elegant strappy heels, black satin gloves and what felt like a beret on her head. And nylons. She was wearing nylons, with a suspender belt and everything, and it felt...draughty. Maybe in the right circumstances it could be sexy, but right now was not one of those moments.

Her hair was now a glossy chestnut shade, and it was loose. She could feel it tumbling over her shoulders in elegant waves. It was the kind of style that, if she'd had it done for real at home, she'd have spent the whole night wandering around trying not to move her head.

“Okay,” Sophie muttered, snapping her bag shut. “This is too weird. Too, too weird.” She had another thought and opened the bag again, rifling through it. She opened the compact and glanced into the mirror, checking her reflection. Yes, it was still her. Or at least, her features were still the same, even if the make-up wasn’t. Gone was the ‘nude lips, big eyes’ look she’d been perfecting over the last few months, and in its place was a strong, yet ultra-feminine look: pale matte complexion, a touch of blush, minimal eye-shadow yet plenty of mascara, disdainful brows and bold lips.

Sophie studied her new look. It suited her, she decided, and then she dropped the compact back into her bag and continued to search through it. Where was her phone? God, she hoped she hadn’t lost it again. It had a shell-pink cover that had looked cute in the shop, but in reality it scratched really badly. She was always dropping it and forgetting where she’d put it. Jen, her sister, kept telling her to strap it to her wrist or something, just so she’d know where it was...

“Jen!”

Sophie closed her bag again and stood up, looking around. She didn’t take in any of the surroundings at first: her main thought was for her sister.

Jennifer sat on the side of road, holding her head in her hands. Sophie went over to her, and as she moved, it was as if the world moved, too: as if her few steps across the road towards her sister were a signal for life to begin again.

A car honked at her and Sophie jumped, startled by the antiquated sound. The car was low-slung and black, with running boards along the side, the kind of car only found in museums...or seen in old movies. She hurried out of its way and crouched down beside Jen, putting an arm around her and taking her hand.

“Jen, are you okay?” She gazed down at her sister, who was dressed in wide black trousers and a white jacket with a twisted gold trim. Her hair wasn’t too different from real life: a blonde bob with curls at the ends, a deceptively simple style that took her about an hour to achieve. Now the curls were drooping a little as Jen ran her hands through her hair and tried a wobbly smile.

“Think so. I’m just a bit dizzy, that’s all.”

Sophie frowned. Jen looked ready to throw up. Her skin was pale and her hand was clammy. “Do you remember what happened?”

Jen shook her head and then groaned at the movement. “We were at the movies. Went to see that film noir screening, back-to-back

1940s classics... I remember we went out after *The Maltese Falcon* to get some popcorn..."

"You had a huge hot-dog," Sophie told her. "With extra onions."

"Maybe that's why I feel so sick." Jen huddled on the pavement. "What then? You were going to check the parking meter..."

"And then I decided not to bother because it was raining," Sophie said. "It wasn't just raining, there was a full-blown storm going on out there! I wasn't going to go outside in all that weather just to check the meter."

"I bet we've got a ticket."

"Maybe, but right now we've got bigger things to worry about," Sophie said. "So you don't remember what happened at the start of *The Big Sleep*?"

Jen wrinkled her nose, perplexed. "Of course I do, it's when Marlowe goes to the Sternwood's place and he meets the general in the orchid house."

"Not in the film, silly. I mean you don't remember what happened to us." Sophie looked at her hopefully. "The storm? The thunder so loud you couldn't hear the dialogue? Then something weird happened. I guess a strike of lightning or something must've shorted out the electrics..."

"The screen went all fuzzy," Jen recalled with effort, still rubbing her head. "And then it went dark. You screamed..."

"No, that was you. I never scream."

Jen's smile was weak. "You scream at spiders."

"That's different," Sophie said. "I'm not scared of the dark, or power-cuts, or...or even sudden transportations from one world into another."

"What?"

"Look around you." Sophie waved a hand and tried to give her sister a confident smile. "I don't think we're in Kansas any more, Jen."

The sisters gazed at their surroundings, taking it all in for the first time.

They were sitting on the pavement of a wide street, opposite a bookseller, a boutique and a funeral director's. The shop fronts were painted in dark colours, green and burgundy, and had frosted glass with elegant black lettering and blinds at the doors. The street was clean, with not even a speck of dirt let alone a discarded Coke can or sandwich wrapper. The cars that drove past at speeds that could only

be described as sedate were either black—Sophie recognised Ford’s signature colour, at least—or cream.

The people going about their business were immaculately dressed in sharp suits and classy outfits. Even the down-at-heels looked good. They cast the occasional glance down at the two women, but no one approached them. This was obviously a place where people kept to themselves and tried not to get involved in anything out of the ordinary. Usually that was exactly what Sophie would have done, but this time *she* was out of the ordinary and she thought she could use some help.

It was quiet. No pollution. No queues. The air had a slightly faded quality, like that of a sepia photograph: slightly under-exposed, although they could see things clearly. It seemed to tint the buildings, the cars and the people, creating a feeling of illusion and impermanence. Sophie could only hope that it was, and that she and Jen would soon be on their way home.

Finally Jen found her voice. “Oh, God. What the...? How could this happen?”

“You know,” said Sophie as lightly as she could, “while I’d love to find an answer to that question, I don’t think it’s going to help us as much as an answer to ‘How do we get the hell out of here’”

“It’s...it’s like a noir movie,” Jen said, still looking dazed.

“I’m glad you noticed that. And I’m even gladder that we were watching film noir and not, say, *Star Wars*, because I think that would freak me out even more.”

“Original or new *Star Wars*?”

“I guess original would be okay, there’s always Harrison Ford, but... Why are you asking me such dumb questions? Jen, this is serious!”

Her sister just laughed. “Maybe this is just some sort of hallucination.”

Sophie rolled her eyes. “Right. It’s a pretty damn real hallucination, if it is.”

“Excuse me, but are you two ladies all right?”

The sisters looked towards the speaker, a dapper middle-aged gentleman. He was peering at them from further along the pavement, as if afraid of getting too close.

“See?” Sophie elbowed Jen. “How can it be a hallucination if other people start talking to us?”

“I don’t know. Help me up, Soph.”

Sophie pulled Jen to her feet, putting an arm around her waist to steady her. She smiled at the man who'd addressed them. "Thanks, we're fine. My sister isn't feeling too good, but she'll be okay. Thank you!"

The man shook his head and tutted as he walked away. "Shameless! Women shouldn't be drinking at this time of day."

Sophie giggled, but Jen pushed her hair out of her face and looked up at her sister. Her expression was belligerent. "Did he just say I was drunk?"

"Yes, he did."

"How dare he!" Jen tried to straighten up, but she stumbled over her kitten-heeled shoes and lolled back against her sister. "Sophie, let go. I'm not drunk! Let me tell him..."

Sophie held on to her. "No! If you go chasing after him and say you're not drunk, but you're from the future and that you fell through some sort of time warp into a black and white movie, d'you know what that guy will say?"

Jen blinked, scraping back her hair again. "That I'm drunk."

"Drunk, or crazy," Sophie said. "Come on. Let's find somewhere to sit down. I guess the first thing we need to do is find out where we are."

"In a noir movie," Jen said, and giggled a little hysterically.

"Apart from that." Sophie steered her away from the road. They walked along the street, and Sophie examined every shop front they passed in the hope that she'd see something that would be useful to them. "Help me out, sis. You're the noir fan, not me. Where can we find some information in a time before the internet?"

"I don't feel good, Soph," Jen murmured. "Can we...? I need to sit down."

"Sure, hon." Sophie led the way to an empty bench outside a tall building that advertised itself as the Post Office. She was vaguely aware of passers-by staring at them, but she didn't care. Not when Jen was in such a bad way.

She sat beside her sister, propping her up, and tried to remember what doctors did in episodes of *ER* when they weren't in the hospital and had to attend patients.

"Feel sick," Jen whispered. "My head...it's like I was hit by an elephant..."

"At least there's no elephants in film noir," Sophie tried to joke, but inwardly she was getting scared. Jen was paler than before. Her

face was chalk-white now, and she looked genuinely ill, as if she were about to faint. Sophie had no idea how to take care of her and even less of a clue how to call an ambulance in a place like this.

“Hold on,” she said, giving her a little shake that made Jen moan in protest. “Try to stay awake.”

“Hurts,” Jen whimpered, her eyes closing. She slumped down on the bench.

“I need to get you some help,” Sophie said. “Where should I go? This is a goddamn noir film. They don’t have signs to the nearest hospital!”

“If you want help,” Jen mumbled, “you could try a private eye.”

Sophie stared at her. “What?”

But Jen had fainted.

Sophie tried to make her as comfortable as possible, lying her sister down on the bench. She couldn’t quite remember how to do the recovery position, so she just turned Jen’s head to one side in case she was sick or swallowed her tongue or something like that, and hoped for the best.

While she thought about what to do, she decided to keep talking to her sister just in case she came round. The sound of her own voice also stopped her from going completely crazy, and she didn’t care how many curious stares came her way.

“I’m going to give you five minutes to wake up, and if you don’t then I’m going to have to leave you and go into the Post Office. They might have a phone in there, then I can call for an ambulance. Wonder if noir ambulance guys are hot? Whatever, they’ve got to be better than that dude who picked up Mom that one time when she nearly got electrocuted doing the DIY, remember that?”

She broke her rambling monologue as she spotted a young man with an armful of newspapers strolling down the street, shouting the name of the paper.

“There’s a newspaper guy across the street,” she told Jen. “I’ll go and fetch one. It’ll have the date and if it’s a local paper then it’ll have the name of the place we’re in. There might even be a clue as to how we got here and how to get back!”

She kept her voice bright and cheerful, but as soon as she left her sister’s side she felt the ache of panicked tears. What kind of clue was she going to find in a newspaper, for God’s sake? The best she could hope for was that this whole situation really was some kind of hallucination, as Jen had suggested. Otherwise...

She stopped the newspaper seller and grabbed a copy, unfolding it and looking at the front page.

“That’s three cents,” the vendor said.

“Three cents? Jeez. No way.” Sophie realised there was a plus side to their predicament. At least everything here in—she checked the front page—Grayville, *circa* 1946, would be nice and cheap. Absently, she went through her bag for her purse and handed over a dollar bill. She didn’t bother to wait for the change, but started across the road to rejoin her sister, the newspaper tucked under one arm.

She hadn’t got halfway across when the young man shouted, “Hey, lady! This money’s fake!”

Sophie turned back, shocked. “What? Of course it’s not fake! That’s a genuine dollar bill I gave you!”

He waved it at her, and to her astonishment Sophie saw not the familiar greenback but a perfectly blank note. She went back towards him. “Let me see that. I’m sure I didn’t make a mistake. I have other bills here in my purse. Look!”

She held out a clump of notes, ranging from fives up to fifties, before she shoved them back in her purse. The man stared, seemingly stunned by that amount of money flashed around so openly, but when she went closer to take the defective dollar bill he refused to hand it over, snatching it out of her grasp.

“Back off, lady! This is evidence.”

“Evidence of what?” Sophie pointed at the note. “Look, there’s nothing wrong with it. That’s a dollar right there in your hand.”

He unclenched his fist and stared at it. His jaw went slack and he looked from the dollar bill to Sophie and back again a few times. “How in hell did you manage that trick? I’ve never seen anything like it before!”

“Trick? What trick?”

“You came over here and it’s a dollar again, but I bet if you walk away right now it becomes a worthless scrap of paper. That’s some scam, lady.”

Sophie gave him the stare she normally reserved for the rudest customers that came into the clothes store where she worked. “I can assure you there’s no trick or scam or anything else. That’s a genuine dollar bill.”

The vendor looked at her, unimpressed. “Sure it is. And I’m sure all those other bills you’ve got stashed in your bag are genuine, too...and I’ll bet they all turn into bits of plain paper as soon as

you've made your getaway! What's the secret? Can't be magic. I'm going to have to call the police and report this."

"You're being ridiculous," Sophie told him briskly. She felt around in the bottom of her bag and found a few coins. She dropped one into his top jacket pocket. "Here. Have a nickel for your stupid newspaper. Keep the change."

Thinking that the little debacle was over, she strode back across the street to where Jen lay on the bench.

"Did you hear that?" she asked, even though her sister was lying still and waxen. "The cheek of it! I haven't been so insulted since I was carded on my twenty-fourth birthday...although I guess I should take that as a compliment. But to say I was passing dud notes when there was nothing wrong with them? That sucks. I don't care how cheap things are in Grayville, 1946, we're not staying, you hear me?"

Jen was silent.

Sophie sighed and opened the newspaper. "The Grayville Echo," she announced in doom-laden tones. "June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1946. And today's news is: *Net Closes On Madam Murder*. Isn't that a nice cheery headline! I guess some things never change. Let's see..." She skimmed the opening paragraph of the story and was about to give Jen the shortened version when she heard a car draw to a halt in front of them.

She glanced up, and felt a moment of dread when a uniformed policeman got out of the car. A man in a long trench coat who had a world-weary face and wore a long-suffering expression accompanied him. If ever there was a man to play the role of clueless cop in a noir film, this was the guy.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," she muttered to Jen.

Mr. Clueless came over to her, taking his badge from his pocket and flashing it at her. "Detective Stan Cole, ma'am. We received reports of counterfeit money and attempted fraud."

Sophie spluttered. "That's complete rubbish! I paid that newspaper guy, he had no right to go running to the police."

"Now, ma'am, we take every allegation seriously here in Grayville." Detective Cole put his hands in his pockets and puffed out his chest a little. "From your accent I can tell you're not from these parts, so you might not be aware of how we run things in this town."

Sophie snorted at the display of posturing. "Wow, you got me good, detective. I'm not from round this way at all. So if you'd like to do your civic duty and help my sister here—who's ill and needs



urgent medical attention, in case it's not obvious—then I'd be happy to tell y'all about the so-called counterfeit bills."

Detective Cole blinked. He turned to the policeman and mock-whispered, "Goddamn, another lippy broad. See the progress wrought by emancipation! Never should've given them the vote. Now they think they can mouth off at every available opportunity..."

Sophie sighed loudly. "My sister? Are you going to help, or what?"

Detective Cole stared at her, and then he gestured for the policeman to move forwards and help the young woman on the bench.

"If you could just take us to the hospital..." Sophie began, and then she was interrupted by a yelp of surprise from the policeman.

"Holy God! It's Jennifer Wells!"

Jen stirred and batted feebly at the policeman.

Sophie stepped forwards, shaking her head. She was alarmed when the policeman took tighter hold on Jen than was strictly necessary for a sick patient. "No," she said firmly, "I'm afraid you've made a mistake. She's Jennifer Price."

The detective leaned over Jen and brushed back her hair from her pale face. He made a pleased sound and stood up, his expression now smug with satisfaction. He clapped his hands together. "There's no mistake, ma'am. We've all been looking for Mrs. Wells ever since we received confirmation from the DA last night. We thought she'd done a runner, but here she is! Lord have mercy, this is a fine day."

"I feel sick," Jen mumbled.

"Of course you do—sick because we've caught you."

"She really is ill," Sophie said.

Detective Cole looked at her again. "Who are you?"

"I told you. I'm her sister."

"Sister? Didn't know Jennifer Wells had a sister." The policeman leered at her. "You must be the cute one. Counterfeiting is small fry compared to what this one's up to. I just hope you're not involved in the same kind of racket."

Sophie stared at him, confused. "What?"

"That's enough, officer." Detective Cole waved him away. They watched as he helped Jen into the car.

"Wait," said Sophie, trying to push past Cole. "I'm going with her."

"The hell you are, honey. Your sister's under arrest. She's prime suspect in the murders of five men. Or don't you read the papers?"

\* \* \* \*

Kit Renard took off his hat and tossed it onto his desk. It slid off onto the floor. He shrugged his way out of his jacket and slung it over the back of his chair. Raking his hands through his dark blond hair, he went over to the window and pulled up the blind. It was a hot day, one of the warmest he could remember in Grayville, but not even the sight of a bunch of kids playing hopscotch in the dirt of the parking lot could shake off the memory of those five stiff bodies lying on the slab in the mortuary.

Before he'd taken up investigating, he'd been a cop. He'd witnessed many a grim scene over the years, but there were few things sadder than seeing young men cut down in their prime in an apparently motiveless series of crimes.

Kit snorted. Idly he tapped the backs of his fingers against the glass just over the lettering that declared his name and occupation to anybody desperate enough to part with twenty dollars a day plus expenses.

The cops thought they'd got their main suspect, but he wasn't so sure. He'd had doubts about Stan Cole ever since that weaselling lowlife had been promoted to take his former rank in the force. Stan would always go for the open and shut cases. Hell, Kit liked those too, but he'd been around long enough to know that human nature was a complicated thing and sometimes, just sometimes, there was more than one reason behind a crime.

Kit tugged down the blind again and sat at his desk. For a few minutes he pretended to study a sheaf of papers, and then he gave up. He couldn't fool himself: he knew himself too well. He doodled on the blotter and cast a glance at the clock above his door. Business had been slow lately. The murders had made the townsfolk wary of putting their trust in anyone apart from the cops, and unless he got a call from a contact down at the DA's office, Kit wasn't expecting to find gainful employment any time soon.

Just as he was thinking of locking up and mooching downtown to see if he could find any action, there was a hesitant knock at the door. Kit was so startled he forgot to invite his visitor in. She knocked again, a little louder this time. Definitely a woman, he thought, coming on gentle and then getting all huffy when she didn't get his attention the first time.

He took up his stack of papers and began to leaf through them. When he was certain he presented an image of busy industry, he called out, "Come in."

The door opened and in strode a buxom blonde. She was something, all right. A foxy dame with curves in all the right places. Big eyes that could look real innocent one moment and then smoulder the next. Her lips were a subtle shade of red and her hair was unpinned, worn free over her shoulders. Her skirt suit was tailored to fit her body like a glove, emphasizing breasts, waist and hips in the most flattering way possible.

He let his gaze travel down her body to her legs, and then he smiled. "Excuse me for saying it, ma'am, but you've got a run in your stocking."

He expected her to blush, but instead she made a sound of annoyance and said, "Hell. I'd forgotten about that. Just as my day couldn't get any worse."

Kit swallowed his amusement and waved her to the chair opposite his desk. He watched as she crossed her legs, the perfect-stockinged one hiding the one with the run. They were good legs, trim about the ankle and with nicely shaped knees. He didn't often get to see a woman's knees, not unless they were about to part for him, and so he indulged himself for a moment and let his thoughts roam.

His client's voice cut into his reverie. "I thought PIs were always supposed to be dark."

Kit stared at her. He'd heard some strange lines before, but he'd not heard that one. Was she really going to hire a PI on the strength of a guy's looks? Annoyed by such shenanigans, he shot his cuffs and showed her his wrists. "If you look closely, you'll see the tan I got when I was skiing in Aspen."

She gave him a startled glance. "You ski?"

"No, sugar, I was the one carrying the poles."

To his surprise, she burst out laughing. Not one of those coy little giggles, or a polite sound that was more like a cough than a laugh: this was full-bodied laughter. His opinion of her underwent a swift revision.

"What can I do for you, ma'am?"

"My name's Sophie. Sophie Price." She took off her black gloves and held out her hand.

He shook it, noticing that her palm was cool and her grip firm. She looked him straight in the eye, too: no blushing or simpering.

This lady was not easily fazed. “Well, Miss Price, why do you need my services?”

Her eyebrows rose a little at that, and she looked as though she might laugh again. But then her expression turned somber as she said, “I’m here on behalf of my sister. She was arrested and charged with murder. It’s all a big mistake. The police think she’s someone else, but they won’t believe a word I say. And Jen is too ill to explain things for herself.”

Kit pulled a yellow legal pad towards himself, fished out a pencil from a drawer, and jotted down a few notes. “Your sister’s name?”

“Jennifer Price. For some reason the police here think she’s going by the name of Jennifer Wells.”

He glanced up sharply. “Jennifer Wells, you said? Boy, honey, your sister’s in a whole heap of trouble.”

“I know that.” She gave him a look of appeal, her expression soft. “But I don’t know why she’s in trouble, or what to do about it.”

“You don’t read the papers or something?” Kit dug through the pile on his desk and extricated several copies of *The Grayville Echo*. “Take a look. It’s been front-page news for the past couple of months. Stan Cole and his trained monkeys over at the police department have been running around trying to pin these murders on anyone and everyone.”

“Then why choose Jen? She’s innocent.”

“How do you know she’s innocent?”

Sophie gestured as if the answer was obvious. “Because she’s my sister.”

“That don’t mean a thing,” Kit said. “You can think you know someone inside out, and then you wake up one day to find you never really knew them at all.”

She gave him a piercing look. “Is that what happened to you, Mr. Renard?”

He stared at her. “Kit,” he said slowly. “Call me Kit.”

“Only if you call me Sophie.”

“Right you are, Miss...Sophie.”

She smiled, her eyes gleaming at him, and then she tapped the newspapers and said, “Tell me about this murder case.”

“You really haven’t heard of it?” he asked, and when she shook her head, he leaned back in his chair and thought how best to tell it.

“The first murder was over two months ago. Factory worker by the name of Jim Dobson. He never did anyone no harm, was just a

regular guy. Not what you'd call a catch, money-wise, but Jim was by all accounts a good-looking swell. He had a few girlfriends but nothing serious. I'm sure you catch my drift, honey."

She nodded. "Just a regular guy."

"Exactly. So Jim's out one night with his pals at Baxter's, a seedy little place on the other side of town, and he meets a dame in there. A real looker, or so says one of his pals, but the others don't remember her face too well. But they do remember what she was wearing, and how she fixed her hair."

Kit shuffled through the newspapers to show her the headline about the first murder. "Jim's body is found the next day. The cause of death was strangulation. Motive unknown. Maybe his new lady-friend did it. Maybe it was a crime of passion. The police are stumped."

"Then two weeks later there's victim number two. Patrick Murphy, Irish railroad worker. Big lad. Muscles. Also a hit with the ladies. Same thing happens. He meets a woman in Baxter's and next day he winds up dead."

Sophie rubbed her forehead. "I get the picture. So there's been five of these murders, all on good-looking young men, all with the same MO, I mean, the same method of killing?"

Kit raised his eyebrows. She sounded like she knew what she was talking about. "That's right, Miss Sophie. And all pretty much two weeks apart, too. Cops were posted on the doors at Baxter's, but they're easily distracted and there are a dozen ways out of there if you know the place well. The bodies were all found in different locations, but none of them is too far from the club."

He fiddled with the pencil, drawing circles on the legal pad. "Now this is where your sister comes in. The description of the mystery woman fits her exactly, but it also fits several other women in Grayville. I don't know why Stan Cole is so convinced that Jennifer Wells is the murderer, but I can find out."

"It's completely crazy to accuse Jen of this. Why, she won't even watch *CSI*, she's that scared of blood and guts."

Kit frowned. "What the heck is 'CSI'?"

Sophie looked embarrassed. "It's, er, it's... Never mind, it's not important. Believe me, Jen freaks out at the sight of blood. There's no way she could ever kill anything bigger than an ant."

He lolled back in his chair, lifting a hand to scratch his head. He noticed the way her gaze moved over his chest and he felt a moment

of smug pleasure at her admiration before he realised she wasn't looking at his body. She was staring at the gun holster he wore.

Kit sat forward again and cleared his throat. "Thing is, Miss Sophie, the urge to commit murder is sometimes a little like the urge to make love. You kinda get carried away by the moment."

She wrinkled her nose in distaste. "That's a horrible analogy to make."

"Yeah, it is. People expect us private dicks to come out with stuff like that. It's part of our charm."

"Well, I don't find it charming at all."

"Okay, so charm's overrated. Let's try that again."

Sophie smiled, and his heart skipped, despite his best attempts to squash any kind of attraction to her.

"My sister didn't do it," she said. "It wasn't Jen. It can't have been." Her voice held an odd note in it. "You see, we're not from around here."

Kit fiddled with his pencil again. "So where are you from?"

"Boston," she said. She paused before adding, "In the year 2006."

The pencil snapped in two. Kit stared down at it, nonplussed, and then he tossed aside the top half and made a note with the bottom half.

"Right," he said.

There was a long silence.

Sophie looked at him as if trying to gauge his reaction from that single word, and then she gave a short laugh, clapped her hands against her lap in an attempt to appear carefree, and stood up ready to leave.

"It's twenty dollars a day, plus expenses," he told her.

He saw her surprised expression and cursed himself for being a fool for a pretty face and a sexy body, and then cursed himself again for not upping his fee by another five dollars.

"How many days will it take you to sort this out?" she asked.

"That depends, honey." Kit tapped out a cigarette from its packet and put it in his mouth. He drawled his answer around it. "You might claim to be from out of town, but Jennifer Wells has lived her whole life here. It'll be pretty easy to do a background check on her. Don't worry; I won't rip you off. I'm not one of those guys who claims time when he's doing something—or someone—else."

He was pleased with that line until he caught the flicker of disappointment in her eyes. Usually he liked to give a broad the brush-off before he started working on her case. He wasn't arrogant,

but Kit knew he was a decent-looking guy. Since he'd turned PI, he'd had large number of cases that were obviously engineered to allow his temporary employer, who was almost always female, to get closer to him.

But now he felt like a heel. Miss Sophie Price hadn't tried to cosy up to him. Sure, she sounded a little crazy, what with that line about coming from the future, but maybe there was a perfectly rational explanation for that. Anyway, it wouldn't hurt for him to do a bit of digging on Jennifer Wells, just to see what turned up; and if he could make Stan Cole look like a prize idiot along the way, then so much the better.

Sophie leaned forward and took her purse from her bag. She counted out two hundred dollars onto his desk and said, "I don't want you to work on any other case but Jen's. I want to take her home as soon as possible. That's all yours if you'll help me. Prove my sister innocent, Kit. You're the only chance I've got."

\* \* \* \*

"That's ridiculous."

Sophie put her hands on her hips and glared at the private investigator. So what that he was the most gorgeous guy she'd ever set eyes on; he was also the most aggravating man she'd met, apart from her boss.

Their first meeting hadn't gone too well. First of all, he'd noticed the run in her nylons. That would have been embarrassing enough under any circumstances, but it was worse when the man pointing it out was just short of six feet of pure babe.

Tall, broad-shouldered, and surely from Scandinavian stock, Kit Renard had dark blond hair that flopped endearingly over his forehead no matter how often he brushed it back. His eyes were grey and his features strong; his skin tanned a very pale shade of gold.

She'd been so surprised at seeing a blond PI that she'd come out with one of the dumbest comments she'd ever made to a guy. Fortunately, he hadn't shown her the door, and had actually listened to her case. Everything had gone swimmingly until she'd mentioned the whole time-travel thing.

She'd really thought she'd blown it then. But to her astonishment, he'd agreed to take the case, and that was before she'd offered him the two hundred dollars. She thought miserably that maybe he found her amusing. The thought was almost as depressing as the fact that her sister was wrongfully imprisoned for murder.

Sophie gave herself a mental shake. What the hell was wrong with her? The first order of the day was to get Jen off the hook, not to hit on cute guys.

Now she dragged her mind back to what Kit had just told her: that Jen was not just a murderer but a woman of questionable morals, too. The cheek of it!

Sophie held out a hand. "You have the coroner's report? Let me see it."

Kit gave her a bemused look and handed over a pile of papers. She flicked through them impatiently, not really knowing what she was looking for, until words and phrases started to leap out at her. Words like *sexual congress* and other, more precise terms that stated in cold, clinical language that the five men had had sex just prior to their deaths.

Sophie sniffed and tossed the papers back onto his desk. "That doesn't prove anything."

"I agree," he surprised her by saying, "but it is strong circumstantial evidence. The police have witnesses who'll testify that they saw the victims leaving Baxter's in the company of your sister. Now, it's not impossible that she was the honey-trap, leading these poor saps out for a good time before they got killed, but that doesn't make a lot of sense to me."

"Nor me," Sophie said, sinking down onto the chair opposite his desk. She stared at the filing cabinets, biting her lip as she puzzled it over.

"You see, there's nothing to link these five guys except they're all under the age of thirty-five, they're well-built, and I guess a girl would call them handsome." Kit leaned forwards. "And they all had a reputation with the ladies, so I guess they must've been good lovers, too."

Sophie brushed her hair from her face and looked at him. "I saw their pictures in the papers. Jen hates that type of macho guy. There's no way she'd even look at a man like that, let alone be a...a honey-trap and actually do anything with them."

Kit raised his eyebrows. "Does she hate that type of guy enough to kill them?"

"Of course not!" Sophie scowled. "It's just that she prefers, you know, the more sensitive New Man type."

"New Man?" He looked at her, bemused. "What's wrong with Old Man?"



"I don't have time to make you a list." She got up and walked around the room, crossing her arms. "This morning you told me Jen's description could have fitted any one of several women in the town. Now you seem just as certain as they are that she's the murderer. Care to tell me why, Mr. Renard?"

"Kit. You can call me Kit."

She shot him a glance. "Mr. Renard."

He held up his hands. "Okay, doll. The money you're paying me, you can call me whatever you want."

"Stop stalling."

"Sorry. I didn't want to have to tell you like this. Hell, I didn't want to tell you at all, but..." Kit sighed and scrubbed his hands through his dark blond hair. "Seems like Detective Cole isn't the idiot I thought he was. He found a witness, some early bird out taking his dog for a walk over by the railroad. The dog must've caught wind of something because it raced off, barking enough to wake the dead. The witness followed and saw a body—the fifth victim—lying on the ground. He also saw a woman hurrying away from the scene."

"Being an enterprising sort of guy, the witness tailed the woman. She didn't seem to realise she was being followed. She walked normally, calm as you like, and she went straight home."

"Home?"

"442 Lavender Road." Kit sat back and watched her expectantly.

Sophie shrugged. It meant nothing to her. "What's that?"

He frowned. "It's where your sister lives."

"You mean it's where Jennifer Wells lives."

"They're the same person, Miss Price."

She put her hands on the back of her chair and leaned forward. "You can call me Sophie."

"I know."

They stared at each other until the atmosphere seemed a little too tense for her peace of mind. She started to pace again. "What did the witness do about his dog?"

Kit snorted. "You're a strange woman, Sophie."

"I just want to get all the facts straight."

"I guess he went back and collected his dog later."

"And alerted the police about the dead body."

"Yeah."

Sophie sat back down in her chair and chewed the thumb of her glove. "I don't know. It doesn't fit. What kind of murderer would just stroll away like that? Maybe it was a set-up."

"Murderers can make mistakes," Kit said. "Maybe she didn't realise the witness had seen her."

"When he had a dog barking like crazy? I don't think so."

"I'm just giving you the facts as I see them, honey. Whatever the truth of it is, a woman matching your sister's description left Baxter's with the victim. That same woman—or one fitting the same exact same description again—was later seen leaving the murder scene, and was followed to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Gary Wells on Lavender Road."

"Wait." Sophie straightened up, frowning. "Gary Wells? Who is that?"

Kit gave her a strange look and said slowly, "He's your sister's husband."

"I told you they've got the wrong woman," Sophie said triumphantly. "Jen isn't married."

He picked up half of his broken pencil and started drawing on the blotter. Sophie was starting to notice his habits. This was one of the annoying ones.

"Jennifer Price might not be married, but Jennifer Wells is," he told her, shading in a cube and drawing a pyramid on top of it. "They've been married four years now. And you know something else? Before he set up in business as an auto-mechanic, Gary used to work as a barman at Baxter's."

"Oh, God." Sophie slumped in her seat. She shivered, as if the room had suddenly gone cold around her. She gave Kit a watery smile and said, "This doesn't look good, does it?"

Kit dropped the pencil and looked at her, his expression warm and tender. "I'm sorry, honey."

"You must think I'm crazy," she said with a touch of bitterness.

"Funnily enough, no, I don't," he said, looking surprised even as he said it. "If you were really crazy I don't think you'd be acting so cool. I've met some bad women and you aren't like that. Maybe I'm the crazy one, but I'm inclined to believe you. I don't know how it happened or why, but something made your sister take Jennifer Wells's place here in Grayville."

Sophie rubbed her head wearily. She knew next to nothing about time-travel, having only some vague idea about its mechanics from

old episodes of *Quantum Leap*. “So you think the real Jennifer Wells is in Boston in 2006?”

“Who knows? But wherever she is, she’s in the wrong place and time.”

She looked at him directly. “Why do you believe me?”

Kit held her gaze for a long time, and then he lifted the blotter and removed a folder from beneath it.

“Because Jennifer Wells doesn’t have a sister. At least, not one that’s living.” He took a sheet of paper from the folder desk and held it out to her. “Take a look. This is a death certificate for Jennifer’s sister Sophie. She died of pneumonia at the age of nine.”

Sophie reached out and took the certificate, her fingers numb as her mind whirled with shock. She stared at what was written on the paper, automatically noticing that it recorded her time and date of death—the same time, day and month of *her* birth some fifty years later. She looked up to see Kit watching her with that same tender expression again.

“So you see,” he said, “I’m beginning to believe you. Because according to that, you don’t exist. And yet here you are. Unless I’m witnessing a miracle, there’s something else going on that neither of us can explain, and maybe the only person that can is your sister.”

Sophie pushed the death certificate back into his hands. “But we can’t ask her anything. The police put her in prison.”

Kit took it, grabbing hold of her wrist at the same time. He held her hand, the warmth of his fingers calming her whirling thoughts. “No,” he said. “She sustained a head injury, so she’s in hospital under guard. We can go see her together, if you’ll allow me to tag along.”

\* \* \* \*

They drove to the hospital in silence. Kit owned a black sedan that was sprung like a shopping trolley, and Sophie shifted from one side to the other as she tried to get comfortable. She’d never complain about her old beat-up Lexus again.

As they drove, she cast a sideways glance at Kit. His trilby was pulled low over his eyes and his mouth was set in a tight line. He seemed uncommunicative, so she glanced out of the window.

Grayville Hospital was on the outskirts of town. They passed over the railroad, and Kit pointed out to her the stretch of waste ground where the bodies had been discovered. He didn’t take her past Baxter’s, and neither did they drive by Lavender Road. Sophie planned on making a stop there later, with or without him.

It was a shock to see her sister lying in the hospital bed. They'd given her a room on her own, and a policeman stood on guard outside. Kit had shown his credentials and the cop had allowed them in.

The first surprise was how ill Jen looked. Sophie remembered how pale she'd been when she'd fainted, but now her face was grey and sickly. Her eyes were ringed with dark smudges, and her hair was lank and greasy. Around her head was wrapped a bandage that looked too tight, and Sophie was horrified to see the dark blossom of blood against the stark white.

The second surprise was the man sitting on the far side of the bed and holding Jen's limp hand. Neat and compact, he looked to be about Jen's height. His face was pale and clean-shaven, and he had sensitive, almost feminine features. When he glanced up at their entrance, he looked startled, shying away from the intrusion.

"Who are you?" he asked, recovering himself quickly. "What do you want?"

"I'm Jen's sister Sophie," she snapped. "Who the hell are you?"

Kit snagged her by the arm before she could go much further. "This is Gary Wells," he said by way of introduction. "Jennifer's husband."

She backed down slightly, staring at him some more. Gary Wells didn't look fit enough to be an auto-mechanic, but when she glanced at his wrists she saw that, despite his slight build, he seemed strong. He wasn't an ugly guy, either. Quite the opposite, he was kind of pretty, the type of man Jen went for in her real life, but for some reason, he gave Sophie the creeps.

She sat down on the other side of the bed and took her sister's free hand. "Hey," she said, "how do you feel?"

"Confused." Jen gave her a feeble smile. "Is it true I've been arrested?"

"Yes, ma'am." Kit came forwards, taking off his hat and turning it over by its brim. "Name's Kit Renard, Mrs. Wells. I'm working with your sister to discover the truth of this matter."

Jen's gaze wandered from Kit back to Sophie. There was a glint in her eyes and her eyebrows raised fractionally.

Sophie shook her head and blushed. Was she that obvious?

"From what I hear, Stan Cole hasn't released any details to the press about your arrest," Kit continued. "I can only think that's a good sign."

"Why?"

“Because I know Cole. He’s a glory-seeker, and for him to sit on something like this means there’s a chance he could be wrong. This is the biggest story to hit Grayville in years. Hell, it’s even made the front of the nationals. He wants to look good, and he doesn’t want his big moment spoiled by facts that don’t add up. I bet he’s just waiting for the doctors to give you the all clear, and then he’ll begin his questioning.”

“But I don’t know anything,” Jen said weakly. “Sophie, tell them. I can’t remember anything apart from being in the movie theatre with you. After that it’s all a blur. I don’t even know why my head hurts so much.”

Gary patted her hand. “It’s all right, dear. You’ll remember sooner or later.”

Jen tried to withdraw her hand from his grasp. “I know I’m not married.”

“Poor thing. Amnesia is a terrible affliction. You can’t even remember your own dear husband.” He smiled at her, but Sophie thought she caught an edge of malice behind his caring look.

“Your head wasn’t bleeding when we got here,” she said, clasping Jen’s other hand tight as if to make up for Gary’s presence. “I don’t get it. You look a lot worse now than before.”

“Gee, thanks,” Jen tried to joke, and then she closed her eyes and groaned.

“You should have a sip of water, dear,” Gary said, holding a glass out to her.

“Uh-huh,” Kit said, leaning down to pick up the chart hooked over the bottom of her bed. “Nil by mouth. Look here.” He tapped the chart and hung it back before they had a clear glance at it, and then he took the glass of water from Gary’s hands.

“Besides, the water’s probably old now. I’ll go fetch a fresh glass.”

Sophie frowned at him, but his return gaze was blank and innocent as he went out of the room. With a shrug, she turned back to look at her sister, only to find Gary glaring across the bed at her.

“Jennifer doesn’t have a sister.”

“I do,” Jen said. “I keep telling you, I’m not your wife. I’m Jen Price, I live in Boston and I’m a data analyst in the year 2006.”

He didn’t look at her, but continued to stare at Sophie as he responded, “You’re not well. You don’t know what you’re saying.”

Sophie stared back at him, unafraid. “Jen knows exactly what she’s saying. She’s telling the truth. I’m her sister, and I’m going to make sure everyone in this town knows she’s innocent.”

Gary sniffed and sat back, releasing his grip on Jen’s left hand.

Sophie smiled down at her sister and then looked up as Kit returned with a fresh glass of water. He set it down on the bedside table, brushing past Sophie as he did so. Then he put his hands on Sophie’s shoulders in what she guessed was a show of solidarity. She jumped, startled by the warmth of his palms, and then she relaxed. It felt nice being held by him, even if he wasn’t really holding her properly.

Her mind wandered, and then she jumped again when the door opened and the policeman came in. He told them it was time to go, watching impassively as first Gary and then Sophie said goodbye to Jen.

By the time Sophie went out into the corridor, Gary Wells had gone.

“That guy’s a sleaze,” she said.

“Mr. Wells?” Kit glanced at her as he led the way out of the hospital. “You’re right, honey. He’s as mean as they come. I think Jennifer Wells was misled by his pretty face, because he sure is no angel.”

Sophie frowned, puzzled by the flat tone of his voice. “What do you mean?”

Kit held the main doors open for her. After she’d stepped through, he came close and took her arm. “I didn’t tell you before, but a little bird told me that Gary Wells likes to give his wife the occasional slap now and then, just to keep her in line.”

“What? That bastard!” Sophie tried to pull away from him. “Why didn’t you say so before? Why didn’t that policeman do anything?”

Kit looked stony-faced. “It’s never been reported. My guess is Jennifer Wells puts up with it. I’m not condoning it, honey, but it’s pretty common for a man to raise his hand to his wife.”

“It is in my time, too,” Sophie said tightly, “but at least in 2006 we can get the bastards arrested, take them to court, and ban access. Gary Wells wouldn’t last five minutes in my time. Not five goddamn minutes!”

He held her closer, as if trying to shield her with his body. “There’s something else,” he murmured into her hair. “When I visited your sister earlier, she was unconscious, and she wasn’t wearing that

bandage. I might be wrong, but my guess is that Wells gave her a tap to keep her quiet when Cole came visiting. A dame asleep in her sick bed isn't going to give away any secrets."

Sophie felt her entire body go cold. She stared up at Kit and whispered, "You think he tried to...to silence Jen?"

He nodded. "Seems to me like Gary Wells is hiding something. Look at the way he reacted to you. Hell, he didn't want you anywhere near her."

"Do you think he might try to hurt her?" Sophie's voice was small. "I mean, really hurt her?"

Kit squeezed her arm gently. "I don't know, honey. But to be on the safe side, I told Frank—the cop on the door—to pay extra attention. He'll be sitting in the room with her when any visitor arrives. Frank's a good guy. He was my sergeant when I was part of the station. We go way back. Your sister will be safe with him."

She shook her head dizzily as the new information mixed in with old fears. Grasping onto something, anything, she blurted out, "You were a cop?"

He gave her a distant smile. "Sure was, honey."

"Why did you leave?"

Kit was saved from making an answer as they reached his car. He opened the passenger door for her. "Here we are. Let's go."

\* \* \* \*

Sophie jerked out of her reverie as the car came to a halt. The night had drawn in, and now the street was lit with the pale glow of lamps alongside the brighter fairy lights and neon flashes around shop fronts and business signs.

She blinked out of the window. "Where are we?"

Kit placed his arm along the back of her seat and leaned closer, looking at her with concern. "You were real quiet on the drive back. Given what's happened today, I thought you might be hungry."

"I..." Sophie paused, realising that since she'd arrived in Grayville she hadn't eaten a thing, and last night in the movie theatre—had it only been last night?—she'd just had half a bucket of popcorn. No wonder she felt peaky.

She smiled at him, touched that he should spare a thought for her welfare when she'd caused him no end of hassle. Sure, she was paying him to put up with the hassle, but still... Kit Renard was a gentleman, and she didn't see many of his type of gentlemen in 2006.

"Yes. I am hungry," she admitted. "Thank you, Kit."

He looked surprised and then pleased that she'd said his name. He gestured through the windscreen. "There's a little place I know. You like Italian?"

"Love it," she responded, and was about to get out of the car when he stopped her, putting one hand over hers. Sophie looked up at him, startled; and then her heart fluttered when she realised how close he was to her.

Kit gazed down at her face and then backed off slightly. "Excuse me. It's just...you should let me open the door for you, Miss Price."

Sophie kicked herself inwardly. So now she was back to Miss Price, was she? And she'd been so sure he was about to kiss her! She curled her hands in her lap and watched him walk around the car to open the passenger door.

"Thanks." She took his hand and climbed out of the car. After he'd shut the door, she casually slipped her arm through his. The gesture startled him, but then he moved closer. When he glanced down at her, she could see he was amused, a look of appreciation in his eyes.

"The restaurant's just down here," he said, nudging her in the direction of an alleyway. "Stan Cole likes to think it's run by the Mafia, but Marco and Gianni are harmless enough. They just like living life to the full. The food's great, the wine is drinkable, and they even have a dance floor."

"A dance floor in a restaurant?"

"Yeah. Not as crazy as you might imagine. As I said, the Italians like to live a little. When the restaurant closes, Ruggiero's does a turn as a bar. What with all the goings-on at Baxter's lately, there's been a lot of punters drifting on over to this side of town. Ruggiero's is getting real popular."

Sophie could see the truth of that as they approached the entrance to the restaurant. A small queue waited to go inside, and a taciturn Italian stood on the pavement beneath the awning, checking names against a list.

Any concern that she had about them getting a table was swiftly allayed when Kit moved past the queue with a cheerful word for the doorman. The Italian brightened and nodded, indicating that they could go straight in.

"They know you, I guess," she murmured as they entered the restaurant.

He gave her a crooked smile. "Told you I used to be a cop."



A man with an expression totally the opposite of his colleague outside came up to them. He beamed as if their presence here had made his night. “Kit! How good to see you again, and who is this charming woman? I am so happy, *bella*, to serve you in my restaurant. For you, only the best table... Come this way, please.”

Kit chuckled. “Knock it off, Marco.”

“I never knock anything off, my friend. Come, come, sit here. It is more private. And the menus, here they are. Take your time. From me, you will have a bottle of wine. I will be back shortly.”

Marco whirled off, shouting in Italian to someone on the other side of the room. Sophie watched him go, and then she laughed. Some things never changed. The guys running the pizza takeout on her block were exactly the same.

He returned soon with a carafe of dark red wine, which he poured into their glasses. Then he took a pencil from behind his ear and held it poised over a notepad, looking between them expectantly.

They made their choices, praised by Marco as being perfect for the occasion, and then he gave Kit a knowing grin before he hurried away again.

Sophie lowered her voice and asked, “What’s with him?”

Kit shrugged. “He probably thinks it’s funny. I’ve never brought a woman here before.”

She felt herself blush. “Oh.”

His voice was overly nonchalant when he continued, “This is a place for couples. And it’s never been appropriate for me to bring someone here.”

“Because you don’t do the commitment thing?”

“I try not to. It can be messy.”

“But I’m different, right?”

“Yeah.” He smiled, his face lighting up. “Yeah, you are.”

“That’s good to know.” Sophie couldn’t believe she was flirting with him. She put her chin in her hand and gazed at his face. With its strong lines softened by the candlelight, he looked even more gorgeous than before. She had to get a grip before she made a fool of herself.

“Tell me about you,” she said. “Just over dinner, let’s pretend we’re not client and PI. I want to know about why you left the police.”

He sighed, but did not seem exasperated. “You don’t let up, do you?”

“Not when I find someone interesting, no.”

“Ever thought about becoming a PI yourself?”

“I’m not that nosey!”

“It’s not being nosey, honey. It’s taking an interest.”

“You’re avoiding the subject, Renard.”

“So I am.” He gave her a twinkling grin.

Sophie picked up her glass and tasted the wine, allowing it to linger on her tongue for a moment before she swallowed. She noticed the way Kit’s gaze fixed on her mouth, and so she deliberately licked her lips before she gave him an innocent look. “It still hurts, doesn’t it?”

His expression went from easy desire to puzzlement. “What?”

“Whatever it was that made you leave the police force.”

He laughed, holding up his hands. “Okay. I give up. You’re right, it does hurt. But it was the only thing I could do.”

“What happened?”

Kit pushed his knife around the table, not looking at her. “It’s like this. I joined the force when I was eighteen and worked my way up. I was good at my job. Hell, I even enjoyed it. One time, me and my partner went out to investigate some smugglers running a racket out of the railroad depot. We thought they were small-town operators, but turns out they knew what they were doing. They knew we were coming, and they filled us full of lead. Jake, my partner...he didn’t make it. I was the lucky one. Got shot in the thigh and side. Bullet went straight through my side but they had to dig it out of my leg.”

Sophie stared at him, aghast. “I’m so sorry.”

“Wasn’t your fault, honey.” He shrugged and managed a smile. “Thing was, I held rank by that point. I shouldn’t have gone off like that without back up, but the information just came in and I thought it needed immediate action. So me and Jake went alone. I guess without being too melodramatic you could say he died because of me. I wanted to solve the case and nail those smugglers. I should’ve waited.”

“Everybody has to make a judgment call sometimes,” Sophie said, reaching across the table and taking his hands in hers. “We never know whether it’ll end up good or bad, but once a decision’s been made, there’s no point in worrying about what might have happened if you’d chosen a different path.”

He nodded, smiling a little. “Yeah. Unfortunately the police department doesn’t share your view. There was an enquiry, and while

it was on going, the suggestion was made that I was on the payroll of those smugglers. That I knew we were heading into a trap, and that was why I survived.”

Sophie shook her head. “You were wounded!”

“Good cover, isn’t it?” Kit’s voice was bitter.

“I don’t believe it.” She squeezed his fingers. “You’re a good guy.”

He withdrew his hands from hers as Marco approached carrying two large plates of pasta. After they’d made the appropriate noises of pleasure and Marco had gone back to his other customers, Sophie asked, “So what happened after the enquiry?”

Kit picked up his fork and speared a piece of ravioli from his plate. “There was insufficient evidence to prove the claim that I was crooked. In fact, there was no evidence at all, but the damage was done. Plus my injuries slowed me down and kept me off active duty. I hated being stuck in the station, where people looked at me strange, as if they half-suspected me still. So I quit.”

“And now you’re a PI.”

“Yeah. With a better track record than Grayville police department at catching the bad guys. Stan Cole, the goon who arrested your sister, he got promoted to take my place in the force. I don’t know if he planned it or not. Probably not. Only sheer dumb luck gets Cole anywhere.”

Sophie snorted. “Like being handed my sister on a plate.”

“Yeah.” Kit looked at her. “Now can we talk about more interesting things?”

“Like what?”

“Like you.”

The rest of their meal passed in an enjoyable intimacy. The food was delicious, and Marco kept the wine flowing. Sophie was able to forget the tensions of the day and relaxed, leaning forward to tell Kit about her life in the real world.

She was careful to avoid talking about wars and other disturbing events, instead concentrating on the minutiae of her home life. She shared memories of her family and friends, of holidays and Christmases spent in a log cabin on the Canadian border. She told him about her job and the customers who came in, about her whining boss and her dissatisfaction with her position.

“Do you miss it?” Kit asked as they finished their desserts.

Sophie half-frowned. "Of course I do. It's my life. As soon as we've cleared Jen's name, I guess we'll be able to figure out some way to get back."

"What if you don't?" He looked at her seriously. "What if there's no way back? What if you're stuck here? Do you think you could stand to live in Grayville?"

Flustered by the look in his eyes, she lowered her gaze and fiddled with the tablecloth. "I guess I'd have no choice."

"At least you'd know me."

"Yes." She looked at him. "That's a definite bonus."

"So..." he was trying hard to be casual now, "you didn't mention a boyfriend back in Boston."

"I was taking a break from guys," she said with a smile. "Just temporarily."

"I see." He poured the last of the wine into their glasses and then asked, "So, does taking a break from guys mean you won't dance with me later?"

Sophie laughed. "I think I could manage that."

\* \* \* \*

They lingered over coffee, their deep conversation easing. Sophie felt warm and sexy from his attention. Unconsciously her feet began to tap along with the music that had started about an hour ago over by the dance floor. She hadn't really noticed it before; it had just been background noise. But now she swayed a little in time, turning her head to glance towards the dance floor as she recognised the strict rhythm of the tune.

Kit followed her gaze. "You know how to tango?"

Sophie hesitated. She'd watched *Dancing With The Stars*, so she knew vaguely how it went...and then she had the image of herself falling on her ass again, and she shook her head. "No idea."

Kit grinned. "Nor me. C'mon, let's make it up as we go along."

She remembered what he'd said in the car about waiting for him to open the door, so she sat still while he stood and slid off his suit jacket before folding it over the back of his chair. With a flourish that he tried not to look embarrassed about, Kit held out his hand to help her rise.

As soon as his warm, smooth fingers squeezed hers, Sophie felt a rush of butterflies that she knew had nothing to do with dance nerves. She straightened her back and tried to make her footsteps match the beat of the music as Kit led her onto the dance floor.

Sophie was more used to dancing to throbbing bass, but there was something exciting about the tango music. Kit tugged on her hand and she found herself spinning into his arms, suddenly flush against his crisp white shirt. He smelt of old-fashioned starch and something more familiar: something raw and sharp that awoke a longing deep inside her.

Even though she was wearing heels, Kit still had enough inches for Sophie to have to look up into his eyes. Around them, three or four couples circled the floor; but they stood still, eyes locked and bodies pressed tightly together.

His eyes told two stories, as if he were teetering on the brink of a decision while looking at her. There was almost anger, a hard-tinged questioning that matched the rigidity of his body against her; but behind it was a spark of passion that was answered in the heavy press of his cock along her belly.

They started to move as one: Sophie instinctively stepping back as Kit advanced. Somehow, her body knew just how to respond to his made-up steps, their bodies in constant contact.

Sophie was no virgin, but she'd never come so close to making love to man fully dressed. She'd never believed it was possible to feel like this about someone she'd known barely a day. That sort of thing only happened in the movies, and maybe that was it— maybe she and Jen had somehow tumbled into the screen at the cinema, and this was a movie where the normal rules of love and romance were suspended.

For the first time since they had landed out of time in Grayville, Sophie felt safe. She didn't even think of Jen languishing in that hospital bed, accused of murder. All she could feel was the heat of Kit's body and the quickness of his breathing, which had nothing to do with the dancing and everything to do with their mutual arousal.

As the music swelled on the bridge, Sophie felt emboldened enough to slide her toe up the side of Kit's calf, relying on him for support as she leaned back as far as she could in his arms, arching her pelvis even tighter against his thigh.

He responded by moving a hand from her waist to her rising knee, and then sliding his hand possessively up her thigh.

"You changed your stocking."

Sophie blushed. "Yes."

With a sharp tug, Kit snapped her body up and against him once more. The rhythm of the dance was forgotten as he stared down at

her, his eyes hot with desire, asking a question that Sophie knew could have only one answer.

She had barely nodded her head before his mouth was on hers. His lips were as hungry as the rest of his body, consuming her, igniting the slow-burning passion that she'd felt from the moment she'd set eyes on him.

Kit's hands roamed over her body, one settling to cradle her head and control the depth and force of their kiss. He paused for only a second when Sophie slipped her tongue into his mouth, as if he hadn't felt anything like that before, but then he relaxed and soon their tongues were dancing together as passionately as their bodies.

Their embrace was broken by a cough of disapproval from close by. Sophie opened her eyes, blinking in confusion to see a cold-faced woman being held in the sterile dance embrace of a grey-haired man.

"Oops," she said, putting her hand to her mouth and feeling her lips swollen from his kiss. She giggled, glancing up at him from beneath her lashes as he swept her away from the frowns of the elderly couple.

"Perhaps we'd better go someplace else to finish this," Kit murmured as he led her off the dance floor.

Sophie nodded dizzily, her heart racing. She didn't trust herself to speak.

Kit paused to kiss her again, but gently this time. "Why don't you go and get your purse, honey. I'll just settle the bill."

"Oh no, I couldn't let you pay for it all," she protested. "Let me pay half."

He looked offended. "Can't a guy take a girl out for dinner? Allow me, Sophie. Besides, in a way you are paying for this, since it'll come out of that two hundred dollars you gave me this morning."

She laughed, not quite satisfied, but she decided to let him have his way. Her legs still a little wobbly, she went over to their table to collect her purse and his jacket. She caught the scent of his cologne from the garment and felt a wave of longing go through her.

Clutching the jacket, she turned to rejoin him, only to stop short when she saw Marco and Kit apparently in deep discussion.

"Is there a problem?"

Kit turned to her, his eyes sparking with anger. "You tell me, honey. What the hell kind of game are you playing? These notes are duds!" He grabbed the sheaf of bills from the counter and waved them at her. "These are the notes you gave me this morning. Two hundred

dollars—you counted them out. Nothing fishy about them. And now they're blank. How d'you do it, honey? That's the best scam I've seen in a long time."

Sophie gaped at him. "You think I'm trying to cheat you?"

He flung the notes back down. "What else am I supposed to think?"

"I'll show you. This money is real—as real as I am. Look."

As soon as she picked up the bills, colour and texture flowed back into them. Kit sucked in his breath in astonishment. Marco crossed himself. Even Sophie felt awed by it, especially when she let go of the money and watched the detail fade.

"This happened earlier, when I bought a newspaper," she said quietly. "I didn't understand it at the time, but now I know why. Those bills haven't been printed yet. They belong in circulation forty or fifty years from now, just like me. They're only real when I touch them or if I'm near them. That means..."

"It means they're worthless here." Kit sighed and faced Marco. "I've got a twenty. I'll come back tomorrow with the rest."

Marco looked between the two of them. "That covers the food, no problem. The drinks were on the house. Leave the tip till next time, *si?*"

Kit flashed him a grateful look. "You're a good friend, Marco."

"I try. Goodnight, Kit. Have a nice evening, miss."

Sophie offered him a weak smile and then was hurried out of the restaurant and along towards Kit's car.

"Don't go so fast," she snapped, almost going over on her ankle.

He stopped, swinging her around beneath a lamppost close to his car. "You paid me in notes you knew were useless here."

"I didn't know for sure."

"You had a pretty good guess!"

Sophie hung her head. Kit looked furious, and she couldn't blame him. "I didn't know what else to do. You wouldn't have helped me otherwise."

"I might have done!"

She met his gaze. "Would you? And now what will you do, Kit? Will you drop Jen's case because I can't pay you?"

"We'll work something out."

In a burst of desperation, she said, "I can't pay you in money, but I can pay you in kind."

He stared at her, shocked. "What?"

“You heard me.” She took a deep breath. “We both find each other attractive. It makes sense.”

“No, it doesn’t. My God, Sophie, I want you, of course I do, but not like that. Not under these circumstances. It’s...”

“It’s all I can offer you,” she cried. “I don’t have anything else.”

“You should have your pride,” he told her roughly. “I’m grateful for your offer, and I’d be a liar if I said I wasn’t tempted. I want you in my bed, Sophie, but I don’t want you to be there for services rendered. I want it to actually mean something between us, not some cheap thrill as payment for helping your sister.”

“You’re saying I’m acting like a whore,” Sophie said, her teeth beginning to chatter with nervous reaction. “I’m laying it all on the line here, Kit. I think could be falling in love with you.”

“Then if that’s the case, you’ll understand why I have to say no.”

He brushed past her and opened the passenger door of the car, waiting for her to step inside. “Get in, honey. I’ll drive you someplace you can stay for tonight.”

Crushed by his rejection and his cool demeanour, Sophie lifted her head high. “Forget it. I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“It’s not safe for you to be wandering around on your own.”

“I’ll take my chances,” she snapped.

He rubbed his forehead. “Sophie. Don’t be so damned stubborn.”

“No!” She could feel hot tears gathering in her eyes. She didn’t want to cry in front of him. “Leave me alone, Kit. I can look after myself.”

“For God’s sake, honey. I’m sorry. Let me help.” He came towards her, but she turned away.

“I don’t need your help. Not for me, and not for Jen,” she said. “Just fuck off, Kit. I’ll sort out this whole mess myself!”

\* \* \* \*

Kit was woken by the shrill of the telephone. He reached for it, rolling over in bed to cradle the receiver to his ear. His voice gruff with sleep, he said, “Renard.”

“Morning, Kit.”

The nasal sound of Detective Stan Cole’s dulcet tones served to snap him awake completely. He sat up. “Cole. What can I do for you?”

“Just some routine information,” the detective said. “Witnesses place you at Ruggiero’s last night with the woman claiming to be Jennifer Wells’s sister.”



Kit frowned. He didn't like the sound of this. "Was that a question?"

Cole laughed without humour. "You and Miss Sophie Price were seen leaving the restaurant at approximately 11.35 pm. Do you agree with that statement?"

"Well, yeah." Kit wondered what Cole was driving at. "What's this about?"

"What happened then?"

The lie slipped from his tongue easily enough. "She came home with me."

Cole was silent for a moment. "You sure?"

That second of hesitation told Kit all he needed to know. Something had happened last night, something bad, and Cole believed that Sophie was involved.

He forced himself to laugh naturally. "Sure I'm sure. You think a guy would forget when a beautiful woman came home with him?"

"You obviously have a way with women," Cole said, his voice stiff with moral superiority. "Either that, or Miss Price is a very easy girl."

"Don't talk about a lady like that." Kit felt the urge to punch the detective. "C'mon, Cole. What happened to get you so riled up?"

"Another Baxter's murder." Cole's voice was clipped as he gave out the details. "It happened just after midnight and, as our prime suspect is under police guard at the hospital, then it occurs to me that Mrs. Wells's sister might be desperate enough to get her off the hook by committing a crime herself."

Kit snorted. "Don't you think that's a little far-fetched?"

"Women are strange creatures. Who knows where their minds lead them? Sophie Price could easily have committed this new murder to make us think that her sister is innocent. They're probably working together."

"That's crazy," Kit said flatly.

"Of course it is...if she really did spend last night with you."

"She did. You want a blow-by-blow account of what happened?"

"That won't be necessary. Not just yet." Cole sounded disgusted.

Kit sighed. "Ever have the thought that maybe it wasn't Jennifer Wells in the first place? That maybe you have the wrong woman?"

"You know as well as I do that Jennifer Wells was followed home from the scene of the fifth murder. She practically advertised

her guilt. And now this baloney about a head injury and amnesia... She's faking it, I know she is."

"I don't think she did it."

Cole snorted. "Well, you'd side with your client, wouldn't you? Or should I say your..."

"Don't say it, or I'll hit you," Kit said, very politely.

"Your lady-friend," Cole continued without a beat. "Speaking of whom, is she still with you? I'd like to ask her a few questions."

Kit paused. "She's not here right now. She stepped out to get some groceries. You know I never keep anything in the kitchen here, and we did work up an appetite last night. I guess she'll be back soon, though. I'll bring her down to the station later, how's that sound?"

Cole was silent, apparently thinking about this, and then he said, "All right. You bring her by my office later. I'll have a word with you both. I'll be expecting you, Kit. Both of you."

\* \* \* \*

Kit spent the day trawling the streets of Grayville, searching for Sophie. To his consternation, it seemed as if she'd simply disappeared off the face of the earth. He wondered if the time-travel thing that had brought her into his life had decided to take her away again, but when he called the hospital and heard that Jen was still there, he began to worry about less supernatural events.

He heard nothing untoward from his usual eyes-and-ears. He figured she might even have gone to the police station, but when he dropped by there late afternoon, the desk sergeant said he hadn't seen anyone all day. Kit decided to skip his meeting with Stan Cole. Lying over the phone was one thing; he didn't particularly want to go through it all again face to face. There'd be time enough for answers later, just as soon as he'd found Sophie.

Before he left the station, he made sure he got more information from the sergeant about the latest murder. Apparently it was the same MO as before, but this time nobody could recall seeing the victim leaving Baxter's, let alone in the company of a woman who was supposed to be lying in her sickbed.

"Cole thinks it's Mrs. Wells' sister," the sergeant told him. "I guess it's easy enough for a woman to slip on a wig and imitate another woman, especially when the other woman is her sister."

Kit stared at the policeman and then slapped his hand down on the desk. "That's it! You're right. Absolutely right. Thank you."

While the sergeant blinked after him and asked, “What did I say?” Kit shoved his hat on his head and strode out of the station. He paused on the steps, looking up and down the main street. He had no idea where Sophie had spent her day, but he was damned sure where she’d be come the evening. Now all he had to do was wait.

Kit had never been a patient man, which sometimes led him into trouble in his line of work. But now he was as patient as a saint. As he waited for dusk to fall, he bought a newspaper and went to sit in the window-seat of the local diner. He ordered black coffee and whatever was on special, then opened the newspaper and began to read it slowly.

Last night’s murder had been reported too late to make the early edition, and he was pleased to note that Cole was still sitting on the news of Jen’s arrest. Instead he read about local Grayville events, looking up only to smile at the waitress when she brought his order.

“Slow day, Robyn?” he asked, indicating the almost empty diner.

The waitress huffed. “We’ve only had five people in today, including yourself. Say,” and she perched on the edge of his table to watch him eat, “don’t suppose you could do something for me, could you?”

Kit sprinkled salt over his bacon and eggs. “Depends what it is, honey. I’m working an exclusive at the moment, but if it can wait a day or two then I’d be glad to look into it. What’s the problem?”

Robyn frowned. “It’s a bit strange. Maybe fraud, but I don’t know. A woman came in earlier. Young, blonde, a stranger, dressed real nice. She stayed all day, just drinking coffee and water and picking at her brunch. She was polite. Chatted with me a while, said she was just passing through. She paid and left. Everything was fine, until the next time I looked in the cash register, the bill she’d given me was blank.”

Kit felt a leap of excitement. Sophie had been here. She was all right. He tried to keep his expression neutral. “I’ve heard of that happening before,” he said. “There’s probably not a lot I can do about it. You sure those bills are blank?”

“Completely.” Robyn nodded. “But they were real enough when she handed them over. I’ve handled enough cash to know when it’s a fake, and these were the real deal. Weren’t none of that sleight of hand, either. I watched her the whole time. She didn’t seem like a scammer. Just goes to show.”

“Yeah, it does.” Kit put down his fork to take a sip of coffee. “Leave it with me, Robyn. I’ll ask around, see if I can’t find out some information. Better put those blanks to one side. They’ll do no one any good in the register.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” Robyn slid off the table as the door opened and some customers came in.

Kit finished his food and took another coffee while he did the crossword. When he glanced up again, it was getting dark. He paid for his meal, bid Robyn a good evening, and walked back to his office to fetch his car.

It was a short drive to Lavender Road, a quiet suburban area with chintz curtains, picket fences and a car on every driveway. His black sedan was out of place here. He cruised past number 442 and saw lights on in the front downstairs and upstairs rooms. Kit continued to the end of the street and pulled into a cul-de-sac, turning his car. He killed the lights and engine, letting the sedan crawl back towards the Wells residence.

Then he settled down to wait.

About an hour later, the upstairs light went out in the Wells household, and moments later a figure stepped out through the front door, leaving the downstairs light on. Kit sat up, lifting the brim of his hat to get a better view of the person walking away from the house. It was a woman, slender and elegant in a dark dress with a wrap over her shoulders.

Kit frowned. He wasn’t close enough to see the woman’s hair colour or style. It wasn’t Sophie, that was for sure, and it couldn’t possibly be Jen. Maybe one of Jennifer Wells’ friends; maybe Gary Wells was having an affair with another woman and using his wife’s murder charge to get her out of the way...

He took off his hat and scrubbed his hands through his hair, waiting a little longer. Another half-hour passed and then he saw her.

Sophie hurried along the street, totally focused on what she was doing. She didn’t stop to glance about. She walked directly up to the house as if she owned it, and there she tried the front door. When she couldn’t open it, she looked around, finally crouching down and lifting the doormat. Kit saw the glint of metal as she picked up the spare key and opened the door.

He got out of the car and walked slowly along the road, giving her time to get her bearings in the house. The last thing he wanted to do was startle her, but at the same time he was worried that Gary

Wells or the mystery woman might return. It would be better if they were to team up and search for evidence together.

Kit strolled up the driveway and pushed open the door as silently as possible. He closed it the same way, dropping the latch just in case Wells came home. Then he crept forwards into the living room.

Sophie had her back to the door as she rifled through the bureau. He'd have to tell her never to leave herself so open from behind, but first...

He was across the room in a few quick, soundless strides. Just as he neared her, she seemed to realise she was no longer alone. She began to turn, but he caught her before she could face him.

Sophie almost screamed.

Kit clamped a hand over her mouth, bringing her closer to him. She seemed to recognise him almost immediately, for her body relaxed and she felt warm and pliant in his arms. The scent of her hair tickled at his senses and he felt himself respond. Swiftly he let go of her, willing himself to calm down. This was neither the time nor the place.

She turned and looked at him. "Kit! What are you doing here?"

"Looking out for you."

"I told you, I can take care of myself." She sounded cross, but there was a relieved expression in her eyes.

"I know that, honey. So how d'you feel about ripping off poor Robyn at the diner with more of your 2006 money?"

Sophie blushed, but didn't look away. "I needed to eat."

"You could've come to me," he said reasonably.

Her eyes sparkled. "You made it clear you didn't want me."

"You know that's not true."

"I...I can't just accept your help for free!"

Kit shook his head and sighed. "Are all women in your time this irritating about accepting help from a guy?"

"Not all of them," she admitted. "But I am."

"Last night I told you to have some pride. Now I think you have too much." Kit gave her a quizzical look, willing her to back down and accept him. "Honey, there's a great divide between taking help when it's offered and you thinking that you have to sleep with me in payment."

Her blush intensified. She looked adorable. Then she lifted her chin and got that proud expression on her face, and she looked even better.

“All right, I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking straight last night. The wine, the dancing, being so close to you... Please understand, Kit, I have to clear Jen’s name.”

He rubbed his chin. “You really want to do this, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Would you kill to get her off the hook?”

Sophie stared at him in shock. “Of course not! How could you even ask me something like that?”

Her horror was too genuine to be false. He’d known it before, but now he was doubly sure: Sophie hadn’t had anything to do with last night’s killing. He said softly, “There was another murder last night. There’s no way it could’ve been your sister. Stan Cole thinks you did it.”

Her face drained of colour. She stared at him wide-eyed. “And what do you think?”

“I think you have a very good reason to come here tonight,” he said. “Why don’t you tell me what you were hoping to find?”

Sophie lifted her hands in despair. “I don’t know. I guess just something that’d implicate Gary in the murders. I can’t believe he’s innocent in all this. He’s got to be hiding something.”

“Agreed.” Kit started to search through the other side of the bureau. “I don’t think we’ll find it here, though. Petty cash, expenses, receipts...they could prove useful in the long run, but we need something more immediate. Whatever we’re looking for, we won’t find it down here. Let’s go upstairs.”

He thought she would demur, but she didn’t. Instead she looked at him with respect and asked, “How do you know all this?”

“Years of practice.” He nodded that she should go first. “After you.”

They went upstairs by the light of a small torch Kit always carried with him on a case where breaking and entering was part of the job description. They opened the door to the master bedroom. Kit moved past Sophie and shone the torch around the room quickly, so they could get a feel for its layout.

“The curtains are pretty heavy, but the overhead light may attract attention,” he said, thinking out loud.

“There’s a bedside lamp here.” Sophie picked her way over to it in the darkness and switched it on. It still seemed bright, but before Kit could say anything, she picked up the thin dressing gown lying across the bed and draped it over the lampshade, dimming the glow.

Kit grinned at her. "We'll make a PI of you yet, honey."

Sophie smiled back at him and then turned to examine the dressing table. Kit glanced at its surface, noting the feminine clutter of make-up and jewelry. There was a beaded purse lying to one side, and so he said, "Check the purse. There might be something in there."

It was always strange being in someone else's bedroom when one was there to snoop for evidence of misdemeanours. Kit couldn't help but be aware of the bed. Even covered with an ugly flowery quilt, it was still a bed, and Sophie was standing right beside it as she looked through the purse. Now if this had been his bedroom, then he sure as hell wouldn't be standing there like a lug. He'd have pulled her down onto the quilt and made love to her, slow and gentle...

"Kit. Kit!"

He snapped out of his reverie and stared at her. "Uh, what?"

"I thought you were helping me?"

He felt a moment of embarrassment. "Sure, honey. I'll check the closet."

It was a large fitted wardrobe with three doors. He opened the first one and was confronted with men's suits, shirts and ties. He began to check through the pockets methodically.

"That's strange," he heard Sophie say. "There's nothing in this purse."

He closed the door and went on to the next. "Yeah. Women usually cram all kinds of things into their purse. Maybe she changed it?"

Sophie put it back where she'd found it. "Even if a girl swaps her purse, she'll leave some things in the old one. Small change, bus tickets, an old lipstick. But this...it's almost as if the purse is just for show. I don't know any woman who does that."

Kit grunted but said nothing. His suspicions were becoming more solid by the minute, but he didn't feel ready to act on them just yet. Besides, while he had her almost undivided attention, he needed to say a few things to Miss Sophie Price.

He cleared his throat. "So," he said, "you thought anymore about what you'll do when the case is over?"

"I'll go home," she said, her voice muffled as she bent over to search through the bedside drawers.

He glanced through the second closet, which contained coats, shoes and a few half-boxes filled with jazz records. "Do you want to?"

"I guess."

"That doesn't sound very definite."

"It was easier when this was...open and shut," she said, her tone wry. "I didn't expect complications."

Kit felt his heart bound in his chest as he closed the door. "Complications," he repeated. "Am I a complication?"

"Uh-huh." Sophie turned to face him, pushing her hair from her face. "A pretty damn big one, as it happens."

He tried to contain his emotions, scuffing the toe of one shoe on the carpet. "Last night you said something pretty interesting."

"Yeah?" She raised her eyebrows, playing it cool. "I said a lot of interesting things last night."

"I recall you said you were falling in love with me."

"You're probably used to girls saying that to you, Mr. Renard."

"Actually, no, I'm not. And it strikes me that I hear it so rarely I should do something about it. That maybe I should keep hold of the lady who said it to me."

He thought he saw a small smile curve her lips. "Maybe the lady who said it to you was carried away by wine and dancing."

"That's a risk I'm willing to take," Kit said, pulling open the last door of the closet, "if you'd..."

He stopped, staring into the closet. "Sophie."

She was immediately aware of the change in his demeanor. "What is it?"

"You'd better see this."

He held open the door and stood aside so she could see. Beneath the neat row of fashionable dresses and suits were a stack of boxes. A few were open to reveal the rounded heads of tailor's dummies. Perched on top were blonde wigs, each one carefully styled.

They were all the same shade as Jen's hair.

"My God." Sophie reached out one hand to touch the wig closest to her, and then she snatched it back as if burnt. "It's real hair. But why would Jennifer Wells need so many wigs?"

"It's what I suspected," Kit began, and then he held up a hand for silence as he heard the front door open and close.

Sophie glanced around the room in horror, looking for somewhere to hide. Then she darted across the room, flinging the dressing gown back onto the bed and turning off the lamp. From downstairs came the sound of the staircase light being flicked on, and then footsteps started up the stairs.



Kit grabbed her hand and pulled her with him into the cramped space of the closet. He edged them toward the back wall, shuffling past the wigs without knocking them over. He moved the clothes aside, making room for Sophie to fold tight against him. He pulled the door shut, leaving it open just a fraction so they could see into the bedroom.

They stood together in the darkness, surrounded by the soft fabrics of female clothing and the lingering scent of Jennifer Wells.

Kit held Sophie tight, tucking her head beneath his chin. She leaned against him, the softness of her breasts pressed to his chest. They both went still as the bedroom door opened and the overhead light clicked on.

His heart raced. If Wells came towards the closet, he'd have to act quickly so they could escape. But it wasn't a man that came into the room.

It was a woman: the woman he'd seen leaving the house earlier. Now he could see that she was a blonde, her hair in a cute little bob with the ends curled under. Her dress was sexy but the fit was all wrong. When she reached to pick up the beaded purse from the dressing table, her wrap dropped down and Kit could see the width of the woman's back.

He felt Sophie's involuntary reaction as she saw what appeared to be her sister. Kit tightened his grip on her, unable to take his eyes from the extraordinary scene in front of them. He wasn't blinded by worry for a sibling. He knew that he was looking at Gary Wells dressed up as his wife.

For a few long moments they waited while Gary primped his blonde wig in the mirror. From a distance, and, Kit guessed, after a few strong drinks in a dimly lit bar, Gary could pass as a woman. But what was his motivation to do such a bizarre thing?

Then Gary turned, slinging the purse over his shoulder as he hurried from the bedroom. The light went out, leaving them cramped together in the dark silence until they heard the front door slam closed.

Only then did Sophie let out the frantic, disbelieving sound she'd been suppressing for the past however many minutes. "What the *hell?*"

Kit pushed open the closet door. Taking her hand, he pulled her after him to the window, where he parted the curtains and peeked out.

There he was, Gary Wells, dressed to the nines, strutting along the street as if he were really a woman.

"I was beginning to suspect as much, but I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes," he muttered.

"Kit," Sophie said, "what are we going to do?"

He looked at her seriously. "I don't know, but we'd better do it fast. My guess is that Gary Wells will try to kill again tonight, and we have to stop him."

\* \* \* \*

Sophie was freezing. She clutched the steering wheel of Kit's sedan and huddled low in the seat, all the time keeping her eyes peeled for any sign of movement on the patch of waste ground.

She had no idea what time it was. It felt like she'd been here an age, but it couldn't have been more than half an hour or so. Kit had asked her to drive here after she'd dropped him at the police station. He said he wouldn't be long. She wondered if they'd send out the equivalent of a rapid response unit, or if Detective Cole had to be woken up first.

It was dark, with only a few stars in the sky. Railroad sleepers, packing crates and junk were little more than black shapes merging with the ground. Sophie started when she heard a dog bark. She rubbed her eyes and stared through the windscreen.

Suddenly she saw something. She ducked her head, keeping her gaze fixed to the scene in front of her. A couple emerged from the shadows. Sophie could see the faint glint of the woman's blonde hair. She watched, holding her breath, as the couple embraced. The woman pushed the man back towards a pile of sleepers.

Sophie sat up. She had to do something. Kit had told her to stay put, but there was no way she was going to let a creep like Gary Wells get away with murder and pin it on her sister, or on any other innocent woman. She started the engine, revving it into life. The headlights glared through the darkness, illuminating Gary's passionate kiss with a young man.

They both turned, the man unsteady on his feet, Gary looking confused.

Sophie stepped out of the car and walked towards them, the headlights at her back casting a long shadow ahead of her.

"You disgusting prick," she shouted, her voice tight with anger.

The young man tried to focus on her. "Me?"

“No! Him!” She raised her arm and pointed her finger as if it were a gun. “Him. Gary Wells. Cross-dressing murderer!”

The man stumbled back a few steps, his mouth slack with disbelief. “She...she’s a he?”

“Shut up!” Gary hissed. His made-up face was contorted with rage and hatred as he glared at Sophie. “Meddling bitch! Why couldn’t you leave things alone?”

“Because you used my sister,” she said. “You abused your wife and tried to kill her, and somehow that brought me and Jen back through time to save her.”

“You’re crazy! Nobody will believe you,” Gary spat.

“Oh yeah, and they’ll believe you? A man dressed as a woman? This isn’t Mardi Gras, pal. You’re in the shit now.”

“Interfering woman!” Gary seized the blonde wig and pulled it from his head, hurling it onto the ground. Behind him, the young man gasped, but Gary seemed oblivious to his former prey. Instead he took a few steps toward Sophie, clutching his purse with fingers that clenched and unclenched.

She shuddered to look at them. “You killed six men.”

“With my own dainty hands!” Gary raised them in the air, giggling. His laughter had an edge of hysteria to it. “It was all perfect. Nobody would ever have found out if you hadn’t come along. My wife deserved to die. Then I would have moved away from here to start a new life.”

“You mean you’d go elsewhere for your sick games,” Sophie snapped. “Why did you kill them? What did they ever do to you? They were innocent.”

“Innocent!” Gary came closer, his expression wild. “Men aren’t innocent, my dear. You should know. We girls always know what they’re after. Nasty boys deserve to be punished...”

Sophie stood her ground as he came closer still. There was a good distance between them, but his crazed looks and shrill voice were beginning to get to her.

“Jennifer was unfaithful,” he said suddenly, using his real tones. He sounded sad, blinking away tears. “I don’t know why. She said I was a bad husband. Sure I had to keep her in line a few times, but what man doesn’t do that to his wife?”

“Only losers hit women,” Sophie snarled. “Pathetic losers who only feel like a real man if they can beat up on another human being.

Sad little bullies who lead meaningless lives. Does this sound familiar, Wells?"

He cringed away from her. "She was my wife! My property! But then she met *him*, Jim Dobson. Said she's in love with him, that he treats her nice. I wanted to show her men were all the same. She wouldn't listen."

His face changed and he stood taller, unconsciously adopting the seductive pose of a woman looking for a man. "So one night," he said, his voice softening, "I dressed up in my wife's clothes. I'd ordered a wig made. I thought I looked like her. I went out to where Dobson was drinking with his buddies. He thought I was Jennifer. Called me his darling. Told me he loved me. Asked about the divorce."

Sophie caught her breath.

Gary started crying quietly. "After that, I had to kill him. I just put my hands around his throat and squeezed. It was so easy! And then I went home and comforted Jennifer when she realised that Dobson had left her forever. She never suspected me."

"Then why did you keep doing it?" Sophie asked. She didn't dare glance at her watch. She had to keep him talking, to give Kit and the police more time.

Gary stared at her as if she was simple. "Because I know what women are like," he said. "I knew Jennifer would look for another lover."

"Two weeks after you'd murdered her first one?"

"You're a woman, too. You must understand how I feel," Gary pleaded with her. "I...I liked being a woman. People looked at me differently. Men wanted me. There was a power to it."

"And so you had sex with them."

Gary nodded excitedly. "Don't you understand? I had to know what it was like to truly be a woman!"

"You didn't want to imitate your wife," Sophie said in sudden realization. "My God, you wanted to *be* Jennifer."

His eyes lit up and he advanced towards her in a shambling rush. "Yes! That's it! That's why I thought if I killed Jennifer, I would be able to take her place! So I pushed her down the stairs, but as she fell, she disappeared. I thought my prayers were answered...until the police told me she'd been arrested and was in hospital."

Sophie shook her head, horror and pity warring within her. "You twisted little man. How many lives have you ruined?"

He looked honestly puzzled. "Ruined? How can you say that? I thought you understood me!"

She felt sick. "I don't understand," she said, shaking her head. "You need help, Gary. You need to be locked away so you can't hurt anyone ever again, including yourself."

He stared at her as, finally, police sirens wailed in the distance. Gary took a step backwards, his eyes wide and hunted. "You betrayed me."

"No, Gary. You betrayed yourself."

"Bitch! I'll kill you!" he yelled, spittle flying from his scarlet-painted lips. He grabbed at the purse and from it pulled a lady's pistol.

Sophie gasped. The gun hadn't been there before, and then she realised that he must've come back to the house to collect his purse and slipped the gun inside it at the same time. She raised her hands in the air, but did not show her fear.

The waste ground was splashed with light as three police cars came screeching to a halt, surrounding them. Gary stared around, his expression insane and terrified.

Sophie didn't dare look behind her. She heard the police jump from their cars, and heard a voice shout, "This is Detective Cole. Throw down your weapon."

"No! I'll kill this bitch first!" Gary yelled. He shook off his fear and looked like a man again, and then he took one step towards Sophie.

"Get away from her!"

Sophie's heart leapt as she heard Kit's furious command. She started to turn, thinking that if this was how it was going to end, then at least she wanted to see Kit's beloved face before anything bad happened.

He gazed at her, anguished. "Sophie!"

The headlights from the police cars dazzled her. She thought she stumbled; there was a noise close by her, a sharp, sudden sound like a balloon popping.

And then she was bundled to the ground, a warm, heavy weight on top of her and the familiar scent of starch and cologne enfolding her. She lay there, dazed and winded, hearing distorted shouts and the sound of a fight. Turning her head, she saw the young man from Baxter's in the dirt with Gary, struggling with him as the police ran forward.

It was going to be all right, she realised. They'd got the bad guy. Now she and Jen could go home... She closed her eyes, feeling dizzy.

Kit cupped her face in his hands. "My darling, are you all right?"

Sophie groaned. "I'm fine...I think. Get off me."

He did, but only enough that he could check her over for injuries. Satisfied that she was unhurt, Kit cradled her in his arms. She could feel him shaking.

"I'm fine," she said again, although now she felt a bit wobbly.

"I could have lost you," he kept saying, over and over.

"Kit!" She sat up in his arms and forced him to look at her. She knew what he must be thinking, remembering that day when his partner had been killed and he'd been helpless to stop it. She took his hands, squeezing his fingers, and she smiled at him. "It's okay. We're okay."

"Sophie..." He pulled her to him and kissed her, deep and passionate; she responded, wrapping her arms around his neck to make the kiss last longer, to make it last forever.

They were startled apart by the sound of a cough. Sophie looked up to see Stan Cole standing over them, a wry grin on his lips. He tipped his hat to her and said, "Sorry to interrupt your romantic moment, Miss Price, but you'll have to come with us down to the station."

Sophie allowed Kit to help her to her feet. Leaning against him, she eyed the detective warily. "Of course. And you'll release my sister?"

"We'll even throw in an apology." Cole looked at her with respect. "On behalf of the people of Grayville, thank you for bringing this criminal to justice. I was wrong about you, Sophie Price. You're not bad. Feel free to stick around."

He turned away, shouting instructions. Sophie caught a glimpse of Gary Wells cuffed in the back of a car between two policemen. He looked shell-shocked, but she couldn't find any pity for him now, just relief that it was all over.

The car drove away. Gary didn't even raise his head.

Sophie shivered and then pulled herself together when Kit kissed her cheek. She smiled up at him and together they started to walk across the waste ground towards his car.

"Well?" said Kit after a moment. "Will you?"

She glanced at him. "Will I what?"

He stopped her in the track of the headlights, turning her to face him and holding her gently. "Will you stick around?"

Sophie gave him a cheeky look. "Is that a proposal?"

Kit smiled. "Yeah," he said. "I guess it is."

"Then I guess I will."

He stared at her, disbelief fading into joy, and then he let out a whoop and clasped her to him again. "You're sure?"

"C'mon now, honey," she said, teasing, "don't give me the chance to change my mind. I love you. I belong here in Grayville with you. Besides," she added, "who's going to help you with the business if I don't stick around?"

Kit kissed her, leaving her in no doubt of his feelings, and then together they got into their car.

The sedan was the last to leave. As it turned, the headlights shone on something lying on the ground: the gleaming curls of the discarded blonde wig. Then the car drove on, and darkness reclaimed the night.

**The End**