

FELICITY HEATON



QUEEN OF HEARTS

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- Chapter One -

It was 1875 when he met her, three years since he started walking away, and three years since he'd began following the path. That path had led him to this place, a quiet town miles away from the world that he used to know, but somehow close to it at the same time. The scenery was familiar, a ghost of what he'd known, and the solitude reminded him of home, but the names and faces were all changed. The only thing that would truly be the same was the way the place was run—with the men, the horses, and the cattle.

At least he'd thought it would.

He couldn't have been more wrong.

~

It was cold. His boots were heavy and full of water. The wind drove the rain into his face until he couldn't see. He knew that he was almost there. He'd walked the muddy track from town like they'd told him to, and now he'd reached the ridge where he'd catch his first glimpse of the Blue Plains Ranch.

White lightning forked across the clouds, weaving patterns of thread-like veins against the steel-grey sky. It was so dark out that night must have fallen during his journey. Either that, or this was turning out to be as big a storm as the folks in town had warned him it would be.

As the thunder rolled overhead and another flash of brilliant white illuminated the wide plains below, he caught sight of the ranch house. It sat nestled in the

valley. Its walls of wood were punctuated by windows lit with weak, warm light that looked like a beacon struggling to reach out to him through the heavy rain. He pulled his hat down so it protected his eyes and shielded his face, and set off down the slope towards the little house.

He bent his body against the wind as it whipped the tails of his coat around, dipped his head so his hat took the brunt of the weather and pulled his long coat tighter around him to protect himself. With nothing better to do, his eyes took to searching out the small torrent of water he could hear in the darkness. With every flash of lightning that streaked along the sky, he could see that the water was running down the cart tracks on the road, carrying little rocks and mud down into the valley.

He raised his head and squinted into the distance as a horse's whinny cut through the sound of the wind and rain. He immediately sought out the owner of it, instinct and years of working on a ranch telling him that the horse was frightened by the storm.

He pushed his sodden hat up so he could see better and a bolt of lightning assisted his search by highlighting the horse that he was looking for.

It wasn't alone.

He watched with interest as the rider managed to remain seated on the wildly rearing horse.

~

Jessie held onto the reins tightly as her horse, Ranger, reared again and kicked out. Giving his neck a loving pat, she ignored the fact that her coat had blown open

and her hat was nearly off her head, and focused on calming him. She leaned close to him, letting him know that she was as scared as he was, and that the quicker they got this done, the faster he'd be in the safety of the stable and she'd be in the warm.

She smiled as he snorted and scratched at the dirt, showing her how unhappy he was about being out in the rain, and then urged him onwards towards the cattle pen.

The mud was slick under hoof and she knew better than to hurry him. Letting him pick his own pace, she relaxed back into the saddle and attended to her coat, fastening it tightly around her slim frame and stopping herself from getting even more soaked. She pulled her hat down hard, jamming it onto her head so it wouldn't blow off in the gale.

When they reached the pen, she waited for Ranger to settle before sliding down from his back and grasping hold of him tightly to retain her balance. The wind whipped the rain at her, stinging her cold face as she tied her horse to the fence and then walked carefully to the gate.

Another rumble of thunder echoed out around the hills and she listened to the cattle as they moved. In their panic, they grouped together and pushed against the fence. It creaked and moaned under the pressure, and she knew she had to get them out into the open. They'd be safer on the plain and down by the creek than they were in the pen, and it would give them space to run like they wanted to.

Tugging the gate open, she swung it around and kept behind it, using it as a shield as she waited for the cattle to move.

They didn't.

She glanced up at the sky and looked for a sign that it was willing to assist her. A grateful smile curved her lips as another bolt of lightning hit the hills in the distance and the cattle immediately began to stampede, running out of the pen at breakneck speed and pushing against each other in an effort to escape.

Turning to face into the wind, she held onto her hat as she looked at the pen that contained the other horses. The storm had come in so quickly that she hadn't had time to get them in before the lightning had begun. She'd had to focus on the cattle first, but now that they were taken care of, she could get the horses into the stable.

Another few minutes and she'd be home dry.

Patting Ranger on his flank as she passed him, she battled against the elements and slowly made her way over to the pen. The thunder and lightning continued to clash, the wind driving the rain hard against her, so fast that it was almost horizontal. Reaching the pen, she grabbed hold of the rope around the neck of the horse nearest her and began to lead it towards the gate.

She shrieked as lightning flashed across the clouds directly overhead and thunder boomed at the same time. The horse reared onto its hind legs, its eyes wide with fright, and she lost her grip on the rope. She leapt backwards as the other three horses began to whinny and kick at the fence. Her eyes widened as one of them

kicked at the gate and she saw the old wood starting to give way.

"Don't you dare you little..." She gritted her teeth as she struggled to make it to the gate, and then pressed herself flat against the fence as the horse leapt over it and thundered into the distance, weaving in a zigzag pattern as it panicked. "Spirit!"

She ran to her horse, hauled herself up onto his high back, and started after the runaway. She crouched low against Ranger's back as she pulled her neckerchief up over her mouth and nose to protect them, and urged him on, galloping at full speed into the storm and onto the plains.

~

He watched in curiosity as the horse came bolting towards him and for a moment, he was sure that it was going to run him down. As it closed in, a rumble of thunder caused it to change direction and it cleared him by a few metres. He turned, followed its progress up the hill, and then looked back towards the house in time to watch another horse fly by. It was the one he'd seen earlier—the one with a rider.

His gaze followed the horse, watching the way the rider was skilfully handling it. He couldn't take his eyes off them as they went wide, breaking away from the runaway and coming around over the ridge.

A neigh from the other horse and the sound of closing hooves told him that the rider had successfully cut the runaway off. He stepped to one side as they bolted past him in the darkness, the rider closing in with a lasso ready to fly at any given moment.



Letting the lasso go, she smiled beneath her neckerchief as the rope settled around Spirit's neck, and tugged her backwards. She slowed her horse down and reeled Spirit in, keeping a firm hold of the frightened mare as they approached the ranch house.

She leapt down off Ranger's back and led him straight into the stable with Spirit, putting them both into their stalls as quickly as possible. Keeping a close eye on Spirit, she checked if she had calmed down now that she was safely in the building, and when she was satisfied that the chestnut mare was going to behave herself, she turned to her horse. She rubbed his nose affectionately while heaving a sigh and looking out at the rain soaked darkness.

Walking back out into the yard, she went straight for the horse pen and led them in one by one until they were all in their stalls. She stretched as she slid the bolt into the lock of the last stall door and then shivered as her wet clothes stuck to her skin. She needed a coffee and time to warm up in front of the fire, and then she'd come back and take Ranger's saddle off.

Stepping out into the rain, she drew the stable door closed.

"That's some fancy riding, lad."

She froze as she heard the unfamiliar male voice, thick with an accent that she didn't recognise, and then looked out of the corner of her eye at him where he was standing by the fence. Putting the bolt across the door, she turned to face the stranger as she tipped her hat up and pulled her neckerchief down off her face.

She looked him straight in the eye.

He stared straight back at her, stunned to find himself looking at the face of a woman when he'd been expecting to see that of a young man. His eyes dropped to her hands as she pulled her gloves off and jammed them into her pockets with an air of annoyance.

"Bad weather for walking. You lost?" She turned away from him and started towards the house.

He stared blankly at where she'd been standing. The only sound in his ears was the steady drumming of the rain on his hat and her receding footsteps. Gathering himself, he followed her.

"Looking for the Blue Plains Ranch. Folks in town said it was out this way," he explained as he continued to try to come to terms with the fact that she was a girl and not a boy. She'd handled the horse so well, as though she was an expert wrangler, but she was nothing more than a little woman.

Albeit a little woman that was showing him that she had a temper not to be messed with.

"Well...you found it." She turned a sceptical eye on him as they reached the shelter of the weakly lit porch of her house. He stepped up onto the wooden deck to get out of the rain, and found her eyes skipping over his face and falling to rest on the bag that was slung over his shoulder. "What're you peddling?"

"Peddling?" He felt confused for a moment and then realised that she was still staring at the sack that he was holding. He frowned beneath his soaked hat. "I'm no peddler, miss. I've come 'bout the position."

"Position?" She raised a brow and pushed her hat off her head, letting it hang loose against her back. "The ranch hand position?"

He nodded.

"I don't see a horse," she said and intimated his possessions. "Unless it's damn small and hitching a ride in your kit there."

He frowned as he looked at her and realised that he had been right the first time. She wasn't a girl; she had the air, manners and grace of a boy, and more venom than a viper.

"I had to sell her. Poster said to contact a Mr. Hayden. Now, unless you're Mr. Hayden, I'd like to speak with him." He smiled wide at her as her brows knitted into a tight frown and her eyes grew dark.

Holding his gaze as he pushed his hat up, Jessie ignored the intensity of his dark eyes and brows, and searched them. There was something about him that seemed so familiar, something that made her want to shove him back out into the rain and tell him to get going.

Keeping her eyes locked with his a few seconds longer, she thought it over and relented.

"Wait here," she said as she realised her parents would be angry if they found out she'd turned away an applicant for the wrangler position. It wasn't like they'd had many.

In fact, he was the first, and the poster had been up for over a year.

She took her hat off as she stepped into the house. Placing it down on the side table, she closed the door behind her to stop the rain from coming in.

"Jessie?" her father called out to her and she headed straight into the next room, smiling as the warmth of the large fire hit her. It made the wooden walls of her home look even warmer as the light danced off them, turning them a rich shade of deep gold. The plain curtains had been drawn across the little windows at each end of the room, shutting out the sight of the storm and making the house feel even more snug. She glanced at the rickety staircase that led up to the bedrooms and silently wished she were tucked up in bed.

The older man greeted her with a broad smile when her eyes finally wandered back to him. The grey whiskers of his moustache bristled and his eyes twinkled as he did so.

"Yes, pa?" She leaned against the doorway.

"You get them in?" he asked and she nodded.

"All of them. Spirit got spooked, but she's in now, and behaving." She hesitated briefly as she thought about mentioning the newcomer, and she could see in her father's eyes that he'd noticed it. Realising that she had to say something now, and seeing the tiredness in his round face, she heaved a sigh. It would be good to have a hand around the ranch. Her parents were too old now to be helping and she didn't want her father to feel like he had to keep struggling with the daily chores. "Found a straggler, too, says he's come about the position."

"In all this weather?" her mother said.

She looked at her where she was sat by the fire, her greying hair pulled back into a loose bun and her brown dress still covered by the apron she insisted on wearing when she worked in the kitchen.

"With no horse, too," she added.

"Did you show him in?"

She glanced at the fire and then turned her back on them as she walked towards the door. "I got to see to the horses. The storm looks like it's getting worse, and Ranger needs his tackle taken off."

"Jessica."

She stopped as she heard the tone of her mother's voice. It's command for her to confess everything was as clear as a summer sky, and she knew better than to ignore it.

"He's on the porch," she said without turning around and waited for them to say something. She didn't know why she'd left him there. She'd known they'd be angry with her for not showing him in, but she just couldn't get past her gut feeling that there was something wrong about him.

"We didn't raise you to be rude, Jessie. Show him into the parlour. I'll fix some coffee," her mother said.

She gave her a restrained nod before continuing to the front door.

Opening it, she found the man leaning against the railings and staring out into the darkness.

She didn't say anything as he turned to look at her; she just stepped to one side and held her hand out, showing him that he was allowed to come in now.

The corners of his lips twitched into a slight smile at the stiff way she'd invited him in and she could see that he knew it hadn't been her idea.

He stepped towards her, holding her gaze and removing his hat.

She managed to keep her eyes on his for a few brief moments before dropping them to rest on the rain-soaked wooden boards beneath her feet. Clearing her throat, she looked at his heavily worn boots and wondered just how long it had been since he'd sold his horse. They looked as though he'd walked across half the state.

As he moved past her and into the house, she glanced at the stable and then frowned again as she looked at his back and saw a rifle slung over it beside his bag.

Shutting the door, she kept her jacket on and let her eyes follow his progress into the house. Her mother ushered him into the parlour, offering a seat and the warm welcome that she'd neglected to give. As he sat down, she went to see her father where he was still resting in the other room.

"Pa," she said as she came to stand by the fire, warming her hands and trying not to leave a puddle on the rug.

"What's wrong, Jessie?"

She didn't bother to hide her feelings as she turned to face him.

"Something ain't right about him," she hissed as she snuck a glance at the door to make sure they were still alone.

"Now how did I know you were going to be saying that?" He smiled at her and shook his head.

"I'm serious, pa. What kind of man walks through a storm, and what kind of wrangler has no horse? All he's got is the clothes on his back and a rifle for company. Something ain't right."

Her father looked at her and sighed. "Jessie, dear, just because he doesn't have a horse, doesn't mean he can't work. Sometimes people lose belongings. Sometimes they lose everything but their name and their gun. These are hard times."

She let his words and his sympathetic look sink in. It was wrong of her to judge the newcomer by what he owned, but she couldn't help feeling suspicious of him, like she felt suspicious of every man.

Mary gave an apologetic look to the man sitting at her table as the conversation between her husband and youngest daughter drifted into the room. She poured the coffee in silence and then sat down opposite him, giving him a warm smile.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Tucker. Jessie's had a hard time of it since her brother, Charlie, left home, but it doesn't excuse her manners."

He pulled his eyes away from the door and smiled at her.

"About near broke our hearts," Sue said with a sigh.

He looked at the woman who was sitting next to her mother and tried to look sympathetic as she fluttered her eyelashes at him. He got the feeling that while her brother's leaving may have deeply upset Jessie, it hadn't really bothered her elder sister. He was spared answering by their father walking in.

Immediately standing, he offered his hand to the older man, who shook it firmly and then looked to his wife for coffee. He watched as the man swiftly drank the warm liquid and then placed the cup down on the table.

"What's your name, son?" Frank wiped his hand across his mouth and looked him over.

"Colt Tucker." He smiled and then glanced at the girl he'd met outside as she started to leave the room.

"Well, Colt, it's getting late. We'll talk about the position in the morning. Think Jessie is about ready to show you where you'll be sleeping for now." Frank frowned at Jessie as she opened her mouth to protest and then smiled at her when she shut it again.

"Hope you like horses, Mr. Tucker," Jessie grumbled as she pulled her coat tight around herself, preparing to go outside.

She didn't wait to see if he was going to follow her, she just walked out of the door.

He nodded to each of her family members and then went out into the storm. He could see her heading towards the stable, her arms wrapped tightly around her body in an attempt to keep some of the warmth in. The rain sapped his body heat, the wind making eerie noises as it blew through the fences of the two pens in the yard. He

saw her tug at the bolt on the stable door, using it to pull the whole thing open, and then she disappeared into the shelter of the building.

He walked into the stable and watched her as she opened the door of the stall at the far end and led the horse occupying it out into the open area in the middle of the stable.

He slid the stable door closed behind him, blocking out the weather, and then took in his surroundings. Two lanterns lit the high barn. They cast contrasting shadows that made strange patterns on the wooden walls. The air smelt damp, the heavy scent of wet horse making it hard to breathe at first.

He watched the girl as she pulled the saddle off the horse and placed it down next to the others. Not knowing what to do with himself, he took to looking around. He hoped that she'd realise she was being less than civil and point him in the direction of his bed.

He got the impression that she wasn't happy about him staying, and that she'd fought the decision every step of the way. She'd clearly wanted to keep him out in the cold until he caught his death. The moment she'd revealed herself, he'd seen in her eyes that he hadn't made a great first impression, and that he was going to have to work hard to get past it. There was something about her that spoke of anger and resentment, and he got the feeling that it wasn't all about him and his addressing her as a lad.

Jessie ignored him as he moved towards her. She kept her focus on brushing Ranger down and getting him ready for the night. He was soaked through and covered

in mud, and she needed to get him as dry as possible so he didn't get sick.

Her eyes moved to rest on the man as he leant against one of the posts between the stalls and she realised that he was in as bad a state as her horse was. His clothes were soaked, along with the sack that he was carrying, and he probably didn't have anything dry to wear.

Placing the brush back with the rest of her tackle, she went to the empty stall at the end and grabbed one of the thick blankets off the pile in the corner. It smelt like horse, but it was dry, and it would help keep him warm through the night. Holding it out to him, she smiled as he gave her an appreciative look and took it from her.

"If you don't have nothing dry to wear, I can see what my pa has." She picked up the brush and began working on Ranger again as she avoided the man's eyes.

Colt looked down at his bag and considered asking her to do as she'd offered but decided against it. He'd always been able to make his own way in life, and that had included spending countless nights sleeping outside in the cold and wet. Tonight would just be another one.

"Few more blankets and I'll be just fine," he replied and let his eyes follow her movements as she took the bridle off the horse and hung it up beside the stall. He watched her as she gently ran her hand down the animal's neck and then patted its shoulders lightly. Something told him that she cared a lot about her horse, if nothing else. "He's a fine beast."

She smiled at her horse. "Finest there is. We've been through a lot, me and him, and he's always stuck by me."

He nodded. "Had me a mare just like him once."

She looked over her shoulder and gave him the smallest of smiles. "Then you'll know just what I mean."

He did know. He knew all too well. He'd once come to see his horse as his only friend, just like she saw hers.

She led her horse back to his stall and nodded towards the empty one opposite as she closed the door. "You can sleep in the end stall. It's empty. Not the best lodgings, but I'm sure ma will fix you up with something better soon enough."

"Much obliged." He made his way down to the stall she'd intimated and then looked back at her as she started to walk away.

"We rise early, with the sun." She didn't bother looking at him as she headed towards the door. "Pa will want to talk with you before you start work."

He watched the door slide shut, looked down at the blanket, and then into the stall. It wasn't much, and it was far from comfortable, but it beat sleeping out in the elements.

His eyes moved to the black horse opposite him and he smiled at the name that was carved roughly into the door.

Ranger.

He looked at the other stall doors nearby and noted that Ranger's was the only one with a name on it. Smiling as he stepped into his stall and stripped off his wet clothes, he found himself wondering just what kind of girl Jessie was. She seemed to sway between behaving like a

woman and acting like a boy. He loosely hung his clothes out to dry over the stable wall and then wrapped the blanket around his cold body as he settled down on the hay-strewn floor to sleep.

Closing his eyes, he thought about what work Mr. Hayden would have in store for him tomorrow. By the looks of things, there wasn't another ranch hand around to help the old man apart from himself. A ranch this size would always have a lot of work that needed to be done.

Work that required an early start, just like Jessie had said it did.

Listening to the horses in the pens, he sighed out his breath and drifted off to sleep, waiting for the morning to come and trying to keep his mind off the girl.

- Chapter Two -

Jessie smiled broadly as she pushed open the curtains in her room and saw the golden morning light reflecting off the wet grass of the valley. She finished buttoning up her shirt, headed down the stairs to the parlour, and grabbed her work gloves off the side before walking to the door. She hummed quietly to herself as she went to the stable door and then frowned when she saw it was already open. Her head inclined to one side as she looked around the corner and watched him brushing down the horse.

He was dressed just like he'd been last night but without the long coat to protect him from the weather, and his hat lay on the side. His boots were still as worn as she remembered them, and his dark brown pants matched the near-black colour of his hair. The deep navy of his shirt contrasted against the black leather of his waistcoat. Letting her eyes follow the line of his throat, she smiled absently at the sight of the stubble that was masking the defined curve of his jaw and found her eyes meeting his as they finally came to rest on his face.

She stared into them, unable to look away.

When the horse in the pen nearest her whinnied, he looked straight at it, bypassing her face completely.

Jessie patted Shadow on the nose and then looked at Colt again. He looked far too interested in the horse and she wondered if anything was wrong.

"Breakfast will be ready soon. Didn't think you'd be up this early."

"You said sunrise." He picked up the brush and continued to tend to the horse.

Looking into each stall, she frowned as she saw that he'd fed all of the horses, and it appeared as though he'd brushed them all down, too. With nothing left to do before breakfast, she found herself idly stroking Ranger and trying to think of something to say.

"I suppose I did." She finally managed to get the words out. It had been so long since she'd not had to brush and feed the horses in the morning that she had a strange sensation of emptiness inside her, as though part of her duties had been taken away from her and she didn't like it.

Looking into Ranger's stall, she frowned. He hadn't been fed, and he hadn't been brushed either. She glanced at Colt and found him busy working on Maverick. Her gaze returned to the empty feed basket in front of her.

Had he intentionally not fed her horse?

She frowned as she thought about it. Picking up the sack of feed, she carried it over to the pen and began emptying it into the waiting tray. Ranger immediately shoved his nose into the food, earning himself a dusty covering down his dark face as the feed rolled off him and into the basket. She smiled at how eager he was and took the sack away.

Glancing at Colt again, she realised that he must have left her horse out on purpose. She hadn't bothered hiding just how much Ranger meant to her, and it was

possible he'd seen in her actions that she loved the animal dearly, so dearly that she wanted to be the only one to look after him. He'd mentioned that he'd had a horse like him once. Maybe he understood her need to look after him alone, without anyone's help.

As she watched the smooth motion of his brushing, she could see that her father had been right. Although he had come to them with nothing but a sack and a gun, he evidently knew his way around horses, and people.

"You didn't have to..." she trailed off when he looked at her, his deep brown, almost black, eyes immediately seeking hers.

"It's no problem, was up early and figured they needed tending to." He offered her a wide smile and she turned away.

She watched Ranger as he ate his food, and tried to ignore the way the stony silence that had fallen made her feel. She idly picked at the hay bale nearest her as she struggled for something to say. When she heard her mother calling, she thanked God and started towards the door.

Walking quickly out of the stable, she wondered what had gotten into her. She wasn't usually like this with strangers. Her parents hadn't been lying when they'd said that they hadn't raised her to be rude. It was just that every time she looked at the newcomer and he looked at her, she felt an odd sensation of disappointment in her stomach and a tight ache in her chest.

She stopped just outside the door and looked back at him.

"I'm sure ma is calling for breakfast, and you'll have to be speaking with pa about the work. You can finish brushing him down afterwards."

Colt placed the brush down as he looked at her where she was standing in the entrance to the stable watching him. When he'd first laid eyes on her this morning, he'd been surprised to see that she was still dressed in men's work clothes. He'd been aware of her the moment she'd rounded the corner. The morning sun had made her shadow long, and it had stretched down to where he'd been standing.

She seemed even smaller than she'd appeared last night. The tan pants and cream shirt she wore hugged her slender figure. Her rich brown locks were held back in a plait with only a short fringe framing her face and drawing attention to her eyes. Last night he'd managed to make out that they were dark, but in the early morning light, he could see they were a warm chocolate brown. He still couldn't believe that he'd mistaken her for a boy. It seemed impossible for him to have done so now that he could see her, but at the same time wholly possible. She was dressed like a boy, and with her hat and coat on it would be hard to tell from behind that she wasn't. From the front, however, it was a whole different matter. She could be considered pretty by some. Her features were small but near-perfectly formed, her soft lips were a rich cherry red that seemed natural, and her cheeks had a rosy glow about them that made him think she had a lot of exercise in her life. He couldn't stop his eyes as they moved gradually downwards, taking in the shape of her, from the clear swell of her breasts to the curve of her hips, right down to her dark brown work boots.

They turned away from him and he raised his eyes up in time to see her disappearing around the corner.

Catching up with her as she walked back to the house, he glanced at her profile and wondered if she knew that it was obvious she was intentionally avoiding looking at him. He could see it in her tight movements and stiff posture.

For some reason, she didn't like him, and he couldn't figure out for the life of him why that was. Sure he'd called her a lad, but in most women that would have warranted an hour or two of the cold shoulder. She still had that same air about her as she'd had last night.

There were moments in the stable both yesterday and this morning when she'd seemed like a completely different person. When she was around Ranger, she was feminine, and gentle. However, the moment she looked at him, he felt as though he was dealing with the wrong end of an angry porcupine.

Following her into the house, he smiled politely at her sister and her mother, and then nodded a greeting to her father. He sat opposite Jessie and tried to keep his eyes off her as he drank down his coffee and ate the food that her mother offered him. He just couldn't get his mind off her. It was as though she'd got under his skin and he was unable to rid himself of her, at least until he figured her out. He'd never met someone with so many different sides to their personality, had never met anyone that he wanted to understand as much as her.

When she stood up, he snapped himself out of his thoughts and looked at her father as he spoke.

"Jessie'll show you the ropes. We don't run the place much different from other folks, but you'll need to get the lay of the land. Afterwards, she'll take you into town and get you some things. They'll come out of your wages, but you can't work with boots like those and one set of clothes."

"You don't work the ranch?" His brows knit in confusion. He looked into the old man's eyes as he laughed and shook his head.

"Not for years now. Jessie takes care of it."

His eyes moved to rest on her where she was standing by the door putting her neckerchief and tan gloves on.

"When you're ready, Mr. Tucker," she said without looking at him and then walked out of the door.

He looked at the empty plate that was sitting on the table in front of the chair she'd occupied; it was as clean as a whistle, not a scrap of food had touched it.

"Jessie doesn't eat in the morning. She hasn't done for a while now," Mary explained.

He figured from her solemn tone that 'a while now' meant that she hadn't eaten it since her brother left. Standing slowly, he drew his eyes away from the empty plate and then nodded to each of the occupants of the room before heading back out into the sunshine.

He found Jessie saddling Ranger. She paused to look at him as he approached her and then took the bridle down off the hook.

Slipping it on over Ranger's nose, she buckled it up as she nodded towards the stall at the end.

"Only horse we don't use is Spirit. She's a might fierce when she wants to be, but something tells me you like a little spirit in things."

He picked up his hat from where it sat on a bale of hay and walked towards the horse.

Sudden silence told him that Jessie had stopped her work and was watching him. Glancing across at her, he found her giving him a look that said he was crazy. He smiled. He could handle Spirit.

He approached the deep chestnut mare slowly. He could see in her wide eyes that she had as much spirit as Jessie had said, and that she earned her name. She was scratching at the floor of her stall, occasionally kicking the door to show him that his attention wasn't welcome. Holding his hat out, he let her see that he wasn't going to hurt her and smiled inside as she turned her attention to it. Her heavy breathing was audible in the still morning air as she smelt it and got his scent.

While she was occupied with his hat, he stepped closer to her and held his hand up, letting her catch sight of it before gently running it down her nose. She was as fine a horse as he'd ever seen. Her rich colour was punctuated by a white diagonal blaze across her face and on looking down, he noted that she had strong legs; her hind left one was marked with a white sock.

He looked across at Jessie. She was wearing a stunned expression that told him she hadn't expected the horse to react so well to him.

"We'll take her into town later. Pa McGintley is a brave man, he'll shoe her." She returned her eyes to her work, fastening the last buckle on Ranger's bridle and then

checking that the saddle was secure. She pointed to the pen opposite Spirit's. "Until then you can ride Shadow. He's pa's. The two bays in the middle are Maverick and Jonah. They're Sue and ma's horses. John's too little to be riding."

Colt looked at the dapple-grey horse nearest him and patted his nose. "Shadow."

The horse shook his head and snorted, and he got the feeling that all the horses had as much personality as Ranger and Spirit.

Unlatching the door, he led Shadow out into the open and tethered him to the same post that Ranger was tied to. He smiled gratefully as Jessie handed him the horse's saddle and took down the bridle for him, laying it on the side.

He placed the saddle on Shadow while Jessie mounted Ranger. When she stretched down to untie him from the post, he beat her there. He undid the reins and handed them to her, catching a glimpse of the awkward smile she gave him as she moved past him and out into the yard.

He watched her go and then focused on saddling his horse. He still had difficulty coming to terms with how different this place was to every ranch he'd worked at, even his own.

When he'd first arrived at the Blue Plains Ranch, he'd presumed that she had volunteered to get the horses in during the storm to save her father from having to go out into the cold. Now he'd been told that she handled it all and that her father didn't work. He couldn't believe she was working the ranch alone, tending to the horses

and the cattle, and running the place for her parents. It was no wonder they had been advertising for a ranch hand. From what he'd seen of it this morning, the property was extensive, with plains stretching for miles around and a creek running through it. It wasn't the kind of ranch that one person could work.

He slipped his rifle into the holster and quickly fastened the bridle into place. He untied Shadow and pulled himself up onto his back. A wide smile stretched across his face as he seated himself and took up the reins. It felt good being back in the saddle. He hadn't realised how much he'd missed it. It was as though he'd found a part of himself that he'd lost, and now he was whole again.

He slowly walked the horse out into the yard, placed his black hat firmly on his head, and smiled up at the sun. He hadn't felt this good in a long time.

His eyes sought Jessie.

"You coming, Mr. Tucker?" she called out to him as she waited on the other side of the cattle pen.

"Colt, call me Colt." He smiled at her but it faded from his face when she gave him a look that said she wouldn't be doing as he asked and turned her horse away, heading towards the ridge at a gentle pace.

Urging Shadow on, it didn't take him long to catch up with her. He slowed his speed as the horse fell into step with Ranger.

Jessie relaxed into the saddle, letting her body move with her horse and keeping her eyes fixed on the horizon. Her thoughts returned to what she'd witnessed

in the stable. She'd been joking when she'd said that Colt would like Spirit, and she definitely hadn't expected the mare to respond so well to him. Spirit had been near wild since everyone had stopped riding her. She was nobody's horse to ride. Not since Charlie left. It hadn't been the family's decision either. Spirit had changed that day, as though she could sense the loss of her owner, and was mourning it as badly as herself. She still couldn't understand why Charlie hadn't taken the horse. He'd always been fond of her, but he'd chosen to take the old black mare instead. She often wondered what he'd been thinking that day. Had he left Spirit behind because she was a younger, fitter horse that would be needed by the ranch? It hadn't mattered that he had. She wasn't any use on the ranch these days.

As light flashed off something out the corner of her eye, she looked down at the rifle stowed in Shadow's saddle and then let her eyes move back to the distance.

"It's a quiet place, Mr. Tucker. I don't think there's any cause for being armed." Emphasising his name, she made it perfectly clear to him that she didn't intend to call him Colt like he'd asked her to.

He glanced at the rifle and then at her. "Can never be too careful."

She frowned for a split second at the way he'd said those words, as though she was foolish for not carrying a gun, or naïve by thinking nothing bad would happen out on the plains. She'd been working alone in these fields since she was twenty, and not once had she had a problem. The nearest town was sleepy and small, nothing more than a handful of buildings, and not even on a stagecoach route. Colt was the first newcomer in three years. No one came out this way.

Besides, out here nothing could hurt her, not with Ranger to carry her.

As the dirt of the yard began to give way to the grass of the plain, she let her eyes traverse the scenery, leisurely roaming over the distant hills and following the sweeping bends of the creek. The trees that lined it were covered in young leaves and buds that were just waiting for the right sunny day to open, and the rich green grass below her was dotted with meadow flowers.

She loved this time of year. There was so much promise in the air, promise of new horizons and second chances. It was like the slate of last year had been wiped clean and now it was time to start all over again.

Colt watched the serene smile as it played out on her lips and in her eyes. He could see the happiness in them as they took in the world around them, and he looked there. It was a beautiful place. Last night during the storm he'd had his doubts about coming here, had almost turned back, but now he was glad he'd kept going forwards, following his feet.

He'd not seen rolling meadows so lush and green since he'd left his home, and it warmed his heart to find himself again in a place that felt so detached from the rest of the world. He'd seen enough towns in his time, places that were filled with bandits and danger, places where you had to watch your back every second, to know that Jessie was right about the one he'd passed through last night. There was nothing bad there, but it didn't mean that nothing bad would ever come. One day something would happen and the town would go the way they all do—it would change, and it would become dangerous.

The smell of the wild flowers being crushed under the horses hooves chased away his dark thoughts and he smiled at the scenery as they reached the top of the ridge. He glanced across at Jessie.

She pulled on the reins, easing Ranger into a stop, and narrowed her eyes as she looked out on the panorama.

"Ranch stretches to the hills you can see yonder and a few miles on both sides of the creek." She looked across at him and he took in the size of the land that belonged to her family. "Cattle will most likely be down by the creek. There's a rocky crop of land there that gives them shelter, makes them feel safe. They go there every storm."

He remained stationary as she started down the hill towards the creek. He could see the outcrop that she'd mentioned in the distance a few miles off. The size of the land they owned was as extensive as he'd thought it would be and the green meadow grass was a stark contrast to the last place that he'd worked. It had been dusty land where people had fought over the water so their cattle wouldn't dehydrate. In another state, people would be willing to die for this land, with its lushness and abundance of water. Here, it seemed to be taken for granted. Every ranch that he'd passed had looked as green as this one.

Jessie looked over her shoulder and stopped when she saw he wasn't following her. He was still at the top of the ridge, his eyes fixed on the distance, drinking in the scenery. She couldn't blame him. She always had to stop there to take a breath of the beauty that surrounded her every day. She never got tired of seeing it stretching out in front of her. No matter what the weather was like, it always looked beautiful.

As he started to move again, she let him catch up. She waited until he was next to her before letting Ranger continue his walk down to the river.

“It won’t take long to reach the cattle.” She filled the gentle silence that had fallen between them and then smiled to herself as she thought of something. Tightening her grip on the reins, she looked at the distant trees. “It’ll be even quicker if we gallop.”

Before he had a chance to respond, she was streaking into the distance.

- Chapter Three -

Jessie was out of breath by the time she pulled back on the reins, forcing Ranger into a sudden stop beside the creek. She looked back over her shoulder, her cherry lips curving into a smile as she watched Shadow struggling to catch up. She knew it was wrong of her to race Colt when he had the disadvantage of riding their slowest horse, but she couldn't help herself. There was something irresistible about beating him, something that made her feel as though she was eighteen again, rather than twenty-six.

As he rode down the hoof beaten path towards her, she frowned. For a moment, she could've sworn that she was seeing a different person, that she was experiencing *déjà vu*. She shook her head, clearing it of the image of her brother that had leapt into it, and turned her attention to her horse.

"Something tells me you knew he was old and tired." He patted Shadow's neck as the horse breathed heavily and headed straight for the water.

She just gave him a restrained smile and then looked up the creek to where the rocks began to rise up and meet the hill.

Colt wondered where her real smile had gone—the one she'd been wearing a moment before—and then followed her gaze when she looked upstream. "Reckon they'll be there?"

"They'll be there," she said with conviction and slipped down off Ranger's back, allowing him to lead himself to water and drink his fill.

Colt followed her lead and wasn't surprised when Shadow practically dived into the river. He smiled in amusement at the old horse and made a mental note to challenge Jessie to a race once they'd had Spirit shod. He got the impression that the chestnut mare would be the only competition for Ranger.

Pushing his hat up, he wiped his brow on the back of his gloved hand and then took the rifle out of its holster on the saddle. He carried it with him as he crossed over the shallow river to the other side and used the cover of the trees to sneak along towards the bend, hoping he'd be able to see if the cattle were there without frightening them off.

He spotted movement by the riverbank and in the trees beside it, and looked back across the water at Jessie. She was fanning herself with her hat, taking a moments rest in the shade of one of the larger trees.

Her eyes followed him as he carefully crossed the shallows again and headed over to her. He was about to open his mouth to speak when she smiled knowingly.

"Told you," she said in a matter of fact tone and stood up, brushing her backside down as she walked over to Ranger where he was drinking from the creek. She took hold of his reins, grabbed onto the horn of the saddle, and pulled herself back onto it.

He put the rifle back into its holster and mounted Shadow, giving the horse a few seconds more to recuperate before following Jessie into the trees.

Breaking away from her after a few metres, he moved back out onto the grassland and came in behind the cattle, keeping far enough away that they didn't smell the horse or him.

They were a fine herd. He could see a few youngsters that must have been born last year. They were hiding in amongst the larger bodies of the adults, using them as protection. From the looks of things, a few of the cows were pregnant already. He watched Jessie as she moved through the trees like a shadow, Ranger's black form making him think that he deserved the name of Shadow more.

He looked down at the dapple-grey horse he was riding and mused that he was more like a ghost than a shadow.

He was still musing it when Jessie appeared next to him.

"Seem fine," she said and then looked around them at the sky.

He glanced up at it. It was a rich cobalt canvas and was clear as far as the eye could see.

She brought her eyes back down to meet his. "It's going to be a hot day. Reckon they're best left to graze until we get the pen repaired. We'll head into town, get those things for you and the fixings for the fence."

He nodded in agreement and turned his horse around.

Jessie found her eyes wandering to rest on him as he stared into the distance, back towards the house. He seemed so at home already, as though he'd been there for years, not hours, as though he belonged on the

ranch. She got the feeling that she didn't need to show him the ropes like her father had said. If anything, he could probably show her a few things.

He started to move at the exact moment she did, as though he was linked to her somehow and had sensed her movement before it had happened.

She smiled briefly at him as his eyes meet hers for a split second and then went back to the horizon again. Squeezing Ranger with her knees, she started back across the plain, riding slowly and letting the sun warm her.

When they reached the ridge, Jessie's attention was drawn to the fences of the horse and cattle pens. The old timbers had given way under the pressure of the frightened animals and needed repairing. The other horses would become restless if kept in the stable too long, and the young cattle needed branding soon.

Riding down the slope to the house, she wondered if they had enough wood stored in the stable to repair both pens, or whether they'd have to go out and gather some from the trees by the creek.

She stopped beside the horse pen and dismounted at the same time as Colt did. He tethered both of the horses to the fence for her and she thanked him with a restrained smile.

"We'll have to take Spirit, get her shod for you." She walked towards the stable, smiling as Ranger whinnied and snorted, clearly not relishing the idea of having to travel with Spirit in tow.

Taking down the bridle, she handed it to Colt, not wanting to go near Spirit herself.

He took the hint and the bridle at the same time. He removed his hat and held it out in front of him as he walked slowly over to Spirit's stall. The horse nosed his hat, sniffing it and trying to eat it when he didn't move it away quickly enough.

"None of that," he warned the chestnut mare and held the bridle up for her to see. "You and me are going to get acquainted soon, and you're going to need to be wearing your best dancing shoes, little lady."

Jessie smiled at the way he was talking to the horse as though she was human and then stopped when Colt looked at her. He reminded her so much of her brother. His hair was the same colour, and they were roughly the same height and build. Charlie had always had a way with Spirit, and it appeared Colt had the same magic touch.

Watching him put the bridle onto the horse, she felt a familiar ache in her chest and furrowed her brows as she thought about her brother. She missed him dearly, more than words could say, and it wasn't getting easier with time like her parents had told her it would. She missed him as much today as she had done the day that he'd left them without a word.

She told herself that Colt wasn't Charlie. He didn't act like her brother did. He seemed gentler, more intelligent, and he had a look in his eyes that said he'd never raise a hand to hurt her. She knew her brother hadn't meant to lash out at her that time, but she couldn't forget how it had felt. Sometimes when she was thinking about it, she swore that she could still feel the echo of his strike on

her cheek. He'd apologised immediately, but it hadn't stopped the hurt, and it hadn't fixed the ideal of him in her heart that he'd shattered.

She was roused from her thoughts by Colt leading Spirit out of her stall. He was smiling broadly at her and she found herself smiling back at him, a genuine smile this time, one that cut through the pain and forced its way to the surface before she could contain it.

He wasn't Charlie.

He didn't deserve to have her anger towards her brother taken out on him.

But it hurt so much each time she looked at him, each time she caught a flash of Charlie rather than Colt, and she couldn't stop herself from reacting.

"Something wrong?" he asked as she stared at him.

Her eyes dropped to rest on her feet and she coughed, clearing the confused lump of emotions from her throat.

She didn't say anything. Instead, she walked past him and out into the yard, meeting his eyes for a split second and struggling to hide the hurt she was feeling.

Mounting Ranger again, she busied herself with smoothing the tangles out of his mane as Colt led Spirit out into the yard. She took deep breaths, trying to calm the turbulent sea of emotions inside her and shooing away the thoughts that were stirring it.

She managed to look at Colt as he tied the long rope attached to Spirit's bridle to the saddle on Shadow. When he untied the horses from the fence and held Ranger's reins out to her, she took them with a smile

that she hoped would show him she was fine now and there was no need for him to ask the questions she could see in his eyes.

He held her gaze, clearly trying to see what had upset her in the stable, and then mounted Shadow. He looked across at her, frowned for a moment, and then pulled his hat down so the brim of it shaded his eyes from the bright sun.

"Ma?" she called out towards the house and was surprised when her sister appeared. She frowned at the fact that Sue was wearing her best dress and that she came out all the way to them before asking what she wanted.

"She's taken John into town on the cart," Sue said, her eyes fixed on Colt as she spoke.

Jessie raised a brow. "We're heading into town to get Mr. Tucker some things and get Spirit shod. Tell pa we won't be gone long."

Sue just nodded and continued to smile up at Colt.

He gave her an awkward smile.

Jessie brought Ranger around and made sure Colt was following her before she started towards the road.

Looking back over her shoulder, the frown stayed on her face when she saw Sue waving goodbye to Colt with her handkerchief, as though he was going off to war rather than to town. She rolled her eyes at her sister and then picked up the pace until Ranger was trotting.

When Colt caught her up, she looked across at him. He still looked confused, and she knew her sister had only

added to things, but at least it was stopping him from questioning her about her moment in the stable.

When they were out of sight of the house, and her sister, she slowed Ranger down to a leisurely walk and slumped into her saddle, her body going lax and moving in time with her horse.

She could feel Colt looking at her. Glancing across at him, she saw in his dark eyes that he wasn't sure what had happened back at the house and smiled reassuringly.

"Does your sister work on the ranch?" he asked.

She almost laughed.

"She's too in love with her frilly clothing and courting to be of help," she remarked and then looked down at her tan pants. "I don't hold with frilly clothes, they're not practical."

"Wise words." Colt smiled at her and rolled his shoulders as he settled into the saddle. It had been a while since he'd spent this long on horseback and it seemed that it was going to take him some time to get used to the aches that came with it. He used to be able to spend a whole day riding without the amount of aching that he had after a few short hours.

Looking at the distant horizon, the town was nothing more than a tiny speck marring it. They were only a handful of miles away from it, but it seemed like three times that distance. He decided to use the time to his advantage and learn more about the girl that he'd be working with, and the family that were paying his

wages. Maybe he could discover just why her behaviour towards him changed so rapidly sometimes.

"Your sister mentioned a John..." he said.

She smiled and he got the feeling she'd been waiting for him to mention her family.

"He's the littlest, barely ten but he acts like a grown up," she answered his question before he had a chance to finish it. "You'll meet him soon enough. He's too young for the saddle, but sometimes he rides with me. He'll make a fine wrangler one day."

He took in the sight of her serene smile and waited for her to continue.

"Pa is getting too old to run the ranch now. I started helping out when I was eighteen, and when I turned twenty I took over. Ma wishes he was out the house more, visiting and the like, but he's stubborn."

"Sounds familiar." He smirked at her.

She frowned at him before looking back at the track.

"Sue is nearly thirty. Ma says if she doesn't marry soon, she's going to have to sell her to the next peddler that comes by." Jessie's lips curved into a wide smile.

"She might get a good deal for her," he said and her smile became a grin.

"They all seem nice. You got any other family?" He tested the water to see if she'd mention her elder brother but was met with a firm shake of her head, the smile instantly leaving her lips. Seeing that she wasn't going to mention Charlie, he revealed a little about

himself. "I've got a brother. He's older than me and runs a ranch down in Texas."

"Older than you?" she asked with a mischievous look in her eyes and he knew that she was getting him back for his earlier comment about her temperament.

He was about to answer her when he caught sight of something out of the corner of his eye. Looking at the track ahead, he frowned as he saw a cart rumbling towards them.

The next thing he knew, Jessie was galloping off to meet it.

He rode after her, and as they approached, he saw it was her mother and a young boy. John he presumed.

"Jessie...thought you and Colt were seeing to the cattle?" her mother greeted her.

Jessie ruffled John's sandy hair and smiled when he tried to swat her hand away, his nose wrinkling into a frown.

"Done it. Just got to fix the fence and we'll bring them in for branding and checking," she explained and then nodded to him. "We're going to town to get some things for Mr. Tucker here and get Spirit shod for him. Damn horse seems to have taken a fancy to him."

Mary nodded a greeting to him and then turned back to her daughter. "I put the order in for the supplies, but you'll need to get the fixings for the fences."

"Are you Colt?" The little boy looked up at him.

He smiled broadly as he leant down towards him.

"Depends whose asking," he said in a low voice and the boy smiled.

"John Hayden, but they call me Pip on account of my being so small. I'll be big one day though." John held his hand out.

He took hold of it and shook it firmly, noting the way the boy's eyes widened when he saw the size difference in their hands.

"Nice to be making your acquaintance, Pip." Colt tipped his hat at him and then watched as John looked at the rifle holstered in his saddle.

"Is that real?" John's eyes sparkled with wonder as he reached out to touch it but Colt moved Shadow backwards a few steps, placing it out of his grasp.

"And dangerous, too." He gave him a stern look that warned him not to go near his rifle. When he looked over at Jessie, he found approval written in her expression and realised she'd been watching him the whole time.

"We best get going," she said as her eyes left his. She ruffled John's hair again and smiled as he grumbled, pushing her hand away. "Shouldn't be long."

"Mrs. Hayden. Pip." Colt nodded to both of them as he began to move off.

"Call me Mary." Mary smiled at him.

He nodded again and then rode off beside Jessie.

"I like him." John turned around and knelt on the seat, watching his sister and the man riding into the distance.

“He’s a good man, can see that just by looking at him. I think Jessie likes working with him.”

John looked up at his mother and smiled broadly. “He’s going to be marrying her.”

His mother looked stunned by his announcement and her face lit up with laughter as though he’d said something funny. She patted his knee, still smiling as she kept her eyes on the road ahead

“We’ll see.”

- Chapter Four -

Jessie tethered Ranger to the bar outside the general store and waited for Colt to tie Shadow and Spirit up before heading inside. She looked around at the array of goods that were displayed neatly in groups on the dark wooden shelves and in front of the two counters. From shirts to guns to food, everything had its section of the store. Walking to the back, she rapped her knuckles on the counter and smiled as the owner appeared. He was a slim man, around the same age as her father with similar grey hair. Ever since she was small, he'd always looked the same. He always wore black, always had a smile for her, and always said the same thing when she came in.

"Whatever it is, we ain't got none." Ed grinned at her as she gave him an unimpressed look, and then frowned at something behind her. "Looking for something, son?"

She quickly looked over her shoulder at Colt where he was standing holding a boot.

"It's fine, Ed. That's Mr. Tucker. He's come to work the ranch." She watched as Colt put the boot down and walked over to them, pulling his black gloves off as he did so.

Ed eyed the hand Colt extended to him and then shook it. "What can we do you for, Mr. Tucker?"

"It's Colt, and I need some work clothes." Colt put his gloves into his pockets.

"Especially boots," Jessie added and then smiled as Ed shook his head at the state of Colt's footwear.

"That the sole reason for coming all this way?" Ed asked her as she started looking over the nails and fixings that were lining the shelves behind him.

"Cattle got spooked last night, and Spirit broke the fence again, needs mending pretty badly. Ma said to get some fixings." She nodded at the nails. "Same as last time. Two boxes."

"I'll get those for you. Beth is out today, so your friend will have to put in an order for his clothes."

"I'll give him a hand," she said as she turned towards Colt and found him frowning at the work clothes again.

As Ed went into the back, she navigated the wooden crates that were displaying goods in the centre of the room and walked over to the other counter where Colt was standing.

She looked over his shoulder at the light blue shirt and screwed her face up.

He glanced down at her and caught the expression on her face. "Too pale?"

"Wise words." She repeated his earlier words about her choice of clothing and walked over to the boots.

Watching her as she sorted through the choices of footwear, Colt tried to picture her in a dress and found that he couldn't. She didn't seem to suit the fancy clothing that women liked to wear. She looked at home in a pair of pants and a shirt, and she had been right

when she'd said it was the sensible option when working on a ranch.

Writing his order down, he walked over to her where she was looking out of the window and followed her gaze.

"You know them?" he asked as he stared at the three men opposite. They were laughing and pushing each other around as they stumbled out of the saloon.

"Used to," she answered and then turned away from him.

Colt watched them a moment longer and then looked at her as she went back to the counter. He scratched his neck as she plastered a wide smile on her face in time for Ed to appear from the back, and then walked over to them. Placing the piece of paper down, he leant against the counter as the man read it and then nodded.

"We'll have those ready for you by the end of the week." Ed put the order list with the others and then pushed the boxes of nails across the counter-top to Jessie. "All on the account?"

She nodded and picked up the two boxes. "Thanks, Ed."

"Send my regards to your father...and Jessie?" He caught her attention and smiled as she turned back to look at him. "Don't wait so long before dropping in next time."

She half smiled and nodded.

Walking out of the store behind her, Colt looked across the square at the three men and then at Jessie as she put the boxes into her saddlebag.

She untied Ranger and led him around into the wide dirt road that cut through town, her eyes remaining locked on her horse. "We can walk to the blacksmith."

Untying his two horses, he kept a tight hold of them as they started to walk along the road towards the other end of town. As they approached the three men, he found them staring at him and wondered if it had something to do with him being a newcomer. Looking around, he realised that they were drawing the attention of a lot of the people who were passing by and then noticed that none of them were looking at him.

They were staring at Jessie.

He looked at her where she was walking with her head bent, her eyes fixed on the muddy floor, and then across at the three men as they leant towards each other, whispering.

He got the impression that she didn't come into town much, and he could see why if she was greeted like this every time. The man in the store had told her not to wait so long before coming back again, and he wondered how long it had been.

Frowning at the three men as they passed them, he let his eyes meet the ringleader's and held his gaze until the horses blocked his view of them. When they were far enough away, he glanced over his shoulder at them and saw that they were staring at him now, their faces no longer full of laughter, and frowns tightly knitting their brows.

Something told him that not everyone in this town was as nice and peaceful as Jessie believed them to be.

Looking up as he heard a creaking noise, he saw the sign for the blacksmith swinging in the gentle breeze. Tying the horses up, he followed Jessie as she walked into the dark building that looked like nothing more than an old wooden barn.

"Pa McGintley?" Jessie called out to him. The heat was stifling and she took her hat off as she walked further in, fanning herself with it. Her eyes scanned the darkness that was punctuated by the brightly burning fires, their orange embers speckled with flecks of black. The smell of burnt wood filled the air, mixing with the thick smoke and the scent of metal.

She let her eyes run over the tools that lined the walls and the stacks of iron that were sitting in wooden half barrels, waiting to be turned into horse shoes.

"Jessie? Is that really you?" A voice sounded out to her from the recesses of the room and she smiled at the familiar tone.

"It's me," she replied, looking at Colt as he idly ran his fingers over the hammer and tongs on the anvil, his eyes absorbing the scene around them.

"What brings you here?" The old man scratched his long dark beard as he came forwards, out of the shadows. He smiled at her.

"Spirit needs shoeing," she said and then nodded to Colt. "This is Mr. Tucker. He's the new ranch hand. He's going to be riding Spirit."

"Then he's a brave soul." Pa McGintley eyed him closely and then smoothed his long hair back. It was starting to

recede now that the years were creeping on, but he still insisted on keeping it long.

She could never understand how he could bear all the heat when he had so much hair.

"Bring her in and tie her out the back." He walked to the back door and pulled it open, giving her a smile as she assisted him.

Her eyes followed Colt as he led Spirit in and tied her up out the back. She could see how tense the horse was as Colt gently stroked her nose. Spirit snorted quietly, her nostrils wide as she took in all the new smells and sounds.

Pa McGintley picked up Spirit's left hind leg and assessed the size of her hooves. He gently placed it back down again and walked over to the fire, stoking it vigorously as he scratched his beard again. The last time he'd shod Spirit, she'd nearly knocked him out with the amount of kicking she'd done, and he'd come away from it with more bruises than he cared to remember. Jessie could see that he wanted to do this as quickly and painlessly as possible.

He took up some shoe iron and placed it into the fire to heat through.

"Been a long while, Jessie." His eyes remained fixed on the flames that were dancing across the hot coals as he spoke to her.

"It has," she said, keeping her eyes locked on him and ignoring the way that Colt was looking at her now. It was bad enough that the people in town looked at her

that way, as though she was a freak. She didn't want him to start doing it as well.

"At least a year." He turned the iron over in the fire.

She took a deep breath and leaned against the wall, trying not to let him see how uncomfortable he was making her. "Been busy on the ranch. Work keeps me there."

"It does?" Pa McGintley gave her a look that said he knew that wasn't the only reason that she was keeping away from town.

"It does," she said with resolution and relaxed a little when his attention returned to the horseshoe and he started to shape the iron.

"I still remember when you and Sue used to come to town. You were the talk of it in your pretty dresses all those years ago." Pa McGintley turned to face her.

She looked away, only to find Colt arching a brow at her. Her eyes dropped to rest on the floor.

Getting control over her feelings, she raised her head up, holding her chin high and squashing down the memories he'd stirred. She set her jaw tight and folded her arms across her chest.

"Times change," she said in a bitter tone and then got the better of herself. "I have work to do now."

Turning around to face Colt, she took a deep breath and sighed it out. "I just remembered I have some things to do. When Spirit's shod, I'll meet you outside."

Colt let his eyes follow her as she walked through the blacksmith's building and into the sunlight on the other side. He looked down at the old man, fixing him with a hard look that said what he'd done wasn't nice and it wasn't deserved.

"She's as tough as old boots," Pa McGintley said and pressed the hot shoe against Spirit's hind hoof.

He didn't respond as he folded his arms and watched the man working. Jessie hadn't been in town for over a year. He wondered if this had something to do with her brother too, or whether it was just because of how she was treated when she was here. She clearly felt safe on the ranch, surrounded by her family and hidden away from the world. He could understand her reluctance to leave there. It had probably taken nothing more than just changing her clothes to start the stares and the whispered comments that she received. As a newcomer, he'd expected a similar reception, but people had treated him a million times more welcoming than they treated her, and she'd lived here all her life as far as he knew.

Letting his head fall backwards, he stared up at the sky and tried to understand what kind of place this was. What kind of place turned against someone because they were no longer dressing the part that God had assigned them? So she was wearing men's clothing and doing a man's work, but her father had been right when he'd said that these were tough times, and at times like these you had to do what was best. For Jessie, that meant working on the ranch in order to keep the money coming in and save her father from an early death.

As the old man tried to get his attention, he made him wait a few minutes longer. It wasn't like him to hold a grudge against someone, but he couldn't stand seeing

people mistreating Jessie just because she'd chosen to help her family.

Taking hold of Spirit's reins, he forced a smile as the man told him he'd put in on the Hayden account and then led the horse through the building. When he came out the other side, he found Jessie sitting on the bar and talking to Ranger.

"This the thing you needed to do?" he asked as she stroked her horse's nose.

"Needed some air..." she trailed off as she looked up into his eyes.

"And a moment to talk things through with an old friend," he added and then tied Spirit to Shadow's saddle.

She nodded as she stood, untied her horse, and then pulled herself up onto his back. Settling into the saddle, she waited for him to mount Shadow and then started heading back through the town with him.

"There ain't much to town." She looked at the handful of wooden buildings that lined the main street. Their fronts were all similar in design, with a broad porch that covered the walkway below, small windows on the first floor and wider ones on the ground floor. The sun had faded their large signs. Most of the buildings hadn't had them repainted since they were built when she was little. People who came to town were nearly always local, and knew the stores and offices by their location rather than the sign above the porch. "We've got the general store on the corner, blacksmith behind us with the stable beside it, and the Sheriff's office opposite the store."

He noticed the way she was avoiding looking at the people as they watched her pass. He could see she found it easier to ignore them when she was high up on Ranger's back and he realised that her horse was a bastion of safety to her, and not just on the ranch.

"And the saloon." He pointed at it where it sat nestled between a small boutique and two smaller stores that looked to be empty.

Her expression darkened.

He saw in her eyes that she didn't like the saloon. She probably didn't hold with the things that went on in it. He'd stopped by on first entering the town, and even in a place as small as this one there were still a few ladies dressed for business. Not that he was interested. All he'd wanted was a moments respite from the rain and a stiff drink to warm him up. He'd seen the notice for the ranch position in the Sheriff's window a few doors down, and had gone to the saloon to think it over and get directions.

"We better get back. Ma will have the dinner cooking and she hates it when I'm late." She abruptly turned her horse towards the road out of town and picked up the pace.

He rode beside her, seeing in her expression that she wanted to be home already, and he was all too willing to oblige.

~

Leading Spirit and Shadow into their stalls, Colt placed the bolts across their doors and then waited for Jessie to finish taking the saddle off Ranger. When she was ready,

he walked to the house with her. The light was starting to fade, the night creeping in. It was so different from last night. There was no sign of a storm; just a clear sky that promised the chance to see the stars.

Walking into the house behind Jessie, he placed his hat down on the side and followed her into the parlour where her family were waiting. She didn't say anything as she took her place, the same place she'd sat in this morning. He found himself sitting opposite her again, but this time he looked around the table. There were six places, six chairs, and only one of them wasn't filled by a family member, but it was one that he knew should have been.

He smiled warmly at everyone as they greeted him and Jessie, filling their plates and asking them about their days work, and how Spirit behaved. Seeing that Jessie had become withdrawn again and she didn't look up to talking, he answered all the questions her family asked, all the while wondering what thoughts were happening behind her sullen eyes.

Mary looked at her daughter where she was picking at her food and placed her hand over hers, trying to comfort her and draw her out of her thoughts. It had been a long time since she'd seen her so upset. She knew the things that happened whenever Jessie went into town, had heard the things people said about her baby girl, and prayed that they would see past the clothes to the woman underneath.

Her eyes moved slowly across to Colt and she snuck a look at his face. He was watching Jessie as he spoke to Frank, his eyes continually coming back to rest on her as though he was checking up on her. A blind person would be able to see the impression Jessie had made on him,

but she couldn't for the life of her figure out exactly what kind of impression it was. Whether it was good or bad, she got the feeling that he would like to know more about her daughter.

She caught sight of Sue where she was smiling prettily at Colt, and then looked back at Colt where he was closely watching Jessie.

Letting go of her daughter's hand, she smiled inside and went to make some tea.

Colt finished his food quickly, but found on looking up that Jessie had barely touched hers. All she seemed to have done was move it around the plate a little. He was about to open his mouth to compliment Mary on her cooking when Jessie stood up and walked out of the door, mumbling something about not being hungry.

Everyone watched her go and he looked up at Mary to find an expression of deep concern on her face.

"What's gotten into her?" Sue asked as the door closed.

Suddenly Colt found everyone looking at him. He swallowed hard and smiled awkwardly as he tried to think of something to say. He didn't want to mention the moment in the stable or the way people had treated her in town. He settled for shrugging and as everyone went back to their food, he glanced at Mary and found her eyes as full of sadness as her daughter's.

After a few minutes of listening to Sue and John's idle banter, he excused himself and went to the door. He couldn't get Jessie's disappearance off his mind. He'd never met someone that had made him so intrigued about them.

Lighting a smoke, he walked around to the stable, enjoying the stillness and the warm night air. The full moon seemed to make it as bright as day, illuminating the yard and the stable.

He paused as he heard a quiet noise coming from the building and he looked around the corner. He frowned as he saw Jessie resting her head against Ranger's nose and stroking his cheek. Her eyes were closed, but the moonlight was reflecting off her tear-streaked face. Extinguishing his cigarette so the smell of smoke didn't alert her to his presence, he watched her as she buried her face into Ranger's neck and sobbed as she clung to him. His chest tightened as he listened to her, and saw her body shaking with her crying. Furrowing his brows, he tried to leave but found he couldn't. He wanted to give her time alone to deal with whatever had upset her, but couldn't bring himself to do it. He didn't have the right words to soothe her, didn't know why she was so upset, but he wanted to know.

He felt sorry for her as she stroked her horse's ears and held him tightly. She should have been in her mother's arms, or her sister's, when she was so upset, not out here with her horse. Was he really the only source of comfort for her?

He silently cursed Spirit as she kicked at her pen, drawing Jessie's attention to where he was standing. He saw her quickly turn away and frantically wipe her face as though there was a chance that he hadn't already seen the tears she'd been shedding.

He wanted to know her story, wanted to ask her what it was that kept upsetting her, but couldn't find the courage to go through with it.

Jessie took long deep breaths as she hurried to dry her face. She knew he'd seen the tears, but she didn't want him to ask questions and that meant acting as though everything was fine. She suppressed her desire to continue crying as she thought about her brother and the people in town, and stood up straight. Taking one final breath, she pulled herself together and turned to face Colt.

He'd moved while she was trying to gather herself. He was standing just a couple of metres away, giving her the same look he'd given her when they were in the stable that afternoon. Holding her head up a little higher, she managed a smile and let her fingers toy with Ranger's bridle where it hung on the nail.

"Didn't mean to disturb you. Figured it would be an early start tomorrow and wanted to get some rest." Colt was the first to speak.

"Forgot you slept here." She looked at the end stall where he'd spent last night, avoiding his eyes at all costs. "I best be getting some rest, too."

Colt's eyes followed her as she moved past him, her hand coming up to dash away the tear he'd seen threatening to fall and her whole body heaving as she sighed.

As she disappeared from view, he walked over to Ranger and patted his neck. He frowned as he felt the dampness of his hair where Jessie had been crying against him and then looked back over his shoulder at the entrance to the stable.

He wondered if tomorrow she would act as though this had never happened.

Heading into the empty stall, he rolled one of the blankets up to make a pillow and lay on his back with one hand behind his head and the other resting on his stomach. He stared at the high wooden ceiling above him and sighed.

It would be the second night in a row that he was going to sleep with that girl on his mind.

- Chapter Five -

Sure enough, the next day Jessie was acting as though nothing had happened the night before. He'd watched her all morning while they went over the things they would need in order to repair the cattle pen and tended to the horses. He couldn't see how she could pretend that everything was fine in her life and he hadn't caught her crying last night, sobbing her heart out against her horse's neck and clinging to him as though he was the only thing in the world that could comfort her.

Pulling his black work gloves on a little better, he carried another of the beams out into the yard and placed it down on the pile. His eyes sought her out as she walked around the perimeter of the cattle pen, checking the timbers and marking which ones needed replacing.

Pushing his hat up, he squinted at the hot sun as it beat down on him and then wiped his forehead as he looked at the posts and beams, trying to figure out if they had enough to repair the pen.

Jessie watched him out the corner of her eye as he scratched his neck, his focus firmly fixed on the gathered timbers. She had seen in his eyes this morning that he wasn't letting last night go, that he had questions he wanted to ask her, but she didn't want to answer them. It was none of his business why she had been crying, and he wouldn't understand even if she told him. Her whole family had seemingly got over her brother's departure just fine, leaving her to mourn his loss and miss him. She wondered sometimes how they could be like that. He'd been close to them all, but especially her.

They'd worked together for years on the ranch, spending countless hours every day in each other's company and talking about everything that was on their mind.

When he'd left, she'd had no one to talk to. She'd never been close to Sue, had never talked to her parents about her problems or her feelings. The only person who had listened to her was Charlie.

Smiling slightly as Colt nearly dropped a fence post on his foot, she realised that she wanted to talk to him. She didn't know if it was because he reminded her of Charlie, or because he looked as though he wanted to know her story, but she wished she could find the courage to let him in.

Her smile faltered at that thought. The last person she'd let deep into her heart was Charlie and he'd broken it clean in two when he'd left. She hadn't been able to bring herself to let anyone in after that. She'd kept people at a distance, even her family, and had told Ranger all her worries. He was always there for her, always willing to listen to anything she had to tell him, and always ready with a tender nuzzle when she started crying.

She wondered if Colt would be like that. If she told him the things that were on her mind, and about her brother, would he just listen or would he ask the questions that she didn't have answers to?

"Miss Hayden?"

Jessie shook her head and looked up at him, masking her feelings with a smile.

"Mr. Tucker?"

"You ever going to call me Colt?" He frowned at her and rested the timber he was holding against the fence.

She picked it up, her focus remaining on fixing the fence. She could see in his expression that he was getting tired of her formality with his name.

"I'll be calling you miss Hayden then."

She gave him a look that said that was fine with her and then held the wood against the fence posts so he could knock the nails in.

She watched him as he worked, his strong hands holding the timber steady as she started to let it slip, her concentration lapsing as she stared at him and wondered what his story was.

He'd come to them in the middle of a storm, with no horse, and had alluded to the fact that he'd had to sell her. She could never imagine selling her horse. She wouldn't part with him for all the world. He was the only thing she loved.

She let go of the fence as Colt finished nailing it into place. Walking over to the pile of timbers, she picked up another one and brought it over to him, putting it into position and going back to her thoughts as she heard him knocking the nails in.

She wondered how many ranches he'd worked on in the past. He looked to be around the same age as her brother, and he'd clearly travelled a lot; she could see that by the state of his boots. She wondered where he was going, and where he'd been. Where had he come from?

Colt looked up to find Jessie watching him, a distant thoughtful look in her eyes as she stared into his.

There was also a lingering edge of tiredness and hurt that dredged up the thoughts he'd tried to shake last night.

Handing her the tools, he stretched his back and then took up the other set. They'd get things done quicker if they both worked and it would give him a chance to observe her. He wanted to get answers to his questions.

As she set to work, he tried to remember what she'd told him about herself. She'd taken over the running of the ranch at twenty. She was twenty-six now. Why had she taken over? Was that when her brother had left?

"You feeling all right, Mr. Tucker?" she asked as he stared at her.

"Just fine," he replied and then took the plunge. "Actually...I was wondering something."

She hammered the nail into place on the fence and then looked at him as though she was waiting for him to say what was on his mind. "Don't stand on ceremony here. Spit it out."

Colt smiled at her manner.

"You said you took the place over when you were twenty." He leant against the fence post as he looked at her. She was continuing to work as he talked and he got the feeling that she was using it as cover.

"I did," she replied.

"Little young to be running a ranch. Surely one of the other ranches in the neighbourhood would've had someone that you could've hired?" He watched her closely as she paused for a second and then continued.

"I was fine with it, knew everything I needed and money was tight."

"Money's always tight," he said.

She stopped working and met his eyes as she looked up. "Not this tight."

Jessie lowered her head again and continued to fix the timber into place. She got the feeling he was trying to draw things out of her, but she didn't mind. He was curious about her past and she'd given him every right to be. He'd caught her crying and he'd seen her upset. It was no surprise that he wanted to know why.

"Now you're twenty-six," he said, "and the best wrangler there is."

"Don't know about that." She moved onto the next section of fence and gave him a look. "Shouldn't you be working?"

He smiled again and took up another timber, carrying it to the section next to the area of fence that she was fixing and starting work on it.

"You know, I was your age when I started my ranch," he said and smiled when she stopped dead and looked at him.

"Your ranch? You have a ranch?" Her eyes were wide with curiosity as she waited for an answer.

"*Did*, I did have a ranch, once." He corrected her and carried on working.

She hesitated for a moment and then cleared her throat as she found the courage to ask her question. "How long ago did you start it?"

He looked thoughtful for a moment and then answered, "Was nine years ago."

She narrowed her eyes on his, searching for a sign that he was that old.

She frowned. He was around the same age as her brother after all. Charlie would have been thirty-three by now, and Colt was thirty-five. She couldn't imagine what it would be like to have a ranch of her own at her age, to own all that land and all the animals. She wondered just where his ranch had been. She'd heard about the different terrain across the country and how people did things differently in every state.

"Was it much like this?" she asked as she kept her eyes on him.

He straightened up and looked around them at the lush hills.

"A little...maybe less green, but not much different."

"Is it far away from here?" She couldn't stop the questions now she'd started them. She'd never been away from home, had never gone further than the Crawford's ranch and that was under twenty miles. She was curious to know what else was out there and she got the feeling that he could tell her.

"Long way away...too far to ride one horse." He looked down at his feet and sighed.

Her brows knit as she saw the momentary sadness flicker on his expression and she realised that he hadn't sold his horse, he'd done something much worse, something which she could never do. A horse could only walk so many miles before it became lame or too tired to keep going. How long ago had he shot her?

Reaching her hand out, she hesitated as she went to touch his arm to comfort him and then pulled it back before he noticed.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled and dropped her eyes as he raised his to meet them.

Colt shook his head, unable to speak the necessary words to tell her that it was all right—it didn't matter. He hadn't been able to look his horse in the eye the day he'd shot her. She'd been so lame and sick that she'd left him with no other option but to do what was right, no matter how much it broke his heart. It was bitter poison to his soul each time he remembered what he'd done.

Taking up another timber, he quickly nailed it into place, using the work to keep his mind off the things he'd done in his life and the things that had happened. He still grew angry every time he thought about his ranch and it still cut him to the bone when he thought about what was taken from him. One day he'd get the revenge he was looking for, and then he could finally stop following his feet and settle somewhere.

He looked at the ranch house and the meadows that were stretching around him.

Hopefully it would be somewhere as beautiful as this, as beautiful as his home had been.

Watching him for a moment as he threw himself into his work, Jessie realised that they weren't so different. There was another reason that she worked so hard on the ranch. She used it to keep herself busy. The busier she was, the less her mind wandered to painful thoughts and the happier she was. There were times—brief moments—when she was truly happy again and she wanted that feeling all the time.

She let him focus on his work as she concentrated on hers. It was the best thing she could do for him, letting him forget it all by busying his mind with the task at hand.

Her eyes wandered to the stable as she heard one of the horses whinny, and she wondered which one it was. It wasn't deep enough to be Ranger, although he'd start up soon enough if she didn't take him out for a ride. It was probably Spirit. She'd been acting up all morning because of the noise the horseshoes made on the floor of her stall. It would take her time to get accustomed to wearing them again, and then Colt could attempt to ride her.

Her attention came back to him as he stubbed his thumb and took his glove off, sucking on the wounded digit.

She smiled and shook her head, and found him smiling back at her, his eyes showing no trace of the hurt that she'd seen in them a few minutes earlier.

As her sister appeared on the porch and waved a hand at them to get their attention, she suppressed a sigh and walked over to her. She was pleased when Colt decided

to continue working rather than coming over to see what Sue wanted.

She threw a quick look over her shoulder and saw him fixing another section of the fence. At this rate, they would be able to start on the horse pen before nightfall.

"Sue?" She tried to get her sister's attention, but she was staring straight past her at Colt. Stepping into the path of her gaze, she frowned. "Quit disturbing us."

Sue caught her arm as she turned to leave and span her back around to face her. "I wasn't. I've got a genuine reason for coming out."

"What?" Jessie spat the word out and ignored the pout that settled on her sister's lips.

"Wanted to know if Colt...I mean...you wanted feeding." Sue smiled sweetly at her.

She saw straight through her charade.

"We don't, so quit and go back indoors where you belong." She tugged her arm free and shook her head as she walked back towards Colt.

Colt straightened up as he watched her walking towards him. He could see how agitated she was by her body language, and he hoped that she wouldn't take it out on him again. So far today they seemed to be getting along, and she hadn't given him the cold shoulder at all.

Rolling a cigarette, he carefully balanced it on his lower lip and struck a match on the fence. He cupped his hand around the match and the cigarette as he lit it, protecting it from the breeze.

Shaking the match to extinguish it, he let it drop to the dusty ground and looked at it.

The well-kept boots of Jessie appeared in his view.

“Problem?” he asked as he looked up, finding her scowling in the direction of the house. He noted that her sister had gone back inside now.

“Sue sure likes to flirt,” she grumbled.

“She sure does.” He took a drag on his smoke and smiled inside as she turned an exasperated look on him. He could see that she wanted him to say something about not being interested in Sue, and it was wrong of him to deny her the answer she was fishing for, but he couldn’t help himself.

Assessing the horse pen as he finished his cigarette, he looked up at the sky and then at the amount of work they had to do. Time was rapidly turning against them, but at least the cattle pen was done.

He flicked his spent smoke to the ground, stubbed it out with the toe of his boot, and scratched his chin.

He needed to shave.

Taking up some timber, he started to fix the fence but paused as he realised that Jessie was just standing looking at him with the expression of annoyance welded to her face.

“Shouldn’t you be working?” He turned her earlier words against her as she stared at him.

Jessie didn’t know what had infuriated her more, the fact that her sister was openly flirting with Colt, or the fact

that he seemed to be inviting her attention. She rationalised that neither of those things should bother her. All she did was work with Colt. They hardly knew each other and he definitely wasn't her property. He was free to come and go as he pleased, talking to whomever he wanted to, and courting any girl that caught his eye.

She didn't care, and she wasn't looking for anything from him in that way. Not like her sister was.

Starting her work again, she snuck a quick look at Colt as he took his hat off, ran his hand over his hair and then placed it back on again.

A tight, knotted feeling of frustration settled in her stomach and she frowned.

She didn't want his attentions.

So why did she feel this way?

- Chapter Six -

It took a further day to fix the horse pen, and Sue hadn't made an appearance. She'd apparently been busy inside, which was fine with Jessie. She'd learnt a little more about Colt's past, but not much. They'd been focused on their work, both of them clearly wanting to be back out on the plains riding the horses rather than fixing fences.

Walking around to the stable, Jessie took a deep breath of the sweet morning air. The grass was damp and the dusty yard had a fine covering of wet dirt, but the underneath was dry. She could see her footsteps as she looked back towards the house. It must have rained overnight, just a passing shower.

She raised her brows into a curious expression as she found the stable door closed. Every morning since Colt's arrival, she'd found it open, with him already at work on the horses. He'd learnt to share the duty with her, letting her take care of Maverick and Ranger, while he tended to Jonah, Spirit and Shadow. She was thankful to have the task back. Mornings were hard for her; it was when she most needed to take her mind off things.

Pulling the door open, she frowned when there was no sign of Colt.

Petting Shadow on the nose, she moved slowly along the stalls, not wanting to disturb him if he was still sleeping. She couldn't imagine how hard it was for him to get back into working again, and it wasn't like she'd been going easy on him.

“Morning.”

She jumped as his voice came from behind her. Turning, her brows rose as she saw the shaving kit in his hand, and she worked her eyes gradually up to his face. He looked different without the stubble. The smoothness of his jaw seemed to draw her attention to his mouth and she found it hard to drag her eyes away.

“Morning,” she replied as she busied herself with checking Ranger.

Taking a breath, she exhaled it by blowing it up at her face, trying to cool herself.

“Going to be a hot day,” she said idly as she fanned herself with her hand. She could’ve sworn it hadn’t been this warm a moment ago.

“It is?” Colt looked outside at the yard and then gave her a look that said it didn’t feel any hotter than it had been yesterday, or the day before. He ran his hand along his jaw and walked towards the stall at the far end.

She smiled lopsidedly and then turned her back on him. Taking another deep breath, she sighed it out as she listened to Colt putting his things away and then almost jumped again as Ranger nudged her.

She took the hint and edged towards the stall where they kept the feed—the stall where Colt slept. She kept her eyes away from him as she went to grab the sack but found she’d grabbed his hand instead. She immediately snatched hers away and looked at him where he was lifting the sack of feed up. He held it out to her with a look in his eyes that she couldn’t quite make out.

"Ladies first." Colt half smiled and then bit his lip as she took it from him and went to feed her horse.

He looked down at his hand, staring at it for a moment before running it around the back of his neck and looking at the floor. He couldn't remember seeing her hands without her gloves before. They'd seemed so small compared to his.

Gathering himself, he walked out of his stall and down to Spirit. She was getting used to him now. She was even starting to nip playfully at him whenever he happened to pass her. Running his fingers through her mane, he smiled at her and then found his eyes wandering back to Jessie where she was tending to Ranger and Maverick.

Spirit kicked the door.

He patted her lightly on the nose and smiled as he whispered, "you're the only girl for me."

"You say something?" Jessie looked across at him as she led Ranger out of his stall.

Colt cleared his throat. "Nothing at all."

She looked at Spirit where she was nuzzling Colt's hand and frowned. "Think she's about ready to go out in the pen. She may look sweet now, but she'll be a different beast out there."

He took it as a warning that he wasn't out of the woods with the horse yet. He'd have to agree with what she'd said; Spirit wasn't going to take him attempting to ride her very well.

"Colt! Colt!"

Jessie smiled broadly as John came thundering around the corner and nearly ran straight into the man he was looking for.

"Whoa, there." Colt put his hands against the boy's shoulders to stop John from colliding with him. "What's the hurry, partner?"

John took deep breaths as he tried to get the words out. "Jessie...Jessie..."

"Jessie?" Colt tried to help him out.

"Jessie said you're going to ride Spirit."

"She did?" He glanced at her where she was standing behind him with rose tinted cheeks and a distant look in her eyes. When he frowned at her, she quickly averted her gaze, her eyes falling to rest on Ranger, and he wondered what had got into her today.

"Sure did," John replied with a wide grin. "You got to be wrong in the head."

He laughed as he heard the boy's words. Standing up, he petted Spirit on the nose and smiled. "Sure am."

"I'll get her saddle and bridle for you." Jessie walked towards them and crouched down in front of John. "Be a good lad and go eat your breakfast, Pip. We won't start without you."

He nodded vigorously and then did as instructed. She looked up at Colt and saw him stroking Spirit as he watched the little boy go.

“He likes you,” she said and straightened up. Walking over to the saddles, she picked up Spirit’s and handed it over to him.

“Feeling’s mutual,” he said as he took it from her with a warm smile and rested it over the wall of the horse’s stall.

She sat down on a bale of hay beside the other set of stalls as she watched him take up the rope and lead Spirit out of her pen. The horse did seem to like him. She’d not seen her so behaved since her brother left them. Something told her that it was all going to change the moment Colt attempted to ride her though. The sweet exterior hid the horse’s true spirit and she couldn’t wait to see her get the better of him. A few landings in the dirt would be enough for him to see that not all the girls on this ranch were as easy to win over as Sue and her mother. At least, not the ones with spirit.

She smiled, the corners of her mouth curving into it as she pictured in her head what was going to happen. This was a big event, and she was certain that her family would all be there watching. It was fun just thinking about it.

Her gaze moved to his hands as he fastened the straps on the saddle and tested it. He seemed so confident, so sure that he could ride the horse. She wondered if it was all for show, if underneath that cool exterior he was secretly panicking about what would happen once he got Spirit into the pen.

Colt swallowed hard as he flexed his fingers, willing them not to shake with nerves as he carefully put the bridle on the horse. He hadn’t attempted to break a horse in since he was Jessie’s age, and even though

Spirit had been ridden before, he could see she really needed breaking again. She'd become sorely used to not feeling the weight of a person or a saddle on her back and experience told him that she wasn't going to react well.

But he couldn't back down.

Jessie had laid the challenge at his feet and he was damn well going to succeed. He looked down at her where she was sitting on the bale, her brown hat tipped back enough for him to be able to see the whole of her face, and her pale blue shirt and dark blue pants contrasting perfectly with the rich creamy-yellow of the hay. She looked like a painting more than reality, like a cover of a book.

"You coming?" he said with as much confidence as he could muster and she nodded, a bright smile softening her features and making her eyes shine.

"Wouldn't miss it for the world, Mr. Tucker," she said as she stood and followed him and Shadow out into the yard.

She sat on the newly fixed fence as he led the horse into the pen. He stepped back, assessing the best way to get on her.

"You chicken?" she asked after a few minutes of waiting.

He gave her a look that said he wasn't. His eyes were narrowed in determination, his brows set heavily and his lips compressed.

"You wait, darling, I'll be riding rings round you and Ranger by this afternoon." His temperature rose as her

challenge rang in his head. He was no chicken, and there was no way she was going to come out of this being right. He could ride this horse. It was just a matter of figuring out what she needed and she'd come round to his way of thinking.

His way of thinking being riding rings around Jessie.

Sure, she handled Ranger with all the grace and expertise of a man his age, but it was easy riding a horse that knew you as inside out and back to front as you knew it. He knew that she was scared of the horse he was about to ride. She was comfortable with Ranger and knew that he wouldn't hurt her. She didn't have the courage to give anything else a chance. If he asked her to ride Shadow or Maverick, she would refuse because she wouldn't feel safe. She wouldn't even consider it. There was only one horse in the world for her.

She'd never try to ride Spirit, and she certainly would never attempt to tame her again.

And that's exactly what he was going to do.

Sniffing, he pulled his gloves on a little tighter and took a final deep breath before gathering up the reins and putting his foot into the stirrup. His heart was racing, going a million miles a minute against his ribs, and his mouth had gone dry. He could practically feel the adrenaline as it raced around his veins.

Jessie leant forwards as he took hold of the saddle and hauled himself up onto it. He saw her motion to John to quickly join her and then watched the little boy run across the yard.

He looked down at the horse beneath him and exhaled the breath he'd been holding. She didn't seem too bad.

As he shifted, she pricked her head up, her ears shooting backwards to listen to him. His heart felt as though it was going to stop as she flattened them. He held on tightly with his knees and grabbed the saddle, knowing exactly what was about to happen.

He could hear Jessie laughing as Spirit began to buck, trying her hardest to get him off her back. He kept his eyes locked on the horse as she reared, kicking her legs out and snorting as she went in circles.

When he finally fell off, he winced and gritted his teeth, hissing through them. He gave himself a moment to recover before he slowly stood and dusted his backside down, a disgruntled look on his face.

He picked up his hat and smacked it against his leg, ridding it of dust as he watched Spirit trotting merrily around the pen. He got the feeling she'd enjoyed throwing him.

"You all right?" John shouted at him and he nodded.

Sucking his cheeks into a thoughtful look, he squinted hard at the horse. She was stood in the middle of the pen and looked as though she was waiting for him to try again.

Walking over to her, he ignored the way she snorted, whinnied and kicked at the dirt.

"None of that," he warned her and took hold of her reins. "Said we were going to dance, little lady, and dance we shall."

He hauled himself up onto Spirit's back and glanced at Jessie. He could see in her expression that she was wondering how many times he was going to get back on Spirit before he gave up.

Sue and Mary caught his eye as they stood on the porch. When Frank joined them, he could see that he was being scrutinised. Frank was about as easy to impress as Jessie. If he tamed Spirit, it would stand him in good stead with him.

Holding on tightly, he let Spirit wear herself out, bucking crazily as she went around the pen.

He cringed as he was thrown off again, causing a cloud of dust to rise up as he hit the dirt. He was still for a moment and then sat up. Looking over at Jessie, he found her watching him with concern written in the lines of her face. She was leaning forwards, one foot dangling as though she'd been about to get down and come over to see if he was all right. He nodded to her and she sat back on the fence, an embarrassed look settling on her face.

He got to his feet and found Spirit waiting for him in the middle of the pen.

"She always acts crazy in the pen. Broke it pretty good when that storm hit the other night," Jessie remarked as he pulled himself up onto Spirit.

He looked down at the horse and then at his surroundings. She was still for a little longer this time and then started to buck again. Holding on for dear life, he found his eyes kept wandering back to the gate and he couldn't get Jessie's words out of his head. It clicked. This was the horse that Jessie had been chasing the

night he'd arrived at the ranch. He looked at Spirit and smiled to himself. He knew exactly what she needed.

"Open the gate!" he yelled in the general direction of Jessie.

He saw her look at the gate and hop down off the fence. She walked over to it and pulled the latch across, letting it swing open.

As soon as Spirit caught sight of the open gate, she bolted for it.

He saw Jessie press herself against the fence as the horse thundered past and looked over his shoulder to see her taking her hat off, using it to shade her eyes as she watched him.

Holding the reins tightly, he leant forwards and let Spirit run, weaving a crazy zigzag just like she had done the night of the storm. He had realised that out of all the horses at the ranch, she got the least freedom and as her name suggested, she needed it the most. She hadn't been ridden in years, had spent all that time in the pen or in her stall. It was no wonder she was so wound up. If someone kept him in a house, or even a town, he'd go crazy too.

"Run like the wind." He smiled as he said the words into her ear and she picked her front legs up, whinnying and increasing her speed.

He noted that this time she was running in a straight line.

Settling back into the saddle, he let her run her own course for a few minutes longer and then decided to see if she'd listen to him now.

"Come around, darling," he almost whispered the command to her, trying to keep her calm as he gently pulled her reins to one side. He was astounded when she did as he'd asked and turned towards the open fields. "Knew you loved me."

He grinned as he pictured what Jessie's face was going to look like when he rode back to the ranch.

"Yah!" He urged Spirit on, wanting to see how fast she could go on the smooth terrain of the plain.

She was faster than any horse he'd rode in the past, and possibly faster than Ranger. His grin stretched until it couldn't go any further as he turned the horse around and started back in the opposite direction. He closed his eyes briefly as the wind blasted against him, running through his clothes and washing over his skin.

Jessie kept her hat held above her eyes, shading them from the sun and helping her see. He'd been gone for a long time and she wondered if he'd fallen on the plain and hurt himself.

Running up the hill to the ridge to see if she could see him, she almost squealed as Spirit galloped past, barely missing her. She turned quickly to see Colt bringing the horse back around to her, a wide, pleased smile on his face as he slowed her down to a stop.

She couldn't believe he'd done it. He'd actually rode Spirit, and she didn't look as though she was going to throw him off again anytime soon.

Her brows rose, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth, and a sense of warmth running through her as Colt looked straight into her eyes, moving the horse and himself closer to her. She stood her ground as he approached and turned Spirit to the side so he was next to her, his shadow blocking the sun. Looking up at him, she let the hand holding her hat fall to her side and held his gaze.

She could hear her sister and John, could hear her father and mother calling out congratulations to Colt, but it all seemed distant somehow, and for some reason she couldn't take her eyes away from his.

He leant over, rested his elbow on his thigh and looked deep into her eyes.

"Told you I'd tame her," he said in a low voice.

She nodded almost imperceptibly.

Her eyes followed him as he flashed her another brilliant smile and then rode down the slope to the ranch.

She got the feeling that he was talking about more than the horse.

But he hadn't tamed her, yet.

- Chapter Seven -

Jessie stood by the window of her room. The dawn was just breaking and she kept her eyes fixed on the horizon, taking in the beauty of the morning sun as it edged over the distant hills. Leaning forwards a little, she looked down into the yard and her eyes came to rest on Colt where he was leaning against the horse pen fence, smoking a cigarette and watching the sunrise, too.

It had been over a week since he'd first taken Spirit out, and he'd kept his promise; each time they went out to see the cattle, he rode rings around her and Ranger. It had bothered her at first, but after a few times she began to get used to his playful attempt to annoy her. She didn't mind that Spirit was faster than Ranger, or that Colt could handle such a rebellious animal. Her horse was stalwart and true to her, and that was something Colt hadn't achieved yet with Spirit. The mare still had a habit of throwing him occasionally, as though she wanted to prove that he hadn't tamed her just yet.

In that respect, her and Spirit were the same.

She still couldn't bring herself to go easy on Colt. There were times when he would do something that reminded her of her brother and he'd pay the price. She could see in his eyes that he didn't know what he'd done wrong, and she wished she could find the courage to explain to him just why she acted so cruel sometimes, but the words still wouldn't come. She'd tried a few times over the past week to tell him about her brother, knowing that her parents hadn't really mentioned what had

happened with Charlie. They were leaving that job to her. Each time she attempted to talk to Colt, she clammed up.

She couldn't even bring herself to call him Colt. She'd intended to say it so many times, but it always came out as a cold 'Mr. Tucker'. Something about calling him by his first name seemed so personal, and it made her feel as though by using it she was betraying her brother. Was it because calling him Colt would bring her closer to him? Was she scared of what that meant? As much as she loved her father and John, she had never been as close to them as she had been to Charlie. By letting Colt in, was she pushing Charlie out, making him lower in standing? She'd told herself a million times that she wasn't, that she still loved Charlie, but a voice at the back of her head kept telling her that Colt was replacing him in her heart, that her feelings for him were different from and ran deeper than those for her brother.

Colt was making the pain more bearable, making it all seem distant somehow. She could think about her brother and what he'd done now, could remember it all without even crying sometimes. She knew that Ranger was there for her if she needed comfort, but recently he'd been joined by riding with Colt. Whenever she fell back on melancholy thoughts, riding beside Colt always soothed and comforted her. All he had to do was smile in her direction and she felt happier.

Focusing her eyes again, she frowned as she saw her sister talking to Colt. He had brought Spirit out into the yard to brush and Sue was laughing and smiling at him, twirling her hair in that way that made Jessie want to hit her.

Leaving her room, she stormed down the stairs and out into the yard. She walked straight past Colt, ignoring his greeting, and went into the stable to Ranger. Leading him out of his stall, she dumped his saddle onto his back and roughly fastened the straps. She quickly put his bridle on and then pulled herself up onto his back.

She grabbed her lasso off the side and rested it around the horn of her saddle. Riding out into the yard, she fixed Colt with a black look, completely looking over her sister's head and ignoring her.

The sun was creeping up into the sky.

It was about time they were out on the plain rounding the cattle up for branding.

And Colt was slacking, chatting to her sister, and ignoring his duties.

"I'm going to round the cattle up..." she said in a harsh tone and set her jaw tight as she narrowed her eyes on him. "If you're done here."

Colt frowned at the way she was acting and glanced at Sue, and then back at Jessie.

"Yes, ma'am," he said as he went to walk into the stable to get Spirit's saddle, pausing briefly to smile at Sue. "We'll talk more later."

As he started to move towards the stable again, he had to leap backwards to avoid being hit by Ranger as Jessie rode off towards the ridge. He watched her galloping into the distance. His look turned pensive.

What the hell had gotten into her this morning? First, she comes over in such a black mood that he got the

feeling she was going to hit him for not being ready, and then she goes riding off without him.

He looked at Sue where she stood twirling her dark hair around her finger and smiling warmly at him.

As it dawned on him what was going on, he blinked in disbelief. She couldn't be jealous. She wouldn't bring herself to call him by his first name, wouldn't look at him during dinner. The only time she talked to him was when they were working, or when he found her in the stable with Ranger at night. There was no way that she could like him when she could barely look at him without frowning. He knew that she forced her smiles half the time, that they weren't real.

Grabbing the saddle and bridle, he quickly put them onto Spirit and then mounted her. He pulled his hat down as he settled into the saddle, and then nodded at Sue as he rode off after Jessie.

He still couldn't fathom what was going on with her.

Reaching the top of the ridge, he saw that she hadn't slowed down when she'd made it to the other side like he'd expected her to. As he let Spirit canter down into the valley, he mulled over everything that had happened whenever he'd been around Sue. Jessie did have a habit of getting him away from her sister, and she'd even said on the day they fixed the cattle pen that Sue was openly flirting with him.

Was Jessie jealous of the attentions he gave to her sister?

He smiled as he thought about that.

The little minx was jealous. She pushed him away, kept him at arms length, and had a bite more venomous than a snake, but she didn't like the idea of any other girl talking to him.

Realising that she was going to hold a grudge for the rest of the day if he didn't catch up with her soon and try to make amends, he geed Spirit on, riding her hard and fast across the plain.

He cut Ranger up, making him rear onto his hind legs and kick out. Turning Spirit around, he rode back towards Jessie, watching her stroking her horse's mane as she calmed him down.

She frowned at him and then fixed her eyes on the horizon as soon as he fell into line beside her.

He looked over at her, tracing the delicate line of her profile as she rode with a look of steely determination on her face. He'd seen thunderclouds that looked less menacing in his years and didn't know whether to proceed with caution and talk to her, or whether to give her some time to cool off.

Instead, he decided to stir the fire a little to see if she was jealous like he believed she was.

"Sue sure looked pretty this morning," he said as he slouched into the saddle, his eyes remaining locked on her profile.

She didn't say anything but her jaw muscle tensed for a split second.

"Said she's going into town today and she'd pick up my things from the store. Mighty kind of her, don't you

think?" he continued and her eyes narrowed into dark slits.

"Mighty," Jessie spat the word out and tightened her grip on the reins. She didn't care that her sister was winning him over. All she cared about was getting the cattle in, and getting Colt to do his share of the work. That was the only reason she'd dragged him away from Sue. She didn't care about him talking to her sister; she just cared about the ranch.

"Even said that when she'd got back she was going to bake a pie, just the way I like it."

"How sweet of her. Pie will be ruined by the time we get back though. It'll be a long day." Jessie found herself slowing Ranger down until the point where he was almost standing still. They didn't need to hurry.

"I was thinking if we galloped, it wouldn't be ruined," he said and she looked at him this time.

"And you run this ranch?" she said between gritted teeth and kept a sweet smile plastered on her face as anger boiled up inside her.

He looked stunned that she'd pulled rank on him.

"If you want to go back, Mr. Tucker, go ahead. I'll get the cattle in myself, and then start advertising your position tomorrow." Her restraint snapped and the last shreds of her temper frayed as she held his gaze a moment longer and then veered off towards the creek.

Colt stopped Spirit and watched Jessie riding into the distance again.

He really hadn't been expecting that.

She was willing to fire him in order to keep her sister and him apart? It was ridiculous. He wasn't even interested in Sue.

Spirit bucked and threw him to the ground.

Landing with a harsh bump that jolted his spine, he stared at the ceiling of sky above him for a few seconds and then propped himself up on his elbows, expecting to see Spirit standing nearby.

She wasn't.

She was heading off after Jessie and Ranger.

"Women!" Colt cursed as he watched his horse trotting away from him. It had to be a conspiracy. Spirit had understood that he'd upset Jessie and had punished him for it.

Swearing to God that he wouldn't tease Jessie again so there was no need to punish him further, he stood up and started walking towards the creek in the direction that Jessie, Ranger and Spirit had gone.

~

Jessie didn't look up as Colt walked over to where she was sitting beneath the tree watching the two horses as they drank from the stream. She kept her eyes on them, smiling at the way Spirit had deserted Colt and come to see her. She'd never seen the horse so tender before; Spirit had come right up to her and nudged her gently in the back. When she'd turned around, she'd expected to see Colt, but had found the horse was alone.

She'd laughed.

"Lost something?" She watched the sunlight as it twinkled on the bubbling creek.

Colt sighed. "My horse."

"She's not your horse, Mr. Tucker." Looking up at him, she frowned. "I thought you were leaving?"

He set his jaw tight and locked his eyes with hers. "I didn't say I was leaving...you did."

"So?"

"So I'm not leaving." He gave her a hard look.

"You're not?" She looked incredulous.

He smirked. "I'm not. I came here to work, and that's what I'm doing."

"You are?" She could see that she was making him angry but she didn't care. He started this and she wasn't about to let it go.

"Jessie..." Colt started in a gentle tone and smiled a little inside when he saw her expression soften a touch, "...I'm not flirting with your sister. I'm just being polite."

"Didn't seem so polite out on the plain." She stood up and brushed herself down as she headed over to Ranger where he was stood in the creek.

"Jessie?" He tried again and she paused with one foot in the stirrups and looked back at him. "It was wrong of me."

"Sure was," she said without a shred of emotion and then mounted her horse. "Cost you your job, too."

As she went to ride off, he caught hold of the reins and held her firm. He looked straight up into her eyes, not letting her move away, and not letting her look away from him.

"You serious?" He searched her eyes for a sign that she was.

She held out for a few moments longer and then slumped into the saddle. Her shoulders relaxed and she let out a long sigh that told him there was something on her mind.

"No," she said in a resigned tone.

"Forgiven?" Holding her gaze, he furrowed his brows into a hopeful look. He'd taken his teasing a little too far, but he knew from the fact she was letting him detain her that she'd already forgiven him. If she were still mad at him, she would've attempted to run him down with Ranger like she had done earlier at the ranch.

She nodded and her lips twitched into a slight smile when his broke apart in a grin.

He mounted Spirit and looked across at Jessie. She was looking down river to where the cattle were probably gathered. He knew she hadn't been lying when she'd said it was going to be a long day. Rounding up livestock was always a difficult task.

When she noticed he was seated again, she started off. He rode next her, walking the horses down the middle of the river so the cattle would hear them coming and move out onto the plain.

"Sue really say that she was going to bake you a pie?" she said.

"Yep." He smiled at her, thankful that she wasn't holding a grudge and was apparently in a good mood again.

"Don't eat it."

He frowned. "Why not?"

She smiled broadly. "Sue can't cook. She made pa sick last time she tried."

He laughed at the same time she did.

Riding beside her, he couldn't keep his eyes off her as she giggled, filling the air with the sound, and making him stop so he could listen to it. He'd not heard her laugh properly before, had never thought he would, but here she was laughing over the fact her sister poisoned people with her cooking. He smiled as he inclined his head to one side and drew a slow deep breath.

She was pretty when she laughed. It seemed to light the whole of her face and change her completely. It was as though it filled her up with brightness, and for the first time he could see what she would be like if she were happy.

And he found himself wishing that he could make her always feel that way.

~

Jessie was still smiling by the time they got the last of the cattle into the pen. She couldn't remember a time she'd felt so happy and free. She smiled broadly at Colt

as she tethered Ranger next to Spirit and then went into the house to cool off.

It was mid-afternoon, and the temperature had risen above the average for this time of year. The hard work of bringing the cattle in had made her feel sweaty and hot. The dampness of the back of her white shirt was testament to that; it clung to her and she'd repeatedly pulled it away from her skin but to no avail.

It was still clinging to her.

Walking into the house, she went up to her room and opened the windows. She sighed as she lay down on her bed, letting the breeze wash over her and cool her down. Her whole body ached. Getting the cattle in was always the worst job on the ranch, but at least this time she had Colt there to help.

He'd done an admirable job of rounding them up. It seemed as though he used the same tactic as her—just slowly herding the cattle and not driving them. They'd had a few that had broken free of the herd and had had to be rounded up again as they made a run for the creek, but other than that, the whole thing had gone smoothly.

She listened to Colt outside as he talked to her father about rounding up the cattle and when they'd be branding them, and closed her eyes. Drifting off for what seemed like only a few seconds, she was awoken by a noise in the hall and got up to see what it was.

Walking to her sister's room, she frowned as she found no one there, and there was no one in John and her parents room either. Going back towards her room, she noticed someone in the one next to it and hurried there.

She stopped in the doorway, a scowl settling on her face as she watched him.

"What're you doing in here?" She gave him an accusatory glare as he turned to face her.

"Your mother said it would be all right," Colt replied.

She gave him a look that said it wasn't, and then bolted down the stairs, shouting for her mother.

"Ma!" She ran into the parlour. "What's this about Colt and the room?"

"He's got to sleep somewhere, Jessie, we can't keep him out in the stable all the time." Her mother didn't look at her. She just sighed. "He isn't coming back."

Her mouth dropped open as she stared at her mother in disbelief. She didn't know what to say, or how to respond to what she'd said. Her feelings tightened her throat until she had to force the words out.

"He is!" she shouted at her mother, and then pushed past Colt and ran out into the yard.

Colt moved immediately to the door and watched her riding off over the ridge. Glancing at Mary as she appeared beside him, he gave her a look that said he wanted to know what had just happened.

"It was her brother's room," she said as way of an explanation.

It was all Colt needed to know.

Running across the yard, he practically leapt onto Spirit's back and galloped after Jessie.

- Chapter Eight -

Tying Spirit up beside Ranger, he crept down the dusty tree lined slope. He kept his eyes on Jessie the whole time, watching her as she swam in the clear waters of the pool and feeling his heart beating fast against his chest. He remained hidden in the trees for a few minutes, letting his eyes run their course over her as she continued to swim, completely oblivious to his presence.

He could see her clothes at the waters edge, sitting in a neat pile beside a large rock. Looking around, he noted that the pool was well sheltered; the high slope and rocky walls surrounding it kept it hidden from view. It had taken him a while to find her, and he definitely hadn't been expecting to see her in such a state of undress.

He kept telling himself that it was wrong of him to keep himself hidden from view, it was wrong of him to be watching her when she was so vulnerable, but he couldn't stop.

He was mesmerised by her.

She'd taken her hair down and it moved like the tall grass of the plain in the wind as she swam. It was slicked back, but tendrils of it kept falling down around her face. His eyes settled on her bare shoulders and what he could see of her back before the water hid her body from view.

Shaking his head, he finally got the better of himself and stepped out into the open.

Jessie turned the instant she heard a noise on the bank and hurriedly covered her nakedness with her arms when she saw Colt standing there. She sank into the water until her shoulders were barely visible above it and scowled at him, trying to hide her shock over the situation she'd found herself in.

She couldn't speak at first. She just kept treading water and staring at him as he moved down to where she'd deposited her clothes. She juggled the position of her hands so she could wipe the water from her face without exposing herself to him, and willed her heartbeat to stop racing.

Finally finding her voice, she looked around to see if anyone else was watching her and then looked back at him.

"How the hell did you find me?"

He smiled and sat down on the rock by the waters edge.

"No one knows about this place..." she trailed off as she caught his eyes wandering down from her face and she sank into the water a little more.

"I'm good at tracking." He smiled and took his tobacco out of his pocket. Casually rolling a cigarette, he kept his eyes fixed on her face.

She quickly glanced down at her body.

"You shouldn't worry. I've only come to talk."

She didn't know whether to believe him or not, but since he was holding her clothes hostage she didn't have much option other than to listen to what he had to say.

She watched him as he struck a match on the patch of rock beside his thigh and then lit his cigarette, taking a long drag on it before exhaling the smoke out into the warm spring air.

"I understand your brother leaving upset you."

She gave him a look that was blacker than the midnight sky and turned her head away from him. He could talk all he wanted, talk until he was blue in the face, but she didn't have to talk back.

"We all lose things we love, but I get the feeling that his leaving did break that heart of yours, just like your sister said." He leant forwards, resting his elbows on his knees as he looked at her. "Something tells me you're not in a talking mood."

She fixed her gaze on the water. He was giving her the opportunity to do what she'd been trying to do all week, and she still couldn't bring herself to tell him.

"Well...figure we've got all day, all night if it takes it. That pool will be getting cold in 'bout one, maybe two hours. If you're still not talking by then, I reckon you'll start."

She frowned. So, that was his game. He was going to keep her trapped until she talked, until she told him about Charlie, and why she couldn't bring herself to be civil to him sometimes.

"How 'bout I start?" Colt said and didn't wait for her answer. His look became pensive as he stared up at the patch of blue sky above them and tried to think of what he could tell her that would get her talking. What could put them on equal footing and show her that he hurt

sometimes too. They were only human after all. "I'm thinking it's going to need to be bad, something that made me feel as bad as you did when your brother left. I don't think there's anything that happened to me that made me feel that way, the way you do. I knew your brother had left, your mother told me on the night I arrived. You didn't mention him on the ride to town."

Jessie continued to stare at the pool but he could see in her face that he was getting to her. He didn't want to hurt her, but he couldn't go on another minute without knowing what made her temperament change so quickly sometimes. He couldn't go on without knowing what made her cry at night, and what filled her eyes with sadness when she looked at him.

"When I lost my ranch, it broke my heart. Then I lost my horse...had to do the right thing, even though my heart got broke again by doing it." He dropped his eyes to rest on the sandy ground as she finally brought hers to meet them. He didn't want her to see what an impact that event had had on him; he just wanted her to hear it had happened. He'd loved his horse more than anything he'd ever loved. It had been the only thing that had remained faithful to him over the years. It had been there from the start when he got his ranch up and running, and had been there when he'd lost it all.

Shooting his horse had been the hardest thing he'd ever had to do.

It had been like killing an old friend.

Rubbing his nose on the back of his hand, he sniffed back the overwhelming emotions that remembering that day had brought to the surface, and then sighed.

He wished she would talk. He didn't know how many bad memories he could dredge up without compromising his masculinity.

There was no damn way he was about to cry in front of her.

"I couldn't do that," she said.

He looked up at her, keeping his eyes almost hidden by his hat, and then brought his cigarette up to his lips again. It hadn't been the way he'd intended to get her talking, but he was glad she was coming out of her shell, even if it was only the first step of many.

Gathering himself, he tipped his hat back and looked at her. "I've spent three years wandering this land, and in all that time I've never met a soul so muddled as yours."

Jessie dropped her eyes away from his again as he gave her a look so full of concern that it brought all the things she wanted to tell him bubbling to the surface. She wanted him to know, wanted him to understand, needed him to give her the comfort she knew he could, but she still couldn't get past the feeling that she would be betraying her brother somehow.

"You're waiting for someone that's never coming back, Jessie," he said in a gentle voice.

She furrowed her brows as the tears began to fill her eyes and she went over his words repeatedly in her head. Her mother had said it, her sister had always said it, and now Colt was telling her, too.

Charlie was never coming back.

His promises had been empty. They lay broken and discarded like her heart, thrown to the wayside by one night, and years of being apart.

She was alone.

He'd told her that she'd never be alone. They'd always be working the ranch, bringing the cattle in, taking the horses out on the plain. They'd be like it until the day they died, and even then, they'd do it together. She'd managed to convince herself for years that he was coming back, but now she was tired of holding onto false hope.

He wasn't coming back.

Looking at Colt, she took in his features, memorising the way he was watching her with so much concern. He wasn't Charlie. Charlie had never looked at her that way, had never made her feel like she did when Colt smiled at her. Colt would never hurt her. Her heart kept telling her that she could trust him with it, that he'd take care of her and keep any promises he made.

"You remind me of him," she whispered, unsure of whether she really wanted him to know that.

"I figured that out for myself." He let his spent cigarette drop to the ground and watched it burn itself out. "I'm not him."

"I know."

He sighed. "But sometimes I am, and that's what makes you crazy."

She nodded. "Sometimes, not so much now."

"Is that why you cry?" He gave her a sympathetic look as another tear cascaded down her cheek and fell into the water. "You've got to let go, darling. You can't spend your life waiting."

"I know," she whispered and then realised that she didn't want to either. She'd waited so long, wasted years watching the horizon for him. He was right; she had to let go. "He promised he'd come back."

She looked up at him. He nodded in understanding as he rolled another cigarette.

"But he ain't," she said. "I've waited so long...since I turned twenty. Was it really six years ago? I thought about him every day, wondering where he went, what happened to him, and if he's alive. I would ride out into the meadow and I'd remember the times we'd rode there, the times we'd laughed and the times we'd talked. He was the only one I talked to...and then you came along. You reminded me so much of him that it made the pain feel new again. It hurt like hell. Then we started riding on the plain, in the meadows, and I didn't think about Charlie. You took it all away, all the hurt, the memories. Now there are new ones that come to me."

"Like having rings rode round you?" He offered with a slight smile.

She nodded, the corners of her mouth twitching almost imperceptibly.

"I've got to let him go, got to see he ain't coming back, but it's not the end. There's work to be done, ranch needs running, and it's up to me to do it." She gave him a genuine smile as she looked at him. It was relieving to talk to him, and she knew that now she'd started telling

him about what happened in her past, she'd find it easier to continue and tell him the whole story when she felt up to it.

"And me." He smiled as her eyes met his. "I'm not going nowhere."

"You kind of have to," she said as she glanced down at her body where she was still covering it with her hands. "My legs are getting mighty tired, Mr. Tucker, and the pool's getting cold."

He gave her an apologetic look and stood up. Just as he was about to leave, he looked down at her clothes and then back at her. He sat back down on the rock.

"Thought you were going?" she said as she continued to tread water, the coolness of the pool making goose flesh erupt in waves over her body.

"I will."

"When?" She frowned at him, furrowing her brows into it as she gave him a look that said sometime soon would be appreciated.

"Just as soon as you call me Colt." He smiled wickedly at her.

She could see that he really wasn't going to leave until she finally said his name.

She considered what he'd said. If only he knew the amount of times that she'd tried to say his name and failed. She wanted to call him Colt, wanted to let him into her heart and wanted to be closer to him, but it wasn't easy. Remembering that she'd decided to let go of the hope that her brother would return, she told

herself that Colt wasn't replacing Charlie, but she couldn't go through life keeping people at a distance. There were people she needed to be close to or she'd always feel alone, and Colt was one of those people.

It helped that he wasn't going to let her out until she called him by his first name. Now she had the perfect excuse. It was either say it and cross the line, or let him see her naked by walking out into the open and getting her clothes from where they sat by his feet. Right now, she preferred the first option.

Letting her eyes lock with his, she moved a little closer to the shore so she could stand, and bit her lip as she built up the courage.

He leant forwards, his eyes still locked with hers as he smiled.

"Colt." She pushed the word out into the open and was amazed by how relieved she felt as he smiled broadly at her. It wasn't so hard after all, and she didn't feel as though she was betraying her brother.

"Jessie?" he said as he looked at her where she was smiling to herself.

She swallowed noisily as she heard him saying her name in such a gentle tone. "Yes?"

"I'll stay in the stable." He stood slowly and turned away from her.

She walked out of the water, stood on the bank and watched him make his way up to the horses. Wrestling with her clothes, she pulled them on over her damp

body and almost growled in frustration as they stuck to her, making it difficult to dress quickly.

She supposed that the right thing to do would be to dry off properly in the sun and find him later to say what she wanted to say, but she couldn't wait. She didn't care that he would be able to see her body through her damp clothes. She was damn sure he'd already seen more than that in the pool anyway.

When she finally managed to get her boots on, she grabbed her hat and ran up the slope. She sighed as she found Colt and Spirit were gone, and then untied Ranger. Mounting him, she turned him about as fast as she could and then rode after Colt.

Colt let Spirit walk as they headed back across the meadow to the ranch. He smiled to himself as he heard the sound of galloping hooves in the distance and waited for her to catch up with him. It had taken everything in his power to stop himself from looking back at her when he'd heard her getting out of the water. It had been good getting her to talk at last and he didn't want to ruin it by taking such a liberty. He could see that there was more to the whole thing with her brother than she'd told him today. He wasn't concerned. He knew that she'd eventually find the strength to talk about it, and he'd be there when she did.

When she finally appeared beside him, he looked across at her. Her hat had fallen down against her back, her hair was still down, and her cheeks were flushed from riding so hard. He quickly let his gaze drop to her body as she struggled to catch her breath and he found himself captivated by the sight of her damp shirt sticking to her body. Drawing his eyes away, he looked at the distance, all the while thinking about what he'd seen.

"Colt?" Jessie said and smiled awkwardly when he looked at her. She spoke in between deep breaths, "You're welcome to the room."

"Jessie...I..." he started but she shook her head adamantly.

"Stay in the room. It'll help me let go of him." She silently pleaded with him as she caught hold of Spirit's reins and forced him to stop.

He considered what she'd said and then nodded. He wanted to help her, wanted to know exactly what had happened with her brother so he could understand her better.

"If it'll help," he answered and she nodded, letting go of his reins.

He looked at their surroundings, taking in the wide, open meadow and the fact the sun was starting to set.

"Today's the first day you've not rode rings round me," she said.

He noted her disappointed tone and smiled at his horse as he patted her neck. "Was going easy on you."

"Bet I can beat you home," she said and tightened her grip on the reins.

"Deal." He shifted in the saddle, readying himself.

She urged her horse on and galloped hard towards the ridge. She glanced back at him where he was bringing up the rear and shouted, "Loser has to eat Sue's pie!"

Colt smiled and kept behind her all the way, letting her ride like the wind and listening to her laughing.

He'd stomach losing and Sue's pie if it kept her laughing.

- Chapter Nine -

Standing outside the cattle pen, Colt watched in amusement as Jessie wrestled with the juvenile. She was doing an admirable job of keeping hold of it while her father attempted to get the lasso around its neck. They'd spent most of the morning checking over the cattle to see if they were all healthy and now they'd moved on to branding the youngsters. He could see that she was tired, but she was covering it well with her enthusiasm. She'd nearly been trampled on at least a dozen times, but each time she'd insisted that she stay inside the pen. His protests had fallen on deaf ears. She'd quickly relegated him to watching the fire and heating the branding irons.

He picked one out of the fire as Jessie pulled the little cow into the enclosure they'd made.

"What're you waiting for?" She gritted her teeth and struggled to hold onto the cow as it tried to go backwards to escape the narrow wooden corridor.

He gave her a look that said he'd be doing this at his own pace and made her wait a little longer as punishment.

Frank watched with a smile as her daughter shot Colt a black look and then heaved on the rope. Mary had told him last night that the new ranch hand and Jessie were getting along at last, and that deep inside she was hoping that they liked each other. He'd thought she was crazy at first. The only times he'd seen the two together they had been angry as hell with each other about

something. He smiled absently as he remembered how things had been when he'd fallen for Mary. They'd fought the whole time, convinced that they hated each other, when in reality they were falling in love.

All day he'd watched the way Colt and Jessie interacted with each other, and now he couldn't deny that Mary was right. They definitely liked each other. People didn't fight that much unless they did.

"Colt!" Jessie shouted, frowning at him where he was idly stoking the fire with the branding iron.

"Hold your horses!" he hollered back at her and then raised his brows. "Or, more appropriately, hold your cow."

She didn't laugh. She just gave him an unimpressed look and then almost flew forwards as the animal in question began to buck.

Closing her eyes, she wrapped the rope around her hand and tried to keep hold of it. When it went still, she opened one eye and looked at Colt. He hadn't branded it, but it was still as a millpond in the enclosure.

He smiled at her, tapped his nose as though telling her it was a secret and then branded the youngster.

She fell backwards as the pain registered in the cow and it ran forwards, knocking her out of the way. She screwed her face up as it ran over her, taking the rope with it as she let go. Staring up at the sky, she wondered how many more hits she could take today before she really started to bruise.

As Colt's hand appeared in view, she reached out and took hold of it. She gave him an appreciative smile as he pulled her up onto her feet, tightly grasping her hand and not letting it go even when she was upright again.

"You all right?" he asked, concern visible in his eyes.

She nodded mutely and looked down at her dirty pants.

Frank smiled as they both realised they were still holding hands and quickly broke apart, similar awkward expressions settling on both of their faces.

Shaking his head, he glanced across at Sue where she was stood on the porch with her arms folded, and climbed over the fence. Walking over to her, he gave her a little smile that conveyed how sorry he was that her plans for Colt weren't working out, and then led her into the house.

Jessie turned around to see them disappearing inside and then smiled at Colt.

"How'd you make him stay still?" she said with curiosity showing in her wide brown eyes.

"It's a secret." Colt winked at her and nodded to the cattle. "You want a hand now?"

She nodded, realising that her father was going to be indoors for a while and that they still had a lot of cattle to brand before evening fell.

Just as he was about to leap over the fence, he stopped and looked into the distance.

Following his gaze, she smiled when she saw a man coming down the hill. He was dressed all in rusty brown

with the exception of his long black coat. The horse he was riding was as big as Ranger, but with appaloosa markings. There was only one man with a horse like that in this area. She smiled broadly, climbed out of the pen, and waved to him to get his attention.

"Jessie." The man smiled down at her as he dismounted.

"Mr. Crawford." She took the reins from him and tied his horse to the cattle pen fence.

"Is your father home?" he asked as he rubbed his dark moustache.

She nodded. "He went inside with Sue. We were branding the cattle."

She looked over her shoulder at Colt where he was stoking the fire to keep the branding irons hot and then back at Mr. Crawford. She found him looking at Colt.

"Heard about you," he said, his smile remaining in place as Colt left his post beside the fire and walked over to him.

"Colt Tucker. Been working on the ranch for a few weeks now." He smiled at Mr. Crawford and then looked at her when she moved.

"It's a long way from your ranch, we don't see you often. What brings you here now? Is Sally well?" she said. Mr. Crawford came by to see her father once or twice a year, but she couldn't remember the last time she'd seen his daughter, Sally.

"She's why I'm here," he said with a proud smile and clapped his hand down on her shoulder. "She's getting married in a month and everyone is invited. There'll be a

dance in the evening in town. I expect to see you there, and Mr. Tucker of course."

She glanced at Colt and smiled. "We'll be looking forwards to it."

"Is that you old Crawford?" Her father's voice drifted across to them and she turned to face him.

"I've got some news," Mr. Crawford called back to him and held his hand up, motioning that he'd be over in a minute. He turned back to her, and smiled as he gave her shoulder an affectionate squeeze. "We'll be seeing you there? Sally was most particular about you being invited."

Warmth filled her as she thought about all the times she'd spent idly passing the day with Sally. They always managed to make the most mundane things take hours; things like braiding hair and choosing dresses. Those times seemed like a million miles away now, like distant memories, or events that happened to someone other than her and she'd just been an onlooker. She couldn't remember the last time she'd worn a dress or a skirt, or worried about her appearance. All she could remember were things she needed to do around the ranch, tasks that had to be dealt with and the daily chores. She didn't even know if she had any women's clothing now. Over the years, all her dresses and skirts had been replaced with shirts and trousers.

"I'll be there," she said with conviction. She wasn't about to miss the wedding. Sally had been her best friend once, and although it had been a long time since she'd seen her, she still felt that bond to her.

Watching Mr. Crawford walking towards her father, she mused that she probably had nothing to good enough to wear to the wedding, or the dance, and for the first time in years, she actually wanted something pretty to dress in.

She snuck a look at Colt out the corner of her eye as he went back to stoking the fire. Her eyes ran over his profile and down his arms to his hands. She kept them fixed there, watching the way he worked the irons to stir the fire. She wondered if it was the wedding that was making her want to wear a dress again, or whether it was him. If he wasn't going to the dance, would she care about her appearance?

When Colt looked over his shoulder at her, she quickly turned her attention to Mr. Crawford's horse.

"It's a fine horse," he said as he stepped up behind her.

She closed her eyes briefly as she felt him close to her and again ran over her previous thoughts about dresses, coming to the conclusion that he was the reason she wanted to look pretty at the dance.

"Pretty," she whispered and found herself subconsciously leaning backwards slightly, as though she wanted to be closer to him still.

"Beautiful," he breathed and she glanced at him, her cheeks tinting a deep rose colour.

As the cattle broke the quiet air, she cleared her throat and straightened up, pushing her feelings back into their places and reminding herself that there was work to do.

Turning to look at him, her eyes instantly met his and she couldn't miss the amount of tenderness in them; they were soft and affectionate, almost overwhelming.

"Can you dance?" he asked her.

She couldn't look away as he kept his eyes fixed on hers.

"I've never tried," she answered honestly and tried to ignore the worry that settled in her stomach, causing a million questions to spring into her head. What if she did it all wrong? What if she made a fool of herself? What if they all laughed at her?

She didn't want to imagine how terrible she would feel. Suddenly, going to the dance didn't seem like such a good idea. There were so many things that could go wrong. People looked at her as though she was strange now, how would they react to her if she made a fool of herself that night? She'd never be able to go into town again.

"Why not?" Colt said.

He watched as her eyes gradually grew wider and wider until they looked as frightened as Spirit's did when he'd first met her.

As he placed his hand on her shoulder, she came out of her thoughts, and looked down at it and then up at him.

"Can you dance?" She turned his question against him.

"I've never had occasion to," he replied and let his hand slip from her shoulder when she looked nervous. He smiled at her, hoping to relieve some of the worry he could see in her eyes. "At least we'll be equal."

She looked a little more relaxed. She smiled and then made her way over the fence again, cornering the cow that had her lasso and slipping the rope noose off over its head.

"Let's finish up here and take the horses out." She looked up at the expanse of blue above them and smiled as the sun warmed her face. "It's such a nice day."

"If I were in the right mood 'bout now, I'd be telling you that there was work to be doing, and it's illegal to be saying such things." He let his eyes follow her as she counted the remaining cattle that needed branding.

"But you won't...because you want a ride as much as I do." She smiled when he didn't respond, and roped the nearest cow that wasn't marked.

Colt stoked the fire with the branding iron. Pulling it out of the flames, he looked at the design; it was an intricate 'H' and it made him think of the mark he used to brand his cattle with. His had been plainer, but then he hadn't had such a skilled blacksmith as Pa McGintley, or so accessible. The nearest blacksmith to him had been nearly thirty miles away in the town. He'd always had to stock up for weeks at a time. Long winters had been a problem a few times, forcing him to ration his food so he would make it through. At times like those, he'd spent most of the day in the saddle; wrapped up in warm clothing and looking after his cattle. It had been the most economic way of keeping warm.

Plus the house had felt awful empty in winter.

"Colt?"

"Hmm?" He blinked as he raised his head and found her staring at him as she wrestled with the young cow. "Sorry."

"What're you thinking about?" Her curiosity showed in her eyes.

"How lonely winter is...how I'm glad that it's spring." He shoved the branding iron back into the fire to let it heat up again.

"Winter's not lonely," she said and then fell silent as he looked at her, not hiding his feelings. "Were you alone on the ranch?"

He nodded.

"What was it like...not winter...I mean, your ranch? What was it called?"

He smiled at her inquisitiveness and branded the cow, listening as it mooed and then watching it as Jessie let it go back to the others.

"Black Mountain Ranch." He looked at her as she sat on the fence beside him. "Was a good place, good land. Not as fertile as this ranch, but it was workable. Cattle liked it. Plenty of water."

"What happened to it?"

"There was a fire..." he trailed off as he thought about what had happened. It still angered him. It was the reason he'd started walking, following his feet, and the one lead that he had.

It had brought him here.

"I'm sorry." Her voice broke into his thoughts and he shook his head, showing her it was fine and she didn't have to apologise. "Have you ever thought about starting a new one?"

"Still own the land." He smiled. "It's crossed my mind once or twice."

Or every night since that day.

"Couldn't imagine not having the ranch in my life." Jessie looked around her at the buildings, and the horses where they were whinnying in the stable, and the cattle as they moved around the expansive pen.

"I couldn't either. I'll rebuild it one day."

She didn't know how to respond to that. The idea of him leaving, of him going back to the place that he'd told her was a long way away, made her heart hurt. Letting her eyes slowly follow the cattle, she tried to think of something to take her mind off it.

"We won't get a ride in if we don't finish soon." He broke the heavy silence.

She looked up at him and nodded. His lips curved into the faintest of smiles.

She roped another of the youngsters and dragged it over to the enclosure. It was giving her hell as she held onto the rope, trying to keep it steady so Colt could brand it.

Jessie went quiet as Colt nudged the branding iron against the cow's lip and it suddenly stood still. She watched as he pressed the iron against its hind and it didn't react until the moment he pulled it away from its skin. Releasing the animal, she looked up at Colt where

he was standing above her with a pleased look in his eyes.

She couldn't believe that such a simple manoeuvre made the whole branding process so much easier. It was something she'd not thought of. Her brother had gone in for the whole biting their lip thing, but there was no way she was going to kiss a cow. Colt seemed to have found a way of doing it that didn't involve getting up close and personal to the animal.

She smiled, letting him see that she really meant what she was about to say.

"I'm impressed."

- Chapter Ten -

Jessie opened her bedroom windows and let the early morning air in. She'd risen later today. Yesterday had been a long day. They had spent most of it down by the river checking the cows. Their pregnancies were progressing well, but they were heading towards the time of year when there were often storms every other day or so. She'd spent enough days in the past out by the creek helping the cows when they'd been having a troubled birth. It wasn't something she looked forwards to.

She smiled as she remembered branding the cattle with Colt. It was only a few weeks ago, but it seemed like longer than that. They'd spent most of their time after that riding the plains and tending to the horses, every so often checking on the cattle. The weather was getting warmer, days longer, and it was all combining to make her feel a calming sense of peace inside.

There had been talk of newcomers in town. Her sister had told them all about it one night last week. The ranchers were worried that the men were cattle thieves. On hearing the rumours, her father had become anxious and the very next day he'd asked her and Colt to fix the gate to the ranch. It had been a long time since they'd closed it, so long that it was nearly falling apart. She couldn't remember a time in her adult years that she'd seen it shut. The sight of it closed unnerved her. It put thoughts into her head about the possibility of men coming to steal the cattle, about them coming to the ranch when she was out on the plain. Whenever she had

a quiet moment, she would find herself going over the rumours in her head.

Colt had told her that it was nothing to worry about, she'd never be out in the meadow alone; he'd always be there with his rifle to look after her. She'd been thankful to him for not mentioning the time she'd told him that carrying a weapon wasn't necessary. It was just that her corner of the world had felt so safe, so protected and invulnerable. Now she felt as though all that had fallen away and she was exposed to the potential dangers of cattle rustlers.

Today they'd promised her father they would go and check the perimeter fence, making sure that it was sound and there were no gaps in it where rustlers could easily get the cattle through.

If things carried on this way, they would have to bring all the cattle into the pen and keep them there until the men went away.

There had been several sightings of them at the saloon in town since they first arrived. No one knew where they went at night or on the days that they didn't spend drinking. They just appeared from the countryside now and then, keeping to themselves and not asking any questions of the local townsfolk. People had grown suspicious of them. They were riding large dark horses, carrying rifles on their saddles and a pair of pistols apiece.

Colt had mentioned to her one night that he'd seen people like them. He'd offered to go into town to check them out to see if they were dangerous or just taking their time passing through. When she'd protested against the idea, he'd told her that he wouldn't. As much

as she was sure he could handle himself in a brawl, she couldn't bear the thought of him getting hurt. That saloon had been nothing but trouble from the day they built it.

All this in time for Sally Crawford's wedding, too. She'd gone to see her a few days after the strangers had arrived, and even though her friend said their appearance in town didn't bother her in the least, she could see that it did.

As the light sound of laughter drifted up to her window, she looked out and frowned. Sue was flirting with Colt again. He was readying his horse and Ranger, waiting for her. She noted that his eyes kept dropping to Sue's apparel and then glanced at her wardrobe.

Walking over to it, she opened it up and stared at her clothes. The other week when she'd thought about what she could wear at the wedding, and whether she owned any dresses and skirts, she had come up to her room and searched through the closet. She'd found two skirts and a dress, and a pair of heeled boots that she hadn't seen in years.

Taking down the dark brown skirt, she laid it out on the bed with a cream shirt. She stared at them for the longest time, trying to remember the last time she'd worn them. It must have been around the time that Charlie had left. She'd started wearing men's work clothes shortly after that.

Picking the clothes up, she slipped into them, fastening her skirt and doing the buttons up on the shirt. She looked at herself in the mirror as she did up the last of the shirt buttons. She didn't look so different, at least not on her top half. Stepping backwards, she frowned at

her reflection, looking at the skirt and rotating her hips to make it move.

She couldn't see what the fascination was. Colt had agreed with her that women's clothing wasn't appropriate for ranch work, but he still got that look in his eyes whenever he was talking to Sue, and she was convinced it was because of the fancy clothes she wore, and how feminine she looked.

Turning away from the mirror, she watched them as they talked in the yard.

Glancing back at the mirror, she caught sight of herself and sighed. It was ridiculous. She couldn't believe what she had been about to do. Was wearing a skirt really going to get Colt's attention? She remembered that he'd said he wasn't interested in Sue, and she got the feeling that he might be interested in herself, but she wasn't sure. And what did it matter? What did she care?

Just as she was about to take the skirt off and replace it with her work pants, a deeper laugh joined the light one in the yard. She immediately looked out the window, anger and jealousy entwining like a deadly pair of vipers in her stomach and making her jaw tense and her brows knit.

He never laughed like that with her.

Storming out of her room, she went to run down the stairs but then dashed back again. Looking into the mirror one last time, she smoothed down her clothes and fixed her hair, trying to make her appearance the best it could be.

When she was satisfied, she walked calmly down the stairs, taking her time as she put her short tan jacket on, and her riding gloves. Picking up her brown hat, she carried it with her as she slowly walked out onto the porch and made her way along it towards the yard.

She smiled inside as Colt's eyes immediately left Sue and came to rest on her instead.

Heading towards them, she blocked out the sight of Sue, not caring about the black look that she would be throwing her way for stealing Colt's attention.

Walking over to Ranger, she took the reins from Colt's hands as he dumbly offered them up, and smiled sweetly.

"Why thank you, Colt." She mounted Ranger with as much grace as she could manage in the skirt, not letting the fact that her legs became tangled in it fluster her.

He stared open mouthed at her as she smiled down at him, her eyelashes fluttering as she held his gaze. She carefully placed her hat on and secured it.

"Shall we be going?" She asked, swallowing her nerves and relishing the way he was looking at her with so much fire in his eyes. She took a deep breath as he nodded and walked around Ranger to his horse. She hadn't been expecting him to look at her for so long. She felt as though he was scrutinising her, waiting for her to slip up or do something stupid. Her temperature rose and her cheeks burned up.

Colt mounted Spirit quickly, not wanting to keep his eyes off Jessie any longer than necessary. It was so strange to see her in women's clothing. Before he laid eyes on

her this morning, he'd never been able to envisage what she'd look like in a skirt. Now he couldn't imagine what she'd looked like in men's clothes. The sight of her dressed so femininely seemed to have chased away all his previous memories of her, erasing them and replacing them with images of her as she looked now.

He followed her blindly as she started to move off, his eyes not leaving her profile as they rode towards the ridge. Spirit knew her way; she didn't need him to guide her.

"Something wrong?" Jessie said as he continued to stare.

"Nothing at all," he replied automatically, his eyes still taking in how different she looked today.

He wondered if this had anything to do with the fact that he'd been speaking with Sue in the yard for most of the morning. Each time he talked to her sister, Jessie always found a way to steal his attention back. He'd told her that he was only being polite and that he wasn't interested in her sister, but she still kept getting jealous.

A voice in the depths of his heart asked if he was interested in her, if he wasn't interested in Sue. Why did he feel the need to reassure Jessie if he wasn't?

He'd been working with her for over a month now, and after trapping her in the pool they'd been steadily growing closer. She talked more now, told him things about herself and he in turn told her things about himself. They'd spent long days out on the plain just riding and passing idle talk. There were so many times he'd found himself watching her closely, memorising

every facet of her personality, every tone of her laugh and every smile that she had.

She had a few. He'd discovered that she had more smiles than days of the week, and some of them were reserved for special occasions.

He got the feeling that one of them was reserved for him.

She had a certain way of smiling at him sometimes that made his heart race a little, made his stomach flip and his lips curve into a smile, too. He knew that he wasn't the only one feeling this way, whatever way it was. He could smile sometimes and her cheeks would flush. He could just look at her and she'd have to avert her eyes.

He could see he was having that effect on her right now.

"Jessie?" he breathed her name lightly, just letting it drift out on the gentle breeze that was crossing the plain, making the meadow flowers dance.

"Colt?" She turned her head to face him. Her smile widened as she found his eyes so full of tenderness.

"Why are you wearing that?" He nodded towards her skirt and her eyes dropped to rest on it.

"Wedding is in a few days...guess I just felt like wearing something frilly for once, see how it feels."

He smiled at the embarrassed air her voice picked up and the way she idly toyed with the material of the skirt. He could see that she wasn't comfortable in it and he wanted to ask her why she was really wearing it, but let it go instead.

Riding slowly with her down the length of the fence to the far end of it, he tried to keep his eyes off her and focused on his work, but they kept weaving their way back to her.

Jessie felt warm inside as she glanced across at Colt and found him watching her again. She was glad that she had his attention now, but was worried that it would disappear again the moment she started dressing like she usually did. She smiled, searching for something to say to him, but secretly just wanting to enjoy the peaceful silence.

It was a long ride along the fence, and she was starting to lose concentration as they moved at a slow pace. Hours later, as they finally approached the far end of the fence where it cut across the bottom of the hills, she slowed Ranger to a halt and went to dismount him.

Colt laughed as she practically fell off her horse, her feet getting tangled in the long material of her skirt and making it difficult for her. He stopped dead when her eyes met his.

"It ain't funny!" She glared at him when she was finally free of her horse and then busied herself with rearranging her skirt.

His laughter had only added to her bad mood. Her stomach had that tight, knotted feeling of frustration from struggling with her skirt, and from being forced to walk everywhere on Ranger.

"Sorry." He got down off Spirit's back and held onto Ranger for her as she struggled to fix her clothing.

"Stupid damn...son of a bitch..." Jessie grumbled, ignoring the way Colt's brows rose as she cursed under her breath.

Finally getting herself together again, she took a deep breath and sighed it out as she looked up at him.

"Why are you wearing that?" he asked her and she didn't respond. "I mean...you're not comfortable."

Colt received another black look for his efforts and then watched her as she walked over to the fence where it looked tattered. Holding onto the horses, he followed her as she inspected the fence, slowly moving along the length of it and then stopping as she reached the end where it butted up against the rocks.

"Seems fine," she announced. "Sturdy enough for at least another year."

He nodded in agreement and then tried to keep a straight face as she struggled to mount Ranger. He wanted to help her, but got the feeling it would only earn him another black look and possibly a lot worse. When she was finally seated in her saddle, he mounted Spirit.

"Home?" she asked with a hopeful look.

"I'll go as far as the creek," he replied and could see she needed him to explain why he wasn't coming back to the ranch with her. "I just want to check the cattle and make sure there's no way of getting them over that rock ridge. I can do it alone."

Jessie knew that he wasn't pushing her away; he was giving her an opportunity to get out of the skirt and back into clothing that she felt more comfortable in.

Riding back across the open meadow, she kept sneaking glances at him as they moved side by side. She was thankful to him for letting her go back. She had been foolish to wear a skirt out to work, but she hadn't been able to help herself. Every time she saw Colt speaking to Sue, she lost all common sense and found herself doing anything to get his attention back on her.

As they reached the point where the creek was nearest, she found Colt leaving her. She stopped her horse as he went to move off, coming to a halt a few metres away.

They looked at each other, holding each other's gaze and both wondering what to say.

He smiled.

"Still think you're more suited to your work clothes, even if you do look pretty today."

She smiled broadly as she watched him ride away towards the creek. Turning Ranger towards the house, she repeatedly went over his words in her head.

She looked pretty today.

- Chapter Eleven -

Jessie was dressed in her work clothes again when they travelled into town with her family the next day. Her parents had business with some of the locals, and her brother and sister had gone along for the ride, and the chance to get away from the ranch.

Colt had ridden with her behind the cart. She never liked going into town without her horse, and since she'd insisted on riding, he had too.

She let her eyes gradually work their way across to him and let them drift down to his boots. They had decided that he couldn't go much longer without getting a new pair, and they both needed some new work gloves. Repairing the fences had taken their toll on their old ones, finally wearing little holes in the old leather.

As they reached the outskirts of town, she could feel Colt's eyes come to rest on her. She kept her eyes fixed on his boots and noticed the way he rode closer to her as they entered the main square. She wondered if he'd noticed the reaction she'd got last time they were here, and this was his way of reassuring her. Maybe he just wanted to protect her.

She smiled at him as she let her eyes briefly meet his and then scanned the people as they moved to and fro, going about their business.

"We'll see you back at the ranch," she called to her parents and then turned off towards the general store

with Colt. Riding beside him, she kept her nerves hidden below the surface so no one could see them. She didn't like coming back into town so soon after they'd last been here. She knew it would cause even more talk, especially since she'd been with Colt both times. They'd all be thinking he was changing her or that there was something happening between them.

Which he wasn't, and there wasn't.

It was just coincidence.

Dismounting outside the store, she waited for Colt to tie Spirit up to the rail and then walked with him into the shop.

She took her hat off as she entered, and gave Ed a wide smile.

"Back so soon?" He forwent his usual greeting, clearly stunned by seeing her so quickly.

"Yep," she answered as she perused the things he had for sale. Her eyes moved to rest on the display of guns behind the clothing counter and she looked at them, taking in the different types, shapes and sizes.

"Looking for a gun?" Ed asked her and she turned to find Colt looking at her.

"Not at all," she said as she shrugged off his question, hoping he wouldn't pursue it any further. Since the strangers had arrived in town, she'd started reconsidering her view on carrying weapons. She felt so much safer when she was around Colt and his rifle, but she couldn't decide whether it was the gun that was making her feel like that, or just being around him.

"Looking for a sturdy pair of boots." Colt drew the storekeeper's attention away from Jessie, giving her time to muse the thoughts he could see running through her mind.

"Sturdy, eh?" Ed said as he walked around to the display of boots and looked them over.

"Got to last a long time," he explained and watched Jessie out the corner of his eye as she went over the gloves. She seemed so distracted today.

Ed picked up a pair of brown boots but Colt immediately shook his head.

"And black," he added to his list.

"Black," Ed said as he looked at the boots again. "Think we have more in the back. I'll go take a look."

Colt watched him go and then walked over to Jessie where she was still going through the gloves.

"Black," she said and handed him a pair that weren't too dissimilar to his last one.

He took them from her with a smile and tried them on. They fitted perfectly. He stared at them and flexed his fingers. He'd never had someone pick out clothes for him, especially a girl. It felt strange for some reason. She knew him so well, knew his glove size, knew...

"You need more tobacco." Her voice cut into his thoughts and he smiled inside as she emphasised his point.

She knew him, and he felt as though he knew her.

"I do?" he asked.

"You mentioned it last week," she said as she pointed at the rows of packets. "They have your brand."

He smiled on the outside this time. She remembered things he said, too, things that he mentioned in passing and then forgot himself. She remembered them.

"Best get me some then." He continued to smile as she looked at him and then turned his attention to finding a pair of gloves for her. He knew that she had trouble finding gloves small enough for her hands. Rifling through the pile, he pulled out a pair of tan ones that looked to be the size she wore.

She glanced at the gloves as he held them out to her. Taking them, she slipped them on and frowned before looking up at him and giving him a grateful smile.

"Thank you." She took the gloves off and put them onto the counter.

He removed the pair she'd found for him and put them on top of hers.

"Boots and tobacco then," he said to her and then looked over at Ed as he reappeared from the back of the store.

"These should do you, Mr. Tucker." Ed placed the pair of black boots down on the counter.

Colt picked them up and held their sole against the ones he was currently wearing. He nodded. "Should do me just fine, much obliged to you for looking for them."

"Not at all." Ed smiled and then began writing down the cost of everything on a slip of paper.

"Tobacco, too," Jessie said and Ed gave her an incredulous look.

"You don't smoke or chew do you?"

She laughed. "Lord, no...it's not for me, it's for Colt."

Colt offered a slight smile as Ed looked at him.

"Didn't have you figured as the smoking kind," Ed said.

Jessie went back to perusing the goods as Colt talked to Ed. She smiled at the dresses in the pattern books and the china that was on display.

"I'll put these on the account, Jessie." Ed caught her attention and she turned her head to give him a smile.

"Thank you, Ed." She took her new gloves from Colt as he handed them to her and then walked with him out of the store.

While he loaded Spirit's saddlebags with his new things, she let her eyes roam the square, watching the people as they milled around and catching snippets of their conversations.

She smiled broadly as she saw a familiar face in amongst the people.

"Colt...I'm going to go talk to Sally Crawford. I shan't be long."

"I'll meet you once I've been to see Pa McGintley 'bout some new tackle for Spirit," he said.

She nodded and walked across the square with Ranger in tow.

"Sally?" She couldn't contain her smile when her friend noticed her and she tied Ranger up.

"Jessie...what brings you into town?" The petite blonde girl briefly hugged her and then pulled back and smiled.

"Came in with my family, and Colt." She nodded towards him.

She saw Sally's eyes move to rest on him as he rode casually along the length of the buildings, heading towards the blacksmith's. When Sally looked back at her, she smiled broadly.

"He's a good looking man," her friend said with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

Jessie gave her a look that said she didn't know what she meant and stifled her desire to blush as she secretly agreed. He was a good-looking man, especially when he was riding.

"How long has been with you?" Sally asked.

She got the feeling that her friend was trying to draw her out of her thoughts.

"With the ranch?" Her voice quivered with nerves as she thought there could be another meaning behind that question—with her?

"Of course." Sally smiled knowingly.

"Nearing two months now." She watched him as he dismounted and tied Spirit up outside the blacksmith's.

Had it been so long already? Time seemed to be flying by. Summer was starting to make itself known, and soon her friend would be married. She couldn't believe that she was getting wed. She was two years younger than herself and it seemed strange that she should get married before her. Whenever they'd dressed up as children, Jessie had always been the bride.

"So what are you doing in town alone?" Jessie looked around them and then back at her.

"Oh, I'm not alone. Frederick has gone to see someone about his clothes for the wedding."

Jessie noticed the flicker of nerves in Sally's eyes as she said that word.

"I still can't believe you're getting married...before me, too. Don't think I'm ever getting wed." She sighed as her friend smiled at her, giggling as she did so.

"Oh, I think you'll get married sooner rather than later, Jessie." Sally patted her on the shoulder while her eyes strayed to the deep chestnut mare that was tied up outside the blacksmith's.

"I don't under..." she trailed off as she realised where her friend was looking and her stomach flipped, "...oh...no...me and Colt...we're not like that."

"Funny, was watching you in the store and you two certainly looked in love." Sally teased her.

"He just works with us, we're friends."

"Friends?" Sally laughed and then stopped when Jessie glared at her. "Okay...friends it is. But the minute he marries you, I'm going to have to say I told you so."

"He ain't going to marry me!" she said, feeling increasingly embarrassed.

"Who's not going to marry sweet Jessie Hayden?"

The slurred male voice made her freeze to the spot and she swallowed down the tight feeling in her throat. She could see by Sally's wide eyes that it was who she thought it was.

"I'll marry ya," the man slurred again, leering at her as she turned to face him. "Sweet Jessie."

Her lip curled in disgust when she smelt the stench of alcohol that was emanating from him. Moving backwards a step, she placed some distance between her and the man. He smiled at her lopsidedly, brushing his sandy brown hair out of his face and struggling to keep his balance.

"I don't need marrying." She held her hands up, trying to show him that she was perfectly all right with her situation.

"Not what you was saying just then." He frowned and then his blue eyes widened as it finally dawned on him through the liquor-induced haze in his head. "It's me you don't want to marry, ain't it?"

She shook her head as he swayed and clung onto the railing that ran along the raised wooden walkway beside them.

Realising that Jim was beyond drunk, and there was a chance he'd get violent, she tried to calm him down and reassure him that it wasn't anything personal against him—she really didn't want to get married.

"It's not, Jim, honest. I'm not ready for this marrying lark." She tried to keep the tremble of nerves out of her voice but she was shaking so much inside that it was impossible. Noticing that Sally was trembling on the outside as much as she was inside, she tried to catch her attention so she could indicate that they should both quickly move away.

"Look at me," Jim slurred as he tried to grab hold of her wrist but she dodged him.

Sally shrieked and hurriedly moved behind her.

Jessie looked around the town at all the people that had stopped to stare.

"Look at me!" he shouted again and managed to catch hold of her arm this time. She tried desperately to tug it away, but he yanked her closer to him, hurting her in the process.

"Get off!" She gritted her teeth as she tried to peel his fingers off her, her heart smashing against the back of her eyes as she struggled against him.

"Was a time you liked my attentions...then you went and changed on us all...now you're all holed up with that man." He tightened his grip on her. His fingertips dug into her soft flesh and she bit her lip to stop herself from crying out in pain. "You marry anyone, you'll be marrying me."

"I won't!" She bit back her tears as pain lanced up her arm and she struggled again to free herself. "I won't, you hear me?"

She fell backwards as a shot rang through the air and Jim let go of her. Landing on the dusty floor, she winced as pain shot up her spine and then looked up to see what had happened.

Colt lowered the rifle, pointing it at the man who had been harassing Jessie—the same man that had been the ringleader of the saloon drunks the last time they were in town.

“Make a move...I swear to almighty God, I’ll kill you where you stand,” he said the words through gritted teeth as he stared down the length of the rifle at the drunkard. Not taking his eyes off him, he said, “Jessie?”

“I was fine!” her tone was harsh as she stood up and dusted herself off.

“Go near her again...” Colt started but found Jessie’s hand on the barrel of his rifle. She pushed it down so it was pointing at the ground, and then stared at him.

“Said I was fine!” she said with venom. “I don’t need protecting.”

He frowned in disbelief and then set his jaw as he realised that she was being serious. “Fine...next time, I’ll leave you to get hurt.”

He watched as she mounted Ranger, glaring at both him and the man one last time before riding away. As the man fell into a drunken heap on the dirt floor, he let his attention return to him, and then noticed the girl that had been with Jessie was still standing rooted to the spot and looking shocked.

"Miss Crawford, right?" he said to her and she nodded in confirmation.

He looked over his shoulder at Jessie where she was slowly riding away. He could tell she was crying. She was doing that thing she did when she was trying to pretend that she wasn't, secretly trying to dash away her tears, but instead drawing his attention to them.

"Mind telling me what's going on here?" he said to the blonde haired girl, giving her a confused look.

The girl smiled nervously and stepped towards him. He walked with her a few feet, placing some distance between them and the man that was sitting on the floor talking to himself.

"He was courting her once. When her eldest brother left, she broke up with him. He's been drinking ever since." She looked down at the man in question. "No matter what she just said, she wasn't fine, and she does need protecting, especially from people like him."

He nodded, knowing that what she'd said was true.

"Much obliged to you. Will be seeing you at the wedding." He tipped his hat and gave one last look to the man before walking back to Spirit.

Mounting his horse, he rode quietly out of town, feeling all eyes on him and realising that he'd probably just put a dent in his reputation, whatever that was, and had made things even harder for Jessie.

He sighed as he thought about her. Even though she'd needed someone to step in, she was going to hold a grudge, and he was going to have a hard time making

amends. She didn't like being made to look weak, and he'd made her look weak in front of the entire town, and so close to Sally Crawford's wedding dance, too.

Everyone was going to be talking about it.

All he could do is hope she'd forgive him.

He wanted to dance with her, just like he'd planned.

- Chapter Twelve -

The night was dark. There was a smell of damp hay in the air, and a far off sound of boots on wood and music. As he approached the town, he tried to picture just what it was going to look like. He'd only been to a wedding dance once in his life, and had never been to a wedding, not even his brother's. Moving gently with Spirit as she walked into the outskirts of town, he wondered what Jessie would look like tonight. He'd not seen her all day. He'd told her father he'd do some work on the ranch and then come up to town in the evening for the dance.

It wasn't that he didn't want to go to the wedding, he just hadn't figured out a way of making peace with Jessie. She'd not spoken to him all yesterday evening, and today he'd rode out earlier than usual, avoiding her at all costs and trying to find some quiet so he could think. The house this morning had been a riot of noise and people pushing past each other as they struggled to get ready.

Not the peace that he needed right now.

It had been nice working alone for the day. He'd done a lot of thinking, but knew there was still more to do.

Riding slowly towards the main square in town, he let his eyes take in the soft lights that had been put up and the paper decorations. Rounding the corner, he pulled Spirit to a stop as he saw the wooden square that had been laid down over the road, and the small stage that had been erected for the band to play on. People lined the

outside of the square, all watching the dancers as they moved swiftly to the beat of the music.

Tethering his horse up by some of the others, he noticed the Hayden's cart and their two horses tied on the other side of the road. There was no sign of Ranger and he wondered if Jessie had actually come without him. It would have taken a lot of convincing by her mother to stop her from bringing her faithful friend. He knew how much safety Ranger brought to her, and she wouldn't leave him behind without being forced to.

His eyes moved to the crowds of people as the song ended and another one began. There was a quick shifting of partners, some people leaving the dance floor and others joining it. He scanned the people gathered around the square, looking over their clothing and seeing that everyone had dressed in their Sunday best.

Spotting Mary, Frank and John, he nodded a greeting to them as they in turn noticed him, and then started walking around the perimeter of the people, trying to find Jessie.

His heart beat painfully hard as he finally found her. She was on the opposite side of the square, stood to one side with some other girls. The warm light of the lanterns surrounding the dance floor only added to how beautiful she looked tonight. She was wearing a dark dress. It looked to be an emerald green colour but he couldn't quite make it out at this distance. He couldn't see her feet, but he could tell by the way she kept shifting and frowning down at them that she wasn't wearing her usual boots, and she wasn't happy about that. Letting his eyes roam back up, he let them travel over the soft curves of her body that her dress emphasised and then finally up the smooth column of her throat to her face.

She had painted her lips a darker colour, drawing his attention to them as he walked around the square, trying to get to her. Her hair was down, hanging in loose dark waves around her shoulders and it reminded him of the time he'd watched her swimming in the pool, and that moment afterwards when she'd come after him.

He frowned as he noticed that everyone around her was being asked to dance, but she was ignored. He could see by the way that she was focusing on picking at her nails, keeping her eyes downcast and off the dancers, that she had been ignored more than just this once. The chances were no one had asked her to dance tonight. Well, he could remedy that. If the men in this town were too blind to ask such a fine looking girl to dance, then that was their loss.

Passing Sue by without even looking at her, he headed straight for the spot where Jessie had been standing but when he got there, he discovered she was gone. He stood on tiptoes, trying to see where she was and then caught a glimpse of someone heading towards the road out of town. Pushing his way through the crowd, he headed after her. There was no way she was going to leave before he had his dance.

Catching up with her before she reached the darker part of town, he walked up behind her.

"Jessie?" He kept his voice gentle and she stopped on hearing him.

"Colt?" She turned, and smiled as she saw him.

"Going somewhere?" He frowned at the road in front of them and then at her.

“Home.”

“On foot?” He looked down at them and raised his brows at the heeled boots that she was wearing. She didn’t seem to care about the fact that she was going home on foot, so he tried a different tactic. “With those men hanging around?”

Her expression became unsure, as though she’d forgotten about the men and had just remembered that between her and home was four miles of darkness. Four miles probably seemed a very long way when she didn’t have Ranger to carry her.

She looked over at Spirit where she was tied to the bar and then back at him where he was standing in front of her. He gave her a look that said he wasn’t about to let her go home alone.

“Will you take me home?” Her fingers toyed with each other as she raised her eyes to meet his.

“I will...but you have to do something first.” He dropped his voice until it was almost a whisper and looked into her wide eyes as she tried to figure out what he was going to ask of her. “Dance with me, Jessie Hayden?”

Jessie’s heart leapt into her throat, fluttering there and making her feel a little dizzy as she looked deep into his dark eyes. She hesitated for a moment, listening to the distant sound of the band playing and the laughter of the people at the dance, and then nodded without taking her eyes away from his.

Taking hold of her hand, Colt held onto it tightly, not giving her a chance to change her mind as he marched her back to the warmly lit square. Moving through the

crowds with her in tow, all he could think about was getting her onto the dance floor and into his arms. He'd been thinking about this moment all day, fantasising about what it would feel like to have her so close to him, and now he wanted to see if reality would live up to it.

He was sure that it would.

They hovered by the edge of the wooden boards as they waited for the music to finish. Colt hadn't felt this nervous in over a decade. He could feel Jessie's hand trembling in his, could see on looking at her that she felt the same way as he did. He wondered if it was for the same reasons. Was she nervous of dancing with him, of being this close to someone, or was she scared of dancing in front of the gathered people?

As the song finally ended and the next one began, he tugged her onto the dance floor. She resisted momentarily and he thought she was going to change her mind, but as he turned and smiled at her, she came willingly.

He turned to face her as the slow melody began to play and found she was looking around her at the people with the same expression that a frightened animal backed into a corner would wear. Touching two fingers to her jaw, he drew her face around, making her to look directly at him.

"Just you and me, Jessie. No one else here." He drew her closer as they started to dance and smiled down into her eyes.

He didn't care if he was doing it all wrong, he didn't care that people were probably drawing conclusions from him having her so close to him, he just wanted to be as close

to her as he could get, regardless of the consequences. He didn't even know what music was playing, or if there was any, all he could hear was the beating of his heart and the sound of their boots on the wooden deck.

"Jessie?" he breathed her name slowly, drawing it out as he moved with her and felt her warm body close to his.

"Yes?" she replied.

"Bout yesterday..." he started and could see in her eyes that she hadn't been expecting him to bring that up again, "...I'm sorry, didn't mean to make—"

"It's fine." She cut him off with a smile and he could see that she'd forgiven him.

He smiled in thanks and looked at their hands where they were joined together. He still couldn't get over how small her hand was compared to his, even without his gloves. It seemed so delicate, so slim and beautiful, not the kind of hand that worked all day long making fences and roping cattle.

Bringing his eyes back to hers, he smiled as he found her still looking straight into his. The feeling of having her in his arms was everything he'd expected, but so much more at the same time. He could feel her soft breathing, could see her eyes twinkling in the low light and could smell her sweet perfume. It was divine, something beyond the imagination, and he found himself wishing things would always be this way between them.

Jessie blinked as his eyes narrowed tenderly on hers, his head inclining and making her heart race again. She could feel her cheeks flush under his scrutiny and bit her lower lip as she smiled up at him.

It had been such a relief to see him at the party. She'd been wondering where he was all day. She'd felt a bitter sense of disappointment when her father had told her that he'd offered to work and then come by later, and it had only grown worse when she'd been rejected by every man at the dance. She'd endured almost an hour of standing by and watching everyone else dancing. No one wanted to dance with her, all she had wanted to do was go home, and then he'd appeared and rescued her evening. She'd forgotten about everything the moment his arms wrapped around her, the second she'd looked into his eyes.

Her heart skipped another beat as she felt his hands on her back, and found herself being drawn into his embrace. As his body brushed up against hers, she almost squeaked. She'd never had a man so close to her before and she didn't know whether it was right for her body to be reacting the way it was. She felt hot and flushed, her skin prickling with sweeps of tingles as his hand brushed against her arm. She couldn't take her eyes off his, couldn't get enough of the way he was looking at her as though it really was only the two of them on the dance floor. She stepped closer, closing the tiny gap between them, and gave him an awkward smile as their bodies brushed against each other again.

She bit her lip as she pushed her hair behind her ears with her free hand and tried to convince her heart to stop beating so fast. It was hammering hard against her ribs, making her feel sick to her stomach.

She didn't hear the song ending, didn't hear the people clapping, and didn't even notice that Colt was leading her off the dance floor. As they broke through the crowd and hit the cool, dark air on the other side, she found herself coming out of warm haze she'd found herself in.

She smiled awkwardly as Colt let go of her hand, his expression almost matching hers.

Not knowing what to say to him, she stared at her boots for a few seconds, seconds that felt like an eternity. Struggling to get over how it had felt to be so close to him, and how it had all ended too soon, she looked around at the people that were dancing to the faster music the band were now playing. She wished she could go back there and remain in his arms. She hadn't realised that one dance would compound her view of him and change her so dramatically, but it had, and now she was left wondering if everything would go back to normal tomorrow. Had the dance meant anything to him? Had the way he'd held her so close that she could feel him breathing signified something? It wasn't the way everyone else had been dancing, that's for sure. Was he trying to tell her something, or was she reading into this and it had only been a dance and nothing more?

She frowned as her head ached with questions and the noise of the music suddenly became annoying. She wanted to be alone, wanted some quiet so she could think, not the laughter and music that were filling her ears.

Looking at Colt, she found him watching her still, and realised that she didn't want to be alone after all. She just wanted to go somewhere peaceful with him, somewhere they could talk and she could get her head around what was happening, if anything.

"Will you take me home now?" she asked and he nodded.

She walked beside him as they went over to Spirit and untied her. When he waited for her to mount the horse,

she gave him a blank look. He expected her to ride? What was he going to do? Walk?

He helped her up into the saddle and then smiled at her. "Move forwards a little."

She looked genuinely confused but did as he asked. As he pulled himself up onto the horse behind her and placed his arms under hers, taking the reins from her, she looked down at them and raised her brows. It wasn't quite what she'd had in mind when she'd asked him to take her home, but she certainly wasn't going to complain or act the lady. As they started to ride off, she tried to resist the desire to lean her back into him, and kept her eyes on his hands.

She kept them fixed there until it got too dark to see them any more. When they left the town behind, she focused on the feeling of him behind her. The night was still warm, but she could feel the heat of his body against her back and thighs. She was sitting nestled in between his legs, with his arms resting against her waist as he held onto the reins, and his cheek close to hers.

As she shifted under the pretence of getting more comfortable, but in reality trying to get closer to him, she slipped towards the edge of the saddle.

She felt his arm wrap tightly around her waist, stopping her from falling, and holding her flush against him.

"Steady there," he breathed into her ear.

She rolled her eyes closed as she relished the way it felt to be so close to him. His grip was strong, but it seemed so comforting at the same time, reassuring. The darkness and the dangers it held didn't seem to matter

when he was holding her like this. She felt safe, protected and warm.

Keeping her eyes closed, she listened to him breathing as they rode steadily homeward. She kept telling herself that this didn't mean anything and that she'd be foolish to read into his actions, but she couldn't help herself. Her mind ran away with her, pointing out everything that he'd done tonight and convincing her that he liked her in the way that Sally had said he did.

She concentrated on the feeling of his arm around her waist, focusing on the way it was holding her body against his. For some reason she felt as though he was making the most of their situation, that this was the kind of excuse he'd been looking for to touch her.

Just like dancing.

They'd danced so close to each other that she was certain there'd been rumours about them circulating around the gathered people before the music had even finished. Everyone would draw their conclusions, the same conclusion that she herself was drawing.

Colt liked her.

Not in a friends sense of the word like she'd told Sally.

He really liked her.

As the horse stopped and he disappeared from behind her, she opened her eyes. He was unlatching the gate to the ranch and holding it for her so she could ride through. Doing what he wanted, she rode into the yard and then waited for him.

He held his hands out to her as she swung her leg over the saddle and sat sideways on it. She pressed her hands into his shoulders, breathing in as he grabbed hold of her waist and gently lowered her to the ground. She blinked as he smiled into her eyes and set her down.

Her eyes remained locked with his for a moment before she took her hands down off his shoulders and cleared her throat.

"We better get Spirit into the stable," she said as she fumbled with the horse's reins.

He took them from her and continued to smile.

She watched him out of the corner of her eye as he led Spirit over to the stable. When he began walking along the porch, she stepped into his path. He stopped and looked at her, his brows knit into a tight frown of confusion. She stared at him for a moment and then cleared her throat again.

"It's a nice night." She hesitated and fidgeted with her dress as she tried to push the words out. "Thank you for the dance."

"Was my pleasure." He smiled at her.

She got the feeling that he could see how nervous she was. Her stomach felt like it was constantly flipping as she struggled with the words she wanted to say.

She clenched her fists and looked up at the sky. She felt so much calmer when she wasn't looking at him. Since their dance, she'd not been able to get anything straight in her head, and it was starting to make her feel crazy.

She didn't want to go to bed, didn't want to go inside and let the night go. She wanted to hold onto it, wanted to make it last forever, so she'd always feel as happy as she did right that moment.

"You want to go to the ridge and gaze at the heavens?" She was amazed by how sure she sounded when she was shaking like a leaf in the spring breeze inside. She kept her eyes fixed on the star filled expanse above her as she waited to hear his answer. The longer he took to speak, the more she began to fear that he was going to say that he didn't want to.

After a few seconds of silence, she bravely brought her eyes down to meet his and found him watching her. She smiled, furrowed her brows, and gave him a hopeful look.

"Would love to," he finally answered her and smiled with his eyes.

- Chapter Thirteen -

Jessie started walking out past the horse pen towards the ridge. There was a spot up on the hill where you could see the entire ranch, and it afforded a glorious view of the heavens, too.

She was just starting to wonder where Colt had gotten to when he appeared next to her carrying his rifle. She'd forgotten the very real danger of the strangers and was thankful that he'd remembered. The ranch seemed like the safest place on earth to her, but she knew that that wasn't wholly true any more. There was a chance those men were cattle rustlers, and those type of people worked mostly at night. She hated the idea of her ranch no longer being safe. It had always felt so detached from the rest of the world, and had always given her a sense of security. Round here, nothing bad could happen and nothing could hurt her.

At least she'd felt like that until the day her brother had left.

Sitting down on the grass facing the ranch, she pulled her knees up to her chest and looked around at the darkness. It made her feel cold and vulnerable. She wished that the strangers would leave town already. She'd spoken to Ed earlier and he'd said that they'd been in town again just last night. Letting her eyes slowly work their way heavenward, she sighed out her breath as she saw the billions of twinkling lights shining down at her.

Colt sat next to her on the grass, placing his rifle down and looking at her as she sat bathed in light from the full moon that was slowly creeping higher into the sky. The pale, silvery light illuminated her skin, making it milky white in the darkness. He could see that she was looking up at the stars and swore that he could feel the waves of heavy thought that were coming off her.

He hadn't quite been expecting her to ask him to go and stare at the stars with her, but he was thankful that she had. He got the feeling that she was having a good time with him, and that she didn't want to call it a night yet, just like him.

Glancing up at her, he saw her chest heave with a sigh and tried to see in her expression what she was thinking. She was holding her knees tightly, hugging them to her chest, and had her head tilted back, her eyes fixed on the twinkling stars. She looked so melancholy as she gazed up at them with her brows raised and her lips parted softly. He could see that something was playing on her mind and whatever it was, it didn't look like it was very welcome.

Turning his face skyward, he lay back and propped himself up on his elbows, crossing his feet as his eyes moved from one bright star to the next. He couldn't remember the last time he'd really taken the time to look up. He'd been so concerned with what was happening in his life on earth over the past few years that he'd never really stopped to take in the beauty of the night sky.

It was more beautiful than he remembered it. His eyes followed the sweeping cluster of stars that arched overhead like a night rainbow, soothing him and chasing

away all his worries until the only thing he could think about was dancing with Jessie tonight.

The way she'd felt in his arms, the way she'd looked at him, he'd felt as though he was going to drown in the prettiness of her smile and her eyes, and he would've been happy to. There'd never been a time in his life when he'd felt that way, and it had left him with so many questions about what was happening between them. But the last thing he wanted to do was ruin the closeness they had by presuming she felt the same way. If she didn't, she was liable to react badly, so badly that he'd find himself out of a job and she'd be out of his life forever. He couldn't live with that. When he'd arrived on the ranch during the storm, he hadn't been looking for anything other than work, but now he got the feeling that he'd found something so much better, or it had found him. Only he didn't know what to do about it.

Letting his eyes lazily traverse the heavens, he moved his focus there, pushing away from his heavy thoughts and welcoming the release that the star filled expanse afforded him.

Jessie glanced down at Colt where he was staring up at the sky and then moved her attention back there.

There was something about the magnitude of what they were looking at that made her feel incredibly small and insignificant. It seemed to place everything in her life into perspective—the ranch, her family, Colt and Charlie. There was so much more going on in the world that she never saw because she spent her life on the ranch, hiding away from it. She didn't want to deal with the reality of what had happened all those years ago, didn't want to come to terms with the fact that her brother was gone for good and she didn't even know whether he was

alive. She couldn't bring herself to believe that he wouldn't have contacted her for all this time unless something bad had happened to him. Her brother had loved her dearly, as dearly as she'd loved him, and she knew in her heart that he would have tried to get in touch with her had he still been alive. The thought that he might be dead filled her with a cold, paralysing fear, a dark sense of dread that he really was gone forever, that he was up amongst the stars in heaven now, and that even if she left the ranch, she'd never meet him again in her lifetime.

Stifling her tears, she tried to quash her thoughts and told herself that this wasn't the sort of thing that she should be thinking about right now. She had passed a perfect evening for the first time in a long time. Colt had stepped in and rescued the night for her, dancing with her and holding her so close that he'd compounded her feelings for him and brought them to her attention. She could no longer deny that she had more than friendly feelings for him, much more.

She couldn't imagine life without him, didn't want to. He seemed so much a part of her life now, and he'd mended the rift in her heart and made her see that there was more to life than working the ranch in order to avoid the hard truth that her brother wasn't going to return to her. She still missed him, but Colt had shown her that it was possible to get over his leaving, if she would only talk about it.

Dropping her gaze to rest on her knees, she took a long, deep breath and held it in as she thought about that. She needed to talk, needed Colt to understand why she was the way she was, she needed him to help set her free so she could move on and possibly admit her feelings to him.

She couldn't hide that she liked him; it seemed impossible to do. Whenever they were together she couldn't stop smiling at him, and she knew that was only going to get worse now that she'd realised the depth of her emotions where Colt was concerned.

Slowly raising her eyes back to the stars, she traced the outlines of the constellations that her father had told her about, searching them as though they held the answers that she was seeking.

The sound of silence stretched all around her, punctuated only by quiet noises that she wouldn't normally have noticed. She could hear the horses in the stable, the distance noise of the night insects, Colt's steady breathing and the gentle pounding of her heart. It picked up speed a little as she formed the first words in her head and then found she didn't have the courage to say them. Glancing down at Colt's hand where it was resting on the rifle beside him, she frowned at the sight of it and then let her eyes move to rest on him.

"You ever kill a man?" She kept her eyes fixed on the outline of his face in the pale moonlight as he looked at her.

Colt considered what she'd asked and let his fingers run over the cool decorative metal of his rifle. He didn't know what she wanted to hear. Would it reassure her to know that he'd done his share of killing when it had been necessary, or would it scare her? The last thing he wanted to do was upset her, or make her see him in a different light. He liked how well they were finally getting along, and he could sense that he was on the verge of a breakthrough with her. He had to keep things going at a slow but steady pace, and eventually everything would

fall into place and she'd let him see the real her, and the truth behind why her brother left.

"I've sent a few to meet their maker...but I've saved some, too." He looked at the rifle as he felt her watching him. "I've only done what was necessary."

Jessie felt oddly unaffected by the fact that he'd taken another person's life. It was almost reassuring that he knew how to handle a gun, and that he wouldn't hesitate to use it. Her father had killed cattle rustlers before, and she knew that Charlie had done his share of killing to protect the ranch and their family. She didn't know why she'd felt the need to ask Colt. She guessed that part of her wanted to know that he could protect her from whatever was out there in the night, that if he needed to, he could defend the ranch against thieves and poachers.

"What 'bout you?" He said, and she let out a little laugh and pushed his arm, as though it was a ridiculous thing to ask her, as though he'd been joking when he'd raised the question. His face remained impassive and she could see that he wasn't kidding. "Seriously."

"Me? Never." Jessie couldn't believe that he'd ask her such a thing. The thought of killing another person made her stomach turn. When she was out on the plain alone, she often wondered if she could raise a gun to defend the farm if people were trying to steal the cattle or the horses, or even the chickens. She'd done her share of using guns to shoot cans off the fence, or to kill livestock when it was necessary, but she couldn't even comprehend what killing a person would feel like, let alone being able to actually go through with it. "I've killed cows when they needed it, mercy killings, but I don't think I could ever take a man's life."

"Didn't think you could." He smiled broadly and looked up at the stars again. "If you had to...would you?"

She considered his question and tried to think of what it would take to get her to shoot someone dead. If her family were in danger, or the livestock, or Colt, then maybe she would be able to do it. She knew herself well enough to know that in that kind of situation she wouldn't think about it, she'd just act on instinct and live with the consequences.

"Under the right circumstances..." She hesitated, glancing at the gun and then nodding. "Yes."

Her eyes moved to the horizon as Colt looked at her. The moon had crept high enough into the blanket of night to illuminate the hills. She could see their shape silhouetted against the pale sky surrounding it, and could see the trees in the valley below them.

Her thoughts returned to her brother. She could still remember the day he'd left. She could remember it as though it was yesterday, or even this morning. It was etched on her memory forever, something that she would always carry with her no matter where she went. She couldn't run away from what had happened, from what she'd done.

Taking another breath, she held it in, using it to gain control over her emotions. She didn't want to cry. She was tired of it now. She'd spent years mourning the loss of her brother, and now she had reached the point where she couldn't go on feeling so sorrowful.

Keeping her eyes fixed on the horizon, she let everything drift to the background, clearing her mind and just letting peace settle inside her. She felt as though she

was empty, tranquil inside, quiet enough to speak her thoughts aloud.

Blinking languidly, she finally found the strength to push the words out into the open.

"Did ma tell you why I don't eat breakfast?" Her tone was quiet as she stared unseeingly at the distance, her expression vacant and her eyes wide.

"No," he said.

"I don't...because..." She struggled with the words and managed to get hold of them, forcing them out of her. "If I didn't have breakfast that day it would've all been so different, I know it."

"Why?"

"Charlie left that morning. If I'd gone straight to the stable to fix Ranger up for a ride like I usually did...he wouldn't have gone away." She didn't blink as tears began to form in the corner of her eyes; she just kept staring into the distance. "I was hungry...I should've gone to him first to tell him I was sorry. He doesn't know I was sorry."

"What happened? Why did your brother leave? I knew back at the creek pool that you were telling me as little as you had to."

"I wanted to tell you," she said as she sighed, "I did...but I couldn't."

"I know," his tone was gentle and reassuring as she blinked and a tear slipped, running down her cheek.

"Charlie and me used to play poker...he always used to beat me. We'd be out with the cattle on a hot, dusty day and we'd have nothing better to do...so he'd teach me how to play. He used to chew tobacco something terrible. Ma wouldn't let him chew, so he hid it from her, said it was our secret. We'd play until the evening light began to fade and then we'd ride on home for supper." She smiled with the memory and then let it fade as she thought about what he'd done. "When they built the saloon, Charlie started going there. He'd drink, and flirt with the girls, and he'd play...he gambled...gambled so badly. He'd lose some times, but he'd win others. One day a group of men came to town and he went to play. He bet more than he had on him and he came back to get the money."

She took a deep breath, her vision shimmering with tears and making the stars swirl and dance in front of her.

"He was drunk...I'd never seen him so drunk. Ma, pa and Sue were in the parlour. John was sleeping; he was only small then. Charlie used to carry him everywhere on his back..." She sighed as the image of her brother carrying John around flashed in front of her eyes. They had been happy times, simple times, and she knew in her heart that things would've remained like that had they not opened the saloon.

"Charlie came back that night, fell off Spirit in the yard and I came out to see what the commotion was. I could tell straight away something weren't right. He was so drunk...he smelt worse than a dead bird I found once out on the plain when I was little. I didn't know what he was saying at first, he could barely stand let alone speak. He came up real close and said something about wanting money. I thought he was kidding, told him we didn't

have none. He'd spent most of the money we had, but ma didn't have the heart to tell him what he'd done. He'd gambled it all away. I can still see his face now; the way he looked when I said it was all gone. His eyes changed, they went wide and then he narrowed them on me. He told me I was lying and there was money, he'd seen it. I swore I was telling God's honest truth and there was no more money to be had. He looked so frightened, so desperate. It weren't his fault...it was all the drink and the fear...I know that now."

Colt frowned and looked up at her face. Propping himself up better on his elbows so he could see her properly, he took in the sight of her absent look. She looked so disconnected from the world around them, but he got the feeling she was aware of his presence, even if it was the only thing she was aware of.

He felt like reaching out to her as she blinked and a tear cascaded down her soft cheek, glistening like a diamond in the moonlight. He watched it as it hung from her chin, threatening to fall onto her knees if she let another tear go.

He knew that she needed to get everything about her brother out into the open. The best thing he could do for her was to sit and listen, just be there and let her see that she could tell him anything that was on her mind, and he'd do his hardest to solve all the problems she had.

His eyes followed her left hand as she raised it up and touched her cheek as though she was remembering something. His heart clenched as he saw the tears flowing freely down her cheeks and heard the strangled emotions in her voice.

"I pushed him...I must've, 'cause he'd never...least I didn't think he would. He said I was lying; I was punishing him. He was so panicked, so wild...he hit me so hard that my ears rang...bruised me deep, too." Jessie let her fingers play lightly against her cheek and furrowed her brows as her throat tightened, her feelings getting the better of her as the memory of that night came flooding back, overwhelming her. "I couldn't look at him...no matter how much he said he was sorry...I just couldn't. I just cried and cried, wouldn't let him come near me. He told me not to cry, he didn't mean it, I'd draw attention to us. I couldn't stop. He'd been the one I looked up to all my life. He'd been the one I was close to and trusted. And he'd been the only one to hit me."

"And he broke your heart, just like your sister said he did," Colt said quietly.

"He broke my heart..." She repeated his words and sighed as she took her hand away from her cheek and hugged her knees again, resting her chin on them. "I told him to stick his head in the horse trough and sober up before ma saw him. He'd have to tell pa in the morning about the money. I couldn't look at him, he tried to get me to, but I went into the house to my room. I heard him come up, wanted to tell him it would all be fine, but I was hurting so badly. I should've gone to see him then...or in the morning...and he wouldn't have left. It would've all been fine like I wanted it to be, and he wouldn't have left...I could've stopped him...we could've fixed it somehow. I didn't want him to leave...I made him go and he should've stayed..."

"You can't think like that, Jessie." His voice was soothing but she pushed away from the comfort it offered her, trying not to let his words affect her. "His leaving isn't your fault."

"It is..." She bit back a sob as it tried to push itself free. "If I hadn't made a fuss, if I'd been strong and shown him that he hadn't hurt me...if I'd gone straight to the stable the next morning, he wouldn't have gone. He would've stayed with me like he'd promised...he would've stayed."

Colt didn't know what to say to make her see that it wasn't her fault. She'd spent years convincing herself that she was responsible for her brother leaving, and there was no way of making her see it any differently, at least not straight away. But he could help her see it from a different perspective.

His eyes followed the tears as they slid down her cheek like a river and pooled at her chin, only to fall onto her lap. He had to say something to reassure her, to stop her hurting so badly inside. He couldn't bear seeing her so upset.

"Maybe Charlie didn't leave because of what he did to you that night," he said the words carefully, weighing up each one so he didn't make a mistake or make her feel worse.

He realised he'd got her attention when she blinked slowly and then moved her head to the side so she was looking at him. Taking it as a sign to continue, he gave her a half smile.

"You ever thought that maybe Charlie left in order to protect you from the men that would be looking for him. These men don't let their winnings go easily. There would've been trouble at the ranch had he stayed when he didn't have the money to pay."

She frowned at him and then let it fade away.

"I never thought..." she trailed off as she stared at the patch of grass between them.

"Maybe leaving broke Charlie's heart as much as it broke yours, broke it so much that he couldn't say goodbye because he knew you wouldn't want him to leave." He kept his eyes locked on hers where she was frowning at the ground.

Jessie felt so much lighter, like a weight had been lifted from her heart and her mind by his words. Her brother loved her so much, as much as she'd loved him, and it would've been so like him to leave in order to protect her, the ranch and their family.

Staring into the distance again, she wondered where Charlie was now. She raised her eyes to the starlit sky and smiled as she pictured him in some far off state doing exactly the same as she was.

Sighing to herself, she let her hands rest beside her on the grass, feeling the cool blades tickling her fingers.

"Colt?" She didn't take her eyes off the stars as she sounded him out.

"Yes, Jessie?"

"Thank you...for this evening...for making me see things in a better light, and for being with me."

"Was a pleasure," he said.

She started as he slipped his hand into hers, his fingers curling around and holding it tightly.

She swallowed as her heart beat hard against her chest, and then smiled up at the stars, savouring the feeling of his hand holding hers.

A smile teased her lips.

Suddenly, the whole world seemed a different, brighter place.

- Chapter Fourteen -

He could feel the sun rising slowly behind him. Its pale light struggled to warm the cold earth and made patterns play on the rocks and water. His eyes followed the little spots of bright light as they danced across the wall of stone that enclosed the pool. The increasing intensity of the sun made the rock change colour; it deepened, becoming a richer, more beautiful shade of honey.

Everything about this land was beautiful, even the girls.

He lit another cigarette as he went over everything that had happened last night. He hadn't expected it to be like that. All he'd wanted was a dance, but it had become so much more. He'd realised that as he'd held her in his arms.

The ride home had given him time to put to memory how it felt to have her so close to him, her body leaning gently against his, the soft rise and fall of her stomach against his arm as she breathed. It had been so calming, so peaceful.

It had been so eye opening.

He'd laughed at her all these weeks for her jealousy over her sister, but now he could see that he would've been the same had she gone talking to another man. A part of the reason he'd stepped in when she was being harassed in town not two days ago was because he couldn't stand seeing a man lay a hand on her. The man in question was lucky that he'd reined his temper in, because he'd

been sorely considering putting a bullet in his leg rather than in the air. The only thing that had stopped him from going down that path was the certainty that Jessie would be madder than hell at him if he had. She'd been mad at him enough for just stepping in.

Then last night she'd asked if he'd killed a man. He'd told her honestly that he had, and added in silence that he'd do it again if he had to. He'd seen the way she looked at the gun, knew that she wasn't feeling safe on the ranch now that the new men were in town. She'd wanted to know if he could protect her, if he'd kill a man in order to ensure that she was safe. He'd thought long and hard about that all night.

He would.

He'd shoot a man dead for the sake of protecting her. She was too precious to let any man hurt her. When she'd told him last night about her brother hitting her, it had made anger coil up inside him like a viper and he'd wished that he'd learnt that earlier, wished that he'd known.

He picked up a small pebble off the bank and threw it into the water, listening to the splash and watching the ripples emanating from the spot where it landed.

All night he'd thought about yesterday, about these past weeks on the ranch, and about Jessie. He couldn't get his mind off her. She gave him no peace, not even now.

Just before it had started to get light, he'd left the house and taken Spirit out for a ride. He'd let himself remain heavy in thought as he rode, letting fate take him wherever she wanted him to go. He'd ended up here;

the place where he'd first had an inkling that his feelings for Jessie might be more than he'd originally thought.

She'd crept in to his heart so slowly, had made herself a home there, and then last night had stolen it away like a thief in the night. Now he couldn't sleep, couldn't close his eyes without seeing her, and seeing how beautiful she'd looked when they'd been dancing. Her eyes had been so intently locked on him, her body so close, and her lips curved into a pretty smile; the one she reserved for him and him alone.

He'd been seeing it more often recently, and last night she'd bestowed so many sweet smiles upon him that it had left his head and heart reeling. He hadn't been able to resist the temptation that she'd placed in front of him by letting her hand rest so close to his. He'd found himself placing his into it before he'd even considered what the repercussions would be.

It wasn't like he'd proposed, but looking back, it certainly felt as though he'd silently promised her that he had an intention to do just that.

He didn't know whether that was true or not. Did he want to marry her? When he'd come out this way he'd been looking for something else, but what he'd found was much more wonderful than he could've hoped for. He hadn't been looking for these feelings inside of him, hadn't been trying to find a girl who would steal his heart away, it had just happened.

He hadn't been searching for love, hadn't been hoping to find it, but it had found him and now there were so many questions in his head that he didn't know where to start.

He didn't even know how he was supposed to act around her any more.

Would her parents approve of him bestowing his attentions on their daughter when they were supposed to be working together? Would they think him worthy of her affections? They liked him for sure, but he was fairly certain that that didn't mean he had a free pass to make moves on their baby girl, especially when she'd been so badly hurt in the past. That alone was going to make them more protective of her.

What he needed was to spend some time with Jessie and see if last night had changed anything between them, and then he'd decide what to do. He supposed that he could ask her how her parents would react to them, and if she wasn't sure they could keep it to themselves and let her family come around to the idea. After all, he'd only been working for them for less than two months.

He pricked his head up as he heard a noise—the distinct sound of loose pebbles tumbling down the slope at his back.

"There you are." The unsteady voice sounded out to him and he smiled at the water, keeping his eyes fixed there.

"Here I am." He waited for her to come to a stop next to him and then looked up at her. She was worried. He could see it in her eyes.

Jessie looked at him where he was sitting on a rock, the same rock he'd occupied when he'd caught her bathing in the pool. He seemed anxious somehow. She'd watched him for a few minutes before coming down to see him and he'd been deep in thought. She wondered if it was about last night, or whether something else was

playing on his mind. Whatever it was, it was clearly troubling him. She'd seen him like it sometimes when they were around the ranch, mostly after the strangers had arrived in town. Whenever he thought that she wasn't looking at him, he'd stare at the horizon with a pensive look on his face and would remain like it until something caught his attention. She'd begun to wonder if he was worried that the men were going to come to the ranch.

"Something wrong, Colt?" She frowned as he shook his head in the negative but the weight of worry remained in his eyes.

"It's nothing." His dismissive reply didn't do anything to ease her concern about him and the frown remained on her face. He turned her question against her. "What's wrong?"

She shrugged as she moved her eyes away from his and across to the water, and watched the twinkling sunlight shining off the ripples.

"What's wrong, Jessie?" He tried again, clearly not convinced by her half-hearted shrug of her shoulders.

"I'd been wondering where you were..." She dropped her eyes to the sandy yellow floor and nudged a rock with her toe. "Thought you were gone. You weren't in your room...and I went down to the stable and Spirit was gone."

He immediately stood up and wrapped his arms around her. She closed her eyes and nuzzled her cheek against his chest, her hands pressing into his shoulder blades as she held onto him. She knew that he hadn't meant to disappear just like her brother had. She could feel it in

how tightly he was holding her, as though he'd never let her go, and the way his cheek rested against the top of her head.

"I'm sorry, darling," he whispered the words to her, softly stroking her hair in a soothing manner. "I didn't mean to scare you."

She sniffed back her tears as she closed her eyes and focused on the comforting warmth and strength of his embrace, and the calming way his fingers were playing in her hair. Savouring the way it made her feel so tranquil after she'd been so frantic with worry, she held onto him a little tighter and hoped he wouldn't let her go.

It seemed so natural to be in his arms, as though that was where she belonged. She didn't want to question what was happening, she just wanted to go along with it and see where it led her. She'd seen in Colt's eyes that he had questions, as many as usual by the looks of things, but that was just his way. They both needed time to come to terms with what had happened last night and how it had changed them.

He smiled down at her as she came out of hiding and looked up at him. As he let her go, he gave her an awkward look. She busied herself by smoothing down her cream shirt and tan pants while he ran his hand around the back of his neck.

They had both acted on instinct, just like they had done all of last night, and it had again brought their feelings for each other into question.

Jessie stared at his boots as she idly fixed her clothing, busying her hands and giving herself something to do so

she didn't feel so embarrassed and confused. He'd shown her again that he had feelings for her, and she didn't know how she was supposed to react. She'd never been in this kind of situation before. Was she supposed to do something to let him see that she felt the same as he did, or was she supposed to wait? If she did have to do something, what was it? She slowly raised her eyes up, letting them roam up his dark blue pants and over his paler blue shirt until she reached his face. He looked as awkward as she felt, and she realised that neither of them knew what to do.

The air between them felt heavy as he looked at her. It was dense with unspoken emotion and uncertainty, so thick that it felt as though she could reach out and take hold of it. She wished that she could. She wanted to catch hold of it and push it away, leaving them free of its oppressive weight. Instead, she stared into his brown eyes.

She held his gaze in silence for a few minutes, studying the richness of his eyes and the overall handsomeness of his face. He needed a shave again; the short dark stubble was masking his jaw and his chin, blurring its definition. Searching for something to say in order to break the intense silence that had fallen between them, she listened to the steady beating of her heart against her chest.

"So why'd you come here?" She settled for what seemed to be a relatively safe subject and then felt her heartbeat speed up a little as the corners of his mouth twitched into a half smile.

"Wanted to do some thinking, needed some peace, and it was a nice morning for a ride." He smiled, evidently amused by how she was trying to make small talk.

She nodded and felt the thread of conversation slip through her grasp. Hurriedly trying to think of something to fill the gap, she said the first thing that came to her.

“Thanks again for dancing with me...” She silently cursed herself as she realised that she’d said that about three times now. Giving him a sheepish smile, she hoped that he’d say something so she didn’t feel so ridiculous.

He stepped towards her with a broad smile on his lips as he looked into her eyes and narrowed his softly.

“I should be thanking you...” Extending his hand, he brushed the backs of his fingers against her cheek and smiled a little more. She dropped her eyes to rest on the floor, overwhelmed by his action. “It’s not every day that a man like me gets to dance with the prettiest girl in town.”

Her cheeks flushed hotly as she heard what he’d said. The heat of it swept through her, making her whole body feel as though it was on fire as she gradually raised her eyes up to meet his again. She swallowed hard as she saw how close he was to her, his fingers still playing gently against her cheek and his eyes intense with desire. Her heart rocketed as they dropped to her mouth. Her eyes darted to his lips and she watched the smile fading from them as they parted.

The tension between them was palpable. She could feel the desire in his touch and in the air. Looking back up into his eyes, she could see in them that he wanted to kiss her. She could almost feel it coming as he leant slightly towards her, closing the gap. She held her breath as she waited, her whole body going rigid and her heart beating so fast that she felt sick and dizzy.

Her palms were sweating as she licked her lips and swallowed noisily, trying to stop her mouth from feeling so dry, and silently begging him to kiss her.

She was on the verge of closing her eyes when one of the horses whinnied and broke the spell. Drawing away from him at the same time as he moved, she bit her lip and wondered if it was possible to feel more uncomfortable than she did right now.

Colt cursed Spirit under his breath, knowing that she'd been the one to wreck his chance to kiss Jessie. He tried to think of a way to get it back, but eventually let the moment drift away on the early morning breeze, knowing that there'd be another one just like it around the corner if he was patient. Remembering what he'd decided earlier about spending more time alone with her, he thought over his tasks for the day and then smiled.

"Come to town with me later?" he asked her, watching her closely as she considered what he'd said.

She frowned briefly.

"I need to pick up some things for your parents and the horses. It's going to take a while and some company would be nice." He didn't know why he was trying to make coming to town with him sound appealing. He figured that he just wanted her to come along with him and she looked like she needed convincing.

"Of course I will." She smiled at him, showing him that he'd beaten her to speaking.

When she looked up at the top of the slope, his eyes moved there also. Ranger was throwing his head around, trying to show them how bored he was.

She shook her head and sighed. "We'd better get to work if you want to go into town later. There's a lot that needs doing, and Ranger is getting restless."

Colt nodded in agreement while he watched the two horses moving around as much as possible where they were tied to the tree. Picking up his hat, he placed it firmly on his head and then started up the hill beside Jessie.

He smiled broadly as she mounted Ranger and untied him for her, handing her the reins and letting his fingers brush against hers. Pulling himself up onto Spirit's back, he turned her around and started after Jessie where she was already heading back across the plain to the house.

She gave him that smile again as he rode beside her, and it bought his one out.

He turned to face the horizon as he continued to smile. Watching the sun as it rose higher into the cloudless sky, he took in the beauty of his surroundings and let it warm him.

He had a feeling that today was going to be a good day.

- Chapter Fifteen -

Jessie clawed the sweat-dampened hair away from her forehead as she walked into the cool of the ranch house. Heading directly into the parlour, she smiled as she found her mother there, and placed her hat down on the table.

"I'm going to town with Colt." She picked up the jug of water and poured some into a cup. Drinking it down, she heaved a sigh as she thought about having to go back out into the stifling heat. It was so cool in the house, so deliciously cold compared to outside.

"You found him then?" Her mother gave her a concerned look and she nodded.

This morning she'd scared everyone half to death by running around in a blind panic and muttering about not being able to find Colt. Her mother had repeatedly told her that he wouldn't have left, and she'd hoped in her heart that she was right. Thankfully, she was.

"He was down by the creek...asked me to go to town with him to get the supplies." She drank another cup of water and wiped her mouth on the back of her hand.

"I thought he was getting them tomorrow?" Her mother frowned.

She shrugged. "He must've changed his mind."

Her mother smiled knowingly as she reached out towards her and smoothed her damp hair into place.

"We saw you dancing last night."

"It's nothing." She tried to brush off the impact of the look her mother was giving her, as though Colt had proposed rather than danced with her. "Besides, everyone saw us dancing last night."

"Not everyone saw you riding off together like me and your pa did once, sharing a horse."

She stifled the blush that wanted to creep onto her cheeks as her mother gave her an expectant look. She hadn't even thought about what people in town would make of them riding off together like that. She took a deep breath and then shrugged as she picked up her hat.

"Nothing happened," her tone was insistent as she gave her mother a look that said not to question her any further.

Her mother smiled at her. "But you like Colt?"

She blushed. Her mother's smile widened, and she gave her a look that said she didn't need to answer the question in order for her to see that liked Colt.

"He's a fine man, good-looking, too, which never hurt no one."

She smiled this time. Her mother was right; Colt was a good-looking man, and good on the inside, too. At least now she thought he was. She hadn't been so sure when he'd first started. He'd come to them with nothing, not even a horse, and she hadn't been able to bring herself to trust him. She frowned for a split second as she remembered what things had been like back then. He'd

worked hard to keep on her good side, but she'd continually punished him for the things her brother had done. Looking back now, she couldn't believe that she'd treated him that way.

"I better get going. He'll be waiting." She gave her mother a warm smile and then placed her hat back on her head. Glancing over her shoulder, she tried to ignore the way the look her mother was giving her kept making her smile. It was as though she knew that something was going to happen between her and Colt, and was silently giving her blessing.

Heading back out into the heat of the day, she saw Colt had already hitched Maverick and Shadow to the cart. She shook her head in amusement as she saw that Spirit was tethered to the back of it. The deep chestnut mare couldn't pull the cart as she hated to be strapped into the harness, but Jessie knew there was no way she was going to be left behind.

She knew it because Ranger was going to act the same.

Looking across at him where he was tied to the cattle pen fence, scratching at the dirt, she waited for him to notice that she was walking towards the cart. She smiled when he saw her and gave a disgruntled snort.

Turning away from the cart, she went to him and untied his reins. She led him over to Colt where he was sitting at the front of the cart and then mounted him.

"We ready?" Colt asked her as she settled into the saddle and put her gloves on.

She nodded and then gave Ranger a gentle squeeze of her knees to command him to start moving when the cart began to trundle along towards the gate.

It was open today for the first time in over a week and she felt a lot better for seeing it that way. She didn't like it when it was closed; it made her feel as though they had to shut the world out in order to protect themselves.

Riding through the gate and under the ranch sign, she cast a glance over her shoulder at it, taking in the heart-warming sight of her home. She remembered when they'd made the sign. It had been a mild October day and she'd been no more than thirteen years old. She'd spent the whole morning and afternoon helping Charlie carve out the words and then fill them in with some paint that they'd had in the store.

She smiled as she stared at the top of the ridge.

It had been a good day—one that would stay with her forever.

Geeing Ranger on, she kept up with the cart and looked across at Colt. He was sitting with his elbows resting on his knees and his body leant forwards as he held the reins in lax hands. He looked so relaxed compared to how he'd been this morning. She still wondered what had been playing on his mind.

Moving her gaze to rest on the rifle that lay beside him on the seat, she remembered what he'd said when she'd asked him if he'd ever killed a man. She was thankful that he'd brought it along with them today. She was hoping that they wouldn't run into trouble, but it was reassuring to know that if they did, Colt would be able to protect her.

Colt looked at her out of the corner of his eye and then turned his head to face her as he found her watching him. He half smiled at her as she smiled at him, and then looked back at the horizon as they reached the top of the ridge.

It was slow work getting to town with the cart, and he wished that he could ride like Jessie was. Maverick and Shadow seemed to know their own way. He wondered if they even needed him holding the reins. If he let go, they'd probably continue along the track, not swerving off course or misbehaving.

Leaning back in the seat, his eyes worked their way around his surroundings, taking in the beauty of the distant hills and the way the heat haze was making them shimmer. The long grass was moving in the breeze, swaying softly back and forth. His eyes moved skyward, and he let them wander over the pale blue ceiling that stretched as far as the eye could see, meeting the plain on his left and the hills on his right.

He looked straight ahead at the distant town and then followed the weaving line of the dusty brown track as it cut across the countryside. When his eyes finally came to rest on the two horses pulling the cart, he sighed.

It really was beautiful. The level of solitude and peace that the people enjoyed here seemed to make it a magical place, one that felt as though nothing bad could ever happen, just like Jessie said.

He wished that were true.

His ranch and the surrounding area had once felt like this, but now whenever he thought about it, all he remembered was the event that had forced him from his

home and ruined it to him forever. The sense of safety his ranch had once afforded him had been marred for all time. Even if he rebuilt it, he'd never be able to rebuild that feeling. He would always be watching his back, would always be watching the horizon.

His eyes moved there of their own accord and his thoughts turned to the men that had made their presence known in town several times. There was something about them that set him on edge, and he hoped that he'd see them in town today so he could judge for himself whether they were dangerous or not. He'd noticed that Jessie had been watching the horizon now. She was keeping an eye out for any sign of the men, and rarely rode out onto the plains without him and his rifle by her side.

He glanced down at it and knit his brows into a frown. A part of the reason she wanted his company when she was riding was because he always insisted on carrying his gun, but he knew in his heart that had he not had the weapon, she still would've felt safer with him beside her.

He'd been considering getting her to buy a gun in town today, but something told him that she'd never agree to it. She'd rather settle things peaceably than be forced to resort to pulling a gun on someone to get them off her land. Their conversation the other night about killing had made him see that she would readily defend her family and land, but she wouldn't willingly carrying a gun around with her; she would rely on getting back to the house and getting her father's rifle.

He wished she'd carry that one, but when he'd asked her about it, she'd told him that it was needed at the house.

When he came out of his thoughts, he saw that they were almost in town. He'd been silent the whole way and was surprised that Jessie hadn't questioned him.

He looked at her and found her staring off into the distance, a pensive look on her face.

Maybe she wasn't questioning him because she was being plagued by her own thoughts.

Jessie had noticed how quiet Colt was, but she'd put it down to being a continuation of how he'd been when she'd found him at the creek pool that morning. She didn't mind that he wasn't talking; she had her own thoughts to deal with and his silence had given her time to ponder them.

She was thinking about him, and the way he'd been acting all day. Apart from the moment at the pool when he'd held her to him, he'd been distant and lost in thought. She realised that there was a lot to think about, and that she wasn't sure of her feelings herself. It was understandable that he'd need as much time to consider what was happening as she did. She didn't want to rush into anything, but her heart still longed for him to show her a sign that something was going to happen between them.

She watched him as he led the horses on up the slope towards the town and then straightened out his hat, pushing it back so he could see better.

The more time he spent thinking, the more her own thoughts weighed her down, and the more she began to worry that last night and this morning had all been a mistake on his part. She didn't want him to go back on his actions. She wanted to remain the object of his

affections, wanted to keep his attentions all to herself. Feeling a little bubble of panic in her stomach, she swallowed in an attempt to clear her dry throat and then opened her mouth to speak.

"Colt?" she said as she traced the outline of his profile with her eyes.

He turned to look at her. "Jessie?"

"What're you thinking in there?" She hated how questioning and nervous she sounded. It felt as though she was saying that he wasn't allowed to be lost in thought.

"Nothing much, darling, just thinking 'bout this place."

"The town?" She ignored the way her stomach and chest heated through when he called her 'darling' and looked at the buildings ahead of them.

"No," he said and then nodded to the landscape, "this place."

"Oh." Her eyes widened in understanding and she looked at their surroundings. "What about it?"

"Just thinking 'bout how somewhere so peaceful didn't deserve to get ruined...hoping it doesn't happen." He tightened his grip on the reins as two men on horses passed them and then directed Maverick and Shadow around the corner into the main street.

"Why would it happen?" She gave him a look full of curiosity, letting her frown wrinkle her nose.

"There's no 'why', it just happens. One day they'll stick this place on a stagecoach route and more people will come. I've seen it happen to so many towns..."

"And you think it'll happen here?" she said as she looked at him.

"Happens everywhere, darling," he replied and then pulled on the reins to slow the horses into a stop outside the general store.

Jessie thought about what he'd said as she got down from Ranger's back and looked at the buildings around them. The town had been growing steadily over the past few years, especially after the advent of the saloon, but she hadn't worried about the impact that it would have. If they did put the town on a stagecoach route, it would be likely that people would be changing coach in the town, and that would mean more buildings to house those people. More saloons would spring up, and coffee houses would appear. They'd build hotels and a bigger stable for the horses. More people would work in the town, so they'd make more places that they could call home on the outskirts. Before she knew it, the town would be changed beyond recognition. People would be filling the streets until she couldn't ride through without being stared at by everyone for her clothing.

She sent up a silent prayer that it never happened.

She barely came into town, but she couldn't stand to see it change that dramatically, and she couldn't live with people staring at her wherever she went. It was hard enough now.

She ignored the way people were leaning towards each other and speaking in whispers as they looked at her. It

was obvious that they were talking about last night. Being seen in town with Colt the day after they'd been seen dancing together probably wasn't the best way of stopping the rumours; she was probably fuelling them and making them gospel.

As Colt finished tying the horses to the bar, she walked into the general store and offered a warm smile to Beth where she stood behind the counter. Beth had always had a soft spot for her, and she'd always felt the same in return. She could remember being bounced on her knee as a child, listening to her sweet voice telling her tales of fantastical worlds.

"Ed's out today, Jessie," Beth said as Jessie looked towards the counter that Ed usually occupied. "What can I do you for?"

"Mary Hayden placed an order for feed and supplies. We've come to collect it," Colt said for her.

Her eyes moved to follow him as he took his gloves off and walked over to the counter. When Beth nodded and disappeared into the back, she found Colt turning to look at her. She absently tousled the loose strands of her hair, twirling them around her fingers as she met his eyes.

He reached across, pushed a rogue strand behind her ear, and smiled at her.

Jessie smiled as she felt his fingers brushing against her skin and around her ear. It was such a gentle touch, tender almost. It spoke silent words of affection and told her more about his feelings than words could express. Looking into his dark eyes, she let herself get lost there, bathing in the emotions that she could see in them.

She'd wanted reassurance that he wasn't going to see last night as a mistake to forget about, and now he'd given it to her. He wasn't going to go on like they had been prior to the dance; he was going to go on like they had been during and after it.

She shyly dropped her eyes away from his as Beth walked back into the room, and busied herself with whatever was in front of her; in this case, a set of braces. Hurriedly letting them fall back onto the pile, she raised her head, an awkward smile on her lips.

"Come round back, you can load up there." Beth pointed towards the rear of the store.

Jessie followed Colt as he started walking towards the door, her thoughts slowing her down as she continued to play with the strand of hair that he'd pushed behind her ear. Stepping back out onto the wooden walkway, she listened to the sound of Colt's boots as he worked to untie the horses and then frowned as it stopped. She looked up to find him with his hand on his gun and his eyes fixed on something across the road.

Following his gaze, she frowned when she saw what he was looking at. Across the way were three large black horses, and mounted on them were three men that she didn't recognise. She didn't move as she watched the silent interaction between the three men and Colt. Both parties were staring at the other, all of them with their hands on their guns, none of them moving. They were just giving each other hard looks full of meaning, full of warning. She let her eyes settle on the three men. They were dressed well, their dark clothes finely made, and their horses were well looked after. She'd not seen tackle so expensive as what their animals were wearing;

it didn't look like the sort of thing you could buy in a small town like this one.

Two of the men had dark hair; she could see that by their moustaches and stubble. The third man had sandy hair; it was long enough to be showing at the back of his head below the brim of his hat. He seemed to be the lowest of the party, placed at the rear. The one nearest the front moved slightly and her eyes fell to where his hand had drawn his long coat back to reveal the pistol that was hung around his waist. When she raised her eyes again, she found that the man was looking at her, but he quickly looked back at Colt. She looked at him also, and saw the muscle of his jaw tense as he wrapped his fingers around his rifle, his eyes still fixed on the leader. As Colt stepped closer to her, she got the feeling that he was defending her.

Looking back at the man, she saw he was smiling now, a slight smirk that was full of intent. As he nodded at Colt and turned his smirk into a thin-lipped smile, Jessie got the impression that he giving Colt a sign that he recognised him; it was almost a greeting. She let her attention turn to him as the men rode out of town; he was still staring at them, his hand still on the rifle, and his eyes still narrowed into nothing more than black slits.

"You know them?" she asked as she looked over her shoulder at the men where they were disappearing around the corner.

Looking back at Colt, she could see that he wasn't going to answer her question. Once they were out of sight, he seemed to relax, his hand leaving the rifle and coming to rest by his side. She watched him as he continued to untie the horses as though the interlude with the strangers had never happened, and frowned as she was

left wondering what was going on. Did Colt know those people? Was that why he'd been so anxious to come into town when they'd first arrived? Maybe he'd had a feeling that it would be them, and he wanted to check to make sure. Maybe her imagination was running away with her and she was drawing a series of wrong conclusions.

He probably just wanted to protect her from the strangers; his actions didn't mean that he knew them.

She walked with him as he led the cart around to the back of the store and then helped as he began to load it up with the supplies. The sky was turning golden now as the sun drew close to setting. It bathed the whole town in a warm light, making it seem as though stormy clouds had parted and everything was all right again.

~

Placing a sack of feed down on top of the one nearest the rear of the cart, she went back for another one and then frowned as she got the sudden feeling that she was forgetting something. Ignoring it and continuing to work, she picked up another sack and carried it over to the cart. She smiled as Colt took it from her and placed it on the back and then let it fade from her face as she realised that she had forgotten something after all.

"Something wrong?" he said as she frowned at his chest.

She raised her head up and gave him a blank look. Her brows smoothed and her lips parted as she looked into his eyes.

"I just remembered...I promised pa that I would help him before supper." She gave him an apologetic smile. "I better get back."

"Can't it wait? I don't want you going home alone." He gave her a concerned look when she shook her head. "You be careful...give Ranger a run."

She caught the meaning behind his words and smiled at him, letting him see that she'd do as he asked. She hated the idea of her riding alone on the plain as much as he did, and there was no way she was going to let Ranger walk home. He'd been itching for a gallop all day, and now he was going to get one. She'd at least make him run until she was over halfway home.

"I won't be long. I'll go get Spirit's new tackle and then I'll come straight back." He didn't lose the concern in his eyes as he looked at her. "You sure you can't wait?"

"Pa will be sorely mad if I'm late," she said as she shrugged and tried to stifle the worry and nerves that his look gave her. It felt as though he was certain that something would happen to her if she rode out alone, and a part of her wanted to remain with him where she felt safe. Stepping away from him, she held her hand up as she started to walk away. "See you back at the ranch."

Colt waved at her and then let his hand slowly fall to his side as he watched her leaving. She mounted Ranger and was out of sight before he could even blink. He didn't want her to go riding across the plain alone, not with those men around.

They were the worst type of men.

They were the men that he'd been waiting for.

~

Jessie smiled at the sun as it set below the horizon, leading her home. She rode straight towards it, letting Ranger work off some steam as he thundered along the grassy plain and down into the slight valley. They were making good time, and she could see that there was no one else around apart from her. The sky was darkening fast, but there was enough light for her to get home safely so she slowed Ranger down to a walk as she made it past the halfway marker.

Riding gently up the other side of the valley, she listened to him as he snorted and the night insects as they began to come out of their day homes and fill the air with chirruping. Stroking her horse's neck, she ran her fingers through his mane and smiled at him. It had been a while since she'd had a ride alone with him, and she wished that she had more time to let him run across the plains like he wanted to, but it would have to wait. Maybe tomorrow they could go out into the meadow together while Colt was working with her father on the new store they were going to build.

Looking back up at the horizon, she continued to smile as she saw the rich orange glow that was illuminating the sky. She'd never seen a sunset so pretty. She looked up at the canvas of deep blue above her and saw that some of the brightest stars were already making themselves known. It made her think of how nice last night had been, and she wished that Colt were with her now.

As she neared the top of the ridge, her ears picked up the distant sounds of hooves and she wondered if it was Colt and the cart. It couldn't be. There was no way that he could have finished loading up the supplies, picked up Spirit's things and caught her up, not when she'd let Ranger gallop.

The sound of hooves disappeared into the distance and she decided that it was probably the cattle. On clear nights, the wind carried the sound of them for miles; she'd spent hours in the past listening to them out on the plain when she couldn't sleep.

Turning her gaze back to the horizon, she cocked her head to one side as she saw that the fiery orange glow wasn't fading as she approached home; it was getting stronger.

Reaching the top of the ridge, her heart leapt into her throat as she saw the scene in front of her and her eyes widened in horror.

- Chapter Sixteen -

Riding hard and fast down into the valley, Jessie continually called out her to her parents. The sun setting hadn't caused the orange glow in the sky; it had been caused by the inferno that was engulfing the old wooden ranch house. Her heart was pounding sickeningly fast against her chest as she galloped under the ranch sign, through the open gate. She went to ride straight to the house, but Ranger reared up as the heat intensified and she struggled to remain on his back. Calming him down, she gave a panicked look around the ranch, trying to find her family. When she couldn't see them, her eyes returned to the house.

Practically leaping from his back, she listened to Ranger running away from the fire and ran towards it. The back of her throat ached as her chest grew tight and her heart clenched. Her tears were blinding her and her knees felt weak as she stumbled towards it, barely able to move as the paralysing chill of fear took over her body. She couldn't lose them; she just couldn't. She wiped her eyes on her gloves as she pushed herself forwards, forcing herself to keep going. This wasn't happening; it wasn't.

The flames crackled and hissed against the wood as she slowly managed to reach the house and she brought up her arm to shield her face as she tried to see inside. The whole house was burning, inside and out, and she knew that there was no way that she would survive if she tried to go in to find her family. She didn't care. They were all she had and she couldn't lose them, not like they'd

already lost the house, not like she'd lost Charlie. They were all she had.

She took careful steps up onto the porch, protecting her face with her arm at all times, and tried to make it to the door. The heat was so intense that she had to turn back. She couldn't bear it.

Tears streamed down her face as she backed away from the house, her eyes remaining fixed on it. She felt cold to the bone as she watched the timbers of the roof giving way, collapsing and sending a plume of hot ashes out of the already broken glass windows.

"Ma?" She bit her lip as it quivered with the realisation of what was happening. She couldn't have lost them. They were all she had. They couldn't be gone. She couldn't be alone. "Pa?"

She was barely whispering their names; she didn't have the strength to say them any louder as she stared at the fire that was consuming her home.

The sound of panicked screams from Jonah in the stable cut into her head and she shuddered on hearing them. They were so pained, so frightened, and she was instantly running to the building, hoping that she could save him. It was on fire, but not as badly as the house. The flames must have leapt over to it, setting it alight a while after the house had gone up. Pulling her neckerchief up and holding it over her mouth and nose, she yanked the door open and stepped back as fire jumped greedily at the air, licking up the outsides of the open door. When it died away, she tightly held the cloth over her mouth and ran in.

Heading straight over to Jonah's pen, she pulled the bolt across and stood to one side as he thundered out of the stable and onto the plain. She hadn't had time to see whether he was hurt or not, but it didn't matter right now. She had to find her family. The sound of timbers creaking above her made her run out of the burning stable and into the yard.

She froze as her eyes came to rest on something in between the horse and the cattle pen.

Her hand dropped to her side.

Her heart sounded loudly in her ears.

A chill ran up her spine.

"No," she breathed the word as tears flooded her cheeks, streaming down them and cutting through the ash that was covering her face.

She shook her head as her brows furrowed and her hand trembled over her mouth.

"No."

Collapsing to her knees, she dry heaved as she stared aimlessly at the body not twenty foot from her. She shook her head as she rested back on her heels and let her bottom lip tremble with her tears.

Crawling on hands and knees over to the small body, she cried out in pain as she finally reached it, and turned him over. Her sobs wracked her as she drew him up into her arms, smoothing the dirty blond hair from his quiet face and letting her tears fall onto his ashen skin.

"No, John...no," she cried as she hugged him tight against her and rocked back and forth, her eyes closing as she pressed her cheek against his still warm forehead. "Please no."

She clung to him as she slowly opened her eyes and looked at the blurry fire through her tears. This couldn't be happening. She felt as though she was stuck in some nightmare, some vision that she couldn't escape no matter how much she told herself to wake up. She sobbed against the dead boy as she cradled his head to her chest, silently hoping he would wake up, but knowing that he wouldn't.

Pulling her hand away from him, she felt sick as she saw the blood on her gloves and then looked down at his torso. She pressed her hand to her mouth as she saw the wound there, the sight of it making her shake with fear inside. This couldn't be happening. Her eyes went wide as she continued to shake her head, tears falling from them and blurring them as she tried to get it to sink in.

He'd been shot.

She felt cold and empty as she looked around her, holding him still, but searching for a sign of who had done this to him. As she turned to look over her shoulder, she dropped John to the floor and screamed.

"No!"

She scrambled across the dirt to the two bodies where they lay side by side. Pushing the rifle aside, her heart ached in her chest and she ran her fingers up the side of her head, burying them into her hair and holding it tightly as she brought her elbows together and curled up

into a ball. She sobbed into her knees as she realised that all was lost, and there was nothing that she could do to save them now.

She shouldn't have gone to town; she shouldn't have gone with Colt. This was all her fault. She should've stayed on the ranch where she belonged and protected it. She should've protected them.

Her whole body felt numb and unresponsive as she stared at the two bodies. Her mother was laying face up, her eyes staring into infinity and the stars above. She had bruising across her cheek and a single thread of blood was running down from the corner of her mouth. Taking her neckerchief, Jessie wiped it away and then looked down at the ground as she closed her mother's eyes. She turned her father over and smoothed his grey hair as he lay by her knees. Her tears flowed freely down her face. She let them escape her but didn't cry. She couldn't cry any more, couldn't get the sobs to come no matter how much she wanted to.

Looking down at him, she brushed her fingers against his cheek and sniffed.

"I'm sorry, pa..." she said between breaths and wiped the tears from her eyes as though he could see them and he'd be angry with her. He always got angry with her when she cried; he'd said it wasn't like her. She was a strong girl; she was strong. She didn't feel so strong. She felt empty, like someone had taken all her heart and her feelings this night. She glanced across at the cattle pen where Sue was lying in the dirt. She'd lost hope of finding anyone alive the moment she'd seen her parents. If her father couldn't defend them, then all would have been lost.

She should've stayed.

This was all her fault.

She picked herself up off the floor and walked shakily towards John. She had to get him away from the fire; she couldn't let anything happen to him. He'd never forgive her if she did. He'd always relied on her to take care of him, and she had until today.

Picking him up, she cradled him against her as she carried him over to her parents and laid him down beside them. She held her breath in an attempt to stop her tears as she fixed his hair and smiled at him.

Walking over to Sue, she stood over her, tears refilling her eyes as she saw the patch of blood on her chest. She looked as pretty as she'd ever done, like one of the china dolls that they used to play with in Ed's store when they were little. They'd always wanted to be one. She'd never realised that you only got to look so peaceful and beautiful as that when you died.

Picking her up under the arms, she continually sniffed back her tears as she dragged her over to her family and laid her down beside her mother. As she looked down at them, a sob pushed its way out of her and was rapidly followed by another, and then another as she began to shake with them. She pressed her fist against her mouth as she realised that she'd lost them all, she'd lost everything, and there was no way of getting it back. Everything she loved had been taken from her; everything in her life that was irreplaceable had been stolen, everything including her heart. The tight feeling at the back of her throat grew worse, making her feel like throwing up as she leant heavily against the horse pen fence to support herself.

She felt dizzy, lost.

She couldn't breathe as it all began to sink in and weigh her down inside.

What had happened?

She looked at her father; his chest was peppered with dark patches of blood where he'd been shot several times. Her mother had suffered a similar fate. Sue had only been shot once in the chest as far as she could see. Little John, she couldn't even bring herself to look at him, it hurt too much.

The sound of crackling fire was punctuated by mooing in the distance and she frowned.

This hadn't been an accident. Someone had murdered her family and burnt her home. They'd taken her whole world away.

And they hadn't even taken the cattle.

An image of Colt in town with the men flashed into her head and she collapsed to the floor.

No.

The men? Colt knew the man; she had seen it in his eyes and his body language. This morning he'd gone to the river, away from the house, and he'd wanted her away from it to. He'd insisted that she go with him. In town, he'd insisted that she stayed.

The man on the horse had nodded and smiled, had tipped his hat as though greeting Colt and had then rode off with the others out of town.

Had they come here?

Had they murdered her family?

A chill swept along every nerve ending as her mind raced to draw a conclusion and she tried to deny it before she'd even thought it.

Was Colt involved?

Had he been here all these months because of these men? He'd clearly known who the strangers were going to be. It was his fault, not hers. He'd put her family in danger; he'd put her in danger. Had he wanted her away because he knew that this was going to happen?

She stared blankly at the floor as she let her thoughts run away with her, all her anger diverting away from herself as she blamed Colt for what had happened.

He could've warned them, he could've saved them, but he'd condemned them to death instead.

This wasn't an accident.

This was planned.

The men had seen Colt in town and had used it as a signal that it was time to act. What had her family done to them? It wasn't the cattle they were after, or the horses; it was her family.

Why?

She sobbed into her hands as she covered her face with them and curled up, the pain of loss lancing through her and angering her.

What had they done to deserve this?

She froze as she heard the distant noise of cartwheels trundling along the track.

Raising her head up, she didn't bother wiping her face as she waited for him to come to her.

This wasn't her family's fault, it wasn't. They hadn't done anything to deserve this. This was his fault. Whatever had happened to his ranch, had happened here, too, and there was only one conclusion that she could see.

He'd brought them here and he'd killed her family.

Getting to her feet as she heard him calling her name, she watched the cart pulling up alongside the pens and stared at him where he was sitting at the front holding the reins. She didn't move as he talked, she couldn't hear his words. His mouth moved, but no sound reached her. She just stared at him, convinced that this was all his fault.

He'd taken her family, and her home.

She knew it.

He'd taken everything.

"Jessie, darling?" He leapt down from the cart.

She shook her head as he approached her and then curled her lip up in anger.

"You!" she screamed and ignored the taken aback look in his eyes as she pointed an unsteady finger at him. Tears streamed down her face, her emotions strangling her voice as she accused him. "You knew that this was

going to happen. That's why you made me go to town with you. You knew those men; you knew they would come here. This is all your fault."

She slapped him hard as her anger boiled over, and then fell silent as he closed his eyes and tensed his jaw, as though he was trying to control his temper.

She shook on the spot as she waited for him to respond, but he didn't. He just opened his eyes and stared at the bodies with a distant look on his face.

She couldn't believe his audacity when she saw the shimmer of tears in his eyes.

How dare he? This was his fault, his. He'd done this.

"Jessie?" He looked into her eyes and took another step towards her. "I'm sorry this happened—"

"Sorry?" She cut him off and frowned at him as her heart rocketed against her chest. She flung her arm around, pointing at her family where they lay in the dirt and begging her tears not to come any more. She didn't want to look weak. She didn't want to cry in front of him.

She didn't want to give him the satisfaction.

"You knew those men in town. You know them! Don't lie and tell me you don't!" she shouted at him as she lost all hold on her feelings and let her anger take over. "How...how could you? This is all your fault...tell me it ain't ...tell me I'm wrong if I'm wrong...don't just stand there staring at me!"

He heaved a sigh and dropped his eyes to rest on the gap between them.

She couldn't believe that she had been right. He wasn't denying her accusation. He wasn't saying anything.

This was his fault, not hers.

"You murdering son of a bitch!" She drew her fist back and hit him as hard as she could across the jaw. Her hand throbbed, only adding to her pain. "Get away from me..."

His eyes closed as he dropped his head forwards.

"Get the hell out of my sight, you bastard!" she screamed the words at him.

When he turned away from her, she blinked and watched him walk over to Spirit and untie her from the cart. She felt an eerie calmness engulf her as he mounted the horse and began to ride away. She didn't know what her heart had been expecting, but it hadn't been this. She hadn't really thought that he would leave her.

Her eyes followed him as he got further and further away, and deep inside she expected him to come back; she needed him to come back.

She walked dreamily to the other side of the cart and stared at his retreating back as he rode up to the top of the ridge. Her breath caught in her throat as he halted and turned back to look at her, and for one heart-stopping moment she swore that he was going to come back to her.

And then he turned away and disappeared over the horizon.

Her knees collapsed as violent sobs shook her frame and she buried her face into her hands as she whimpered.

Her heart shattered into a million pieces.

Now, she'd lost everything.

Raising her head up, she knelt in the dirt and stared at the ridge.

As Ranger nudged her shoulder with his nose, she wrapped her arms around his head and rested her cheek against him. Silence filled her ears and she let it fill her whole body as she cried against her horse, keeping her back to the fire and the bodies of her family.

There was nothing that she could do now, nothing that could change what had happened.

All was lost.

Including herself.

Or was it?

- Chapter Seventeen -

Jessie awoke with a start, her clothes drenched in cold sweat and her heart hammering hard against her chest. She pressed her hand against it as she tried to get her bleary eyes to focus on the rising sun, and attempted to calm herself again, telling herself that it was all a dream—the same dream that she had every night.

She couldn't remember how long she had sat there that night letting her tears fall until no more would come. It must have been hours, but it had felt more like days; time had seemed irrelevant. All there had been was a vast feeling of emptiness and despair. Someone had eventually come from town to get her, but she hadn't realised who it was until she woke the next day in Sally's old room.

Had Colt sent them?

She told herself that it didn't matter if he had.

He'd broken her heart that night and in all the months that had passed, it had never healed.

It was spring again now; the trees back home would be starting to blossom and the early flowers would be out. It was the start of a new year and time to put the past behind her, to make a fresh start, but first she had to find the man responsible for murdering her family. She'd travelled so far, miles away from her home, through wind, rain and snow. She hadn't stopped, hoping to find him, praying each night that the next day would bring her face-to-face with him again.

It never did, but she still had hope.

Wiping her face on her neckerchief, she stood up and stretched, looking down at the dusty floor that had been her bed for the night. It wasn't the best accommodation, but there was nothing for miles and she had got too tired to ride last night. Ranger needed his rest, or she'd ride him lame, and there was no way she was going to lose him too.

She picked up her long brown coat and shook it, ridding it of dirt. Warily putting it on, she drew it close around her to protect herself from the early morning chill and rolled her blanket up. She tied it tightly and then secured it to Ranger's saddle as she put it on him.

"Next town ain't far now, we'll get some good lodgings there and rest a while," she said as she stroked his nose and looked into his large brown eyes. Since that night, she'd grown even more attached to him. He was the only thing she had left in the world—her only source of comfort.

Packing the rest of her things away as the sun broke the horizon and struggled to warm the earth, she forced the tiredness from her body and told herself the same promise that she'd just given to her horse. She would rest in the next town. She'd been tracking Colt for months now and was always one step behind him. A night in a comfortable bed wouldn't change that.

Mounting her horse, she gave one last look to the sun as it rose above the distant horizon, and then started towards the town.

This land was so much different to hers. The ground was dusty earth, orange as the setting sun, and the trees

were gnarled and dry looking. The air seemed to draw all moisture from her and Ranger, leaving them with a permanent thirst. The towns were bigger here, vast sprawling places full of people. They reminded her of the vision she'd had of her town the time Colt had mentioned what would happen if a stagecoach route passed through it.

She'd even seen a train.

It had frightened the life out of her and Ranger.

The hulking mass of metal had been idle at a station and the sound it of was etched on her memory; it had sounded like the heartbeat of a giant as it repeatedly wheezed and went silent as it took on water. She'd asked around the town about Colt and had been told that there was a card game taking place in the next town over in two days, and a lot of people were heading that way for it, she could make it there in time if she took the train.

She'd stared at it for ages, considering what to do, and had then turned away and started following the rail track on horseback.

There was no way she was placing herself and Ranger on such a frightening contraption.

The train had overtaken them half a day into her ride, and she realised that she was going to miss the card game. It didn't matter. She'd been tracking Colt for months; she had patience enough to wait a little longer.

Focusing on the horizon, she listened to the steady breathing of her horse as they rode across the desert plain to the town in question. It was around two days

after the card game had been due to take place. If she could discover that Colt had been playing, she would know that he was only two days at most ahead of her.

She wondered if she'd have to play him when they met. She'd sold her cattle before she left, but had kept her land. She'd used part of the money to pay for the stable and feed for the other three horses; Pa McGintley had promised he'd look after them until she came back. The whole town's attitude towards her had change dramatically. They'd gone from staring at her as though she were a freak, to treating her as though she was a child.

She didn't know which was worse, but she appreciated the kindness that some of them had shown her.

She'd used the rest of her money for clothes, provisions, hotels and gambling.

Charlie had taught her well and she was making quite the name for herself in the gambling circuit. People were even beginning to recognise her when she sat down at a table, and she'd had some big wins.

She'd had some big losses, too; the last one being a couple of towns back. It had drained most of her finances, and now she was going to have to play better than she'd ever done in order to win back enough money to keep going. The games were getting harder as she followed Colt. She knew that he was gambling, that's where she'd got most of her leads, and she knew that he was good, but she was going to beat him at his own game.

There was a big game due to take place in a city in a few days time. She knew that she could make it. It was only

a day's ride from the next town. She would use her time there to get enough money back to enter the competition and she would win.

She didn't care how good the men were she'd be playing against.

All she cared about was finding Colt and making him pay. She planned to take his money first, so she could rebuild her home and buy back her cattle, and then she was going to take his life.

She looked up as she heard voices passing her by and realised that she had reached the town while she'd been lost in thought. Patting Ranger's neck, she walked him along the main street, searching for the stable.

She smiled as she saw it down one of the side streets and headed over to it. Getting down off Ranger's back, she kept hold of his reins and led him around the back to the pen. The owner either kept a lot of horses, or there were still a lot of people in town from the game. She was still staring at the horses in the pen when a man came up beside her.

"Can I help you, miss?" He touched her shoulder and she turned to look at him with wide eyes.

He was only small, no taller than her. His thin face was as tanned and wrinkled as leather. He looked a lot like the men she'd seen in these parts. The sun was strong here, and they all clearly spent too much time in it. She couldn't stand the heat herself; she spent most of the day inside if she could and then came out in the evening to play.

She stared blankly for a moment and then smiled. "Looking for a place for my horse; he needs feeding and shoeing."

"We've got a stall free, down the end. Will you be in town long?" His rich blue eyes became filled with curiosity as he held her gaze.

"Just passing through," she said as she led Ranger along the rows of stalls to the very end. When he neighed and nodded his head, she wondered what had gotten into him. Placing him into the stall, she took his saddle and bridle off, and then took the saddle bags that were holding her belongings. Closing the stall door, she patted his nose as he whinnied.

"Won't be long, quit being silly." She smiled at him and then let it fall from her face as she heard the horse behind her neigh.

Turning slowly, she blinked in disbelief as she saw a deep chestnut horse with a diagonal white blaze across its nose. She edged towards it, holding her breath and telling herself that she was imagining it. It couldn't be. There were so many horses here that it was possible that one had similar markings.

She took a deep breath and looked over her shoulder, checking the man wasn't watching and feeling foolish as she thought over what she was about to do.

Leaning closer to the horse, she whispered, "Spirit?"

The horse nodded its head and snorted.

"Mind yourself, miss." The man's voice sounded out to her. "That's a wild one right there, near took my head off when he brought her in."

"He?" Jessie's heart thumped hard against her chest, skipping a beat as she considered the possibility. "The man who brought the horse in..."

"Tall man, dark clothes and even darker eyes," the man said as he walked towards her. "He's a player, leaves tomorrow for the big game."

She felt dizzy as his words sank in. Colt was here. He was here. She wasn't going crazy. That was really Spirit, and he was really here.

Gathering the chaotic feelings that were colliding inside of her, she took another deep breath and held it in, forcing herself to remain calm.

"Are there any good hotels in town?" she asked, trying to keep her voice relaxed as her mind ran million miles an hour over the implications of what was happening. She hadn't expected him to be here; she wasn't ready. Did she let him go so she could follow him? Or should she confront him now?

"Only one good hotel, The Lady Luck, down on main street." He pointed at the wall at her back, intimating the road she'd just come down.

Only one good hotel? Surely that meant that Colt would be there too. She didn't know what she was supposed to do. She didn't have the money to play him right now. She wanted to see him, wanted to confront him, but she was shaking so badly inside that it probably wouldn't be the wisest move.

Thanking the man, she walked out into the bustling street and headed along the shady side towards the main road through town. The sun was beating mercilessly down on the world now, making it impossibly hot. She drew her hat down over her face and pulled her coat around her, conscious of the fact that Colt could be anywhere. She didn't want him to see her; she had to keep the element of surprise.

Finding The Lady Luck Hotel, she pushed the doors open and stepped in. There was no relief from the heat; it was as hot inside as it had been out on the wooden walkway.

Heading over to the counter, she rang the little bell and waited patiently for someone to appear.

A woman came out from the back, her long dark blue dress clinging to her curves and her hair neatly pinned up in the latest fashion.

"Can I help you, sir?" Her sweet voice rang out through the still air.

Jessie frowned and pushed her hat up, staring straight into her eyes and giving her a look that said she wasn't impressed.

"I'm frightfully sorry, miss..." The woman looked more than a little taken aback as she stared at her clothes.

Jessie let her saddlebags slip to the floor and then put some money down on the counter.

"I'd like a room...actually..." She paused as she considered what she was about to say. "I was wondering if you had a Mr. Tucker staying here?"

She watched as the woman ran a long, dainty finger down the register and then stopped before she got halfway, as though she didn't need to look in order to answer that question.

"Colt?" She smiled wide at Jessie with a look in her eyes that told her she'd met him all right.

"That'll be him. What room is he in?"

She checked the register. "Twenty."

"Is there a room available nearby? I'm an old friend of his, we used to...play cards together." Jessie realised that it was probably better go with knowing him by playing cards than knowing him from working on a ranch. The woman was already looking at her as though she was strange, she didn't need to go adding to her image of her.

"There's the room opposite. It was vacated this morning. Most of the folks are—"

"Going to the city to play in the big game...I know...I'm going there myself." Jessie cut her off and picked up her saddlebags. Holding her hand out, she waited for the woman to place the key into it and then gave her a brief smile of thanks before heading up the stairs that led to the rooms.

She paused outside her room and looked across the corridor; it was directly opposite number twenty. Staring at the number on his door, she wondered if he was inside and then dragged herself away from it. Walking into the room, she dumped her belongings down onto the bed and then shut the door. She walked over to the

window and watched the people in the street below as they went about their business.

She sighed as she thought about what she was going to do.

She'd wait until evening fell.

He was bound to be playing cards tonight at one of the local saloons and he'd have to come back to get cleaned up and changed.

Her heart pounded against her ribs as she thought about seeing him again. She could still vividly remember what he looked like, could remember how dark his eyes were and how they made her feel when he looked at her with the tiniest hint of affection in them.

She swallowed hard.

Deep inside she just wanted to see him again. She didn't care what the outcome was. The desire to set eyes on him again had been fuelling her for the past few months; it was burning like an inferno inside of her and she had to quench the flames before it consumed her.

She had to see him.

But she couldn't get past what had happened.

The images of that night and the days afterwards flooded her vision and she bit back the tears that threatened to come to the surface. She wasn't going to cry. She wasn't going to give him the pleasure of seeing her upset when they met again.

The only thing he was going to see was the devil when she sent him to hell with the rest of the sinners.

- Chapter Eighteen -

Colt frowned when he heard a knock at the door. Wiping the soap from his face with a towel, he wondered who it could be. He'd paid up until tomorrow so it couldn't be the hotel owner or any of the people who worked there, unless it was the girl from the front desk. Every time he saw her, her smile got a little wider and his frown grew a little heavier. He wasn't interested in women; he'd made that clear in every town he'd stopped in.

Unlocking the door, he turned the handle.

Women were nothing but trouble.

He swallowed hard as he looked up and saw the barrel of a gun in his face. He backed away on instinct as it moved towards him, and stared at it. He heard the door closing through the sound of his thundering heart, and tried to shut down the nerves that were spiralling out of control inside of him. When the backs of his legs hit the bed, he fell into a sitting position on the end of it and continued to stare at the gun. He couldn't take his eyes off it as he tried to think who would be after him. As he noticed the pistol was shaking, he followed the barrel to the hand that held it and then followed the arm up to its owner.

His heart almost stopped as he saw her face, her brown eyes still full of accusation and anger.

"Jessie?" He frowned at her and then at the gun.

She took a step forwards as she pushed it into his face, her jaw tensing. Her eyes remain locked on his as she

cleared her throat as though she was having difficulty finding her voice.

"Colt," she greeted him coldly.

"How the hell...what're you doing here?" He looked incredulous as he ignored the gun that she was holding in his face and stared at her.

It was a wrong move on his part.

She struck him hard across the temple with the barrel of it and sneered at him as he leaned to one side with his fingers pressed against the side of his head.

"You dare!" she hissed at him as he looked up at her, still leaning over as he reeled from the force of her blow. "You dare act like nothing happened."

She cocked the gun as she narrowed her eyes and compressed her lips.

Colt held his hands up as it dawned on him that she was being serious; she still believed that he was the one responsible for what had happened to her family. Remembering their night on the ridge under the stars, he prayed that she was telling the truth when she said that she couldn't kill a man. Her hand was shaking badly, her whole body trembling with nerves and anger, and he couldn't tell whether she'd go through with it or not.

"Hold your horses. Let's not do anything stupid." He kept his hands held up beside his head, hoping she'd realised sometime soon that he wasn't going to try anything—there was nothing that he could try when she had him trapped at such close quarters. He kept still on the end

of the bed, giving her time to get a hold of the emotions and conflict that he could see running riot through her.

She sniffed back her tears as she looked at him.

He pleaded her with his eyes, his strong brows furrowing and his lips parting the tiniest of amounts. He tried to show her without words that he would never have done anything to hurt her, and that he definitely wouldn't have done that to her family.

He let his breath out in a sigh as she relented, resetting the gun but keeping it pointed at him.

"Jessie, darling?" He gave her a worried look as she stared unseeingly at him, her eyes filled with tears. All he wanted to do was comfort her. He wanted to gather her up in his arms and tell her that everything was going to be all right, but he knew that any movement on his part would only force her to act.

And he didn't feel like being filled full of lead by her.

Her eyes left his and she walked over to the wooden chair that was by the door. Dragging it across the room behind her, she spun it around and sat in it, keeping the gun pointed at him.

"I want to know what happened." She stared straight at him, her expression emotionless.

He nodded. She deserved to know why her family were killed and her home was burnt to the ground. No matter how much it hurt her, she had to have the answers or she'd never heal.

He wanted her to heal.

Dropping his eyes to rest on his knees, he felt overly conscious of himself as he tried to arrange everything in his head. He sighed as he realised that he wouldn't be able to concentrate unless he remedied something first.

"Jessie?"

"What?"

"Don't suppose you'd at least let me put a shirt on?" He intimated his bare chest and watched her eyes drop there, and her cheeks tint pink.

Jessie hadn't realised that he was half naked. Feeling suddenly flushed and hot, she tried to take her eyes off his bare chest, but found that she couldn't. They traversed the taut muscles of his stomach and roamed up the line of them to his pectorals. As she worked her way up the curve of his throat and found him looking at her with eyes reminiscent of the time he'd wanted to kiss her, she averted her gaze.

"Make it quick." She waved her gun dismissively and then watched him out of the corner of her eye as he grabbed a shirt and slipped it on. She followed his fingers as he carefully buttoned it up, hiding his body from her eyes.

"Done," he said.

She looked at him as though she hadn't realised, acting like she had kept her eyes off him.

Raising her gun again, she pointed it back at him and gave him a look that said to get started with his explanation.

"I wasn't responsible for the murder of your family," he said and she frowned at him. "It was...your brother."

She immediately shook her head, denying what he'd said. Her brother? No, her brother wouldn't do such a thing. She frowned as she realised that her brother wouldn't, but the people he owed money to would.

He continued when she didn't speak.

"Your brother came to me nearly four years ago. He was badly hurt, gunshot wound. I gave him food and a place to heal, rest. We talked a little. He told me 'bout you and the ranch. He didn't mention why he'd left, or any of the circumstances surrounding it. He left a couple of days before the people came and burnt my ranch. I lost everything. My cattle scattered to the four winds. I didn't know who the men were, all I could do was track them to the next big town." He paused and looked at her. "I heard them one night talking 'bout a man name Hayden. I knew the name of your ranch. I lost them shortly after that. All I was left with was those two names. I knew they'd not find Charlie, so I came to your ranch, knowing that they'd find their way there eventually."

She frowned as it all began to sink in. Her brother was the reason he'd lost his ranch and his cattle. He'd helped her brother, and then had everything he loved taken from him, including his horse. If it hadn't been for Charlie, he wouldn't have had to walk his horse into the grave, and she never would have met him.

She'd be dead, like the rest of her family.

Colt had saved her that day by making her come to town with him. He hadn't known that the men would use that

opportunity to attack, or that they would have recognised him.

This wasn't his fault; it was Charlie's fault.

She couldn't believe it.

Her brother's debts had caused so much hurt to so many people. A part of her wished that he were dead, that the men had found him and made him pay. She stared at the floorboards between hers and Colt's feet.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she said quietly as she tried to fit everything into place in her head and force it to sink in.

"Because I knew it would hurt you to hear it. Besides, you'd already made up your mind that night. I'd wanted to tell you that morning, wanted to tell you so many times, but I knew you wouldn't have believed me...not if I was saying things against Charlie."

What he'd said was true. She never would have believed that her brother was responsible for the loss of his ranch. All Colt had done was help someone when they were in need, and he'd lost everything. No wonder he'd tried to track the men. She wanted vengeance for what had happened to her family and her home; he'd come to her ranch for that same reason.

"I didn't know they were coming, Jessie...I wouldn't have let them if I had." He looked straight into her eyes as she raised her head up. She didn't bother hiding all the hurt she was feeling. She let him see that it was still as raw and painful as the night it had happened. The months had done nothing to heal her heart. "I'm sorry, darling."

A sob escaped her lips when she heard the tenderness in his voice and she lowered her gun, pressing her free hand to her mouth.

All these months apart, long nights of tears and regret, and in the end she still hadn't found the person she was looking for. All she'd found was what she'd been missing all this time, and it was her own fault for pushing him away and blaming him. If she'd given him a chance to explain that night, things could have been so different. She wouldn't have broken her heart completely by having to watch him leave, and she wouldn't have been alone all this time.

She stared at the gun where it was hanging limp from her hand.

"Did you find them?" she asked, knowing that there were two reasons he'd left her that night. One was because she'd forced him to go, the other was to track down the people responsible for her loss and his own.

He leaned forwards a little, resting his elbows on his knees. A tear slipped down her cheek. She brushed it away hastily. It wasn't welcome. She didn't want to cry in front of Colt. She'd done that far too often.

"Yes," he said.

It was such a small word with such a big meaning. She could feel the weight of it on her chest. He'd found the men. Maybe she could have her revenge after all.

"They're playing in the big competition in the city."

"The card game?" She looked up at him with questioning eyes. They were going to be playing in the game that

she'd intended to beat Colt in. Now, she'd have to beat them instead. If they'd beaten Charlie so badly all those years ago, she'd have no chance against them. Beating Colt would have been hard enough; beating them would be impossible.

"It lasts over a week. There's going to be plenty of time to find them and—" He didn't finish his sentence, he didn't need to. Her fingers tightened around the handle of her gun, showing him that she'd caught his meaning.

When she looked up at him, she found he was staring at the weapon with a frown on his face. She wondered what he was thinking. She could remember their conversation on the ridge that night, word for word. She had meant it when she said she couldn't kill a man, not unless she had good reason to.

When his frown intensified and he raised his eyes to meet hers, searching them, she got the feeling that he wanted to know if she would have killed him.

She looked down at the gun and shook her head slightly, trying to reassure him that she wouldn't have gone through with it. She couldn't have gone through with it.

Standing up, she smoothed down her clothes and put her gun back into its holster. It still felt a little strange sometimes to be carrying a pair of pistols, but she was getting used to it. She'd only used them to kill rabbits and birds so far, but she was ready to use them on a man if she needed to, so long as that man wasn't Colt.

Giving him an awkward look, she wondered what was going to happen now. They both wanted to play in the game, and they both wanted revenge, but she couldn't

bring herself to ask him if he wanted to work with her again, not after what she'd done.

Colt noted her hesitant body language and smiled.

She seemed so much more grown up now. She'd never been out of the state she was born in, but somehow she'd taken to this like a natural. She'd tracked him over hundreds of miles, through all weather and across all terrains. He had to admit that he was impressed, even if she was a little misguided in her beliefs. Still, it would be good to have an extra pair of eyes during the game, and it would be nice to have her by his side again.

He hadn't realised how much he'd missed her until he'd seen her standing on the other end of the gun.

He came out of his thoughts and looked at her. She was as pretty as she had been the day he'd left her. He could still remember being with her down by the creek pool, and how drawn to her he'd felt. He still felt that way.

"There's a game tonight at the saloon across the road," he said as he nodded towards it without taking his eyes away from hers. "I've learnt a lot 'bout the men I'm looking for—"

"We're looking for," she corrected him.

He frowned. "I'm looking for...this isn't women's work, Jessie, and a saloon is no place for you."

She smiled sweetly at him as she toyed with the handle of her gun. He could see the anger boiling up inside her again but he couldn't risk her getting too involved in what they'd be doing. He couldn't risk her getting hurt.

"I was just wanting to tag along. I have nothing left..." She bit her lip as she looked down at him, closing the gap between them.

His heart thumped against his chest as he gazed into her eyes and tried to keep a hold of his feelings. She knew what she was doing, that was for sure. She knew exactly what she was doing.

When her knee brushed against his and she was so close that he could smell her perfume, he caved.

"Fine...don't be getting in the way, or getting upset by what you see." He stood up and went back over to the bathroom to finish washing up. "Game starts in an hour."

She nodded and walked over to the door. Looking back at him, she held his gaze and then smiled.

"Be seeing you there, Colt."

He watched her leave and then sighed as the door closed.

"See you there, darling."

- Chapter Nineteen -

Stepping into the saloon, Colt's eyes immediately scanned the crowd, searching for a sign of Jessie as he moved towards the bar. He ordered himself a drink and then turned around and leaned against it, his elbow resting on the wooden surface. He couldn't see her anywhere. He recognised a few of the players from the games he'd previously played in, but none of them were as skilled as him. Making money tonight would be easy. He had enough to buy his way into the big game in the city, and more besides, but he was always happy to relieve people of anything they were willing to part with.

Catching the eye of one of the men in the corner, he nodded a greeting and tipped his black hat, letting him know that he recognised him and receiving a similar greeting in return. In about ten minutes, the whole scene would change. The tables would switch from drinking, to playing and drinking, and the women would all choose the man they'd be supporting that night in the hopes that he'd be the winner. It was the same in every saloon. The local ladies always backed the man they believed most likely to win the money and spend it all on them.

He generally brushed away any attentions they gave him. He wasn't interested in fast women or the pleasures they offered. All he was interested in was making money, and tonight looked to be easy pickings.

Taking his drink with him, he walked slowly through the room, letting everyone see him and letting them know that he'd seen them. When he reached the end table, he

sat down opposite the man he'd greeted earlier and placed his whisky down beside him.

"Lovely evening." The man smiled across the table at him with blackened teeth.

Colt didn't respond, he just rolled a cigarette and then lit it. He kept silent as another man joined them, and another followed him.

Taking a slow drag on his cigarette, he leaned back into his chair, slouching as he surveyed the room. He didn't bother watching the men as they dealt the cards and didn't listen as they spoke about stakes and rules. All he was interested in was finding Jessie. There was still no sign of her.

Where the hell was she?

Jessie looked in through the dirty windows, scanning the people inside and searching out any familiar faces. When she only recognised Colt, she walked towards the swinging doors of the saloon and pushed them open. She ignored the way the whole saloon seemed to stop and stare at her. Even the joyful tinkling of the music seemed to fade in volume as she breezed through the gathered people and headed straight for the bar. It was the same in every saloon she walked into in every town. She'd gone from being stared at for dressing like a man, to being stared at for dressing like a woman.

Keeping her back straight, she walked demurely through the room, thanking the men with a pretty smile as they stepped to one side to allow her to pass and make her way to the bar. Reaching it, she held her breath and counted the seconds until they all went about their business again.

The moment she leaned against the wooden bar and put her foot up onto the brass rail while avoiding the spittoons, the whole room sprang into life. The noise of talking elevated and the piano in the corner began to hammer out a new tune for one of the ladies to sing to. Jessie didn't order a drink, and didn't accept any of the ones offered to her by the men. She just continued to look around the room, taking in the scene.

The air was thick with smoke and smelt like the rich scent of cigars. The man behind the bar was cleaning glasses with a dirty rag and she wondered why he bothered. He was only making them dirtier than they had been before he started. She looked over the heads of the women that passed her, not seeing the looks they shot in her direction. She'd had run-ins with the ladies in other saloons and knew better than to make eye contact with them. Half of them seemed to believe that she was after their business. She would have laughed at them had they not been pointing a gun at her and wearing a deadly serious expression.

Her eyes passed over the men. They all looked the same, all cowboys and gamblers. Their faces were grim, their jaws masked in a thick layer of stubble and their skin darkened by the sun. Some of them were dressed finer than others, but most of them wore the same set up of a shirt, pants, boots, waistcoat, hat and a sidearm, just in different colours. She gave a thought to her gun where it was sitting on her side table back in her room. A part of her wished she had brought it with her. Today was the first time she'd come out without it.

Her eyes sought Colt where he was sitting at the poker table at the far end of the room. He was the reason she didn't have a gun on her tonight. She knew in her heart that should anything happen, he'd protect her. She

wasn't blind. She had seen in his eyes that the feelings he held for her all those months ago were still burning brightly in his heart. She knew because hers were still the same, too.

He didn't look much different from the night that she'd met him. He was wearing a dark blue shirt with his black waistcoat. His pants were black and he had on the boots they had bought together in town. He still wore the same hat, and the same look in his eyes. There was such intelligence in them, a twinkle of brightness that had always shown her that he could see straight through her barriers and into her heart. She'd never been able to hide anything from him.

She'd never wanted to.

She watched him as the crowd between them parted for a moment and he raised his eyes, finally seeing her.

Colt couldn't believe what he was seeing at first. He felt as though he'd been looking in the wrong place for Jessie now that he could see her. She was dressed in a fine dark blue dress. It hugged her figure but didn't reveal anything near as much as the dresses of the other ladies in the room. There was something alluring about how it kept her body hidden from view, and he knew it wasn't just him that she was affecting. She was drawing the attention of every man. They were all watching her as she stood at the bar watching him.

He didn't feel the brush of the lady's fingers across his shoulders as he stared at Jessie, his eyes locked with hers and his breathing coming slow but steady.

As she averted her gaze, he could see that same girl he'd left back at the ranch and he knew that all the

attention she was receiving was making her uncomfortable. She shifted slightly, straightening out her skirt, and he smiled. She was so self-conscious when she wore anything other than her work clothes, and he could see in her eyes when she glanced back at him that looks were being deceiving and she was itching to get out of the dress. He was reminded of the time she'd worn the skirt when they'd gone to check the fence and how she'd almost fallen off her horse because of it.

But she did look beautiful.

She always looked beautiful.

Jessie smiled at him as his lips curved into the slightest of smiles. She hoped that he'd get on with playing and stop staring at her. The more he looked at her, the more other people noticed her, and all she wanted to do was fade into the background.

No, that wasn't strictly true.

She wanted to play cards, wanted to win some much needed money so she could enter into the big game in the city, but she couldn't bring herself to. She didn't want Colt discovering her reputation, at least not yet. She wouldn't be able to hide it from him forever, but for now, she could pretend that she was just another onlooker and not a player. His words still rang in her head, tormenting and frustrating her as she watched him play.

It wasn't a woman's work.

She wanted to beat him at cards just to make him swallow his damn words. Maybe she would. Maybe she'd beat him in the big game and show him just what she

was made of. He should've known her better. He hadn't even asked how she'd afforded to come out this far and track him all this time. She wondered if he'd presumed that she'd sold the ranch. It was either that or she was selling her body.

He should've known that both were impossible for her to do.

She frowned as she was brought out of her thoughts by the sight of one of the ladies running her hands over Colt's shoulders and leaning towards him from behind, placing her mouth by his ear and whispering something with a smile.

Her jaw tensed as she watched the way the corners of his mouth tugged into the briefest of smiles, but not brief enough for her to miss. He hadn't looked interested in any of the women present, but that didn't mean that he wasn't. He knew she was watching him and he knew how she felt about him. Surely, he wouldn't be so heartless as to upset her after everything that had happened.

She looked away as the woman leaned in closer, kneading his shoulders and smiling.

She pushed her way through the crowd, heading for the door.

As the cool night air washed over her, she took a deep breath. The heat of the saloon had been stifling, the smoke making her eyes water and suffocating her. She told herself that's the reason she had left. It had nothing to do with the whore or Colt.

She sighed as she leaned against the railing that separated the wooden walkway from the dirt road and looked up at the sky. It was clear tonight, making the temperatures drop so low that goose flesh swept over her exposed skin. She listened to the dulled noise of the saloon as she stared up at the stars, letting her eyes follow their own course as her thoughts carried her away, back to her home.

Tears formed in her eyes as she remembered what it was like to sit on the ridge with Colt just watching the stars. That peaceful world seemed like a million miles away now. Everything there had been pure and clean, safe and tranquil; everything here was rough and dirty, sinful and dangerous. She longed for her home, for the quiet and solitude that it used to afford her.

She didn't know how to act in this world, didn't know how to act around Colt, not any more. She found herself having to consider everything she wanted to say to him before speaking it, fearing that she would say something wrong and drive him away. He'd taken hell and high water from her, had taken everything she'd thrown at him back at the ranch, but there was no reason for him to do that now. He didn't need her any more, didn't need a job or a place to stay. Out here, it was quite the opposite. Out here, she needed him. She needed the security and comfort his presence gave to her, she needed the knowledge he had of the terrain and the men that they were after.

Colt leaned back against the pillar on the opposite side of the door to the one she was holding onto. He couldn't see her face, but he could read in the way she'd been motionless for the past few minutes that she was miles away. He just hoped that wherever she was, it was a good place, not a bad one.

He folded his arms across his chest as he watched her, waiting for her to come out of her thoughts and notice him. He should've pushed the woman away earlier. He usually did, but he'd been so distracted by Jessie and how beautiful she looked that he hadn't noticed the lady until it was too late. He wasn't interested in the local ladies. There was only one woman in his heart.

After a few minutes of waiting, he took a step towards her, treading softly so he didn't disturb her. He rounded her slowly and looked at her face as she stared at the sky, watching the twinkling stars as they shone down at her and this wretched town. He raised his hand, wanting to touch her shoulder to bring her back to him, but struggling to go through with it. When she continued to be oblivious to his presence, he built up the courage and took a deep breath.

"Jessie?" He touched the soft skin of her shoulder, inhaling sharply as he felt it under the pads of his fingers.

Jessie gasped quietly as she felt the sweep of tingles and prickly heat run up her neck and down her arm. She swallowed to stop her stomach from flipping and then looked across at Colt where he was standing beside her. She hadn't noticed he was there. She'd been so far away in her thoughts.

"Colt?" she said as she found his eyes meeting hers. "I thought you were playing?"

"Was...it's over now." He sat on the railing that she was leaning against and looked into the saloon through the grimy windowpanes. "Our men have moved on. They've gone to the city to play. We should get going early tomorrow."

"I can't," she said in a distant voice as she let her eyes go back to the heavens above them.

"You can't?"

"I promised Ranger another day's rest." She didn't take her eyes off the stars as she spoke. She could sense his gaze on her, could still feel the hum of her skin where he'd touched her. It made her whole body feel flushed.

"I'll wait until you're ready." He touched her arm lightly and she looked at him. His expression was full of tenderness as he smiled at her.

She closed her eyes as he trailed his fingers off her arm, and listened to his boots on the wooden walkway as he headed back to the hotel. Opening her eyes, she watched his retreating back and sighed as she read into what he'd said to her.

He'd wait until she was ready for him.

She wouldn't keep him waiting long.

- Chapter Twenty -

Taking a long drag of his cigarette, Colt kept his eyes fixed on the floor in a distant stare as he walked along the road that led from the hotel to the stable. He didn't notice the people as they passed, or the coaches as they came close to knocking him over. All he could concentrate on since last night was Jessie.

He felt as though a whirlwind had come down and rattled him, stirring his emotions and shaking his world up until he couldn't recognise it any more. He hadn't expected to see her again, at least not while he was still hunting down the men. He'd intended to go back for her once it was all over, and was going to explain to her what had happened.

He still couldn't get the image of her holding that gun in his face out of his head.

Everything seemed so confused since then, and he felt as though he was just letting it all drift by him, not really taking part in the events, just watching them from a distance. He still felt like that in a way. He couldn't come to terms with the fact that she was here, that she was in his life again, and they were working together. No matter how many times he'd told himself last night that it was really happening, it still wasn't sinking in.

She was really here, had really followed him all this way in order to exact vengeance upon him.

She had as much spirit as his horse.

A part of him was glad that she was here. He'd missed her sorely and had spent most nights thinking about her before he finally fell asleep. He realised that he was doing this mostly for her now. It wasn't about his ranch any more. It was about everything that had been stolen from her. Even though he wasn't the reason the men had come to the ranch, he still saw himself as responsible for what had happened. If he'd told Jessie that morning, if he'd told her when they'd met why he was there, then it all could have been avoided.

The men would pay, he'd see to that, but it wouldn't bring back everything that she'd lost. It wouldn't bring back her family and her life.

He wished that it would.

Looking up at the morning sun as it rose steadily into the pale blue sky, he sighed out his breath.

Now he had a complication in his plan. As much as he liked having Jessie by his side again, he wished that she hadn't followed him. Whenever he thought about what was to come, a cold fear wrapped its icy fingers around his heart and squeezed it, paralysing him. He couldn't bear the thought of her getting hurt. The idea that she wanted to remain with him touched his heart, but he couldn't place her in the path of danger, and taking her with him was doing just that. When the final fight came, she could get hurt or worse, and he'd never be able to live with himself if that happened.

He couldn't let that happen.

He tossed his spent cigarette to the floor and ground it into the dirt with the toe of his boot as he looked up at the stable sign.

All he could do was keep an eye on her and protect her. He wasn't going to let anything happen to her and that meant staying as close to her as possible.

Stepping into the shade of the building, he nodded to the man as he came out from the back.

"Come to get that mare of yours?" the man said and Colt arched a brow at the way he'd intentionally pointed out the sex of his horse. "Strange beast for a fella like you to be riding."

Colt scratched at his eyebrow with his thumb and continued to frown. "Can handle my women just fine...including horses."

He'd never cared what sex his horse was. He'd had a few geldings in his years, but the two horses he'd loved most had been mares. His previous horse had never given him any trouble, and neither had Spirit since they left the ranch.

"Was just saying..." the man trailed off as he went to turn away and then stopped when Colt didn't make a move to leave. "Something I can do you for?"

"Keep her for another day. She'll need feeding, but I don't recommend trying anything else. She's mighty particular 'bout who touches her."

"Sounds like that sassy girl's black horse that's stabled in the stall opposite yours," the man remarked and then wandered into the back mumbling, "Pay on leaving."

Colt wondered what horse he was talking about and then noticed that the stall was empty. He smiled as he realised that the man had been talking about Ranger

and that the sassy girl was Jessie. Her horse had always been particular about who touched him, and he'd rarely gone near him for that reason, that and the fact that Jessie was as particular about who went near Ranger as the horse himself was.

Leading Spirit out of her stall, he stroked her neck as he looked her in the eye and she nodded, breathing heavily as she did so.

"Let's go ride some rings round an old friend."

Saddling her up, he fastened her bridle into place and then led her out into the street. He looked around him at the possible directions Jessie had taken Ranger, and then decided to take a right; it was the quickest route out of town.

Mounting Spirit, he settled into the saddle and then nudged her with his feet as he geed her on with the reins. He smiled as she broke into a trot, rapidly following it by speeding to a gallop once she hit the open desert plain.

It didn't take him long to find Jessie. She was riding out in the scrub, weaving her horse through the bushes as though it was a game. As he approached her, he slowed his horse so he could watch her for longer without her seeing him. He wasn't surprised to see that she was wearing her work clothes again. Her hair was tied back into a long ponytail, her body clad in dark brown pants and a cream shirt. She was wearing the gloves that he'd picked out for her and an image of her slender hands flashed into his mind. When he'd first met her, he'd never thought that she could be so feminine and graceful when she wanted to be. It didn't come easy for

her, but that night at the dance, and last night, made it clear that she was as beautiful as any woman out there.

More beautiful in fact, and in his eyes the dress only added to it.

Hell, he'd fallen for her when she was dressed like a boy.

He jumped as the sound of hooves thundered by, scaring Spirit and dragging him out of his thoughts. He smiled as Jessie rounded him on Ranger, a broad grin on her face as she looked at him.

"Dreaming again?" She continued to smile as she rode around him, tightening the circle until she was barely a few feet away from him and Spirit.

"It's a nice day for it," he said as his eyes followed her, his head turning to track her as she rode around behind him.

She looked up at the crystalline blue sky and raised her eyebrows as she pursed her lips in thought.

"It's always a nice day for dreaming, Mr. Tucker." She smiled.

"Well, Miss Hayden, I'll leave you to your ride." He turned Spirit around towards the town and smiled as soon as his back was to her and he heard an exasperated sigh followed by the sound of hooves on the hard ground.

"Colt?"

Her voice had a note of panic in it that went straight to his heart. It lanced through him, making regret run along every nerve as he stopped Spirit dead in her

tracks. It was the same note of panic she'd tried to hide the morning she'd found him by the creek pool, the morning she'd thought he'd left her.

He didn't turn back, he just waited until she sidled up close to him on her horse and then looked across at her, giving her an apologetic smile as he saw the hint of hurt in her eyes.

"Ride a while?" Her voice quivered with nerves and he could see in her eyes that she believed he was going to leave her alone on the open wasteland.

He nodded and started at a slow walk beside her as they rode. He wanted to break the silence, wanted to stop the quiet mood that had settled over them when he'd gone to leave her. He knew that she'd been joking when she'd called him 'Mr. Tucker', just like he'd been kidding when he'd called her 'Miss Hayden', but he wished that he hadn't turned away now. He should've remained facing her, shouldn't have made her feel as though he was going to let her be alone out in this dangerous place.

She'd been alone too long.

Nearly a year had passed since he'd seen her and she'd been alone all that time, tracking him across this big country and fending for herself. He wished he'd never left her back at the ranch now. He should've stayed and explained. He shouldn't have presumed that she would stay there. She loved her family dearly and had loved her home just as much. Of course, she would want revenge for what had happened to them, just like he wanted revenge for what had happened to him.

But his pain was tempered by the knowledge that if it hadn't happened, he never would have met her, he

never would have found someone as wonderful as the girl riding next to him.

It felt so good to have her by his side again, as though they'd never been apart all these months. The only reminder that they had been was the awkwardness that hung between them. He wanted to believe that her feelings for him were the same as his were for her, but there was a part of him that was scared that they weren't.

After they took care of the men, she was the only thing he had left in the world. Well, the only thing except his horse. He didn't want to part from her again, didn't want to go back to his homeland. He wanted to remain with her.

He glanced across at her to find her watching him closely with a small smile teasing her soft cherry lips. They were still as red as the day he'd got his first real look at her. In fact, she didn't look any different, except maybe a little less prickly.

He smiled back at her as he remembered how she used to be around him.

He was glad that she'd come out of her shell, and that he'd been able to help her find herself again and come to terms with what had happened.

Reaching across, he placed his hand over hers where it was holding the reins and curled his fingers tightly around under her palm. He gave her a gentle squeeze and smiled when her eyes dropped to rest on their hands.

He didn't let go of her hand as they continued to ride across the wasteland, he couldn't let go of it. The feeling of it in his was too good to give up and he didn't care if anyone saw them. He wanted to hold onto her, wanted to feel her fingers in his so it finally sunk in that she was here and she was tangible.

Jessie stared at their joined hands. Warmth spread through her, making her smile as she looked at them and understood perfectly what he was silently trying to tell her.

He hadn't meant to scare her.

He'd never leave her again.

She held back the tears that struggled to push their way to the surface as she thought about the long months she had passed alone, and wrapped her fingers around his hand and held onto it, showing him that she knew what he was telling her.

"You left an easy trail to follow." She broke the silence and found his eyes meeting hers.

"Hadn't expected to be tracked," he said as he smiled at her and her own one tugged at the corners of her lips.

"I couldn't sit there and do nothing," she said, letting her smile fade as she thought about what had happened.

Colt felt the weight of silence fall between them again and was half tempted to remove his hand. He could see that she still felt awkward about the fact she had blamed him for what had happened when it was her brother's fault, and deep inside he hadn't forgiven her for it, but he had done nothing to convince her otherwise. He'd left

her without a word, without a denial of what she'd accused him of, when he should have set her straight before leaving.

He should have told her he would come back for her once it was all over.

"I've been keeping my eye on the men. They play high stakes, and they don't take any prisoners. They're good, Jessie, it was no wonder they beat your brother. These are the kind of men that do this for a living, real gamblers."

"And we're just a couple of wranglers, but it doesn't mean we can't beat them."

There was venom in her voice that he had to smile at. She sounded so confident that they were going to play cards against the three men that were responsible for their losses and win. She couldn't even play cards, unless she counted a few friendly games against her brother as winning.

He wanted to tell her that she was a wrangler and he had half a chance at beating the men, but instead bit his tongue and just smiled as she looked at him with steely determination in her eyes.

"The game in the city has a high entry price," Jessie said.

"It's got high prize money, too," Colt added as he rode beside her and finally let go of her hand as Ranger moved too far away for him to keep hold of it. His hand felt empty, his fingers cold as they lost their prize. He looked across at Jessie and noted that she hadn't

seemed to notice the loss of his hand, or even the fact that he'd spoken. "Jessie?"

"Hmm?" she said with raised brows and blinked languidly at him, as though she was bringing herself out of her thoughts and back to the world.

"I said the prize money is high, too."

"I know, but first you have to get that far." She shot him a confident smile.

He couldn't believe that she was implying he wouldn't make it into the final. Sure, she hadn't seen him play, but he thought she would've been more supportive of him and his abilities.

"I'm sure I'll make it, just as I'm sure their boss will make it, too." He leaned back into his saddle as he thought about the upcoming game. It wasn't far to ride to the city, but the open ground was a dangerous place to be before a big competition like this. Bandits would know that you were carrying the hefty entry fee and were likely to ambush you when you were in the middle of nowhere. There were rocks and trees that afforded them cover, and it was easy pickings out there.

He glanced down at his rifle and then across at Jessie's saddle, surprised to see a similar one mounted there. Not only did she carry a pretty set of six shooters, but now she carried a rifle too. Maybe she had learnt something from him when he'd spent all that time lecturing her on not carrying a weapon.

He just hoped that she could use the damn thing if the need arose.

"I've got some things to do," he said quietly, not wanting to bring her away from whatever was on her mind, but needing to all the same, "I'll meet you tomorrow morning, outside town to the north, early."

"With the sun rise," she said with a smile and he smiled too.

"Just like it used to be." He nodded and then turned Spirit around and began to ride away. Looking back at her, he found her watching him and crooked his finger. "You think I'm leaving you out here?"

Jessie smiled and geed Ranger on so she caught up with Colt. She should have known that his leaving would signal the end of her ride for the day. He didn't like the idea of her being out on the wasteland alone and she liked it about as much as he did. Even with the rifle, she still didn't feel safe when she was alone.

Riding back towards the stable with him, she let her eyes idly peruse his profile. He kept his gaze fixed on their surroundings, probably scanning it for trouble, and she got the feeling he was playing the protector again. He'd done it a few times when they were back at the ranch, not letting her ride out to check the fence alone, or head up into the hills without him and his rifle.

It was probably second nature to him now, looking out for her even though she had a rifle to protect herself these days.

She wasn't complaining, she liked the way he wanted to look after her; it made her feel like she did back then.

It made her feel loved, and right now, she needed to feel that way.

Dismounting Ranger, she led him into the stable and listened to Colt following her. It was probably a bad idea to come back to the stable together, but they'd be leaving tomorrow morning and the building was so near the outskirts of town that the chances of people seeing them together was remote.

Besides, she was dressed like a boy and it wasn't like they were holding hands still.

She smiled as she looked at her tan glove and pictured his hand still wrapped tightly around it. It had felt so good that she just wanted to slip her fingers back into his again so she could recapture the feeling.

Taking Ranger's saddle off, she gave Colt a shy smile as he beamed broadly at her. He seemed so happy, as happy as she felt inside. It had been a long time since she'd felt like this, and after everything that had happened she hadn't thought it was possible. He'd made her feel this way a few times in the past, and it was nice to know that he still had this affect on her; it made her feel as though everything between them was getting back to how it had been before he'd left.

Her fingers paused at their work as she remembered how close he'd been to kissing her that day. She'd been able to see it coming, had been hanging by a thread waiting for him to make a move. Now she felt as though she was still dangling by that thread and she'd been hanging from it for ten months, and if he didn't kiss her soon it was going to snap.

She blushed as she averted her eyes away from him and concentrated on brushing Ranger down.

She listened to Colt's footsteps as he put Spirit into the stall and then bolted the door.

"I'll be seeing you in the morning then," he said as he started to walk away.

"Colt?" Jessie said and then bit her lip.

"Darling?" He looked back at her expectantly.

"Doesn't matter." She shook her head in negation as she focused on Ranger again.

She stared at his dark hair and her tan glove where it was resting against him and listened to the sound of Colt's heavy steps on the solid ground. When they drifted into the distance and disappeared, she let out her breath in a sigh and looked at her horse.

"You think he'll kiss me soon?" she said to Ranger and he nodded his head as he snorted. She smiled. "Better, because I'll be getting fit to burst if he keeps giving me those looks and not doing anything about it."

Patting Ranger's neck, she let him walk himself into his stall and then slid the bolt across. She waved back at him as she started walking away.

"See you tomorrow, handsome."

~

Jessie rode in impatient circles as she waited on the edge of town for Colt. She'd gone a short way out so she didn't draw as much attention to herself from the townsfolk and had started to grow increasingly bored as time drew on. There was nothing to do or to look at out in the wasteland, unless you counted tumbleweeds and

dry scrub as interesting. The sun was getting hotter by the second and, as usual, there wasn't a sign of cloud in the sky. She longed for the weather of her homeland, wanted the variation in temperature and the relief of rain. She'd always loved the way the cool rain felt against her skin on a hot summer day. It was refreshing and gave her a sense of relief that seemed to carry all her cares away with it.

Right now, she would welcome something that could do that.

She rode in another circle, patting Ranger's neck in an attempt to keep him calm. He was getting as edgy as she was. He wasn't made for dry desert where everything looked the same. There were no defining features out here; it was a flat land punctuated with trees that were struggling for survival, and towns that were identical to the previous one.

And it was teeming with snakes.

She didn't like snakes. They'd frightened Ranger a few times and she'd almost ended up landing on top of them.

It wasn't pleasant.

She didn't have snakes this big where she was from, and she was damn glad of it.

"Morning."

His voice made her smile; it was bright and confident, just like always.

She turned slowly and gave him a look that said she'd been waiting for a long time and then let her smile show through.

"Morning," she said as she looked at him; he was wearing his usual choice of dark clothing and she wondered how he could bear the heat. She'd chosen to wear the palest shirt she owned and her tan pants, and she was already boiling.

"Shall we?" He held his hand out to one side as though he was ushering her through a door rather than pointing the way to the city.

She began in the direction he'd intimated and then sighed as he came up beside her. It felt so good to be riding with him again, bringing back happy memories of their time together on her ranch, and making her think of that perfect evening they'd passed together. She'd loved the feeling of him against her back as they rode together on Spirit; it had been so comforting, had made her feel so safe and loved.

Riding a little closer to him, she offered him a warm smile as he looked at her.

They rode in silence through the heat of the day. It made Jessie feel drowsy as the sun beat down on her and she kept wiping her brow with her neckerchief. Thankfully, the sun was against their backs, but with no shade to offer them relief, it didn't make much difference other than the fact they weren't blinded by it. The arid landscape seemed to reflect the way her throat felt after a time and she found it difficult to refrain from drinking all of her water in one go. She didn't know the route to the city and she was too tired to ask Colt if

there was anywhere in this godforsaken land to fill up her canteen.

Colt looked across at her as she wiped her brow again. They'd been riding for over six hours now, and there were still at least another four hours to go before they reached the city. He could see that she was fading fast from the heat. Out here was no place for a woman and he wished that he'd convinced her to take the train. She'd told him about her previous encounter with one and that she wasn't going to travel on the so called 'evil contraption', that she wouldn't trust it with her life, so he'd decided they would ride to the city. It wasn't a long distance, and it saved them much needed money.

He offered her some of his water as she looked at him, and smiled as she hesitated for only a split second before taking it. Wiping his brow, he squinted into the distance in the hope of seeing the city, but was greeted with miles of windswept desert plain.

Undoing the top few buttons of his shirt, he got little relief from the breeze. He swigged the water as she handed it back to him and then smiled inside as he noticed how relaxed they were around each other again. The awkwardness of two days ago seemed to have been gradually disappearing over the past day, and now things felt as though they were back to how they had been.

"We'll be there by sunset. It will give us time to get in on a game and get through to the finals," he said as he stowed his water back in his saddlebags.

She just nodded and he wished she'd said something instead as they both fell silent. He stared off into the

distance as they continued to ride, feeling Jessie's eyes on him.

"You don't ride rings around me any more," she remarked quietly and he looked over at her.

He smiled inside at how sulky her words had sounded. When he'd looked over at her, he'd been surprised to see that she wasn't pouting. He didn't know why he wasn't riding rings around her like he'd used to. It just didn't seem right any more. These weren't those carefree times like they had shared; these were times for being serious and getting things done.

"I will again, someday, when all this is behind us." He offered her a smile but she kept her eyes fixed on the horizon. Something told him that she wasn't happy with his answer, but it was the only one that he had for her. Things had changed between them, and although they still had feelings for each other, this wasn't the ranch and they weren't riding out to check on the cattle.

They were riding out with the intention of killing.

She didn't know what it was like to live with a man's death on your conscience so he could understand how light-hearted she was acting. He couldn't bring himself to horse around at a time like this; there was too much to think about, too much weighing down on him.

She'd understand soon enough, when she'd had her first taste of killing.

~

Reaching the rough wooden buildings that marked the outskirts of the city, Colt silently dropped back as they'd

planned. Jessie would ride alone at the front, keeping her distance from him so it looked as though they were arriving separately. She would then go to the stable and, from there, to the hotel they were going to be staying at.

He'd be following a few steps behind her.

She looked around her as she entered the busier part of the city. The buildings were tall and all well kept. There were so many of them that she felt as though she was suffocating. Everything was closer together than the towns she'd passed through. The side streets were narrower, crowded with an assortment of people, carts and carriages. She watched one carriage as it passed her by, heading in the same direction as she was. There was a woman on it next to the male driver. Both of them were finely dressed and the lady was carrying a parasol, even though the canopy of the carriage shaded them.

Her eyes moved to rest on the people on the walkway beside her. All the women were dressed in exquisite clothes, all of them wearing what Jessie thought was beyond Sunday best, and all of them carrying parasols to protect them from the harsh light of the sun.

Suddenly she felt very underdressed. Even her finest dress was no match for what these ladies were wearing. People were going to laugh at her if she showed up to the big game in her blue dress, and she didn't have enough money to get into the game, let alone getting a new outfit for it.

She glanced over her shoulder, catching sight of Colt where he was riding a few metres behind her. She couldn't bring herself to ask him to lend her the money.

He couldn't know about her intention to gamble until it was too late for him to stop her.

She'd find another way to get the money she needed for entry to the game and a new dress.

Spotting a stable down the side street to her right, she carefully crossed the road and headed down it. She dismounted as she reached the sign and frowned at the number of horses already occupying the stalls.

"Any room?" she asked as a man came forwards and looked her over.

"Couple of spaces." He spat on the floor just a few feet from her and then gave her a toothy grin.

Resisting the temptation to curl her lip up in disgust over being leered at by such a wretched looking man, she followed him into the stable to the empty stall. She gave him the smallest of smiles as he pointed it out and then looked affronted as he smacked her behind.

Raising her eyes, she found Colt glaring at the man.

"No way to treat a lady." He continued to frown at the man. "Want a stall for my girl here, treat her well, she's liable to fight you if you don't."

She smiled at him as he glanced at her and then put Ranger into the stall. Removing his tackle, she took her saddlebags and her rifle, and then found herself staring at him.

"Tomorrow night, Black Feather Saloon," Colt whispered to her before walking out of the stable.

She remembered the fact that she was just shy of the entry fee and frowned. She had to get that money somehow. There was no way on earth she was going to let Colt be the one to beat them, not unless they played her out of the game fair and square. There was truth to Colt's words. These men were gamblers, they did play high stakes, and to cap it all they had a reputation for leaving men broken by the wayside in each town they passed through. But she wasn't a man, and they weren't going to break her; she was going to break them.

They would pay for what they'd done to her and Colt, and she wasn't just talking in the money sense of the word.

She just stared at her horse as she patted his nose and thought over her options.

She had to get into that game.

No matter what it took.

She needed that money.

- Chapter Twenty-One -

Colt put his hand over his gun as the man he was talking to stopped dead halfway through a sentence. All he'd done was come to find a game he could play in that would get him through to the finals. At first, he thought he was going to have trouble, but then he realised that the whole room had suddenly become a lot quieter and the man wasn't the only one staring at something.

Turning slowly, he felt the breath knocked from him as he saw her standing in the doorway. She was wearing a rich emerald green dress that shimmered under the lamplight as though it was made of the precious stones whose colour it had stolen. The strapless bodice clung to her body, revealing more than he thought was decent for her to be showing to every man present, but he couldn't take his eyes off it. Forcing them upwards, he watched as she gently pushed a strand of dark hair from her face with her glove encased fingers. His gaze was drawn to her lips. They were painted an enticing shade of rose and her eyes had been made up, along with her hair. It was tied back in a loose tumble of curls that fell behind her and framed her face.

Her dress reminded him of the night that they had danced and how beautiful she'd looked then, but she had surpassed herself tonight; tonight there weren't any words in his vocabulary that could convey how divine she looked.

He felt his heart pounding against his chest as she demurely moved towards him, her steps in perfect rhythm with the beat sounding in his ears. His breathing

slowed as his eyes remained fixed on her; his chest warmed with the familiar stirring of his feelings for her. He stared dumbly at her as she came to a stop just beside him and looked at the man he'd been talking to.

Realising that she was talking to the man, he forced himself to focus on what she was saying.

"I want in."

He looked confused for a moment and then frowned as she raised her purse up, the long green gloves she was wearing shining in the low light.

"Wait!" He stepped between her and the man before she had a chance to open her purse. Was she saying what he thought she was saying?

The flicker of a frown and the steely look she gave him said that she was.

"You don't play," he said as he matched her frown.

"Oh, boy, she does." A man next to him nudged the other one and he turned his frown on them, suddenly getting the feeling that she'd neglected to tell him something.

Her look became awkward.

He looked around the room as everyone stared at her and tried to listen to their muttered words. Evidently, people knew who she was, and judging by the look on her face, she had expected them to.

"You...what do you mean?" He turned to the man who had spoken a few seconds before.

"You been out of town? Whole state is talking about the Queen of Hearts. Money is riding on her to win this thing." The man smiled at her and her jaw tensed, her eyes dropping to the floor.

"Queen of Hearts?" he said as she shuffled her feet.

"I've played a few games...I told you Charlie—" she started to explain but he didn't give her a chance to finish.

"You don't have the money," he said and smiled for a moment when she didn't answer.

She took a deep breath and opened her purse. "Yes, I do."

He stared at it. Sure enough, she had the money.

"I don't want to know how you got that." He closed her purse for her and then paused as he raised his eyes to meet hers. There was a familiar look in them, one that went straight to his chest and hit him hard. Something was wrong.

She took another deep breath, holding it for a few seconds before sighing it out.

"I sold..." She didn't finish the sentence.

He could see in her face that she couldn't bring herself to admit to what she'd done and he instantly knew why when he saw how much hurt she was holding in her eyes.

"You did not just sell that horse!" His words seemed futile as he saw her unshed tears. She'd sold her horse in order to pay her way into the game. She couldn't

have sold him that long ago, and there was no way he was going to let her part with him.

Grabbing her arm tightly, he ignored her quiet whimper of pain and dragged her with him as he headed towards the door.

"Keep a table open, we'll be back," he hollered at the man who was in charge of the taking the entry fees for the game and then pushed his way out of the door.

Jessie stumbled along behind him. She had been hoping that he wouldn't be there to question her, had hoped that she would have been able to pay the entry fee before he noticed her, but he'd been stood right next to the man she had to give the money to. She'd had no option.

Her eyes filled with tears as she thought about what she'd done. She couldn't believe that she had gone through with it; she felt heartless for selling something that she loved so much and something that had grown up with her. She felt as though she'd betrayed Ranger, and now Colt was angry with her for selling him, too. She'd seen the silent fury in his eyes when he'd realised what she'd done. It had made her feel even worse than she'd already felt. She didn't even know if they would be able to get Ranger back. It was dark out and the chances were the stable would be closed.

She hoped it wasn't.

"Why didn't you just tell me? Why didn't you ask me for the money?" he growled the words as he dragged her along the wooden walkway towards the stable.

"I was going to buy him back when I won," she said and his grip on her arm loosened slightly as he turned to look at her.

Colt couldn't believe she'd sold her horse. He knew how much he meant to her; Ranger was more of a friend than an animal. He was the one thing she had left from her ranch.

"If you won, Jessie, if." He frowned at her where they stood bathed in moonlight. Her cheeks were wet with tears and he couldn't imagine how hard it must have been for her to come to this decision. A part of him was disappointed that she hadn't been able to bring herself to tell him that she had been playing and doing well, and that she hadn't asked him for the money she needed.

He'd told her that he had money; she knew that he would have helped her out, but she'd ignored him in her time of need and stood alone. Maybe he was reading into it too much, and that she'd only done it so he wouldn't stop her from playing like he would've tried to, but it still hurt to think that she didn't trust him enough, that she didn't need him.

Not waiting for her to say anything, he turned on his heel again and strode towards the stable. He banged his fist against the wooden door as he breathed heavily, trying to get his emotions back into place.

"Something I can do you—" the old man started as he opened the door.

"This the man you sold him to?" Colt frowned at Jessie and then looked back at the man when she nodded, ignoring the tears he'd caused by raising his voice. "She sold you a horse, a big fella, dark as midnight."

"She did," the man said and looked at Jessie.

He glanced at her and saw she was trying to stop her tears with her gloves.

"I'm buying him back." He put his hand into his pocket and pulled his money out. It would make a dent in what he had, but he'd still have enough to play, and if he bought Ranger back for Jessie then she would be able to play too.

"You are?"

He gave the old man a look that said he wasn't going to take no for an answer and then held a wedge of money out to him. "That should cover it."

The man thumbed his way through the notes and then eyed him closely. He knew it was more than the man had paid for Ranger. He didn't care. He'd pay anything in order to get the horse back to its rightful owner.

"It'll do," the man said and started off towards the saloon.

Looking down at Jessie, he saw that there was no sign of her tears stopping and took hold of her hand. Leading her into the stable, he shut the door behind them and walked with her down the row of stalls to Ranger's one.

Jessie's lips broke into a smile as her horse greeted her and she petted him on the nose before turning to Colt. She couldn't thank him enough for what he'd done for her. Not stopping to think, she stepped up to him and placed her hands against his chest as she pressed a thank you kiss to his lips.

She froze as she came back to rest on her heels and looked up at him, realising what she'd just done. Staring into his eyes in the near-darkness, she could feel his heart beating hard against her fingers and found hers racing to match it as it began to accelerate. She swallowed down the tightness in her throat that the anticipation of the kiss caused and started slightly as she felt his hands slide around her waist, holding her firm. She began to breathe faster as his eyes dropped to her mouth and her lips parted as she waited.

He breathed out sharply through his nose as he claimed her mouth, kissing her hard and crushing her lips under his as he gathered her up into his arms.

She leaned into his body, moaning into his mouth as his arms wrapped themselves tightly around her slim frame. The only sound in her ears was the rapid beating of her heart and their heavy breathing as he kissed her. She clawed at his chest before forcing her arms up, wrapping them around his neck and holding him against her mouth. She didn't care that his stubble was scratching his lips, she just wanted him closer to her, as close as he could get.

Burying her fingers into the hair at the back of his head, she grasped hold of him as he broke the kiss and began to work his way down her jaw to her neck. She let her head fall backwards and gasped at air, panting heavily as she tried to steady her heart and stop herself from feeling so dizzy. She bit her lip as his tongue swept along the curve of her throat, making her shiver with delight, and then let her mouth fall open as she felt his fingers trailing down over her chest.

She was so hot and flushed; all she wanted was to be out of the dress and into his arms. She felt as though

she was burning up with need and desire and there was only one remedy that she could think of, one that had been on her mind for so long now. She'd been waiting so long to feel a man's touch, to feel his touch, that she felt as though she was going to burst if he made her wait any longer.

Stepping her backwards into the post that divided the stalls, Colt moved his body up against hers as his hands coursed up her sides and curled around her shoulders. His brows furrowed as her tongue brushed against his, making tingles race down his spine and his fingers tightly grasp her soft flesh. She was so warm in his mouth, her lips so yielding and tasting so sweet. He wanted her closer, wanted to feel the warmth of her body against his, wanted to run his fingers over every inch of her supple skin.

Her fingers tightened in his hair as he kissed and nipped at her throat, and he hitched her skirt up.

He closed his eyes and breathed heavily against her neck as he felt the silky smoothness of her stockings under his fingers. He groaned and his stomach grew tight as he ran his hands over them, savouring the feeling of them as he slowly raised her skirt up to reveal her legs to him. They were slender, but strong, and the sight of the stockings made his heart race even quicker.

He smiled as he felt her fingers desperately tugging at his shirt, frantically unbuttoning it, and knowing that she wanted this as badly as he did only drove him on. Running his hands up her thighs as she pulled apart his shirt, he tensed his jaw to steel himself against the pleasure of the feeling of her soft backside under his fingers.

Jessie furrowed her brows and moaned into his mouth. She moved her hips forwards, silently begging him for more as she continued to kiss him. She was burning up, needed to feel him surrounding her, inside her. Running her fingers down his chest, she smiled against his mouth as he moaned over the feeling of her satin gloves against his skin.

She explored every inch of him as he kissed her hungrily. She ran her hands down to his stomach and then around to his back as he leaned into her, pushing her against the post his with hard body. Letting her tongue tangle with his, she slid her hands down to his backside and held her against him, revelling in the way it felt to have his body pressed into hers.

He felt so hard against her. She could feel him touching her stomach and couldn't stop herself from grinding against him.

Colt grasped her buttocks as he felt her rubbing against him, her warmth seeping into his pants and making him harder for her. Not stopping to question her, he gently slid her underwear down her legs and looked into her eyes as she kicked it off. In the dim light from the moon that was filtering in through the high window, he could see that her eyes were wide, her lips were parted and swollen with his kisses, and her cheeks were flushed as she looked at him, waiting for him to make a move.

He stepped towards her, his chest heaving as he struggled to keep a fraction of control over himself. He licked his lips as he stared at hers and then buried his fingers into her hair as he smashed his mouth back against hers. She instantly responded, her lips pressing hard against his and her tongue fighting him. He could

taste her desperation, could feel her need, and it was as bad as his own.

Sliding his hand back under her skirt, he revelled in the feeling of her silk stockings again and then tensed his jaw as he brushed his fingers over her curls.

She ran her finger along the waist of his pants, and then turned her palm to face him and slid her hand inside.

He shuddered in delight as he felt her sleek gloves against his length and kissed her harder, driving her against the post and trapping her hand between their bodies. He ground into it, relishing the feeling of the material against his skin and the warmth of her hand.

Releasing her, he used his free hand to undo his pants and pushed his braces off his shoulders.

She squealed as he lifted her up and pinned her against the post with his body. Wrapping her legs around him so she didn't fall, she continued to kiss him.

He moaned into her mouth as he lowered her down onto him, burying himself to the hilt inside her warm core. He stilled for a moment as he adjusted to the delicious sensation of her surrounding him and pulled back to look into her eyes.

She bit her lip and smiled as he moved closer to her again.

He rained kisses down on her neck and jaw as he ground against her, moving into her with long slow strokes and enjoying the change in tempo. Now that their bodies were joined, he wanted to go slow and make the most of their first time together. As much as he desired to act

out his passion and need for her, he wanted to make this something more than that.

He recaptured her mouth as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders, holding him tightly against her as her hips moved against his. He loved how she was writhing against him, her body clenching and unclenching him as she tried to get the most pleasure out of him being inside her.

Thrusting deeper into her, he breathed heavily as she tightened her grip on his shoulders and kissed him languorously. He smiled at her as he pulled back so he could see her face. Her eyes were so wide and full of emotion, and he knew that his looked the same. He felt as though everything that he was feeling was being reflected back at him as he moved inside her.

Jessie felt herself falling hard as she stared deep into his eyes, losing herself in them and the sensations that were filling her up inside. She moved against him as he thrust into her and her muscles tightened around his length, milking him.

She could feel his fingers grasping her backside, could see in his face that it was all becoming too much for him. She moaned as her abdomen began to tense, feeling like a tight ball in her stomach that was begging for release as she kept her eyes locked with his. Moving against him, she closed her eyes and leaned back into the wooden post as he quickened his thrusts. She tensed her thighs, locking her feet around his waist as she bit her lip and dug her fingers into his shoulders. Her whole body felt stiff, all of it hanging by a thread and waiting for the moment that it would snap. She curled her toes in her boots as she squeezed him with her knees, her body tightening until she felt that she would explode.

As he thrust into her one last time, she felt the tense ball in her stomach dissipate and her whole body jerked forwards, convulsing with her orgasm as it swept through her. She breathed heavily against his neck as he continued to slide into her, his movements becoming faster and faster and his breathing rough in her ear as she clung to him.

He buried his face in her neck as he came, spilling himself inside her and breathing hard against her soft skin as he held onto her, his hips slowing as he closed his eyes.

Giving herself a moment to recover, Jessie pressed small kisses against his neck and listened to the thundering of both of their hearts.

She smiled as she pulled back and looked him in the eye, and then slowly drew her to him and kissed him tenderly as he held onto her still.

She frowned as he drew back and then cocked her head to one side as she saw all the emotions playing out in his dark eyes. Raising her hand up, she cupped his cheek and smiled as he pressed a kiss against her palm.

She could see in his eyes that he didn't want to go anywhere, didn't want to go back out into the world yet.

It was fine with her.

She didn't want to go either.

She was in heaven in his arms.

- Chapter Twenty-Two -

The city was bustling, the games were in full swing and Jessie couldn't remember a time she'd seen this many people. She was walking with Colt down the main street, talking intermittently and occasionally sneaking glances at each other. After last night's events, she didn't know how to act around him and he didn't know how to act around her. She felt as though people were going to start staring if she slipped her arm through his as they walked.

He cleared his throat and smiled awkwardly at her as she looked at him. Catching hold of her arm, he led her hastily down a side street and round a corner.

Jessie moaned into his mouth as his lips crushed hers in a bruising kiss. She grasped his upper arms tightly, matching the fervour of his kiss and hoping that no one saw them, and then not caring about what people thought when his hands came to rest on her waist.

There wasn't a crime against kissing the man that you loved.

He moved his body closer to hers, stealing her breath away as he continued to kiss her until the need for air forced her to push him backwards. He smiled at her as he bit his lip, cocking his head to one side as he watched her.

She straightened herself out and coughed quietly as she tried to rein in her feelings and desires. All morning it had been like this. They'd manage to walk and pass idle

conversation for all of a quarter of an hour before one of them had to drag the other out of the public eye and kiss them senseless. She wasn't sure how they were going to get anything done if they continued like this, but she was certain they were going to get a reputation for themselves.

Someone was bound to see, in fact, at least a handful of people already had.

She smiled at Colt as he continued to stare at her, his eyes heavy with desire and passion as they looked into hers.

Tugging him back to her, she let her lips play against his, kissing him at an achingly slow pace that made her stomach heat through and her heart beat loudly against her chest.

Colt groaned as he closed his eyes, losing himself in the feeling of her soft lips and warm mouth. She felt so good against him, all he wanted to do was remain here in this tiny back alley and kiss the entire day away. He hated the tense air between them, wanted to expel it somehow so they would get back to how relaxed things had been before they'd made love. He could still feel the softness of her stockings on the tips of his fingers, could still smell her sweet perfume filling his senses.

He pulled back immediately when he heard footsteps approaching on the wooden walkway that ran along the street and took hold of Jessie's hand. She looked even more beautiful when she was flushed with his kisses, her lips an alluring shade of red and her cheeks rosy.

Leading her out into the street, he tipped his hat to the man and the lady that passed them and then smiled broadly at Jessie as she giggled.

They couldn't keep doing this; they really had to start focusing on their work.

"We better get listed," he said as he looked up at the sun and saw it had crept around to the south, showing him that time was drawing on. Keeping hold of her hand, he kept his senses fixed on it as they walked together through the town. He didn't care who saw them; it was none of their business.

Holding his head up high, he smiled and nodded at anyone who looked at him and then grinned as he saw that Jessie was doing the same. He let his thumb brush against hers as they walked, and his chest tightened as hers mimicked his move.

Pushing the door to the saloon open, he held it there for her as she walked through, and ignored the hush that descended across the room. The ladies all stared at him, the men all stared at Jessie, and they just looked at each other. Taking his money out, he glanced at the list of people who had already made it through to the finals and frowned as he saw the men's names there.

He pointed to the leader's name and then looked up at the man behind the table.

"Samson, you know where he is?"

Jessie looked up at him as she wondered if this was the name of the man responsible for the death of her family. Her hands clenched as she thought about what he'd

taken from her and she held her breath she waited to hear what the man had to say.

"Samson? Believe he and his boys have gone out of town until the game," the tall slim man answered as he adjusted the twin black bands around his shirtsleeves and then pushed his glasses up his nose.

"Which way?" Colt asked as he weighed up the money he was holding.

"North." The man nodded in the direction and then looked down at Colt's hands. "You want in?"

Colt nodded. "When's the last qualifier?"

"Tomorrow. Few good men are playing too."

She slammed her money down on the table. "Now a good woman is playing, unless you boys have a problem with that."

The man eyed the money and smiled as she slid it across the table to him. "I've got money on you to win already. All the boys are itching to be playing you."

Colt frowned as he glared at the man and then sidled a little closer to Jessie. Throwing his money down on the table, his eyes remained locked with the man's.

"Write us down then; Colt Tucker and the Queen of Hearts." He took hold of Jessie's hand and started towards the door with her.

When they made it back out into the street, Jessie stopped dead and frowned up at him.

"Why didn't you tell him my name was Jessie Hayden?" She gave him a curious look.

Colt took his hat off and ran his fingers over his hair as he thought about why he'd done it. He still wasn't sure that he wanted her competing in this game, but it wasn't up to him to make that decision for her. She wanted to play, and he wasn't going to stand in her way. He knew her well enough not to be so foolish; if she felt he was trying to run her life, she'd give him hell like she did the time he'd threatened the drunkard with his rifle.

"The men will see that register, and they'll know the name Hayden," he explained as he rolled a cigarette.

As they started to walk again, Jessie went over everything he'd said to the man. He'd mentioned a name, someone he was looking for; was it the man that she was looking for, too?

Her eyes followed Colt's hands as he raised the match up to light his cigarette and then watched his mouth as he exhaled the smoke.

"This man you're looking for, Samson, is it...?" she trailed off as he looked down at her and nodded.

It was him. She didn't know how to feel or what to say. She looked at Colt.

He took hold of her hand and wrapped it around his arm as he walked with her. He took long slow drags on his cigarette as he directed them back towards the hotel.

"The leader is Samson. Butler is the fair one, and Washington the other dark haired man. They probably have a place out this way. I passed through here shortly

after I started tracking them when they burnt my ranch.”

She frowned as she stared distantly at the floor. Colt had passed through this very city all those years ago, and so soon after they had destroyed his home. Did that mean that they were close to his home? A week’s ride in any direction would change the landscape dramatically. The desert was giving way all around them. There were more trees now and, in the distance, she’d seen the making of hills, dark against the sky.

She wanted to ask him if his land was far from here, but couldn’t bring herself to dredge up the hurt associated with it. She didn’t want to cause him pain, not when everything between them felt so good right now.

Placing her other hand over the one that was resting on his arm, she moved closer to him and smiled as he looked down at her with such warmth in his eyes that she could see all his feelings for her.

“What’s the plan?” she asked as the hotel came into view.

“We ride out, see where they’ve gone. Not many people are leaving town right now and the weather has been still, so there’s a high chance of finding a good trail.” He let his arm drop to his side and held the door open for her as she walked into the building. “Get changed and meet me at the stable. I’ll get provisions in case we have to spend the night out in the open.”

She nodded and went up to her room, leaving Colt to go to his.

Colt rode in silence, keeping his eyes fixed on the trail they'd been following for the past few hours. There was still no sign of the men, and they were beginning to lose light as the sun finally disappeared over the horizon. He moved half his attention to searching out a suitable resting place for the night while still following the hoof prints in the sand.

She followed him as he veered off onto a small track that seemed to lead down into a valley.

"We stopping?" she asked as she came up beside him and looked at his face in the fading light.

He nodded. "Thought it best to stop now while we can still see."

Reaching the bottom of the incline, he listened hard, searching the silence for a sign of water. When a distant trickling met his ears, he smiled. Following the sound, he directed Spirit down another steep incline and finally came to a halt next to the narrow stream. Getting down from Spirit's back, he let her find her own way to the stream as he looked up at the top of the hill where it towered a few metres above them.

"Looks like a good spot," she remarked.

He took in the scene. There was water, a few trees for cover, and a lot of scrub surrounding them that would make good firewood. The night looked as though it was going to be clear which meant the trail would still be there in the morning for them to follow.

Jessie dismounted Ranger, led him over to the water, and started picking up dry twigs and tinder.

He watched her while he cleared a patch in the dirt, making sure that there was nothing for a good distance around where the fire would be. He smiled at her as she stacked the sticks up in the centre of his clearing and then went off to find some more wood. Catching hold of Spirit's and Ranger's reins, he led them over to a nearby tree and tied them up for the night. He took down the blanket he had packed and laid it out on the ground.

Settling down, he took a match out of his pack and lit it, allowing it to burn for a few seconds before using it to light the tinder.

When Jessie reappeared, she placed more dry wood down onto the fire and then sat down next to him.

He could feel her watching him as he went about preparing some food. He looked at her out of the corner of his eye and saw she'd closed her eyes. He couldn't blame her for wanting to doze off. The ride had been long and hot, and all he wanted to do was sleep now.

~

Colt took his gun down and placed it beside the blanket as Jessie finished her food. He looked back at Ranger and her rifle where it was holstered in the saddle and then went to retrieve it.

Her eyes widened as he reappeared with her gun and cocked it, looking down the sight at a dead tree across the river. Picking up an empty can, he carried it with him as he went to the tree and then balanced it on a branch.

She frowned in curiosity as he walked back to her and held the gun out.

"Can you use this?" He looked at the rifle and then at her. The target he'd set up was barely twenty metres away, but the darkness would make it harder for her. He could just about see the can where it was resting in the dead tree's pale branches and glimmering in the moonlight. If she could hit it, or even come close to hitting it, he'd be reassured.

She took hold of the gun as she stood up, rising to the challenge.

Looking down the sight, she rolled her shoulders and carefully lined up her shot. She squeezed the trigger and the noise of the gunshot echoed around the wasteland.

He heard her reloading the rifle as he wandered across the stream to retrieve the can.

He stared at it as he picked it up and held it in his hand. Turning it towards the moonlight, he could see the bullet had hit the can dead centre. He smiled with amazement at his girl as he looked back at her.

Walking back towards her, he tossed her the can when he was close enough and she grinned when she saw the mark she'd made. He'd asked a difficult thing of her, and she'd passed with flying colours; now all she had to do was retain the same accuracy when the nerves over killing a man were consuming her.

Taking the rifle from her hands, he placed it down beside his and then sat on the blanket with his back against the tree. He patted the material and then raised his brows as she chose to sit between his legs rather than beside him.

Jessie leaned her back against his chest as his strong arms encircled her. She stared at the fire, enjoying the warmth that both it and the sensation of being held by Colt gave her.

She smiled as she thought about how good it had felt to hit the can, especially when Colt had looked so impressed with her skill. He shouldn't have doubted her. She'd spent long lazy days on the ranch learning from her brother how to fire a rifle accurately.

Looking up at the deep blue sky, she could just about make out the stars through the firelight.

A frown knit her brows as she thought about the last time she'd sat with Colt looking at the stars. It had been such a perfect evening, and had felt like the start of something new and wonderful. Little had she known what would happen the next day. Colt had said that he'd wanted to tell her what had happened to his ranch all those years ago, and she knew in her heart that if he had then her family would still be alive today.

No, it was wrong of her to think like that.

Her family may have been alive if Colt had told her. There was no definite answer to it. If he had explained about her brother, she probably wouldn't have believed him, even after their evening together. Not even her feelings for him would've swayed her to believe what he was saying about Charlie. She felt wretched inside every time she thought about how she'd felt when she'd realised that if it hadn't been for Colt that day she would have been dead. She'd been so glad that she was alive, so happy, and relieved. It was terrible of her to feel that way, glad that she was alive when her family was dead,

when they had paid the ultimate price for her brother's mistakes.

She stared unseeingly at the fire as she sighed and then felt Colt's arms tighten around her, his fingers gently caressing her arms as though he could sense her thoughts and her feelings.

She didn't want to feel like this, didn't want her thoughts to weigh down on her and force her into silence. She wanted to push away from them and leave those times behind her, but they'd left an indelible mark on her heart and the long months alone hadn't healed her at all.

Leaning into Colt, she placed her hand over his. Her eyes followed the flames as they danced up into the night, leaping and moving in time with the gentle breeze. All she could see was the ranch burning. Whenever she looked into a fire, she heard Jonah's petrified screams, and her heart ached with the recollection of finding her family murdered, their eyes staring blankly into infinity.

Dashing away the tear that coursed down her cheek, she took a deep breath and reined in her feelings, forcing them back down inside her.

"You left," she said in a quiet voice that was barely a whisper.

Colt held her a little tighter as he closed his eyes. Parting from her had been the hardest thing in the world, but he'd had no choice. He should have stayed with her like he'd wanted to, should have made her see the truth behind what had happened and why, and he should have been the one to protect her and comfort her.

Resting his chin on her shoulder, he stared into the fire and sighed along with her.

"I didn't want to, darling, but I had to. I had to track the men before they got too far. It was something that I had to do," he whispered the words into the shell of her ear, fearing raising his voice and breaking the intimacy between them.

"I know," she said and he saw tears filling her eyes again.

"I'm sorry I didn't stay with you like I should have."

She leaned into him, her grip on his arm tightening as she sniffed back her tears.

"I stopped by the Crawford's..." he trailed off as she turned her head, resting her forehead against his jaw. Bringing his hand up, he brushed the tears from her cheek and looked distantly at the fire.

"I got them to settle my affairs. They sold my cattle, saw to it the horses got stabled." She sighed.

"Did you sell your land?" He continued to stroke her cheek as he closed his eyes and listened to her soft breathing.

"No," she said with a little shake of her head.

"Are you going to rebuild it?" He remembered the time she'd asked him the same thing about his ranch and how upset she'd looked when he'd told her that he might one day. He'd realised in that moment that there was more to her feelings than she let show on the surface, and he'd had second thoughts about rebuilding when he saw the hurt in her eyes.

"Once this is over, I'm going back." She looked at the fire.

Her brows knit into a frown and it was clear she was thinking about the ranch. He knew that she'd rebuild it. There was no way that she wouldn't, even if she didn't win the game. He'd seen how determined she could be once she set her mind to something, and this was something she wasn't going to let go of. She'd find the money somehow. Of that, he was sure. He'd give it to her in a heartbeat.

"If you ever need anything," he said as he drew her closer to him, feeling the rise and fall of her stomach against his arm as she nestled close, "any money or help..."

Jessie pulled back and smiled up into his eyes as he looked down at her. She didn't know what to say. The offer had touched her deep inside but she couldn't bring herself to answer him. Craning her neck, she let her lips play against his in a thank you.

She knew now that he hadn't wanted to leave her. She hadn't given him much choice in the matter and he had done the right thing in following the men. She only wished that he'd waited a few days before starting out so she could have gone with him.

She felt a little better as she focused on the feeling of being in his arms, the warmth of his skin and how close he was to her.

Curling up in his arms, she rested her head against her chest and closed her eyes, listening to his breathing and letting it lull her to sleep.

Tomorrow she'd see the men she had come to kill and would face her biggest card challenge.

But right now, she didn't care; she just wanted to make the most of being with Colt.

- Chapter Twenty-Three -

The incline down into the valley was sharp, the richly coloured rock rising high above them as they rode through the twists and turns. Jessie had never seen anything so beautiful. The rocks were sweeping curves that dipped and peaked, banded with different shades of orange and yellow. The canyon floor was fiery sand, higher at the sides where it rose to meet the rock.

She got the feeling that Colt knew this place. His eyes remained fixed on their path, showing no sign of stirred emotions. They were cold and clinical, his brows knit and his lips compressed as he focused on tracking the men.

She let her eyes wander their own path as she led Ranger around another bend and wondered what force on earth had made such a deep impact on the sandstone.

Patting her horse's neck as he snorted, she muttered a few words to him, agreeing that she didn't think much of all the dust and sand either. It got in her eyes and her mouth, the breeze tossing it up high into the air. On the open wasteland, the wind was sweeping the sand in droves and it reminded her of how the rain used to bend to the wind back at the ranch.

She could hear the wind as it cut through the rocks, whistling and moaning. Riding a little closer to Colt, she smiled as he looked at her briefly and then concentrated on the trail again.

He'd held her close all night, never once relinquishing his grip on her. She hadn't complained. She felt safe when she was in his arms, her head resting against his chest and her leg hooked over his. She'd had trouble sleeping out in the open in the past, but when she was with him, she felt as though nothing could hurt her, and slept peacefully.

As they finally came out of the canyon, Colt held his hand up, motioning her to stop, and she pulled back on Ranger's reins.

"What is it?" she asked as she squinted into the distance at the spiral of smoke that was cutting through the early morning air.

"Samson," Colt said in a cold tone as he looked around for somewhere that would give them shelter. His eyes came to rest on a ridge above where the smoke was and he started in its direction.

He knew this land, had tracked Samson and his boys through here before. He'd lost them shortly afterwards and had decided to head back to the city and find out more about the name of Hayden and their ranch. Little had he known that his search would end so much differently from how he'd expected. He'd been ready to make the Hayden's explain why three men had burnt down his ranch, but had wound up working for them instead. The moment he'd seen Jessie it had been over without him knowing it. She'd crept into his head and his heart the second she'd revealed herself, and from that point onwards, he'd had to find out more about her and why she was so cold. He hadn't even realised that he had feelings for her; he was so blinded by wanting to discover the story behind her brother, and her.

She seemed so different now. She was so much sweeter than she had been when he'd first met her. It was like he'd unlocked something in her the day he'd trapped her in the pool and now she was free again.

Moving closer to her, he let his eyes come to rest on her lips and traced the fine line of her nose up to her eyes. She was looking at him, her brown eyes smiling as she clearly tried to make out what had gotten into him this morning.

He couldn't help it.

It was so hard to keep his eyes off her and his concentration on the trail. He had to literally blank out her presence completely in order to focus.

If he didn't, he found himself staring at her like he was right now.

Riding along the little path that wound its way up to the top of the ridge, he was glad that it forced her to ride behind him. He needed to focus on what he was doing, not on how she was looking; otherwise, he'd end up giving their position away to the men.

Coming to the top of the ridge, he dismounted and led Spirit over to a rocky outcrop. Tethering her to a tree there, he waited for Jessie to do the same with Ranger and then crept low along the ground to a set of rocks near the edge of the slope.

Lying down on the dusty floor, he kept a tight hold of his rifle as he looked down into the valley below. It was a good twenty metre drop to the ground and at least another thirty metres to where the men were sitting around the small fire.

“Colt?” she whispered across at him.

He kept her eyes locked on the distant men. They were packing their things away.

“What?” he replied as he shuffled into a more comfortable position and scanned the landscape.

“We going to do this now?” she said and then raised her brows into a questioning look as his eyes moved to rest on her.

He shook his head in the negative and saw her frown. The men were mounting their horses and there was no way they could ambush them now. The wasteland was so open that he couldn’t see where they were going, and they couldn’t follow them without being seen. Samson and his boys had to be back in town by tomorrow for the game; he couldn’t fathom why there were out in the scrub, or where they were going. There was a canyon just a few miles north of where they were. He’d never been out that far, but there could be a place on the other side of it.

They didn’t have time to find out now. He watched them as they rode away, following their progress. Right now, he and Jessie needed to get back to town and get qualified for the game tomorrow.

He turned to face Jessie and found her eyes tracking the men as they got further and further away. She glared at him as he went to get up.

“What’s wrong?” he said as he saw the anger in her eyes.

“Why?”

He knew exactly what she was asking and sighed as he lay back down again. "We can't follow them without them seeing us, darling. They aren't going anywhere. They'll be in town tomorrow and we'll settle this then."

She held his gaze for a minute longer and then relented.

"How long until the game?" she asked.

He looked up at the position of the sun and tried to calculate what time it was.

"Enough time to ride back."

He stood and offered his hand to her. His stomach flipped as she placed hers into it and held onto him tightly as she got up off the dirt. His eyes followed the sweeping motion of her hands as she brushed the dust off her front and he couldn't help swallowing noisily as he remembered the way she'd run those same hands over his chest the other night.

Walking over to Spirit, he untied her and then pulled himself up onto the saddle.

He looked down at Jessie as she mounted Ranger and then smiled across at her.

"Time to get back and get you changed. Don't want the Queen of Hearts showing up without that fine green dress of hers."

Jessie averted her eyes as she recalled what had happened last time she'd worn the dress and then found the confidence to raise them to meet his as he turned his horse around and moved close to her. Leaning across, she kissed him slowly, letting her tongue explore his mouth as she closed her eyes.

She wondered if the dress would have the same effect on him tonight.

Deep inside she hoped that it did.

~

She stared down into the dark street below her window, listening to the rowdy shouting of the men in the saloon opposite and the occasional gunfire that rang through the night. She brushed her dark hair methodically, giving it long strokes as she focused more on it than the outside world. She sighed and then smiled as she felt the relief that came with winning her way through to the finals.

It hadn't been easy, somehow she'd been matched up against the hardest contestants, or at least it felt that way. Colt had breezed through his games, thankfully never coming up against her as she realised now that she was watching him play in person that she was no match for him. If anyone would be able to beat the men they were after, it was him. She was just lucky she'd scraped through her games and came out the victor.

It might have had something to do with her pretty smiles disarming the men she was playing.

Colt had given her several angry looks over the course of the evening and each one of them had followed her smiling at another man. She liked how jealous he got, as though he really believed that she had eyes for a man other than him.

She shook her head over how ridiculous a notion that was and then put her brush down beside the bed. Keeping one eye on the street as several men fell out of

a saloon and into it and began to fight, she mused over her evening.

After she'd made it through to the finals, Colt had insisted on celebrating with a drink. She'd foolishly agreed, and the minute the whisky had hit the back of her throat she'd been coughing and spluttering. The whole of the saloon had gone quiet as people stared at her where Colt was patting her hard on the back while she grasped at her throat. He'd been smiling all the time, as though he was thoroughly amused by her reaction to the alcohol, as though he'd known it would happen.

She still swore he'd done it on purpose because she'd smiled at those men.

As gunfire broke out in the street below, her heart leapt into her throat and she ducked behind the safety of the wall, peering around it at the fight. Feeling suddenly in danger, she decided that she didn't want to remain in a room where she didn't feel safe and immediately walked to the door.

Grabbing one of her pistols, she carried it with her as she stepped out into the hall and locked the door.

She smiled and hid the gun behind her back as a man and a lady walked past, and then waited for them to disappear before heading to Colt's door. She silently hoped that no one else would see her as she knocked and waited for him to answer. Her heart was still pounding loudly in her ears and she jumped every time she heard a shot fired outside.

Colt opened the door and rubbed his hair sleepily as he looked at the person responsible for disturbing his sleep.

“What’s wrong, darling?” he asked her as she stood in the hall with a gun. At least she wasn’t pointing it at him this time.

Jessie hesitated and then raised her eyes to his. “Can I come in?”

He heard a shot outside and nodded, seeing in her eyes that she was frightened. Holding the door open, he waited for her to pass him before closing it and locking it again. He ran his hand down his face as he tried to wake himself up and then looked at her where she was standing in the middle of the room as though she didn’t know what to do with herself.

He smiled.

He had dozed off when he’d come in, barely awake enough to remove his boots before flopping down onto the bed and closing his eyes. As his brain slowly began to wake up again, he realised that she hadn’t just come here to see him for a while; she’d come to sleep with him.

She fidgeted with her gun.

“You can put that down now.” He nodded towards the weapon and then gave her another smile as she looked at it as though she’d forgotten she was carrying it.

She walked over to the dressing table and placed it down beside his gun belt. She stood motionless, her eyes fixed on the pistol and her fingers still touching it. She looked as though she was thinking hard, and he knew what was on her mind. He waited in silence. He wasn’t going to offer her a place to stay; he wanted her to ask him.

She swallowed hard, glanced over her shoulder at the bed, and then back at him.

“Can I...?” she said, her eyes and voice betraying her nerves.

He nodded. She gave him a look of thanks and then turned her back on him. His eyes followed her every move as she slowly removed her green dress, keeping her back to him all the while. She brought her foot up to rest on the chair as she undid her boots and removed them each in turn. He couldn’t help cocking his head to one side as she rolled her stockings down off her legs and then slid under the bed covers.

He smiled to himself as she shimmied out of her underclothes, and wondered why she hadn’t done it before getting into bed. She was going to be lying naked next to him all night long, but she couldn’t bring herself to strip off completely in front of him. When she gave him a shy look, he removed his shirt and his pants, stripping himself off before slipping under the covers beside her.

She lay on her back and stared up at the ceiling as she held the covers up around her shoulders.

He brought his head closer to hers and tried to see the same spot on the ceiling that she was staring at. It must have been fascinating, because she couldn’t take her eyes off it. He smiled as he ran his fingers against her side and she breathed in sharply.

Moving back across to his side of the bed, he gave her a little time to get accustomed to lying beside him and put one arm behind his head as he listened to the gun fight outside.

"I feel a bit safer now," she whispered without taking her eyes off the dirty ceiling.

He held his arm out to one side, inviting her to come closer. "You'll feel a lot safer if you come over here."

Jessie let her head roll to one side and looked at him where he was laying with his chest exposed and his arm waiting to wrap around her and hold her close to him. Her stomach wouldn't settle, and every time his foot brushed against hers under the covers, it flipped and jiggled. She swallowed her nerves.

Shuffling across the bed, she curled up beside him, resting her head against his smooth chest and placing her palm against it. Her knee hooked over his leg and her stomach pressed into his side. She listened to the steady beating of his heart while her fingers ran lightly over his chest.

He pressed a kiss to her hair. She relished the feeling of his warm body against hers. When he sighed, she wondered what he was thinking. She glanced up at him and saw he was staring distantly at the ceiling as he gently caressed her arm and held her close to him.

"Darling?" he whispered.

She smiled.

"Colt?" She kept her tone as hushed and intimate as his, not wanting to disturb the comfortable peace they were sharing. She felt as though she wasn't just wrapped up in his arms; they were wrapped in a safe cocoon of blankets and night, and there was only them and nothing else in the world.

"You remember when we watched the stars after the dance?" His voice trembled the tiniest amount.

How could she forget? Every time she saw the night sky, she was reminded of sitting with him on the ridge overlooking the ranch and spilling her past; she was reminded of the feeling of warmth that had spread through her when he'd slipped his hand quietly into hers and held it.

"Of course," she said and felt him hesitate. She listened to his heart as it began to accelerate, hammering out a rhythm against her ear that spoke of nerves. She moved so she could see his face. "Why?"

He looked deep into her eyes and held her gaze for a few seconds.

"That night made me realise something," he said as he ran his fingers over her hair and smoothed a loose strand back into place, "it made me see that I'm...in love with you."

Her lips instantly broke into a wide smile as happiness filled her up inside. She felt stunned by hearing him say the words that she'd kept locked inside for so long, but overwhelmed with joy that she could finally tell him, now that she knew for sure how he felt.

"I can't remember when I fell in love with you...it's been coming on for so long now." She paused, resting her hands against his chest as she rolled onto her front and brought her lips close to his. "I love you."

She closed her eyes the second their lips met. His words rang in her head as he gathered her closer against him. He kissed her slowly, letting his lips brush against hers.

She savoured the moment, putting each feeling and sensation to memory so she could remember it in the years to come.

She smiled against his mouth as he rolled her over onto her back, his hands grasping her tightly and his body pressing into hers.

Breaking the kiss, she looked up into his eyes as they smiled at her, and let her feelings come to the surface for him to see.

"I love you, darling Jessie," he breathed as he stared down at her.

As he pressed another long kiss to her lips, Jessie forgot all about what the tomorrow held for them, bypassing it completely as though it was a molehill that they would easily step over in order to get to the next day.

By the dawn of that day, they would have put all their pain behind them. It would be the start of a new year, and a new life. She would begin the long journey home, and in her heart, she hoped that she wouldn't be alone.

All she had to do was ask him to come with her and she knew that he would say yes.

When tomorrow was over, they could start their new life.

Together.

- Chapter Twenty-Four -

The room was noisy; men jostled each other while drinking at the bar or playing at the tables, and women swept around the room like brightly coloured birds of paradise, their ruche barely hiding their tainted goods. Smoke hung heavy in the air, a visible line of cloud that floated a few foot off the ceiling. He could barely hear over the din of voices and badly played piano; the woman warbling on the stage only added to his headache and his increasingly bad mood.

He wasn't losing; he was sweeping through the games like a wild fire. The thing that was making his head pound with anger was the way the men were all leering at his girl, and the way she smiled right back at them.

He tapped his gathered cards against the table as he smoked and waited for the men in his game to make a move. This was the last one he needed to get through in order to make it to the final. Three other tables had already declared their winners, leaving only his and Jessie's table to conclude. She was playing against the sandy haired Butler, having already knocked Washington out in a previous game.

She was bearing up well. Even the way Butler was smiling suggestively at her didn't make a dent in her façade, but he could see that just below the surface it was a whole different matter. She could look as still as a mill pond to everyone else, but she couldn't hide her feelings from him. The moment he looked into her eyes, he could see the hurt and the anger, and it was all directed at Butler.

He smiled at her as she glanced across at him, letting her own smile momentarily flutter across her lips before concentrating on the game again.

Taking the hint as his fellow players coughed and muttered words under their breath that were aimed at him, he dragged his attention away from her and spread his hand out to look at it.

He sighed, frowning as he stared at the cards as though all was lost.

Laying his hand down, he held the gaze of every man as they saw what he had.

Full house.

"You cheatin' son of—" the man opposite him started as he rose to his feet, going for his gun, but he didn't get a chance to finish.

Colt looked down at his gun where it was still smoking and then watched the man fall to the floor, his hand still grasping his holster. The room went silent for a split second, everyone freezing to the spot and turning to see what the commotion was, and then carried on as though nothing had happened. He tipped his hat to the other men he'd outplayed and then put his pistol back into its place by his side.

Looking across at Jessie, he found her eyes on him. They were wide with concern and he gave her a slight smile to tell her that he was fine and that she should focus on her game, not him.

He walked over to the bar as the dealer declared him the winner and ordered a shot. Knocking it back to steel his

nerves, he let one foot come to rest on the dented brass pole that ran along the bottom of the wooden bar. He leaned against the counter as he ordered another drink and then let his attention move to Jessie.

It was no wonder she had made it so far; not only was she good at poker, but she had the advantage of being able to disarm every man present with her sweet cherry lips. All she had to do was flash them a smile and they forgot what day of the week it was.

He wasn't at all surprised that they had donned her the Queen of Hearts. There wasn't a man present tonight that hadn't heard of her and her reputation as a mean player and a prized beauty. Even Samson and his boys seemed to know who she was, but they didn't know at the same time. They didn't know that this girl who was outplaying them was the same girl whose family they had murdered. They knew him though, and even though it was possible that they didn't know who he was or what they had done to him, he couldn't risk going to Jessie and making them recognise her. If he showed any sign of knowing her intimately, there was a chance they would realise that she was the same girl they had seen with him that day in town.

As much as he wanted to lay claim to her and show every man in the room that she was spoken for, he just couldn't risk it.

She looked so much different to how she had back then, but at the same time, she looked the same to him. She had been beautiful back then, had always had the same features and the same pretty smile. The only thing that had changed was her clothing. He could still feel the silk stockings against his fingers, and even in the dense smoky air, he could smell her perfume. Last night had

been heaven. To hold her close to him all night, to sleep with her in his arms, it had been impossible to put into words how it had made him feel. Waking this morning next to her and watching her face as she slumbered on, he'd felt as though he was dreaming. Things didn't get this perfect, there weren't any happy endings in the real world, but there she was in his arms, and telling him that she loved him.

He knocked back his second shot, closing his eyes as it slid down his throat, warming him through in an instant.

Opening his eyes, he kept them fixed on her as she laid her hand down on the table and he instinctively put a hand on one of his guns, ready to draw it at a split second's notice if any man showed a sign of making trouble.

They didn't, they all stood and graciously shook her hand, even Butler. He cast a glance at Samson and saw the darker man shake his head in disappointment as Butler walked over to him and Washington.

Easing his hand off his gun, he relaxed against the bar. He let his eyes follow Jessie as she walked over to it and looked as though she didn't know what to do with herself.

Jessie wanted to go to him, wanted to share the joy of winning her way through to the final and beating two of the men responsible for her family's death, and wanted to kiss him, but she couldn't. She had to remain firm and keep her feelings in check for fear of Samson discovering that something was happening between them.

She looked out of the corner of her eye at Colt where he was resting just a few feet from her and smiled as he glanced at her.

She could see in his eyes that he was having as hard a time keeping away from her as she was in resisting him. Deep in her heart she wished that the final was over already so they could put an end to all this. It was hard to bide her time when she was being presented with the perfect opportunity to kill Samson. Colt had killed a man over a game, and she'd seen other deaths throughout the course of the day; all she wanted to do was create an argument in which she could get away with filling Samson full of lead.

Colt wouldn't allow it. He had given her strict orders not to exact her vengeance in the saloon because he wouldn't be able to get to her quickly enough if the other two men decided to open fire on her. He was right, killing Samson openly would lead to his men retaliating, and that would lead to her own death, or Colt's—neither of which she wanted to happen.

She gave him a questioning look as he frowned at something behind her.

Turning sharply, she found herself face to face with Samson. She hesitated for a moment as her heart leapt into her throat and then masked her nerves with a smile.

She looked down at the hand he'd extended and calmly placed hers into it. The moment he bent over to kiss her hand, she clenched her teeth and narrowed her eyes, and then smiled sweetly as he looked up at her.

"You play exceptionally well," Samson drawled in a thick Texan accent.

Her smile remained fixed in place as she retrieved her hand from his. "Why thank you kindly."

"Where'd you learn to play such a rough game?" he asked as he leant against the bar beside her, partially obscuring her view of Colt.

She could just about make out the scowl Colt was wearing and the fact that his hand was resting on his gun.

"You could say it's in my blood." She giggled as she tried to keep her eyes fixed on Samson's but found it difficult. She didn't want to look into his eyes, his murderous steel-grey eyes that seemed void of any emotion no matter how much he was smiling at her.

"I don't believe I know your name..."

She could see that he was fishing for it, wanting her to tell him just who she was, but she wasn't in the mood for taking the bait. "Haven't you heard? I'm the Queen of Hearts."

He gave her a thin-lipped smile that set her teeth on edge. For a moment, he looked as though he wasn't going to accept that as her answer and then he chuckled quietly. She breathed a sigh of relief before smiling again.

"And a fine Queen you are...real Oklahoman beauty." He raised his hand up and brushed the backs of his fingers against her chin as his eyes locked with hers.

Her heart sounded loud in her ears and she moved her chin away from his touch. She didn't like the idea that he knew where she had come from. It rang warning bells in

her head and made her stomach sick with nerves. He couldn't know her; her accent must have given away where she was from.

"You know your accents," she said in the hope that it would draw him into proving her theory for her.

He nodded. "I've travelled all over this land, and I know all kinds of things."

She glanced at Colt and saw he was toying with his empty glass, watching her out of the corner of his eye.

"I'm impressed," she said with another smile and then raised her brows as the dealer announced the game was about to start. "Now if you would excuse me, I think we should take our places."

"Maybe we could share a drink to my victory afterwards?"

She laughed. "I don't mix business with pleasure, Mr. Samson, but you can raise a toast to my victory if you'd like. I'm afraid I have something that I need to attend to once the game is over."

Colt watched Samson frown as Jessie walked away from him. Her eyes moved to rest on him and he let his attention move to her as he pushed off from the bar and followed her to the table.

He seated himself opposite her so he could keep an eye on things and wouldn't draw as much attention to himself when he took to watching her like he so often did. He smiled across at her as another of the finalists held her chair for her. He knew that she'd mention it later; she'd question him about why he hadn't been the

one to show her such chivalry. He already had his answer prepared—he couldn't let Samson think he had any interest in her.

Samson sat down to his right and Jessie's left, and was soon followed by the other Texan that had made it through, and a man from New Mexico.

Jessie cleared her throat, trying to relieve the dryness and nerves that were constricting it. She sat patiently waiting for the dealer to do his job and then picked up her cards, frowning at them as she was faced with her worst hand of the evening.

This was not going to be as easy as she'd thought it might be.

~

Her brows furrowed into a look of disappointment as she realised that she was about to go out of the game. The Texan and the New Mexican had already fallen to the wayside, and she was about to follow, leaving only Colt and Samson to play.

Laying her hand down in an act of folding, she leaned back into her chair and gave Colt a look that said to give Samson hell. She didn't know what kind of hand he had, but it had to have been better than hers.

At least she hoped it was.

Colt glanced at his hand and then at Jessie. He knew that she wanted him to win, but he couldn't bring himself to. He wanted the men to be happy and drunk when they left the bar, and they weren't going to do that if they lost the prize money. They wouldn't be able to

spend much of it in this run down saloon, so he could easily claim the lion's share once they'd dealt with them out on the wasteland like he'd planned. Besides, instinct was telling him that if he won, there was a high chance Samson and his men wouldn't let him live to see the next five seconds, let alone the light of day. He couldn't raise their suspicions. He had to disappoint his girl.

Jessie held her breath as Colt laid his cards down, his hand moving in slow motion as they were revealed to the world. Her eyes widened when she saw the three queens he was holding and she blinked as she looked across at Samson where he was grinning like a Cheshire cat.

Her heart sank as he laid down three kings and a pair of twos. She felt as though the man had snatched victory from her rather than Colt. Her chest ached, her brows furrowing as she heaved a sigh. Looking across the table at Colt, she frowned as she saw him casually lighting a cigarette and not looking at all disappointed by the fact he hadn't won.

She mumbled congratulations to Samson as he stood and then stared at Colt as he shook the man's hand.

She couldn't believe that he'd lost.

What the hell was he playing at?

Her brows knit even tighter as he looked at her; his whole face was a mask of blankness as he smoked.

He was up to something. There was no way he would have lost to Samson unless it had been on purpose.

Standing slowly, she smoothed down her green dress and ran her fingers through her hair. She smiled at the men who had gone out of the game before her and then walked towards the exit.

She walked around the corner of the building and leaned against the wall. After a few minutes, she heard the sound of heavy boots on the wooden walkway and waited for him to appear. When he did, she tugged him close and kissed him fervently, releasing the desire and passion that had been building inside her over the past few hours. Breaking for air, she closed her eyes as he brushed the backs of his fingers against her cheek, his hand holding her waist as he moved close to her.

"What happened?" she whispered as she finally opened her eyes again and looked into his.

"I couldn't win, but it doesn't mean we won't get that money. It's what we're owed," he said, smiling down at her.

Colt could just about make out the features of her face in the near-darkness. The lights of the building opposite barely reached them, but it was still enough for him to see her eyes and the curve of her lips.

The rest he could feel.

His other hand trailed down her neck and over her chest, pausing there briefly before moving to her waist.

"You could've won."

He smiled at what she'd said and nodded. He could've won, but it would have had repercussions.

"Why didn't you?" she asked as he leaned his body closer to hers and she ached inside for him to kiss her again.

"The drunker they are, the better," he breathed into her ear as he kissed her neck and felt her shudder beneath him.

"Is that your plan? Get them drunk and then we kill them?"

He pulled back and sighed. "Get them drunk and then we'll follow them."

"Then kill them." She frowned and let one of her hands come to rest on his chest while the other settled over the gun at his waist.

He placed his hand over hers where it held one of his pistols.

"Then we'll kill them."

~

It was a cold night. The wind that swept across the valley made his flesh turn to goose bumps. He glanced across at Jessie where she was laying beside him on the dirt, ruining her dress and looking down on the campfire below. When she shivered, he frowned in concern. He'd wanted her to change out of her dress, knowing that the night temperatures were going to fall when they were out in the wasteland, but she'd been so insistent. She hadn't wanted to waste time. She'd wanted to follow the men the moment they left the saloon.

Taking off his long coat, he placed it over her and she gave him a wide smile that was full of thanks.

He'd be cold, but he didn't mind. He'd do anything to make sure that she was fine. Returning his attention to the encampment in the valley below them, he squinted into the darkness and tried to make out any sign of movement other than the horses. They'd been watching the camp for a few hours now, waiting for silence to fall and then biding their time until all the men were asleep.

He wasn't up for a fight tonight, he just wanted to get into the camp without being noticed and kill as many of them as possible before the others awoke.

Nodding to Jessie that it was time, he edged away from the slope and then stood up. He checked his two pistols as she did the same with hers, and then made sure his rifle was loaded. Slinging it over his back, he walked over to Spirit and patted her nose, silently telling her that he wouldn't be long. They couldn't risk taking the horses down into the valley; there was a chance they would make a noise and wake the men. They would come back for them once the men were dealt with.

When Jessie looked at him with nerves showing in her eyes, he tried to reassure her without words that everything was going to go fine; they were going to get their revenge and nothing bad was going to happen to either of them. He just wished that he believed it. He was shaking inside, petrified that something would happen that would take her away from him. He couldn't lose her, didn't want to be away from her again, and he knew that she couldn't lose him.

Jessie stroked Ranger's neck and smiled at him as he scratched at the dirt. She didn't want to leave him behind, but Colt was right; the horses were a liability and they needed to move in silence. Slipping his coat on, she took her guns out and looked at Colt. He smiled at

her and cupped her cheek, pressing a brief kiss against her lips that she hoped wouldn't be her last from him.

Following him down the track to the valley, she focused hard on where she was placing her feet, not wanting to make a noise. She could barely see where she was going; it felt more like she was blindly following the vague shape of Colt in front of her. Once they made it down into the valley, the moon would be shining on them again, but this side of the ridge was in shadow.

Keeping a tight hold of her guns, she came up beside Colt as they reached the bottom of the valley and walked towards the camp on the other side of the ridge. She kept her breathing quiet as they walked, her heart pounding hard against her ribs and making her feel sick with her nerves. She kept telling herself that she could do this; she could take the life of a man who had stolen her entire family away from her.

As they rounded the ridge, she saw the small campfire in the distance. She looked across at Colt and felt a little calmer as he smiled at her in the darkness.

He removed both of his guns from their holsters and cocked them. She crept towards the camp beside him, carefully treading over the bracken and dry twigs that littered the ground, and silently hoping that the horses wouldn't stir on seeing them.

Her nerves overwhelmed her as they entered the camp and she found she couldn't breathe. She looked around at Butler and Washington where they were sleeping peacefully next to each other, and then across at Samson where he was laying on the opposite side of the fire by the trees.

She stopped just short of him, her eyes not moving from his face as a sudden calm filled her. Staring down at Samson, the whole world seemed to drift away and she blinked slowly. It all ended here; she could see that now. After tonight, the sun was going to rise on a different day, a day where she could finally move on with her life.

But there was something she had to do first, and the thought of it made her stomach turn and her palms sweat; it made her heart race until she felt it couldn't go any faster and it was going to stop. Her father had always said that she was a strong woman, her little brother had always relied on her to look after him, even her mother and her sister had trusted her to protect them and their home.

She couldn't let them down now.

Raising her eyes to the paling starlit expanse of sky above her, she wondered if they could see her now, and felt in her heart that they could. This was her moment to show them she hadn't failed them, that she was everything they'd believed her to be and more.

She jumped as two shots echoed through the night; the sound was harsh in her ears and made her heart leap into her throat. Turning sharply, she saw Colt standing over Washington and Butler, his back to her and the fire, and his two guns still smoking where they pointed at the bodies.

As she heard a noise, her head swung around and her gun automatically came up to defend herself against the man now watching her. She stared into his eyes. Her brows knitted into a tight frown as she brought her other gun up and aimed it at him.

His eyes widened in fear and it drove her on, making her feel powerful now that he was the one at her mercy.

He held his hands up and his eyes darted away from her to look at his two dead friends before coming back to rest on her.

She could feel Colt watching her from a distance and it was clear that he was going to let her go through with this alone. She knew that he wanted to take Samson's life as much as she did, but he was letting her be the one to do it. She needed to do this so she could get the revenge she was looking for and find the peace she'd been searching for all these months.

"If it's the winnings..." Samson's voice shook as he backed up against the tree behind him and blinked rapidly, his eyes locked on hers.

"It ain't about the money," she said as she stepped towards him, closing the gap and cocking her guns, "it's about my family...you son of a bitch."

The moment she saw a flicker of recognition in his eyes, she unloaded both of her guns, shooting him once in the chest and once between the eyes. She let her hands drop to her sides as they shook with adrenaline, and stared at Samson where he was still looking back at her, his eyes lifeless and glassy.

The moment she dropped her guns, Colt gathered her up into his arms and a sob escaped her lips.

Burying her face into his neck, she cried with relief as she felt the weight lift off her heart and her shoulders. She closed her eyes and held Colt tightly to her, taking deep, calming breaths of his scent as his fingers brushed

lightly over her hair and he mumbled soothing words to her.

She couldn't believe that it was over; it felt like it had all been some strange dream and now she'd awoken to find herself in a land far from home, far from where she wanted to be.

Pulling back from him, she looked up into Colt's eyes and smiled as he wiped her cheeks with the pad of his thumb and smiled back at her.

"Well, that's that then," she said as she looked around the camp, her body still trembling and her stomach finally settling.

"Guess so," he replied.

She bent over and picked up her guns, slipping them into the pockets of the coat she was wearing. Untying the three horses and letting them run off into the wasteland, she didn't look back as she walked away from the camp, leaving the men lying there under the lightening sky. She headed straight for the ridge, wanting nothing more than to get Ranger and get out of there.

Colt watched her go and picked up the saddlebags that contained Samson's winnings. He had no qualms about taking the money; it was what he and Jessie were owed for the damage to their homes and their lives. Walking out of the camp, he followed her at a distance, letting her lead the way up the ridge to where they had tied their horses up.

By the time he reached her, she was already mounted and staring at the distant horizon as it began to warm

with the rising sun. The sky was gradually changing, going from a rich dark blue above them, down through shades of light blue, green and finally orange where it met the earth. The light streaks of cloud that spotted the sky were a dull grey, threaded with veins of pink and orange where the sun caught them.

He looked at Jessie where she sat high up on Ranger's back and then frowned as she started to move off down the slope to the valley without looking at him.

His stomach twisted with nerves as his eyes followed her. Was she leaving him?

"Jessie?" he said in a voice that showed all his worry and she turned to look at him. "Where're you going?"

Her face was blank as she looked at him, her tone matter of fact. "It's a long ride home, and we've a lot of work to do to rebuild it when we get there."

He smiled at the word 'we' and then mounted his horse. He'd been waiting for her to ask him to go with her, not hoping that she would, but knowing in his heart that she was going to. She'd still managed to scare him though by acting as though she was going off without him.

He looked at her where she was waiting patiently for him and smiled. "We best get going then."

Jessie smiled as he rode up beside her, catching hold of Ranger's reins and holding him steady as he leant across and kissed her. She closed her eyes, savouring the feeling of happiness that was washing through every inch of her and then smiled at him as he pulled back. Riding down into the valley, she kept her eyes fixed on the rising sun, watching it creep over the horizon.

It was heralding more than the start of a new day for her.

It was the start of a new life, one she was going to share with the man that she loved.

As they reached the bottom of the valley, she chuckled as he picked up the pace, and she let Ranger break into a trot as Spirit and Colt rode around them. It was nice to have him riding rings around her; it made home feel a lot closer than it really was.

Her smile broadened as she realised that she'd felt at home ever since she'd bumped into Colt again.

She realised that what her mother had always said was actually true.

Riding hard, she galloped alongside Colt, smiling across at him as he raced her back to the town.

Home is where the heart is.

And her heart was with Colt.

Forever.

The End

About the Author:

Felicity Heaton is a great believer in love at first sight and the romantic ideal. Having grown up reading extensively, she developed a deep love of classical literature, ranking *Jane Eyre*, *North & South*, and *Persuasion* amongst her all time favourite reads. The most romantic moment of her life was when her husband got down on bended knee on the steps of *Sacré Coeur*, Paris, at night in front of several hundred spectators and proposed. She was too drunk on love, and subsequently champagne, to care about the audience. All she could see was the man that she loved. A writer of emotion and life, she always strives to touch a chord of familiarity in her readers and give them characters they can love and a read to remember.

To see her other novels, visit:

<http://www.felicityheaton.co.uk>

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