



Outlaw's Daughter

Copyright 2006 By Cia Leah

Ebook ISBN 978-1-58495-638-9

Electronically published in arrangement with the author

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

No portion of this book may be reprinted in whole or in part, by printing, faxing, E-mail, copying electronically or by any other means without permission of the publisher. For more information contact [DiskUs Publishing](http://www.diskuspublishing.com)

<http://www.diskuspublishing.com>

E-mail sales@diskuspublishing.com

DiskUs Publishing
PO Box 43
Albany, IN 47320

*

This is a work of fiction. All names in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to any person living or dead is coincidental.

* * *

OUTLAW'S DAUGHTER
? 2006 By Cia Leah

Chapter One

Jassy's breath caught in her throat upon hearing her father's words. She swung around from the pan of dirty dishes and faced the men at the table. "You can't let Timmy ride with you!"

"Hush, girl, and get back to what you were doing. I'll decide who rides with us. Timmy is old enough to start earning his keep around here."

"Let me take his place, Papa. I can shoot and ride better than most of the men here, including you. Timmy is only fourteen and he's such a bright boy. He should be in school learning things."

Deke Marker stared at his daughter. She reminded him so much of his wife and the life they used to live when they had first married. They had a small ranch where sunshine and joy were the only ingredients to a perfect life. Until outlaws ruined that ideal little scene. Killing his Martha, but not before he watched them rape her repeatedly, helpless to stop them. They had beat him so badly, they had just left him for dead with two babies in the next room crying.

He still remembered the pain, the fight to stay alive and to care for his own. He had buried his wife, then rode into town with the two little ones and told the Sheriff what had happened. The Sheriff hadn't believed him and tried to take him into custody, even though Deke had screamed at him to look at his face, the way he was beaten. Nothing he said convinced the Sheriff that he was telling the

truth. They fought, and Deke grabbed his gun, hit him over the head, and high-tailed it out of there. That day he began the life of an outlaw and now feared by many and hunted by most. He had no choice now to change his ways.

Deke signaled for the men to leave them alone, waiting until the door shut behind them before turning to Jassy. Her white blonde hair hung straight down her back to her tiny waist and her big blue eyes beseeched him to change his mind. She was beautiful and looked so delicate, but he knew whomever fell for that was in deep trouble if they ever touselled with her. She was hard as nails and knew how to fight, to save her own life if need be. He had made sure of that as she was growing up, as both his children did, yet, Timmy was not as spirited as his sister was and quieter. Too quiet to Deke's liking and he was always making up poetry and telling them stories by the fire.

Deke sighed. Jassy, come over here and sit with me."

Jassy moved to the table and sat beside her father. She knew he had a good heart, but also knew he was the most feared outlaw in these parts and he had good reason to be. "Papa, take me instead of Timmy."

"No, daughter. Not this time. It's too dangerous. I promise the men will keep an eye on Timmy. We won't let anything happen to him."

Jassy bit her bottom lip nervously. "He's in town, isn't he? The outlaw that raped and killed Mama?"

Deke's blue eyes turned cold. "Yes, and his son is the Sheriff in town. Quite a good one too from what we've learned. I've had Bart on stake out for over three months now and he came back with a full report late last night. I'm going to

make him pay for what he did to my Martha and for the life that we all must lead now."

"Oh, Papa, let him go. What would we do if something happened to you? I've heard the men talking in camp about Sheriff Thorne Taylor, and he's not one to go up against. They say he is hard as steel on outlaws or anyone who crosses his path on the wrong side of the law."

Deke laughed derisively. "All except for his father. Your Mama's and my savings helped build that big ranch he has outside of town, just like so many other poor folk's money did. He lives the good life and he must pay for what he did. Justice is for everyone."

"So all the months we have been here, hiding out in camp, you have been watching him and waiting."

"Yep, and found out all I need to know. Even his son does not know the dealings his father is in or he turns a blind eye to it if he does."

Jassy sighed heavily. "Let me go, Papa. I have a bad feeling about this."

Deke reached over and gently grasped her chin in his hand. "I will need you here if anything goes wrong. You're smart and can handle yourself. I might need that option open," he said, as the door slammed open. Instantly, Deke was on his feet, gun in hand.

Jassy watched Timmy's face whiten as he stood in the doorway. He hated violence in the worst way. She wished she could give him a better life. "Good morning, little brother," she smiled, pushing up from her chair and going to him.

She hugged him as their father shoved the gun back into its holster that sat low on his hips.

"Timmy, how many times have I told you to announce your entrance!"

Timmy unwrapped himself from Jassy's arms. "Sorry, Papa, but look what I found out in the woods!" He reached inside his shirt and pulled out a bedraggled looking puppy, all light brown with huge dark brown eyes. "Can I keep him?"

Deke's eyes twinkled. "Guess you got him with you. No choice now but to keep him and care for him. Give the pup some warm milk. His mama must have gotten killed or something or she wouldn't have let you get far with him."

Timmy smiled. "I'm naming him Bounce cause when he barks, he bounces!"

Jassy laughed. "Good name. There's milk in the pitcher. You can heat it up in the pan."

Deke motioned Jassy to follow him outside. "We'll be out in the barn when you're done, Timmy. Come out so I can talk with you."

Jassy grinned as she followed her father, hearing Timmy's soothing voice reciting a poem to the puppy about a lost puppy. She shook her head and stepped out onto the small wooden porch her father had built onto the shack they had found here. He had added a room on for each of them, making them a home as best as he could. They had enough chickens to provide them with eggs and a milk cow that gave plenty of milk and made the most delicious butter.

She saw the men over at the small corral, working with the horses. Her father would ride tonight. She tried to shake off the eerie feeling that made her

skin prickle. She just knew something was going to happen, but what, she had no inkling.

Deke led the way to the barn, and shut the doors as soon as Jassy stepped inside behind him. "Come over here," he said, leading the way to a stall at the other end of the barn. He stepped inside and knelt down, moving away the straw.

Jassy watched as he dug about two-foot down with his hands then lifted a dark wood box out. He took a key out of his shirt pocket and slid it inside the lock and lifted the lid. "Papa!"

Deeke stood up and held it out for her inspection. "Just in case something happens to me, Jassy girl. There's enough here for you and your brother to live comfortably on for a long time. To get a nice little place somewhere. He shut the lid, locked it, and put it back, and covered it back up with straw."

Jassy swallowed hard. "Papa, I don't want the money. I just want you to be with us forever."

Deke rose wearily to his feet. "I know Jassy, but the life we lead is dangerous. Always has been and always will be. There's no future here, but I've been saving this for a long time for you and your brother just in case something happens. It's time you knew it was here. The men who ride with me will go their separate ways if anything happens to me. You and Timmy would be left to fend for yourselves. Don't think about where it came from, girl, just use it."

Jassy nodded, hugged him tight, and left the barn. No more words needed saying. They both knew the chances of the life they led.

Thorne Taylor watched as his father crossed the street with his business partners and entered the building with his father's name inscribed on a huge sign in front of it. It was his father's meeting house and had been built when Thorne was a little boy. Even now, he was not allowed to attend those meetings, his father explaining he wanted Thorne to do what he did best and that was being a lawman. Said he might need him sometime. Thorne grinned at that. His father was the most upstanding citizen around. Daniel Clay Taylor was very respectable.

Dusk was just settling in and he knew the town would become a mass of drunken cowboys and young boys making mischief. Saturday nights were the liveliest and he loved the feel of expectancy in the air. He felt tonight was going to be a busy one.

Thorne stepped into his office, made a few notes, then started his rounds just as darkness descended. He checked all the business's first, making sure the doors were locked tight. Many times, the owners were so busy during the day that by the time they retired for the evening, they forgot to lock up.

As he walked up the sidewalk towards the saloon, he saw a bunch of men ride up, dismount, and go inside. He'd saw them several times before. They'd never given him any trouble, but he wondered where they came from. Tonight they had a younger boy with them.

He followed them inside and stepped up to the bar. "Hi Charlie, how's it going tonight?" he asked the bartender, grinning as Charlie wiped the sweat from his bald head with a kerchief.

"Busy. Good for business, but hard on these old bones. Thankful I got the rooms upstairs full of gals and if they don't get down here shortly, gonna fire every one of their worthless souls!"

Thorne laughed. "You wouldn't do that, Charlie. You're like an old mother hen to those girls. By the way, do you know who those men are over in the far corner?"

Charlie wiped the already spotless, scarred bar top and shook his head. Seen them around town once in a while and been in here several times, but don't know nothing about them. Why?"

"Thorne frowned. "Just wondering. I know about everyone around these parts. No new families have moved in that I know of. Just wondering what they're doing here and where they're staying."

"They've never given me any trouble. Always polite to the girls and tip them well. No complaints."

"Well, I guess I better go finish checking out the town. Be back when things get lively in here." He turned, just as another man came in the door and went to join the men he had been talking about." He watched for a second, seeing the oldest man glance at him quickly, then turn his attention to the young boy next to him. He didn't know why their presence bothered him so much, but he just had a gut feeling. He strode to the door and slipped outside. Maybe his job was finally getting to him. He couldn't suspect people that hadn't caused trouble of going to make some. Nothing wrong with strangers showing up once

in a while. They were probably on the move and just camping out somewhere outside of town until they moved on.

Jassy played with the puppy until it curled up in a ball under the table and fell sound asleep. She got up from the chair and paced around the room. It was quiet, too quiet without the other's here and she hated the waiting. She knew nothing of their plans, except little bits and pieces she had heard throughout the day. Even her attempt at getting information from Timmy had failed. He remained tight-lipped and kept changing the subject. Finally, her little brother had resorted to reciting poems of love for her to hear, and she had laughingly covered her ears and ran. She had heard his laughter behind her as she fled, knowing full well, she thought that stuff a bunch of nonsense.

Love, she thought, was just something mythical between a man and woman. Not something she would ever feel. She was too down to earth and couldn't imagine even being kissed with passion. Of course, she had been kissed once by one of the men who had joined the outfit. Her father had caught them and the next morning, Steve had been gone. She had smiled because the kiss was like kissing a stone. Cold and uncaring. She didn't like it at all.

The puppy whimpered in his sleep and she stopped pacing to look and make sure it was ok. She ran to her room, got an old wool blanket and covered the puppy up under the table. Maybe it was missing the warmth of its mother. She knew how that felt. The blanket would help.

Jassy moved to the window and stared out. The moon was only a shadow behind gray clouds, scudding along the night sky. It was going to rain. She realized that soon, her father's plans would go into action and again that feeling of unease washed over her.

Making up her mind instantly, Jassy pulled her gun from the holster around her waist, checked the ammunition, slammed it back into the holster again, and then grabbed her hat. She swung open the door, remembering the puppy and put down extra food and water for it. If something happened it would be ok until she could get back for it. She shut the door behind her and ran to the barn. There was no time to loose. She had to ride hard to get to town before it started. It wouldn't hurt if her father had someone else on his side looking out for him. Just in case he needed her, she would be there for him and Timmy too.

Daniel Clay Taylor lifted his brandy glass and drank his drink straight down. Life was good, he thought, looking about his opulent surroundings. He leaned back in his stuffed red velvet chair and watched his business associates being entertained by only the best the saloon had to offer, only tonight, the girls were dressed in silk and satin gowns with their hair done proper. They looked the perfect lady-like types.

He had done well in his life. He had a beautiful ranch, an extravagant home, and his son. His thoughts turned to his wife whom had died giving birth to their son. Theirs had never been a love relationship and he didn't miss her at all. His son had been his sole life and the one who meant the world to him. Thorne never

knew his penchant for illegal gains, nor would he. In his son's eyes, he was the perfect, respectable father. That being the case, he never let his son come here. He wouldn't understand what went on here and upstairs. Plus, in the basement he had a gambling room. Many of the town's people owed him big time and they kept their mouths shut and never said a word to Thorne. They knew if they did, they would loose everything in a blink of an eye.

Yes, Daniel thought, as he poured himself more brandy, nothing could dent the life he had built. Nothing at all. He didn't notice the newest member of his team lift the curtain to the front window three times, then let it fall back into place before turning around to slip noiselessly out the back door.

Deke stood behind the building in the shadows as Bart stepped out the door. He got a glimpse of all the finery inside bought with his money and other poor people's that made a living the honest way.

"Bart," he whispered loud enough for him to hear.

"Yeah boss." He walked to where he stood and blended into the shadows.

"Is everything ready?"

"Most of the men are getting ready to leave. Have to get home to their wives. All that will be left in there is Taylor and his three men."

"What about the girls?"

"They're leaving now. Saloon is getting busy. They were just waiting until Thorne went to his office so they could slip out unnoticed."

"You got the combination to the safe?"

"Yeah boss. Right up here," Bart said, tapping his head with his finger. "You and the boys keep them busy and I'll get the money. Plenty of it in there too."

"Pay back time, Bart. I've been waiting for this for a long time," he said, just as a shrill whistle sounded from across the street. It was the signal that all was clear. In five minutes, all his men stood around him, waiting for him to give them the ok. "Let's move!"

Bart was the first one in the door. "Nobody move!" He yelled, as Daniel Clayton jumped up from his chair, reaching for his gun."

Deke pushed his way through his men that had gathered around him. "I wouldn't do that if I were you. It'd be my pleasure to kill you right here and now."

Daniel stared into eyes such an icy blue, that somewhere in his memory, a vague recollection of eyes just like those flashed before him. They held the unmistakable look of hate. A hate so deep that murder wouldn't be enough to avenge what this man had against him. He lowered his hand, and sat back down. "I'm sure we can be reasonable here. How much do you want? I can make you a rich man, every one of you rich men."

Deke laughed. "We'll have your money anyway," he said, moving to take the bottle of brandy from the table. He lifted it to his nose, sniffed, then poured a liberal amount in one of the glasses sitting on a silver tray. He nodded to Bart to get the money, then turned his attention to Daniel again. Slowly, he lifted the glass and downed the drink, then set the glass back down on the table. "Only the best will do, huh, Daniel? In business, in women, in dirty dealings, in stealing."

"Looks like I'm in good company," Daniel said, reaching for the bottle of brandy. He knew if he acted calm, the chances of getting out of this were in his odds. He caught one of his men easing his hand inside his coat. He shook his head. Now wasn't the time. Not when they were outnumbered and one of the gunmen had his weapon aimed straight at his heart.

"Daniel, you don't remember me, do you? Kansas City about nineteen years ago. A small farm. My wife whom you and your men couldn't resist. Children crying in the next room as their mother's screams filled the house and their father being beaten almost to death. "

Daniel frowned. "She must not have been anything special since I don't remember her." He hoped to get the man angry enough to make a mistake.

Deke laughed derisively. "I'm not stupid enough to fall for that trick," he said, as Bart entered the room with three sacks of money.

"Got it all boss, and by now, the Taylor ranch is burnt to the ground. Let's get this one burnt too."

Daniel jumped to his feet. "Damn you! My house! You will pay for this! I swear!"

Deke tipped his hat. "I've paid for years. Now it's your turn." With those words, he motioned for one of his men. Pour the kerosene and light it."

Daniel charged into Deke, knocking him backwards. "I'll kill you with my bare hands!"

"Pour the kerosene! Light it," he yelled, landing a right into Daniel's face, feeling the impact of the man's nose with his knuckles, the crunch of bone and

the warmth of flowing blood. He shoved the man aside and within seconds the place was on fire, and they were out the door.

Timmy stood with the horses, holding them from bolting as his dad and the men came out of the building. Gunshots sounded from behind them. His dad yelled at Bart to get going and meet them at the place they had planned on. To divvy up the money the way he said in case they got separated. Just as the men rode off and Deke stepped into the saddle, a shot rang out from behind them. His father fell to the ground.

"Dad!" He scrambled off his horse and ran to him. "Bart looked up at him. "Get out of here! Go! Now! Go to your sister! She will know what to do!"

"I'm not leaving you, dad!" He pulled his gun and fired as a man stepped through the door of the burning building. The man staggered and fell face forward in the dirt.

Deke felt fire ripping through his gut and knew all was lost. "Get out of here, Tim! Just go! I'll cover you!"

Tim dragged his father further into the alley behind the building and then to the next alley. "I'm not leaving you, Dad!"

Deke moaned and saw stars dance in front of his eyes. "I'm dying, Tim! Go while I can still protect you!"

Tim felt tears slip down his cheeks. He leaned down and kissed his father. "I love you, dad," he said, feeling the clammy coolness of his skin."

"Go, son!" Deke pulled deep within himself and raised up with his gun, trying to focus as Tim ran for his horse. He saw him mount, just as Daniel Taylor

came flailing from the building in flames. The brightness of the man on fire obscured his range of vision focused of his son. He only prayed he had made it. He watched in a feeling of rightness and revenge as Daniel Taylor fell a few feet away from him, the life burnt out of him.

Jassy rode into town, just as townspeople were running towards a burning building. Flames shot high in the air and men scrambled to throw water on the fire. A movement of someone walking on the opposite side of the street caught her attention and her heart stopped beating for a second. The Sheriff had Timmy at gunpoint and was moving with him towards the jail.

She moved her mount slowly into the alley and watched as he pushed Timmy inside. As she rode back out into the street, she paused long enough to see inside the open door. The Sheriff shoved Timmy in a cell and turned the key in the lock.

Kicking her mount, she rode through the people in the street, past the burning building and down a few houses, then steered her mount into an alley and dismounted. Even here, the smell of smoke was thick. Something must have gone terribly wrong and where was papa?

She walked towards where the building was, and almost stumbled over something. A faint grunt issued forth and she bent down, just as flames shot high, lighting the area with an eerie red light. "Papa," she said, kneeling down beside him. "Papa?"

Deke heard her voice from far away. The pain was unbearable but numbness was quickly taking over. He forced his eyes open and saw Jassy staring down at him with tears streaming down her cheeks. "Jassy, girl. It's over. Bart will make sure you get my share. He will return to camp while the others will go elsewhere when I don't show up. Make a life for you and your brother. Is Tim with you? Did he get away?"

Jassy nodded. "He's fine, Papa. Let me get a doctor."

"No time, Jassy love. Just promise me you will take care of each other. Get a home and settle down."

"I promise, Papa," she said, leaning down and hugging him close. She kissed his cheek and felt his last breath slip from him. The end of a life she had known since she was a child was over, but a new one just beginning. She had to think of Timmy and get him out of jail. "Good-bye, Papa."

Jassy willed herself to get up, to mount her horse, and ride up through the alley that led behind the jailhouse. A small window with bars showed bright light inside. She nudged her horse close to the wall. "Timmy?" She whispered. "Timmy?"

Timmy jumped up on the bed and looked out. "Jassy! Papa is..."

"I know. We have to get you out of there. They will hang you."

"Yeah, I know," Timmy said. The Sheriff is sending someone over to watch me while he makes arrangements for his father's burial."

"Then we have to do it now, Timmy."

There's a side door right beside the cell. It looks easy enough to get into. The keys are on the wall. I tried to reach but couldn't."

Jassy dismounted, led her horse to the side and without even thinking about the consequences, pulled her gun, aimed, and fired at the handle. The shot sounded loud but she knew there was enough noise right now that it might not be noticed. She stood back and kicked the door hard twice before it gave way. She ran inside, grabbed the keys and fumbled getting it inserted, but at last, the door swung open and she was hugging Timmy. "Let's get out of here," she said, pushing him in front of her. A noise at the door caught her attention and she turned and aimed. "Stop right there or you're a dead man."

Thorne's hand hovered above his gun. He debated on whether or not to take a chance that she knew how to use the thing, but her stance, the calm steady aim of the gun, and the deadly look in her blazing blue eyes told him she was not joking. "You won't get far," he said, his tone cold and level.

"Get on the horse, little brother," she said, knowing Tim wouldn't have told the Sheriff his name. He could be so tight lipped when it came to things like that. She waited until Tim had left, then motioned with the gun. "Get in the cell, Sheriff. Now."

Thorne felt his temper flare. "Think you can make me? Were you in on the killing of my father too?"

Jassy laughed. "You're father was a mongrel from hell! He and his outlaw friends raped and killed our mother, and left our father for dead many years ago. His wealth is all ill gained by worse than what my father has done tonight in the

name of revenge! You will find his body in the alley. Make sure he gets a descent burial! It's you father's fault this all happened!"

"That's ridiculous! My father was the most respectable man in these parts and has been for years!"

Jassy pulled the trigger back on the gun. "Either get inside or die!"

Thorne had no doubt she would pull the trigger. He moved to the cell and slipped inside." She turned the key in the lock and stepped back, staring at him coldly. "It's a shame, you being a lawman and such, and not know what has been right under your nose all these years. You had a good life, provided with all the best from other people's deaths and their money stolen by your father!" With those words, she ran out, jumped on the horse behind Timmy and rode out of town.

For hours, they rode in circles, a drenching rain began to fall and she shivered from the wet cool drops. "Let's go home now, Timmy. It's raining hard enough to wash away the horse's prints. As Timmy obeyed, she laid her head on her brother's back and let the tears fall. It wasn't over yet. Thorne Taylor would hunt them down. She had seen it in his eyes.

Chapter Two

Thorne maneuvered his horse between the rocks and hills surrounding the area. He felt like he was going in circles. Maybe he was. His whole life seemed to have crumbled around him in the past month. Things he had learned about his father's business practices left no doubt in his mind the girl had been telling the truth. It didn't excuse her from what she or her brother did, but it did enlighten him as to why.

He had been furious when he found out the home he had grown up in had been burned to the ground that night also, but on further investigation into his father's final affairs, had laid to rest the haunting of that. He had sold the ranch and all his father's business holdings and placed the money in the bank, taking only enough to provide for him on his journey of hunting the boy and girl down. He knew their father by a wanted poster hanging in the Sheriff's office. Not that it was much help. He was only known as Outlaw Deke. He had no clue as to the boy and girl's name.

He swiped his arm across his forehead and stared ahead. He remembered the girl so well. He hadn't heard the pain in her voice, but while sitting in the jail cell, he recognized it as her voice played over and over in his mind. She had lost her father as well that night. He had given him a decent burial like she had asked, but only after seeing for his own eyes what his father had been involved in, He put a stone on the grave, reading, *here lies Deke, loving father.*

He reined in his mount at a stream and let it drink. If the man's directions were right, he should be at his destination just about dark fall. An old man had been in the saloon, talking about a young girl living up in the hills all by herself. Thorne had seen the interest on some of the men's faces and joined the man at his table and bought him a drink, quelling the other's interest with a cold stare. The woman the man described fit Deke's daughter's description.

The old man's praise of the girl, whom he called Jassy girl, was as if he'd fallen in love with the young thing. The old man had been thrown from his horse and hurt his ankle. She had found him, taken him in, and cared for him, even giving him money to make sure he would have enough to get where he was going. Thorne had gathered his gear the next morning and set out to find her.

Thorne kept an even pace all afternoon, not stopping to eat. He chewed on jerky for supper and washed it down with cool water from the stream. Daylight was fast dwindling and dusk was beginning to descend. As he topped a rise, the beauty of the sunset made his breath catch in his throat. He always had admired the beauty of Mother Earth. It was clean and pure and never the same.

He continued on his way, and darkness descended in earnest. He would have to stop soon. He didn't know the terrain. As he drew his horse to a halt, a growling from the bushes on his right side made his horse shy. He reined in to control his mount, and peered into the shadows. Didn't sound like a wolf to him, but a dog. He pulled his gun out of the holster just in case. The animal came bounding from the bushes, barking in earnest. Thorne laughed as he controlled his horse, patting his neck to calm him. "Easy boy," he said.

The dog stood his ground and by the moonlight beginning to shed its soft light, Thorne watched in amusement as every time the dog barked, he bounced. He reached inside his shirt pocket and threw the mutt a piece of jerky. The dog inched forward, keeping his eyes on Thorne the whole time. Smelled the jerky, then snatched it and ran back the way it had come.

He kicked his mount and rode after the dog, skirting the trees and bushes, which grew thick here. After a short time, he came to a clearing and there stood the house the old man had described to him. Just as he dismounted, a shot rang out and his hat flew off his head. He jumped for cover behind the nearest rock. "Hey!" He yelled. "That wasn't a smart idea. You could have shot me!"

Jassy grinned, despite the situation. "If I would have wanted to kill you, you wouldn't be talking right now. I'd be getting my shovel to bury you! Who are you? Why are you here?"

Thorne believed she could have shot him dead on the spot. "I came to tell you, I made sure your father got a decent burial!"

"You're the Sheriff?"

Thorne raised his head above the rock to peer at the house. "I'm not the Sheriff anymore! I turned in my badge!"

"I'm not falling for that trick!"

Thorne sighed. "It isn't a trick! Let me come in and talk to you!"

"You're doing fine at that right where you are!"

"You can keep your gun on me, just let me come and talk with you and your brother, then I'll be on my way!"

"My brother isn't here!" Jassy yelled, thankful he was far away and safe. She should have gone too, but felt as if this place were home. Upon returning here the night their father had died, Jassy and Timmy had both fallen into bed emotionally and physically exhausted. If they hadn't been so tired, neither could have slept with the events of that night clear in their head. The next morning, Bart had shown up with their share of the money, and Jassy had packed Timmy's belongings, given him most of the money, just keeping enough for herself to get her by, and sent him away. He hadn't wanted to leave her, but she had made Bart promise to see him safely back east and to make sure he went to school. Bart had no desire to continue being an outlaw without his friend, Deke. He had accepted the job and assured her he would make sure Timmy got the finest schooling available.

"Then let me talk to you!" Thorne yelled, getting very disgusted at having to yell at her from this distance. He pushed himself to his feet, walked over to get his hat, and started approaching the house.

"Stop right there, mister!" Jassy had moved and opened the door wide, aiming straight for his heart.

Thorn saw her silhouetted against the backdrop of light emanating from inside. She was dressed in men's pants; a shirt tucked tightly in the waistband, showing off her tall, svelte figure. Her long, white blonde hair hung well past her hips, straight and silky, and the thought of running it through his fingers assaulted his senses. "I'm coming in, whether you like it or not." He started walking forward, slowly, but with purpose.

Jassy aimed the gun and shot right in front of his foot. He kept coming, a look of fierce determination on his features that she could see in the moonlight. She aimed and fired again, only closer, hoping she didn't cripple the man. She didn't want to kill anyone, but she would never let him take her in.

"Put the gun down!"

"Make me," she shot back, aiming and firing again, grinning when he jumped back a step.

"Dang it, you got the tip of my boot!"

"The next thing I'll be getting is your foot if you don't stay right where you are! You can tell me what it is you have to say from there."

Thorne remained still and stared at her. Would she kill him, or shoot him if he charged at her? Maybe, he thought. He needed to say something that would distract her for a few seconds. "You're beautiful, you know, standing there like that with the light from the lamp accenting your silhouette. You are a very beautiful woman."

Jassy's hand lowered for the briefest seconds at his words, and then she knew her mistake as he came charging towards her. She aimed and missed. "No!" She stepped back and grabbed for the door, but by the time she got it to the hinges to shut it, he tackled her, knocking her backwards onto the floor.

Thorne wasn't prepared for a wildcat. He felt his cheek burn as her nails dug into his face. He grabbed her hands; thankful the gun had been knocked out of her reach upon falling to the floor. "Stop it! I'm not going to hurt you!"

Jassy's breath's escaped in heavy gasps as his weight pinned her to the floor. She instinctively brought up her knee, but found him too quick as he maneuvered both his between hers. "Get off me!"

Thorne levered himself up on his knees, just sitting on her middle hard enough to hold her down, while still pressing her hands against the floor above her head. Her hair was a tangled array of silk about her face and the sides of her. "I'll let you up if you promise to quit fighting me. I just want to talk to you!"

Jassy stared up into Thorne's dark brown eyes. He had high cheekbones, a day's growth of beard, and as her eyes slipped to his lips, her stomach flip-flopped. She stared at them, unable to move her gaze away, wondering what they looked like when he was smiling. Right now they were held taut, and she wondered what it would be like to be kissed by him. She knew without a doubt that it would affect her more than Steve's had.

Thorne loosened his hold on Jassy's hands as she quieted. He watched the way her ice blue eyes changed to a deeper warm color as she inspected his face. Now her gaze was locked on his lips, and he slowly smiled, hearing her quick intake of breath. "I won't hurt you," he said softly, still smiling, as her gaze slid back to lock with his.

"I won't let you anyway. Now get off me!"

"Promise to be good?"

Jassy chewed on her bottom lip. "Yes."

Thorne shook his head and laughed heartily as he rose to his feet and pulled her up beside him. He still held onto her hand. "Somehow, I doubt that

very much. Now if you would be kind enough to offer your generous hospitality, I am hungry and could use a strong cup of coffee."

Jassy wrenched her hand from his, and lightning quick, went for her gun lying on the floor. Just as her fingers touched the cold steel, he kicked it out from under her hand, sending it sliding across the floor. "She turned and glared at him. "If you aren't going to hurt me or try to take me in, then why can't I have my gun?"

Thorne walked across the room, picked up the gun, and emptied the chamber. He then set it on the table. "I told you the truth. I'm no longer the Sheriff in town. Your father was the one to blame for my father's death and I filled out the report that way. You have nothing to fear. I just want to hear the whole story."

Jassy moved to the sink, grabbed a cup, and walked to the stove. She filled it with coffee she had just made before he showed up. "Here," she said, sitting it on the table.

"Thanks," Thorne said, sitting down. He lifted the cup and sipped at the hot liquid, finding it very good. "You make great coffee. Can you cook too?"

"I'm not your slave," she replied, running her hand through her hair and pushing the long strands back."

"You've been around outlaws too long. You need to learn some manners."

Jassy smiled sarcastically. "I'm not one of those snippy little girls who swoon over handsome men."

Thorne grinned wickedly and winked. "Think I'm handsome, huh?"

Jassy swung away from him, turning to the pot that simmered on the stove, determined not to let him see her blush. "Well, I hope you like rabbit stew, because that's what I was having for supper before you showed up."

"It's got to be better than jerky," he replied, as she filled two bowls and set one in front of him and hers on the other side. He didn't wait for her to sit, but started eating, surprised to find it was delicious. He ate half the bowl before he looked up to find her watching him. She had put a loaf of homemade bread and fresh churned butter on the table with a jar of raspberry jam.

"Help yourself," she said, wondering when he'd ate last.

"Thanks, and you're an excellent cook."

Jassy lowered her head and started eating. She worked hard from sunup to sundown taking care of things and the garden and she was hungry. "Glad you like it," she said, letting her hair fall to shield her face.

Thorne finished off three slices of bread and two more bowls of stew before he sat back. He waited until she finished hers before starting a conversation. "Tell me what you know about my father."

Jassy sighed, got up, and cleared the table. She moved back just as Bounce started barking outside. She got up and went to the door. "Come on, Bounce, she called, just as a bullet whizzed by her head.

Thorne jumped up, slammed the door shut, and pulled her to the floor with him. "Tell your outlaw friends to put down their guns!"

Jassy frowned. "Tell your posse to put down theirs! You tricked me!"

Thorne stared in her eyes, noticing her confusion. He was too at the moment as another shot rang out, breaking the window in the kitchen. "If it isn't your outlaw friends and my posse friends, then who the hell is shooting at us?"

Jassy chewed thoughtfully on her lower lips as someone outside shouted her father's name. "I don't know, but that voice sounds vaguely familiar."

"Remember fast, or we might not get a chance to talk," Thorne said, as he slipped his gun from his holster. Cover me while I get yours from the table and blow out the lamp."

Jassy got to her feet and went to the window on the opposite side of room. She had left them swung open after sweeping the room out to help alleviate the dust. She quickly fired two shots, then pressed back against the wall, not surprised when a barrage of gunfire answered. Before the last shot splintered the wall on the opposite side of the room, the light went out and Thorne came to stand on the opposite side of the window.

"Here's your gun. Give me mine."

Jassy gave it to him. "What are we going to do now?" Maybe I can sneak out the back door and get behind them."

Thorne chuckled. "Cute, Jassy, girl, cute. Do you think I'm stupid enough to let you out of my site? I want to know the whole story about what happened to your folks at my father's hands and I mean to know no matter how many shoot outs I have to survive to get the information."

"My father was the only one who called me Jassy Girl."

"And an old man who came to town after you had cared for him. Told everyone in town about the girl who had taken care of him when he had his foot hurt."

Jassy smiled. "He was a nice old man," she said, as she heard footsteps on the porch. "Damn!"

"Deke! Open up! We got you surrounded and there's no way out except for a shoot-out! You don't stand a chance!"

"Steve!" Jassy said, wondering what he was doing challenging her father.

"You know the man out there?"

"Yeah, he was with the gang a few months back. Papa found him kissing me one night and he was gone the next morning."

Thorne groaned. "Just what I need. A love sick outlaw!"

Jassy stomped her foot. "He's not a love sick outlaw. Well, outlaw he is, but I've only been kissed one time and it was by him and he only got to do it once."

"All the more reason to come back," Thorne whispered under his breath.

"What'd you say?"

"Nothing. Yell at him and tell him your father is dead. Evidently the news hasn't got around yet."

Jassy moved closer to the window. "Steve, is that you?"

"Yeah, it's me, Jassy darlin' and I come to get ya and kill your ole man."

"You're too late, Steve. Papa was killed in town about a month ago. The gang is busted up."

"Then what the hell you shootin' at me for, darlin'? Open the door and let me in! I was just teasing about bein' surrounded. Just me and my brother out here is all!"

"What do I say now, since you're so smart?"

"Well, I could just leave and let him have you."

"What?"

"You heard me. I've had nothing but trouble since I met you."

"You bast..." she started to say, but found Thorne's hand over her mouth. "Shhh..."

"Jassy heard the noise at the back of the house. Someone was trying to get in. "They're trying the door at the back."

"Is there any other way out of here?" he asked, as Steve's voice rose loudly right beside the window.

"Come on, Jassy honey. Open the door for me and let me in. You aren't scared of me, are you? Why I just want to finish that little ole kiss we started before your old man chased me off."

Jassy cringed at the thought. "She didn't want Steve kissing her or anything else. She jumped as something slammed into the back door and she heard the faint sound of wood crunching. "Come on," she said, grabbing Thorne's hand.

Thorne went with her, keeping his senses alert as she led him to a room at the back. It was so dark, he wondered how she knew where she was going, but

suddenly he found himself in a built in closet. "Don't you think they'll find us in here?"

"Get closer to the wall," Jassy said, pressing him back with her body. "I got to find the clasp to the door."

Thorne sucked in a sharp breath as she pressed against him with her behind, then bent downward. He couldn't help the thoughts his mind was taking with such a position. Just as he heard a grinding, screeching sound, she stood back up.

"Take my hand and when we get down the steps, close the lid, making sure the biggest part of the clasp is pulled to this side."

Thorne started his descent behind her, almost losing his footing on the narrow stairs once, but found her hold on his hand to be strong and sure. He finally made it far enough down, just as he heard a loud slamming sound that jarred the rafters of the house. He eased the lid down, fumbled for the latch and finally got it in place. He felt her tug at his hand and went down three more steps until he felt solid ground beneath his feet.

"Stay here while I get a candle lit," Jassy instructed, slipping her hand from his.

Thorne listened to the muffled footsteps and voices upstairs. From the sound of it, there was more than Steve and his brother and all his lawman instincts came flooding back full force. Jassy was in serious trouble. They wanted something and he bet it just wasn't Jassy that brought them back, although he'd bet they would all get a chance at her after Steve tired of her. She

didn't realize it yet, but she had just lost her home to outlaws. History was repeating itself and it was the perfect hiding place. He squinted as light filtered into the room.

"I'll get some things, then we can go," Jassy said, moving to pick up a bag on a wooden table in the middle of the dug out cellar.

"Does Steve know about this place?"

"No. Only my father, Timmy and I know of it."

"Good," Thorne said, walking over to her. "Don't take too much and we have to see if we can get our horses."

Jassy opened the bag, and checked inside. She had a couple shirts, pants, and other clothing in it and her money. Not much, but enough for her. She quickly grabbed some canned jars off the shelves she had made last fall and put them inside the bag too, making sure they were nestled between the clothes so they wouldn't break"

"Come on," she said, moving to the far side of the room where a single rack stood with more canned stuff. She grabbed three jars of canned beef and put them in the bag too and bent down and grabbed some vegetables off the bin at the bottom. When she finished, she rose up, and pulled on the shelf and it slid out. "The tunnel isn't too big, but you can stand up in it. It's just close."

"Let's go," Thorne said, as she led the way. He pulled the shelf shut behind him. The air here was dank and moldy. Several times he felt like sneezing, but held his nose to keep it back. He didn't want to take the chance they might be

heard or seen. When he stepped out into fresh air, he stopped, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness as Jassy had blew out the candle. "Where are we?"

"We're on the other side of the barn. I'll see if anyone is inside."

Thorne was amazed at how quietly she walked, not making the slightest noise. She went to the middle and pulled back a small square of wood, pressed her face to it, then turned back to him.

"Shhh..."

Thorne nodded and walked up beside her. He peered inside. A man sat with his back to them, whittling on a piece of wood while he sat on a bale of hay. He slid the wood back in place and grabbed Jassy's hand and pulled her with him to the edge of the woods just as a voice called from the house.

"Ben! You see anything or hear anything out there?"

"No, Steve! Nothin'! Quiet as a mouse out here!"

"Where the hell did she go? Come on in, brother! There's food on the stove! Ted will find her! He's searching behind the house now."

Thorne waited, then moved to the barn and slid the piece of wood back and peered inside. "He's gone," he said, as Jassy joined him. He noticed the way she kept guard and how her hand hovered over her gun, ready to pull it out.

"Let's get the horses."

Thorne grabbed her arm gently. "If we go up there, they'll see us."

Jassy smiled at him. "No they won't. They put your horse right beside mine. Makes it easy. Come on."

Thorne followed her to the side of the barn. She felt along the wood and suddenly the wall slid towards the back of the barn as she pushed against it. They both called out their horse's names to calm them and in a few seconds had them saddled and led out of the stalls backwards. He jumped on his mount's back and watched as Jassy mounted with ease.

"Follow me," she said, and urged her mount into a canter. Just as they neared the edge of the woods, a shot rang out and Jassy felt a stinging pain along her thigh. She glanced down and saw the area darkening with blood. She gritted her teeth and kicked her mount with her other leg. "Come on!"

Thorne shot back as another shot rang out, spurring his mount on to follow Jassy. They rode fast and hard and Thorne wondered how she knew where she was going in the darkness. Once, he thought he saw her sag forward as the moonlight filtered through the trees, but thought maybe she was just leaning over her horse to soothe him. His own horse didn't like the pace they were setting in such close quarters with the trees and brush.

Jassy saw the opening in the trees ahead and sighed. It wasn't much farther and she knew they wouldn't find them here. Not at night anyway. The hideout was well hidden with safety from the law in case the law ever found their other place. Her father had been quite adamant about them learning the way here from the time they were little. Many times he made them ride behind him in the middle of the night until they learned the way here by heart and on the darkest of nights. As she cleared the woods, she slowed her horse so Thorne could catch up and waited until he drew up beside her. "It's up there," she said, pointing to

the hill above them. There's a path right ahead of us that will take you there. Jassy saw the landscape spin and felt herself fall from the saddle, where darkness consumed her.

"Jassy!" Thorne called, sliding to the ground, and running to her. He bent down and gently took her in his arms. He ran his hands over her, noting how cold she felt, yet clammy at the same time. When his hands slid over her right thigh, he felt the stickiness of blood. She'd been shot and had still kept going! He lifted her in his arms and put her on his horse, grabbed her horse's reins, then mounted behind her, pulling her safely back into his arms. He kicked his horse in the sides and rode towards the hill in the distance, praying he wouldn't miss the path leading to the place she indicated.

Thorne missed it on the first round and rode back along the hillside again, squinting in the darkness, wishing the moon would quit playing hide and seek. Several times, Jassy moaned and he knew it wouldn't be long before she was conscious again and he didn't know how bad the wound was. He wanted to have her on solid ground and lying down.

"Damn it, where is it?" He swore as he neared the end of the hill. He turned again, pulling on the reins of Jassy's horse when the horse stood still and wouldn't budge. "Oh come on now, don't you give me trouble," he said, pulling on the reins again. The horse refused to budge. Then it dawned on him the horse knew where he was and there must be provisions stocked there for the outlaw's stock. He let go of the reins and watched as the horse moved back the way they came. He followed, then started up the hill behind the horse.

Thorne tightened his hold on Jassy. The steeper they climbed, the harder it was to keep hold of her. Several times, his horse stumbled on the loose rocks and he thought they would all tumble over the hillside to their deaths. Just when he thought the ascent would never end, he was no longer in a slanted position and the moon came out in full to brighten the way. He glanced up. "Now you give me light."

Jassy awoke to the warmth of blankets, the smell of food, and the unmistakable stab of pain in her leg. She groaned as she pushed herself up on her elbows to look about. She saw Thorne turn from the small fire he had going and watched as he got up and came to her.

"How do you feel?"

"Good, except for the pain in my leg, but it isn't so bad."

Thorne shook his head and grinned. "You're tough as nails, huh? A real outlaw woman."

Jassy frowned and slumped back. "I never rode with my father and it was Timmy's first time the night pa died."

Thorne could have kicked himself. He knew the bullet had just grazed her but the wound was deep enough to hurt like hell. Too, the stitches he had sewn in her leg had to be hurting also. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like it sounded. Do you think you could drink some broth?"

"I'll try," Jassy said, pushing herself up against her saddle that Thorne had covered to make her a pillow.

Thorne moved to the fire and got the cup of strained broth he had sitting beside the fire to keep it warm. "Here. Let me help you. He squatted down beside her and held the cup while she took a sip. "Again," he instructed until she had half the cup gone and pushed it away.

"What's in that?" She asked, making a face.

Thorne chuckled. "I hoped you wouldn't notice. It's whiskey and some herbs that will help you feel better and rest. Also helps a fever." He put his hand to her forehead and frowned.

"It isn't a bad one," she said, shivering slightly. "I see we made it ok."

"With the help of your horse. He knew where to go to find his feed."

Jassy smiled. "Pepper always knows where that is."

"Pepper, huh?" Thorne teased. "Some name for a horse."

Jassy smiled weakly and leaned back. "He's black as pepper and can run fast until he is overheated if need be. He's a good horse."

"Can't argue with you there. Now lay back and rest."

Jassy squirmed and moaned at the pain in her leg. "I have to..."

Thorne frowned. "Have to what?"

Jassy blushed. "I need to..."

"Need to what, Jassy? You don't have to worry about anything and we aren't going anywhere. I'll keep watch but tonight we don't have to worry, they aren't going to look for us until daylight."

Jassy groaned loudly. "I have to attend to something. She threw the covers back and gasped as the cool air of the room hit her bare, fevered skin. She pulled the covers back quickly."

Thorne grinned devilishly. "I already saw it all. No need to be shy."

"Bring me my bag."

"Ok," Thorne said, getting up and going to where it sat by the door. He brought it back and set it beside her. "I took out the food, left your money and everything else in there."

"Turn around," she said, watching as he did so. She pulled out a long, white nightgown and quickly slipped it over her head. As she maneuvered it down over her hips, she saw the tiny neat stitches in her leg. The skin was all red and puckered and still seeping blood. It was about six inches long. She hastily pulled the gown down. "You can turn around now. Thanks."

Thorne turned and the sight of her in her proper little white cotton gown had more effect on him than when he had seen her stark naked. She had the collar buttoned to her throat and her arms were covered to her wrists. She looked sweet enough to make love to all night, he thought. "Ok, now that you feel clothed, cover back up and get some rest. I'm going to turn in too."

Jassy ignored him and pushed herself up and hopped on one leg. "I need to attend to something," she said, gritting her teeth to keep from crying out in pain as her leg throbbed as if someone were hitting her thigh with a sledgehammer.

Thorne grabbed her and lifted her in his arms. "Tell me what you need or want to do and I will do it."

"I have to go," she said, blushing beet red.

"Thorne frowned and then it dawned on him. 'Well, why didn't you say so? I don't know if it's a good idea to take you out in the night air with the fever you have. You have a commode here or something?' He turned with her as he inspected the place but knew there wasn't. The shack was just an outer wooden frame with the back of it hillside. Just a place to stay and keep out of the elements when the need arose.

"Take me to the outhouse or put me down and I will go myself."

Thorne laughed. "You're a stubborn outlaw." He strode to the door, opened it, and carried her to the small outhouse several yards away. He felt her shivering with the cold night air and worried the fever would worsen. He lifted her inside and turned his back. Just yell when you're done," he said as the door slammed shut none too gently. In a few seconds, Thorne heard her call softly and the door open. He went to her, lifted her in his arms, kicked the door shut and carried her back inside. He laid her down gently and covered her up, noticing the shivers that wracked her body. She didn't complain but snuggled deeper under the blankets.

He ran to get his and placed them around her. "Jassy, you ok?"

"Cold..." she said, her teeth chattering. "So cold..."

Thorne swore and looked at the small fire. He couldn't feed it anymore or the room would fill with smoke. It hovered above the ceiling as it was, but most

escaped through the cracks in the exterior and through the door when he had opened it. His gaze slid back to Jassy and saw her curled up in a ball. In record time, he stripped off his clothes and slid under the blankets with her and pulled her close.

Jassy felt his heat the moment he got in beside her. Her only thought was getting warm. She snuggled up against him, and as soon as she felt her front warm, he turned her tenderly in his arms and cradled her back against the length of him. She soon fell asleep, feeling warm, safe, and secure.

Thorne listened to Jassy's easy breathing, knowing she was sleeping comfortably. She was still fevered but she had stopped shivering. He kept her in his arms, holding her close, loving the feel of her against him. The soft contours of her body and the silkiness of her hair against his chest and stomach were comforting.

He sighed heavily and wondered at this feeling of protectiveness he felt towards her. By all rights, they should hate each other for the deaths of their parents, each faulting the other's part in it. Yet, Thorne realized it was not their fault. What had happened had been between his father and hers. Jassy and her brother were just as innocent as he was, although she had been wrong to break her brother out of jail and run from the law.

As the fire dwindled, and the shack darkened, he thought of all he had left behind. He loved his job and always had, but didn't feel right being a man of the law after learning of his father's crimes. He still couldn't believe everything that had been revealed to him, that he had no inkling what so ever of what was going

on right in front of his nose. The towns people had been threatened, bullied, and blackmailed by his father to keep Thorne from finding out.

Three of the murder's he had investigated hadn't proven it was his father's men. It made him sick to his stomach to even think about it. How could the man he called father, loved, and respected so much have done the things he had done? He wondered also about his mother, whom he had never known and wondered if she realized what kind of man she had married. Too, had there been any love between them? Somehow he felt there had to be on her part, but now realized his father probably only saw her as another possession and one that could provide him with sons.

As he drifted off to sleep, he knew he'd never know the answers to his questions. All was dead and buried. What he had to do was make a life for himself and he pulled Jassy closer feeling warm and happy with her in his arms.

Jassy awoke slowly, savoring the heat under the blankets. She opened her eyes to see Thorne's bare chest, and her breath caught in her throat at the site. She had seen shirtless men before around camp, but none that affected her like his. She was so close his hair tickled her nose and she moved back just a little. Unable to resist the temptation, she lifted her hand and touched a fingertip to glide it through the soft hair. She found it odd that even though soft to the touch, it was sort of wiry from the way it curled.

She smiled as she laid her hand flat against his chest and slid her hand around. Funny things were happening to her. Her stomach felt all fluttery and

her breath quickened as she let her hand move lower to where the hair tapered to a line down the middle and ended just above the muscled plains of his stomach. She hoped he stayed asleep for a while longer so she could just touch him. She'd never had a woman to talk to about such things. That had been taken away from her at a young age. She would just have to explore these feelings by herself. She stilled her hand as Thorne's breathing changed, then started caressing him lightly again just to savor the new feelings it caused. He was probably dreaming.

Thorne had awakened at her first touch, thinking he was dreaming with his eyes open as hands so tender, and soft as silk, caressed his chest. Instinct told him she had never before experienced the feel of a man's chest. She'd also told him she had only been kissed once by Steve, whom he knew would be hunting her, beginning this morning. He knew they would be hard to find on this side of the hill and so far away from the main camp, but he had no doubt that trouble was on its way and he was going to be ready for it when it came.

As her hand slipped lower to run across his stomach, he felt her hand tremble as it paused just below his belly button. He couldn't help but laugh as she stuck her finger inside. "You know, Jassy, if you keep doing that, you're going to get into trouble."

Jassy gasped and moved back, moaning softly as the quick motion made her thigh start throbbing with a dull pain. "I'm sorry," she said, her eyes seeking his. She felt her face flush as he stared intently back at her.

"No need to be sorry," Thorne said softly, gently smoothing back her hair with his hand. He moved his hand to cup her chin, stroking her pink cheek with

his thumb. Her sensuous lips parted as she gasped at his touch, and he couldn't resist the temptation to kiss her. He lowered his head and gently kissed her, feeling her respond so tenderly.

Jassy felt her body tremble as Thorne's lips caressed hers. The pain forgotten, she moved closer, slipping her arm around his side to his back to urge him closer.

Thorne deepened the kiss, pulling her into his arms, feeling a desire he'd never known before. He had been with many women, but holding Jassy in his arms and feeling her sweet lips against his, was the most tempestuous of all. Throwing all caution to the wind, he began to love her like he had never loved another woman.

Jassy felt she was on fire as Thorne's hands began to caress her, each touch bringing new feelings and emotions to a fiery ember of desire. Lost in his touch, his kisses, his voice, Jassy knew she finally knew the mythical essence of love her brother's poetry always bespoke of.

"Jassy," Thorne breathed, as he stared down into her blue eyes so darkened in passion. "Are you sure?"

Jassy wound her arms around Thorne's neck and leaned up and captured his lips with fiery need, knowing only he could give what her body sought. She didn't know what it was, but knew he was the source of her desire. "Yes," she whispered against his mouth and felt her world begin to spin, as he loved her.

Thorne tried to control his emotions, knowing this was her first time, but at her insistent touch, her soft moans of want, and the heat of her, he couldn't hold back. He captured her cry of pain, and stilled, waiting for the pain to subside.

Jassy felt the burning pain disappear and a new feeling of emotion hold her in its fiery grasp. She moved against Thorne slowly, and at his quick intake of breath, became bolder, staring up into his dark eyes, losing herself in the dark pools of passion shown there.

Thorne groaned and held her tightly in his arms, loving her with a passion beyond words, and as she cried out his name, he whispered hers at the same time.

Thorne watched the area below as Jassy walked the soreness out of her leg. He was happy that in the past four days, she had recovered quickly. She limped slightly as she came to stand beside him and he pulled her into his embrace, as a movement to the North of them caught his attention. "Look," he said, pointing. Looks like riders coming this way."

"Steve?"

"Probably," Thorne said. "Let's get ready for them just in case.

"Jassy checked her gun, then went inside and got her rifle and Thorne's. The past days had been the happiest she had ever known in her life. Their days and nights had been filled with passion and love, and she knew she would do anything for Thorne.

As she checked the ammunition, she thought of all they had talked about. Thorne was ready to be a lawman again. They decided they would move on to a town South of here. It was always rumored that no Sheriff lasted long there, but she knew Thorne would bring law and order to town and she would help him. Together, they would build a new life. With her father's death, her outlaw days were over.

As she went to the door of the shack, she looked back at the place that had erased old hurts for both of them and started a new beginning. Now, to face the last challenge of her old life and put the final chapters to rest. She stepped out the door and came face to face with Steve. Thorne lay on the ground unconscious.

"Hello, Jassy love. Drop the guns."

Jassy stared into Steve's deadly green eyes. She did as she was told, leaving her gun in her holster. "What did you do to Thorne?"

"Let's just say he will have quite a headache. It was quite easy to fool you with my brother and partner riding in the distance. You sure don't take after your father. He would have been more careful."

Jassy started to move towards Thorne, but Steve grabbed her arm roughly, stopping her. "What do you want, Steve?"

"Well, for starters you can give me some of that moaning and groaning you did for lover boy there. I must say, I was tempted to just walk in and kill him last night, but thought better of it. Might have hit you too and I want to finish that kiss

we started a long time ago before your pa found us and beat the hell out of me. Too bad he's already dead. It would have given me much pleasure to kill him."

"I'd kill myself before I let you touch me!" Jassy spat, yanking her arm away.

Steve laughed. "You don't have a choice. The others will be here soon and you're going with us. I want the money your pa hid in the barn too. What'd ya do with it, Jassy? Where did you hide all the loot your pa stole?"

Jassy smiled. "So you came for the money. Well, I hate to disappoint you, but I gave it all to my brother and he is very far away from here. Back east."

Steve's hand shot out and slapped her across the cheek. He watched her fall to the ground and hold her hand to her face; her blue eyes blazing with hate. "I want the money, Jassy. You don't think I'm going to fall for that, do you?"

Jassy shook her head and tried to focus on Steve. Her jaw felt like she had been hit by a sledgehammer and she tasted blood. "I don't have the money! I gave it to Timmy so he could go back east and go to school and make a good life for himself!"

Steve advanced towards her, when the ominous click of a gun stopped him. He turned slowly and saw Thorne standing there with his gun aimed at his heart. "You can hardly stand up, let alone shoot and kill me. Your vision can't be that good after the hit I gave you."

"Get away from her," Thorne said, his voice cold and deadly.

Jassy watched as Thorne swayed and saw Steve reach for his gun, and without a moment's hesitation, pulled her gun and shot him at the same time Thorne's gun exploded.

She scrambled to her feet, stepped over Steve's body, and ran to Thorne. "You all right?"

Thorne shoved his gun back in his holster. "Yeah, but here comes the others."

"Steve! You up there? What's all the shootin' about? You kill the guy?"

Thorne pulled Jassy behind a rock as Steve's brother and the other man started up the hill towards them. "Get my rifle, Jassy, and don't let them see you."

Jassy ran and got the rifle's and handed Thorne his. "We're in this together."

Thorne grinned despite the pounding in his head and the situation they were in. "I think you should be the lawman," he teased.

Jassy laughed. "Only if I can be at your side," she said, as the two men topped the rise right below them.

"Stop right there!" Thorne yelled, watching as the men reined their horses to a halt. They were at the most vulnerable spot. Loose rocks slid down the embankment and there was no place to seek cover.

"Where's my brother? Steve! Steve! You all right?"

"He's dead! If you don't want to find yourself the same, then get out of here and don't come back!"

Jassy watched as the man kicked his horse hard and started up the hill. The other man took off the other way, and finally was on solid ground below. He looked up one last time at his partner, then spurred his mount and rode away. The shrill whinny of a horse, pulled Jassy's gaze back to Steve's brother. He was whipping the horse with the reins unmercifully to get up the steepest part before he would be at the top. The horse reared, and both rider and horse went tumbling backwards. She buried her head in Thorne's chest, hearing the horse's terrified cries.

Thorne held her tight, then pushed her away from him. "Look," he said, pointing at the horse that had gotten to his feet and just stood waiting patiently for his master.

"He's ok," Jassy cried, smiling.

"Yeah, but not his rider. I'd say the fall broke his neck. He hasn't moved and from the angle he's laying, I'd say it's all over. What do you say we get on with out life now?"

"I'm ready!" Jassy smiled as he pulled her into his arms and kissed her lovingly.

Chapter Three

Fifteen Months Later

Thorne stood on the porch of his house as dawn broke over the horizon. He looked over the home Jassy and he had worked hard to build. It in no way compared with the luxurious place Thorne had grown up, but it held a beauty that nothing else could compare to and it showed all the love they held for each other.

He stepped inside the house and looked up the stairway. How much longer, he wondered, as Timmy stepped out the door at the top. He ran up the steps. "Is Jassy all right? The baby?"

Timmy grinned. "Doc says you can go in shortly."

"And?" Thorne scowled at him. It unnerved him to no end that Timmy and his relationship bordered on such brotherly in law love they teased each other unmercifully.

"Timmy laughed and slapped him on the back. "Jassy is fine and the baby is too! Wait 'til you see!"

Thorne grinned. "What is it?"

Timmy shook his head. "Jassy said if I told you, she'd kill me and I ain't takin' no chances on that!"

Thorne reached for Tim's throat just as Doc opened the door to their room. "Thorne, come in and meet your new family."

Thorne didn't waste a second of time. He brushed past Doc and headed for the bed. "Jassy, love, he said, going to sit down gently on the bed beside her. He glanced at the baby she held in her arms. He arched his eyebrows questioningly.

Jassy smiled tenderly. "Thorne honey, meet your first born son."

Thorne felt a lump rise in his throat. His son, he thought, not being able to say a word as he smoothed back the black silky fine hair of the baby's head. "He's beautiful, Jassy. Just beautiful!"

"Hey, brother in law," Timmy's voice interjected, meet the rest of your family.

Thorne turned and saw Timmy holding a baby and Doc too. His heart raced and he felt he was going to faint. "Jassy?"

Jassy laughed. He looked at her in such bewilderment, that she felt sorry for him. "Honey, did I forget to mention that on my mother's side, triplets run in the family?"

'But," Thorne said, looking at the baby she held, then to the others as Doc and Timmy laid them on the bed beside them. How are we going to know who's who and what are we going to name them?"

This is our first-born and I named him Thorne Jr. This is Dawn, your daughter and second born, named after your mother, and this is Deke, if you don't mind me naming him that. As you can see, Thorne has your hair, Dawn mine, and Deke a mixture of both. We won't have any problem telling them apart."

Thorne shook his head. "Jassy, love, you picked fine names for them, but is this going to happen every time we have children?"

Doc and Timmy laughed as they slipped out the door, leaving them alone.

Jassy snuggled down in bed. "No, honey. Doc says it shouldn't, but my Aunt Jassy had three sets of triplets."

"Three sets?"

"Uh huh," Jassy said, her eyes closing. "But we can handle anything."

Thorne watched as she fell asleep, then at the babies as they started crying. Lord, it was gonna take a lot of love to get through this, he thought, as Doc and Timmy came in, each taking a baby and leaving Thorne Jr. for him.

He picked the baby up from Jassy's arms and kissed her tenderly on the cheek. "I love you," he whispered. "We sure did start our life out right, Jassy love."

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cia Leah grew up in Ohio, outside of Toronto, at her family's country home. She has always been an avid reader and enjoys writing stories for her friends and family. She is presently working on a suspense/thriller novel and historical romance novel. You can visit her website at http://www.geocities.com/kaleidoscopic_colors/.