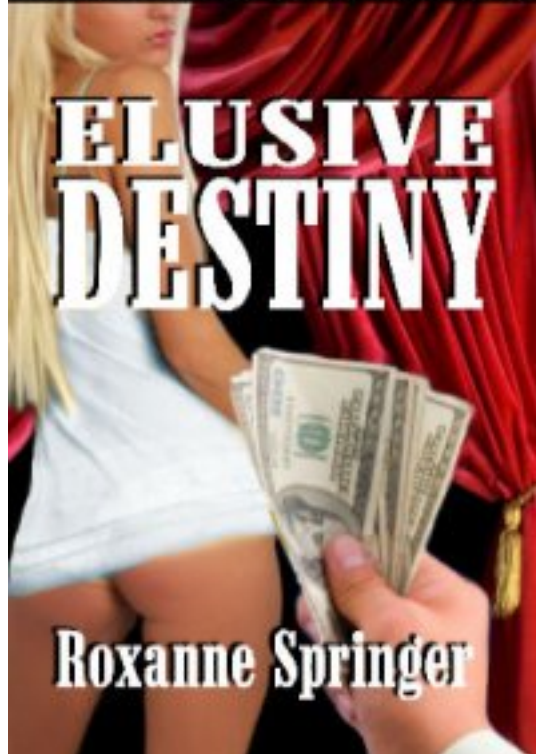


SPECIAL EDITION

ELUSIVE DESTINY

Roxanne Springer



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by

Roxanne Springer

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my husband Barry W. Springer and my dear friend Beth Babbitt. Without their beautiful faith and encouragement, this book would not exist.

Chapter 1

The naked form of Elise Draiden snuggled up to her equally nude bed companion, Reed Donovan, and she chose to ignore that he did not put his arm around her or respond at all in an affectionate way.

“C’mon, Reed honey,” she said in a velvet purr as she teasingly stroked his smooth and muscular chest. “I know under that cold exterior of yours beats the heart of a man who truly loves me.”

“It’s never been like that between us,” he declared solidly as he left her luxurious bed, “and it never will be.”

Anger lit a blazing fire in her bewitching violet eyes as she watched him serenely walk over to the chair he had laid his clothes on and begin to dress.

“I’m not good enough for you, is that how you feel? It seems I am good enough for you to come dump your seed into when you take a notion, but not a quality lady you would ever love or marry! Well, I have news for you, Mr. Donovan; I don’t consort with anyone but you and haven’t for the last five years!”

Reed kept his back to her as he sighed in exasperation. This was an argument they had had several times over the course of their association. He continued to pull his pants up over his hips while she ranted about things like fidelity and commitment.

“You chose to be a whore and own this whorehouse; absolutely no one forced you into it,” he calmly explained when she had finished. “Exactly whom you lay with is entirely up to you, I pay

you very well for your time and effort. Please don't make out like your company is some sort of gift to be cherished."

His composure only infuriated her further, and with a frustrated growl, she leapt from the bed and meaningfully strode to her dresser. Angrily she flipped open a silver jewel box she kept on top and took out a large fistful of paper money. She then went over to Reed and proceeded to throw it in his face while he buttoned his shirt.

"There is every single cent you have ever given me, and you can take it all back right now! I have never sold myself to you, always gave because I wanted to!"

She realized that instead of winning the argument, she was angering him, and just as abruptly as it had risen and surfaced, her anger dwindled and her voice became a tearful and desperate plea.

"I love you, Reed, I always have," she tenderly confessed as she clung to one of his strong arms.

He pulled away from her and finished dressing in silence while she retreated to a corner and wept noisily. She hoped her distress would make him feel guilty, but in reality, it apparently made him pity her.

He ignored her as he went to one of her many full-length mirrors and checked his appearance. When he was satisfied he was presentable, he turned back to Elise with a somber expression on his handsomely chiseled features.

"Keep the money, it's yours. I have told you before I don't love you, Elise, and to be truthful with you, I never will. If it would hurt you too much for me to return here and see you next week, I fully understand."

She inwardly panicked as his words sank in, and she quickly got up and rushed over to where he stood. She threw her arms around his neck and looked deep into his dark eyes.

"I always want you to come back, darling," she reassured him wholeheartedly. "Forgive my little outburst, won't you? I just get

frustrated sometimes. I know deep inside you love me; no man could make a woman feel what you make me without some sentiment being involved somewhere. When you're ready to open your heart and admit your love, I'll be here waiting for you. Promise you'll come back next week. Reed, honey, I need you."

"Until next week then," he answered politely as he smiled and tipped his hat to her. He then left her bedroom, crossed her equally ornate sitting room, and headed downstairs to go home.

As Reed reached the bottom of the large curved staircase, he noticed a young girl wiping down the top of the bar in the lobby. She wore an ankle-length flowered dress and had her long blonde hair pulled back in a loose ponytail. She looked up at him for a moment, but then went diligently back to her work.

He decided to investigate by going to the bar and ordering a cup of coffee. As she prepared his drink, he watched her intently, every move she made was fluid and a pure pleasure to observe. She placed the steaming cup of coffee neatly in front of him, and he quickly threw a coin on the bar to pay for it.

"Who are you? I've never seen you here before," he asked quickly when it seemed she was about to leave.

"My name is Lucinda Hoffman, I'm Miss Draiden's niece. I just arrived from Tennessee yesterday."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Hoffman. My name is Reed Donovan. I own the business across the street, the Red Rose Hotel."

She smiled at him sweetly, and that small gesture seemed to magically strum heartstrings he had never realized he possessed. She was the picture of innocence, and seemed so out of place in such racy surroundings. Reed was shocked by a sudden urge he had to take her away and see to her every need.

"You don't strike me as the kind of person who would willingly accept a job in this rather lewd institution."

“My mother remarried recently, and her new husband was getting more friendly with me than he should have. To protect me, she sent me here to live with her sister, Elise. My aunt made it very plain from the moment I stepped off the stagecoach that I would be earning my keep and would not be allowed to be a good-for-nothing freeloader.”

Reed smiled appreciatively as he listened to her; he was completely charmed by her familiar southern accent and her very presence.

“Tell you what, Lucinda Hoffman,” he said as he admired her aquamarine eyes. “I want you to go across the street to the Red Rose and tell them Reed Donovan said to give you a job. I will pay you a fair wage, and you can give money to your aunt for room and board. She can’t accuse you of being a freeloader if you pay her every week.”

“Don’t tell me you are coming between family,” said Elise gently as she sidled up next to Reed and gave him a playful peck on the cheek. She wore only a very sheer silk robe to cover her nakedness, and for the first time, Reed felt embarrassed by her openly showing affection for him. Oblivious to his discomfort, Elise kept an arm draped over his shoulder as she continued to speak.

“Besides, if you were to hire my niece away, you’ll ruin all the festivities I have planned for next Saturday night. I expect a big crowd here; perhaps the biggest crowd Chez Elise has ever seen! There is no doubt more than a few of them will stop in at the Rose for a meal before or after the auction, so we’ll both benefit from my brilliance.”

“Auction? What auction?” he asked warily.

“The auction for my dear niece’s innocence, of course,” replied the madam elatedly. “I came up with the idea to sell her virtue to the highest bidder, and I expect it to go for quite a sum. Virgins are very rare in these parts, and there are men who would be willing to pay handsomely to be her first lover.”

Reed was appalled at her barbarism and uncaring attitude towards her own kin. He carefully hid his feelings for the time being; he knew Elise well enough to know that if he acted disgusted by her plan, she would have no problem making a public scene and utterly humiliating him.

“You will be here, won’t you, Reed?” she asked as she batted her eyes at him prettily. “I certainly wouldn’t want you to miss the most exciting night Holton, Texas has ever seen. I want you sitting right by my side when Chez Elise becomes the most famous spot west of New York City!”

“Of course I’ll be here. I wouldn’t miss it for anything. I hope you ladies will excuse me now; there are urgent matters at my own place of business that need attending to. Have a pleasant afternoon.”

He bowed to them slightly as he took his leave from the busy brothel, making sure to briefly lock gazes with Lucinda.

“I’m going to marry that handsome man and be an elegant society lady for the rest of my days.” Elise sighed dreamily as he cleared the door. “Reed Donovan is very rich, and his money will make every lady in the state of Texas want me as a member of their elite social circles.”

“He seems very nice,” Lucinda replied sincerely.

“Don’t go getting any ideas,” snapped Elise possessively as she glowered at her niece, “Reed and I are already involved and it’s only a matter of time until he realizes I’m the only woman fit to be at his side. Now get back to work before I throw you out on the street like your mother did!”

“She didn’t throw me out, she sent me to live with you because she had to!”

“How does it feel to be cast aside for some drunk your mother was ignorant enough to marry? My sister Jane always was an idiot, and it seems her daughter is no better. After the auction, I’ll have

you servicing so many men a day, you'll be too busy to use that smart mouth of yours for anything but making me money!"

Lucinda, raised to respect her elders, bit back an acidic retort and hastily resumed cleaning and dusting in the lobby.

Elise, considering her niece well put in her place, turned to retreat to her office to look over the daily cash report. Just as she was about to leave the room, a strong and very familiar voice rang out behind her and stopped her in her tracks.

"Elise Draiden, you are the most beautiful woman in Texas!"

She inwardly groaned as she turned and gave Garrett Cameron a dazzling smile. Garrett owned the Imperial, a very prosperous gaming house just outside the Holton town limits. He had his usual bouquet of wildflowers for her clutched in his right hand, and she took them without comment.

"Hello, Garrett," she said with obvious false sweetness. "I hope you can forgive me for not staying and visiting with you. There is some paperwork in my office that I simply must get done, and I must make preparations for Saturday night."

"Aw, to hell with all that, come and sit with me, honey! Seeing you is the brightest part of my very lonely day."

She sighed heavily and went over and sat on the pale blue sofa next to the tall and thin flame-haired man whom she secretly despised. He grated on her nerves terribly, and she only tolerated the uneducated oaf because he sent a lot of business her way.

Garrett Cameron would never be even half the man Reed Donovan was in her eyes, even though both men had an elegant wardrobe and impressive bank account. In her opinion, the crude Garrett lacked the charm, sophistication, and charisma the handsome hotel owner had in natural abundance. Reed Donovan was a true gentleman who had been born into a world of wealth and refinement; Garrett Cameron was a ruffian who had managed to strike it rich gold mining.

Garrett felt about Elise the way she felt about Reed, and was constantly trying to win her hand. She saw no social standing whatsoever in becoming Mrs. Cameron, and that was the acceptance she desired most. Garrett had asked her at least a dozen times to be his wife, but each proposal had been flatly rejected.

"Which of my gifted and vigorous ladies are you going to charm today?" she asked brightly, hoping to distract him from his pursuit of her.

"The only woman I'm interested in this place is you."

"You know I'm not available," she replied demurely as she nervously shifted her weight on the couch.

"You'd be available enough if I were that simperin' and magnolia drippin', Reed Donovan! If he would show up here seven days in a row, you would gladly spread your legs for him every minute of that week!"

"Must you be so dreadfully uncouth? Jealousy is an ugly thing, Garrett. A true gentleman is neither crude nor overly emotional."

"Some day you'll see he's all show and no heart, and when that day comes, I'll be waiting for you," he declared lovingly as he raised her hand to his lips and kissed the top.

Elise coughed nervously and waited for the moment she could pull her hand back. She did so when it had been long enough not to offend or anger him. Garrett was famous for his violent temper.

"Enough of the love stuff," he declared loudly. "Right now I got to get my ashes hauled. Gimme that girl, Joanne, she was a right decent piece the last time I had her as I recall."

"Only decent?" Elise questioned cheerfully, grateful for this diversion of his unwanted attention. "I'll speak to her this moment and make sure you have the time of your life in her company today."

"The only way it could ever be that good is if it was you under me, Elise."

Just then Lucinda walked by with her cleaning cloth in hand, and Garrett got a devilish glint in his cold blue eyes. He reached out and grabbed at the hem of her dress, making Lucinda turn and swat at him with her free hand. She hurried away, and Garrett chuckled sinisterly as he watched her go.

“Is that the girl you’re gonna auction off? I think maybe I’ll bid high for her; it’s been a long time since I busted a cherry.”

Elise immediately saw a way to finally get the man off her back once and for all and was delighted.

“Bring gold to the auction,” she whispered happily, “and I will see to it you get special priority from the auctioneer.”

“I knew you had a soft spot in there somewhere for me,” said Garrett as he smiled at her fiendishly. “I’ll take that girl and make her into the whore you want her to be.”

“Splendid! Perhaps you could even take her home with you after the auction and marry the little snit. If you did that, you could have her for your own personal pleasure any time day or night.”

“The only woman I could ever marry is you,” he declared warmly as he took her slim hand in his callused palm and pressed it right over his heart.

“I do have that pressing business in my office,” she explained as she gently removed her hand from his grasp, “so you must excuse me for now. I’ll see Joanne on my way and tell her to give you something special.”

“You are one hell of a woman, and mark my words, I’ll have your heart yet!”

Elise stood and left the room, grateful to be out of his presence. She went toward the office and did indeed see Joanne on her way. She told the girl who wanted her services but nothing else.

Once the door was shut and locked and she was in the sanctity of her plush office, Elise could not help but smile wickedly at her own cunning. She would allow Garrett to win the auction, know-

ing full well that he would use her niece in a way that reflected the disgusting animal he truly was.

Elise had not missed the way Reed had regarded her niece, and it had immediately caused alarm bells to sound within her. Anything she perceived as even the slightest threat to becoming Mrs. Reed Donovan had to be hastily eliminated.

If everything went according to her quickly formed plan, very soon Lucinda would be just another whore in her employ and the glorious path to the altar with the handsome and rich Reed Donovan would once again be clear.

Chapter 2

Thanks to the many cowpunchers, prospectors, and travelers that drifted through the dusty town of Holton, word of the upcoming auction spread as fast as a Texas brushfire during a dry spell.

Surrounding towns for a hundred mile radius were buzzing with the news, and it had even been mentioned in some of their newspapers. Men from all walks of life were frantically gathering what funds they had to visit the upscale whorehouse Chez Elise and be a part of the unique event.

When at last the fateful evening arrived, Holton was bursting at its seams with rowdy and lusty men. They were all busy eating, drinking, and secretly hoping they could outbid all others for the sweet prize of a pretty young girl's innocence.

The Red Rose, the Imperial, and Chez Elise were all doing a brisk business, but none of the owners could be found among the throngs of people who crowded into their thriving establishments.

Elise Draiden was in her sitting room putting the final touches on her niece's appearance, and as she worked, she recalled when she had first met and became enamored with Reed Donovan.

When Reed had arrived in Holton five years earlier, he had put his masterful sense of business to good use. He quickly saw the advantage of the hotel he was going to build being in alliance with the two most profitable businesses in town and went about making it happen.

He had been the one to initiate the original meeting with them to form a sort of commercial trinity, and Garrett and Elise had agreed to the terms that had been explained to them so eloquently.

A person could buy liquor at the Imperial, but not at the Red Rose or Chez Elise. A hearty meal and a soft bed for the night were waiting at the Red Rose Hotel, but not offered by Chez Elise or the Imperial. Female companionship was the attraction at Chez Elise, but neither Garrett nor Reed allowed any women to participate in the selling of themselves at their businesses. It was a simple plan, and it had made scads of money for the principal players in the arrangement.

Reed had been able to easily persuade the others to agree to his lucrative business plan, and that was the day Elise had determinedly set her cap for him. Her eyes had hungrily drank in his glorious physique and never left him as he explained the advantages of his proposition. By the end of the meeting, she would have gladly agreed to walk on water if he had wished it of her.

A small cough from her niece brought her mind back to the present, and she looked into the girl's lavishly made up face.

"Just a touch more red on the lips," she said knowingly. "Men can't turn down a pair of succulent ruby red lips. You need to be utterly irresistible tonight, we want to make the men bid high for you."

A nervous Lucinda watched as Elise swirled a fingertip in the small pot of rouge she held in her left hand. When she judged she had enough, she gently spread it on the girl's generous lips.

"I won't lie to you," explained her aunt in an authoritative voice as she applied the makeup, "what our lucky winner is going to do to you tonight will hurt a bit. Please try to keep your dignity by not yelling and certainly don't scream. If you don't act like you are enjoying what he's doing to you, it may very well drive away a potential return customer."

Lucinda uneasily nodded her understanding, though she was frightened nearly out of her mind. She remembered the sweaty hands and clumsy groping of her stepfather and hoped that her companion for the night would not be as disgusting.

Elise beamed her satisfaction at her niece's facial appearance and quickly retrieved a silver hand mirror so Lucinda could behold for herself the stunning transformation that had taken place.

She was amazed by her reflection and quickly decided she did not like what she saw. Her aquamarine eyes had been heavily lined with black kohl, making them appear larger and their unusually brilliant color even more prominent.

Her cheeks and lips practically glowed from the artful application of the rouge, and though her aunt had called them 'ruby' she thought they looked the color of fresh blood.

The only thing that pleased her about the whole unbelievable façade was her hair. Her golden tresses had been meticulously curled with metal tongs that had been heated over an oil lamp. She loved how it cascaded down her back in soft waves and swooping curls and admired it greatly.

"I look so different," she said finally in a completely dumbfounded voice. "Will men really think I'm beautiful beneath all this paint?"

"It's the 'paint' as you call it that makes you beautiful, you ninny," chided her aunt as she put the rouge down and then went into the bedroom. A few minutes later, she called Lucinda in, and when she entered, Elise was picking through the clothes that were hanging in her large armoire.

"We have to choose your dress for tonight, and I suppose it will have to be something of mine. Those frumpy and shapeless flowered things you insist on wearing are just not going to do; you couldn't attract a man in one of those things if you tried!"

Elise laughed heartily at her own joke as she considered all the lavish gowns in her massive wardrobe. Most of them were immedi-

ately deemed inappropriate; whatever Lucinda wore had to make her look ready for love from the auction winner.

After sorting for a solid ten minutes, Elise pulled a nearly transparent white lace gown from the cabinet. She immediately turned and held it up against Lucinda to see if it was too long.

“Try this one on,” she urged as she handed the gown to her. “It’s actually sleepwear but I think it might be just what we’re looking for tonight.”

Lucinda dutifully shed the cotton robe she had been wearing and unquestioningly donned the thin white gown. She was horrified when the neckline landed very low on her breasts and exposed the tops of them provocatively. She tried to cover herself with her hands, but Elise just pushed them roughly away.

“Stop being such a silly goose,” she demanded as she led Lucinda to a mirror. “Look and see how it sets off your natural curves.”

Lucinda blushed deeply when she saw how the sheer cloth flaunted her pert pink nipples, and nearly cried out when she realized there was absolutely nothing about her body that was hidden.

The translucent lingerie was formfitting around her shapely hips, and if it had not been for the sturdy cotton bloomers she wore, everything from the waist down would be just as visible as her breasts were.

“I can’t wear this in public!” cried Lucinda as she tried to remove the whisper thin nightgown from her body.

“Not only will you wear it,” explained Elise angrily as she held her niece’s wrists tight, “but you will wear a robe over it at first. When I give you a signal, you will remove the robe and show all the bidders exactly what they will be winning if they have enough cash. Now hurry up and take off those damn ridiculous bloomers, they do absolutely nothing for you!”

Lucinda felt tears coming, but held them at bay. She knew better than to incur her aunt’s wrath by ruining her makeup. She

did as she was told, and when she handed over the bloomers, Elise threw them across the room.

"The only thing those are good for is the fire," she said with blatant repugnance. "In our line of work, bloomers and flowery old lady dresses just have no place."

Seeing that now the soft triangle of hair between her legs and the twin globes of her bottom were now also out for display made Lucinda finally abandon what little courage she had.

"I'm frightened," she wailed miserably. "I don't want all those men staring at me like I'm a prize racehorse for sale! I won't even know what to do when I'm alone with a man!"

"Just make sure and do whatever he wants," counseled Elise sternly. "And make him feel like he's the most talented man on earth. If he wants to hit you or do anything else strange make sure and sing out, such practices are not allowed at Chez Elise."

Elise turned her frightened niece away from the mirror and put a hand on each of her trembling shoulders. Her violet eyes seemingly delved into Lucinda's very soul as she gave her niece a final piece of advice.

"Whoever produces the most gold tonight owns you body and soul until he has made you into a woman. The sooner you accept that idea, the better off you'll be."

Her aunt's harsh words sent a bolt of fear through her already rapidly pounding heart. A man had only touched her once in her life, and if the winner was as lewd as her stepfather Ben Kruger had been, she was not sure how she would react.

The chime from the finely crafted grandfather clock in the sitting room corner made Lucinda jump and shattered her anxious thoughts.

"It's time for the auction," said her aunt sharply as she handed her a gray silk robe. "Put this on and do exactly as I say from here on out. There are a lot of men downstairs very eager to behold the virgin they're competing to deflower."

Lucinda gladly donned the gray silk robe; the fluffy white feathers around the cuffs and the hem were actually quite pleasing against her skin. If only she could wear the robe all night instead of the scandalous garb she sported beneath it!

When Elise opened the sitting room door, all the loud talk, friendly shouts, and raucous laughter drifted up from the massive crowd that had assembled in the lobby below.

The lobby itself had been readied for the auction hours before; a small podium had been borrowed for the auctioneer. Two chairs had been placed very near it, one for Elise and the other for Reed. She fully intended to be holding her beloved's hand on her most glorious night as madam and owner of Chez Elise.

Elise kept a firm grip on her niece's shoulder as they descended the massive curving staircase, and as they neared the crowd, the catcalls, whistles, and shouts became almost deafening.

Lucinda had an irresistible urge to bolt from the hideous happenings and never look back, but as if Elise could read her mind, her aunt's grip on her shoulder suddenly tightened and became as secure as an iron claw.

Lucinda thought her heart would burst from relentless hammering when at last they reached the landing where she would be put on display. She stared out into the sea of unfamiliar male faces gawking at her and was totally transfixed with fear.

After a few moments, Elise nodded to her as a signal to disrobe, but the frightened Lucinda missed it completely and kept the silk robe gathered tightly around her.

Elise, frustrated with her niece's obvious fright, clenched her teeth in rage as she proceeded to wrench the fragile robe from her niece's grip and cast it onto the staircase behind them.

The entire room went silent as Elise turned her niece around slowly before the crowd. She wanted all the prospective bidders to get an eyeful of her niece's generous attributes, and the men were all as mesmerized as she had hoped they would be.

Lucinda felt tears prickling her eyelids, but did not give in to them. A small shred of courage she was able to summon from within refused to deepen her humiliation by crying before all the strangers in the room.

“Here is your prize, gentlemen,” announced Elise loudly so every last man could hear. “A virgin to be sure! Though she is timid by nature, she is guaranteed to be good bed sport! I know she is hoping one of you fine and skilled men will initiate her into the delightful world of pleasures of the flesh!”

When she had finished her speech, she noticed that Reed had arrived and was seated in his designated chair. He had his coat across his lap and watched the presentation as did the rest of the men. She left her niece alone on the landing as she rushed down and sat next to her darling. Eagerly she placed her hand in his as the auctioneer took his place behind the podium.

Judd Penfer, owner of the local feed store, had been asked a week before to be the auctioneer for the event. He had agreed to her terms amicably, he was a happily married man and did not care one way or the other who won the girl for the night.

Elise had returned unseen to the feed store two days ago and had given him double the fee they had originally agreed on, and he accepted it willingly. She explained that the extra money was to ensure that he was to give Garrett Cameron every advantage in any bidding war that would ensue, and Judd assured her that he would.

Judd banged the wooden gavel he had been supplied with to get silence in the crowded room, and when he was sure he had everyone’s attention, he spoke in his most professional voice.

“Before we start this auction, the lovely Miss Draiden has asked me to explain the single rule she has set. The winner will pay with gold only at the end of the auction; no bank notes or drafts will be accepted as payment.”

To keep up the appearance that the auction was a fair and unbiased contest, he paused a few minutes in case anyone wanted to

dispute the single rule. When he saw no hesitation or doubt in anyone's facial expressions, he continued with his duties.

"Since there have been no objections, let's begin the auction! Okay, gentlemen, let's start the bidding at five dollars; only five measly dollars for this sweet little honey to be your companion this very night!"

"Five fifty." An eager shout came from the back of the room, and the first bid immediately launched the auction into a vicious price war.

The bids easily soared to forty dollars, and just before the shout of "Going twice at forty dollars!" Garrett Cameron called out, "Seventy-five dollars!"

There was a massive intake of breath by the crowd, and many men present had to admit defeat. More than just a few cuss words and mutterings of, "Too rich for my blood," could be heard coming from the sorely disappointed participants.

Elise, pleased that she was having her way, smiled warmly at Garrett. Just as flashes of her marrying Reed danced through her mind and seconds before Garrett was declared the auction winner, another bid was called out.

"One hundred dollars!" shouted Reed meaningfully as he dropped Elise's hand.

Elise stared at the impeccably dressed man seated next to her in utter shock, and then a nervous smile crept across her face. She put a hand on Reed's thigh and rubbed it affectionately.

"How divine of you to attempt to drive up the price, darling! Once again you seem to have my best interests at heart."

"I'm bidding to win," he snapped hatefully as he threw her hand off his leg, "and I have enough gold with me to do it!"

"If you dare bid again, Reed Donovan, it's over between us!"

"One hundred and fifty," shouted Garrett defiantly from the crowd as he tried to stare down his hated rival.

“There was never anything between us to begin with,” he hissed at her just before glaring at Garrett and shouting loudly, “Two hundred!”

“Two hundred and fifty,” shouted Garrett with authority; sure he had just ended the auction the way Elise had wanted.

All eyes swung to Reed, and he did not disappoint. He kept his composure, as he always did, and then slowly stood up to his full six foot two inch frame. Just before he rose, he picked up a cloth bag that he had kept in his lap and had been concealed by his coat. Without a moment’s hesitation, Reed took the bag and plunked it heavily down on the podium in front of Judd.

“Let’s end this abominable flesh auction once and for all, shall we? I bid the sum of the gold coins in this bag, five hundred dollars.”

The crowd that had remained to see who finally won the bidding war collectively made sounds of awe; most of them had not seen that much gold at once in their lives.

Both Garrett and Judd looked at Elise questioningly, but all she could do was hang her head in defeat. She could not back a higher bid; all the money she could have supplied Garrett with was in the bank. She had been trapped by the single rule she had set, and with great reluctance, Elise nodded slightly at the auctioneer.

“Going once!” Judd shouted while never taking his eyes from Garrett.

“Going twice.” The announcement came and went with both Garrett and Elise powerless to stop it.

Garrett cursed loudly and shoved his way through the crowd and out into the busy street before the auctioneer’s gavel sounded its final blow.

“Sold to Mr. Reed Donovan for the amount of five hundred dollars in gold!”

Reed bowed graciously to the spattering of applause his win had gotten him, and then quickly went behind his chair and onto

the staircase. He found the gray silk robe that had been tossed aside earlier and gently shrouded Lucinda with the sleek dressing gown.

The previously stunned crowd was in for another great shock as instead of taking her upstairs as he was supposed to, he took her hand in his and led her down from the landing and into the lobby. The mass of amazed and gaping men parted like the Red Sea as the couple crossed the lobby and headed for the front door.

As they exited the crowded brothel, an undeniable curiosity made all the remaining auction participants file outside to see what could possibly happen next.

When the couple reached the edge of the wooden porch, Lucinda gasped in delighted surprise as Reed easily swooped her up into his solidly muscled arms and carried her across the street and into the Red Rose Hotel.

Elise was among the onlookers, and she was barely able to keep her rage in check. The inferno of violent fury churning within her heart suddenly escalated, and the raw pain was so overpowering that it consumed all the feelings she had for Reed and altered them hideously.

The bright, shimmering, and unshakably devoted love she held within her heart twisted painfully and became a black and acrimonious mass of unconditionally evil hatred.

He had deceived her with deliberate malice and heartless cruelty, and as she gazed steadily at the hotel they had entered, she solemnly swore that the man she had once longed to marry would pay dearly for what he had done.

Chapter 3

Lucinda felt as if she were in a glorious dream as she rode in the safety of Reed Donovan's arms. If she had been allowed to choose her first lover from all the men she had seen come and go in Chez Elise, he would have been the one. She barely knew the handsome dark-haired man, but she could sense he was gentle and had a kind soul.

When he had made his first bid, her heart had soared. The mere thought of Garrett Cameron winning the auction and being her lover had been devastatingly horrible, he reminded her in more than one way of a weasel.

Just as she had sensed goodness in Reed, she sensed evil in Garrett; she thought him too unnecessarily foul-mouthed and crude. If what she was about to participate in was truly going to hurt like her aunt said it would, she wanted Reed, and not a man she had instantly despised and mistrusted.

When they entered the practically empty hotel lobby, Lucinda was pleasantly surprised. The decorating job was just as elaborate as Chez Elise, but the interior of the Red Rose was elegant and stylish instead of flamboyant and gaudy.

The furniture, walls, carpeting, and even the velvet drapes, were all in muted shades of pink, rose, and mauve. The colors blended together seamlessly to create a beautiful and tranquil environment. Reed set her gently on her feet by the front desk and gazed at her amusedly as she took in her posh surroundings.

"Do you like my hotel?" he asked with a smile.

“I think it is the loveliest place I have ever been in,” she gushed happily.

“I don’t have an entire floor of rooms to myself like your aunt does, but I have a very spacious suite upstairs. My best friends in the world, Bill and Marie Hanscom, occupy the suite next to mine. They are valued employees as well as friends, and I am sure they will both like you immensely when I make the introductions.”

“Introductions?” she asked, obviously perplexed. “You sound as if I will still be here in the morning. As soon as we are done with the business you paid for, I must return to Chez Elise or my aunt will be furious.”

“Follow me, please,” he said as a playful twinkle emerged in his dark eyes.

Lucinda did so willingly, and they went up to the third floor. Reed produced a set of keys from his pocket and then opened the door and held it for her. She entered what she quickly realized was his suite of rooms.

The room they stood in was definitely masculine with its dark paneling and highly polished mahogany furniture. The whole room had a scent of cloves and cinnamon, and she instantly felt at ease and comfortable within it.

A large fireplace with a gleaming wooden mantle was the centerpiece of the room, and a few logs ready for lighting sat neatly in the steel grate.

There were quite a few exquisite paintings of landscapes on the walls, and she beheld them each for a few moments before noticing the soft Persian rug on which she stood. She found its intricate pattern to be quite fascinating.

When she looked at Reed again, he motioned for her to follow him to another door to his left.

“From this moment forward, you no longer live or work at Chez Elise,” he explained softly as he put a key in the door lock and turned it. “I want you to stay here with me. This will be your

room; I trust you will find everything you need in there. I will send Bill over to your aunt's tomorrow morning for your belongings."

The room was plain with no real color scheme or motif to it, and there were several dusty boxes piled in two of the corners. A small bed, a desk, and an old and decidedly sad-looking dresser were the only furniture.

"We can have the room decorated any way you like, Lucinda. I apologize for the drabness of the way it is now. I had originally intended on using it for storage, but I would be honored if you would call it home."

"I think it can be a wonderful room, and I thank you for letting me use it," Lucinda said as she wandered in and sat on the edge of the bed.

"You are very welcome," he replied warmly, "have a good night and get some sleep."

As he was about to shut the door behind him, he noticed she started to fidget nervously. After a few more moments, she looked up at him and then suddenly stood and let the silk robe fall to the floor.

Her body was plainly visible through the sheer nightgown she wore, and as she walked toward him, Reed could not help but admire her stimulating curves and pleasantly protruding nipples.

She was unsure what to do when she stood before him, so she decided to imitate what she had seen the girls at Chez Elise do when a familiar customer entered the building.

She threw her arms around his neck and placed her heavily painted lips against his in a long and sensuous kiss. She slid her hands down his back until she found the two handfuls that were his bottom and she squeezed them appreciatively.

Lost in the swirling fire her kiss ignited in his blood, Reed gave in and kissed her back passionately. His tongue slipped past her lips and explored the sweet cavern that was her mouth while his hands gently fondled her small breasts. He was pleased when

her nipples hardened quickly under his teasing touch, and he felt his manhood grow in appreciation.

“Do you want to go to your room?” she asked in a breathy voice she had heard the whores in her aunt’s employ use, and the sound of her asking such a brash question shattered the enchantment.

With deep regret, he stopped touching and kissing her and just held her hands as his dark eyes stared into hers compassionately.

“If this is what I had won the auction for, I would have just taken you upstairs where we were and had my way with you. I prevailed in that barbaric contest tonight to spare you from every man in the room, and to save you from making the use of your body into a profession. You are so much better than that, Lucinda, and to see you waste yourself on anyone who had money enough to afford your price would have been to truly witness pearls cast before swine.”

What he said touched her heart warmly, and she was completely awestruck that such a sophisticated man would care about what happened to her.

“Thank you very much for everything, and I truly am glad it was you who won tonight.”

“It has been my utmost pleasure, I assure you.” He smiled, and then on a whim, he bowed to her gallantly while kissing the back of her hand.

Lucinda turned and entered the room he had deemed hers and closed the door behind her. Reed stood there for a moment looking at the door she had went through, and put his fingertips on lips still tingling from her kiss.

After a few moments, he decided he was being inordinately foolish and went to his own room. He went inside, closed the door, and began to undress with unsteady fingers. His mind reeled and spun as he involuntarily recalled the sweet taste of her lips and

the firm yet yielding feeling of her breasts beneath his exploring hands.

He groaned slightly as his manhood stirred again with his recollections, and he fought to clear himself of all thoughts of her. He had never in his life been so affected by a woman, and he strove to look at the entire situation objectively.

He reasoned that he had done what any honorable gentleman would; he had saved an innocent and respectable girl from a life of debauchery and sin. At eighteen, she had her whole life before her, and he had done his duty by helping her out of a bad situation.

Because of his actions, Lucinda would go on to find a good husband and lead a decent and moral life, and he should be proud of himself for having the courage to pull off such a righteous venture.

Another voice, this one springing from the depths of his heart, leapt unflinchingly forward and told another tale. What he had done had been entirely self-serving; he did not want another man ever touching her.

To him she was as beautiful and delicate as a porcelain doll and she epitomized all things in life that were good and pure. He could have no more left her in Chez Elise and the clutches of her greedy aunt than he could have stopped breathing.

His face paled slightly as he looked in the mirror and realized what his now rapidly beating heart had revealed to him. For the first time in his life, at age thirty-five, he had fallen hopelessly in love.

Chapter 4

Daybreak found Reed sitting in the hotel office with Bill Hanscom, quietly sipping the strong coffee that was all he had wanted for breakfast. Neither man spoke, and Bill sensed that something very profound had occurred the previous night at Chez Elise.

Bill Hanscom was a bit taller than Reed at six feet four inches, and just seeing him, quite a few people were often intimidated by his size and obvious strength. More than one foolish man had seen his 'lucky' knife and felt its razor sharpness slice their flesh. He kept the weapon in a black leather leg sheath he had specially made for it.

He was definitely a force to be reckoned with when he was angered, but Bill Hanscom was an easygoing man by nature. Anyone daring to venture a closer look at his pleasant face would effortlessly notice a merry twinkle in his cheery blue eyes and a ready smile between his neatly kept beard and mustache. He was always ready for fun, and loved to tell or hear an amusing yarn.

He had managed the Red Rose since it had opened five years earlier, and he had an excellent repartee with customers, suppliers, and especially his boss. They were close friends and confidants, and Bill could not help but wonder what had come over his friend in the last twenty-four hours.

"I want you to get all the books and documents to do with running this hotel together here on the desk this morning," stated

Reed after he had finished his coffee. "I have an assistant manager I want you to start training."

"An assistant?" Bill asked unbelievably as he nearly dropped his cup. "Since when have I needed an assistant?"

"My hiring an assistant manager does not in anyway reflect badly on your work; I just want you to train Miss Lucinda Hoffman in how the business runs and let her help you where she can."

"The same Lucinda from last night's auction?"

"The very same. I want her to be able to do all the paperwork here in six months' time. Is that long enough for you to instruct her on it properly?"

Bill shifted uneasily in his chair and gazed at his friend with disbelief on his face. He had never seen Reed behave in such a way and was thoroughly shocked.

"Not to pry," he began cautiously as he curiously regarded his dearest friend, "but what happened last night so now the girl is going to be working here? You barely know her, Reed. What if she isn't bright enough to handle the paperwork? Keeping this place running is no easy task, you know."

"I guarantee she is bright enough for anything," he replied in a slightly defensive tone, "and I have come to realize I have fallen deeply in love with her. In spite of my having won the auction last night, her innocence is still intact, and I have given her the spare room in my suite to use as her own. I am going to marry her one day, Bill, and I hope to have your sincere blessing."

Bill could only stare at his friend in utter astonishment. If he had said he was selling the Red Rose and joining up with a band of renegade Indians, it could not have shocked him any deeper.

He had never seen the usually reserved and cordial Reed Donovan act like he had this morning; it had always been his way to not get personally involved with anything or anyone. Bill had been convinced Reed would be a bachelor for all his days.

Reed left the office to go get Lucinda, and after he was gone, a thunderstruck Bill finished the last of his breakfast coffee in one gulp. He then took out all the ledgers, invoices, and assorted documents that went along with running a prosperous hotel and spread them out on the desk before him.

When he had finished, he poured himself another cup of the rich and flavorful coffee and then sat down in his chair. He waited patiently to meet the woman who had turned his best friend's life upside down.

A short while later, Reed returned with a wide-eyed Lucinda in tow, and Bill recognized the dress she had on as belonging to his wife, Marie. The garment was quite a few sizes too large for her, but the girl did not apologize for her appearance in any way.

"Lucinda, may I present to you the only man in the entire world I trust besides myself, Mr. William Hanscom."

"Good morning, Lucinda," said Bill easily as he flashed a warm and infectious smile. He shook her hand gently and immediately set her at ease. "I'm the manager of the Red Rose and I'll be teaching you to do all the paperwork associated with it."

Lucinda looked over at all the documents and books on the desk and felt slightly overwhelmed. The ever vigilant Reed saw the distress in her eyes and was quick to respond.

"Do you feel up to it?" he asked with warm concern flowing through his voice and shining in his dark eyes. "Would you prefer to spend today resting? If you feel this is all too much for you, I can escort you back to your room and have Marie bring you some breakfast and tea."

Lucinda knew she could not possibly disappoint this man who had been so kind to her. Though in her heart she wanted to retreat, she took a deep breath and remained in the office.

"I'm ready to learn," she declared solidly to both men, "and I swear I'll try my very best to take it all in."

"I have every confidence you will surpass my expectations," replied Reed as he smiled at her warmly. "You won't find a more kind, patient, and knowledgeable instructor than Bill. I will leave you to your education now. I have a pressing matter that needs attending to."

Reed took a small folded note from his pocket as he shifted his gaze from Lucinda to Bill. The look on his face as he tossed it on the desk told his friend that the note was not pleasant in nature.

"This note was delivered to Marie this morning; she gave it to me when I got the coffee tray. Elise says I must come and claim Lucinda's belongings personally or she will not surrender them at all."

"Do you want me to come with you?" asked Bill in a troubled tone.

"Not at all, I can handle anything she can come up with. I'm sure this is just some pathetic ploy to get me in her presence so she can attempt to make me listen to what she considers to be reason."

"I smell a rat," said Bill distastefully, "and I don't trust Elise Draiden as far as I can throw her. If you're not back here in half an hour, I'm coming to look for you."

Bill's last remark made Lucinda nervous, and Reed immediately sought to put her mind at ease.

"I promise you both, I will be back shortly. The worst I expect her to do is rant and rave and make a deplorable fool of herself. Her false tears and pitiable theatrics have never worked on me before, and they won't now."

As he prepared to leave, he could not help but smile at Lucinda and take her hand in his. He bent down and kissed her cheek sweetly, causing her to blush prettily.

"I shall return to you unscathed, my fair princess," he joked as he put on his hat. "Do not fear for me!"

Bill rolled his eyes and shook his head in disbelief at the way his friend was acting. He had never known Reed to harbor a ro-

mantic bone in his body, and now there he was fawning all over a girl he had just met.

“I’m a new man, William,” he proudly declared when he saw his friend’s reaction to his mock chivalry, “and this is the first day of my new life!”

“Well if the ‘new’ Reed is always going to be this syrupy in the future, I would appreciate a warning.”

“Where is your romantic soul, my friend? I bet if you went into the kitchen and kissed your fair Marie’s hand right now, she would simply melt with love for you.”

“If I went in there and bothered her while she was cooking to kiss her hand or anything else, she would more than likely clout me upside the head with a frying pan.”

Reed’s jovial laughter rang out behind him as he left the office and headed toward the front door of the hotel.

Chapter 5

Reed exited the hotel and stepped into the bright morning sunlight. Before he could even start across the street, a wickedly grinning male passerby called out to him.

“How was your prize last night, Donovan? Did you break that little filly in right?”

He chose to ignore the man’s rudeness and ignorance as he continued on his way to his destination. He was surprised when he felt a slight inkling of trepidation creep into his reserve as he stood before the bright red door of the famous brothel. He quickly dismissed the feeling as nonsense and prepared himself mentally for a clamorous confrontation with Elise.

When he entered the brazenly decorated lobby, he saw several nearly nude girls milling around inside—it was much too early for Chez Elise to be doing any serious amount of business. He got the attention of the nearest scantily clad girl by gently brushing her arm with his fingertips.

Obviously not recognizing who he was, the girl went into her usual act and used the playful seductive tone of voice she knew enticed the customers.

“Now a good-lookin’ man like you is exactly what I need for breakfast this mornin’, sugar,” she declared hungrily as she snaked her arms up behind his neck.

“Thanks for the compliment,” he said sarcastically as he removed her arms, “but could you please go tell Miss Draidan that Reed Donovan is here as she requested?”

“Your loss,” she snapped vainly as she turned on her heel and then quickly ascended the stairs to notify her boss of the visitor.

She returned a few minutes later, and Reed noticed how she enjoyed him looking at her as he awaited a reply.

“She says for you to go on up, handsome.”

Reed leaned away from her slightly to avoid the hand she reached out to stroke his cheek, and headed for the curving staircase. He ascended them slowly and was soon at the door to Elise’s private rooms.

He knocked sharply on the white door he knew so well, something he had never bothered to do when he had come to see her during their previous involvement.

“Come in,” came a decidedly downhearted female voice from inside, and Reed inwardly groaned as he did what she had said.

It was all he could do to not burst out laughing when he saw Elise was dressed all in black and clutched a lacy black handkerchief in one of her pale and trembling hands.

She gazed at him with tear-flooded eyes from behind a thin black veil that hung down from the wide-brimmed feather-strewn hat she wore. She daintily dabbed at the corners of her eyes and sighed sadly as she beheld him, thereby completing the illusion of being a woman in deep mourning.

“Really, Elise, this scene is extreme, even for your flair for the dramatic,” he commented with unmistakable scorn.

“Do you not believe my heart is truly broken? Do you doubt the pain and embarrassment your public shenanigans have caused me? I’ve always said you were a cold man, but your indifference to me now has taken cruelty to a new and disheartening echelon.”

“You have no reason whatsoever to be publicly embarrassed or be in the clutches of such supposed tremendous pain,” he said angrily. “Furthermore, it is pure idiocy for you to be nursing any sort of a shattered heart and to be draped in that ridiculous mourning dress. There was never anything between us, Elise, it was simply

another business transaction and I paid you well for services rendered.”

“How can you be so utterly inhuman?” she asked after a small cry of sorrow had escaped her quivering lips. “All the hours we spent together meant nothing to you?”

“I won’t deny that I enjoyed your company, but you are taking that and blowing it way out of proportion into some love affair that never happened.”

She put her head on her arms and wept exceptionally noisily, and Reed found himself quickly losing patience with her and her poignant little performance.

“I have come for Lucinda’s things as your note requested, now where are they?”

She looked up at him and pointed to a far corner of the room. He saw a small and threadbare steamer trunk, and the way it was haphazardly laying on the floor indicated that it had been carelessly tossed or kicked there.

Reed stormed over to the case and grasped one of the handles firmly. Just as he began to drag the trunk to the door Elise sprang from the couch and blocked his way.

“How can that stupid, mealy-mouthed brat melt your cold heart and inspire such a deep love within you? She could never be anything but a clumsy and hopeless fool when it comes to knowing what a man like you truly wants and needs!”

“Perhaps it’s her very innocence and lack of carnal knowledge that charms me the most,” replied Reed contemptuously.

Pure hate sizzled feverishly in her violet eyes as the devastating insult hit home. “If you believe that, then you’re a bigger fool than she is,” she spat acidly.

“I have had more than enough of you, Elise!” he shouted as his anger erupted into a fiery blaze of rage. “I am leaving now and taking Lucinda’s things with me and I strongly suggest you do not attempt to delay me any further!”

He flung the door open so viciously the crystal knob punctured the plaster wall behind it. The loud crash and the small puff of white plaster dust did not faze him in the least as he easily hauled the small chest out of the room and into the hallway. As he started down the stairs with it, he could hear her rapidly approaching from behind.

“We’re through, Reed Donovan, in every way!” she shrieked maniacally from the top of the staircase. “I will run that insipid hotel of yours out of business and laugh as you beg for coins in the street! Mark my words, you will deeply regret all you have done to me, you malicious maggot!”

Reed refused to participate in any more of her impetuous lunacy and ignored her as he took the steamer trunk out of the building.

He was relieved when he entered the Red Rose, and took a few deep breaths to calm himself. He then took the single piece of battered luggage upstairs and placed it before the door to what was now Lucinda’s room.

When he was positive he appeared entirely unruffled and unaffected by his trip across the street, Reed returned to the office. He found Bill and Lucinda pouring over the paperwork, and they looked up at him when he walked in.

Lucinda smiled at him affectionately and suddenly all the infinitesimal traces of his prior irritation were magically melted away.

“How is the bookwork coming along?” he asked lightly.

“She’s as smart as you said she was,” replied Bill enthusiastically, “I’ll have her doing this work alone way before six months is up.”

“Splendid! Can I tear her away from you for just a short while, Bill? I know I could use a cup of tea, and I would enjoy it so much more in Lucinda’s company. Shall I have Marie send you a cup as well?”

“I’ll say yes to both, and tell my darling Marie if she could see her way to cutting me a slice of her mixed berry pie, I would love her for it.”

“You would adore that woman in spite of anything,” declared Reed with a knowing smile as he and his lady left the room together.

The dining room of the Red Rose was large and elegant, and a dozen beautifully dressed tables were placed inside. The tablecloths were the same color scheme as the lobby had been, and there was a small opaque vase with a single red silk rose on each table. Lucinda and Reed chose a table in the center of the room for their tea.

“Do you think the bookwork is something that interests you?” he asked after they were seated.

“I understand everything Bill was showing me well enough,” she replied quickly. “Math was always one of my best subjects in school.”

Her swift reply to his question and the way she continued to appear anxious had Reed slightly concerned. She had seemed to be almost in her own world when he had asked her about the paper-work.

“Is there something bothering you? You seem very distracted right now.”

“Can I ask you a question, Reed?”

“Of course” he replied brightly. “My life is an open book to you.”

“You already know so much about me, but I hardly know anything about you. Where are you from? Do you have any family? How did you get started in the hotel business?”

Reed laughed amicably. “That’s quite a bit more than just one question, but I will gladly tell you all you seek to find out. The Donovans are a very old and very wealthy family in the South; we made our family fortune in the lumber trade. When my twin brother and I turned twenty, our father gave us both five hundred

thousand dollars. 'Go find your destiny' he said to us. 'Though it may seem hard to find, there is a place for you boys somewhere in this world.'"

"Your father sounds like a wonderful man," commented Lucinda glowingly.

"He is a good man, and he was especially thrilled when my brother David decided to remain in Georgia and invest his money in the family business. He has expanded it considerably and done very well for himself."

"What made you come to Holton?"

"I had always longed to see the West, so I decided to seek my own elusive destiny in the great state of Texas."

"Have you found your destiny yet?" she asked curiously.

"Yes," he replied tenderly as he took one of her hands in his. "I truly believe I have."

They held each other's gaze amorously until Marie arrived with the tea and broke the enchantment between them.

Marie Hanscom was a very pretty woman with rich brown hair and expressive jade green eyes. She smiled at both Reed and Lucinda as she put the tray she had been carrying on the table and unloaded its contents before them. Lastly she put down a small plate of thin sugar cookies.

"Lucinda Hoffman, please meet the lovely Marie Hanscom; she is the cook here and the most magnificent woman to ever set foot in my hotel. As you know, Bill Hanscom was the man lucky enough to steal her heart."

"It's very nice to meet you, Lucinda. I hope you are comfortable here at the Rose," she said warmly as she smiled at the girl. "But you, Reed Donovan," she teasingly scolded, "you're such a flatterer, you're going to have this nice young lady thinking you're nothing but a silver-tongued devil!"

Lucinda laughed prettily, and Reed gave her a playful wink and a smile just before he fondly addressed Marie.

“Your husband has requested a cup of tea and a slice of your fabulous mixed berry pie. I’m sure he needs it to sweeten up all the paperwork he’s tending to in the office.”

“I’ll take it to him, and in the meantime, you both make sure to try one of those sugar cookies. I made them just this morning.”

“If you made them, my dear, I’m sure they’re as light as air and as delicious as ambrosia.” Reed smiled.

Marie blushed and giggled happily before she returned to the kitchen. As soon as she was gone, Reed turned all his attention back to the beautiful lady at his table.

“As I’m sure you’ve realized by now, it was Marie who kindly loaned me the dress you’re wearing. The good news is you won’t have to borrow it much longer, my dear; I am going to take you down to Louise’s dress shop tomorrow and order some dresses made just for you.”

“I don’t have enough money to pay for any new clothes,” Lucinda confessed sadly as she cast her eyes downward.

“I will deduct their cost from your salary,” explained Reed gently as he once again took her hand in his. “A small amount each week. I want you to have clothes that will compliment the lovely lady you are.”

Lucinda felt herself becoming lost in his dark eyes as she gazed at him in wonder. No one had ever been so kind and generous to her, and his actions constantly amazed her.

Reed smiled inwardly as he sipped his tea, he was having the time of his life. He had no intention of deducting anything from her ever; he wanted the new wardrobe to be a gift.

He longed to see her in the very latest fashions, for her to have the absolute best of everything. Reed was falling even more deeply in love with her, and he delighted in every minute of his unbelievable happiness.

Chapter 6

Garrett burst angrily into Chez Elise, a look of pure rage mottling his boyish features. He ruthlessly pushed away the girl who had come up to him flirtatiously, and stormed over to the large curving staircase.

“Elise Draiden!” he shouted at full volume toward her rooms. “Get your ass down here now, woman!”

Two of the girls in the lobby looked at each other fearfully and sprinted upstairs to retrieve the woman the apparently insane Garrett was bellowing for so frightfully.

Elise, still dressed in her mourning attire, met the frightened and anxious pair just outside the door to her rooms. They quickly told her of Garrett’s outrageous actions, and she felt decidedly disgusted.

“Please inform Mr. Cameron he can come upstairs and see me as soon as he can conduct himself like a gentleman.”

With that, she turned and went back into her elegant rooms. The girls returned to the lobby and delivered her message, making Garrett even angrier than he had been.

“Who the hell does she think she is?” he demanded of them loudly.

The girls shrugged helplessly, and he furiously stomped over to the staircase and began his belligerent ascent. When he reached her door, he did not bother to knock or announce himself, he just bulldozed his way into the opulent champagne-colored sitting room.

Elise jumped when he made his discourteous entrance, and then just glared at him with cold disdain dancing in her violet eyes.

"I believe my message was explicit enough, you were not to be allowed up here in your current emotional state! How dare you barge so offensively into my private sitting room?"

"I'll act any damn way I see fit," he shot back, "and don't be telling me any different! What the hell happened at the auction last night? You were supposed to back me and you let Reed win! I thought we had a deal!"

"Calm down and conduct yourself like something other than a foul-mouthed lout and I will explain!"

"You sure seem to like tellin' me what to do," he said tightly as he regarded her with narrowed eyes, "but I got news for you, lady. I'm not one of your whores and I'm sure not that fool Reed Donovan! You may try to lead them all around by the nose but not me; I'm my own man and always will be."

"I couldn't back you further in the auction because I only had fifty dollars in gold here in my safe," she replied calmly, determined to not sink to his level of brashness. "I certainly couldn't have stopped the auction; if anyone suspected we had tried to fix the outcome, it would have been disastrous. I can't afford that kind of tarnish on the reputation of myself or my business."

"You're worried about the reputation of a whorehouse?" asked Garrett with disbelief as he laughed bitterly.

"Business is business, Garrett, no matter if you run a livery, a blacksmith shop, or a whorehouse as you so crudely put it. If people don't think you're being fair with them, they won't return."

"Half the games at the Imperial are fixed and nobody complains," he challenged.

"You do pay winners quite often, and the reason you do that is to feed their dreams of winning even bigger. Their greed and dreams of massive wealth is what keeps them coming back to your gaming tables."

“True enough,” he agreed as his ferocious anger started to fade.

She saw the opportunity for manipulation and took it, changing her voice into the velvet purr she knew most men adored. “We were both betrayed at that auction, Mr. Cameron, and I think it’s high time we made some personal business deals to square things up.”

His ice blue eyes lit from within at her inviting tone, and without hesitation, he moved closer to her. He put his arms around her tiny waist and kissed her with blazing passion.

“Tell me what you have in mind,” he breathed when he broke the kiss, and then he began to kiss her again and reach for the hem of her dress.

“I need you to help me find a way to get Lucinda out of Reed’s life once and for all,” she stated softly as she gingerly moved out of his reach.

Garrett cursed loudly, took a few steps back, and turned his back on her. A few minutes later when he faced her again, his breath was in short gasps and he was as enraged as he had been when he first entered her sitting room.

“Do you really think I would be stupid enough to help you with something like that?” he demanded stridently. “You must think I just fell off the back of some damn turnip wagon! I can see it all now; I help you get that chit out of Donovan’s life and then you run back to him and leave me out in the cold! I’m no fool, Elise, and if you know what’s good for you, you’ll never try to play me for one again!”

Elise smiled at him seductively and quickly closed the gap he had made between them. She kissed him tenderly several times as she let her arms snake up behind his neck and caress it gently.

“I’m all through with Reed,” she explained in a honeyed whisper between kisses, “but can’t you see, he has to pay for what he’s

done to both of us? If you could help me achieve this, Garrett, darling, I would belong to you alone.”

His resolve melted under her sultry promise, and he surrendered to her will as he returned her fiery kisses.

“Show me how you can be all mine,” he softly pleaded as his hands began to urgently roam her upper body.

“Love me, Garrett,” she muttered as she undid his shirt buttons and then fumbled with his belt buckle. “Take me here and now.”

Needing no further coaxing, he quickly reached around her and began undoing the tiny buttons on the back of her dress. When he had loosened the bodice enough for it to fall away, he began to kiss the newly exposed tops of her breasts.

He moaned appreciatively as his eager mouth explored her sweet and tender flesh, and his breath came in short and ragged gasps as his sizzling assault continued.

Elise began to undress him as soon as she could, and she kissed, nipped and caressed every inch of his flesh as it became exposed. She appreciated the good size of his throbbing cock as she at last released it from its confinement.

She gently pushed him backward until he was sitting on one of her overstuffed champagne colored sofas, his manhood standing tall and looking decidedly delicious.

Elise knelt down on the floor in front of him and began to stroke his inflamed flesh lovingly. She touched it with feather light strokes on the head and the length of the shaft as she whispered to him sexily.

“Find a way to get rid of her,” she intoned huskily, as without releasing him, she climbed up on the sofa and put a knee on either side of his legs.

She at last relinquished her hold on his pulsating cock, but only to replace the heady sensation of her teasing fingers with enticing brushes of her wet and slippery sex.

“Promise you will help me,” she demanded in a throaty whisper as she goaded him.

“Yes, yes, anything!” he cried out hoarsely as he put a hand on either side of her shapely hips and impatiently tried to penetrate her.

A triumphant smile played about her lips as she got the oath she craved. She made him swear his allegiance to her again before she finally allowed him to lower her down until he was completely encased in her sweet and velvety wetness.

His grasp on her became like iron, as with a loud groan, he lost what little control he had and began to thrust into her wildly.

She did not enjoy it as much as she had when Reed made love to her, but she knew in her heart no other man’s touch would ever surpass his. Still, the passionate and grinding body beneath hers was demanding a response, so Elise threw her head back and closed her eyes so she could pretend she was with the man she truly loved.

Her fantasy was working nicely for her when suddenly Garrett noticed her tightly closed eyes and dreamy expression. In an instant, he released her hips and his strong arms shot up behind her back. He crushed her to him mightily, making her gasp in surprise.

“You open those eyes of yours and look at me as I’m pleasuring you,” he commanded breathlessly. “I won’t have you thinking of that bastard Donovan while you’re with me!”

She had no choice but to do as he said, and his icy eyes locked intensely with hers as he continued to thrust into her furiously. She felt the spine-tingling hot tempest of sensations that was her climax begin to sweep over her as his movements became even more demanding.

They exploded in a fiery maelstrom together, each grasping the other tightly in the sweet agony of their violent joining.

“Elise,” moaned a sweaty Garrett as he suckled her bare breasts. “My sweet Elise, I always knew it would be like this with you. I love you, God help me, I love you!”

She was tremendously pleased to hear his heartfelt declaration; his devoted feelings for her would weaken him into very effortless management.

She learned a lesson from their joining as well; Garrett was not the complete buffoon she had thought him to be. She had been utterly amazed that he had been able to decipher what she had been imagining as they coupled, and when he had informed her of it, she had seen an indication of madness in his eyes that had frightened her badly.

She vowed to herself to mask her emotions more cleverly in the future so he would never find out her true intentions concerning him.

Chapter 7

Shortly after daybreak on the following day, Reed knocked lightly on Lucinda's bedroom door.

"Just a few minutes," she answered sweetly, and true to her word, in a few minutes, the door opened and she stepped out of the room.

She wore the black flowered dress she had worn the day she arrived in Holton, and had the dress Marie had graciously loaned him draped over her arm. Her gleaming blonde hair hung loose, and her aquamarine eyes sparkled at Reed when she smiled at him with genuine fondness.

"You look lovely, my dear," he said sincerely as he held out an arm to her. "Would you be so kind as to let this aging southern gentleman escort you down to breakfast?"

"You are not aging in any way," she scoffed. "When I look at you, I see a very handsome and debonair man whose attention I in no way deserve."

"I shall be the judge of that, Miss Hoffman, if you don't mind," he replied with a warm and dashing smile.

"I want to wash this before I return it to Marie, where do you keep the washtub?" she asked as she slightly raised the arm that had the loaned dress on it.

"Laundry is not done here at the Red Rose, it is all sent out to a woman who lives at the other end of town. Just give the dress to Marie and she will see it is included in the load for the week."

"Wouldn't it be cheaper to do the laundry here?"

“It’s not always about the money,” he replied gently. “If I started having the laundry done here, how would Mrs. Linabeck support her four children now that her husband has passed away?”

Lucinda smiled at him tenderly, and at that moment, she lost her heart to Reed Donovan. She had never known a man to be so kind, giving, and generous, and she gladly put her arm through his as they descended the stairs to the hotel lobby.

Marie had just finished setting a breakfast table for them in the crowded dining room as they entered, and she could not help but admire what a lovely couple they made. She noticed a slightly different look on the delicate features of Lucinda, and she inwardly leapt for joy when she recognized what it was. She had fallen for Reed as hard as he had for her. She knew the expression well because she and her beloved Bill still looked at each other like that every day.

“Don’t you two look chipper this morning,” she said happily as they took their seats at the round table. “Are you off to somewhere special?”

“We are both taking the day off, me from my ownership duties and Miss Hoffman from her learning. Louise’s dress shop awaits us, where I will be purchasing an entire new wardrobe for this lovely lady by my side.”

“He’s letting me pay him back over time,” Lucinda quickly interjected.

Reed winked deliberately at Marie as she left for the kitchen, and Marie knew he would never accept a dime from a girl he obviously loved so dearly.

Lucinda and Reed talked and sipped coffee until Marie returned with their meal. Lucinda was shocked when she found liberal helpings of pancakes, bacon, fried ham, and home fries all on her plate.

"If I were to eat all this, I would never fit in any dress they made me," Lucinda declared as she gazed in wonder at the bountiful meal before her.

"If you leave a table I set hungry, you have no one to blame but yourself," stated Marie with pride in her voice.

"Eat what you want," added Reed pleasantly, "anything left over can be fed to the several stray dogs that always seem to linger by the back door to the kitchen. Marie gives them food all the time, and I believe she considers them pets."

"We were put on this earth to tend to the animals," the cook stated righteously. "Besides, I can recall just last week when a certain owner of this hotel was out there playing with a new black puppy that had come to eat."

"You saw that?" He blushed deeply.

"These eyes of mine miss nothing," she said with a smile as she picked up her tray and headed back to the kitchen.

When they were alone again, they started to eat, and Lucinda savored every bite of the delicious food.

"A lady like you needs more than mere dresses," said Reed about halfway through the meal, "there are things like shoes, hats, gloves, jewelry, and undergarments to be considered as well."

"That's way too much for just me!"

"Nonsense, you need those things whether you realize it or not; and I say you shall have them all."

"I'll be the rest of my life paying you back," she fussed sadly.

"You let me worry about the financial end of things, my dear, I just want to enjoy yourself today and choose anything that strikes your fancy."

As they finished up their meal, Lucinda became increasingly worried. She wanted to tell Reed of the feelings she had for him before they went shopping, but was having trouble finding the right words.

She felt it was absolutely imperative that she tell him now, for she would be horrified if he even had an inkling or notion that she loved him just for buying her gifts.

“Reed, I need to tell you something,” she began when she thought she had something passable worked out in her mind.

He instantly put his fork down and gave her his full attention. As he looked at her, she became lost in his strong dark eyes and the pure angelic qualities of his face, and it caused her to falter miserably in her mission.

“Just say what you have to say,” he coaxed lovingly as he put a warm hand over hers.

“I just wanted to say,” she began slowly, her entire body shaking and her nerves stretched as tautly as piano wire, “that in the last few days, I have begun to have certain feelings for you. I know you will probably think I’m foolish, and I won’t blame you if you do. I just wanted to let you know that I’ve fallen in love with you, and if you can never feel that way about me, please be kind and tell me now.”

Reed smiled widely and his entire face seemed to glow from within. He felt like jumping up from his seat and shouting his love for her to the rest of the hotel patrons who were enjoying their breakfasts.

Each moment that passed was torture for Lucinda, and she steeled herself for the rejection she was sure was coming when she realized he was ready to speak.

“Well, Miss Hoffman, I can tell you this much,” he began as he removed the napkin from his lap and laid it on the table. “I think that is the very best news I have ever received. It just so happens I have been in love with you from the first moment I saw you cleaning in the parlor of Chez Elise. Let’s go upstairs; I think we need to discuss this away from the hotel customers. A crowded dining room is not a very intimate place.”

“Of course,” she agreed in an emotionally quivering voice as she let herself be led from the room. It took a moment for what he had said to sink in, but when it had, she grasped the hand that held hers tightly.

Her legs were like water as they ascended the staircase, and when they were alone and seated on his leather couch together, she put her trembling hands in her lap.

“Please tell me what you said downstairs was not a joke of some sort,” she said as she looked into his dark eyes. “I don’t think I could take it if it was.”

“I’ve never been more serious about anything in my life,” he whispered as he leaned over and kissed her lips tenderly. “I love you, Lucinda.”

“I love you, Reed,” she returned adoringly, then she began to kiss his lips and cheeks. “I love you, I love you, I love you.”

Their kisses suddenly turned fiery, and as if by their own will, their hands began to wander unreservedly over each other’s bodies. Reed felt passion more scorching and impetuous than he had ever known wash over him in a giant wave.

“We have to stop this,” he said raggedly when he realized his self-control was on a razor’s edge. “Things will go further than we want them to.”

“I don’t want to stop,” she quietly stated as she continued to touch him and kiss his soft and willing lips.

“Neither do I,” he added between a few final smoldering kisses, “but when we enjoy each other fully, I want it to be with no regrets. I know if we were to consummate this relationship right now it would be a big mistake. There is a time and place for everything, my lovely, and I am very sorry to say that right here and now is not the correct time or the acceptable place.”

His words cooled the rampant fires burning within them, and they reluctantly let go and began straightening their clothes. As she made herself presentable, Lucinda could not help but admire the

handsome man she had come to love so immensely. She looked forward to the day when they would not have to stop touching, kissing, and holding each other for anything.

When Reed finished smoothing his clothes and his thick and wavy, jet mane, he held his arm out to her in true gentlemanly fashion. She gladly linked her arm through his and they went downstairs together.

They kept their arms coupled as they walked down the dusty street toward the dress shop, and Reed warmly greeted several people he knew along the way. He introduced her as Miss Hoffman, and she was relieved when none of them made any of the rude comments or snide remarks she had been expecting. Between the recent auction and the age difference, she was sure they were prime fodder for gossip, but she was very relieved to not have to hear it herself.

They arrived at the shop much too quickly for her liking, since her walk down Main Street on the arm of such a stylish and refined man had been sheer pleasure. She hoped that inside, they would be able to acquire all she needed to make her feel as elegant as he always looked.

As they entered the shop, Lucinda was immediately drawn to all the beautiful bolts of cloth they had behind the counter. She had never seen so many radiantly exotic colors and textures and she hurried over so she could inspect them all more closely. Reed watched her enjoy herself for a moment with a glint in his eyes, and then turned his attention to the proprietor, Louise Driscoll, when she emerged from a back room.

“I would like the enthralled young lady with me to be properly measured and have half a dozen dresses made for her. Five of them are to be of the every day sort in colors of her choosing. The sixth dress is to be an elegant and flattering gown of silk to be worn at social events, and I will be choosing the color and style for that one.”

“Yes, sir,” the middle-aged seamstress replied smartly, “my assistants and I can have those completed for you in six weeks. If the lady would please choose some cloth and dress styles, we can get things underway.”

Lucinda excitedly chose attractive shades of green, blue, brown, yellow, and purple for her every day dresses. She decided to have them all fashioned in the same style with a tight fitting bodice, a modest neckline, and a flowing skirt.

“Please bring all the various shades of blue and green silk you have,” requested Reed politely when it came time to choose the silk for her gown. “Hold each bolt of cloth up next to her face one by one. I will let you know when we arrive at the correct hue.”

The seamstress and her assistants complied, and when an exquisite bolt of a bluish green was held up, Reed pointed and shouted out emphatically.

“That’s it!” he declared as he left his seat and took the bolt of sleek cloth in his hands. “This is the silk her dress must be fashioned from.”

“Do you think it will look good on me?” asked Lucinda as she admired the look and feel of the shiny material.

“It very nearly matches your eyes, darling, but not perfectly. I only say that because there is no color in heaven or on earth that is quite as glorious. It will look magnificent on you, and I will be proud to have you on my arm during the party at the Red Rose.”

“What party?” she inquired animatedly.

“Just a small soiree I decided to put together, and not many people will be invited. The celebration is intended for just a few close friends.”

“I’ve never been to a real party,” she gushed. “I can hardly wait!”

“Well then, my precious, who am I to make you wait?” he smiled at her tenderly as he laid a hand on her cheek. “I will pay

double the normal cost if you put a rush on that ball gown, Mrs. Driscoll,” he called out over his shoulder.

“I love you with all my heart,” she declared just before kissing him soundly.

They spent the remainder of the morning and a good part of the afternoon shopping for Lucinda’s wardrobe. They went to the cobbler, milliner, and the general store where the clerk showed Lucinda a recent copy of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*.

As she looked through the large book, she found a depiction of a lady dressed very elegantly. She admired and studied the elaborate illustration for a few minutes before pointing it out to Reed.

“That’s how I want to look,” she stated determinedly.

“When at last you have everything you need, you will outshine that image by far.”

“Honestly?”

“There is no doubt in my mind,” he replied frankly. “Now that our shopping is finished, why don’t you go ahead back to the Red Rose and tell Marie about your purchases?”

“Aren’t you coming with me?” she asked sadly.

“I have some very boring business to attend to, and I can’t see punishing you by making you come along.”

“How could anything you do ever be boring?” she posed with pure and unashamed love shining brightly in her eyes.

“I thank you for that compliment.” He smiled. “But I assure you it’s all just banking and monotonous errands. Go back to the Rose, and I swear I will be there shortly.”

“I’ll miss you,” she whispered just before she softly kissed him.

He returned her kiss with equal ardor, and then held her close. “I’ll miss you, too, dearest.”

Reed escorted her to the door of the store, and when she left, he could not help but watch her walk down the street. When he was sure she was too close to the Rose to turn back, he reentered the store.

He went directly to a nearby clerk and made a request. "Could you show me your selection of engagement rings please?"

The clerk nodded and then quickly took a velvet-lined tray out of a nearby showcase and put it on the counter in front of Reed.

He inspected all eight rings carefully, finally deciding on a lovely gold ring with a large but discerning diamond. He paid for the ring with cash, and the clerk placed it in a small, blue velvet box for safe transportation. Reed slipped the small box into his pants pocket and then left the store.

Reed hit the street feeling as if he were walking on air, and he could not help but smile and hum happily as he walked along. For the first time in his life, he felt truly alive, that anything and everything was possible.

The party he had mentioned in the dress shop had actually been a split second decision; he had not even told Bill or Marie. All he knew for sure is that he wanted the night he asked Lucinda for her hand to be the happiest she had ever known.

Chapter 8

The gown arrived two days before the party was to take place, and Lucinda was astonished when she removed it from the box.

It was the exact shade of muted teal Reed had requested, and the square neckline had a froth of exquisite silver lace elegantly spilling from it. The sleeves, puffed at the shoulder and tight below the elbow, dripped the same shimmering lace at the wrists. The high waistline had a wide ribbon of teal velvet attached that made a large and lovely bow in the back when tied. The skirt was a very full bell shape with a slight split in the front to reveal a peek at a shimmering silver underskirt.

In smaller boxes were gloves and slippers made of the softest kid that had been dyed to match the underskirt. The stiff petticoats and delicate silk stockings she had ordered to wear under her breathtaking gown were already hers; they had arrived the day before all the way from Chicago.

Reed had contracted the woman he knew styled Elise's hair to come and do Lucinda's the night of the party; he wanted his future wife to be the epitome of style and beauty.

Marie and her helpers, Jeff and Selena, worked busily to get all the food ready for the upcoming event; both Reed and Lucinda had requested all their favorites.

Holton was a relatively small town, and word of a gala affair to be held in the dining room of the Red Rose did not take long to spread. When the precious few invitations finally went out, those

who received them began a harried flurry of activity to prepare for the party.

Louise Driscoll had to bring in extra help to assist in what turned out to be one of the most profitable weeks she had ever known; ladies promised her everything just short of the moon if they could have their gowns finished first.

When at last the highly anticipated night arrived, Lucinda was a complete bundle of nerves. Selena helped her to dress, and when she put on the teal gown, she truly felt like a princess in a fairy tale.

The hairdresser arrived just an hour before the party complete with her comb, brush, and curling tongs. She assured the nervous Lucinda that she would assist with her makeup as well as her hair, and Lucinda breathed a great sigh of relief.

Forty-five minutes later when the hairdresser was finished, Lucinda was handed a mirror and told to look. She hesitated for a moment; frightened she would look like she did the night of the auction. When she did look, she was pleasantly surprised to find that instead of a heavily-painted face, a graceful and stylish lady was reflected in the glass.

Her golden hair was delicately arranged in curls pinned artfully to the crown of her head. A few wavy tendrils hung down on each side of her face, and when she turned her head, they seemed to float on the air.

The rouge that had been applied was in a much more subtle fashion than her aunt had done; it gave her cheeks no more than a decidedly healthy glow. The eyeliner was also much more subdued, and she was pleased to not look like she did on the night her virtue had been for sale.

"Thank you so much for everything," she said gratefully as she paid the hairdresser and gave her a large tip.

"It was my pleasure, Miss Hoffman, and you look very lovely if I do say so myself."

Lucinda then left the room and went to the full-length mirror that Reed kept in his sitting room. She twisted and turned before it, making sure she looked good from every possible angle.

She could hear the noise of the arriving guests from the dining room below her and knew it was time to join them. She went over to the staircase and had to take a few deep breaths to calm her nerves before starting her descent.

The first guest to see her spotted her when she was about halfway down, and he gasped at her beauty. Soon everyone in the room was staring at her appreciatively, but none with the deep love and endless admiration that glimmered warmly in the eyes of Reed Donovan.

He went to the foot of the staircase just as she reached the last step and held his hand out to her gracefully. She placed her hand on top of his and let him lead her into the room where their guests were gathered.

"You are an absolute vision of elegance and style, my darling. I'm so very proud of you," he said as they walked. His kind words caught at her heart and it was all she could do to not cry.

She looked around the dining room as they entered and was amazed at how it had been transformed into a ballroom. Someone had taken the time to hang colorful paper streamers, and the round tables had been all pushed to the walls so dancing could take place later in the evening.

Marie and her assistants had loaded the tables near the door with all the food they had lovingly prepared for the party. There were numerous plates and platters arranged attractively on the tables, and Lucinda was overwhelmed by the huge variety of dishes.

She saw there were succulent peach and apple dumplings, enormous apple, cherry, and sweet potato pies, plump black olives, juicy pickles, boiled and deviled eggs, and several kinds of cookies.

A decadent-looking cheesecake was the centerpiece of all the offerings, and everyone who had even just a taste proclaimed it to be the most resplendent thing they had ever eaten.

An elegant and delicate crystal punch bowl that had belonged to Reed's mother was on a nearby table filled with a delightful fruit punch. Jeff and Selena, both dressed in their own elegant attire, happily served the sweet drink to the guests.

Marie, looking beautiful in a lilac satin gown, smiled proudly as she accepted continuous praise for her delicacies. Her devoted Bill, stylish in a new suit and tie, kept his arm around his wife's back and beamed proudly.

The open floor, its dark wood gleaming in the candlelight, was vacant and seemed to beckon a couple to lead the first dance of the evening. Lucinda let the dashing Reed in his new charcoal gray suit lead her out onto the dance floor, and the musicians immediately began a lilting waltz.

The makeshift symphony consisted of gentlemen playing a banjo, squeezebox, fiddle, and a guitar, but to Lucinda, it was as beautiful as music played by angels on heavenly harps and lyres.

They twirled around the room effortlessly, as if they had been dancing together all their lives. Eventually other couples joined them, but they went unnoticed by Lucinda as she became lost in Reed's eyes, heart, and soul.

When the tune ended, everyone applauded the musicians, who bowed to their audience appreciatively. A lively reel was next on the agenda, and everyone laughed and joked as they skipped, spun, and cavorted to the jaunty music.

Bill asked Lucinda to dance the next waltz, and Reed partnered Marie. Their dear friends and their guests had a wonderful time until suddenly Reed stopped dancing and stared openly at the dining room doorway.

An angry wave of his arms brought the music to an abrupt end, and soon everyone in the room had stopped what they were doing and faced in the direction of the disturbance.

Garrett Cameron, with a lavishly dressed Elise on his arm and a sarcastic smirk on his face, stood just inside the doorway.

The air quickly grew thick with tension as Reed approached the couple and said with an iron tone, "This is a private party and not open to the public."

"We are hardly 'the public' as you put it," stated Garrett arrogantly. "As a matter of fact, my woman is a blood relative of your guest of honor."

"Neither of you were given invitations." Reed stepped toward his enemy menacingly. "So your presence is not wanted here. You are both decidedly not welcome and making our legitimate guests uncomfortable."

"Well then, maybe we should take our problem out in the street; that is, if you're man enough to face me," challenged Garrett as he boldly stepped forward.

"No one here is going to do any such thing," said Lucinda as she quickly came forward and wedged herself between the two bitter enemies. "Mr. Cameron, you and my aunt can stay as long as you both remain calm and composed."

At first Reed was furious as the couple gazed at him with triumph in their eyes. He calmed himself and thought for a moment, and then slowly a secretive smile crept across his chiseled features.

"You are correct, my darling," he said in a light tone as he put an arm about Lucinda's waist. "It was incredibly rude of me to want them to leave. I would like very much for them to witness to the highlight of this party anyway, so they may remain."

They moved aside so the unexpected couple could enter the room, and all the guests visibly relaxed. The band members conferred for a moment and then resumed playing, and within a few minutes, all was merriment again in the Red Rose Hotel.

After a few more dances, Reed and Lucinda went to the table for some punch. They enjoyed their drinks until Garret and Elise approached them.

"You dance with my beaux, Lucinda, and I'll dance with yours," said Elise quickly as she began to tug Reed toward the dance floor.

Solely to spare everyone present the grief and worry of another angry scene, they both surrendered and allowed it to happen.

Lucinda waltzed with Garrett, though his unavoidable nearness and the hungry look in his eyes made her decidedly uncomfortable.

"You are beautiful tonight, Lucinda," he said quietly as they danced. "You even outshine your aunt. I'm sure you chose the color you are wearing knowing how much it flatters you."

"Reed chose both the color and style of my gown," she replied tightly as she carefully avoided his probing gaze.

"Then he must be congratulated on his excellent choices. Tell me, have you ever regretted my not winning the auction? I know I certainly have," he said heatedly as he pulled her even closer.

Reed was faring no better with his dance partner, and Elise was pressing herself into him just as tightly as Garrett pulled Lucinda toward himself.

"I miss you," she breathily whispered as they danced. "Just between us, Garrett could never be the man you are. Come back to me, Reed; forget that simpering child who has somehow bewitched you."

"You chose to be with Garrett, so you have no one to blame but yourself." He sighed impatiently. "Please do not force me to go over the details of our association again. I believe I have made my feelings quite clear several times in the past."

"I have no intention of giving up on you," she declared in a strong-willed voice.

The last strains of the waltz sounded, and Reed smiled. "I think perhaps the next few minutes will finally put any misplaced hopes you are harboring to rest."

Reed left Elise standing alone on the edge of the dance floor and went over by the tables laden with food. He clapped his hands loudly to gain everyone's attention, and when he was sure he had it, he addressed the gathering as a whole.

"The last few weeks have by far been the happiest I have ever known," he declared loudly, "and I now realize what has been missing in my life for a very long time. I want to remedy that situation here and now, and ensure my happiness forever. Lucinda, my darling, please come here and join me."

Lucinda was relieved to pry herself from Garrett, who had managed to stay close in spite of the end of the waltz.

Garrett went over and stood next to Elise, who immediately grasped his hand tightly. Trickle of dread as cold as ice raced down her spine as Lucinda joined Reed and he kissed her devotedly. When she saw Reed take Lucinda's hand and then fall to one knee, her stomach sank to her feet.

"Lucinda Hoffman, will you do me the supreme honor of agreeing to be my wife?"

Lucinda nodded vigorously as tears of joy sprang to her eyes. He took the velvet box from his pocket, removed the shimmering ring, and slipped it deftly on her finger as the guests applauded and cheered happily.

Elise closed her eyes tightly to blot out the scene, but the cheers and well wishes from the other guests mocked her effort. Her hand, still grasping Garrett's tightly, trembled mightily with her effort to not reveal her devastating heartbreak and explosive fury.

Garrett must never know how upset she was by the turn of events; she still needed him to help her complete her final solution to the entire situation. When she opened her eyes and beheld the

couple again, they were embracing tenderly, and that sight just intensified the agonizing grief that already shredded her heart.

Lucinda would have to be disposed of as soon as possible, before she and Reed could marry. She turned to her escort and gave him a quick kiss, hoping he would see it was a sign that she was not upset by the proposal.

Garrett smiled at her sweetly, and she was relieved to know that at least he was still very much under her control.

Chapter 9

Elise and Garrett congratulated the newly engaged couple, and it was all she could do to not scream piercingly and scratch her niece's eyes out. Shortly afterward, when she truly feared she could no longer contain her boiling, black hatred, she pleaded a headache and she and Garrett left the hotel and returned to her rooms across the street.

Garrett settled into one of her comfortable overstuffed chairs and took a slim cigar from a small supply of them he had in the inner breast pocket of his suit coat. He took a match from the same pocket and struck it on the bottom of his shoe, and with a few puffs, had the cigar lit and inhaled deeply.

"I have these specially made for me on a plantation in Virginia and shipped here," he bragged as he exhaled the fragrant smoke, "they're as smooth as a virgin's thighs."

Elise turned on him with a scorching fury; she hated Garrett Cameron intensely at that very moment. What she truly despised about him was the one thing he could not change; he was not Reed Donovan.

"Put that smelly thing out before it stinks up my clothes and draperies!" she shouted viciously. She then lowered her voice and looked at him with narrowed eyes full of contempt and disgust. "How rude of you to smoke without asking my permission; I'm afraid your uncultured background is showing, my dear."

His boyish features turned to stone as he calmly went over to a window, opened it, and tossed out the cigar and burnt match. Af-

ter he had closed the window again, he sprung on her with a rage so intense it frightened her. He brutally shoved her into the nearest wall, causing a framed photo to crash to the floor and break.

“Don’t you ever bring up my past again!” he hissed through clenched teeth as he pinned her to the wall by pressing a strong forearm against her throat. “You’re awful snooty actin’ for bein’ a dirty whore. I bet there’s enough skeletons in your closet to fill up a boneyard three times over!”

She clawed at his arm and struggled to breathe, and when he thought she had suffered enough to truly frighten her, he let her go.

“I thought you loved me,” she croaked tearfully as she crumpled gracelessly and landed on her knees. She quickly put her hands to her throat as she painfully gasped for air, coughing hoarsely a few times in the process.

“I do love you,” he said as his rage ebbed away, “but sometimes you make me madder than a peeled rattler.”

“Will you still help me to get rid of Lucinda?” She looked up at him hopefully.

“I been thinkin’ on that,” he said as he reached out a hand to help her up, “and I’ve decided that I will as long as you are willing to do what I ask.”

“What is it that you want?”

“The day she’s gone from his life and this town for good, you will marry me.”

“I’m sorry, that is simply not acceptable,” replied Elise coldly as she straightened her gown and regained some of her former poise.

“It’s either their wedding or ours, I will not give in on this,” he declared solidly as he grabbed her upper arms and forced her to look him in the eye. “Promise to marry me or I swear I will not lift a damn finger to help you.”

Her mind began screaming with panic, if she promised him what he wanted, it would ruin all her plans. "Give me the night to think it over," she replied at last.

"Of course, my dear," he said gallantly as he released her and then gave her a sound peck on the cheek. "You can expect me here very early for your answer."

Elise did not move again until she was sure she had heard him leave the building. Once she had heard the front door close, she rushed toward a window and peered out into the darkness. She could make out his figure riding his horse in the direction of the Imperial and was relieved to see him go.

She proceeded to go into her bedroom, which was decorated in shades of light peach. She was both mentally and physically exhausted, and she flopped tiredly onto her large four-poster bed without removing her deep green beaded gown. As she lay where she and Reed had spent so much time together, she tried to sort out the entire desperate situation in her mind.

Her heart clenched with pain as she recalled his skillful love-making and how it was going to be wasted on her niece. Bitter jealousy rose in her throat and burned sourly like acidic black bile.

Garrett had been cleverer than she thought he could be by demanding her hand in marriage as payment for his participation. She had assumed by seducing him and giving him the access to her body as he had always craved, he would have been satisfied, but apparently not.

It was not only that she in no way desired to be Mrs. Cameron, but marriage would also ruin her reconciliation plans with Reed. She could not—and would not—allow anything or anyone to put those plans asunder, no matter what transpired.

She happened to think of her pricey emerald-colored gown and how it was getting crushed beneath her. She stood and carefully removed the garment, wishing all the while it were Reed's caring hands taking off her clothes.

When she was clad only in her corset and stockings, she began to pace the room. For two long hours, she paced and tried to figure out a way to get what she wanted without having to marry Garrett. At last she came to a distasteful but viable solution, though the mere thought of what she would have to do made her shudder.

She would marry Garrett as he had demanded, but shortly after the ceremony, he would fall prey to a fatal prearranged 'accident'. Having him break his neck by tumbling down the long flight of stairs below her seemed the most convenient catastrophe and there would be no damage to her establishment. Perhaps even the story of how a newly married groom died there would add a dark ambiance to the place.

As she sat down at her elaborate vanity table and began to remove her makeup, the very thought of being a murderess made her cringe. She had no choice in the matter; Garrett had backed her into a corner with his selfish demand. If everything worked out as planned, no one else would have to know what she had done. She could just take her grisly secret with her to her grave. She would simply lock all recollection of the dark deed in the back of her mind, never to stain her thoughts again.

When her face was completely devoid of paint and powder, she took the small stool she had perched on and moved it over to the window facing the Red Rose. She spent the majority of the night there; staring over at the window to the room where she knew Reed slept. She amused herself by weaving sophisticated and detailed fantasies about when it would all be over and she would be Mrs. Reed Donovan at last.

As the obsidian night sky lightened to deep lavender with the dawn, she rose and removed the few garments she still wore. She could not help but smile as she slipped nude between the soft cotton sheets, soon she would have her world neatly in the palm of her hand.

Both her sickeningly sweet niece and the conniving Garrett would be out of her hair for good and Reed would be by her side where he had always truly belonged.

Elise, imagining it was Reed, touched herself on her already slick and aroused sex. She began to rub her swollen and hardened pleasure nub vigorously as her feelings of intense pleasure began to swell.

She called out his name passionately as she brought herself to an explosive climax, and as she writhed on the bed in pleasure, she continued to rub her throbbing flesh slowly.

When her rapturous sensations subsided, she snuggled under her covers and settled in for sleep, hoping she would dream of the dark-haired man she adored so completely.

Chapter 10

Lucinda woke to a feeling of pure bliss that she would never have believed existed before she left the town of Brandlee, Tennessee. In what seemed as rapid as the stroke of a heavenly hand, her life went from miserable and bleak, to opulent, rich, and marvelous.

As she dressed for the day, she could not help but recall what had been her home and the events leading up to the fateful day her mother had decided it was best for her to leave everything she had ever known behind.

Jane Hoffman had been a beautiful woman filled with pride until the evening her husband had come home just long enough to tell her he was running off with a local saloon girl.

Lucinda's heart and world splintered into oblivion as she was forced to watch her mother, stripped of all her dignity and humility, fall to her knees and tearfully beg her husband not to abandon them both.

"Why? Why, James?" bawled Jane pitifully as she reached out to the man she thought loved her exclusively.

He refused to answer her as he packed his few meager belongings, but just before he walked out the door, he looked back at both his wife and his daughter irately.

"I'm tired of you and this whole damned place, woman! Loretta does things to me you never could, and we are going to New York together tonight! Good riddance to you and that plain daughter of ours!"

Jane Hoffman collapsed to the floor in a paroxysm of wails and heart-wrenching tears while Lucinda tried desperately to comfort her. Jane had just shooed Lucinda away, too caught up in her own grief to accept any kindness. Not knowing what else to do, Lucinda just went to bed, the still steaming pan of eggs and potatoes that was to have been their supper forgotten.

She was shocked to find her mother nursing a tall glass of whiskey the next morning, and when she tried to take it away, her mother scolded her soundly.

“Stay away from my whiskey, girl,” her mother warned drunkenly. “It’s all I have to ease the pain.”

Her mother spent the next few weeks in a constant state of inebriation, squandering what little money they had hidden under the mattress and in the pantry on more and more whiskey.

Lucinda took care of the house during this time; she made meals that her mother mostly refused to eat as well as doing the laundry, housework, and gardening without uttering a single complaint.

A month to the day after her father left, Lucinda sensed a change in her mother, and she was not sure if she liked it. The tears were gone, the whiskey bottle put away, and instead a small but determined smile was pasted on her newly haggard-looking face.

“If your father thinks he is the only one who can find somebody new, he’s wrong,” she stated as she put on one of her best dresses. “I’m going out man hunting tonight and find somebody of my own.”

“We can make it, Mama, just me and you,” Lucinda said affectionately as she smiled at her, “We don’t need anyone else.”

Her mother looked amused and then barked out a short laugh. “I’m not going to have every person in this town look at me with pity and whisper about me behind my back! If I don’t get another man soon, everyone will be convinced I can’t!”

Sadly her mother caught the eye of Benjamin Kruger that night, a notoriously mean drunk who was employed at the local sawmill. Within hours of their meeting, they proceeded to get drunk together and then get married.

When Jane arrived home the next morning, she introduced a totally horrified Lucinda to her new stepfather.

"Who the hell is this?" he slurred as he eyed Lucinda distastefully. "I don't remember you mentionin' any kids when we were gettin' hitched!"

"This is my daughter, Lucinda, she's a good girl," Jane explained defensively.

Ben looked Lucinda over again slowly and then began to rub the crotch of his pants in a very lewd fashion.

"I can think of a few things she'd be good for," he remarked heatedly.

"Now you cut that out, Ben," Jane said as she playfully swatted him on the arm. "That's no way to think of your daughter."

"She ain't no daughter of mine," he replied sloppily as he began to roughly fondle his new wife's breasts. "Let's go in the bedroom and make this marriage legal, or do you want her to watch and learn?"

Jane looked slightly appalled, and Ben just laughed cruelly as he hustled her in the bedroom and then slammed the door shut behind them.

Lucinda's tiny bedroom was right next to her mother's, and she tried hard to block out the disgusting sounds of their crude coupling. She could have sworn she heard her mother cry out in pain a few times, but the yelps and short shrieks were always followed by sounds that were unmistakably drunken pleasure.

Her new stepfather was no kinder to her the next morning or the next few months. He went to work at the sawmill every weekday morning and returned drunk every night. The whiskey flowed

freely in their home as well, and to Lucinda's growing dismay, her mother drank as heavily as her new husband.

Lucinda returned from gathering vegetables in the garden one morning to find them both intoxicated and arguing viciously about her.

"I want that good-for-nothing bitch out of this house!" roared her stepfather, the ever present glass of rotgut whiskey sloshing in his hand. "She's lazy and keeps me from takin' my pleasure with you when I want to!"

"She's a good, hard-working girl," her mother stated between gulps from her own glass of liquor, "and she does a lot around this house. She cooks, cleans, and does the laundry and you should appreciate it!"

"She looks at me as if I were dirt under her feet, and I'm damn tired of it!"

"It's just your imagination," her mother slurred. "She's a good girl."

"I am so God-awful sick of hearing what a good girl she is," he growled as suddenly his rough and craggy face became a mottled mask of rage. He flung his glass into the far wall as he shouted caustically, "Tell you what, Jane, I'm going to find out just how good she is right here and now!"

Ben pounced on Lucinda, knocking the basket of newly harvested vegetables from her arm. With one easy movement, he tore the bodice of her worn dress asunder, exposing her small and pert breasts. Lucinda screamed and stumbled backwards as she tried to cover her exposed flesh with her hands.

In an instant, Ben was upon her again, and he slapped her viciously across the face. The blow stunned her, and he took the opportunity to pull her close, move her hands, and begin to suckle on one of her jutting pink peaks.

Lucinda quickly regained her senses and struggled against him valiantly, until with a hollow *bonk* her attacker went limp and

slumped to the floor. She looked where he had been and saw her mother standing there unsteadily, the large cast iron frying pan clutched tightly in one hand.

"Pull yourself together," her mother demanded tipsily, "we have to get you out of this house before he wakes up."

Lucinda tried to hold together her torn dress while her mother went to the fireplace and pried up a loose stone. She pulled a small amount of paper money from beneath it and then held the crumpled bills out to her daughter.

"I managed to squirrel away this hundred and fifty dollars," she explained solemnly. "I was keeping it for an emergency. You take this and get a stage ticket to Holton, Texas. My sister, Elise, lives there. I'll give you a letter to hand her when you arrive. She runs a business in town called Chez Elise; I think it's a boarding house. You go there and live with her, it's not safe for you here now."

Lucinda stared down at the bills in her hand as tears welled in her eyes. A sudden thought made a spark of hope flare brightly in her mind, and she hugged her mother to her as she explained her idea.

"Come to Texas with me, Ma, we can both live there!"

"I can't go," she stated strongly as she pushed her away. "I have to stay here with my husband."

"Why do you want to stay here with him? You can't possibly love him, how could you?"

"He's my husband," her mother explained as she staggered over to the table and picked up a half full bottle of whiskey. She proceeded to drink straight from the bottle and finished her answer after several large gulps. "I made a promise to God to stay with him, and I will. I hurt so much when your father left me, and I do not want to hurt another person like that. Bring me paper and a pencil to write to your aunt, and get rid of that torn dress. You can pack while I'm writing."

Her mother wrote the short letter between long hauls on the bottle, and when she was finished, Lucinda appeared in an undamaged dress with a small shabby steamer trunk holding her few belongings.

Ben Kruger started to moan and stir on the floor, and with a look of pure trepidation, Jane stuffed the note into her daughter's hand.

"Always remember I love you," she said frantically just before she literally pushed Lucinda out the front door and then slammed it in her face.

A moment later, she pressed her ear to the door and could hear her stepfather moan heavily and then start ferociously cussing and shouting at her mother. She tried to pacify him with what was left in the bottle of whiskey, but it didn't seem to be working well.

Not being able to bear any more, she turned away and started to walk toward Main Street dragging the small trunk behind her.

She caught the noon stage for Texas, and in five days, she found herself in Holton, Texas introducing herself to her aunt.

She had always hoped that she would get a letter, telegram, or even a visit from her mother, but not so much as a word had come from Tennessee. She still loved her mother very much, and in her heart, forgave her mother for the drinking and the bad choices it had brought about. As it turned out, if it had not been for her mother sending her away that fateful night, she would never have met her darling Reed.

Lucinda put the past away as she thought of her fiancée and gazed at the diamond ring he had given her the previous night. She could still hardly believe it was hers, and that soon she would be Mrs. Reed Donovan.

She chose her sunny yellow dress for the day, and as she dressed, she suddenly decided to send her mother a letter about her recent engagement. She grabbed her sunbonnet as she left the

room and quickly went downstairs to find Reed waiting for her in the dining room.

He kissed her good morning, and she shivered with excitement from the touch of his strong yet yielding lips. Bill and Marie soon joined them, and they all feasted on eggs, toast, home fries, bacon, and fresh fruit that had been masterfully prepared by Marie and her assistants.

As she ate, she excitedly explained her wishes to them all, and asked Bill for permission to postpone that day's paperwork lesson long enough to purchase stationery and compose her letter.

"Take all the time you need, dear," he answered warmly as he sipped his coffee. "Those books aren't going anywhere."

Reed smiled at his friend and then took his money clip out and removed a few bills. "There should be more than enough there for your stationery, sweetheart," he said as he gave her the money, "and while you are out, could you pick me up some shaving soap? Sadly mine has become hardly more than a wafer."

"Of course, darling," she replied lovingly as she put the bills in a small white lacy drawstring purse that dangled from her left wrist.

"I'll be back soon," she said cheerfully as she stood and left the room.

Chapter 11

Though she was sure the deplorably sappy Lucinda was enjoying her breakfast at the Red Rose with her besotted fiancé, Elise was barely able to swallow a single mouthful of her own morning meal. She dined with Garrett, who to her utter annoyance, had arrived as early as he had said he would. He looked very dapper in a suit of navy blue broadcloth but ate with the uneasiness of someone to whom manners and self-control did not come naturally.

He had yet to hear what her decision was regarding their marriage, and any time the conversation even remotely veered toward the subject, she quickly tried to change it and distract him.

“Garrett is such an unusual name,” she said when she caught him staring at her expectantly as they ate. “How did your parents come to bestow it on you?”

“My birth name is Leon Cameron,” he began gruffly, “given to me by parents who were as poor and dumb as dirt. Every day, children made fun of my poor clothes and the sorry contents of my lunch pail, and every night we had little or nothing for supper. As I watched them try to scrape a living out of the used-up soil, I always swore to myself that I would become someone important and not be anything like them.”

Garrett put down his fork before he continued. “When I was seventeen, I went to California looking for gold and became friends with an old prospector named Ted Threadgill. ‘Thready’, as he was known, let me in on his claim because he said I reminded him of his

son or someone. Two months of backbreaking labor later, it finally paid off; Thready and me had panned us some gold at last.”

Elise actually looked interested, so he persisted. “We only ever turned in enough to get by on, we didn’t want anyone to know we had found a good vein and jump our claim. Thready and I stockpiled gold for a year; we had enough to pay a king’s ransom ten times over.

“As luck would have it,” he said after a minute, “one night, old Thready got drunk and got to shootin’ his mouth off in town about our gold. He staggered back to our camp at sunup, and before you know it, I had three men who followed him shootin’ at me and tryin’ to jump our claim.”

“What did you do?” Elise seemed enthralled.

“I gunned down two of the sons a bitches, and the third one took off runnin’. Right then, I packed up every ounce of gold we had and loaded it onto our horses and took off before more could come. I wound up in a small Mexican town called San Calando and that was where I opened my first gambling house. I made money hand over fist, changed my name to Garrett, and then invested in some businesses there that I am still involved with today.”

“So where did Thready wind up?” Elise asked curiously. “Did he invest money in San Calando too? Does he still live there?”

He leaned forward and looked directly into her violet eyes with a deep menacing glare. “As soon as I was sure the last claim jumper was gone for good, I blew that old blabbermouth’s head clean off his shoulders.”

She gasped in horror. “How could you kill the man who had been so kind to you?”

“His loose lips damn near got me killed,” he replied coldly, “but more important than that, he broke the promise we had made to each other about the gold. I take any promise I make very seriously, Elise, and I hope you understand that well. There is a moral

to the story of Thready and me, and it is something you do not ever want to forget.”

“What’s that?”

“Don’t ever lie to me, try to deceive me, or think you can manipulate me into anything. When I find out, and trust me I will, you will be just as dead as old Thready is. The first time you kill a person is the hardest, after that, it comes quite easily.”

Elise was frightened badly by how he then smiled at her wickedly, picked up his fork, and resumed eating his breakfast with gusto. He chewed and swallowed his food as easily as if he had not just confessed to a cold-blooded murder.

“By the way, have you decided whether or not you will marry me?” he asked calmly after he had finished his meal.

“I need more details before I can commit to our bargain,” she began uneasily. “First of all, I want to know where Lucinda will be taken; just driving her out of Holton will not be good enough. I never want to see her again, so I hope you plan on taking her very far from here. Second, if killing is as easy for you as you claim it is, why don’t you just shoot the annoying brat and get it over with?”

“For a whore, you’ve got good business sense, I’ll give you that,” he said shrewdly as he leaned back in his chair, “I wouldn’t expect you to agree to something you didn’t know every part of. I will gladly fill you in, and I think it may be something that will give you a lot more satisfaction than if I just gunned her down in the street. One of my investments in San Calando is a whorehouse, a place the locals have named *El Corazon Del Diablo*.”

“The heart of the devil,” she translated with simultaneous wonder and horror in her slightly quivering voice.

“That’s right, the heart of the devil,” he repeated as he chuckled in a sinister way. “The place is an absolute pit of a cathouse where any and all perversions are practiced. Enough pesos can buy torture, beatings, even a lay with animals if that’s your thing. Any-

thing a truly sick or twisted mind can come up with is not out of reach within the walls of the *Diablo*.”

“That is where you are taking Lucinda?” she asked hopefully.

“Well, wouldn’t it just make your black little heart sing to know that she is screwing and having God knows what done to her by at least twenty or more filthy men a day for the rest of her life?”

“How soon can it be done?” she inquired eagerly.

“One of your girls is downstairs watching for her to leave the Rose right now. Agree to my terms and she will be the newest attraction at the *Diablo* within a week.”

Any reservations she had about Garrett were instantly stripped away as she envisioned her niece’s horrendous fate. She went over to him and threw arms around his neck adoringly.

“Make it happen, give me proof that she is there, and I will gladly marry you!”

In a moment, Garrett had her in his arms. “Let’s seal our pact with a kiss, my love,” he whispered against her lips.

“I can do much better than a kiss,” she answered slyly as her hands slipped down to unfasten his pants.

When they were open, she slid them deftly down over his slim hips as she sank slowly to her knees. She began to stroke his velvety cock, and he moaned loudly as it grew mightily under her expert caressing.

As soon as it was rock-hard and pulsating, she took the massive organ in her mouth and stroked it eagerly with her talented tongue.

As his moans became more frequent and urgent, she began to piston her head on it, taking the entire length in her throat before pulling back and sucking lightly on the swollen head.

“Yes, my darling, yes!” he cried out as he buried his hands in her dark hair and his hips bucked against her face wildly. With a last sharp cry, his passion was fulfilled and his hot tribute poured directly into her vigorously working mouth.

She quickly pulled him deeply into her throat and swallowed repeatedly until she was sure she had claimed every last drop his quivering body had to give.

"Nobody could ever do that better than you," he sighed contentedly as he ran his hands over her smooth and milky shoulders.

She inwardly smiled as she stood and let him take her in his arms again. Regardless of all his violent threats and stories of murder, he was still under her control when it counted.

He could obviously be swayed by her sexual favors. A few well practiced moves and the man was as pliable as wet clay in her hands. She still had every intention of disposing of him once she was sure of Lucinda's fate, and she hoped that he could start on that venture soon. The sooner she was done with the whole mess, the sooner she would be back with Reed.

Just then Arleen, the girl Garrett had hired to watch the Rose, entered the room unannounced. She grinned largely and stifled a giggle with her hand when she saw his state of undress.

"Lucinda just left the hotel and headed toward the bank," she blurted out loudly as she tried not to laugh.

Before he could pull up his pants and compose himself enough to thank her, Elise stepped in front of him to shield his semi-nudity.

"Thank you for the information, Arleen," she barked bitingly as she stared at the girl angrily. "The rest of what I am about to say you may consider a stern warning. If you ever enter my private rooms without knocking again, I will dock you your cut of the day's take for a solid week!"

Arleen nodded and then quickly left the room, closing the door behind her tightly. She waited until she was on the stairs before she rolled her eyes and shook her head at the violence of her boss' temper.

When they were alone again, Garrett pulled up and fastened his pants. He then proceeded to go to one of her many mirrors and check his appearance carefully.

“Preening for that little monster, are you?” Elise asked acidly. “Please keep in mind that you are supposed to be making her disappear, not courting her.”

“I must be nothing less than the perfect gentleman to her now,” he explained as he continued to groom himself. “I won’t get far in fishing for bait if I don’t.”

“Come straight back here and tell me if you find out anything we can use,” she stated impatiently. “I will be waiting.”

“I wouldn’t dream of doing anything else, my future wife,” he replied warmly as he left her sitting room.

Chapter 12

Lucinda took her time walking to the general store, as she wanted to fully enjoy the bright morning sunshine as well as all the handsome and colorful window displays she passed along the way.

Several ladies going about their shopping stopped and made small talk with her, and they all admired her sparkling engagement ring.

“You are a very lucky young lady,” she was told more than once, and she knew it to be very true.

Garrett followed her at a discreet distance, straining to hear any conversation she had for useful information. He got nothing of value from her chats on the street; so a few minutes after she entered the business that was her destination, he went inside as well.

He feigned interest in a rack of men’s shirts as he slyly watched her go over to the small section of writing supplies. She casually examined and contemplated several packs of writing paper before settling on some with delicate pink roses adorning the thin pages and the matching envelopes.

As she nonchalantly moved along, she admired a few dresses, some hair ornaments, and a porcelain vase. Garrett watched her carefully, noting everything that piqued her interest. When she went over to the soap and perfume display, he decided to make his move. He went to the opposite end of the short aisle and pretended to be completely surprised by her presence in the store.

“Good morning, Lucinda,” he said graciously as he tipped his hat to her. “How pleasant to see you out and about in such a lovely

yellow dress. If you would permit me to, I would like to say your beauty this morning rivals only the sun itself."

"Thank you, Mr. Cameron," she replied warily as she nervously clutched the stationery she had chosen to her chest. "If you will excuse me, I need to pick up a cake of shaving soap for Reed."

She had hoped the mention of Reed would make him leave her alone, but it only seemed to encourage him further. He scanned the products and quickly picked up a small yellow box containing a round cake of shaving soap.

"Please give me the pleasure of assisting you in your purchase. I want your intended to have only the very best. I always use Grovner's soap myself; I find it very refreshing and it seems to last longer than any other brand they sell here."

"Thank you, you've been most helpful," she said fretfully as she took the box he offered her and turned to walk away.

She tried to exit the aisle they occupied, but before she could make it out, he had artfully stepped around her and was in her way again.

"Is there anything else I can do for you this morning? I would be deeply honored to be in your service."

"I have my stationery and Reed's soap, so my business here is done," she replied in a tight voice. "Thank you again for your kindness and advice."

"It looks like quite beautiful stationery you have chosen. Are you writing a letter to someone important?"

Lucinda, exasperated and still highly apprehensive, would have told him anything to make him go away and leave her alone.

"I am writing to my mother in Tennessee to tell her of my engagement."

"Your aunt always speaks so highly of her sister. Are we going to be fortunate enough to welcome her for a visit anytime soon?"

"My aunt has never had anything nice to say about my mother," she snapped as her patience with the man finally reached

its end, “so please do not bother to say any different. Nevertheless, I miss her very much, and I wish she would come here and visit for a while. Now please excuse me, Mr. Cameron, I need to finish my business here so I can return to the hotel and give my fiancé his shaving soap.”

“Have a splendid afternoon,” he said pleasantly as he moved out of her way. After giving him a distrustful glance as she brushed by, she hurried over to the clerk, paid him for her items, and then quickly left the store.

Garrett did not bother to try to follow her; he had all he needed to put his daring scheme into action. He wandered about the store for a few minutes, eventually winding up back at the perfume display. He looked over the wares and finally decided to purchase a lavish bottle to take back to Elise.

He pulled the glass stopper on a particularly beautiful bottle and was delighted when he inhaled the rich fragrance of the gardenia-scented oil within. It was Elise’s favorite perfume, and the exotic aroma never failed to arouse him.

He paid for the cologne happily, and could not help but smile winningly as he stepped out into the bright morning sunlight and headed back down the street to Chez Elise.

When inside, he quickly went back up to Elise’s sitting room where he found her sitting in a comfortable chair impatiently awaiting him. He presented her with his gift, and she looked it over for mere seconds before placing it on a nearby table and dismissing it completely.

“Did you find anything out?” she demanded huffily.

“I need you to tell me all about your sister.”

“Jane? She’s nothing but an ignorant twit in Tennessee who married some drunk named Kruger and then dumped her ill-bred daughter on me. What on earth has she got to do with our plan?”

“Everything, my darling,” he said quietly as he gathered her in his arms. “Your ignorant twit of a sister has turned out to be the answer to all our problems.”

He kissed her passionately several times, the amorous mood the heady perfume had brought about in him still pulsing wildly in his blood.

“Are we going to make that dreadful little monster niece of mine gone from all our lives soon?” she asked breathlessly between kisses.

“You can count on it, my darling,” he replied dreamily as he planted small and smoldering kisses on her throat. “She will soon be nothing more than an unpleasant memory for you.”

You, too, will soon be just another unpleasant memory, she thought deliciously as his fiery kisses seared her tender flesh, and as your grieving widow, I will inherit your wealth and the ownership of the Imperial.

Chapter 13

It took a week for Garrett to get all the pieces of his plan into place, and when at last he was ready, he considered his devious snare to be very inventive and utterly foolproof.

One of the most complicated pieces of the macabre puzzle had been how to get Lucinda out of town unnoticed. After discarding every idea he had come up with as too conspicuous, he was forced to seek help.

The ingenuity of Garrett's dear friend, Roy Anson, the local mortician and frequent gambler at the Imperial, solved this dilemma.

Garrett met with his friend in his elaborate office in the Imperial, and promised him a large line of gambling credit if Roy would help him solve his problem. They sat together and sipped expensive whiskey for a while, the silence between them broken at last when Roy jumped up enthusiastically with his brilliant idea.

"I've got it!" he shouted excitedly, and was immediately cautioned to speak softly by Garrett. "No one would bother or question a person taking someone to be buried," he explained mellifluously, "that would be seen as disrespect to the dearly departed."

"Great idea, Roy," replied Garrett sarcastically, "and what about when I open the coffin and she has smothered? She's no good to me dead."

"A special 'traveling' coffin could be made," answered his friend with a devious smile. "A coffin a person could easily survive in."

Garrett quickly sat up straighter in his chair and gave his friend his undivided attention. "Are you sure she would make it?" he asked skeptically.

"I can build such a coffin in my workshop, and I am positive she will be unharmed no matter how long she were to be in it."

Roy had been commissioned on the spot to design and construct what he had referred to as a 'traveling' coffin to transport Garrett's precious human cargo to her fate in the sun-baked wastelands of Mexico.

The night before the abduction was to take place, Garrett visited Roy in his woodworking shop in the basement of the local funeral home. He looked carefully over the newly painted coffin, making sure it was truly escape-proof but survivable.

"Are you sure she'll still be able to breathe in there once we nail the lid on?" he asked the mortician distrustfully.

"I have drilled several small holes on either side of where her head will lay and I assure you there will be an excellent airflow in and out. I also added sturdy ropes where her arms and legs will be; if you tie her down, there will be no chance of her attracting unwanted attention by kicking and clawing at the inside of the coffin. They are cleverly disguised on the outside as these rope handles."

Garrett inspected the rope handles and was satisfied. "Do you have that stuff you promised me to keep her still?"

"Naturally," answered the mortician brightly as he handed Garrett a medium-sized bottle of dark glass. "This is chloroform, just soak your kerchief in it and hold it over her mouth and nose. I guarantee she will be totally unconscious in just a few moments."

"Very good," answered Garrett in a delighted tone as he pocketed the chemical. He then took a large banded stack of bills out of his pocket and gave it to the greedy mortician.

"You are now also the owner of a five thousand dollar line of credit at the Imperial, Roy, and I suggest you use it wisely," he

warned just as he was about to take his leave from the sawdust-strewn workshop.

“No worries,” assured Roy happily as he began to count his money.

“And just one more thing,” added Garrett as he regarded Roy with a dark and deadly glare. “If this thing does not work or you say one word about what I have done, the next coffins that will be nailed shut will belong to your wife and children.”

The undertaker nearly dropped his money as his expression quickly shifted from happiness and greed to stark fear and horror. He woodenly nodded his total understanding at the very serious Garrett.

The morning of the abduction dawned bright and sunny, and Garrett put on some worn clothes he had stolen from a nearby farm’s clothesline days before. They closely resembled what he had worn when he had been panning for gold with Thready, and that was the look he was going for when he chose them.

When he emerged from the seldom-used back door of the Imperial, he pulled a large worn sombrero as low over his face as he could. He quickly scooped up some nearby loose dirt and rubbed it over his face, hands, and clothes until he was quite grimy.

He had effectively transformed from a successful gaming house owner into just another unlucky prospector, and an unfamiliar dirty stranger was someone he knew regular townsfolk would avoid.

He reminded himself to speak ignorantly to anyone he met; the careful elocution and pronunciation he had practiced when he became rich would be very out of place in his disguise.

Near the edge of town he found the last pawn he needed to carry out his plan as he spied a boy and a beagle puppy playing together in a narrow and dusty alley between two buildings.

Jack Avery, ten years old, had decided that spending the day playing with his beagle puppy, Georgy, would be a lot more fun

than being in school. He had chosen to play in town rather than in the woods near his house to minimize the chance of his father finding and severely scolding him. Georgy was busy clumsily chasing the rubber ball Jack had tossed to him when Garrett approached the pair.

“Hey, kid!” he called from the mouth of the alley, and when Jack looked up at him, he enthusiastically waved the boy over.

Jack went over and looked up at the man inquisitively, and his eyes grew as round as dinner plates when Garrett knelt down to his eye level and then produced a gleaming silver dollar from his dust-covered pocket.

“How’d you like to earn this here shiny silver dollar? It could buy a lot of treats for a boy and his dog.”

“Sure,” he answered readily, excited at owning what he saw as a tremendous amount of money. “What do you want me to do?”

“All I need you to do is go over yonder to that fancy Red Rose Hotel and give a message to a girl named Lucinda. Tell her that Mr. Bonham says there’s a telegram there for her from a Mrs. Jane Kruger.”

“But that would be a lie,” stated the boy righteously, “and my Ma and Pa always tell me not to lie.”

“Okay, then, sorry I bothered you,” Garrett said in a deliberately disappointed tone as he stood and slipped the coin back in his pocket. “I’ll just find some other boy who needs a silver dollar to spend on himself and his pup.”

Garrett purposely jingled the change in his pocket, and the metallic noise made Jack give in to his childish self-indulgence as quickly as he had suspected it would.

“I guess one lie wouldn’t hurt nobody as long as my parents don’t find out. All I have to do is give a message at the hotel?”

“That’s all,” he assured the gullible boy brightly as he once again slid his hand into his pocket. He produced the original silver

dollar and another along with it, and the young boy was truly mesmerized.

“Now, this here other silver dollar can belong to a boy who is smart enough not to tell anyone who sent him to the hotel. Are you smart enough to do that?”

“I sure am!” the dark-eyed boy chirped proudly.

“I knew you were,” complimented Garrett as he and gave him the two coins and then playfully ruffled the boy’s hair. “Now you and your little pup there run along and do what I paid you for.”

The boy took the rope he used for a leash and gently tugged at the dog, urging him forward. The beagle happily wagged his tail and followed his young master faithfully out of the narrow alley.

The pair stepped into the lobby of the Red Rose a few minutes later, after Jack had practiced what he was going to say enough to satisfy himself. When Marie noticed them, she thought they were the cutest sight she had ever seen.

“Is there a girl named Lucinda here?” he asked Marie when she approached him.

“Yes, she’s in the office doing some paperwork with my husband. Do you know her?”

“I got a message for her.”

“Wait here while I go get her, I won’t be just a minute,” she said just before she smiled warmly at him and then left.

Jack knew in his heart the lie he was about to tell was wrong, and he had a sudden strong urge to take Georgy and run. The weight of the silver coins in his pocket and the thoughts of what he could buy with them made him stay where he was.

When Marie returned with Lucinda in tow, Jack felt even worse and quickly found that he could not look either lady in the eye.

“Mr. Bonham sent me here to tell you there’s a telegram for you in his office from a Mrs. Jane Kruger,” he said quickly as he shuffled his feet and kept his eyes on the floor.

He suddenly wished he had never seen the dirty man in the alley who had paid him.

"Are you sure that is who he said it was from?" Lucinda asked hopefully as she knelt down and made eye contact with the anxious boy.

"That's what he said," he replied quickly as he felt tears threatening. He abruptly pulled away from Lucinda's gaze and knelt down to where he could hug the warm and wiggling body of his beloved and loyal Georgy.

"Thank you very much, young man," Lucinda said excitedly as she stood. She was too thrilled by the news to be worried by the boy's strange behavior. She happily raced back to the office to tell Bill her wonderful news.

"How would two molasses cookies for you and a few meaty bones for your puppy sound?" asked Marie as Jack was turning to leave.

"No thank you, ma'am," said Jack in a thick and strange sounding voice. "Me and Georgy really need to go now."

He sprinted out the door of the hotel, the puppy on his rope leash following at his heels. Guilt twisted his small innards painfully, and once he was a safe distance away from the hotel, he let his tears flow freely.

He hadn't liked lying to what had been such nice ladies, and he ran for home as fast as his legs would carry him. Along the way, he decided that the next time he skipped school, he and Georgy would just play in the woods close to home.

Back at the Rose, Lucinda was caught up in a whirlwind of excitement and happiness as she put on her shawl and tied her sun-bonnet beneath her chin.

"Don't wake Reed, I'll be back from the telegraph office shortly. Oh, Marie, I hope this is good news!"

Marie hugged her dear friend just before she left. "Make sure and let your mother know we are all looking forward to meeting her and that she can stay here as long as she wants."

Lucinda dashed out the door and walked as quickly as she could toward the telegraph office, happily lost in visions of being reunited with her mother. She was completely off-guard when Garrett sprang from an empty alley and clutched her arms tightly. As he forcibly hauled her between the buildings, he quickly clapped a chloroform-soaked handkerchief over her mouth and nose.

"Sleep now, Lucinda," he hissed nastily as he forced her to inhale the vapors of the chemical. "You'll need all the rest you can get for where you're going!"

She felt herself slipping away as her struggles weakened dramatically and her eyelids began to flutter. Her body went totally limp when at last the chemical took full effect and she lost consciousness.

Garrett easily hefted her slight figure onto his shoulder and quickly carried her down the alley and then down another until he came out behind all the major town buildings.

Roy Anson was waiting there, the unique coffin open and sitting in the back of a wagon that had been decorated with bunches of wildflowers bound with black ribbon.

When he reached the wagon, he carefully laid Lucinda in the coffin, arranging her so she would be as comfortable as possible. He tied the ropes around her wrists and ankles securely, and when he had finished, Roy jumped down from the driver's seat. Together they began to nail the coffin's lid tightly in place.

"Is that stuff going to keep her knocked out long enough for me to get far away from anyone who could hear her?" asked Garrett as they worked.

"Absolutely," assured the mortician as he pounded the last nail home.

Garrett then hopped up into the driver's seat and slapped the spry-looking horse smartly with the reins. The coal black mare reared up greatly as she screamed in pain and then shot forward.

The wagon rumbled and jerked along intensely as the frightened horse galloped at full speed, and several times Garrett looked over his shoulder to make sure the black box that held his captive cargo had not fallen out and smashed on the ground.

Once he felt he was a safe distance from Holton, he pulled back on the reins and assumed the pace befitting a normal funeral wagon. Appearances were crucial on his journey; he wanted no questions or suspicious looks from any travelers he might meet on the way to San Calando, Mexico.

A few hours after he slowed down, the frantic and panicked screaming from inside the coffin began. He unsuccessfully yelled at her twice before he was forced to stop the wagon and go around to the coffin at the back of the wagon.

"If you don't stop all that noise immediately, I will bury you alive right here in the middle of nowhere!" he shouted hatefully. "You will be let out of the coffin soon if you just shut the hell up!"

The screams stopped then, and the only sounds emanating from the sealed coffin were barely audible deep and quivering sobs.

Garrett arrived at the home of his friend, Lorenzo Cortez, in the late afternoon, and Lorenzo was thoroughly surprised to see him looking like a grubby gold miner.

"I thought fancy clothes had become your style," joked his friend in a thick Spanish accent. "What are you doing here? I haven't seen you since you left San Calando for good."

"Do your brothers still live here with you?" he asked sharply.

"Yeah, Diego and Juan still live here. We just raided this house owned by some gringos not far from here two days ago. They didn't have much, but we gladly took what they had," he said with a menacing smile.

"I need you and your brothers to steal a jail wagon for me; I will pay you well for your time and effort," said Garrett as he removed and unfolded a large stack of bills from his pocket.

Lorenzo's eyes bugged with greed. "You will give us all that for a lousy jail wagon? We can sneak into Canamera tonight and grab theirs; it will be no trouble at all."

"Go right at dusk," ordered Garrett as he handed over the money. "The sooner we get it, the better. Make sure it's a strong one, not some broken-down piece of garbage they'll be glad to be rid of. Also make certain no posse of law dogs follows you back here, I can't have that."

Lorenzo was surprised by the seriousness of Garrett's tone. "What have you got going on, amigo? Planning on kidnapping the *Alcalde* or something?"

Garrett took his friend over to the coffin in the back of his wagon and related the whole story to him. The whimpers and sobs coming from within the gleaming black box validated his story, and when he finished, Lorenzo just regarded him with a highly amused gaze.

"You are going through all this for some fancy whore? What do you think Carmelita will think of all this? Do you really think she will help you when she finds out what it is all about?"

"I will handle Carmelita when the time comes; right now, get something so we can pry off the lid of this coffin."

Lorenzo did as he was told, and soon they were taking off the coffin lid with crowbars. It took the pair a few minutes of prying, but finally the lid came off.

Lucinda squinted and turned her head as far away from the sunlight as she could. When the men untied her, she slowly sat up and tried to take in her surroundings.

The fact that she saw absolutely nothing familiar frightened her badly, and tears began to stream down her cheeks as she looked at Garrett helplessly.

"Are you well?" he asked with feigned concern.

"When Reed finds out what you've done, he'll kill you," she stated in a terrified and trembling voice.

"Nobody will find out anything," he shouted at her callously as his rage exploded, "least of all that fool! Keep a civil tongue in your head, woman, or you can have another face full of chloroform and spend the night in that coffin!"

The threat of more time in the tight confines of the coffin made Lucinda immediately back down. She was sure if she was tied down within it again, she wouldn't be able to keep her sanity intact.

"Can I use the lavatory please?" she asked meekly as she looked pleadingly at her kidnapper. "I need to very badly."

"Escort her to the privy," Garrett instructed his friend, "and stand guard while she is using it. Do not listen to her and more importantly, do not trust her, she'll try to escape if she can. When she's finished, bring her to me in the house."

Lorenzo nodded and then went and helped Lucinda out of the coffin. Her legs were stiff from so many hours of lying in such a cramped space, and her walk was very wooden. She leaned heavily on her escort and he supported her solidly with a shoulder under her arm.

Garrett entered the house and found Diego and Juan playing cards with a very worn and dirty deck. They both jumped up from the game when the door opened and they drew their knives. Once they recognized the visitor, they both began to laugh heartily as they put away their weapons.

"As soon as you two get done laughing like a pair of jackasses, I'd like something to eat," said Garrett in an irritated tone.

"There's a pot of beans and some cornbread on the stove," replied Diego between fits of laughter. "Get it yourself, gringo."

"Beans and cornbread? No better food than that must mean the Cortez brothers are as lousy at stealing as they ever were."

Both men instantly stopped laughing. "We have killed men for saying less," growled a furious Juan as he stared at Garrett with cold hatred flashing in his eyes.

"I have a job for you, and I have given Lorenzo enough money for it to support you all for a year," he said casually as he put down the plate of boiled beans he had taken and picked up a piece of cornbread. "But if you boys want to fight instead of talk business, we can do that, too."

"We always want to talk business, amigo," said Juan with renewed friendliness, "especially when there is a large payment for me and my brothers involved."

Garrett rolled his eyes wearily as he began to explain to Juan and Diego what he needed them to do. He knew from experience Lorenzo was the most intelligent of the trio, so he explained the stealing of the jail wagon to them in very simple terms.

"We can steal your wagon," said Juan happily when he had finished. "We could do it right now in the daylight if you want! Everyone in Canamera fears the Cortez Brothers!"

"Do it right after dark like I said; I cannot tell you how important it is that everything is kept quiet! The three of you go into that town whooping and hollering and making a big show out of stealing a jail wagon and it could be all over."

"Why all the secrets?" asked Diego curiously. "When you were in San Calando, you owned the sheriff and never cared about the law!"

Just then the door opened and Lucinda stumbled through, having been pushed roughly by Lorenzo. She gained her footing and stared fearfully at the unfamiliar and dangerous-looking men occupying the rundown house.

"She's why," Garrett said as he motioned to the terrified Lucinda.

Diego and Juan both stared at her hungrily, and Lucinda cowered against the far wall of the dirty kitchen. She sank to the floor

and whimpered in fear as they went up to her and began to touch her dress and stroke her long blonde hair.

“Do we get to have our fun with her?” asked Diego hopefully. “It has been a long time since I have had a woman that is so pretty.”

“She’s pure and must remain that way,” Garrett informed them as he bent and handed her the plate of cornbread and beans. “I’m taking her to work for Carmelita in the *Diablo*.”

“She will not remain pretty for long in that place,” remarked Juan gravely.

“Eat,” ordered Garrett gruffly as he looked down at her.

Lucinda looked at the food and then up at her captor. Gazing into his emotionless ice blue eyes made sharp and bitter hatred boil fiercely in her blood. The venomous loathing she harbored helped her to summon up the courage she needed to stand up to him.

“I hope Reed beats you like the mangy yellow dog you are,” she snapped wrathfully.

Garrett was immediately enraged and swatted the plate of food from her trembling hands. Lucinda shrieked as the tin plate flew against the wall, the beans and the chunk of cornbread spilling onto the worn floorboards.

“I am quickly losing my patience with you,” he warned as he ruthlessly grabbed a handful of her hair and forcibly dragged her to her feet. “I am half tempted to let these boys have you as payment for their hospitality. I wonder how much your precious Reed would want you after that!”

Lucinda was frightened to her very bones, but refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing it reflected in her eyes. When he released her hair, she gathered her strength and lifted her chin to stare defiantly back at him.

“If any harm comes to me, Reed Donovan will have your head and you know it!”

Her insolence made the fiendish decision for him, and he took one of her upper arms tightly in his strong grip. He slung her away

from him and toward his friends, who, when they caught her reeling form, made no attempt to conceal their obvious lust for her.

“She’s all yours, boys,” he announced acidly as they roughly groped her, “have all the fun you want! Just make sure when you are done that her maidenhead is left whole; if I find out she’s not a virgin when I deliver her to Carmelita, I will gladly kill the filthy lot of you!”

The three brothers all grinned widely, and she could feel their raw and feral desire for her in their lecherous and unwelcome assault. Pure lust burned hot and wild in their Latin blood as they all caressed, squeezed, and groped her everywhere.

Lucinda closed her eyes tightly, but that did not shut out the disgusting feeling of their crazily pawing and tearing hands. She silently wept hot and bitter tears of humiliation and shame as she felt and heard her dress being torn asunder.

When she knew she could endure no more and survive, the dark specter of oblivion loomed close, and she welcomed him with open arms.

Chapter 14

Marie got very worried when two hours had passed and Lucinda had not returned. She had at first hoped Lucinda had decided to go shopping and that accounted for the delay, but the more time passed, the more obvious it became that something was amiss.

She hurried into the office and told Bill what had transpired, and he sighed worriedly as he looked into the concerned face of his loving wife.

“I’m going to have to get Reed, I have a feeling something foul is happening. I expect things to get a lot worse before they get better.”

“Don’t say such horrid things!” she scolded firmly. “Saying them only puts any wickedness into motion!”

“It’s what I feel and it’s too strong a feeling to ignore, so there’s no point in lying about it. I’ll get Reed and tell him everything as calmly as I can. Make some coffee and something for him to eat.”

She nodded and then gave him a quick hug before she rushed off to the kitchen. She had a hard time concentrating on what she was doing, worry made her hands tremble and her mind unclear.

With a feeling of dread weighing deeply within his heart, Bill went to Reed’s bedroom and knocked heavily on the door.

A mumbled response let Bill know Reed was awake, so he entered the smartly decorated room. A shirtless Reed sat up slowly in

his big and comfortable bed, pulling the sheets and blankets snugly around him.

“What time is it?” he asked in a gravelly voice as he stretched his arms and yawned. “I must have been sleeping the sleep of the dead!”

“It’s just after ten in the morning.” It was a solemn reply.

Reed was alarmed by the absence of Bill’s ever present joviality, and suddenly all traces of sleep vanished as fear gripped his heart.

“What’s wrong?” he queried in a somber tone.

“It may be nothing, we’re not sure, but Lucinda went out to get a telegram from her mother and has not returned. She’s been gone for two hours.”

“My God man, why didn’t you wake me sooner?” he demanded loudly as he bolted from the bed and began to hastily throw his clothes on. “Did anyone even think to go to the telegraph office and inquire about her yet?”

“I only found out about it a minute ago, so don’t be yelling at me,” Bill shot back defensively. “I will gladly go to the telegraph office and speak to Mr. Bonham myself right now.”

Reed, now sloppily but fully dressed, forced himself to slow down, take a deep breath, and gather his wits. He extended a hand towards Bill in pure friendship.

“You’re right, old friend, I had no call to shout at you so sharply. I deeply appreciate your concern and willingness to go to the telegraph office.”

“No harm done,” he replied warmly as he shook Reed’s hand confidently. “We’ll find her, try not to worry.”

Reed rushed from the room with Bill at his heels. The two men practically leapt down the stairs, and when they reached the dining room, Marie had food and hot coffee on a table waiting.

“No time to eat,” stated Reed in a hurried voice, “I’ve got to get to the sheriff’s office right away.”

"At least have some coffee and calm down a bit," she pleaded. "If you go into the sheriff's all flustered and raving like a maniac, he's likely to not listen to anything you have to say."

With obvious anger and impatience, Reed poured a cup of coffee and then put enough milk in it to make it barely warm. He downed the entire cup in two massive swallows, and then slammed it back on the table.

"There," he declared tightly. "I've had my coffee! Now I have to go!"

Marie burst into tears just as he rushed out the door, but he had no time to stop and console her. He ran the short distance down Main Street to the sheriff's office, and the middle-aged deputy at the desk almost fell out of his chair at the commotion when Reed surged into the building explosively.

"I need to see Sheriff Wilner now!" he demanded as he slammed both fists on the wooden desk.

"He's out back with the prisoners," said the deputy carelessly, "you can see him when he's done."

"My fiancée is missing and I demand some action be taken now!" he nearly screamed.

"I said he'll see you when he's done," replied the deputy nastily. "Now you can either wait patiently for him or I can put you out of this office head first!"

Just then Bill entered the office, and a frustrated Reed was very glad to see him. He rushed over to his friend and they spoke together in hushed tones.

"What did Mr. Bonham have to say?"

"He said there was no telegram and Lucinda never came in and asked about one," replied Bill urgently. "Where's the sheriff at?"

"He's out back with the prisoners and that oaf over there refuses to go get him."

“Is that so?” asked Bill with a confident yet devilish grin. “Maybe I can light a fire under his puny backside and make something happen.”

Bill drew himself up to his whole six feet four inches and strode purposely over to the desk where the deputy was sitting. He reached a hand across the desk and grabbed the deputy’s shirt, and with very little effort, proceeded to lift the man entirely off the floor.

“Here’s what’s going to happen, little man,” he said menacingly as he hauled the deputy’s face close to his own. “You are going to drag your lazy, good-for-nothing carcass out back and get the sheriff out here now. If you don’t and we let him come out here in his own sweet time, he can have fun cleaning up the five or six rather large bloody pieces I’m going to leave your body in.”

Bill released the visibly shaken deputy abruptly, and the man fell gracelessly back into his chair at an odd angle. Male pride made him try to act tough in spite of the glaze of fear that shone brightly in his eyes.

“You dare to threaten an officer of the law?” he asked as he stood and straightened his uniform. Both men noticed a slight quiver in both his voice and hands.

“Get the sheriff now,” demanded Reed in a deadly tone that was tinged with ice and held promises of severe bodily harm.

The deputy chose to no longer push his luck and, after cautiously passing the two angry men, went out to where the prisoners were held and retrieved Sheriff Wilner.

When at last he emerged, his swarthy face was a mask of concern and he had his right hand placed gingerly on the butt of the pistol he kept on his right hip.

“Now what is so all fired important that you two saw fit to barge in here and scare the daylights out one of my deputies?”

“My intended bride is missing,” explained Reed austerely, “and we have reason to believe there may be sinister forces responsible.”

“Is that right?” he asked as he regarded the men skeptically. “May I ask exactly what the reason you believe that is?”

“She left early this morning to go get a telegram from her mother,” explained Bill impatiently, “and she never returned. I went to see Mr. Bonham myself and he said no telegram had ever arrived for her from anyone.”

“Exactly how long has the lady in question been missing?”

“She left the Red Rose Hotel at eight o’clock.”

“It’s just closing in on eleven, so that would mean she’s only been missing for about three hours,” replied the sheriff offhandedly. “I got news for you gentlemen; my wife could easily take three hours going over *Godey’s Lady’s Book* or the latest *Vanity Fair* over at the mercantile. She probably just went and did some shopping and such and will show up soon.”

“You’re not even concerned for her welfare?” asked a deeply shocked and completely unbelieving Reed.

“Why don’t you all come back when she’s been missing for two or three days; that is when you will see me get as upset as you two are. If I spent all my time chasing women who are probably just out spending their husband’s money, I wouldn’t have time for anything else. Go home and wait, she’ll show up eventually.”

The sheriff went over to his desk, picked up a copy of the local newspaper, and began to study the pages nonchalantly. His deputy began cleaning his gun, and both Reed and Bill knew they were silently being dismissed.

Equally frustrated and very angry, they left the sheriff’s office at a quick and determined pace. Suddenly Bill ran across the street and began to question anyone he saw there, and Reed followed suit on his side of the street.

By the time they met up again at the Rose, the pair was decidedly disheartened; no one they had spoken to had seen or heard anything.

Marie met them at the hotel door wearing an expression of pure misery and wringing her hands. After relaying their disappointing news to her, she led them to a table where she had put out some sandwiches and hot tea for lunch.

"Eat all you can, there are both chicken and ham sandwiches there," she said in a heartsick voice. "You both need to keep up your strength."

They each took a thick sandwich and began to eat mechanically; it could have been roasted shoe leather for all they tasted. They simply chewed and swallowed because it was nourishment to continue their search for the missing Lucinda.

"Did either of you talk to the Avery boy yet?" Marie asked as she poured them each a cup of the strong tea.

"Why on earth would we concern ourselves with a ten year old boy?" asked Reed with a puzzled look on his face. "This is serious business, regardless of how that dunce of a sheriff feels."

"I figured since he was the one who came here this morning and told Lucinda about the telegram, he might know something."

Reed dropped his sandwich and Bill choked on the mouthful of tea he had just taken. They were both completely stunned at her not having mentioned Jack at all, and as they stared at her incredulously, she began to weep.

"Why didn't you tell me this earlier?" demanded Bill as she wept harder. "We've wasted valuable time questioning innocents when all this time we could have been talking to him!"

"I thought I had mentioned his name when I saw you and Lucinda in the office this morning, when I told her someone was here to see her. I'm so sorry!"

"It's all right, Marie, at least we know now," soothed Reed as he held a comforting hand out to her. "Thank you for the sandwiches and tea, it was a very thoughtful thing to do."

"I just wish I could do more to help," she wailed as she took Reed's strong hand in her trembling fingers.

"You are fine here, running the Rose for me while I search for Lucinda." He gently took his hand back and then turned his attention to his dearest friend.

"Let's saddle up two fast horses and head for the Avery homestead."

"On my way," Bill replied over his shoulder as he dashed for the door.

He went to the small stable they kept behind the hotel and began to prepare two strong and swift stallions for their journey.

In a short while, both men were astride the magnificent beasts and closing in on the small Avery homestead. Both men rode along praying that they would find out who was behind Lucinda's disappearance and where she was being imprisoned.

Chapter 15

As consciousness seeped back into her, the first thing that battered Lucinda's confused senses was the unmistakable pungent odor of old sweat. The horribly sour and nauseating smell was strong, and she felt her fluttering belly involuntarily begin to churn.

The more her mind cleared, the more she began to remember, and the memories were horrible. She was startled to comprehend she was completely naked and lying on some smooth but still gritty feeling planks. Panicking, thinking she was still in the ranch house and in the hands of the Cortez brothers, she cried out in fear as she forced her weary eyelids to open.

Her inner fear momentarily dissolved when she saw she was alone, but it returned with a turbulent vengeance as she realized she was now being held in some sort of large, roughly-hewn wooden box. There were long wooden benches attached to the walls about midway up, and strong chains with heavy shackles were solidly bolted just above the lengthy benches.

The heat was intolerable, and she found it hard to breathe. The small barred windows on either side of the boxlike prison offered little hope of any breeze reducing the interior temperature. Sweat beaded her entire body, and she rubbed her eyes when a few drops from her brow ran into them and blurred her vision.

She tried to move, but her muscles painfully protested her intent. In the dim light, she could make out that her legs sported sev-

eral deep purple bruises, and judging by the way she felt, she suspected there were many more on her body she wasn't able to see.

The heavy door was at the opposite end of where she was, and as she studied it, several outside locks rattled solidly and the door slowly creaked open.

In spite of the searing pain, she pressed herself up against the back wall as tightly as she could, trying in vain to cover her nakedness with her hands.

"Lock this thing up tight as soon as I'm inside," said Garrett over his shoulder as he entered the box.

As soon as he was fully within, the heavy door slammed followed by the sound of deep raucous chuckles and several weighty deadbolts being crashed into place.

"Good morning, Lucinda. Are you comfortable here in the Canamera jail wagon?" he asked sarcastically as he sat on a bench and stared down at her naked and cowering form. "I brought you the remnants of your dress to cover up with," he said with a devilish smile as he held up her hopelessly wadded and crumpled yellow garment, "but I think I like you better the way you are now."

The only thing Lucinda cared about at the moment was the tin canteen he had slung over his right shoulder, the canvas cover on it still damp where he had filled it.

A raspy croak of, "Water," was all she could say, but her request was granted as he took the canteen off his arm and threw it in her direction.

It landed close to her, and she greedily reached out and plucked it from the grimy floor of the jail wagon. Her unsure fingers fumbled with the lid at first, but soon she was gratefully gulping down the cool and refreshing water.

When she stopped drinking to take in a few deep breaths Garrett quickly leaned forward and jerked the canteen from her hands.

"You've had enough," he said cruelly with an evil smirk on his thin lips, and her eyes watched with despair as he replaced the lid and slung the canteen carelessly beside him.

After a moment, she found her voice and pleaded pitifully, "How can you keep me in here? This thing is not fit for humans!"

"Well, Lucinda dear," he replied mockingly. "You have shown me and my friends nothing but rudeness and defiance since you arrived, so why should we try to make you comfortable? You truly have been an ungrateful guest, and I think this stinky jail wagon suits you very well. I suggest you make the best of it, this ramshackle carriage will be your home until we reach what will be your final destination."

"Where is that?" she asked fearfully as she slowly repositioned herself.

"You'll find out when we get there."

She tried to sit up and cried out sharply as she shifted her weight to her bruised bottom. Rampant frustration and anguish made her body and voice quiver equally.

"Why do you hate me so much, Garrett? What have I ever done to you?"

"It's your beloved Reed Donovan I'm out to destroy," he explained in a hard and spiteful tone. "That man has been nothing but a thorn in my side since he arrived in Holton! My hurting you hurts him in a much worse way than if I were to have him beaten or burn down his hotel. Let him always live with the knowledge that if he had never loved you, you would have been safe for all of your days."

Even in the dim morning light that managed to poorly illuminate the inside of the dreary wagon, she could see the iciness in his emotionless blue eyes as he stared down at her maniacally.

"I never realized one human being could be so heartless to another," she said quietly.

“If you think this imprisonment is cruel, then the place I am taking you to will give you an entire new meaning of the word.”

Lucinda had to look away from his terrifying gaze; to behold his perversely obsessed stare was too upsetting. She had no doubt that he was very intent on completely annihilating his rival, no matter what it did to her or anyone else that stood in his path of unholy vengeance.

She instead concentrated on trying to find a comfortable position on the hard wooden floor, but found the task to be nearly impossible.

“Why does my entire body hurt?” she cried out miserably, “what did you let those sickening friends of yours do to me last night?”

Garrett stood, picked up the torn and crumpled dress he had brought with him, and tauntingly shoved the yellow material in her face.

“You won’t be needing this,” he snapped as he then proceeded to stuff it through one of the small barred windows until it fell to the ground outside.

To her utter shock and repulsion he then began to remove his own clothes. “You fainted when they started in, so I made sure you would not fight them off by knocking you out again. I let them have their enjoyment on your body and now it’s my turn to have some pleasure with you.”

“Please don’t do this,” she keenly begged as she pressed herself into the wall of the jail wagon as tightly as possible.

He ignored her desperate and heart-wrenching request and continued to strip until he stood before her completely naked. His fully erect manhood jutted from his hips threateningly.

Garrett leaned over, grabbed her forearms fiercely, and pulled her unwillingly into his embrace. His demanding mouth crushed down on hers with hot impatience, and his probing tongue plunged so deeply into her mouth she gagged.

When she was able to pull her head away from his disgusting and invasive kiss, she sputtered her revulsion and barely kept from vomiting. Her sickness did not deter him at all, and his hands seemed to grope her nearly everywhere at once.

“I regret deeply that I must leave you a virgin,” he breathily whispered as he forcibly kissed and nuzzled her breasts, “but your sweet body has many more delights I can easily partake of.”

With a loud yell, he overpowered her and forced her on her back, his knee thrusting between her thighs. Her hands clawed viciously at his chest, and she felt a fleeting moment of satisfaction as he cried out when her nails drew blood.

He jumped up and quickly examined his wound, and when he discovered it to be no more than a deep scratch, he angrily turned his attention back to her.

“I had hoped you would give yourself to me willingly and it would not come to this, but you have left me no other choice.”

He grabbed her bruised and trembling forearms and under protest, drew her into a corner of the wagon where a pair of heavy shackles, complete with locks, waited. The chain between the manacles was strung through a thick iron ring that was bolted solidly to the floor. Within minutes, he had the metal restraints locked on her slim wrists, and though she jerked and strained against the bonds with all her might, they did not give.

Lucinda, lying flat on her back with her arms chained above her head, used her only available means of defense and kicked at her attacker with all her strength.

Garrett just laughed mockingly at her futile attempts to hurt him as he sat himself on top of her thighs and rendered her legs as useless as her arms.

“I am prepared to chain your legs as well,” he warned sternly as his weight held her lower limbs immobile. “You really should stop fighting and just accept your situation; I will use your delightful body anyway I want whether you like me or not.”

“Like you? How could anyone with any sense or decency ever like you? I hate you and hope you die a thousand deaths for everything you’ve done to me,” she asserted scathingly.

“You’ll never live long enough to see anything happen to me,” he replied confidently, “the place I am taking you to is death itself for any woman. Now you will spread your legs for me willingly or I swear I will change my plans and kill Reed Donovan right before your eyes just prior to my killing you.”

Lucinda was astute enough to know his threat against herself and Reed was much more than meaningless words, and the chilling gaze she had seen earlier in the madman’s eyes stated that cold-blooded murder was in no way foreign to him.

She turned her head away in unreserved shame as she nodded her reluctant consent to his disgusting demand. Silent tears slid down her cheeks as she slowly opened her legs for him, and she cringed as she felt his fingers exploring her sex. She gasped and jerked in reflex when one of his probing fingers adroitly slid inside her.

“Your maidenhead is still very much intact,” he said quietly as he continued to prod and explore her with his finger. “I was afraid the Cortez brothers had gotten carried away and took what I had warned them not to. How I wish I could take it myself right now; to be the first to feel your beautiful body swallow me whole.”

He removed his investigating digit and Lucinda breathed a great sigh of relief. He studied her turned head for a brief moment, and then quickly sat down on the bench directly beside her.

“I can’t have you yet, not in the way I need,” he declared with frustration. “Hell, I’m not sure I even dare to touch you now; I can’t take the chance of word getting back to your aunt. She’s going to marry me, you know.”

“You two deserve each other,” she said hatefully as she glared at him from the floor.

“You and that fool Donovan think you’re so much better than us,” he growled as he stroked his aroused cock. “Well, I’m going to give you just a taste of what you’re gonna be getting where you’re goin’. You better get used to things like this because it’s nothing compared to what you’ll be forced to suffer!”

He began to moan loudly as he pleased himself on the bench above her, and Lucinda turned her head away from the repulsive sight.

“There will come a day when I will have you,” he moaned as he stared at her and increased his fondling of his now rock-hard cock. “I’m going to lick, and suck, and kiss you everywhere and there won’t be a damn thing you can do about it. I’m going to shove my cock here in every damn hole you got and make you scream my name over and over as I screw you, you prissy ass bitch!”

Garrett’s slim hips began to rock in time with his strong strokes as he gripped himself tightly and then stroked with more and more force. His words dissolved and became just a series of small shouts as he suddenly fell to his knees on the floor beside her. He loudly announced his pinnacle and Lucinda was shocked and thoroughly disgusted as with a loud cry and one final deep shuddering stroke, his pulsating member suddenly seemed to burst and he shot his hot load all over her bare breasts.

After a few more minutes of milking his softening cock, he let go of it and grinned at her cruelly. Lucinda turned her head and body as far away from him as she could and Garrett laughed nastily at her reaction.

“You had better get used to that,” he jeered mercilessly. “In the future, you’ll be wearing it quite often. Doing that gave me so much pleasure,” he breathed raggedly as he reached out and started to rub his cum into her skin, “it’s almost a shame Reed never did that with you; he didn’t know what he was missing.”

“Reed would never dream of doing something like that,” she said between tightly clenched teeth. “He’s a true man who doesn’t need to act like an animal to make himself feel good!”

Garrett viciously snarled his displeasure at her statement and then proceeded to fondle her breasts, buttocks, and thighs as brutally as he could until his anger dissipated. When he finished, he stood over her and smirked down at her wickedly.

When at last he put his clothes on, Lucinda breathed a great sigh of relief. Parts of her body where he had brutally pinched and squeezed her felt as if they were on fire, and it hurt her to move even slightly. She lay naked on the floor sobbing pitifully, her wrists still encased in the heavy iron manacles.

Garrett fastened his pants without so much as glancing at her, and when he was done, he put his face up to the small barred window facing the ranch house.

“Hey, Lorenzo!” he bellowed. “Let me the hell out of here!”

In a few minutes, Lorenzo emerged from the house, and Lucinda once again heard the metallic sound of the deadbolts on the jail wagon door as Garrett was released.

“Was it good?” asked Lorenzo eagerly as he once again locked the door.

“She’s some sweet piece,” Garrett replied smugly. “I think after she’s been broke in over in San Calando, I’ll go there and do what I really want to with her.”

“Carmelita finds out and she will cut it off and wear it on a chain around her neck,” Lorenzo warned cautiously. “She’s a woman I wouldn’t want to make mad.”

“If it wasn’t for me, she’d still be lying down with men for coins behind dirty cantinas,” stated Garrett angrily as they started for the house. “She may think she has some sort of claim on me, but she doesn’t.”

Lucinda lay in the wagon and sobbed bitterly as the voices faded away. Her mind reeled with all that had happened to her;

how could she have gone from utter bliss to the excruciating hell she now suffered?

One thought shined brightly in her mind, and she clung to it to keep herself from drowning in the desolate misery she was being forced to endure. Reed would come for her; only death itself would keep him away. She was certain that when he appeared, his rage at her abuse would demand no less than the very lives of everyone who had been foolish enough to hurt her.

Chapter 17

Harold and Emily Avery looked up from the weeding of their small vegetable patch when they heard hoofbeats rapidly approaching. The two riders nearing their homestead were riding as if the devil himself were chasing them, and the husband and wife looked at each other questioningly before putting down their tools.

Both men quickly jumped down from their horses and hurried over to where the bewildered couple stood staring at them.

“Mr. and Mrs. Avery,” said Reed congenially. “My name is Reed Donovan and this is my friend, Bill Hanscom. Would it be possible for us to talk to your son, Jack?”

“We know who you are, and no, you can’t. Jack is in school,” replied Harold Avery gruffly. “What’s this all about? Has he been getting into trouble again?”

“Your son delivered a false message to a girl named Lucinda at the Red Rose Hotel this morning,” explained Bill calmly. “Lucinda has since disappeared, and we would like to speak to him and find out who gave him the message to give her.”

Emily Avery quickly stepped out of the garden. “I’ll check the barn, Harold you check the woods. You two can go over to that rise yonder and check down by the creek, that’s one of Jack’s favorite places to play.”

They all hurried off in separate directions, and in a short while, they all gathered back at the garden. Reed and Bill returned with a reluctant Jack and his devoted Georgy accompanying them.

“We found him down by the creek as you had guessed, playing with some crawdads,” said Bill amusedly.

Harold Avery looked at his son sternly. “We will talk about why you were not in school later, young man, but right now these men have something they need to ask you, and you better tell the truth.”

Jack looked up at Reed and Bill, and it was all Reed could do to not grab the boy and rapidly fire questions at him. He knew instinctively if he frightened the boy, he would never get the information he needed, so as he knelt down so he could be eye to eye with the young boy, he kept his voice and mannerisms under strict control.

“My fiancée came up missing shortly after you gave you gave her the message at the Red Rose this morning. Can you describe the person who sent you to my hotel with the message for her? I think whoever sent you had a hand in her being taken away.”

The boy’s eyes became wide with shock as he asked slowly, “She was taken away?”

“Yes she was,” replied Reed solemnly, “and I think she may be in danger.”

Jack thought of the two shiny coins he had carefully stored in his room and had no intention of giving them back.

“I don’t remember going to the hotel or anyone sending me there,” he stated quickly.

As Reed hung his head in despair, Harold Avery angrily stepped forward. He gingerly touched his leather belt as he scowled at his son.

“If I find out you’re lying, boy, I’ll tear you up,” he threatened.

Jack regarded his father fearfully and then began to sob as he got on his knees and hugged his cherished puppy. He had wanted to spend the silver dollars, the first money he had ever owned, on

something special for Georgy. He turned his small tear-stained face up and looked at Reed.

“Will I have to give back the money he gave me? I wasn’t goin’ to spend it on nothin’ bad, just buy a present for Georgy.”

“You can keep the money, Jack,” Reed soothed as he opened his arms and the distraught boy rushed into them. “There is something much more valuable than cash at stake here. Please tell me who paid you.”

“It was Mr. Cameron,” he answered between snuffles as he wiped his eyes with his hands. “I knew it was him even though he was all dirty-looking. He gave me two dollars; one to deliver the message and the other one to be quiet about it.”

Emily was furious. “What sort of man uses an innocent child for evil? I always thought Garrett Cameron was underhanded and now he has went and proved it!”

Reed, still on his knees, snapped his fingers and summoned the curious and trusting Georgy. When the beagle puppy bounded over, he instantly began licking the visitor’s hand as his tail wagged rapidly.

“This is a very fine dog you have here, Jack. You should be very proud.”

“He’s awful smart too. He knows three tricks and I taught him all of them myself.”

Reed smiled. “I’m sure he’s splendid at all three. Thank you very much for your honesty about who gave you the money and I hope you never lose your sense of integrity. It is a very admirable quality in fine young men such as yourself.”

With a final pat on Georgy’s head and a word of thanks to the Averys, both he and Bill leapt into their saddles and were off. Neither spoke a word as they rode, they both knew they were heading out to the Imperial.

When they arrived, they both quickly tethered their winded horses to the hitching post and then rushed inside.

The usual thick cloud of cigar smoke hung in the richly decorated gaming house's air, and shouts by both ecstatic winners and sore losers reverberated from the thick wood and stucco walls.

The very minute he spied them entering the building, the manager, Mitch Sweeney, approached them and put his arms out to try and prevent the men from leaving the lobby and reaching the bustling gaming floor.

"Neither of you gentlemen are allowed to gamble here at the Imperial," he said determinedly. "Direct orders of Mr. Cameron. I have to ask you both to leave."

"Well, guess what, Sweeney?" said an outraged Bill as he stepped forward and put his face directly in the other man's. "We aren't going anywhere until we get a few answers! Go get your boss and tell him Bill Hanscom wants to see him right now!"

Mitch, every bit as big and powerful as Bill, remained calm and even looked slightly amused as he took a step back and then raised his massive arms over his head. He clapped his hands together twice sharply, and out of the rowdy crowd came four very large men who were dressed exactly the same.

"Mr. Cameron isn't here. He's out of town for the time being. You gentlemen may leave now or be escorted out by my coworkers."

"Those hired thugs don't scare either of us," replied Bill nastily, his aggressive gaze never leaving Mitch Sweeney's eyes. "Please take the following warning very seriously; if I find out you're lying about Garrett being out of town, I will come back here and tear this place apart with my bare hands."

Anger quickly rose in the manager's face and voice. "Anytime you think you can get past us, you just come right ahead."

Bill bit back the sharp retort that had come to his lips and then turned to leave. Reed followed suit, and when they were back on their horses, they rode at a fast trot back to the Red Rose.

Upon their entering the dining room, Marie threw herself into her husband's strong embrace, and he hugged her back warmly. Her tears started anew, and Bill consoled her as he held her. When she had composed herself, they all sat at a table.

Reed sat down in his chair heavily. Frustration and apprehension made him constantly clench and unclench his hands as he stared ahead angrily.

"We know Garrett had something to do with Lucinda's disappearance," he explained dourly. "He was the one who paid the Avery boy to come here this morning."

"Are you going to see Garrett next?" she asked worriedly.

"He's out of town," Bill spat heatedly. "Who knows where he has hightailed it to?"

Reed's eyes suddenly brightened as he had a gripping idea. "There's one person in this town who will know exactly where he is; Elise Draiden."

"I know what you're thinking," Bill said skeptically, "and I think it will turn up nothing. She is still pissed at you for the whole thing with Lucinda. At your engagement party she had definite daggers in her eyes."

"How very unlike you to underestimate me so severely, my old friend. Elise has always prided herself on her wiles and how she can make any man bend to her will. I'm very curious to see just how she will react when I turn the tables on her."

"More than likely, she'll just try to scratch your eyes out with those long red nails of hers," commented Marie sullenly.

"Is Jeff Acton here today?" he asked Marie optimistically.

"He's always here, that man never misses a day of work."

"Excellent! Please tell him to come here and see me in twenty minutes, I will have a note for him to deliver to Chez Elise."

Reed left his friends staring after him curiously as he hurried away to the office. Once inside he took out a piece of monogrammed stationery and composed a brief letter.

Elusive Destiny

My Dearest Elise,

I must see you; my soul has been grieving for you since our last meeting. It is my fondest wish that you could forgive my foolish haste in ending our former association. Please, I beg of you, mend my broken heart and say that I may call on you at eight p.m. tonight.

Devotedly,

Reed

With triumph blazing in his dark eyes, Reed returned to the dining room and handed the note to his friends. They both quickly read it, and when they were finished, Bill looked at him with tremendous doubt.

“Laying it on kinda thick, aren’t you?”

“I’ll tell you this plain,” stated Marie worriedly. “I’m afraid of you being alone with her! If she is evil enough to have her own niece kidnapped, Lord only knows what she is capable of doing to you!”

Both Bill and Marie were surprised at how quickly Reed’s expression shifted from excited to as hard as stone. They saw how vivid sparks of sheer wrath danced in his dark eyes as a deep frown marred his good looks.

“If she had anything to do with this, she will pay for what she’s done just as surely as Garrett will.”

Chapter 18

Through the foggy haze that clouded her groggy mind, Lucinda felt warm fingertips brushing her cheek lovingly.

“Is that you, Reed?” she moaned. “Is it over? Are we safe?”

A gravelly and sinister chuckle was her reply, and suddenly her stomach clenched tight in pure terror as she realized the voice she had heard was not Reed’s.

Her eyes flew open instantly, and she was shocked to realize she was totally naked and lying in a large bed with a very overweight, dark-skinned man.

He began whispering in her ear in a foreign language, and she could smell whiskey on his rancid breath. Her heart hammered painfully in her chest as she drew the sheet very closely around herself and scrambled off the bed and into the far corner of the drab room.

“Where am I? Who are you?” she demanded hysterically.

“I am Ramon Espozita, my sweet desert flower,” he replied with a lustful smile, “and I am famous in San Calando. The women here call me *El Toro Grande*, and I am here to rid you of your virginity. You are very pretty for a whore; just your beauty alone is worth the great price I paid to have you.”

He stood up from the bed, and Lucinda gasped in horror at the sight of his enormous manhood. Her reaction made Ramon chuckle, as if he had seen that look of shock and fear on women’s faces many times before.

"You don't understand," she pleaded as tears streamed down her cheeks. "I was brought here against my will and my body is not for sale. I am not supposed to be here!"

"I see," he said with a look of mock understanding as he slowly approached her. "You must want to play games. I enjoy such games and will play, but I warn you that you will be punished for being naughty when I catch you. I have paid many pesos for you, many more than I have paid for any other whore I have ever had here. Your maidenhead will be mine; I bought it from Carmelita free and clear."

He lunged at her and caught her tightly by her wrist. With his free hand, he mercilessly ripped away the sheet that covered her nakedness. He gaped at her appreciatively as she struggled against his iron grip and tried to push herself further into the dusty corner.

"For someone who likes to play games, you did not make me chase you very far, and for that I am grateful. You have a beautiful body, my dear, and it will be a shame to punish you like I must."

He quickly jerked her up from the corner, spun her around, and then shoved her face down onto the bed. She tried to crawl away, and he laid his heavy body on top of her to keep her still.

Lucinda was crushed beneath his enormous weight as he reached forward and pulled up a pair of long leather straps that were securely bolted to the headboard.

He quickly bound her arms over her head, and when he was certain they were no longer a threat, he used similar straps bolted to the corners of the footboard for her ankles. Her legs were gaping widely, her innocent pink sex fully revealed to his famished and depraved ogling.

He enjoyed watching her struggle in vain against her bonds for a few minutes, his large hanging belly shaking in silent laughter.

He suddenly moved out of her line of vision, and she could hear him moving around behind her. It was physically impossible

for her to see what he was doing, and that frightened her badly. She began to scream as piercingly as she could.

Ramon, panicking at her reaction, tried to cover her mouth with his hand and got harshly bitten for his effort. He swore loudly in Spanish and then went to the door and bellowed mightily for Carmelita. When she arrived, he pulled her out in the hall where he could confront her and be heard over Lucinda's shrill screams.

"What kind of trick is this?" he demanded furiously.

"There are no tricks here," she insisted angrily. "She is a virgin like you paid for!"

"She bit me," he shouted as he shoved his bleeding digit in her face, "and she won't stop screaming! Do something about it now or I will take back my money and tell everyone the *Diablo* is a sham!"

Carmelita swore under her breath as she strode angrily to her shabby office and then jerked open a drawer of her desk. She removed a medium-sized cardboard box Garrett had given her the night before and irritably threw the lid aside. She took the needle inside and quickly stabbed it into the top of a small bottle that was also in the box. At first she only drew the clear liquid into the glass chamber until it was half full, but then in her rage, decided to fill it all the way. After she pressed the plunger enough to remove the air from the glass compartment, she set out down the hall again.

"This will make her what into what you paid for," assured Carmelita as she passed the irate customer in the hallway and shoved the needle in his face. "She will no longer fight you after I give her this."

"She better not," he warned angrily. "I am not above going to the sheriff."

"Oh, thank God you heard me," said a grateful Lucinda from the bed. "I am not supposed to be here, please help me up. That man strapped me down..."

"Shut up, whore," snarled the madam as she searched Lucinda's arm for a good vein. "You are exactly where you are

supposed to be. You work for me now and will pleasure all the men I send in here.”

“What are you doing?” asked Lucinda fearfully as Carmelita held up the needle and got ready to puncture her arm with it. “What is that? Why are you giving it to me? Stop, please, stop this and let me go!”

Carmelita ignored her as she roughly shoved the needle into her arm and quickly depressed the plunger. Lucinda screamed again, and Carmelita immediately slapped her face viciously.

“I told you to shut up once before, don’t make me do it again,” she warned nastily. “One more scream earns you a day locked in the cellar.”

Lucinda cried and pulled at her restraints until everything started to get hazy and ethereal. She felt as if she had been made to breathe chloroform again, but the immense lethargic feeling was somehow coming from inside her.

Once Carmelita was sure Lucinda was totally subdued by the giant dose of morphine she had been given, she left the room and told Ramon he could continue with his enjoyment of her body.

“It is time for me to collect what I have paid so much for,” he said, growling hungrily as he roughly pawed her breasts and then greedily lapped at her sensitive nipples.

“Please let me go,” she implored in a slurred voice as he continued his lecherous assault on her body. “I beg of you not to take what I would give my husband on our wedding night.”

He acted as if she had not spoken as his hand slid down her trembling belly and made its way to her mound. His disgustingly prying fingers began exploring her pristine sex as the unbelievably massive amount of narcotic she had been given rendered her totally unconscious.

Chapter 19

Elise was thrilled beyond words when Jeff handed her Reed's note, and after reading it over a few times, she retreated to her desk to write him a reply. She tried to steady her trembling hands as she took a delicately scented note card and wrote:

Darling Reed,

I will gladly accept your visit at eight p.m., and am looking forward to the rekindling of our formerly amorous relationship.

Lovingly,

Elise

She placed the card in an envelope, sealed it, and then handed it to the patiently waiting Jeff. When he left, she watched out the window, and when he entered the Red Rose, she sped to her bedroom and glanced at the elaborate clock on the wall. It was just closing in on six o'clock; she had only two hours to get herself together. She vowed to make it happen as she stood in front of her large armoire and smiled elatedly.

She flung the doors open and meticulously went over her dresses, finally settling on what she considered to be her most flattering gown. She wanted to look absolutely perfect for the return of the man she genuinely loved to where he truly belonged—in her adoring arms.

The glorious gown she chose was made of champagne-colored silk and had a complicated pattern of beads and crystals sewn on the

bodice. Stiff cream lace frothed from the very low neckline, and the skirt clung to her slim hips and shapely legs very provocatively.

She quickly put it on and then admired herself in a full-length mirror. The gown complimented her raven hair, her seductive figure, and her tiny waistline. She turned around several times so she could check the appearance of the gown from all possible angles. When she was finished, she complimented herself on her wise choice.

His note had sent her hopes of at last attaining a top spot in society into the stratosphere. She could not help but daydream happily as she sat at her large vanity table and began to brush out her long black hair. Her diligent fingers trembled on the brush handle as she considered that Reed might very well pick up on her attire's remote resemblance to a wedding dress and gallantly ask for her hand in marriage.

She deftly pinned her hair up in an ornate pompadour, which she knew to be the very latest style in the big metropolises of New York and New Orleans. Perhaps Reed would take her to one of those grand cities for their honeymoon; after all, they would make such an elegant couple as they strolled down the busy streets.

Elise hardly noticed the soft off-white slippers or the stylish silver and mother of pearl necklace with matching earbobs she hastily donned as she became lost in her fantasies. It was only when she went to choose a ring that she put her dreams away and concentrated on what she was doing.

After much consideration, she at last chose a small and demure pearl ring for her right hand. She left her other hand ominously bare as she hoped with all her heart that Reed would be bringing a ring for her to put there with him. She would certainly want a bigger and more impressive ring than he had given that worthless snippet of a niece of hers; that pathetic ring would not have pleased her at all.

She passed the remainder of the time until eight pacing in her sitting room, smiling and quietly giggling over the visions and flights of the imagination that soared through her mind as fast as she could fabricate them.

She knew Reed would be punctual; he always made it a point to be on time for any appointment he made. At four minutes prior to his arrival, she began to arrange herself prettily on her elegant sofa, trying to make the most of the soft oil lamplight that illuminated the room warmly.

When the knock came on her door at precisely eight o'clock, she called out permission to enter in her most affectionate and seductive voice. Her carefully made-up violet eyes were eager to drink in the sight of his virile form.

Reed opened the door, and his appearance did not disappoint her in any way. He was resplendent in a dazzling white suit and flat-brimmed hat. The hatband matched the suit perfectly, and the brilliance of the material set off his silky and gleaming black hair handsomely.

His shirt and tie were of the finest sky blue silk, as was the handkerchief that peeped from the jacket pocket. His finely crafted black leather shoes gleamed like highly polished onyx, and the final touch to the very elegant and tasteful ensemble was the silver tipped walking stick he carried in his right hand. It was just enough to successfully complete the appearance of a refined and worldly gentleman without being flamboyant or overdressed.

Though he loathed Elise to the depths of his soul, he forced himself to keep a wanting look in his dark eyes as he went to where she sat on the couch and knelt before her. He took both of her slim hands in his gently and gazed into the deceitful violet eyes he knew so very, very well.

"I am so happy you were gracious enough to accept my call," he lied smoothly. "How can I ever make up to you the incredible wrong I have done?"

Happiness frolicked in her watchful eyes; his begging for her forgiveness was more than she had dared to hope for.

"It won't be easy," she replied with false aversion to his abundant charms. "I'm not a lady who will tolerate having her emotions trifled with so callously."

Reed inwardly smiled, she was taking the bait he offered and swallowing it down greedily. He would get her to tell him what he needed to know very quickly.

"Of course you're not, my dear," he stated convincingly. "And I sincerely hope you will allow me to make reparations for what I have done. You are a woman of class, style, and breeding; and I am but a foolish mortal humbled in your enchanting presence."

His fanciful words made her heart flutter, and she could no longer resist throwing her arms around his neck.

She suddenly kissed him soundly, and instead of the pleasure he had once felt, it was as if her lips were coated with the most pungent of poisons. It was all he could do to not pull away from her tainted lips and embrace.

He managed to respond well enough that she did not notice his utter repugnance. He knew he had to do whatever it took to get Lucinda home safely, even if it meant sinking low enough to physically flirt with this odious woman.

"You still have the sweetest lips in Texas," he said believably when the kiss ended. He then rose to his feet and stepped away, not truly sure if he could tolerate her touching him again.

"May I get you some wine?" he asked hopefully.

"By all means do, there is a bottle of Bordeaux in the cabinet by the window."

Reed was careful not to move away from her too quickly; she must not suspect his true feelings in any way. He kept silently reminding himself that he only had to endure her company until the information he needed was his.

He purposely made a production number out of opening and serving the robust wine just in case she was starting to get suspicious in any way.

He detested having to be close to her again as she took her drink, but a clear mental picture of his darling Lucinda gave him the courage he needed to complete his unsavory task.

The former lovers made small talk as they sat together on her luxurious sofa and sipped their wine. Reed was sure to compliment her on her apparel, hairstyle, and physical beauty. His hands trembled with the need to choke the very life out of her, but he kept them quietly at bay as he listened to her mindless prattle.

Elise voraciously drank in every flattering remark and admiring gaze he gave her. She was very thoroughly enjoying what she perceived to be his heartfelt groveling to win back her favor.

He had never been so attentive or so warm toward her in the past, but any inner alarms of suspicion his actions set off were quickly doused by her enormous ego.

"Enough of this visiting," she said sexily as she set her empty wineglass down on a nearby table. "Let's take this intimate gathering of ours into my bedroom."

She began to pull down the bodice of her gown, and Reed knew that touching her sexually would be more than he could stand.

"Gladly, my sweetness," he replied, though he knew he had no choice but to spring his trap at that very moment. The thought of making love to her and being caught in her clutches again made his stomach roll dangerously.

"Tell me one thing first, my lovely," he stalled. "How did you manage to remove from my life that child I was foolish enough to become engaged to?"

"What exactly are you implying?" she asked tightly as alarm appeared in her eyes.

“All I am implying is that you are the most clever woman I have ever known,” he lied as he flashed her his most winning smile. “You were able to show me how very foolish I had been; if you had tried to merely explain it to me, I would never have listened. You had the intelligence, resourcefulness, and initiative to do exactly what was needed to save me from myself. I salute you, Elise.”

Her lips trembled slightly as she smiled nervously at him and then cast her gaze away. After what seemed a moment of anxious uncertainty, she nimbly flipped open a white lace fan that dangled from a silken cord on her slim wrist.

She fanned herself much too quickly for it to be anything but a nervous reaction to how close he had come to realizing the truth about her involvement in the abduction.

“I simply couldn’t stand by and let you make such a horrid mistake,” she twittered uneasily. “When placed in such a situation, one does what one must.”

Reed felt he was quickly gaining ground, so he let himself brazenly forge ahead with his extravagant lies and fabrications.

“How very much you must care for me,” he said in a loving voice as he forced himself to kiss her heavily rouged cheek. “I am honored and greatly pleased to be thought of so highly by such a lady as you. I am extremely impressed by it all and am compelled to admit that it has made me see you in a very different light. Your unswerving devotion has made me consider taking our relationship in a new direction.”

Reed was secretly ecstatic as he watched the distrust in her eyes melt away and a bright gleam of hope take up residence instead. He decided it was at last time to ask her the most pivotal question of all.

“Just how were you able to perform such a great service for me?”

“Although I would adore to take all the credit, I can’t,” she gushed proudly. “It was Garrett who came up with the plan that

would make Lucinda disappear forever. He is part owner of this abominable house of pleasure in Mexico that has earned itself the name of *El Corazon Del Diablo*. That means heart of the devil, you know,” she stated with diabolical glee.

Black rage boiled up in Reed’s throat at a threateningly rapid pace, but he physically restrained himself and let her continue with her sordid tale.

“He has assured me it is by far the most evil and monstrous brothel that has ever marred the land, and I am sure by now, that hopelessly juvenile niece of mine has serviced close to fifty of the filthiest men ever born.”

She laughed cruelly at Lucinda’s fate, and that final insult to his fiancée made Reed suddenly snap. He bent down and took the wineglass he had recently emptied and cast it viciously into the nearest wall.

The shattering glass made Elise jump back, and the fiercely enraged Reed clutched her tightly by the shoulders, his fingers digging cruelly into her creamy white flesh.

“I knew you would eventually spill your guts to me, you filthy, deceitful bitch,” he snarled venomously, “and you didn’t let me down.”

“What?” she sputtered feebly as she searched his features for any scrap of tenderness. “What about taking our relationship in a new direction?”

His triumphant smile was laced with austere fury. “It was all an elaborate act, and your ego made you fall for every false word! You’ve been pulling that same detestable feat and exploiting everyone you have ever known for years! How does it feel to be manipulated like that? I sincerely hope you choke to death on the bitter taste of your own medicine!”

He looked down at his hands and then quickly released her with a clearly identifiable look of disgust. “It sickens me to touch you,” he stated bitterly.

"I hate you, Reed Donovan," she whispered in an emotionally ravaged voice. "You are nothing but a vile, black-hearted bastard! When Garrett gets back, he'll deal with you and make you pay!"

"He will never make it back to Holton; at least not alive," he stated confidently. With one last look of pure abhorrence, Reed turned and started for the door.

Her anger and hurt exploded within her, and Elise launched herself at the departing Reed violently. Her sharp fingernails dug into his back, but in a moment, he had easily overpowered her and propelled her away from him. He quickly grabbed one of her arms and twisted it cruelly behind her as he pinned her to the wall.

"You can't hurt me any more than your spiteful selfishness already has," he said menacingly, "and I am going to spend the rest of my life making sure that you and anyone you know never hurts Lucinda again!"

Reed seriously entertained the thought of murdering her right then. It would be so easy for him to snap her accursed neck and assure that she would no longer be a danger to him or the woman he loved. Reluctantly he backed off and forcibly quashed the very nearly overwhelming urge to exterminate her life.

Immediately upon her release, Elise whirled around to face him, her tear-streaked face the very image of savage fury.

"How are you going to feel about your precious Lucinda if she has caught the pox?" she taunted callously. "I hope she has caught it and gives it to you so you can die the slow and torturous death you deserve!"

"If I never got it from you and the thousands of stinking and grubby men you sold yourself to, then I'm not worried about it," he replied flippantly over his shoulder.

He cleared her door and started down the massive curving staircase, wanting to be out of her place of business as quickly as possible. He turned and faced the top of the staircase when a sud-

den blood-curdling scream split the air. A very disheveled and completely enraged Elise began to pursue him.

Completely consumed by her unquenchable wrath, the brash Elise ran blindly forward and gravely misjudged the first step of the wide staircase. She helplessly plummeted down the entire length, her body striking several steps brutally in its graceless tumbling descent. Her lifeless body at last crashed awkwardly on the lobby floor, her head and left leg resting in dubiously impossible angles.

Two girls who were seated in the lobby waiting for customers took in the gruesome sight of their boss lying broken on the floor and began screaming hysterically. Several men who had been making their companion choices or having coffee at the bar rushed over to the corpse and began trying to rouse it.

After several attempts to waken and revive her failed, one of the men announced loudly, "She's dead."

Reed came down the stairs at a decidedly unhurried pace as several people crowded in from the street. When he reached the lobby, Reverend Barkley was holding the dead woman's hand and starting to pray. Reed took no notice and stepped over the broken and bleeding corpse as if it were no more than a pile of dung in the street.

"You pushed her!" accused one of the girls who had been in the lobby. "You murdered Elise Draiden! Somebody call the Sheriff!"

"On the contrary, it was Miss Draiden who was trying to murder me," replied Reed calmly as he reached the door. "I dodged her onslaught and that was when she tumbled down the stairs to her death. If you or anyone else in this room unjustly accuses me of murder again, I will have my attorney swiftly prepare a case of slander."

Reed left the building and went across the street to his hotel. He swiftly located Bill who was immersed deeply in paperwork as

usual. He quickly told Bill what he had found out about Lucinda's whereabouts and the untimely death of Elise.

"Lord have mercy on us all!" said the large man worriedly when Reed disclosed the name of the brothel his fiancée had been taken to.

"Is it really as bad as Elise made it out to be?" he asked fearfully. "I was hoping perhaps she had made it out to be worse than it truly is."

"That place is the closest thing you'll find to hell on this earth," replied Bill as he stood up from his work. "We had better go at first light and ride hard for Mexico."

"If Lucinda is in as much danger as I think she is, we ride now!" demanded Reed frantically.

"We ride at first light," Bill reasoned as he came around the desk and put a comforting hand on his friend's shoulder. "We need time to get provisions and get rested up. Mexico is not just a hop and a skip away from here, you know."

"The sooner we get there, the sooner we can save her from whatever that bastard Garrett has planned; I put nothing past him any more!"

"First light," repeated Bill reassuringly. "We go at first light, and when we get to *El Corazon Del Diablo*, we are going to tear that place and anyone responsible for taking, accepting, and keeping Lucinda there, apart piece by bloody piece."

Once again Reed protested strongly, and he and Bill continued to argue about their departure for a short while longer. Reed at last reluctantly gave in to his closest friend's reason, and once the matter was settled, the men went to see Marie and told her what to pack for their journey into the unforgiving badlands of Mexico.

Chapter 20

Neither man slept well that long night, nor did the devoted Marie. She spent most of the hours weeping pitifully and clinging to her beloved husband. When the sky turned from deep black to the pale golden hues of daybreak, both men rose from their beds and dressed quickly.

They met in the deserted dining room where Marie had left exactly what they had asked for wrapped carefully in small cloth bundles. Neither man spoke as they gathered the provisions, and then Bill lit a candle to illuminate their way out to the stable.

Both men adeptly saddled their horses by the dim candlelight, but Bill quickly realized he could not hold back his strong feelings of foreboding as they worked.

“I know you didn’t sleep any better than I did, Reed,” he stated glumly as he buckled the thick leather strap he held, “so that means we got maybe two hours of real rest. Neither of us can travel well on that.”

“I have enough hate and loathing in my heart to travel halfway around the world and beat the hell out of ten men like Garrett Cameron if I have to! We have delayed this trip long enough, we ride to Mexico now!”

Bill shook his head and continued to prepare his saddle. He had never known his friend to be so steadfastly passionate about anything. Not even the materialization of his life’s dream, the gala opening of the Red Rose Hotel, had brought forth such raw and

heartfelt emotion in him. Nothing had ever moved him heart and soul the way the young Lucinda Hoffman had.

As if he were able to read his friend's thoughts, Reed looked wistfully out into the soft pastel colors of the dawn and began to speak softly.

"She's everything I ever wanted and needed," he explained as his voice cracked with emotion. "She makes me feel so vibrantly alive! My world is a much brighter and sweeter place since she has entered into it, and I'll be damned straight to hell before I let anyone steal that away from me!"

His hands began to tremble so badly he had to stop working on saddling his stallion. He turned to his friend with bright tears and horrific pain swirling in his dark eyes.

"I cannot live without her, Bill, she's the only person I have ever known who makes me feel completely loved and desired for more than just my money or social position. She's above such paltry and meaningless things; she wants me simply for who I am."

"We'll get her back; I stake my good name on it," Bill offered as a form of reassurance.

Reed smiled sadly and nodded gratefully at his friend as he returned to the task at hand. He knew he had to keep his courage and spirits up; he could never make the journey if he let himself become an emotional wreck.

After a few more minutes, they both had their horses saddled. Reed looked out into the distance and was pleased to see the sun just making its glorious debut.

"Let's go, the sun is rising," Reed said decisively.

They both mounted up and let the horses walk from the stable. Just as they got to the front of the hotel, they were shocked to find Sheriff Wilner and three armed deputies astride horses and pointing rifles at their heads.

"What's this all about?" demanded Bill stormily.

“Elise Draiden died last night, and we think Mr. Donovan here played a large part in her demise,” informed the sheriff as he turned his rifle barrel and full attention to Reed. “We are here to question you about the death of Miss Draiden. Come along peacefully or I’ll make my mind up here and now to exercise my right to uphold Texas justice.”

“I made my statement last night in Chez Elise in front of an abundance of witnesses,” he stated with severe impatience, “and I have nothing more to say on the matter. I am leaving now on very urgent business, so please do not detain me any longer.”

Reed and Bill tried to leave, and as if on cue, all four men cocked their rifles and the resumed pointing them threateningly.

“This is your last warning,” the sheriff advised loudly. “So I suggest you don’t take it lightly! You are coming down to my office with me right now or you will not be going anywhere alive again!”

“You better go, Reed, he’s not bluffing,” said Bill solemnly.

“This is absolutely ludicrous!” shouted Reed furiously. He then turned his angry gaze directly at the sheriff. “How much does it actually cost for Garrett Cameron to buy you these days? How can you sleep at night knowing that instead of truly upholding the law, you are nothing but the chartered lackey of a dishonest casino owner?”

“Take careful aim and shoot that smart alecky son of a bitch off his horse, Reuben,” Sheriff Wilner angrily ordered the deputy on his right.

The young deputy took careful aim and then abruptly hesitated, obviously not wanting to shoot a man who was posing no threat to the lives of anyone present.

“Shoot him now or I swear you’ll hang on the gallows the same day he does!”

“I am not killing an innocent man,” said the deputy boldly as he threw his rifle down in disgust.

“Consider yourself fired, you good-for-nothing-lily-livered milksop!” shouted the sheriff.

“There is no need of firing him for having honor and a conscience,” said Reed directly to the sheriff. “I’ll come along with you peacefully so we may put this foolishness behind us as quickly as possible.”

The sheriff and the two deputies who were still armed kept their rifles sharply trained on Reed as he dismounted and threw his horse’s reins to Bill. He went over to Reuben; picked up the rifle he had discarded, and handed it back to him.

“You are what an officer of the law should be,” he praised. “I hope the blatant corruption in this town does not eventually ruin you as well.”

Bill began to protest, and suddenly the sheriff pointed his rifle directly at Bill’s heart and put his finger on the trigger.

“It’s okay, I’ll be done with this idiocy soon and then we will ride for Mexico,” Reed said to his dear friend apologetically.

Bill wasn’t so sure, he knew very well Garrett owned the law in Holton and that well-bribed Sheriff Wilner would do everything in his power to keep Reed from going to find Lucinda.

Reed walked before the sheriff and his deputies as they went to the office, and he knew that the rifles they each held were aimed at his back. He did not hurry or let what he knew influence his stride in the least; he had the utmost confidence in his total innocence. No matter how much money Garrett Cameron lined the sheriff’s pockets with, he had no right to keep an innocent man in jail; his attorney would see to that.

Once inside the small office, the sheriff pushed a very uncomfortable looking chair toward Reed. As he calmly sat down, the sheriff and his deputies took their chairs and lined them up in front of him. Reed regarded each man who had escorted him there with disdain as they stowed away their rifles and he waited for the tedious questioning to officially begin.

When they had all taken their seats, the sheriff stared at him coldly before frostily firing the first question.

“Did you murder Elise Draiden?” he demanded pointedly.

“I did not,” replied Reed confidently. “It was a tragic accident. She fell down her staircase and died. I no longer want to answer any more such ridiculous questions.”

“One of the whores told us you pushed her,” interjected an eager freckle-faced deputy.

“A total lie. Elise was attempting to attack me and in her haste missed the top step. She fell to her death, as I stated just a moment ago. Sheriff Wilner, I demand that you set me free and let me go about my business!”

“You can demand all you want,” said the sheriff with a toothy and decidedly evil grin. “But you’re going to get nothing and like it! Now what exactly would you say if I told you we just happen to have a witness who swears she actually saw you push Elise Draiden?”

“I would most definitely have to say your so-called witness is a detestable liar on two accounts. First of all, there was not a soul present at the top of the stairs except Elise and I when she fell, and in the second place, I never pushed Elise.”

“I think the only liar in this room is you, Reed Donovan,” said the sheriff nastily. “I am going to keep you here in a jail cell until your trial.”

Reed was completely outraged and sprung from his chair angrily. “My trial? You are going to have me stand trial for murder, even though it is overwhelmingly clear that I have done nothing wrong?”

“The jury will decide that,” stated the sheriff coldly.

Reed completely lost his temper and in a blinding fit of rage, picked up the wooden chair he had been sitting in and smashed it vociferously on the wooden floor. He swiftly grabbed a jagged edged chair leg and began swinging it at the deputies furiously.

While the three deputies dodged his angry swipes and thrusts, Sheriff Wilner retrieved his rifle from the rack. A quick blow to the head with the butt of the rifle brought Reed down and rendered him unconscious.

As blood leaked precariously from his head, the four men carried him out back to one of the holding cells. They laid him on the narrow plank bunk, and the sheriff smiled happily as he turned the key in the heavy lock.

When he returned to the outer room, the deputies were busy cleaning up the wooden shards that had once been a chair. He grabbed Reuben by the arm and pulled him aside.

"Go tell Bill Hanscom that Reed's trial for the murder of Elise Draiden will start in a month when the circuit judge is due here again. No amount of money or property will be accepted for bail, he's going to stay right in that cell until his day in court."

"You know he damn well didn't do it," stated the deputy angrily.

The sheriff gritted his teeth with rage and then soundly punched the young deputy in the stomach. The boy instantly crumpled to the floor and wrapped his arms around his middle as he gasped for breath and gagged violently.

"I'm your boss, boy, and you will do what I say!" he shouted viciously as he leaned over the suffering deputy and stared angrily into his contorted face. "Before he left for Mexico, Garrett told me to not let Donovan leave town, and by making him hang on the gallows for Elise's murder, I'll keep him in this blasted town forever!"

Reuben, still gagging and laboring strongly to get a full breath, struggled shakily to his feet and then stumbled out the door to deliver the message.

"That rotten son of a bitch!" swore Bill loudly when he learned of the impossibility of bail. "I'll find a way to get Reed out of there; and you can give that bastard sheriff my word on that!"

“It’s going to have to be something even he can’t question, maybe the testimony of someone who Garrett’s money can’t buy. Good luck finding someone like that in Holton,” the young deputy replied hopelessly.

When he was alone again, Bill sat down heavily in his office chair and held his head mournfully.

Chapter 21

When the sweat-soaked bulk that was Ramon Espozita as last left her room, Lucinda felt as if she had been through an atrocious war and lost miserably.

The sickening and perverted pig of a man had taken her in every conceivable way, and her very bruised and blood-streaked body reeked of his disgusting sweat and his very vinegary body odor.

She carefully latched onto the edge of the well-used bed and hoisted herself up until she was sitting up on the creaking and lumpy mattress. Her tortured body quivered involuntarily from a devastating combination of exhaustion, pain, and severely frayed nerves.

She jumped as the large form of the madam, Carmelita, came bursting unannounced through the rickety bedroom door. She carried a small chipped basin and a few ragged cloths in her pudgy hands.

“Get yourself cleaned up,” she snapped cruelly as she thrust her holdings into Lucinda’s weak and quaking arms. “You’ll have another customer very soon, and he won’t want a dirty lay.”

“How can I?” she asked weakly as she looked down at the items now resting in her lap. “I’m raw, bleeding, and my...”

Carmelita’s hand shot out and cracked smartly across her face before she could finish her sentence.

“Don’t ever tell me you ‘can’t’ do anything again, bitch, or I’ll start sending in men so sick and twisted they make Ramon look like

an angel! Now get the hell out of that bed and clean yourself up good!”

When Lucinda’s only response was weeping, Carmelita quickly grabbed her arm and hurled her out of the bed and across the confines of the small, dingy room. She landed in a sobbing heap on the dirty floor and gazed up at her captor pitifully in the hope of finding perhaps even a tiny speck of mercy within her.

Carmelita only glared at her threateningly, and Lucinda gave up all hope of appealing to her sympathy. She attempted to crawl to where the basin and cloths had landed, and found it to be a very painful endeavor.

Due to fear, sheer will, and a very great effort on her part, she finally made it, and when she shakily righted the porcelain basin, Carmelita went out into the hall and retrieved an equally worn pitcher that held cold water.

When the basin was sufficiently full, Lucinda dunked one of the cloths in the water and made feeble attempts to wash herself in the places that the nauseating Ramon had sullied. It hurt tremendously for her to touch her bloody female organs, and new tears fell to the floor when she tried to clean herself there.

A string of angry Spanish words erupted from the impatient Carmelita as she bent down and grabbed the cloth from Lucinda’s unsteady hand. She then proceeded to lean over the frightened girl and pointed a plump brown finger ominously in her face.

“When I tell you to wash, you stupid whore, this is what I mean!” she shouted cuttingly as she forced Lucinda’s quivering legs open and began to cleanse her inner thighs and torn sex very harshly with the abrasive cloth.

Lucinda screamed and writhed in pain as the coarse square of material was rubbed forcefully against her tender flesh, but a hefty arm thrown across her body kept her pinned securely to the floor.

When Carmelita freshened up the cloth in the basin the first time, the water turned a startling shade of pink. The second time,

it was the indisputable tinge of bright red that could only be fresh blood.

“Now you’re clean,” she declared at last, and the parts of Lucinda’s body that had felt raw and violated were now throbbing and screaming in torturous pain.

Carmelita roughly helped her to stand and then led her back to the bed. She flopped on it weakly as if she were a worn and tattered rag doll. Carmelita looked her all over and then quickly smiled as she thought of the remedy that would bring the girl back to some semblance of life.

“You need a shot,” she declared solidly just before she left the room. “I can’t have you bawling and blubbing all over the paying customers now, can I?”

When she was alone, Lucinda just lay back on the soiled mattress and cried tears of hurt, sorrow, and utter humiliation.

The madam quickly returned and unceremoniously shoved the prepared needle into Lucinda’s slender arm again. She quickly pushed the plunger down hard, making sure the distraught girl got every drop of the clear liquid injection. She then carefully withdrew the needle and began to scrutinize her vigilantly. Carmelita had given her another very powerful dose of morphine and wanted to make sure it would have the desired effect.

A few moments later, Lucinda saw the room grow muddled around her and she suddenly stopped her incessant weeping. Her newly befuddled mind tried very hard to remember what it was she had been so sad about; all her pain, torment, and heartache had been magically whisked away.

An image of her dearest love Reed slowly floated through her altered consciousness, and Lucinda made an effort to mentally grasp it and hold it close to her heart. Fleeting questions swirled dreamily in her fuzzy mind, but she had no idea what the answer to any of them could possibly be.

Random thoughts and questions formed and then dissolved in her mind so rapidly she actually chuckled when she tried to piece all the fragments together. After a few more ineffectual tries, she decided that the thought process itself was much too hard and she would just have to stop it completely.

Carmelita smiled with satisfaction as she watched the drastic changes in Lucinda's demeanor and expression. She then left the room and went downstairs to tell the waiting customer his woman was ready. She accepted his hefty payment happily just before he started up the creaking stairs to where his lust would be sated.

The door to Lucinda's dreary room squeaked open and a thin man in haggard clothes quietly slipped in. He swiftly shut the door behind him and then went over to the large bed and admired her bruised and welt-covered naked body.

After looking her over hungrily, he speedily shed his threadbare clothes. The dopey Lucinda could not help but stare at the rock-hard manhood that jutted from his bony hips as he climbed onto the bed.

"Call me Daddy, sweet one," he crooned wickedly as he leaned far over and began to kiss and suckle her tender breasts. "Tell me what a good girl you've been today."

The strong narcotic flowing freely in her veins made her not mind what he was doing to her, and Lucinda resisted the urge to laugh again as he took his pleasure.

Lucinda laid quietly on the bed until the drug had worn entirely off and the pain, fear, and degradation all came roaring back to life. She cried out in her agony and demanded loudly to be released from the hellish place she was being kept in.

As soon as her carrying on became very audible to the other customers and girls, it was more than Carmelita was willing to tolerate. She quickly filled another syringe, drawing up more than twice the amount Garrett had told her to. She frankly didn't care

how dazed Lucinda got, as long as it kept her quiet and very compliant with the heavily paying customers.

Once again the drug had to be forced on her, and Lucinda fought wildly against the injection. Carmelita had no choice but to physically restrain her captive before she could administer the mind-numbing shot.

After a week, Lucinda stopped fighting the frequent inoculations, and after a second, she actually started to look forward to them. When the potent narcotic was in her bloodstream, she didn't miss Reed so much, and the bleak room inside the appalling brothel became tolerable.

Carmelita smiled victoriously the first time her detainee actually asked her for a dose. The girl had finally become dependent on the powerful drug, and any fear of her trying to escape the Diablo had been reduced to nearly nonexistent.

"You can have your special medicine any time you need it," said Carmelita in a seemingly caring voice as she injected her. "I can always get enough to give you just what you need."

Lucinda smiled dreamily once she felt the familiar serenity and euphoria sweep over her mind and body. The shots were the only thing that made her feel good, and making sure she got them every time she needed it became the solitary focus of her life.

"Thank you, Carmelita," she slurred as she sloppily smiled at her keeper. "I'm so glad you are here to help me. At first I thought you would not be my friend, but it turns out your medicine helped me very much."

Her only reply was to smile deviously at the lethargic girl, and as she left the room, one of the better known regular customers entered. Instead of going downstairs as she had originally intended she left the door open a crack and watched the couple intently.

The man made no pretense about the nature of his visit to the drab room and quickly stripped off his clothes. He practically leapt

onto the bed and without so much as a word, he began to ravage the languid Lucinda.

Satisfied with what she had witnessed, Carmelita went downstairs and entered the shabby room she had designated as her office. She opened a drawer in her battered desk and took out a worn stub of a pencil and a sheet of coarse paper.

She did some quick figuring, and according to her crude calculations, as long as the morphine held out to keep her in a constant daze, Lucinda could service at least a dozen customers a day. Men had been and would continue to pay dearly for a whore as pretty as Lucinda, and Carmelita smiled at the amount of money she and Garrett were sure to make.

She put that paper aside and got another sheet from the drawer. She wrote a short note pertaining to the matter and included her sheet of figures when she sealed it in an envelope. She put Garrett's name on it and then took it outside with her. She paid a man she found begging for coins near the local cantina to take it to Garrett at the Oasis hotel where he was staying.

He had received the letter from Sheriff Wilner informing him of Elise's death and had been devastated. He instantly swore to himself that the diabolical plans he had made for Reed's downfall would increase tenfold in their malevolence.

The successful detention of Reed in Holton had cheered him, and the note regarding Lucinda had cheered him even more. The sheriff's bribe was a trifle compared to what it cost to have morphine delivered to the *Diablo* every week, but if they both added to Reed's demise, it was well worth the cost.

Garrett was doggedly determined that Reed would hang for Elise's murder, even if the heavy kickbacks he would have to pay drained him of every cent he had. His single regret was that he would not be in Holton to see Reed die a murderer's death on the gallows.

Chapter 22

Reed's shoulders sagged forlornly as he sat on the hard wooden bunk in the very grim and reeking jail cell he had called home for the past two weeks.

He missed, worried, and fretted about Lucinda every waking moment of his unjust captivity, and even when utter physical exhaustion claimed him and he slept, it was no solace to his tortured mind and soul.

He slept very sporadically, his vivid nightmares filled with ghastly images and horrifically gory scenarios. He had been unable to eat, only taking a few bites when the sheriff himself entered the cell and threatened him with an even longer incarceration than the time it would take the judge to arrive in Holton.

Bill had come by to see him every day of his confinement; and the sheriff grudgingly allowed him daily visits that usually lasted about five minutes. Bill spent the short time each day reassuring Reed that he would find a way to set his friend free.

When he was not visiting, Reed knew his downhearted friend Bill was ardently scouring Holton and even other nearby towns of Snyder and Jasper for anyone who had possibly seen what happened that fateful night in Chez Elise.

He had tried hanging posters advertising a large reward for a credible witness, but he told Reed it seemed every time he turned his back, the posters were torn down and destroyed. More than once he had returned to a place where he had hung a poster to find only ragged shards of paper being carried off by the wind.

When he was asked about the progress he was making, it was obvious Bill could not bring himself to lie to his closest friend. He told him the truth about the lack of a witness, and Reed accepted the cheerless news without surprise.

Bill watched helplessly as with each passing day his friend deteriorated physically, mentally, and emotionally. The deep depression and psychological fatigue Reed endured sapped what little strength he had and it was taking a heavy toll on his body. He had lost quite a bit of weight and his complexion and spirit were both becoming decidedly sallow and ashen.

During a visit on the fifteenth day of his imprisonment, Bill sensed Reed was starting to lose his will to live. He became alarmed and redoubled his effort to help his friend.

"You can't give up, Reed, I won't let you! You'll get Lucinda back and Garrett Cameron will get his due!"

"It's Garrett Cameron's money that's keeping me in this cell; even if you had been fortunate enough to find a credible witness, Garrett would have just bought them off. Lucinda may very well be dead by now, rumor has it women don't last very long in a place like *El Corazon Del Diablo*."

"She's tougher than you think," stated Bill with conviction. "That girl went through a lot in Tennessee with her mother and stepfather before she ever came here. She'll be there when we get to Mexico, and you'll see that she is well."

Reed suddenly became angry. "We've been friends for years now, and I have never had an occasion to be cross with you," he snapped heatedly, "and I'm sorry that I have to now but I think it's high time that you faced up to some of the hard realities of this situation. Sheriff Wilner says I am to be kept here until my trial starts, but how do we know he has even contacted the judge yet? He can keep me here in this revolting cell waiting for trial until I die of old age if he chooses! I can't even save myself, Bill, so how am I supposed to save Lucinda?"

His friend's words hit him like a shockingly unexpected spray of ice water; and though it tore him apart to admit it, he knew in his heart, Reed was right.

Bill had run out of encouraging words for his friend, so he told him the only thing he could think of at the time.

"All I can do for now is tell you to pray," offered Bill in a kindly and hopeful tone. "The Lord knows what is good and just and he will see to it that the evil people are dealt exactly what they deserve."

"Oh, silly me," Reed said sarcastically as he laughed bitterly. "Why didn't I think of that? I should have long ago wished that a giant divine hand of God would sweep down from heaven and rescue Lucinda and smite Garrett with one awesome blow! I feel much better now; as a matter of fact, I am going to fall to my knees this very moment and pray for that to magically happen!"

Reed then made an elaborate mocking gesture of literally falling to his knees and clenching his hands tightly beneath his chin.

"Dear God," he acerbically prayed in a derisive voice. "Please deliver my love from where she is being held and strike down the wicked man who took her there! And while you are at it, if you could reach down and bust me out of this jail cell, I would truly appreciate it. Amen."

Just before he turned to leave, Bill looked at his friend with deep hurt in his gentle blue eyes.

"I'm going to forgive you for that because it's obvious what state of mind you are in right now. I'll be back tomorrow, and hopefully by then, you can once again accept the encouragement of the only person who cares enough to try and help you out of this mess."

Reed immediately regretted hurting his friend and jumped to his feet apologizing profusely. The wounded Bill did not even bother to look back or slow down his brisk pace as he exited the gloomy holding area.

When he entered the office section of the building, he was surprised to see the elderly Reverend Barkley sitting in a chair by the sheriff's desk. The two men were in a deep conversation that was bordering on an argument as he approached.

"Please come and sit with us, Mr. Hanscom," invited the reverend pleasantly. "I think the matter I have been discussing with the sheriff will interest you greatly."

"I'm not sure I want him hearing this just yet," the sheriff grumbled nastily.

The reverend suddenly became angry and glared at the sheriff with deep scorn reflecting in his usually kind brown eyes.

"I am not blind to the immoral corruption that runs rampant in this town, nor are the names of those responsible for it becoming that way unknown to me. Up until now, I've never said a word about it, but it is well past time I listened to my conscience and the true teachings of the scriptures and spoke up. I just hope the Lord can see fit to forgive us both for our sins, Mr. Wilner; me for my silence and you for your participation in the evil mortal men are capable of."

"I've never seen you turn down a dollar," replied the sheriff defensively. "Money from both Chez Elise and the Imperial helped to not only build that church you preach in every Sunday morning, but also for the new bell that brings everyone to hear you."

"I appreciate those things, and the money donated to provide them was given as a collected gift from the town. Not a cent of that money ever landed in my pockets for my own personal use; unlike you, I do not allow myself to be purchased by whomever can pay me the most money."

"Keep a civil tongue in your head or I'll have you sharing the same cell with Donovan!"

The reverend, still very much calm and in control, turned his attention to Bill. He had pulled up one of the empty chairs and was sitting next to him.

"I was walking by Chez Elise on the night in question, Mr. Hanscom, and I was compelled to rush in when I heard a shrill scream come from within. I arrived in time to see Miss Draidon hurl herself at Mr. Donovan and then plunge down the steps to her death. She caused her own demise; she was in no way pushed down the stairs as it has been wrongly implied."

"Well I'll be!" Bill said happily as hope and excitement spread a large smile across his bearded face. "Reed never mentioned seeing you there."

"I was there as Reed was leaving as well. He walked right past me as I was praying over the broken body of the poor woman. I asked God to forgive her for her earthly sins and admit her to the kingdom of heaven. If need be, I will very gladly bring in a least half a dozen people who will testify to my being there."

"Thank you, sir!" Bill practically shouted in euphoria as he shook the old man's hand. "I truly appreciate your courage in coming forward with the truth!"

"Hold on now here, boys," interrupted the sheriff. "You two think that I should just let Donovan go because the preacher here decided to spill his guts? Sorry, but I'm going to need more than just his word before I release the prisoner."

"I anticipated your hesitation," explained the reverend as he smiled complacently at the sheriff and pulled an envelope out of his front pants pocket, "so I wired the governor a week ago telling him the entire story of what happened and my eyewitness testimony. Here is the telegram he sent himself demanding the immediate release of Reed Donovan. I trust you will comply with it."

Sheriff Wilner's expression transformed into one of pure astonishment, and he quickly snatched the offered envelope from the reverend's aged fingers. He unfolded the telegram and saw that the man of God spoke the truth; it was an authentic message from the highest authority in the state of Texas. The sheriff swore loudly as

he carelessly stuffed the paper back in its envelope and then threw it down on his desk.

“Reed Donovan will be cleared of any murder charges and released this very minute, Sheriff Wilner,” said the reverend in an unmistakably triumphant tone. “I will make it a point in my life from here on out to pray even more diligently for your immortal soul as it seems you are in dire need of it.”

Bill was very near tears as he saw the sheriff reluctantly take out his keys and then stomp out toward the holding area. Bill then turned and once again shook the reverend’s hand.

“Make no mistake,” Bill said warmly, “you have been a part of miracle here today; I will always be in your debt.”

“People should always be willing to help each other,” replied the reverend as he smiled amicably. “The Lord gave us our hands so that we may extend them to our brothers and sisters in times of need.”

A moment later, an ecstatic Reed burst into the office followed by the still agitated sheriff. Reed quickly rushed over to Bill and Reverend Barkley and gratefully embraced each man in turn.

“I will never doubt my faith again,” swore Reed earnestly as he shook the reverend’s hand as vigorously as his friend had. “Thank you very much for all you have done. I admire your courage and tenacity.”

“I get my strength from God,” he replied candidly.

“I shall see to it personally that a very large donation is made to your church, and it will be made in the name of Lucinda Hoffman. She is my fiancée and the woman whose life you have saved by setting me free.”

“Any money received will be used to expand and improve our church and school; not for my own personal gain,” announced the reverend as he gazed at the sheriff with unconcealed disrespect.

After another heartfelt expression of thanks, both Reed and Bill literally ran from the sheriff’s office and down the busy street

to the Red Rose Hotel. They quickly passed through the elegant lobby and packed dining room and burst happily into the kitchen. Marie, completely surprised by their abrupt appearance, very nearly dropped a plate she was holding.

"You're free!" she cried elatedly as she set the plate on the counter and then launched herself into Reed's arms. After the affectionate hug, she turned to her husband and regarded him with skepticism.

"You didn't smash the jail up and make us all criminals, did you?"

"He did no such thing," insisted Reed before Bill could speak. "But his eternal optimism, faith, and hope were big factors in my release. I owe him my life."

Marie smiled at her husband with love in her jade green eyes, and then returned her attention to her haggard-looking friend and boss.

"You look horrible and you are way too thin! Let me fix you a big plate of meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and buttered broccoli; I have to fatten you back up!"

"No big meals today," said Reed determinedly. "Your husband and I need our rest and have to be up before daylight. Tomorrow we ride for Mexico."

* * * *

Jake Wilner looked at his deputy and said, "Stay here while I go wire Garrett in San Calando."

"He's gonna be pissed," replied the deputy in a warning tone.

"Pissed or not, he's got to know what's happened. Reed Donovan and his friend will be on their way to Mexico at first light, I guarantee it. I have to warn Garrett so he can be ready for them."

"I hope he's got an army lined up to stop them two fellas. I think that's what it's gonna take."

"I've known Garrett Cameron for many years, and he always manages to come out on top. He'll take care of this, just like he

does everything else. He'll hire the best gunslingers and outlaws his money can buy to fight for him; Reed and his friend are on nothing but a fool's errand. They don't stand a snowball's chance in hell of leaving Mexico alive."

Chapter 23

Lucinda paced her room impatiently as beads of sweat formed all over her painfully thin body. Carmelita was late with her shot, and every moment that passed seemed like an agonizing eternity.

Her anxiety and panic ballooned quickly as the minutes passed, and she suddenly began to violently quake all over and cry like a little girl.

“I’ve got to have my medicine,” she pitifully whined aloud. “I need my medicine, I’ve got to have my medicine!”

At last Carmelita arrived and Lucinda’s tears of pain and suffering transformed into tears of relief and joy.

“Please, please give me my medicine,” she unashamedly begged as she stumbled forward and thrust her skinny sticklike arm out toward the madam. She knew she was losing weight, but her appearance was the least of her worries. With her medicine, she didn’t even feel like eating. Besides, no one else seemed to care what she looked like, so why should she?

Carmelita injected her in the forearm, and Lucinda felt sweet relief from her severe physical distress. Everything in the world seemed right again as the powerful dose of narcotic quickly coursed through her body. She smiled thankfully at Carmelita, who did not return the endearment.

“Wash yourself up,” ordered the madam with a look of disgust on her round face. “You look a mess. You’ll be having many customers today, more than usual. If I hear a single complaint from any of them, I may completely forget your medicine next time.”

"You wouldn't really do that, would you?" asked Lucinda as she regarded her with fear.

"Yes, I really would."

"You can't take away my medicine," she cried in raw panic. "I need it. I can't live without it!" She fell to her knees and clutched the hem of Carmelita's black dress in her hands tightly. "Please, I beg you, don't ever take it away!"

"You will do exactly what I say when I say it or you'll never see this again," Carmelita threatened savagely as she held the empty syringe close to Lucinda's anxious face. "Up until now, I've given you the easy customers, but from this point on, you'll be getting the kind of men *El Corazon Del Diablo* is famous for servicing."

"Some of them will want to see you with another woman," explained Carmelita in a businesslike voice, "and some of them will enjoy watching you use certain devices on yourself. As long as they can pay enough, we will provide them with whatever they want."

"That can't be true," said Lucinda slowly as she blanched with horror, "you're just trying to scare me."

"Talk to the other girls if you don't believe me, they've all had their share of them in the past."

Lucinda could not help but stare hungrily at the syringe that Carmelita held between two of her fingers. She would do whatever she was told; she simply had to have her medicine several times a day to survive.

"If I do what you want and take care of the men you send me, will you make sure I always have my medicine when I need it?"

"I'll never be late with it again and I may even give you a little extra from time to time if you perform exceptionally well for one of our guests."

Lucinda just nodded, agreeing to whatever the madam said. She knew she had no choice; the clear liquid she got every few hours had become by far the most important thing in her life.

Carmelita closed the door as she left and Lucinda was alone again in her room. She lay down on the bed and looked straight into the mirror that was bolted to the ceiling.

Though she had just had a very large dose of morphine, Lucinda felt as if she were seeing some things clearly for the first time. Her own reflection disgusted her; she had become the lowest of whores even if it was not by her own choosing. She came to realize that Reed, Marie, Bill, and everyone she had known before she arrived in Mexico were now a part of her past. She no longer considered herself worthy to speak to them or be in their company.

This was her life now; here in the confines of the dingy room inside what was possibly the most horrible and degrading place on earth. Lucinda sighed heavily as she mournfully said a mental farewell to all she had known and loved in Texas.

When Carmelita returned to the lobby, her heart pounded happily when she found Garrett Cameron waiting for her. Before speaking to him, she turned to a nervous-looking man sitting on an old and faded sofa against the far wall.

"She's ready for you now," she informed him calmly.

"Has she been told what I need her to do?" he asked hopefully.

"You may instruct her yourself, and I personally guarantee she will give you no resistance whatsoever. You will find a good supply of torture devices in the bottom drawer of her bureau."

"I knew I could count on you," he replied hastily as he handed her a large roll of bills and then scrambled up the stairs.

When he was gone, Carmelita turned to speak to the waiting Garrett, who began eyeing the money she had collected greedily.

"How much of that is my cut?"

She unrolled the bills and without counting it gave him what she judged to be half of the thick pile.

"Do you have something for me now?" she asked slyly.

"There's enough morphine in here to keep the whole town of San Calando high for a week," he commented as he handed her a

small box that had been wrapped in plain brown paper and tied with string. "And how is our lovely captive today?"

"She has grown dependent on the morphine and got very nervous and upset when I was late with her shot. She is a complete addict now and unquestionably belongs to us; we can do anything we want with her."

"Has she been with any of the really unusual customers yet?"

"I sent her a regular who likes torture just now. He is partial to beating the girls and burning them with cigars before having them."

"The minute he is done with her, I will be next," he proclaimed as lust swirled heavily in his ice blue eyes.

She frowned at him deeply; she had always had strong feelings for her American business partner. She had secretly hoped for several years he would ask her to be his wife and they would leave San Calando together.

"Don't be jealous, Carmelita," he soothed as he hugged her briefly. "You know there is no woman on this earth for me but you. I just want to talk to her, discourage her from trying to escape."

"Just talk," she repeated sardonically as she glared at him with hate in her eyes. "She is young and willing, so I find it very hard to believe you will just sit and talk to her."

Garrett quickly put on a look of contempt and disgust. "That scrap of a girl is nothing I want! I could have had her a dozen times over on the way here if I had wanted to, but I didn't."

Carmelita thought about what he said for a moment and then her anger melted away. The part of her that loved him and wanted so badly to believe he was true to her took over her reason and common sense.

"I'll get you some of the wine you like so much," she said kindly as she brushed past him and went to the cabinet where she kept it.

Garrett watched her go with scorn in his eyes. He decided she was getting much too possessive of him and would have to be done away with shortly.

He had originally found her in Laredo servicing customers in dark alleys for one or two dollars each. Garrett had her on the first night he met her, and found her to be the most enthusiastic and passionate partner he had ever had up to that point in his life. He kept her with him for a short while, and together they carelessly spent thousands of dollars of his money from the gold he had mined.

When the intoxicating newness of his wealth wore off, he put some thought toward the future and set her up in a house. Carmelita, desperately in love and feeling like someone for the first time in her life, eagerly agreed and accompanied him on his searches to find girls to fill the establishment.

He gave each of his new employees a generous portion of their fees to keep them happy and loyal to his business. They were also given small bonuses when customers wanted what was referred to as 'special' treatment, when their sexual tastes ran far from what was considered decent or even normal.

He could not help but smile deviously as he thought of all the money he would rake in with Lucinda. There would be no bonuses or even pay for her: all he had to do was keep the morphine flowing in her veins. Any twisted or deranged request from a customer was not a concern either; she would do absolutely anything to get what she needed.

Though it was true the morphine itself was an expense, the cost was repaid a hundred times over every time he thought of how it was Reed Donovan's woman he had as a completely submissive sex slave.

Carmelita disturbed his pleasant thoughts when she returned with a dusty bottle of wine and a pair of glasses in her hands.

“Let’s go to my office and discuss our business,” she said sweetly.

He nodded and followed her to her office that was just as seedy, rundown, and shabby as the rest of the building was. He sat down on a threadbare green sofa, and as bad as it was, it was still the best one he had seen so far.

Carmelita poured the wine and then sat down close to him. He gazed into her eyes with a false look of love and admiration as he held his full glass up to her in a toast.

“Here’s to you, my dear, and the excellent job you have done on Lucinda. If she is as bad off as you say when I see her, you will be entitled to a bigger cut of the profits this month.”

She smiled brightly at him as she accepted and joined him in the toast, even though she knew he was not true to her. San Calando was a poor town and it took not many pesos to convince a few of the locals to make weekly trips to Texas to spy on him.

She knew all about the woman he had been keeping company with in Holton and she had been glad to hear of the woman’s death. Now that the fancy *puta* was dead, perhaps he would stay with her and it could be like when they were first together.

They talked and drank their wine for about an hour, and every time she tried to bring up his moving to Mexico permanently, he cleverly avoided it. He covered his aversion with lavish compliments, and her lonely heart gobbled them up hungrily. She had been with him first and she held tightly to the belief that when he had finally done everything he wanted to do, he would realize he belonged to her and always had.

She knew Lucinda would be free soon but did not want to surrender him to her, so she prolonged the visit by plying him with questions.

“Do you think someone will come and try to take her back?” she asked innocently, though she knew the answer as well as he did.

Garrett took another sip of his wine, and after savoring the rich and slightly frisky flavor, he swallowed and then chuckled sinisterly.

"I know for a fact someone will be coming for her, and he won't be alone. I sent Lorenzo and his brothers out to give them a proper San Calando welcome; an unfriendly greeting I truly hope they will not survive."

"If they do?"

"Then I will deal with them myself," he stated arrogantly. "I think I have always seen a showdown between Reed and I coming; it has just been a question of where."

"You sound very confident," remarked Carmelita with humor in her voice.

"I am confident," he shot back defensively, "because everything in his life has always come easily to him; he's never had to fight for anything. He doesn't have the killer instinct that comes along with having to claw and scratch out a place in this world, and he doesn't have the guts to just take what he wants."

"He is in love, Garrett," she gently warned as he finished his glass of wine, "and that can inspire even the meekest of men to do things they normally would not."

"He's nothing but a Southern dandy," snorted Garrett with disbelief and loathing. "He doesn't even come close to scaring me in any way! I was making deals with the devil and killing people when the biggest concern in his life was what to wear to a church social!"

"Why don't we just forget the whole matter and let it go, Garrett?" she asked as she snuggled close to him. "Let's just pack up and leave tonight. We can go to Mexico City and live there like royalty for the rest of our lives. I love you and would gladly spend the rest of my days making you the happiest man on earth. Let Lucinda go; in the state she's in, she wouldn't last two days out on

the street. Reed can come find her body after the thieves and vultures have picked it clean!”

“Damn you women for the trouble you are,” growled Garrett gutturally as he crushed his wineglass in his fist. “Every blasted one of you thinks you own every man who pays the slightest bit of attention to you!”

He got up and began to pace the small office as his anger swelled enormously. “I got news for you, you damn dirty whore!” he yelled between ragged breaths of rage. “I am not your man and never will be! I know how you feel about me; I can see it every time you look at me with those lovesick cow eyes of yours! Make no mistake about this, Carmelita, no woman owns me now or ever! Now get off your fat ass and take me to Lucinda; that fool who paid for her must be done by now!”

She would not accept what he had just said to her; she had totally convinced herself that he loved her even if he did not realize it himself. Though it felt as if her heart was being shredded by a thousand rusty razor blades, she calmly finished her wine before leading him out of the office.

She took longer than necessary while preparing Lucinda’s morphine shot as well, and she hoped her intentional dallying would prove that she was not devastated by his cutting words, nor was she afraid of him. She had dealt with men ten times as tough as Garrett when she had been alone on the streets of Laredo.

When at last he followed her up the unsound stairs, he was wrapping his bleeding hand in his white linen handkerchief. They went to the stained and soiled door Lucinda was behind and Carmelita knocked on it soundly.

“Your time is up!” she called out firmly.

A few minutes later, the thin man who had been in the lobby earlier opened the door. The broad and toothy smile he gave to Garrett and Carmelita as he left spoke volumes about the sexual satisfaction he had found in the squalid room.

They entered the room to find Lucinda tightly curled in a protective ball in the center of the sagging bed. What had been one of her filmy nightgowns was now a pitiful pile of rags on the floor. Several red and angry looking round wounds dotted her rail thin arms and legs.

Garrett gazed at her open lesions with utter amazement; he thought Carmelita had been exaggerating when she told him of that customer's particular fetish.

"I have your medicine," announced Carmelita in an almost caring voice.

Lucinda immediately straightened herself and sat up on the edge of the bed slowly. She stuck a quivering needle-marked skeletal arm out for her injection, and Garrett was stunned.

Looking at her once beautiful face was another great shock and his breath caught in his throat as he gazed at the girl who was familiar and yet so very changed.

Her face was a mass of small bruises, with especially dark and brutal looking contusions around her eyes. There were ominous flakes of dry blood under her nose and in both corners of her mouth.

The damage did not only exist on her face but continued on her body, her slender neck had the clear and unmistakable marks of a man's hands having been around it tightly. It was obvious one of her sick and very deranged customers had actually tried to strangle her during his visit.

The burns he had seen on her arms and legs were a mere glimpse into what the last man had actually done, there were more than a dozen identical burns on her painfully thin chest, belly, and back.

"Please give me my medicine," she rasped, her voice harsh from the abuse to her throat.

As Carmelita injected the bruised, burned, and slightly quaking arm, Garrett knelt down and looked directly into her eyes.

He remembered their startling color from Holton, and the sparkling and vivid eyes he had beheld back then no longer existed. What he now studied were a mottled and murky greenish blue with slightly yellow whites. As the injection she received took effect, her expression became increasingly detached and delusional.

“Do you remember me?” he asked very slowly. He was careful in not moving his face from its close proximity.

The face of Garrett Cameron swam before her eyes. Somewhere in her fuzzy mind, he was familiar, but actual facial recognition was in a dark and hazy place she could not possibly reach.

She mumbled something incoherent to him, and he rose to his full height as a vicious smile spread across his face.

“Better than I thought,” he proclaimed smugly. “She’s damn near a vegetable!”

“Then there’s no sense in trying to talk to her,” added Carmelita acidly.

“Let me be, woman!” he snapped viciously without bothering to look at her. “Get out of here and let us alone!”

She did as he ordered, but not before shooting him a dark look that let him know in no uncertain terms she was furious with him.

When at last he was alone with the prisoner, he began to stroke her limp hair and speak to her in soft and sweet tones.

“I’ve kept you from marrying Reed, and now I am going to keep you here for the rest of your life. Your fiancée will be coming for you, and I am more than ready for him. You are truly mine now; and I am never going to let you go.”

Though she still could not fully recognize the man before her, Lucinda enjoyed the fact that he was touching her and it didn’t hurt like it sometimes did when men were near.

“Mmmmm...nice, so nice,” she sloppily mumbled as she moved her head closer to his gently stroking hand.

“You like that, do you? Well, my dear, if you like that, I have something for you that you’ll really love!”

He quickly undid his pants and released his stiffening member and tapped her lightly on the cheek with it as he smiled down at her with depraved glee.

“Now you suck on it real nice, sweetie.”

Lucinda opened her mouth slightly to ask why he had stopped touching her hair and Garrett took advantage of it. He pushed himself fully into her mouth and throat.

Even in her muddled state, she immediately knew what he was doing to her; it had been done to her many, many times in the recent past. She began to perform what she had learned through numerous beatings and abuse was expected of her, and teased his engorged manhood with her tongue.

“You have been taught well,” he groaned appreciatively between quick gasps of breath. He once again began to stroke her long blond hair as he put his head back and let pleasure fully overtake his senses.

Lucinda worked on him mechanically, but she was grateful that he had not hit, hurt, or abused her as so many of the others had. In her highly confused state, she reasoned that maybe if she pleased this man well, no one would ever hurt her again.

Garrett looked forward to his release and wanted to be looking in her eyes when he unloaded into her mouth. He tipped her head back slightly and gazed at her as she did what was expected of her. After a few minutes, he found her bruised and hideous-looking face to be somewhat repulsive, and after a few more moments, he knew he could not participate any more. He fully lost his sense of thrill and excitement as he looked over her emaciated and abused body and withdrew himself from her mouth with a small sigh of regret. Her expression did not change. Apparently the heavy drug injections kept her in a perpetual state of numbness.

He had wanted very much to throw what he had done with her in his hated rival’s face if the occasion ever presented itself, but

the now lackluster skeleton of a girl had nauseated him to the point where he had very nearly been sick.

Garrett callously left what remained of the beautiful girl he had known on the side of the bed and headed downstairs. He made up his mind that he would allow his captive to just service the warped men who could stand to look at her during her undoubtedly short stay at the brothel.

“How did your ‘talk’ go? Did you learn anything?” asked a still furious Carmelita as she waited for him by the front door of the ramshackle business. Jealousy burned hotly in her obsidian eyes as she waited for a response.

As quick as a strike of lightning, Garrett swung and landed a fist squarely on her jaw. She spun from the serious blow and landed heavily on the floor. She held her face as she looked up at him and gasped with pain and humiliation.

“Don’t you ever question anything I do, you fat, greasy, disgusting bitch,” he shouted wrathfully as he stuck a finger in her face, “or I’ll cast you right back in the goddamn gutter where I found you!”

He stormed out of the brothel and went quickly to the hotel where he was staying. He paced his rented room repeatedly until his rabid vehemence started to cool. When finally he was composed, he thought of Elise, the one true love of his life.

Her death had to be avenged, and he would have to be the one to make sure it happened. He would easily kill Reed and his friend, Bill; they were no match for the Cortez brothers and himself. After they were dead, he would see to it that Lucinda was used every day in every perverted way the customers could think of for the rest of her life to square the debt.

Chapter 24

Reed and Bill rode hard for Mexico, pushing their horses as much as they dared. When they finally stopped to make camp, the weary, sweat-soaked, and foam-flecked animals were grateful for the respite.

Bill fed the horses oats while Reed got together their supper. They ate sparingly of the apples and thick sandwiches they had stored in the saddlebags, not wanting the light of a cooking fire to attract any attention to their whereabouts.

"I wish we could travel more tonight," Reed said sadly between bites. "I miss Lucinda more than anything on earth."

Bill sighed heavily, he had been expecting to hear something along those lines. While he could understand how eager his friend was, he had to be reasonable.

"Look," he explained with deep exasperation, "the horses are done in and so are we, for that matter. Rest tonight and gather your strength; who knows what we'll find when we finally get to San Calando."

"I'm not worried. I can outwit that ignorant Garrett Cameron all day long."

"You can't go on thinking we are just going to waltz into San Calando, whisk Lucinda up onto the back of your horse, and then parade happily out of town," said Bill with deep concern. "I'm sure Garrett knows we will be coming and my guess is he has gathered some help and will be ready for us."

Reed did not let his friend's words discourage or frighten him; he was totally convinced they would be victorious in their quest. They had to be; he would not be able to live with any other turn of events.

"Let's take turns standing watch tonight," Reed offered. "We don't need an ambush."

"Good idea," agreed Bill. "I'll take first watch. Sleep while you can, I'll wake you when it's your turn."

Bill took his shotgun from its leather sheath and made sure it was loaded before he cocked it. He walked a short distance away from their haphazard camp and began scanning the landscape for anything suspicious.

Reed removed his bedroll from behind his saddle and laid it carefully on the dry ground. He lay down on it and tried to get comfortable, but his whirling mind would not let him rest.

He looked up at the myriad of twinkling stars and thought lovingly of his fiancée. Lucinda Hoffman, with her unbelievably sparkling aqua eyes and rich blond hair, had been the first person that made him want to care. She inspired him to let his feelings free and not keep them bottled up tightly inside like he always had.

At first he had tried to deny what he felt because of their age difference, but it didn't take long for his heart to swell with such deep and incontestable love that nothing but holding her close mattered. She made him feel complete; he never realized such vast emptiness had existed in his life until she had filled the gaping void with her beauty, laughter, and love. She was the best thing that had ever happened to him, and he would gladly go through the blackest bowels of hell to have her back.

In the past, the sordid reputation of *El Corazon Del Diablo* had reached his ears as it had everyone else's; the wretched place was so famous it was nearly a legend. He just stalwartly hoped and diligently prayed his unavoidable delay in the Holton jail had not cost her her very life.

Bill was simultaneously watching out for interlopers and wishing for a positive outcome for the entire situation. He too had heard all the horrifying stories of the infamous Mexican brothel that everyone else in Holton had, and he also knew the truth about how Garrett had become so rich.

Roy Anson was not only a heavy gambler but also a heavy drinker. While Reed was in jail, Bill went to question Roy about his good friend Garrett. He made sure he took a bottle of very good aged whiskey with him when he went, knowing the mortician would not be able to resist drinking most of it.

Roy ardently swore on his own life he did not know where Garrett was at the time. After he had drunk and enjoyed half the bottle of whiskey, he spilled the sordid tale of Garrett and his former partner Thready.

Bill had not been surprised by what he had learned that night; he had always suspected Garrett Cameron was a far more sinister man than most people thought. He kept the dark information to himself; to tell Reed about Garrett's murderous past would be only to worry him more.

Though he truly appreciated the miraculous change that had come over his friend, Bill also missed Lucinda because she had been kind and respectful to his wife and a very diligent student. She had done true wonders for Reed; it seemed that she had taken his life and transformed it from the unadorned starkness of a poorly crafted charcoal drawing into an exquisite portrait vivid with brilliant shades of every conceivable color.

Bill heard a slight rustling and quickly turned and faced where it came from. He held the loaded shotgun up to his shoulder, ready to unleash its power on whoever was trying to attack.

His keen gaze delved into the darkness, seeing nothing but the few small clumps of brush that dotted the horizon. They were too small and inhospitable for even a jackrabbit to hide behind, but he stared at them for a while just to make sure. They could take no

chances; any sort of an ambush could mean an end to their mission and a life sentence of hellish servitude for Lucinda.

After a few minutes, he relaxed, took a deep breath, and let his guard down. There was not a soul—man or beast—out on the flat Texas landscape that posed any sort of a threat.

He kept a rigorous watch for a few more hours and then went and woke a restlessly sleeping Reed for his turn at sentry duty.

Once he was fully awake, Reed took the shotgun, and as he did, he regarded his friend with true affection and appreciation.

“Thanks so much for sticking by me through this whole mess. If it hadn’t been for you and the reverend, I would still be in that miserable jail cell.”

“What kind of a friend would I be if I hadn’t helped you? I know what that girl means to you, and we’ll get her back one way or the other.”

Unable to find the words for a gracious reply, Reed just nodded. As he walked away, he blinked away glistening unshed tears that had sprung to his dark eyes.

He went to the exact spot Bill had so recently occupied and stared out into the same barren landscape. The wind blew across the land a few times, slightly rustling the scrub brush that grew in the distance. Other than that, the silence was occasionally broken by the lonely sounding cries of distant coyotes.

Though the animal’s forlorn voice was known to strike fear in the hearts of many cowboys and travelers, Reed took a knowing comfort in their infrequent vocalizations. As he sat alone in the darkness, he fondly recalled a story his grandmother had told him during one of many pleasant childhood visits to her home in Macon, Georgia.

The story was called *Brother Coyote* and as a child, Reed had always loved it dearly. Each time he had scrambled up into the soft and comforting lap of his grandmother, he had begged to hear it, and she would always tell it in her warmhearted and flowing voice.

According to the legend, when the world was very young, only a trio of ugly and selfish hags had fire. The “fire beings” would not share it at all, keeping it solely for themselves and their enjoyment.

People could not find a way to get to the top of the lofty mountain where they lived, so they implored the Great Spirit for help. Taking pity on his human creations, the Great Spirit charged the cunning and crafty Coyote with the task of getting fire to all the people he had made on earth.

Coyote and his friends, Frog, Chipmunk, and Squirrel, set off to scale the mountain and retrieve the fire as they had been told to do.

The cunning Coyote went cautiously into the fire being’s camp while his friends hid in the nearby bushes.

“Who’s there to steal our fire?” screeched one of the hags.

“It’s only a scraggly coyote,” said another hag with distaste, “he’s no threat to us. Let him warm himself by our fire.”

As the hags settled down for the night, Coyote lay down and pretended to sleep, secretly keeping a watch on the possessors of fire.

When they were all fast asleep Coyote quickly rose up, took some fire in his mouth, and ran away with it. The hags heard him leaving and woke screaming and howling at his clever betrayal.

They chased after him, and the swiftest of them nearly caught him. She missed him by mere inches, only managing to touch the hairs at the very end of his tail. The evil magic in her claws turned the hairs snow white.

Coyote threw the fire over to Squirrel, who caught it with her bushy tail. Fire scorched her soft fur so badly that her tail would be forever curled up over her back.

She threw the fire to Chipmunk, who was very nearly caught by a hag and wound up with three white stripes down his back from the same claws that had marked Coyote.

Fire was finally passed to Frog, and being the slowest, he was easily caught by the hags. His eyes bulged as they clutched his beautifully long tail and then eventually broke it off. They happily took his tail as a prize and gave up the chase.

Frog foolishly tried to hide the fire in a tree, and wood swallowed the fire. The animals clawed, kicked, and bit wood, but wood refused to give fire back to them.

Coyote, being as crafty and cunning as always, had an idea. He and the other animals took two pieces of wood to the people who had prayed to the Great Spirit and told them to rub them together. Wood was very ticklish, and when you rubbed two sticks together very hard, wood would have no choice but to spit out fire in laughter.

Reed could almost hear his grandmother's lilting voice in his mind as he mentally concluded the story the way she always had.

"So that is why to this very day, Frog has no tail, Squirrel's tail curls up, Chipmunk's coat has three white stripes, the tip of Coyote's tail is white, and rubbing two sticks together can make fire."

He chuckled softly in the darkness as he recalled how he had marveled at his grandmother and thought the story of the brave coyote and his friends was pure magic. Reed suddenly hoped that perhaps one day, he could share the immense joy he had gotten from the story with a child of his own.

He was startled by his own thoughts; before he had met Lucinda, children had never even been a consideration. He had even avoided being seriously involved with eligible marriage-minded women for that same reason. His arrangement with Elise Draiden had been pure convenience; she had been a warm and willing woman he could remain distant from while she alleviated his needs.

He had always believed having anyone close to him would be an anchor holding him back from achieving his goals. Now he had his hotel, and it was definitely a place to be proud of, along with

being a great success. He found that his life was not complete unless he had the woman he loved with him to share it all.

The mere thought of his beloved sent him into yet another round of silent prayers. He prayed for her safety and that she would have the physical and emotional strength it would take to hang on until he reached her.

When his prayers concluded, a vision of Garrett Cameron slipped into his thoughts, and hot seething anger quickly filled his being. He considered what punishment could possibly be just for the unspeakable evil the man had done. He had diligently tried to ruin the lives of himself, Lucinda, Bill, and Marie; and Reed was steadfast in his conviction that Garrett would not succeed.

Death was too simple and easy a punishment for his atrocities, if he were gunned down in the street, he would never have to suffer for his misdeeds. He knew in his heart it was truly best to let the law settle the matter; the mental image of the once rich and powerful Garrett languishing in the same cell he had occupied made him smile brightly in the still darkness.

A sudden and very frightening thought made him inwardly cringe and shattered his pleasant vision. He had been kept away from the quest he was currently on by Garrett's money and the influence it had on people; so couldn't that same money also purchase him a lenient judge and jury?

White hot fury made Reed grind his teeth together sharply as he realized that Garrett's filthy money could easily buy him a life of luxury that was free from any form of punishment for what he had done. He could not take the chance that he would get away with his crime. He and Bill would have to see to it that justice was carried out on their own.

He pondered what would be a fitting punishment for Garrett, as mere jail or even a hanging did not seem enough. As he carefully considered every option, the sky lightened from its deep black to a vibrant shade of dark blue.

He wanted to resume their journey before the sun actually rose above the horizon, assuring a very early arrival in Mexico. He could picture himself and Bill bursting righteously into *El Corazon Del Diablo* and boldly rescuing Lucinda before any foolish customers or hired guns got in the way.

Bill woke at the first tap of the toe of Reed's boot against his leg. When Reed told him of the thoughts of bursting into the brothel, Bill regarded his best friend with a hard and impatient glare.

"You need to understand how far into Mexico we need to go, Reed. We will be lucky to reach there by nightfall! Any daring raid you are planning will have to wait until tomorrow."

Hurt and disappointment reflected in his dark eyes as without a word, Reed began to pack up his bedroll and blanket. Bill did the same, obviously sorry that he had to once again give his friend such a harsh slap of reality. Once their belongings were secured behind their saddles, they both mounted up and began to ride toward San Calando, Reed promising himself he would not push the horses as hard as he had the previous day.

Chapter 25

A few hours after they set out, Reed and Bill slowed their tiring horses to a walk. The heavily-panting animals seemed grateful to quit traveling at the breakneck speed that had been the pace all morning and have a less demanding journey.

The men did not speak as they rode side by side, the look on his friend's face told Bill that Reed was still cross from him having destroyed the fantasy Reed had indulged himself in about a courageous early morning rescue.

As midday approached, a small structure appeared on the horizon. As they got closer, they could see it was actually the ruins of a farmhouse surrounded by broken and disintegrating plank fencing. Someone had tried to have a small ranch there, most likely with the intention of raising cattle for market.

There was a round stone well not far from what had been the house, and Bill carefully lowered down a nearby bucket miraculously still attached to a sturdy looking piece of rope. Both men were overjoyed when Bill's endeavor paid off and the bucket came back up full of clear water from deep within the well.

"Let's go in the house and see if there is anything we can use in there," suggested Reed between swallows. "Maybe we will get lucky and find some guns or knives."

"Not very likely to be anything in that place except old mouse turds and dust," replied Bill with his usual humorous tone.

They drank their fill and then gave their weary horses a drink before going over to what had been left of the house and checking it out.

There was no furniture to be had in the dilapidated building, just splinters and jagged pieces of wood that had perhaps started out as a table or a chair. Small useless items like broken buttons and rusty nails were scattered aimlessly on the heavily soiled floorboards, certain parts of the interior looked—and smelled—like different visitors had used it as an outhouse.

The meticulous search of the outside property turned up nothing as well, and when the men concluded their search and met up outside again, Reed seemed even angrier than he had been before.

“There’s no point in staying here and looking any longer,” sighed Bill sadly. “This place has probably been picked over by bandits a hundred times.”

“Then one more time won’t hurt any,” snapped Reed edgily. “Maybe there is still something that everyone managed to overlook.”

Bill sighed and shook his head; he was truly concerned about his friend. He had never seen the outwardly aloof and reserved Reed Donovan so worked up over anything, and he feared for his friend’s mind if things did not work out exactly as they hoped.

Reed began searching again, and even though he thought it was a waste of time, at last Bill joined him in his hunt. They searched even more scrupulously than they had the first time, but the ramshackle house and its unkempt grounds seemed to have nothing to offer.

When finally Reed exited the house empty-handed, he conceded to defeat. He noticed that the horses had wandered about a hundred feet away from where they had left them and went to go gather them. He went to the itinerant animals, gathered up the reins, and started leading the stallions back to the well where he

originally had left them. During the short walk, he stumbled on something and nearly fell.

He looked down to see what had tripped him and saw a small black iron ring that had been carefully concealed by a little pile of stones. He tried to pull on the ring, but found whatever it was attached to too heavy to be dislodged from the earth. He adroitly scanned the area close to the protruding iron ring and found that his pulling on it had made a long crack appear in the soil.

He quickly knelt down and began clawing with his fingers to remove what dry earth he could. After about three inches had been cleared away, Reed was thrilled to see the ring was solidly fixed to what he recognized to be wooden planks.

“Bill!” he called out excitedly. “Come see what I found!”

Bill, glad and relieved to hear something in his friend’s voice besides misery, abandoned his search in the house and quickly went to where Reed still knelt on the ground to see his discovery.

“There’s a wooden door under here, I’m sure of it,” he gushed elatedly as he looked up at his friend. “Help me dig it up.”

“How in the blue blazes did you manage to find that?”

“Believe it or not, I tripped on it! I stumbled on a small pile of rocks when I went to get our horses, and beneath them was this iron pull ring.”

“The Lord has provided for us again!” shouted Bill heavenward in his happiness.

“Let’s just hope in His infinite wisdom, the Lord had the insight to provide us with some kind of weapons we can use!”

“I thought your release from jail taught you how the Lord can work in our lives and provide for us in times of need. We will be grateful for whatever lies beneath that door, Reed Donovan, even if it turns out to be nothing,” stated Bill piously.

Reed rolled his eyes and then began to claw at the ground. “Isn’t there anything we can use for digging?” he asked after a few painful minutes of removing earth with his hands.

“We could use the plates in the saddlebags,” suggested Bill.

“Great idea! Hurry and get them!”

Bill retrieved the plates and then joined his friend, and both men dug as fervently as any West Virginia coal miner. It took them half an hour of hard digging and scraping to remove enough dirt to swing the door open. It easily swung over on its brass hinges and flopped on the opposite side of where it had been.

Both men eagerly looked down into the five foot deep wood-lined grotto and saw rows of neatly stacked medium-sized flat wooden boxes. Each box had rope handles on either end, and the condition of the boxes told them they were relatively new.

They carefully jumped down into the wooden vault and Bill took a box and removed its lid. Inside they found six sticks of dynamite that were nestled in, and partially buried beneath, tufts of crisp hay.

Reed shouted his joy at their great discovery as Bill removed one stick of the explosive and carefully examined it from every angle.

“This looks like good stuff made by someone who knew what they were doing. If I thought it was shoddy or old, we would be leaving it here. Neither of us needs a hand blown off.”

Reed could not contain his exhilaration. “Once we get Lucinda out safely, we can use this to blow *El Corazon Del Diablo* off the face of the earth!”

“Hold on now,” said Bill cautiously, “we can’t just go blowing up a building because we are angry at the man who runs it. There will be a lot more innocent people within its walls, and I won’t see them hurt no matter how badly you want vengeance.”

“The only person who is truly innocent in this whole thing is Lucinda. People who let such a place operate and do nothing to stop it are just as guilty as Garrett Cameron,” replied Reed defensively. “If blowing up that stink hole of a whorehouse hurts them

all, then so be it. The people of San Calando and Garrett Cameron will all reap what they have sown.”

“Let’s just wait until we see the lay of the land in San Calando before we make plans about anything.”

Reed nodded in agreement while quickly scooping up three sticks of dynamite from the box in each hand. He went to the edge of the hole, jumped, and landed half out of it on his belly. He hoisted himself up on his elbows and then climbed out. He carefully stored the half a dozen sticks of dynamite in his saddlebags.

Bill followed suit and took just as much as Reed had and stored them just as carefully. When finished, both men looked down into the wooden storage vault that was yawning open before them. There had to be at least thirty more boxes down there, enough dynamite to blow an entire town to kingdom come.

“What are we going to do about all that?” asked Bill worriedly as he motioned toward the stacked boxes. “If that dynamite gets into the wrong hands...”

“We’ll just have to shut the door and leave it,” interrupted Reed gruffly as he went over and grabbed one edge of the open door. “There’s no way we can take it with us.”

“Why don’t we just stay here for tonight? That way, we can cover the door over and ride into San Calando early in the morning and maybe get a jump on whoever or whatever is waiting for us.”

“Once again, you’re the voice of reason, Bill,” acknowledged Reed. “We need to cover that door over and put everything back the way we found it. If we spend the night here, at least we can be reassured that Garrett won’t get any of the dynamite and use it against us.”

The men swung the door shut and picked up their tin plates from where they had tossed them earlier. They began scraping dirt from where they had piled it, and when the door was completely concealed again, they carefully walked over it to pack down the earth.

Once again they did not have a fire, still not wanting to draw attention to themselves or their makeshift camp. They both took turns standing watch, the shotgun fully loaded and ready to blast apart any interlopers.

When the sky lightened with the coming dawn, they packed up their bedrolls, checked their weapons, and made a plan they hoped would get them into San Calando without harm.

After much discussion and debate, it was decided Bill would use the dynamite to cause confusion and chaos while Reed covered him with carefully aimed rifle fire.

Bill cautiously stuffed three sticks of dynamite in each of his back pants pockets and matches in those in front while Reed loaded the rifle and filled every space on his gun belt with bullets. Bill made sure his shotgun was ready to go, and that he had spare shot for it with him.

Reed insisted they both check the door they had concealed one last time and try to make it look as though the earth above it had never been moved. They worked together on it diligently, and quit when they at last mutually concluded it looked very natural and undisturbed.

Once they were absolutely sure they were ready to face even the most fearsome demons from Hell itself, they headed for the dusty Mexican town where Lucinda, Garrett, and the notorious *Diablo* all waited for them in the pallid morning light.

Chapter 26

Garrett received the telegram from Jake Wilner that said Reed was a free man and knew that his coming to San Calando was only a matter of time. He knew Reed would have Bill with him, and he was very well aware of just how long it would take the pair to travel from Holton. On the morning he expected them to arrive, he sent Lorenzo and his brothers to watch and wait just inside the town limits.

The presence of the infamously vicious Cortez brothers armed to the teeth in broad daylight could mean nothing but trouble, and most of the frightened townspeople sought refuge within their homes and businesses.

The outlaw brothers were each ready to fight and carried two pistols, a rifle, and razor-sharp knife in a sheath on their belts. Their meticulous marksmanship was known to be as deadly as their highly advanced skills in hand-to-hand combat with their keen blades.

Diego, by far the best shot with a rifle, opted for the high rooftop of a seedy shop as his outpost. His brothers hid themselves on opposite sides of the wide dusty street between two of the town's poorly constructed buildings.

All three men had killed many times before, so gunning down or possibly gutting the *gringos* that Garrett was sure would be coming would be no difficult task for any of them. The large reward Garrett offered for the heads of any would-be rescuers made the deal much sweeter than their usual murder for hire; not only

would they be rich but they would each get a lifetime of free visits to the *Diablo*.

Lorenzo Cortez smiled wickedly as thoughts of all the depraved things he could do to the whores danced enticingly through his mind. He had only been in the expensive brothel twice after two very lucrative killings, and had enjoyed himself immensely.

Diego scanned the horizon carefully; his dark eyes as sharp and watchful as any bird of prey. Garrett had said there would be two men coming, and when he saw two riders approaching, he shouted a warning to his brothers.

“They come! They come!”

The three Cortez brothers all took cover, Lorenzo and Juan between buildings and Diego laying flat on his belly and putting the barrel of his rifle just over the rooftop edge.

The two riders did not slow down at all as they entered the town, but instead started steering their madly galloping horses in a series of small zigzag patterns as they charged relentlessly ahead.

Their asymmetrical path of travel made them hard to aim at, and bullets whizzed closely by them, but none hit them. When he was close enough to do damage, Bill slowed, lit a stick of dynamite, and quickly tossed it at the nearest buildings and then lit another.

The powerful dynamite partially demolished the shoddy buildings, causing smoke, masses of smashed brick, and flaming wood to fly in every direction. The earth-shattering blasts sent terrified townspeople running for their lives; their uncontrollable screaming in panic just adding to the bedlam that Bill and Reed knew the dynamite would create. When he was across the street from Diego’s lofty location, Bill lit yet another stick of dynamite. He carefully sighted his target and then threw it over his head in the direction of the rooftop where he knew a gunman hid, firing at them.

Diego stared with wide-eyed shock as the lit stick of dynamite landed before him on the rooftop, and he quickly dropped his rifle and reached for it. Just as Diego’s fingers clutched the explosive,

one of the two men landed two quick shots in his chest. The force of the bullets straightened his body upright, and he was standing tall and clutching his massively bleeding upper body in agony as the dynamite exploded.

Lorenzo, still on the ground, covered his head with his hands in an attempt to ward off the crazily flying debris. When a smoldering section of what had once been his brother's leg landed with a thump on the street before him, he shrieked a piercing slew of cuss words. As he screamed, he began firing his pistols at random in the general direction of the two riders.

Bill yelped loudly as a wild bullet winged his lower leg and took a small chunk of his calf muscle with it. The impact of the shot nearly knocked him off his horse, but by sheer will, he managed to hang on and continue to light and throw the remaining dynamite sticks according to plan.

Thanks to the confusion caused by the heavy smoke, the flaming debris, and his own maniacal hysteria, Lorenzo's usually accurate aim was way off. He fired blindly into the melee.

Bill had circled his horse around and was in an alley just a few feet away. He lit the last of his dynamite and in spite of the intense pain of his wound, watched the fuse carefully until there was only about two inches left to burn. He then kicked his horse fiercely with his good leg, and the frightened animal shot out into the chaotic street.

He fearlessly rode directly to where the shots were coming from and as he went by, he dropped the nearly detonated explosive directly at Lorenzo's feet. The once feared bandit did not even have time for a last prayer for forgiveness before the explosion that killed him. Bloody pieces of what had been his body splattered grotesquely all over the walls of the two whitewashed buildings he had been standing between.

Juan Cortez lost his sanity, bravado, and taste for battle when he had witnessed his brothers literally blown to bits. He took off

down the street screaming wildly toward the only place he thought would offer him sanctuary, the *Diablo*.

Reed caught sight of the escaping outlaw and chased after him on horseback. When he got within spitting distance of the terrified man, he leapt from his horse's back and heavily tackled the frantic outlaw. Reed easily overpowered him and stripped him of all his weapons, then pinned him to the ground. Reed then pulled the frightened bandit to his feet and slammed him ruthlessly into the brick wall of the nearest standing building.

"Who hired you to kill us?" Reed demanded loudly.

"Garrett paid me and my brothers," stammered the quivering man just before he rolled his panic-stricken eyes skyward and began to pray diligently in Spanish.

"Did he hire anyone else?"

"No, only us!" Juan replied falteringly after Reed slammed him into the wall again. "I beg of you, please don't kill me like you did my brothers!"

"Tell you what, amigo," said Reed sarcastically. "You go get Garrett and tell him Reed Donovan is in town and has a score to settle with him! If he's half the man everyone around here seems to think he is, he'll come out and face me!"

He cast the trembling Juan Cortez away from him in the direction that he had been running in, and took a mighty swing at him when he hesitated to go. Juan, astonished and grateful to be alive, ran haphazardly in the direction of his original destination.

Garrett had heard the explosions and watched some of the fight from the whorehouse's lobby windows, and when he knew the Cortez brothers had been soundly defeated, he strapped on a gunbelt he had purchased and then settled down on a worn sofa with a drink in hand.

When the frantic Juan Cortez at last burst into the brothel with his pulse so fast he was nearly in cardiac arrest, he was amazed to find Garrett sitting calmly in the lobby sipping a glass of his fa-

vorite wine. Juan immediately stumbled over and landed on his knees directly in front of Garrett.

"These are not men you paid us to kill, they are devils from hell! We shot at them as they rode into town, but our bullets did not even graze them! They blew Diego and Lorenzo to bits with dynamite right before my eyes!"

Garrett quickly drained his drink and then proceeded to roar with unmitigated rage. He slapped the babbling Juan viciously across the face several times just before pulling him very close.

"I hired you and your imbecile brothers to kill those two men, and you three braggarts assured me they would be dead before they even set foot in town! I should have known all along I would have to do away with Donovan myself."

"They had dynamite and fought with the strength of ten men!" cried the hysterical Juan, who was still on his knees and clutching Garrett's pant leg tightly. "The bleeding bearded man blew up half of San Calando and both my brothers!"

Juan, sobbing pitifully, let go of Garrett's clothes and collapsed into a quivering lump on the floor. He mindlessly repeated his brother's names several times before launching into a series of rambling beseeching prayers.

Garrett regarded his deranged and sorrowful actions with pure disgust. He stood and quietly drew one of his guns from its finely tooled black leather holster. He cocked one of the twin pistols as he went and stood over the frightened form of Juan Cortez. Juan, desperately hoping for mercy, rose shakily to his knees.

"You're a sorry excuse for a man and you make me sick," Garrett barked loudly as he raised his gun and fired a bullet at point blank range into Juan's head. A large chunk of hair, bone, and bloody brains flew from the back of his head seconds before his lifeless body crashed clumsily to the floor.

Garrett calmly replaced the bullet he had spent and then put his pistol away. He insensitively stepped over the gory corpse of

the man he had just murdered and calmly left the building. He stepped out into the sunlit street boldly to face his greatest enemy, and he did so with a confident swagger in his stride.

His immediate surroundings surprised him and he let out a deep sigh as he observed the vast destruction the vengeful pair had brought down on the town. He gazed unbelievably at the many structures that had been reduced to mere smoldering ruins.

The main street of San Calando was ominously empty and quiet as Garrett cautiously made his way to its center. He carefully scanned all the crevices, piles of rubble, and alleys he thought Reed or Bill might be hiding behind as he turned around in the empty street. His massive ego had been disappointed to not find his nemesis cowering in fear of him, and his annoyance was plainly evident when he began to thunderously shout.

"I'm here, Donovan, show yourself!"

Reed, who had helped the wounded Bill down from his horse, was currently inside the lobby of the Oasis Hotel. Upon entering the hotel, he had found the frightened proprietor and his family cowering behind the front counter and had convinced them to help him get Bill onto one of the lobby sofas.

Reed had used his belt to make a tourniquet for his friend's leg and then stole outside and took their horses around behind the hotel. He watched Garrett through the lobby's picture window.

"Go kill him," Bill said brutally through clenched teeth as he half sat up. "If you don't, I will!"

"You stay here," Reed replied soundly as he laid down his rifle and began loading the pistols that hung beside his hips. "There will be enough people dying today without you bleeding to death on top of it."

Bill lay back on the sofa, and Reed quickly went over and made sure he was not going to attempt to stand up. He then went over and gave one of the women hiding behind the counter a few dollars.

"Please look after my friend until I return," he asked kindly.

She regarded him with wide frightened eyes. "What if you don't come back?"

"Have us both shipped back to Holton, Texas in boxes," said Reed grimly as he finished loading his guns and turned away and started for the door.

"Come out of wherever it is you're hiding, you spineless dog!" taunted Garrett loudly as he paced the street. "Come out and see the world for the last time!"

Reed purposefully strode out of the hotel and into the brightness of the street and found he faced Garrett at a distance of about thirty-five yards.

"About time you grew some backbone and came out of hiding. I was starting to think you had turned yellow!" shouted Garrett confidently.

"I hope for your sake you can use those guns of yours as well as you can run your big mouth!"

"You kill me and you'll never get your precious Lucinda!" called out Garrett as he started slowly advancing toward his enemy. His hands rested lightly on the butts of his pistols and he was ready to draw them if need be.

"The last thing that bitch Elise did before she died was tell me where you are keeping Lucinda!" shouted Reed. "I'm here to take her home and make sure no other woman is ever hurt or mistreated by you again!"

Garrett continued to slowly close the space between them, and when they were roughly fifteen yards apart, he stopped.

"You'll never make it past me to do anything!"

Just then, the sharp crack of rifle fire rang out, and Reed jumped at the sound. He instinctively drew his pistols as Garrett's head jerked back violently. A bullet slammed through bone, tore through his brain tissue, and exited his skull with a wide spray of dark blood and ragged chunks of flesh.

"You talk too much, you murdering son of a bitch," asserted Bill precariously from the porch of the hotel. He leaned heavily against the doorframe, the rifle he had killed Garrett with dangling from his quivering hands dangerously.

Reed rushed over to his friend and took the smoking weapon from his weak grasp. Reed let Bill lean heavily on his shoulder as he helped his friend back into the hotel lobby and back onto the couch.

"You had no business getting up; now you've got your leg bleeding again," Reed scolded with a friendly tone. "But thanks just the same for what you did."

"Somebody had to save you," he joked through his obvious pain. "In spite of the way you were acting, you're no gunslinger, and there is no way you could have been fast enough to outdraw him."

"You're probably right about that." Reed chuckled. "Garrett had much more experience at killing than I ever hope to have. Thank you again on behalf of myself and Lucinda; you saved us both today. I've got to go to the *Diablo* now, and I better not see you there or you'll more than likely bleed to death from that bullet wound."

"Killing that no good bastard was the last of my energy; I'm definitely staying put from here on out. Be careful, Reed, this thing hasn't ended yet."

"Garrett is dead, who else is there to oppose us now?"

"Maybe nobody, maybe a whole Mexican army," groaned Bill as he reached down and pulled his knife from his leg sheath. "Take this with you and don't let your guard down for a minute."

"I don't want your lucky knife; what if someone were to come here and try to attack you? You'll need it worse than I will."

"Take it!" insisted Bill strongly. "This knife has brought me good fortune, and I have a feeling you are going to need some."

Just to pacify his wounded friend, Reed took the long bladed knife and stuffed it between his belt and the waistband of his pants.

Once he saw the woman was again caring for his friend, Reed left the building. As he went down the street toward the brothel, he stopped and gazed down at the body of what had been his greatest enemy. It amused him greatly that in the short time he had taken to make sure Bill was being taken care of, Garrett's tie, shoes, and silver decorated gunbelt had been stolen.

As he continued on his way, he hoped that the next time he passed, the body would be gone too and someone would have the good sense to grind it up and use it to slop some local hogs.

Chapter 27

The gray stucco walls of the notorious brothel loomed before him menacingly as Reed approached, and he couldn't help but wonder what was awaiting him inside the veritable house of horrors.

He was very surprised when he entered the lobby; he had been expecting a place decorated in the elaborate style of Chez Elise. The room he now beheld was very worn and tattered, and his heart broke again at the thought of his beloved having had to reside in such a revolting environment. The corpse of Juan Cortez did not help matters any; the huge puddle of blood from his head wound had turned a sickening black and had drawn several hungry insects.

A heavy-hipped Mexican woman slowly walked up to him as he gazed around the room, but her walk was in no way seductive or even alluring. She kept her arms behind her back as she neared him, and he felt great pity at the grief and poignant sorrow that reflected deeply in her dark eyes when she looked at him.

"Is Garrett dead?" she asked in a low, tormented voice.

"Yes."

"Did you kill him?"

"My friend Bill did," Reed explained solemnly. "But if he hadn't, I was going to kill him as quickly as I could."

The grieving woman studied him for a moment, and then hung her head and sighed forlornly. When she looked at him again, there were tears sliding down her wide cheeks.

“We been together a long time, me and him,” she whispered dejectedly, “but I bet he never said a word about me, did he?”

“Not that I recall, he was involved—”

“I know all about the white bitch in Texas,” she interrupted as the pain on her face trebled, “so don’t bother to say any more. Garrett not only hurt me with her, but with many others over the years. The only reason it hurt me so deeply is because I did love him so very much. He was like a god to me; a red-haired angel sent to brighten my sad life. He made me feel clean; and there is nothing a whore values more than feeling clean.”

A look of understanding came over Reed’s handsome features as he watched anger and resentment slowly creep into her heart-broken countenance.

“You’re going to try to kill me, aren’t you?”

“I have to, my love for Garrett demands that I avenge him.”

Just then she brought her other arm out from behind her back, and a heavy iron fireplace poker whooshed through the air in a wide arc, barely missing his head. She had amazing speed and agility, and he found himself having to cleverly dodge her next few swings.

“This doesn’t have to happen,” he said as he sidestepped yet another potentially devastating strike. “We can end this whole thing now and just walk away. Just let me get Lucinda and it will all be over.”

“My man died to keep you away from her,” she explained through great gulps of air as she continued to try to trounce him with the poker, “and honor demands that I must follow through with his wishes!”

He guessed her next wild swing incorrectly and saw stars when the heavily built poker crashed down solidly onto his right shoulder.

The forceful strike drove him to his knees, and in an instant, she dropped the poker, seized him by his black hair, and bent his

head back sharply. With her free hand, she fished in the bosom of her dress for a moment and then produced a straight razor that she easily flicked open single-handedly. She held the weapon high over her head, and Reed saw how the light glinted cruelly on the thin steel.

“Say goodbye, murdering bastard,” she spat menacingly as the hand holding the razor began to swoop toward his exposed throat.

In desperation Reed quickly grabbed Bill’s knife and with both hands, firmly plunged it to the hilt into Carmelita’s thigh. She screamed sharply, and the razor only nicked his throat before she released him and tried to grasp the knife handle that protruded from her upper leg.

Reed hung onto the knife stalwartly, jiggling and twisting the razor sharp blade within her in spite of the fingers that were clawing madly at his hands. Once he heard the razor hit the floor, he gave the knife one final shove and knocked her off-balance. She landed solidly on her back and began writhing painfully on the floor, still scrambling to grab the knife that jutted from her meaty thigh.

“I’m sorry it had to be this way,” said Reed apologetically as he shakily stood and drew one of his pistols. He grimaced as he emptied the gun into her ample chest.

The bullets rocked her body as they entered her in rapid succession. When the smoke cleared, he saw her lifeless onyx eyes stare sightlessly to the cracked ceiling as blood pumped from her gaping wounds.

Though it made him physically ill to do so, Reed removed his friend’s treasured knife from her leg. He found it to be an effort, and eventually he had to put his foot on her large belly to gain the leverage he needed to remove the weapon. The crimson blood that poured from the wound afterward made him extremely nauseous, and he staggered over to a corner where he could spill the meager contents of his stomach.

When nothing else would come up, he forced himself to straighten up and leaned against a wall for support. Sweat streamed down his face as he took in great gulps of air; he swallowed repeatedly and waited for his turbulent insides to settle down. Once he felt somewhat stronger, he headed for the staircase and was very careful to avoid looking at the woman he had been forced to kill or the other corpse in the room.

The girls and their curious customers that had gathered at the top of the stairs scattered amid anxious screams and shouts as a bloodstained Reed ascended the rickety staircase.

By pure chance, the first door he opened was the one to Lucinda's room. At first he did not identify the painfully emaciated girl as his fiancée, but as he continued to slowly approach the sagging bed, recognition slammed his senses like an unexpected and unwelcome blast of subzero wind.

She was so excruciatingly skinny that each of her ribs was plainly visible and well defined, as were the bones of her hips and spine. Her entire skeletal body shook violently as she clutched her bony knees to her chest. She was sweating so copiously drops were falling to the stained mattress at a steady rate.

It took her a few minutes to realize there was someone standing next to her bed, and when at last she did, she looked up at him with cloudy and listless eyes. Her face was as unbelievably cadaverous as the rest of her, and her normally delicate cheekbones protruded so prominently they were sharp looking.

"Did you bring my medicine?" she weakly croaked through cracked lips as she flopped out one of her arms at him.

It was all he could do to not cry out at the sight of the numerous unhealed injection sites in her gaunt flesh. Several of them had already developed into fetid weeping sores.

"Medicine!" she choked out weakly between a series of dreadful sounding coughs and deeply retching gags. "I've got to have my medicine now!"

“I’m going to take you home and make you well, darling,” he declared with half a sob as he tried to figure the best way to lift her from the bed without hurting her.

After a few minutes of consideration, he put an arm under her shoulders and under her knees and hoisted her effortlessly from the soiled mattress. As he did, she swung her perpetually perplexed gaze up at his face. He was relieved and happy to see even the tiniest glimmer of recognition in her eyes as she studied his features.

“Reed,” she slurred sloppily. “I’m so glad you’re here! Please get me my medicine, it hurts not to have it.”

“What have they done to you?” he asked as he carried her slight sweat-soaked form in his arms and started down the steps.

Without warning, she vomited violently, covering herself and splashing him with her spew. He continued down the steps like it hadn’t happened, and when he reached the lobby, he turned around and looked back up the stairs.

“I’m coming back here and shutting down this evil place once and for all,” he proclaimed loudly as he continued to stare up the unsound set of steps. “Any of you stupid enough to stay here will go up with the place! It’s your choice whether you live or die. I’m beyond caring about that!”

No noise emanated from the upper floor, so Reed once again shouted his warning before leaving the rundown brothel with the sickly and soiled Lucinda lying dependently in his arms.

Carrying her was like what Reed imagined transporting a fragile newly hatched baby bird would be like, and every step he took was slow and cautious. His heart broke anew every time he looked down at her; and he could no more prevent the bitter tears that leaked from the corners of his eyes than he could stop himself from breathing.

“I will help you, my love,” he softly crooned as he walked along. “I will heal you and make you well again. I’m not sure of

everything those monsters did to you, but I swear on my own life I will make you well again.”

She looked at him with pain and anguish swirling rampantly in her dull eyes, and her only reply to his heartfelt vow was a nearly inaudible whisper of, “Medicine,” just before she completely lost consciousness.

“Lord have mercy!” exclaimed the injured Bill horrifically as Reed entered the lobby of the Oasis Hotel and gently laid his fragile cargo down on a narrow sofa. He stood and limped painfully over to where she lay and quickly looked her over.

“The poor girl is half dead!” he exclaimed with horror.

The horror and truth in Bill’s statement made him wince, and he looked around angrily at the small group of hotel employees that had gathered to gawk rather than help.

“I need blankets! Clean water and clean cloths! Come on, people, move! Is there a doctor nearby?” Reed asked angrily as he fussed over Lucinda.

“There is one close by,” replied the young girl who laid the blanket he had demanded down next to him, “but I don’t know if he’ll come here.”

“Tell him I’ll gladly pay triple his normal fee if he comes here instantly!”

“I will,” she replied dutifully just before she slipped out the front door and took off running up the street.

Reed was relieved when a few minutes later, Lucinda opened her eyes. He held a cool damp cloth to her feverish, sweat-beaded brow and smiled at her devotedly.

“Please,” she moaned pathetically as she wrapped her rail thin arms over her abdomen, “Please get my medicine. There’s so much pain, so much pain! If I don’t get my medicine I’ll die!”

“You’re not going to die, sweetheart,” comforted Reed as he continued to bathe her face. “I won’t let that happen. Just rest now, the doctor is on his way.”

Lucinda wept, and soon she was coughing, choking, and vomiting again. Reed just cleaned it up and then returned to comforting her as best he knew how.

“Could you please watch over her while I change my clothes and wash out these cloths?” he asked one of the women.

“Just strip where you are and I will take care of it,” she replied compassionately. “My husband owns this hotel and I am sure he would not mind you borrowing some of his clothes for now.”

Reed nodded his thanks as he did what she asked. Once all the soiled and smelly items were gathered together and wrapped in a blanket, she took the bundle out of the room. She returned momentarily with a shirt and pants for Reed to wear.

Both items were tight and the pants were short on him to the point of ridiculousness, but he was beyond caring about anything but Lucinda. Her soiled nightgown had gone out with the laundry, so she was naked except for the blanket covering her. Reed had pulled it back and was bathing her entire quivering and perspiring body when at last the doctor arrived.

He was a fat, balding, middle-aged man sweating through his expensive-looking suit. He sat down his worn bag with care and then began to examine his weak, moaning patient.

“She was abused very badly,” he began in a listless monotone, “and many of the burns she has are badly infected.”

“Burns?” asked Reed with surprise.

“These round sores on her arms, legs, and torso are burns; and by the shape of them, they were more than likely made by cigars.” He opened one of her rail thin arms and gasped in shock at the devastation he saw in the fold. “These marks here indicate that either she, or someone else, has been injecting her with something, and pretty carelessly at that. Where did you find this girl?”

“She’s my fiancée,” answered Reed defensively, “and she was being held at *El Corazon Del Diablo* against her will by Garrett Cameron and a female friend of his. Though neither of them are alive to

tell you so, I can assure you Lucinda had no choice in anything that has been done to her.”

“Oh dear Lord,” uttered the doctor suddenly as a hand flew to his mouth.

“What is it?” demanded Reed.

“It all makes sense now! Garrett Cameron told me he was supplying *morphia* to the place he lived in up in Texas, but after I sold it to him, he never left town. I had assumed he had someone else take the package to Texas, but from the looks of this young lady, I would say he had been giving it all to her.”

Reed was instantly livid. “You sold him the garbage he pumped into her veins?”

The doctor became uneasy under Reed’s close and condemning scrutiny. “San Calando is a poor town; one does what one must to make a living and survive.”

Suddenly Reed’s anger erupted with the force of a tumultuous cyclone and he roared frighteningly as he flung himself at the aging doctor. He violently tackled him and knocked him heavily to the lobby floor.

“You should be killed for supplying that trash to anyone,” he growled menacingly as he rained heavy punches down on the plump doctor’s face and body.

His lips and his nose soon began to spout blood, staining Reed’s hands as well as his own pristine white shirt collar. Reed only stopped the merciless beating when Bill limped over and physically removed him off of the ailing doctor.

Reed bent over and picked the bleeding doctor up by his tie, nearly strangling him in the process. Once he had him on his feet, he half-walked, half-hauled him to the door.

“You don’t understand,” pleaded the doctor through his blood spattered and swollen lips as he was being dragged along. “She is so addicted to the *morphia*, she will go through hell from needing it!

The only possible way to get her past her addiction is to give her more now and then wean her off the drug slowly!"

Reed pushed the doctor out the door and watched him fall haphazardly into the street.

"Get out of here, you dirty son of a whore, and don't come back! I hear so much as a rumor of you peddling your drugs again, I'll blow your goddamn head off!"

The doctor stood up, tried to brush the dust from his suit, and turned to face Reed to warn him again of the horrors of overcoming such a powerful addiction. Reed would hear none of it and threatened the doctor with bodily harm again if he did not leave.

When he was sure the doctor was gone for good, Reed hurriedly returned to his ailing love. She was still burning with fever and her entire body shook disturbingly.

"We'll get through this, honey, just you and I," he said to her softly as he lovingly touched her filthy blond hair. "You don't need any of his poison drugs to make you better. I won't leave your side. I can make you well my love; patience, devotion, and caring will make you well."

Bill ordered the hotel workers to show them to an empty room, and soon Reed was carrying her slight weight in his arms once again.

Chapter 28

The hotel room was small but very well kept and had a large and inviting bed as its centerpiece. Within moments of Reed gently laying Lucinda down on the soft bed, she began to once again violently cough and vomit. He quickly turned her on her side to prevent her from choking on or inhaling her own sickness.

When he was sure she had finished, he stripped off the soiled bedspread, balled it up, and put it in the corner of the room by the door. When he returned to the bed, he noticed her complexion had gotten even paler. He touched her forehead and inwardly panicked when instead of the heat of a burning fever, it felt like touching ice.

Not sure how to best battle this new dilemma, the only thing he could think of was to warm her with his own body heat. He quickly stripped off his borrowed clothes, and when nude, slipped between the sheets and lay down next to her. He wrapped his arms tightly about her and pressed the entire length of himself against her shivering, skeletal body.

It frightened him badly to feel her heart fluttering as riotously as a caged wild bird, and her breaths being so rapid and shallow. Her violent tremors were practically endless, and he felt helplessly as her weak cries for her 'medicine' clawed mercilessly at his heart and grated monstrously on his soul.

Reed did not think of himself at all that first twenty-four hours, only loosening his grip on her when he could no longer physically deny the urgent need to urinate. He even refused to

leave her side for that, instead using the chamber pot he found tucked under the bed.

When he had fallen into one of the momentary naps he had taken during his vigil, Bill came in and tapped him on the shoulder. The disturbance made him jump and cry out, and he alarmingly checked the condition of his love before he realized the tapping had not come from her.

“You need to really sleep and have something to eat before you’re as bad off as she is,” insisted his friend gently. “I’ll stay and watch over her while you go next door to my room. Take as long as you need, I will be here to care for her.”

The heartbreak and intense fear Reed was experiencing was evident in his deeply mournful and distressed voice as he addressed his best friend.

“I can’t possibly leave her now,” he explained as he gazed at her wasted form. “If something dreadful were to happen to her...”

“You know I’ll care for her as tenderly as if she were my own wife,” Bill interposed. “I’m telling you that you look like hell; please don’t make me resort to begging you to take some time off and rest.”

With a deep sigh of regret, Reed slowly released her quaking, sweat-soaked body. He had dutifully changed the sheets twice since they had taken up residence in the room, and to his dismay she had sweated through them again.

He tucked the top sheet and blanket around her snugly; making sure they would warm her well. He then proceeded to watch her rest fitfully as he put on the too short pants he had been loaned the day before.

“Just go to the room next door and there should be a tray of food and clean clothes waiting for you. Instruct the girls here to bring you the bathtub too, you could stand a good washing. I took the liberty of sending word to the bank in Holton to transfer some

funds down here; we are going to have one doozy of a tab when this is all over.”

“Keep a close eye on her,” said Reed worriedly, “and if she calls for me or anything, do not hesitate for a moment to come and get me.”

“You sound worse than an old mother hen,” chided Bill playfully. “Just go eat, bathe, and sleep; you can rest assured she will be fine in my care.”

Reed’s feet and heart felt as heavy as lead as he left the room and went along the corridor to the next door down. He felt very culpable about leaving her, but he knew his friend was right. If he kept up the way he had been going, he would fall ill, and then he would be truly powerless to see to her needs.

When he entered the room so similar to his own, the delicious scents wafting from the tray of food struck him, and his empty stomach rumbled in anticipation. He quickly sat down and voraciously devoured the generous portions of tangy Spanish rice, succulent fried steak, zesty baked black beans, and tender roast chicken. He liberally buttered two of the warm flour tortillas he had discovered in a small, flat clay container on the tray and used them to mop up the tasty juices from his meal.

Cold water washed down his plentiful feast, and when he had eaten all he possibly could, he felt more exhausted than he had ever been in his life. Both the physical and mental fatigue of what he had been through over took him and forced him to postpone the bath. He didn’t feel he had even the meager strength it would take to remove the pants he wore, so he didn’t bother to undress before he lay down on top of the pale yellow bedspread. Within seconds, he had surrendered to his body’s intense craving for rest and was in a deep and healing sleep.

When he at last stirred, it was dusk, and by the time he was alert enough to realize how long he had indeed been slumbering, he immediately sprang from the bed and ran to the room next door.

He flung open the door to find Bill mopping Lucinda's forehead with a damp cloth. He instantly noticed that his beloved was even more restless than she had been the last time he had seen her.

"Why didn't you come get me earlier?" he demanded as he rushed to the bed and began to diligently try to comfort her.

"She was relatively quiet until about ten minutes ago," snapped Bill, "so don't go accusing me of keeping her discomfort a secret from you."

Reed looked at his friend apologetically. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to imply you hadn't been taking care of her while I was resting. I am just so unsure of what to do for her that I'm at my wit's end."

"This is tough on both of us," Bill said, then let out a heavy sigh. "If you ask me, it looks like it's going to get worse before it gets better. We have to be patient with each other; if we start squabbling like a couple of brats, it's Lucinda who will pay the ultimate price."

"For the love of God, someone get me my medicine!" A strident shriek came from the ill and devastatingly scrawny Lucinda as she sat bolt upright in the middle of the bed.

Both Reed and Bill dove for her and tried to make her lie down, but even in her present rundown physical state, she managed to slip away from their grasps and crouch nude in the corner of the hotel room. She pulled ruthlessly at her limp and lusterless hair and clawed viciously at her own pale skin as she begged them erratically. "Can't you two idiots see without it I'll die? Don't you want me to live? Don't you love me anymore?"

When she saw her desperate pleas and attempts at begging were not producing any of the morphine that every fiber of her entire being howled insatiably for, her attitude changed drastically.

"I detest you both!" she shouted as she glared at them both intently. "God will never forgive you for not helping me!"

Her words were then reduced to unremitting babbling, and eventually, even that dissolved into senseless but livid shouts and squeals. The intense situation finally escalated to the point where she became completely hysterical beyond any reason. Without warning, she launched herself into a physical war with them both, her arms and legs flailing in every direction. Both men found it very difficult to capture and then subdue her crazily windmilling limbs.

“Lucinda, sweetheart, listen to me please,” pleaded a worried Reed as calmly as he could. She paid him and his compassion no mind at all, and he just barely dodged her fists that she aimed maliciously at his face.

“Calm down now!” shouted Bill in an incredibly stern voice, but he only induced the same violent reaction that his friend had gotten moments before.

Suddenly she stopped fighting and looked from one man to another with crazed eyes and an extremely determined expression. Her voice, between heaving breaths, had a menacing tone tinged with ice.

“If you two simple-minded bastards won’t get me my medicine, I’ll just go and get it myself!”

She emanated a low and guttural growl as she leapt from where she had been crouching and tried to reach the door. Bill managed to grab her and use his considerable strength to put her in a massive bear hug. The out-of-control Lucinda then proceeded to shock both men by rearing back while encased in Bill’s arms and kicking toward the door with her feet.

Reed went and stood directly in her line of vision, hoping that seeing his face again might bring her back to a rational state. He took a foot full force in the jaw for his efforts, but he also managed to grab her legs and pin them together in his arms.

“Let’s get her on the bed,” Reed instructed as he tightly held on to her legs. “We are just going to have to keep our weight on her until she calms down.”

They struggled mightily to get her over to the bed, and when they at last had her somewhat reclined, Bill laid across her legs while Reed held her arms down and leaned carefully on her chest.

“You’re killing me!” she shouted viciously as she bucked and writhed to escape their physical restraint of her. “You said you loved me, you lying son of a bitch, and now here you are smothering me!”

Her words broke Reed’s heart, and tears sprang to his eyes as she continued to accuse him of not caring about her in any way.

“I do love you, darling; and I am trying very hard to make you well! You’re very ill right now, poisoned by those wretched shots they forced you to take!”

“I hate your stinking guts, Reed Donovan. You make me sick!” she snarled cruelly as she continued her seemingly fearless efforts to escape.

“Don’t listen to her,” reasoned Bill as he continued to lie on her legs. “It’s the sickness that is making her say those horrible things. If she was in her right mind, she would not talk to you like that for anything in the world.”

Reed merely nodded as an acknowledgment, the tremendous hurt he was enduring had rendered him unable to speak at that particular moment. Though he knew in his heart Bill was right, just the fact that the acerbic words were coming from the mouth of the woman he loved was enough to cut him to the bone.

Lucinda carried on for a few more hours, her behavior fluctuating from savagely berating and brutally scolding the men who were trying to help her to calling out distressingly for her medicine. When at last she finally exhausted herself and fell into a capricious sleep, both Reed and Bill made absolutely sure she was no longer a threat before they sat up.

"I'm going to get us some coffee," said Bill tiredly as he rose from the bed. "I think we're going to need a lot of it before we have ridden this thing out."

"Have them make some soup as well," suggested Reed glumly, "maybe if we get some food in her belly, she will start talking and acting like her old self."

Bill regarded his dearest friend with mild irritation. "You are still letting those things she said to you bother you, aren't you? Don't you understand that all she wants is more of that rubbish that was shot into her and right now she despises anyone who will not give it to her? She honestly doesn't feel that way about you; the Lucinda I know and that you fell in love with never could."

"You and your eternal optimism," replied Reed hollowly. "Sometimes your blind faith amazes me, old friend. I realize that Lucinda is not behaving like herself right now, and I can understand why after seeing how she had been treated for the last few weeks. Here's the things really bothering me; the questions that keep coming up again and again in my mind as my heart broke while I listened to her rant and rave. What if she isn't the person we both knew anymore? What if the girl I fell in love with no longer exists and what we have seen in this room is all that is left? What then, Bill?"

Bill was at a loss for words; the last thing either of them needed was to start arguing about faith, miracles, and the workings of God. Instead of trying to come up with an answer that would not offend or upset and actually be listened to, he simply left on his mission for the coffee and soup.

He wandered into the small hotel kitchen and startled the girls that were preparing food for the Oasis' few guests. He told them what he needed, and they sweetly agreed to bring it as soon as possible.

As he returned to the room, he felt concern for his friend growing by leaps and bounds. Bill knew firsthand just exactly how

cultured, intellectual, and intelligent Reed Donovan was, so why couldn't he understand that his future bride was just not in control of her own mind? Bill instinctively knew the answer to the question he had posed; Reed was a man in love and every word that woman uttered had the power to either send him to paradise or cut him to caustic ribbons. He was listening to her not with his ears, but with his heart.

As he stood in the hall pondering his friend's frame of mind, one of the kitchen girls arrived with a steaming pot of coffee, two mugs, and a large bowl of hearty looking beef and vegetable soup on a festively painted wooden tray. She handed it to him and he accepted it with many thanks before entering the hotel room.

Nothing had changed during his short absence; Lucinda slept soundly and a hurt-looking Reed sat on the edge of the bed gazing at her despondently. Bill poured out two cups of coffee and then handed one to Reed.

"You have to be strong for her now," he advised kindly as Reed took his cup. "She needs you now more than she has in the past. If you give up, then all truly will be lost; you are the world and all its holdings to that girl. All I can do is to keep reminding you to try hard to ignore the words coming out of her mouth right now."

"It's very difficult to ignore them when someone you love so deeply accuses you of trying to murder them," he answered dully as his eyes reflected a kaleidoscope of pain, misery, and despair in their depths.

"Hard or not, you have to do it," replied an increasingly frustrated Bill. "When she returns to her old self, you'll see that she still loves you just like she did before."

"I'm not only hurt by what she said, I'm also terrified out of my mind! What if she says my long absence from Mexico was just another way of trying to kill her? What if she never forgives me for the horrifying weeks she had to spend in that revolting brothel? Can

you say with absolute certainty that she will even listen when I attempt to explain what kept me from going to get her for so long?"

Bill shook his head forlornly as Reed struggled to keep his bitter tears at bay. The only one who could answer the questions he posed was Lucinda herself, and she was still in no condition to discuss anything.

"Perhaps Garrett Cameron truly did triumph in the end," Reed hollowly wondered aloud. "Instead of gunning me down in the street, he managed to come up with a way to execute me from the inside out."

Chapter 29

The men spent the next thirty-two hours restraining Lucinda during her turbulent tirades and gathering courage and strength when she fitfully slept.

She continued her verbal and physical assault on those trying to help her, and had refused every morsel of food that had been offered. Many meals wound up on the floor or the wall from her forcefully cuffing whatever it was away.

When at last she slept deeply, Reed took a turn going to the kitchen. The girls there were as affable to him as they had been to Bill, and when he returned, he brought back not only coffee but also bowls of spicy chili and warm flour tortillas.

They never took their eyes off of the resting Lucinda as they ate, and to their great relief, she never stirred. Her last violent tirade had been less severe, and the men were more than grateful for the reprieve.

“I would like to think the worst of it has finally passed,” said Bill hopefully. “Why don’t you go next door and get some sleep?”

Reed couldn’t help but smile at his best friend. “Your selflessness never ceases to amaze me. I will be fine here alone if she were to wake up, you go ahead.”

Bill found the offer to be very tempting, and after Reed reassured his friend several times that he would be fine, Bill took up the offer.

Reed spent the hours looking after his love, changing the sheets on the bed again, and washing her down with fresh cool water provided by the staff.

As the afternoon began to dim and turn to twilight, Lucinda began to awaken. She managed to open her eyes to mere slits and speak in just above a whisper.

“Reed? Are you here, Reed?”

In a moment, he was by her side on the bed and holding one of her pale and trembling hands.

“I’m here, precious, I’ve been here all along.”

“Water,” she croaked miserably. “I need water.”

He quickly took his coffee mug, rinsed it out, and then half-filled it with water. He helped her to sit up and held the cup to her quaking lips and allowed her a few small sips. Regretfully he pulled the cup away and would not allow her to have any more; he knew if he gave in and permitted her to have all the water she craved, it would just make her vomit.

“I’m so tired,” she whispered breathlessly as he laid her back down on the bed.

“Sleep all you need to, my darling,” he soothed as he gently stroked one of her sunken and sallow cheeks with a finger, “I’ll make sure everything you need is here when you wake up again.”

He hadn’t moved from the spot on the bed when a very refreshed Bill entered the room a little over an hour later.

“A hot meal, a hot bath, and a long and deep sleep have done wonders for me,” he crowed at full volume. “I recommend it highly.”

“She called out for me and then took a few sips of water,” Reed explained happily as he regarded his friend with a buoyantly hopeful look. “I think she’s going to get well.”

“Of course she’ll get well; I never doubted for a moment that she would. Soon we’ll all be heading back to Texas; and I for one will be very happy to get back!”

"Me too, old friend, I miss my hotel."

"I miss Marie," said Bill with a lonesome sigh.

"You keep the vigil here," said Reed tiredly, "and I'm going next door to partake of every single one of your suggestions. They all sounded quite heavenly."

Bill grinned and nodded amicably as he sat in a chair near the bed and took over the duties of sentry and caregiver.

Reed plodded over to the room next door and once again did not bother to disrobe before falling into the bed and conceding to the siren song of sleep. He slept very peacefully; it was the first real restful sleep he had had since their hasty departure for the dry and dusty San Calando so long ago.

When he woke hours later, he felt very much rejuvenated, and just as he was about to leave the room to return to his love, a knock came at the room door. He opened it and recognized the girl who looked up at him to be one of the young ladies he had seen and spoke to in the kitchen.

"The *hombre* next door said you would like a bath," she said cheerfully.

"I expect what the *hombre* next door actually said was I need a bath desperately," he replied as he smiled at her affably, "and he is absolutely correct. A bath would be wonderful, and if I could have my clothes laundered again, I would appreciate it greatly."

"*Si, Senior*," she said with a small curtsy just before scampering away.

A short while later, the girl and another slightly older brought in a small round wooden tub, a folding screen, and several large folded towels.

"Thank you all for everything since my friend and I have been here; each of you have been very considerate and hospitable."

"*Gracias*," the girls replied in unison. They busied themselves setting up the screen, and when they were finished, they smiled at him sweetly before leaving.

Reed happily stripped and hung the clothes that needed washed so badly on top of the screen. He took one of the towels he had been provided with and wrapped it around his waist, knotting it at the side.

The girls who had brought in the tub returned once again, this time accompanied by a boy close to their age. Each child had a bucket of steaming water in each hand, and they commenced to pour it into the tub one bucketful at a time.

When the task was completed, they all filed out, the smallest girl stopping only long enough to reach into a pocket on her small white apron and pull out a soft cloth and a small rectangular bar of soap she shyly handed to Reed. He thanked her graciously and her dark eyes widened with wonder and awe as he kissed the top of her tiny hand in a gentlemanly fashion.

When he was at last alone, he quickly removed the towel that covered his nakedness and sank appreciatively into the sweltering water. The cake of soap he had been provided with had a fresh and brisk citrus scent and he used it liberally as he washed himself vigorously all over, even soaping and rinsing his thick jet hair.

He sighed heavily as he realized this was the fifth day they'd spent in San Calando, and that was much longer than he had originally wanted to remain in Mexico. Until Lucinda was well enough to travel, they were stranded there at the Oasis, and there was nothing that could be done about it.

His anger soared mightily as he thought of the evil people who had poisoned his love with morphine, and in his heart of hearts, he hoped that wherever they were, they were all suffering terribly for their misdeeds.

His hot anger quickly dissipated as the door to the room opened once again and the girls entered the room with one hot bucket of water each. After making sure his intimates were adequately covered by the washcloth, he waved them over, and they

smiled at him shyly as they took turns pouring the hot water into the tub.

When both buckets were empty, it amused him greatly to have both girls stick their hands out to him for a kiss. He proceeded to lean forward in the tub and kiss their hands as gallantly as he could and still keep his modesty. Both girls giggled and blushed at receiving his act of chivalry and courtly affection.

He soaked for a while longer in the newly reheated water, enjoying the placid tranquility it offered. He finally forced himself out of the tub and got dressed in the borrowed clothes. He made a mental note that once things next door became less chaotic, either he or Bill would find a local merchant and purchase themselves some new attire.

When he entered the room next door, he was thrilled to see Lucinda, still pale and somewhat shaky, sitting on the edge of the bed having an enervated conversation with Bill. He had a bowl of *menudo* and was giving her small spoonfuls of the spicy stew as they softly conversed.

She looked over and smiled brightly, and her reaction made his aching heart skyrocket with joy. He immediately went to her and took one of her thin hands in his and held it to his cheek.

“How are you feeling?” he posed with gentle concern.

“I’m so tired! I sleep and sleep, but I’m still drained when I wake up.”

“You’ve been through a lot, sweetness, and now your body needs time to recuperate. Sleep all you need to; either Bill or I will always be here when you awaken.”

Bill held another spoonful of the delightfully piquant smelling food up to her, and it did Reed’s aching heart and soul a world of good to watch her take it appreciatively. Bill gave her an encouraging smile after she chewed and swallowed.

“This food is very good, but my belly still feels a little sickly.”

“Don’t eat too much then, sweetheart,” Reed cautioned lovingly as he gazed into the eyes he loved so well. “Just relax and do what feels right to you.”

She nodded, and then Bill helped her with another bite. She took it slowly, and then smiled at both men adoringly. The meal went down well and she had taken in a good amount until suddenly with a dry, barking cough, she turned her head and everything she had eaten spewed violently onto the bed.

When the sickness subsided, Lucinda looked around helplessly and then began to weep at the mess on herself and on the bed. Both men reassured her soothingly before they started cleaning up.

After fetching the folding screen from next door Reed helped her out of her soiled nightgown and into a clean cotton shift while Bill swept the bedspread from the bed. Both items were then carefully rolled into a ball and placed outside the door.

Reed knew the fouled things would be laundered quickly; the staff at the Oasis had been very accommodating and tolerant of their situation. He made his second mental note of the day: that upon their departure, he would give the Ortiz family who ran and staffed the hotel, a very large tip they could all share.

An exhausted Lucinda lay on the bed and was soon asleep again. Once he was certain she was sleeping soundly, Reed regarded Bill with strong fortitude and a meaningful purpose swirling in his eyes.

“It’s time for me to take care of some unfinished business,” he explained as he rose from the bed.

“What are you going to do?” asked Bill apprehensively, although in his heart, he knew what would be taking place in San Cando that day.

“I’m going to make sure no one else ever gets harmed or damaged in *El Corazon Del Diablo* again,” he said quietly just before leaning over and kissing his love’s pale forehead.

“The law will be on your back,” admonished Bill soundly, “and I seem to remember you didn’t think much of the time you just spent in jail.”

“Any town that would let a hellhole like that operate has no law,” he declared pessimistically as he gathered together their saddlebags and threw one over each shoulder.

Reed left the room, went downstairs, and then went out into the daylight. He looked up and down the dusty and ominously quiet street before him, not surprised when he saw only a few brave souls milling about.

He was aware that the townspeople had slowly returned in the last days while he had been staying in the Oasis, and that many of them watched him fearfully as he made his way down the street toward his goal.

Reed did not speak to or meet the eyes of anyone he passed; he headed toward the opposite end of the small town with a single-minded and vengeful purpose.

He tried to mentally prepare himself for what he might see when he reached the despicable building he was intent on destroying; and upon arrival, he unwaveringly entered the building without faltering.

A putrid odor from within gave him warning as to what he would come across, but seeing Carmelita’s and Juan’s equally bloated and flyblown corpses disturbed him nonetheless. They both still lay where they had died, insects and small rodents swarming on and around them and delighting in their decomposing flesh.

He went up the well-used staircase and meticulously visited every room of the repulsive brothel to make sure it was as empty as it seemed. His breath involuntarily caught in his throat when he entered the smelly room his love had been unwillingly detained in. It sickened him greatly to think of the vulgar monstrosities she had endured within its grimy walls, and he made note of exactly what window he was standing near.

On impulse, he ripped the well-worn sheet from the bed just before exiting the room and the ramshackle building itself. He angrily tore the thin sheet into jagged strips as he went, and when he reached the side of the structure where the window in Lucinda's room faced, he stopped.

While gazing hatefully at the unbelievably smudged panes of glass, he wrapped and tightly tied three sticks of dynamite together with the sheet strips. He diligently knotted the cloth several times to make sure the bundle would hold together well.

He then quickly made another bundle, using the remainder of the dozen sticks of explosive he and Bill had brought to San Calando. He fished in Bill's saddlebags for a moment and smiled devilishly when he came up with two of the matches.

Without a moment of indecision or lament, he struck one of the matches on the sole of his boot. When it brightly flared to life, he deftly lit the first dynamite bunch and then threw it directly at the grubby window that had been Lucinda's room. He then sprinted around to the front of the building, lit the second explosive package, and tossed it through the open front door.

He didn't get far away before the first sticks detonated deafeningly, and another earth-shattering blast of identical magnitude from the second bunch soon followed. Reed found himself knocked flat on the ground and feebly covered his head with his hands to shield himself from the sudden rain of flaming debris.

The thunderous explosions quaked every building in San Calando, and when the Oasis hotel's windows, walls, and furniture all shook, Bill breathed a great sigh of relief.

A weak Lucinda was shaken from her sleep by the evil brothel's demise. She looked around in confusion for a moment before turning to Bill.

"What was that horrible noise?" she asked sleepily.

His deep blue eyes glowed warmly as he reached out and gently touched her cheek with heartfelt affection.

“You heard only the sound of the righteous destroying Hell on earth, my dear.”

Chapter 30

The hideous round burns that dotted Lucinda's arms, legs, and torso showed promising signs of healing as her fragile and rail-thin body continued to strengthen. When she had been able to keep solid food down for forty-eight hours straight, Reed and Bill collectively decided she was well enough for the journey back to Texas.

The men were mutually thrilled at just the thought of leaving San Calando and putting the entire sordid mess behind them. They both missed Holton immensely; it was high time for them to be back in the safe haven that was the Red Rose Hotel.

The only thing that nagged at Reed and made him question his decision to leave was the inherent and unexplainable sadness that had come over Lucinda. She was very quiet and did not seem to want to do anything but lie in bed and stare sadly at the closest wall or the ceiling.

Reed did his best to cheer her; but nothing he had done had been enough to pierce the invisible cloak of depression she now incessantly wore. On one occasion, he went out and purchased an adorably spry little chestnut mare for her to make the journey home on; but she was so disinterested she had to be heavily persuaded to even look at the beautiful animal through the hotel room window.

The next day he purchased her the best clothes he could find in San Calando, a pale blue cotton dress with delicate white lace adornment. He also bought her a pair of fashionable shoes, a large

and beautifully decorated hat, and an elegant lace parasol to ward off the worst of the scorching Mexican sun.

She disinterestedly unwrapped and examined each item as it was handed to her, not making any signals on them one way or the other. After a few expectant moments, she looked up at him with distinctly somber eyes and thanked him politely.

"Is everything all right with you, sweetheart?" he asked as he sat next to her on the bed and took one of her pale hands in his. "If you don't feel well enough for the trip back to Texas, we can always stay here a few more days."

"There's no need to stay," she replied glumly. "I feel much better and it will be good to see Texas again."

Reed was grateful she did not want to remain in Mexico; he was totally convinced the sooner they put San Calando behind them, the better. He looked forward to the journey itself, perhaps when they were out under the stars, she would open up and be the sweet and loving girl he had known before.

The night prior to their leaving Reed tried to be physically loving with her, but she became so distressed he made it a point from then on to avoid touching her as much as possible. His motives had been pure; he had wanted nothing more than to hold her and reassure her that everyone who had hurt her was gone from their lives forever. Even though he had explained his intentions to her, she could not abide being touched by a man in any way.

He carefully suppressed the deep wound and heartrending pain her rejection had caused him, and decided her reaction to his closeness was yet another consequence of the horrible ordeal. He couldn't help but wonder if as they were despicably scheming, Garrett and Elise knew exactly how much their evil plot would damage the gentle Lucinda. Once again he sincerely hoped they were both suffering for the inexcusable things they had done.

The trio started out for Texas at daybreak on Reed and Bill's tenth day of having been in Mexico. Reed had kept the promise he

had made to himself and when he at last settled up their enormous debt, he gave the Ortiz family a generous gratuity in gold.

The good-sized family gathered and waved goodbye to them from the porch of their hotel, and Reed and Bill waved back happily. Lucinda waved as well, but it was with the same somber half-hearted effort that she gave to everything she did.

As they reached the plains where there were no signs of people, they arranged their horses to ride in a single file line. Lucinda rode in the protected middle of the tiny procession while Reed led and Bill brought up the rear.

After a few hours, Reed let his horse fall back so it was even with Lucinda's and tried to make conversation. Her one word replies and glum expression made him soon realize his efforts were futile, and he heartbrokenly returned to his former spot in line.

When they stopped at the hottest part of the day for the simple meal the Ortiz family had provided for their journey, it was at the ranch house ruins where they had found the dynamite. He told Bill he wanted to eat alone with her and then took her about a hundred feet from where they tethered the horses. He watched her closely and noticed how she ignored the flavorful tamales, picked at her cornbread, and barely sipped from her canteen of water. It was as if she had no interest at all in returning to Holton and the pleasant life they had shared before she had been abducted.

"You need to drink, Lucinda," he cautioned her with extreme tenderness. "People dehydrate easily out here in the midday heat."

"I've had all I wanted, thank you," she responded listlessly.

With a vicious curse, Reed quickly stood and returned to his horse. He had held his anger and hurt back for as long as he was able, but he could not tolerate her listless and hurtful unfeeling ways for another minute.

He stormed back over to where she sat and looked down at her with contempt and irritation blazing in his dark gaze.

"I am honestly starting to wonder if you are truly happy I took you from that disgusting place where you were being kept."

"I haven't complained about anything," she snapped tightly as she looked up at him with equal parts fury and hurt teeming in her aqua eyes.

"You're right," he agreed with cold sarcasm, "you haven't complained about a single thing. The real problem here is that since you have been set free, you also have not laughed, loved, appreciated, or treasured anything at all! You have been merely existing, Lucinda, a sorry shadow of the vibrant and lovely girl I used to know."

"How can you possibly say such things to me? Do you have any idea what I have been through? I may not remember all of what it felt like having those men touch me, but I recall enough to make me sick every time I think about it! I was drugged, tortured, beaten, and raped almost constantly when I was living in San Calando, and may God damn you straight to hell for insinuating anything else!"

"At least my words got some sort of reaction from you," he retorted stiffly.

She stared at him in pure astonishment for a few minutes, and then a shrewd countenance stole across her delicate features.

"I understand; you're angry because I can't tolerate a man's touch right now, not even yours. I had expected you of all people to be a little more understanding of why I can't help being that way; but I guess when it all comes down to it, men are nothing but animals."

Her expression was callous as she stood and started to unbutton her dress. "Why don't you take me right here, Reed? I won't fight you, I promise, I'll just lay still and you can use me however you please."

When he did not make a move toward her, she bared a shoulder and jeered cruelly, "What on earth are you waiting for? Isn't this what you and every other man truly wants from a woman?"

Reed, his expression like iron, aggressively clapped a hand over her hands to stop her from disrobing. He arranged her dress properly and secured the buttons while regarding her with blatant anger. When he finished, the desperately distraught Lucinda suddenly burst into tears and backed away from him. She turned and darted away toward where the horses were tethered and Bill was eating his lunch. Reed took off after her, and had soon caught her by the arm.

She struggled against him, but he held on to her until she gave up. When she ceased fighting, he turned her to face him, his tone and gaze having softened considerably. He reached out and placed his hands on her slim shoulders while his dark eyes told her volumes of his deep love and unwavering devotion.

"All I truly want to know is why it seems like nothing matters to you anymore; that we as a couple are no longer significant. My feelings for you haven't changed a smidgen, no matter what transpired during your captivity. Please, my dearest love, return to me so we can be like we once were."

His tender words and adoring expression quickly melted her vast rage and she found herself tempted to once again lose herself in his dark and expressive eyes. She could not possibly bear looking at him while she said what she knew she must, a harsh truth that had been apparent to her ever since she had been transported to Mexico. She turned her face away as tears of misery slowly slid down her cheeks.

"I have changed," she began haltingly as agonizing emotions tightly swirled within her and choked her voice. "I'm not the same girl you fell in love with or the one you so gallantly asked to marry. The sweetness and innocence that you adored has been demolished; I can never be that girl again."

"It doesn't matter," he soothed as he pulled her head to his chest and enfolded her in his strong and comforting embrace. "I love you solely for who you are, not for a few certain characteristics or charms. You will always be my beautiful and engaging lady; the most essential person in my life."

"Can't you see that I don't deserve to be?" she shouted at him tearfully as she pushed herself out of his arms and took a few steps away from him. "Don't you understand that all the love in the world does not alter what I've become? I'm nothing but a whore now, Reed. A filthy whore who has been had by the lowest people in society. You should have just left me in that horrid place; I can never be the wife you want me to be."

"That's not true," he said tenderly as he stepped forward. "You could never be anything less than delightful in my eyes."

She avoided his arms and backed further away from him. She chuckled mordantly as she dodged his attempts to catch her.

"What about the rest of Holton?" she asked as she kept away. "Can you honestly stand here and say that everyone in town has not found out where I was taken? I am sure the gossipmongers and busybodies can devise their own disgusting ideas of what happened to me during my absence; and it will likely be more horrifying than the truth actually was. If you marry me, you would instantly become the town joke and the hotel you put everything into would go broke. Decent people would not condescend to speak to us, let alone socialize or invite us anywhere; we would probably even be shunned from church on Sundays! I simply can't allow that, Reed Donovan. I can't in good conscience permit you to throw your future away on an unsalvageable dirty *Diablo* whore."

Lucinda inwardly recoiled as he shuddered helplessly and gawked at her. His strong arms, abruptly rendered limp and numb, fell to his sides uselessly. Unshed tears that had shone brightly in his dark eyes tumbled forth at her next words.

"I can't marry you, Reed, now or ever."

Chapter 31

Reed's heart shattered into a million ragged slivers that tore meticulously at his very fortitude. He bowed his head deeply as his entire body slumped with unfathomable devastation and despair. He covered his face with his hands and gave vent to the agony of his deplorable loss with grave soul-wrenching sobs and moans.

Lucinda, unable to tolerate the indescribable pain she caused him, left his side and went to retrieve her horse. She didn't say a word to Bill as she mounted up and then rode away in the general direction they had been traveling. Before she had been gone a minute, the bleak and miserable sound of Reed's torment reached Bill's ears.

Bill rushed headlong to where his friend was collapsed and weeping, hoping that perhaps he could help in some way.

"I'll go get her," he offered quickly. "I'll bring her back here and you can discuss whatever it is that went wrong between you."

"Let her go," he choked out miserably, "she doesn't want to be married to me; so let her go." He removed his hands and regarded his friend with swollen red-rimmed eyes and a tear-streaked complexion. "She's been forced into enough; I won't force her to stay where she obviously does not want to be."

"I think this whole ordeal has made you both batty!" Bill shouted as his normally cheery blue eyes clouded with anger. "I'm going to get her and this whole matter had better be settled before this day is out! If I have to spend so much as another day away from

my wife because of you two bickering, I swear I'll tie you both up and drag you back to Texas behind me!"

Bill went over and mounted his horse and then kicked its sides sharply. The animal reared and screamed in protest just before bounding forward onto the empty landscape.

His strong and sleek stallion easily pounded along the earth in the direction Lucinda had gone, and Bill kept a keen eye on the ground and effortlessly followed her path. Fifteen minutes later, he was galloping right beside her and reaching out to grab the reins of her quick little mare.

She had hurriedly looked over her shoulder when she first heard the rapid hoofbeats behind her, and had instantly urged her chestnut mare on as much as she could. Though she was fast and quite agile, the spirited mare was just no match for the awesome power and speed of Bill's thoroughbred stallion.

When he finally got both of the panting horses stopped, he gazed at Lucinda with intense anger and irritation. His voice, though eerily quiet and calm, had an unmistakable undertone of cold contempt.

"What have you done to Reed? In all my days, I have never seen a man so crushed as the one I just left. Did he really deserve to be so hurt?"

Lucinda was distressed by Bill's demanding tone but refused to show her fear. She had made her decision regarding marriage, and was convinced it was the best decision for all concerned. Steadfastly determined not to give in, she swallowed hard, lifted her chin, and faced her questioner's gaze with bold determination.

"I told Reed I can't marry him and I meant it," she declared solidly.

"Why in the blue blazes can't you? Do you fully comprehend everything that poor man has gone through in the last few weeks? You can't possibly believe he doesn't adore you; if it had taken him

moving a mountain to bring you home from Mexico, he would have done it gladly!”

“He shouldn’t have wasted his time and energy,” she said as she turned her face away to hide the tears that had sprung to her eyes. “He should have just left me where I was.”

“If I wasn’t a gentleman, I’d pull you off that mare and box your ears soundly,” he seethed with mounting rage. “The man you just wounded so deeply could no more have left you where you were than he could have quit living! He loves you with such a passion that even when death was looking him squarely in the eye, he did not flinch or pull back, he went forward and did what he had to do to save your life!”

Each word Bill spoke triggered a pain within her tormented soul so terrible it was like having sharp steel spikes driven relentlessly into her torn and aching heart. Her unsteady resolve quickly crumbled, and she finally hung her head and began to unload her massive grief by unashamedly bawling as she slid from her saddle. She finally landed on her knees by a small scrub bush, completely surrendering to her tempestuously churning emotions.

“I can’t marry him,” she avowed between deep sobs and uneven breaths as she clung to her heaving chest. “All the things he loved about me are gone. All the filthy men and the evil things they did to me destroyed them. I’m no longer worthy to be his wife.”

Bill’s anger rapidly dissolved and he felt deep sympathy for the clearly anguished Lucinda. He quickly got off his stallion and went over to where the devastated and weeping girl had crumpled wearily to the ground. He gently put his massive arms around her and tightly embraced her slender and shuddering form.

“It doesn’t matter what happened in Mexico,” he soothed as he began to rock her gently. “Reed loves you unconditionally. I was the first person he told of his feelings toward you, and I know for a fact he has wanted to marry you since the day he realized he was in love with you.”

"I don't want him ridiculed for having a whore for a wife; that's more than I could stand. I couldn't make him see that, Bill, but you can understand, can't you?" she lamented as she clung to his arms.

He shifted around so they were face to face and his compassionate blue eyes seemed to delve into her very being as he spoke to her.

"The only one who thinks anything like that about you is yourself, Lucinda. You can't be blamed for being taken away by force; and you can't be held responsible for what happened while morphine was being injected into you on a regular basis. Reed and everyone who cares for you knows that; and if anyone were ever to say anything different, then they would be nothing but a damned dirty no account liar."

He held her for a while longer and let her cry out the contents of her aching heart. He tenderly alleviated her pain and comforted her with his benevolent compassion. Lucinda clung to the big man as he answered all her burning questions and quelled her rampant fears. As he reassured her, she was grateful for not only his big size, but also his incredibly kind heart. He made her feel safe and secure, a truly glorious sensation that she had nearly forgotten in her weeks of hellish captivity.

"Are you ready to go find Reed?" he asked her gently when her tears had slowed and she was somewhat composed.

"I must look a mess!" she blurted out as she tried to smooth her dress and hair with her hands.

Bill quickly put his fingers beneath her chin and tilted her face upward. He repeated, "He loves you as you are."

She stopped fussing about her disheveled appearance. When her arms finally rested at her sides, he smiled at her brightly.

"Now let's go tell him your good news," he said as he led her to her horse.

They both swung into their saddles quickly, and Bill let Lucinda lead the way back to where they had stopped for lunch. They let the horses walk rather than travel at the high speed they had arrived at, and her hope and outlook soared as she thought of everything Bill had said to her.

“Does Marie know how truly fortunate she is to have you as a husband?” she asked with a cheerful grin.

“I try to remind her every chance I get,” he joked as he rode beside her.

They reached the spot a few minutes later, and Lucinda was at first slightly alarmed when there was no sign of Reed. She quickly dismounted and rushed over to the ruins of the home, stepping gingerly inside. She breathed a deep sigh of relief to find him sitting listlessly on the floor among the shards of broken furniture and bits of shattered glass.

Before she had a chance to speak, he looked up at her despondently as he picked up furniture and glass fragments.

“This place had been someone’s dream once,” he stated indolently. “Some poor soul and his family worked themselves probably half to death to get the money to build this ranch; and just look at it now. Their hopes and dreams were crushed and mutilated as surely as mine have been.”

He tossed away the useless wood he had gathered and gazed up at her fully. His broken heart was plainly evident in his beleaguered eyes and his tired face.

“Does anyone in life get what they desire most, or are dreams truly the fodder of fools?”

Lucinda knelt beside him and took his hands into her grasp. The love he had longed to see in her aqua eyes blazed brilliantly within.

“You’ve never been a fool, Reed Donovan, though I can’t say the same for myself. Can you forgive me, my darling, and let me become your wife?”

He warily searched her features for a long moment, looking for any sign of concealed doubt or masked fear. Seeing there was nothing but deep devotion and unfaltering love gazing at him, he slowly let himself comprehend and believe what he had heard.

He shot up to his knees, never losing the grip of her hands. His dark eyes sparkled with joy and exuberance as life returned to his heart and soul.

“I don’t care what has happened, whom you were forced to be with, or about anything else but being with you,” he gushed elatedly. “You are the only woman I have ever loved, Lucinda Hoffman, and you are my destiny. I need you to be my wife, and I will love you until the very moment that I cease to be.”

“I will marry you if you’ll have me,” she stated just before she kissed him quickly on the cheeks, forehead, and lips.

A euphoric Reed leapt to his feet with a loud shout of elation and pulled the giggling Lucinda up next to him. Without warning, he grabbed her around her tiny waist and swung her about the dusty and debris strewn room several times.

“I will never make you cry, darling,” he proclaimed happily when he at last set her down, “and I swear here and now that I’ll make every dream you have ever harbored within your heart a certainty.”

“Being your wife was the only dream I ever had,” she explained once she caught her breath. “It is the best thing that could ever happen to me.”

Reed suddenly wrapped his arms around her, pulled her into his warm embrace, and kissed her fully on the lips. He was relieved when she did not recoil or try to oppose his touch. Her succulent lips were as sweet as they had always been to him, and he languorously reveled in their soft exquisiteness.

Lucinda hid her fear and panic and enjoyed her fiancé’s kiss as fully as she could. His generous lips, so filled with affection and

passion, were a far cry from the disgusting animals lusts she had been an unwilling victim of receiving.

He kissed her hungrily, and to his utter relief, she returned his ardor equally. He dared to gently caress one of her breasts through the material of her dress, and was delighted again when she did not cry out in fear and attempt to pull away.

Lucinda, her heart hammering and blood racing, was completely shocked by her eagerness for his touch. One of her principal fears had been that she could never be a wife to him in the most important of all ways, but it seemed her fear was unfounded. She did not want to run and hide from this man as she had agonized that she would; she wanted to give him all she had to give.

"I'll never hurt you, my precious jewel," he uttered when the kiss ended and he held her close. "I'll spend my life making sure you are safe and happy."

Lucinda sighed contentedly, snuggled closer, and then surprised him by suddenly breaking free from his embrace. She took his hand and began to pull him from the interior of the ramshackle ranch house.

Bill, who waited patiently by the horses, was thrilled and relieved when they came out of the crumbling building together. Their expressions were not of anger and frustration as he had worried they would be, but were glowing with profound and thriving love and forgiveness. They were still the most well-suited couple he had ever seen, and the fact that things were as they once had been between them made his heart fill and swell with joy.

"So is there a wedding in the works?" he asked jovially as he neared them with a slight limp in his gait.

"The biggest, loudest, and most gaudy wedding that Holton will ever see is in the works," replied Reed with a huge grin, "and I can't imagine you wanting to miss out on an event like that! Would you grant me the distinction of consenting to be my best man?"

"I wouldn't settle for anything less, but I got a problem here. My leg is throbbing and bleeding again and I got to get some help for it."

The smiles melted away from both Lucinda and Reed's faces as they looked down and saw a fresh bloodstain on the leg of Bill's pants.

"Why didn't you say something earlier?" asked Reed. "We would have gladly stayed another day in San Calando to have your leg fixed up."

"I thought I could get by with the bandage we had put on until we reached Holton, but I guess not. You two stay here, I'm going to ride back and see the doctor."

"Not that guy," protested Reed. "I've seen enough of him for a lifetime! He's lucky I let him live!"

"I got no choice, Reed, I have to see somebody about it. If I go home a bloody mess, Marie is gonna be some upset."

"You got a point there," Reed said with a smile. "If you go home and have been bleeding all over the place, she's liable to beat the tar out of me for letting you get hurt. Go on back to the doctor if for no other reason than to save my hide!"

"I'm sorry if your wound got split open chasing after me," apologized Lucinda sincerely as she stepped forward with sadness in her aqua eyes. "I would never hurt you intentionally, Bill."

"I know that," he said as he gave her a gentle hug, "and it's nobody's fault but my own. You two stay here while I go back and see if he wants to throw a stitch or two into it or just wrap it up again."

They agreed and Reed helped him up on to his horse. When he was sure he was in the saddle, he rode away in the direction they had come from.

"Do you think he'll be okay?" asked Lucinda worriedly as she watched him leave in the direction they had come from.

"He's the toughest man I've ever known," stated Reed seriously. "I've seen him do battle with some of the orneriest people to

ever set foot in Holton. He's never been one to complain about anything; if he feels he needs attention for that leg then it must be just about killing him."

"Let's get out of the sun, the heat is making me dizzy," said Lucinda as she shaded her eyes with her hand and looked up at Reed. "We can wait for him inside the house."

"Of course," he agreed instantly, and they both went inside the wreckage of the ranch house together.

There was nowhere for them to sit, so before they settled down, Reed went and got his bedroll and laid it out on the debris-strewn floor.

"You don't need to get cut by anything lying around here," he said thoughtfully as he spread out the blankets. "You've had enough pain in your life."

"Sometimes people are not happy unless they are hurting someone else," she replied hollowly as she sat and then wrapped her thin arms around her knees.

"I'm sorry for it all," he said as he sat down next to her on the bedroll. "If I could make every second you spent being abused disappear, I would. It doesn't change you in my eyes, Lucinda; to me, you will always be the lovely girl in the flowered dress with the green ribbon in your hair. That is the image of you I held in my heart when I was in jail."

"You were not disappointed or disgusted by what condition you found me in?"

"You were alive, my darling, and that was all I truly wanted. As long as you were still alive, I knew I could help you put your life back together."

They lay down together on the bedroll and were soon in each other's arms. They kissed a few times, each kiss growing more passionate. Their hands began to touch each other lightly, and Lucinda could feel his uneven breathing on her cheek.

“Make love to me,” she urged quietly as she placed a hand on his chest and felt his racing heart beneath it.

“I wanted to wait until marriage,” he whispered as his gaze traveled over her face and then searched her aqua eyes.

“No more waiting, my love; make me yours in the only way I have never been.”

Reed said no more, he let his warm kisses and tender touches be his reply. As his passion began to soar, he kissed her devouringly and was thrilled and excited when she returned his ardor. As he roused her passion, his grew stronger, and in between fiery kisses and shivering caresses, they both shed their clothes.

His eagerly exploring mouth on her breast made Lucinda’s heart gallop, and when he took a sweet and sultry pink nipple in his mouth, she gasped her exquisite joy. He feasted on her soft flesh hungrily, teasing one nipple and then the other with his clever and assiduous tongue.

Lucinda felt no fear or repugnance at all; her beloved Reed was making her experience pleasure she had never imagined could exist. He caressed her silken belly and thighs, and each stroke of his fingers sent pleasant jolts through her entire body. When he touched her moist sex, the sensation was so beautifully intense she involuntarily arched her back as a small cry escaped her.

He groaned his pleasure when her trembling hands explored the smooth planes and lines of his back, waist, and hips. She touched his raging cock gingerly at first, but then with wildly growing sensual abandon. She stroked and teased it with feather light touches until Reed thought he would not be able to control himself.

Gently he moved on top of her, and Lucinda willingly spread her legs as she kissed and lightly nipped at his chest, belly, and shoulders. The first touch of his cock against her hot sweetness was unrefined bliss, and when he eased himself into her, he felt as if he had just crossed over to paradise.

Lucinda welcomed his length and girth within her and moaned softly as he delightfully filled her. She thrust her hips up to meet him and was thrilled when he sank even deeper into her velvety depths. She clung to him and kissed his upper body repeatedly as he began to move within her.

The lovers soon found the primordial tempo that bound their bodies together, and Lucinda called out his name as she wrapped her legs around his waist. She met him thrust for thrust, and Reed felt the delicious building sensation of his own pinnacle begin.

Lucinda was not sure of what was happening to her as the waves of pleasure that washed over her swelled and gained in intensity. Her entire body trembled uncontrollably as her sweet Reed softly told her how much he loved her. It felt as if her very soul and essence were careening toward a great precipice, as if at any second, her heart would burst from her chest and fly to the heavens.

When her climax hit, it was the sweetest and most feral miracle she had ever known, and she clawed his back as her head thrashed side to side on the bedroll. Reed held her tightly as she rode out the wild tempest of glorious sensations, thrilled that he could make her attain such undeniable ecstasy.

As she came down from the dizzying heights she had achieved, he began to thrust into her again. He let himself join her in her marvelous and fantastic ascent to the stars, and when she exploded again, he called out his own magnificent release before burying his face in her soft golden tresses.

They both clung to each other and took in soul drenching breaths as they came back to earth. Reed kissed her cheeks, chin, and supple lips pleasantly as she looked up at him with a large smile and eyes that were positively luminous.

“Thank you for showing me how it can be between a man and a woman,” she said before she kissed his lips tenderly. “I love you, my darling Reed. I will love you forever.”

"I love you," he murmured meaningfully as he pulled her even closer. "I will always love you as I do here and now."

They clung to each other for a long while afterward, kissing and touching as they vowed never to be separated again. When they stood and began to dress, it was with a distinct note of sadness. They each would have gladly remained there for the rest of their lives if it had been possible.

Bill returned just before sunset and showed them each where the doctor had cauterized the wound and then wrapped his leg with a clean cotton bandage.

"He didn't charge me for the visit," he explained to Reed with an amused glint in his cheery blue eyes. "He was probably afraid you would come beat the hell out of him again."

"Maybe I should just for good measure," he joked lightly.

They both chuckled and then Bill turned to ask Lucinda if Marie would need a new dress for the upcoming wedding. He was shocked to realize she had already mounted her mare and was several feet away and grinning at them both daringly.

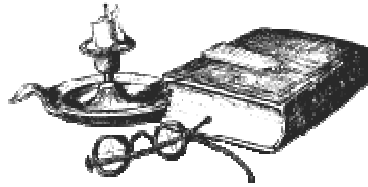
"You two can stand there and talk all night if you want," she shouted with spirit as her impatient horse pawed at the ground, "but as for me, I'm going home to Texas!"

Lucinda's feisty little chestnut mare needed no more coaxing than a gentle nudge from her knee to take off at a full and strong gallop. As horse and rider sped wildly across the open grassland, Bill and Reed just looked after them with deep satisfaction.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roxanne Springer was born in Newton, NJ, but has lived all over the US. She currently resides in Maine with her husband, Barry, and daughter, Jade. She must write just as surely as she must breathe, and pounds away at the keyboard when not watching and admiring her favorite pro wrestlers.

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