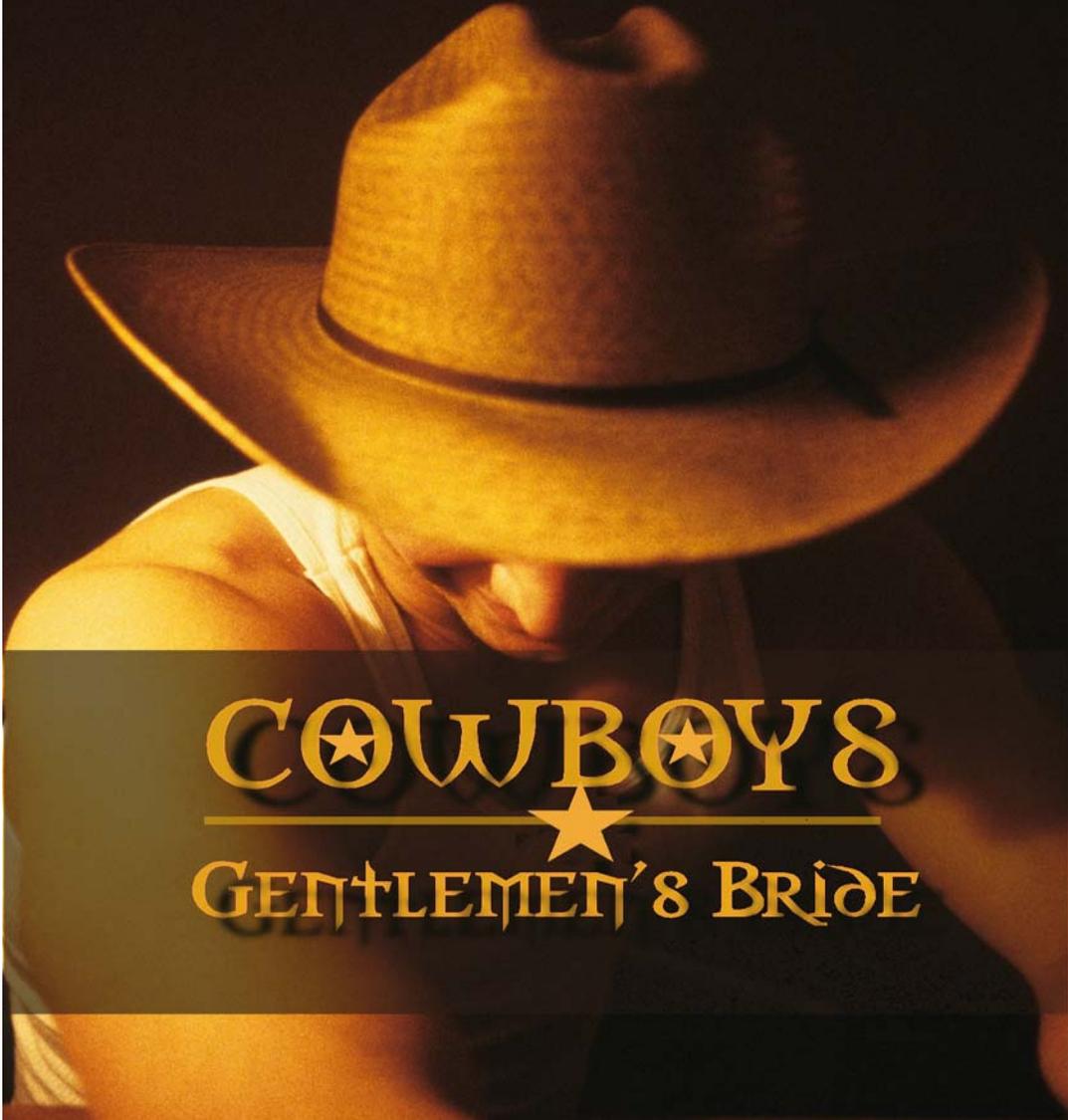


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COWBOYS
★
GENTLEMEN'S BRIDE

Carol McKenzie

CAROL MCKENZIE

GENTLEMEN'S BRIDE

BY

CAROL MCKENZIE

GENTLEMEN'S BRIDE

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DEDICATION:

To my hubby who puts up with my addiction to writing.

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CHAPTER ONE

October, 1870, outside Sheridan, Wyoming

Raddigan Holloway sat astride his gray gelding and glanced over at his partner, Ben Haggerty. Judging by the grin on Ben's tanned, taut face, he liked the lay of the land. Raddigan lit a cigarette, looked out at the wispy green hills that rolled gently beyond the distant brush, cottonwoods and willows. He exhaled smoke and said, "It's time to call it a night."

"I guess so."

It was a warm autumn day, but Raddigan barely noticed. With sweat trickling down his back, he dismounted. He loosened his horse's girth a little, stretched his legs and let his mount meander off and munch on grass. Raddigan had enough riding the past month to last him a lifetime.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ben dismount his mare, let go of the reins so his horse could drink from the shallows. He crossed to a nearby spring, dropped to his extended arms, and leaned down, skimming the water with his lips and taking a sip.

Raddigan redirected his gaze toward the peak of distant mountain and took a whiff of the clean air. The scent of wildflowers and pine laced its warmth.

Ben approached from behind and admired the low, green hills with him. Golden light of a late, hot autumn afternoon, colored them. They hosted a jagged outcropping and scattered aspens that stood around them as if sprinkled like pepper into a pot.

"This is area right in through here is amazin'," Ben said, his tone low. Together, they gazed a quarter of a mile out, toward a canyon. "This is a hell of a place to keep a few hundred head of cattle." Ben propped his boot on a knee highboulder.

"How long do you think it'll take to get goin' if we was to do it here?" Raddigan asked and squinted off into the distance.

"It'll take time." Ben turned around and walked toward his horse. "Yes sir, this looks to be a darned good place to settle down."

A stream wound its way around the rocks and disappeared ahead into the land. Dark purple mountains peaked to the heavens. It made him dizzy just looking at them. Game no doubt, inhabited the area—elk and deer. The parcel looked fertile displaying

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breathhtaking scenery.

Rolling a matchstick between his lips, Ben picked up the reins. "I'll just bet we can make a good living here."

"It'd be better than winning a few dollars here and there off a deck of cards, tryin' not to dig into our other money."

"That kind of life gets old quick." Ben sniffed. "It isn't nearly as healthy as runnin' a ranch. I s'pose gamblers get shot a hell of a lot more than ranchers. But for this, I'd like to spend my nest egg."

"This here's God's country, plain and simple," Raddigan murmured as smoke escaped his mouth. "What I like is that the land ain't full of people. This is where I want to stay. I knew it when we first stepped foot on it. And there ain't no better things to spend our money on, in my opinion."

Ben chuckled and climbed up a boulder. He studied the mountains and sat on a rock ledge. Visibly, the view moved him. "I like bein' away from big cities myself."

A tall, straight-standing Texan, with strong shoulders and chiseled features, Ben wore his guns tied down on his strong thighs. He carried himself like a wry, fast-walking man. He stood an inch over six feet tall. Raddigan never asked him personal questions like how old he was, or about his upbringing. He did know, like himself, Ben had a bundle of money hidden away in some bank somewhere, just waitin' to be invested. Raddigan didn't know where Ben's money came from. *Hell, I don't know where all my own money comes from let alone about the origins of Ben's money.* Raddigan's Grandfather died and he hadn't had the chance to ask him. It'd just been there all his life, left to him in a will.

If he was a betting man, he'd say Ben was thirty—his own age—or thereabouts. Something about Ben drew him in a way he'd not experienced with any other man. He seemed to have done a lot of living beyond his years.

A thin layer of dust covered the legs of their pants and brown boots. Raddigan leaned down, whisking it away with a brush of his hand.

A picture of masculinity, Ben stood less than five yards away. He tucked his black broadcloth shirttail under the waistband of his gun belt and trousers while he admired the nearby mountain peaks. He impressed Raddigan in ways he didn't want to think about. *A body can get himself killed for thinkin' what I do about my partner.*

He dropped his cigarette on a rock and crushed it out with the toe of his boot. Raddigan shoved his gun under his waistband a little farther. "I sure as hell hope the Indians stay peaceful if we were to settle here."

"I do too, Rad. Don't worry. I'm keepin' an eye out, and I know you will, too. They don't want to stir up any unrest, surely. Neither do we for that matter. That bartender in the town back yonder told me that they were pretty peaceful in these parts."

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“I sure as hell hope he's right.”

He picked up a rock and tossed it into a stream. “I s'pose we ought to do something,” said Ben.

“Something? As far as what?” *Half the time I can read his thoughts.*

“Winter's comin' and we need to start gettin' ready for it. That is, if we're goin' to settle here. There's food to get in and shelter of some kind to be built.”

“You're right.”

They ambled about the area discussing where would be best to build a cabin and later cooked some food and brewed coffee. The sun went down, and the birds quit chirping. They finished up supper. There was no explaining it, but Raddigan felt at home.

“How long have we been partners, Rad?” Ben asked, after they decided where they wanted to build a cabin.

“Nigh on two years. Hitched up in Tennessee, didn't we?”

“I'm sure as hell glad we agreed on comin' here and doin' this.”

“Me too, seein' this land and all, it does things to the heart.”

“It sure does. Well, I guess we should eat and get some rest. Then we can roll up our sleeves and get to work tomorrow.”

Raddigan and Ben began bedding down among the tall pines, staying hidden near the brush. Owls hooted and a coyote howled. As the fragrant flames of the small fire licked heavenward, Raddigan rustled around readying his pallet on the hard ground while Ben sipped the last of his coffee from a tin mug and peered out where the sun had sunk a couple of hours earlier. Using his saddle for a pillow, he lay down and discussed the long, arduous job that lie ahead, readying the homesteading acreage to make it livable and workable.

“I think a bath with some real soap sounds pretty good.” He laughed.

“Yeah, we'll need a day off now and then. It makes the head clear. Maybe one day a week, go into town, at least.” Ben began readying his pallet.

“Good.” Raddigan raised the cigarette to his lips and took a quick puff before he flicked it into the fire.

A few minutes before Raddigan fell to sleep, he said, “My mind keeps goin' back to my birthplace back there in a shack in the Tennessee hills. It wasn't much, but it was comfortable growin' up in. Know what I mean?”

“I do.”

“I like the Rocky Mountains and this parcel of land as much. I just laid eyes on it this afternoon and now I want to live here. Maybe even die here.”

“My heart is goin' to be here from now on,” said Ben. “What do you suppose we ought to call it?”

“I dunno. Seems to be plenty of trees for shade and fuel.” Raddigan put his hat

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over his face and closed his eyes.

“Seems so.”

He raised his hat and looked down at Ben. “I dunno...we both have the letter H startin' our last names. So how about the Double H Ranch?”

Ben unrolled his blanket, put his saddle at one end and sat down. He began pulling off his boots. “Sounds fine to me. I'll get the brandin' irons made up next week.”

“Well, now that Union Pacific Railroad has arrived over in Cheyenne, I hear this territory is now connected with the east. I think you and I will stand to make a lot of money going into cahoots.”

“I do too. Congratulations, partner.”

“Same to you. Let's get some sleep, then get busy tomorrow. What do you say?”

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CHAPTER TWO

The faint light crept up the eastern horizon and cast a pastel, airy haze over the landscape, making it look softer and less rugged than it looked the previous day. A chill nipped the slight breeze, and dew drenched everything around Ben, including his shirt and hat. Annoying morning birds twittered in the treetops.

His eyes opened. The fog of sleep crept away. He realized he lay parallel to his buddy, close enough that if he reached to his left a little bit, he could touch Raddigan's arm. Pine needles softened the earth beneath his pallet, comforting him. He found the moments proceeding dawn inspiring. Only at that time of day, he thought about things and experienced his deepest emotions, both good and bad. Lately, his need of Ben haunted him and made his loins ache with arousal. It couldn't be explained. The longing was just there a lot of the time, bothering him.

Raddigan looked over, interrupting his thoughts and whispered hoarsely, "You up?"

He raised his head and glanced at his partner who rested on his back and looked up at the brightening sky. He paused evidently pondering his question for a moment and frowned. "I s'pose."

"Time's a-wastin,'" Raddigan said quietly and coughed. "Crap. Where's my boots?" *I need a damned cigarette.*

"They're right there."

"Thanks," he said in his deep, resonant voice. "I sure as hell hope they ain't wet inside."

"Let's get to it, then." With a loud groan, Ben rolled over and got to his feet. "I'd give my last shiny silver dollar for a hot bath and some decent grub."

"We'll get our chance today." He scratched a match, making it flare. He lit a cigarette, and said, "I need coffee. How about you?"

"Hell, yes."

Ben located the old pot, some coffee grounds and set it near the fire. They each drank a cup of the steaming brew, ate some jerky and biscuits. After Raddigan crushed

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his second cigarette out with the toe of his boot, within the hour, they mounted their horses and rode into town for supplies and a day or two of relaxation.

Once there, they planned to grab a bite to eat at Betty Finney's place, play a game of poker, and hire a few hands to ride out and help them construct the cabin. First, they boarded their horses at the blacksmith's shop and rented a hotel room at the Emperor with one bed, not to save money, but to protect one another's back in strange towns from thieves.

"I need a hot bath before I do another thing," Raddigan said. "I stink so bad, I can't stand myself." He knocked dust off the legs of his trousers while they stood outside the hotel's front door, three hours after breaking camp.

"You and me both." Ben crooked a finger. "Follow me. I saw a place we can get a bath." They walked into the fifth establishment down the street and paid a dollar to a tall, pock-faced man who stood behind a glass counter. "Gents, go that way," the man said. His black hair was plastered down with grease and parted down the center of his head. His mustache looked like a pencil thin line over his upper lip and he wore an apron over his generous midsection. "The tubs are in the back room, three doors down. I'll have them filled."

Following the clerk's helper, they carried their saddle bags that held a change of clothes with them and followed the him into a small, brown room that held two claw foot tubs and very little else.

"Bradley, fill their tubs up," he told a scruffy looking man who stood outside the door.

Raddigan's brows rose and fell on his forehead as he commanded, "Make mine medium hot."

"Mine, too."

"We will. I'll get your soap and towels." The clerk walked with them, unlocked a door and motioned for them to enter the adjacent room. "Thanks for the business, boys. You can put your clothes on that clothes rack over there."

"Thank ya kindly." Raddigan lowered his voice. "We'll keep our guns with us."

"Most strangers in town do. Once they get to know most of us, they aren't as nervous."

Later, they found their room and went inside, each man quietly readying for bed. Deep in his thoughts, Raddigan recalled how he'd always had feelings he didn't understand—sexual feelings about other men. Since an early age, he recalled liking to see them naked, though he never acted on the impulse, touching a man in the way he'd touched women, with sex on his mind. Through the day on occasion, he thought about how good it would feel to fuck him.

As they stripped, Raddigan noticed his partner's groin with longing; his cock

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hardened and heat pooled in his balls. *It wouldn't be wrong for one man to jerk the other off. Especially in times of need. It wouldn't hurt a thing would it? Well, it'll give me something to think about.*

* * *

Within thirty minutes, they emerged onto the street bathed, smelling like soap and wearing new, clean clothes. “Now for a shave.”

“It'll feel good to look and smell real purty again,” Raddigan joked, making Ben laugh.

They ambled to the barbershop, gazing in the windows of the wooden buildings as they ambled along. The barber gave them a shave and haircut, then thirty minutes later, they entered Bilbry's Saloon located across from the hotel.

“It's a little early to drink, but what the hell? Since we're movin' up in life, let's enjoy a couple. What do ya say, Ben?” he asked and patted his buddy on the back.

“Sounds good to me.”

With a boot propped on the brass footrest, they downed a shot each of bourbon and began talking about the house they'd build to replace the cabin. Maybe they'd do it the following year—a nice house with columns along the front and it'd have a rolling landscape for the front yard. It didn't hurt to dream and think ahead.

“For the time bein' we could let the hired help sleep in the cabin for the winter. Maybe we could build two or three just like it, after we gained a few more head of cattle.”

“Sounds good,” said Ben. A man approached from behind, making Ben nervous. They turned to see who approached. “You've gotta walk 'for ya crawl.”

“You boys new in town?” asked a toothy, large-bellied businessman who happened by them at the bar. “My name's Gibbons...Rod Gibbons. I have a business two doors down. Welcome to Sheridan.”

They shook hands with him, exchanged a few pleasantries, turned around at the bar and finished a second shot before downing a quick beer. They left the saloon full of rowdy, drunken men and meandered toward the restaurant. Along the way, Raddigan noticed a sign outside a store window which read: Rod Gibbons, Writer for Newspapers...Arranger of Marriages. Bringing Sheridan Gents Fine Brides. A photograph of a buxom woman occupied the corner of the window.

Ben said, “That Rod Gibbons must deal in mail order--”

Raddigan didn't hear the end of Ben's sentence, because men noisily hammered up a clap board sign above them. *Damn it, I didn't hear the last of what he said. I'll ask him about it later.*

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* * *

Nine o'clock that evening, Raddigan glanced at his partner's dark profile in the dingy hotel room that overlooked the main street and took off his guns. Cowboys whooped it up down in a nearby saloon and a firearm shot off somewhere close by.

They continued their discussion about marriage and Raddigan couldn't hide his disdain. "If there's one thing we don't need is two women waitin' at the house for us every evening." He pulled the covers down the double bed. "Two women together under one roof...hell, it'd like lightin' a keg of dynamite."

"I know. The roof 'd blow off for sure," Ben drawled. He pulled off his trousers and underwear and climbed under the sheet and covers with Raddigan in the dingy, dark hotel room. He seemed to be making himself comfortable for the night. The deep gnawing began as it often did when he'd bed down beside his friend.

He felt Ben's even, warm breaths on his back and smelled his lemony scent of shave lotion.

Raddigan said and yawned, "It's been a full day. I'm bone weary."

He could have bought two separate accommodations, he supposed. God knew he had the money. Tonight he skimped on buying two separate rooms on purpose. Not only because thieves would steal their gear, but also because he enjoyed sharing quarters with his buddy. "I know. I'm dog tired, too," agreed Ben as he plumped his pillow and stuffed it under his head. "I love this nice soft bed, but it'd be nice to have a woman about now. All nice and round and....hot."

"I don't know where any good, available women are in these parts," Raddigan said. "Ones that are worth a damn, that is."

"Texas women are behind me and Wyoming's wide open as far as the weaker sex goes," Ben said quietly. "I'm doing good and happy without her. I wouldn't mind someday to find another one, though."

"There aren't that many women here, if you just look around."

"I guess not."

"From the sounds of it, you're lucky to be away from the Texas gal." Raddigan paused. "Well, partner, goodnight."

He yawned big. "Before you drift off, tell me about Sharon."

"You mean Sharon down in Laredo?" asked Raddigan.

"Yes sir, her."

"Well...I dunno. What do you want to know?" he asked, as they lay in the dark looking up into dark ceiling. He looked back on his time with Sharon and the day he left Laredo.

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“Tell me about the time you left her behind.”

“You want to hear that again?”

“Yep, I do.”

Raddigan rolled his eyes, sighed and began his story. “She stood there at the window and gazed out at me. I was ridin' out of Laredo and had the itch to ride on to the next town and then the next, not stoppin' anytime soon.” He brought a fist to his mouth and yawned. “When she raised a hand to pull the white lace curtains aside, I gazed at her beauty, just knowin' I wouldn't see her again. I can still see her.

“Yes sir. She wore this dark beet red, gathered skirt on her curvy build.” He slipped his hand down to his cock and caressed it. “I can remember it like it was yesterday. The top of the dress fit her midsection real nice and tight. A redheaded woman, she held her chin held high even though she worked out of a saloon hall. Men in the bar told me she rode in to Laredo on the stage and had no living folks. I wish you could've seen 'em, Ben. Her big 'ol breasts rose high from her chest. I loved their pink tips. The first time I undressed her, they didn't disappoint me. It excited me to look down her emerald eyes, pull her to my chest, and kiss her on the mouth. Sometimes it was soft, sometimes it got pretty damned hot and rough. I'd slip my tongue deep into needy mouth, knowing our passion would lead us to fuck.

Most men in town would've jumped at the prospects of beddin' her down for a night or two...nothin' permanent, mind you. I guess I was no exception. I didn't think straight in my youth, I guess. Her full lips pouted and parted slightly when she needed me. Softly, she'd call me to her in the shadowy bedroom. I thought my cock would explode when she said those words. She'd bat her thick lashes at me with her eyes full of wonder as we did it. I could tell she liked it. Her blush made her freckles stand out against her ivory skin. I felt her eyes enjoyin' my body a time or two.”

“That's the most I heard you talk at one time, in two years, Rad. But your words are makin' me hard as that wall over there.”

Raddigan had the inexplicable, petrifying urge to turn and run his finger along Ben's lips. He'd seen his cock hard on more than one occasion. He resisted and instead tried to think back to the last time he slept with Sharon, scolding himself. *It isn't right to think of Ben that way.* “I wonder if her skin is still soft as ducks' down.”

“That was all,” he said, though he could say more. Much more.

She'd whimper when I'd scoop her breast in my hand and nibble her rosy nipples. I worked my way down the center of her body, get lost in the valley between her breasts. Her tummy quivered when I drew wet circles around her belly button with my mouth. I'd stop at her bush and lightly bite her swollen lips and take the time to tease her clit. Her pussy was a humid hotbed by then. I dragged my tongue up from the base of her slit, a little inside the crevice and dip into her hole. She raised her hips off the sheet for me,

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spreading her legs wide so my tongue could once again slide into her pussy. I liked to lick her repeatedly even when the bright afternoon sun filtered through the curtains. I fed on all her sensitive spots until tears spilled down her cheeks and she cried out my name. Two maybe three hours would pass as we lay in each other's arms after we did it. My seed would build again. Soon I'd get on my knees and thrust my hard shaft inside her tight hole and pounded her until she came and I shot my juice. When I took my time, we could come two and three times a night. Occasionally she'd do it, come, more than I ever could.

"Damn, I miss what I had with her. Oh, the sex, I mean, that we had. She had a way about her...I don't know..."

Ben seemed addicted to the story. To Raddigan, it was evident it made him horny. Raddigan longed to turn over, grasp and stroke his partner's cock and give him relief.

"Tell me more," said Ben, who was obviously stroking himself behind Raddigan's back.

"She'd put her mouth over the end of my cock and take it deep. I swear I think the head of it would touch the back of her throat. The whole time it'd be leakin' my seed. She loved it, I recall." Raddigan laughed. "I did, too."

"Damn!" Ben cried out. He let out a few moans. The bed shook when he jerked. Raddigan realized that Ben had come. His heart stuttered as he let him regain his composure and return to normal and said, "Yeah, we both need sex now, but I don't suggest gettin' it from around here."

"Aah." He heard his partner shudder.

After a long pause, Raddigan clucked his tongue. "I heard that the woman at the house down the way carries diseases."

"It's prob'ly because she's been with every ranchero and cowboy dude from here to the Rio Grande."

"You're right. We sure as hell don't want her."

"I think I'll wander over and talk to a man named Gibbon's tomorrow," said Ben.

"Who's Gibbons?"

"Rod Gibbons. I read a sign outside the hotel. He arranges for mail order brides to come to Wyomin' right here to this town, prime women who're willin' to marry men. Good lookers from back east it said. That is, for a price."

"That'll cost plenty, don't think it won't."

"Probably so." Ben sniffed and yawned. "We can afford it."

"It's something to look into." Raddigan thought the idea over carefully while he fluffed his pillow and stuffed it under his head. "Marry a woman sight unseen? I dunno about that. You might get the short end of the stick, too."

"Don't say no yet, because have you noticed that there are ten men to one woman

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around these parts? They're scared to come out because of all the bloodlettin’”

“Let’s get through the winter first. Next year we’ll consider it again. We need to make some money before we can order us each a bride.”

“I figured it'd be that way.” He frowned, thinking. “We'd have to build two houses. There'd be serious trouble. Have you ever seen a cat fight?” asked Ben.

“I'll think up something to get us by.”

“I sure as hell hope so. I don't think I can make it through the winter without a piece of ass,” he grumbled, a minute before he fell to sleep. “Let's think on this.”

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CHAPTER THREE

Raddigan looked on as Ben strode to the center of the dirty saloon. Ben promised five wranglers a permanent job if they wanted it. "I'll give you boys some work next year. We're gonna begin raisin', breedin' and sellin' cattle on the Double H."

Raddigan swallowed, put down his shot glass on the bar and added, "If you men can help now, then come springtime, you'll be among the first called to work."

A few of the men nodded and agreed to go. They followed Raddigan and Ben outside, hopped on the back of a waiting wagon or a horse and rode with them to the Double H land, ready to work.

Ben explained what the construction plans included. To start, a small, two-room cabin among the pines should go up because it would provide shelter through the winter for Raddigan and Ben.

Within the next couple of days, the hired hands met the incoming wagons that delivered building supplies they needed to proceed. They lifted large saws and rope out of the back of a wagon. Chattering away about gossip in town, they cut down pine trees and piled the logs near the site. Shoulder to shoulder in the early autumn sun, Raddigan and Ben worked with the hired hands. One of the hourly workers cooked meals and everyone slept on the hard ground. For Raddigan, the days were hot and the nights were cool. The men were friendly and worked hard. During this time his caring for Ben stayed strong.

Upon the completion of the cabin, a worker hammered the final nail into the cabin's roof, while another finished its outer walls. *It ain't fancy, but it'll work*, Raddigan thought. They built and hung a door. Work on the corral and smokehouse commenced immediately. Another two men built a hearth and pantry inside the cabin. Once it had been built, they began construction on the barn. Raddigan happily took care of the few head of cattle and Ben acted as boss.

They cut down more trees and used the wood to build shelter for the horses. On the fifth day, Ben and the cook rode into town to buy foodstuff. Still using the money they'd won gambling, he bought salt, lard, cured meat, apples and potatoes to last them

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through the winter. Having to cook over a campfire ended when men brought them a used stove on the back of a wagon. They bought a feather bed and an armload of quilts from a group of churchwomen in town who sewed.

The trees took on coats of color, and leaves brightened the ground the day they completed construction. Raddigan stood out along a fencerow with his partner. The time arrived to quit the outdoor work. Winter blew in with its ice, cold wind and snow.

He drew in stinging smoke from his cigarette, glanced Ben's way, and wondered how good it would feel to pull him close and kiss him full on the lips. *Does Ben have any idea about how I feel?*

He gazed at him in the eyes, took another drag and looked down. *Probably not.* It wasn't an unusual experience for him to feel manlove for Ben, because on occasion, he felt sexual attraction to him. He hoped to hell Ben couldn't guess his deepest thoughts regarding his attraction. He didn't want to scare him off. Angry citizens pulled men who loved men out of their homes, strung them up and hanged them. He'd heard tell of enraged men who dragged homo men by horses until dead over rocky terrain. Some folks even thought men who fornicated with men were mentally feeble.

In a reflective mood he said, "When we get this goin', want to begin buildin' onto the house when it gets warm, maybe next year? And more to it?"

Ben looked over and cast him a white, perfect smile that made his knees turn rubbery. "Sounds good," he said. "I've always wanted a white house with a fence runnin' down the front property line. I can see us havin' several horses runnin' around in the corrals. We could start...sure...on a nice house once the weather's warmer."

"What about a wife to go with it all? Ever thought about that?" Raddigan asked.

"We'll talk about it sometime soon."

Soon after they built the cabin, they busied themselves by chopping enough wood to burn as fuel through the month of December and January. The first of December, they mounted a horse, toured the property and located a few cattle abandoned by other drives. They brought the animals back and put the Double H brand on them.

Carpenters took the better part of a week to build a barn. Raddigan liked their property more with each completed task. They'd finished putting the rails up on two corrals and the roof on the smokehouse when the first flurries of winter started falling. When the last of the hired help readied to depart for the winter, Ben told them goodbye and said, "Come back early next spring, and we may have some more work for you."

"That's all right," the shortest, oldest workman said. "I'll work for food if need be."

"It's okay." Ben raised his hat and scratched his head with his other hand. "We'll pay cash."

The second man said, "I'll stop in after the thaw and see how you gents are doin'."

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“See you boy's after the January thaw then,” said Ben. He waved at the departing cowboys and pulled up the collar to his coat to keep the chill off his neck. “Don’t worry, we’ll pay good wages.”

“At least we know we can live off a deck of cards ‘til we get started,” joked Raddigan as he gathered logs for the night's fire. “Long as our luck lasts.”

Ben nodded, grinning. He looked out at the rest of the men who mounted their horses and rode toward town. He remembered their nest eggs in separate banks, saved from high stakes games of chance over the past few years. The money came in handy. Ben and he knew when to walk away from the gaming table and it was paying off.

A few small flakes flecked Raddigan’s calf-length, brown coat. He took it off, draped it on a stump and grabbed an axe handle. “Instead of standin' around jawin' all day, guess I’d better get busy.” He walked toward a tree. “That was nice of that older fellow sayin' he'd work for food to start. I want to hire him first.”

“You betcha we will.”

Raddigan stopped, nodded, dropped the cigarette into the dirt and smashed it out with the toe of his boot, before he raised the axe and took a swing.

Ben walked toward the barn. “Guess I’d better get busy, too.”

The harsh winter the workers spoke of neared and fortunately hadn't started early that year, much to Raddigan’s relief. On clear, sunny days, they rode into town and picked up odds and ends in food and supplies. They returned to work on the barn and made the cabin more livable, larger and warmer, waiting for the notorious snows to make their appearance and blanket everything in white shit.

A cold December evolved into the expected, wintry January with heavy snow and wind that kept them inside the cabin. Raddigan endured tense moments when they undressed for a bath or bed. It became difficult to spend cold nights under the blankets, naked with his partner, lying a foot away. Regardless of the severity of the weather, they managed to feed and water the horses and cattle in the new barn, though long foot trips into the forest or rides to town were too dangerous to attempt.

They contented themselves to stay in the cabin and pass the idle time by playing five-card stud at the table. January fifth, four days after a winter storm passed through dumping a couple of feet of snow on the area, the wind ebbed. Raddigan suffered from cabin fever, and politely took turns with Ben cooking and cleaning up.

And his desire for Ben was growing stronger. *What’s wrong with me? I love women. They are soft and enticing. Maybe our seclusion messes me up, but lately it’s a constant struggle to keep my hands off him.*

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CHAPTER FOUR

One night, late in January a hot, aromatic fire popped and crackled in the fireplace while a cold, snowy wind whistled among the pines outside. Ben peered outside the open door at the mesmerizing storm before he stepped out a few feet in the frigid air. The flakes fell at a fast clip and piled up fence post high in less an hour. In short order, he peed and shivering he hurried back inside and closed the weather out. "It'll be days before the trail to town'll melt off."

"Yeah." Ben sharpened his knife some more and added, "They said it could get pretty damned bad."

Unlike the icy precipitation, their relationship heated like the tropics in the cramped quarters. Desire twisted within as he watched Raddigan cross the room, in the cozy, private confines, time and time again, in various stages of dress. He moved gracefully, reminding him of a sleek mountain cat.

The two-room, rustic cabin held a feather bed in one of the rooms. It was covered with quilts, a table, hearth, two chairs and plenty of food and drink. The cupboards contained dishes, food and silverware. The mantle held a tin, matches and a picture card.

"How about a drink to warm you up?" Ben asked in a low tone after they ate a filling supper of chicken and potatoes.

Raddigan took the cigarette away from his lip, blew out smoke and said, "Thanks, don't mind if I do."

"When I bought the bottle, I thought it'd come in handy some wintry night."

Raddigan grinned. "This is definitely the right time."

He opened a cupboard and brought out a brown, corked bottle that he bought in Laredo one day and had kept with him ever since then. It would be a good night to have a deep conversation. He located two glasses and placed them side by side on the tabletop.

Raddigan's eyes followed his movements.

"There's not anything better to do, so we may as well have a snort or maybe even two."

"Okay," said Raddigan. "Sounds good."

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Ben uncorked and tilted the long-necked brown bottle, pouring an inch of the amber liquid into one glass and handed it to Raddigan. "There you go." He poured himself one, twirled the glass under his nose and smelled the liquor's bracing aroma. He crossed the room and joined Raddigan hearthside.

For a while, they gazed into the fire and spoke of cattle, the inclement weather and hiring new men the coming spring. The conversation veered toward sex as it so often did in recent months.

"I've told you all about my love from Laredo," Ben said. Tell me again about Margaret...or Maggie. You know, the brunette from Nashville. What was she like?" He raised the glass to his lips and sipped the stinging liquid. "You've never talked about her much."

"Let's go sit over here." He pointed toward the chairs. "This damned thing's gettin' too hot," he said, referring to the fireplace. "B'sides, the chair would help my achin' back."

Sad that his old wound still bothered him, Ben rose and joined him across the small room.

They took a seat across from each other. Raddigan's chuckle seemed a little nervous.

His gaze returned and he blinked. "Well, is this okay?"

"It's fine."

Ben sat on one end, picked up a partially carved stick and sharpened knife. He took a quick sip and whittled while Raddigan took a seat on the other end of the table and lit a cigarette. He winced with what looked like pain. "Mmm."

"Are you okay?" Ben looked up from his stick, concerned.

"Aw, it's nothing."

"Your back...is it giving you fits again?"

"Don't worry about it. It comes and goes. It's caused by that bullet I took last year. I guess it tore up somethin' back there."

"Oh, it did, huh?"

"Yep. I told my cousin several times to make sure his guns weren't loaded, especially around his kids."

"Well, you were lucky. The kid didn't mean to do it."

"I know."

Raddigan took a small, thoughtful sip, effectively changing the subject. "Maggie's married now, I think. If she's the one you were askin' about," he drawled and puffed on his cigarette.

"Oh, really?"

After blowing out a stream of blue smoke, he said, "I guess you never know what

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to believe. There's not much to tell.”

“What was it like, you know, bein' with her, if you don't mind me askin' and bein' a little too nosey?” He cock tightened.

“Do you mean in bed?” A dark, sexy grin curved his lip. He took another deep drag and looked at him with intense blue eyes.

“Yep.” Ben nodded once.

“Well, if you want to know...” He crushed out his cigarette, exhaled the last of the smoke and took a long sip of whiskey. “...I'll tell you.”

“It's not my place to ask.” Ben scratched his nose with the sleeve of his blue shirt. “It gets a might lonely way out here in the middle of God's country and I thought...well...” A thoughtful pause followed. “Forget that I asked.”

A second hesitation followed, and he said, “Maggie was a virgin when we met and still was untouched when I rode out of town. I was twenty-one at the time. I didn't want no fight with her ma and pa. They hated my guts.”

Ben nodded and his mouth dropped open. “What'd she look like?” He picked up a match stick, put it between his lips and rolled it, listening.

“There's no other words to describe her, now that I look back, except beautiful.” He got up, crossed the dirt floor and stopped at the hearth. He picked up a tin box, opened the lid and drew out a cabinet card picture. He brought it back to the table and showed it to Ben. “Here she is.”

Ben took the picture and nodded. “Nice.”

“This picture here doesn't show her face real clear, but her eyes, oh God, they shined like sapphires in the sunshine. I've kept this likeness of her with me all these years. Her lips curved soft and full, like she was about to kiss you.” He held his hands at his chest. “She had beautiful, large breasts that could make a man hot in bed. I didn't see her naked or nothin,' but still I cared about her.”

“Why the hell didn't you marry her?”

“I guess I had the same problem you had at one time...wanderlust, I think they call it.” A few seconds passed. “What I wouldn't give for a good woman right now.”

“Me too.”

He straightened and winced again. “This damned back. I turned the wrong way or something.” He took the picture back to the tin and put the top in it.

Ben removed the match stick from his lips and said, “You need a rub down like a doctor gives.”

“You think so?” He nodded as though he liked the idea. “It sounds good.”

He imagined Ben's hands rubbing the bulge at the apex of his thighs, fingering his balls. He visualized and experienced the resulting arousal he'd experience. Fluttering sensations moved through him and he felt his balls tightening.

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Raddigan cleared his throat. "Sure."

He admired Raddigan's dark head of hair, high cheekbones and aristocratic line of his jaw and nose. He liked his taut ass and hard chest and longed to run his hands over his body. *What would it be like to lean forward and brush his lips with his own?*

"This damned back aches like hell. I picked up a pile of logs wrong or something. It hurts in the upper part and a little in my lower back, right here," he said and pointed to an area near his kidneys.

The table seemed too small and uncomfortable to lie down on. "Maybe I should do it on the bed?" He tossed the matchstick into the kindling wood near the hearth.

"That sounds good."

Ben carried the lamp to the bedside table and put it on the dark stained wood top while Raddigan stood beside it. It seemed evident that his back pained him more than a little. Wanting to give him relief, Ben said, "Here, let me get you out of this."

Vowing to take good care of him, he unbuttoned Raddigan's shirt and undershirt and cast them aside. His eyes momentarily stayed on his chest and a few sprigs of dark chest hair on his breast bone area. "And these." He took his trousers and underwear down his strong hair-dappled legs. He stood before Ben nude, his cock semi-hard. "Lay down," he said, trying to not gaze upon his state. His thickened member rose high to under his navel and beckoned Ben in an obscene way.

It seemed Raddigan noticed his embarrassment. "Don't pay any attention to my arousal. It gets hard at the slightest mention of something sexual. Actually, anything can make it do this. A touch even. Maybe sometimes even the wind causes it. It gets hard especially because we're way out here all winter with no relief in sight."

Ben jerked his gaze off his crotch, wondering if Raddigan considered a back rub a sexual action. "I'm not paying attention. Mine gets that way. In fact, it's hard now, too."

Raddigan slowly got down onto his front side and let out achy moan after his head sunk in the pillow.

Ben saw his partner's strong back and buttocks and felt the hot, swelling in his groin. His own muscles weakened. "Just relax," he said, not knowing what he'd do next. He needed to apply heat to his back. "Just a second." He looked around cabin, developing a plan to ease his pain. The liquor bottle stood on the table, washed dishes occupied the cupboard and two shirts hung on a wooden peg.

Tense, he warmed some towels on the hearth while he undressed. Soon, holding the hot towels, he climbed onto the bed. His knees depressed the feather mattress beside Raddigan. He put the warm towels on his back. "Is this where it hurts?"

"Yeah." Raddigan's voice was quiet. "Rub it there now. Ahh yes."

He closed his eyes for a moment so he could better manage his lust. "Okay." *Body and needs, don't betray me now.* "I'll take care of ya."

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Below him, he noticed that Raddigan's head turned aside. Ben put his hands on his back and began stroking his back, wishing it were another, more intimate part of his body that his hands manipulated.

“Oh yeah.”

Raddigan's body felt overwhelmingly good under his massaging, roving hands.

“If you want straddle my butt and rub it that way. It may be more comfortable for you.”

Ben's heartbeat quickened. “Okay.” Ignoring his own raging arousal, he mounted him, leaned forward and massaged his muscular back over and under the warm towels, as the tip of own erection brushed Raddigan's ass and lower back. “Is this better?”

Raddigan's voice boomed through the quiet cabin. “Oh God, yes.”

His view of the world narrowed to Raddigan's back. The whole while, with each push and movement of his hands, the end of his cock tapped the cleft of Raddigan's butt. The muscles flexed under his kneading hands. His own emotions scared him. He found himself thinking that Raddigan's ass would make a tight pussy that tantalized him with promise of endless erotic pleasure.

Back in Tennessee, he'd be considered more than a lost sheep or a backslider, as his mama called them. Or worse, they'd say he was a nutcase. His need of Raddigan stunned him. Desire tightened and twisted in his traitorous body. He didn't know about that, but he did know that his erection needed satisfaction soon. Ten minutes passed when Ben realized that Raddigan had fallen asleep. His breathing seemed shallow, yet even.

He looked down at the sticky pre-cum that had leaked from himself onto his partner's buttocks. *Thank God he's sleeping.* He slowed the rhythm, inwardly cursing his weakness.

Panting and feeling sharp pangs of guilt, he stilled, took his hands off Raddigan's skin and fell to one side. He removed the towels from his back and tossed them onto a chair. He raised the quilts and covered his partner and himself. With trouble, he forced himself to cool down and stay away from Raddigan as far as humanly possible on the bed.

Minutes ticked by. He squeezed his eyes shut, willing himself to fall into some semblance of a dreamless state where he couldn't feel or need. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't escape his lust that hazed his mind. The only alternative relief would be to jack off, but he didn't want to do that—he wanted Raddigan's hands and body to bring him relief.

How does Raddigan feel about me sexually? Would taking him as a lover ruin our business partnership? Something had to be said or done to alleviate the building problem.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Ben read an old newspaper from town while Raddigan took a seat at the table and tried his hand at whittling. For many long minutes, he forced his gaze down on the printed page, never once letting his eyes stray to the table.

Later they stripped naked, standing on opposite sides of the quilt-covered feather bed. Ben turned the wicks down on the oil lamps and they climbed into the softness and settled under the covers, together, but apart. Ben turned his back to Raddigan, preparing to sleep. *What's wrong with me? I like women, not men. I sure as hell have bedded enough women to know.*

Ben soon succumbed to a fitful sleep but awoke in the middle of the night. His body dampened with perspiration and his heart thumped hard in his chest. He climbed out of bed, lit the oil lamp and went into the next room and added some logs to the fire. Try as he might to fight it, Raddigan's nearness aroused him.

When he returned, he glimpsed his partner for a second and lay down beside him. Raddigan had turned sometime in the night. Now he slept on his back. He extended a long, strong and inviting leg into Ben's side. The covers barely hid his midsection. It would be so easy to reach over and yank the quilt off him. Ben's gaze lazed over him. He admired his musculature, appreciating his body as though it were a work of art.

Chastising himself, remembering he had to go pee, he turned, hurried outside and relieved himself into the snow near the door. An image of Raddigan blazed in the back of his mind the entire time. The air caused goose bumps to form on his skin. He came back inside, shut the door to close out the night, and returned to bed.

Ben fought an overpowering urge to touch Raddigan in a sexual way, effectively losing the war raging within. Perspiration beaded on his forehead. Trembling, he sat down on the edge of the bed and turned Raddigan's way. He reached over and lightly brushed his partner's balls with the back of his hand and waited to see if the touch had awakened him. He took his hand away and heard his own heart hammering. Mesmerized, his eyes slipped down the line of small hairs that trailed from his belly button to his pubic area and lightly slipped the sheet completely away.

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The fabric that strategically hid his cock lay between them. Once Raddigan's lower abdomen was bared, he ran a finger up and down the length of his sleeping member, hoping Raddigan wouldn't stir and wake up. Incredible sensations shot through Ben's nervous system and spread to all of his extremities as he continued carrying out the unthinkable evil, but arousing act. It was sudden and not to mention immoral. His buddy slept and he continued. Enjoying the velvety texture, he lightly rested his palm on his genitals and let his fingers skim over his cock. *I'd love to take it into my mouth.* He pressed and plied it, moving the foreskin up and down a few times, forgetting the implications and losing himself in his own pleasure.

Raddigan's eyes opened.

I'm fuckin' dead. Ben quickly removed his hand. Fearing what he'd say or do, he pretended he merely resituated on the bed to get a better sleeping position. "Sorry. I was reaching for the cov—"

"Ben," Raddigan said in a resonant, unsurprised tone that shocked him to his core.

Ben gazed his way, swamped with guilt and needy. *Does he know that I just fondled his cock?* Ben cringed, waiting to hear and feel Raddigan's wrath.

Raddigan spoke softly and extended a hand. "I like you doing that. Can you do it more?"

Ben gasped. "I don't know what got into me." A long pause transpired. "Are you sure?" Ben asked with caution. "I mean, I don't want to—"

"More than anything, I want it." He settled back into the pillows. "Take it in your hand if you want. Hell, it feels good." His smile widened, as he looked down his body, showing Ben his approval. He eyed Ben, his gaze intense. A sexy curve of his lips gave away his arousal. "Do it more...please."

"Okay." Using his fingers, Ben brushed the length of his shaft and massaged his tight scrotum. Occasionally, he squeezed the end, making sure Raddigan still accepted his advances. He cupped his heavy balls and found himself wanting to kiss him.

"I haven't touched a man this way...ever, so don't get that impression."

"Me either. I ain't ahhh, queer but this..." he replied in an endearing voice. "I'm enjoyin' it, partner. Continue doin' it, if you want."

Their unexpected intimacy flooded him with doting, carnal feelings. Ben stroked his hard dick in earnest and Raddigan in turn threaded his fingers through his hair, in a way urging him on. He breathed quietly, remembering the painfully needy dreams he'd had of their coupling and now it was like a dream come true. It was happening. The sensation seemed more intense in reality than it occurred in dreams.

He applied a bit of pressure to Ben's head and guided it down, so that his mouth hovered over the cock's head. Just before his mouth touched and tasted it, Raddigan murmured, "It's okay. Really. We need to get through the winter, that's all this is."

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Nothing more.”

“I still like women,” Ben rasped and lifted Raddigan's heavy balls in his hand and drew the tip of his tongue over the leaking slit.

Raddigan winced and said hoarsely, “Of course you do. So do I. But for right now I'm needin' this. I want to do it to you, too. What you're doing now is feelin' real good.”

“In case you didn't notice, I've wanted you this way for a long time,” he said, scooting down into a better position.

There wasn't that much room on the bed to get in different positions, because they were big men, but Ben was determined to make the best of it. Raddigan's member rose high now, inviting his lips to suckle it in earnest. Ben grasped his sex at the base, causing what seemed an exhalation of pleasure to leave Raddigan's lips.

“You attracted me since that first day in Tennessee,” Raddigan murmured as Ben's other hand smoothed over his thigh.

“I know one thing...”

“What's that?”

“It's been a might tough for me too, keepin' my hands off you...this winter especially...us being closed in this cabin and all horny as hell. I don't fuck men either, but you and only you. I guess because you do things to me.”

“Mmm,” said Raddigan.

A thoughtful pause followed.

“They say men who feel this way are feeble-minded.”

“Don't believe none of it. It's all crap.”

“I don't,” stated Ben.

“Good.”

He'd forgotten what he was talking about when lust took over his body and mind. His mouth found its way to each of Raddigan's tightly budded nipples, and began to suckle them. His tongue gently flicked the rosy, hard buds among the hairs of his breasts. He licked a path down the center Raddigan's body with the intention of driving him insane with desire. Ben opened his mouth, tightened his lips around the head of his cock and let the thick length slide back toward his throat. The resulting sensation felt intense and he thought Raddigan probably enjoyed it too. In fact, he noisily exhaled and said, “Oh, yeah.”

Ben backed off it, nipped and licked it up and down, slowly at first. He pulled the foreskin back and flicked his tongue wildly over the exposed end before taking it deeply into his throat again. Raddigan's leg and abdomen muscles tightened, relaxing in unison with Ben's movements. The passion increased and focusing on reality blurred. He tongued the veined underside, and pulled the shaft down.

After muttering a few undecipherable words, Raddigan moaned and said, “Don't

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stop.”

Another groan left his lips. “I don't intend to.”

His body jerked as Ben's head bobbed in his lap, stroking him hard and fast with his mouth. Raddigan held his head and jutted his loins out for his easy access. He continued mouth fucking him, burying his face into his musk-scented bush while Raddigan fisted his hair on each side of his head. His mouth stretched as his cock expanded. Ben held onto his partner's thighs and continued until salty juice shot down his throat.

Ben came up on his body, their faces met and they hugged. “You taste good.”

“I want to do this to you.”

Ben liked the feeling of his body pressed against his. He wrapped his legs around his, pressed his cock against Raddigan's, and slowly thrust and released his sex against his. Their lips brushed and met. Ben let his hands slide back and massaged his granite ass while indulging in a long, awkward kiss with him. “I can come several times over the course of a night.”

“I can, too.”

Fucking a man evolved an intriguing, new experience for Ben; one he wouldn't soon forget. Raddigan obliged his kisses with deep-throated kisses of his own. He slid his tongue into Ben's mouth and he eagerly accepted it. He sucked and pressed into him; his thrusts moved more wildly than before. Raddigan pulled him under him. Ben realized his breathing rate quickened and he moaned into his partner's mouth.

“This really gets me goin' partner,” Ben murmured against his lips, now taking the dominating role.

“Fuck me all you want and how you want. Do it like I'm a saloon hall bitch. Do me in the ass.” Ben began to feel like his girlfriend. “Mm.”

“You want it again? What would you do if I really did fuck that tight ass pussy of yours?” His voice trembled a little. He slid his hand between them and wrapped his fingers around both of their cocks, squeezing. Together, they climaxed, enjoying the after effects. A few enraptured, satisfied minutes passed.

Raddigan said in an exhausted tone, “I've never felt better in my life.”

During a break in their lovemaking later in the night, Raddigan asked, “Now, how do you feel about havin' a woman?”

“After this?”

“Yeah.”

“I don't know.”

“There's no rush. Let's think about that. You've got all I need right now.”

They held one another in their arms until sleep took them.

“I still wouldn't mind havin' a woman,” said Raddigan a little before dawn. “Don't

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get me wrong. I still want you. But a woman provides other needs, too.”

“I feel the same way. No one needs to know about this—you and I.”

“I agree.”

* * *

Days evolved into weeks and they continued to enjoy and become aroused by each other's bodies in the privacy of their cabin every night. Thinking about their relationship, one day Ben ambled out to the fence and admired the land he shared with his lover.

The flat part of the parcel lay bare except for a few of last autumn's stubborn, stray weeds that still blew in the wind. All winter, the ground had been covered with snow and ice, but suddenly the hope of a spring thaw cheered Raddigan up. He looked hopefully toward a patch of ground near the barn door and out toward the pasture. Still, a thin layer of snow survived in shadowy areas under pines scattered here and there, hidden from the warming March sunshine. Raddigan likened Ben and himself to the weeds; they survived the lonely winter by doing what they had to do, enjoying it along the way.

On another day, Raddigan chopped wood twenty strides behind the cabin while his partner fed the cattle. White vaporous puffs rose from his lips as he worked. They usually spoke very little outside the cabin. Occasionally he let his gaze lift from the axe after it had split a log and let them slide toward the barn where Ben carried a hundred pound bag to the field where a few head of cattle huddled.

That moment he thought about how he liked being filled with Ben's dick, of being fucked by him, of being able to satisfy him in that way. Just like Ben, he also yearned to bed a woman down, but he didn't want to lose Ben in the process. It was time for them to sit and discuss the plan of bringing mail order brides to the ranch, into their lives...and bed.

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CHAPTER SIX

A few weeks after the freezing winter weather ended, the trees were budding and people shed their heavy coats and clothes Nellie Anne Brigham took an arranged train trip west to Sheridan. *Finally*, she thought as the train chugged past the city limits, *I've arrived*. She took the conductor's hand and stepped from the train onto the platform at the Sheridan Depot.

The air stank of coal smoke. Steam hissed from the train. It had been a difficult and nearly impossible trip. One more minute of riding aboard the uncomfortable, dirty train would certainly do her in. Dust covered her new, black dress and her feet ached from the black lace-up shoes that she had worn day and night for a week. She couldn't really afford to buy the new clothes in the first place and now they were covered with slate colored dust. The corset constricted her breathing and it would feel so wonderful to get it off her body.

"Wonderful...just wonderful," she said with disdain. Her raven hair needed brushed out and washed. When freed from a bun at her nape, its shiny length reached the middle of her back. She even tasted the horrible dark gray ash and needed to brush her teeth. *In all my twenty-five years, I've never experienced anything so horrible. Well, except for one incident that I don't want to think about now.*

The trip to Sheridan wasn't all bad; there were highlights. It provided a means for her to escape harm. Out of Culley Wheelin's bloodthirsty need for revenge, the criminal from Boston ached to find, rape and kill her. He was an animal, but then again, that would give animals a bad name. *I hope he won't find me here.*

Unfortunately, according to past acquaintances, his sick need for revenge spurred him to do despicable acts. Her dead father owed him a large gambling debt. *I don't owe him a cent. Couldn't he see that unfortunate even occurred long ago? Shouldn't he let bygones be bygones? Her father lost all the Brigham wealth over a few lowly hands of poker and didn't have the money to pay everyone. Of course there was the little matter of her shooting Culley.*

Culley tried to kill her once before. Fortunately, she shot him in the foot upon

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escape out a window, enraging him more. A marm from downtown Boston told her he now limped because of it. Nellie felt deep in her soul it was her bullet that maimed him. Thank goodness she carried her father's old gun in her handbag and she knew how to use it. Culley would regret the day he showed back up in her life, because she had made up her mind to shoot to kill next time.

Culley struck her as the type of man to root for information and ride to Wyoming territory hell bent to do away with her. If only she could change the color of her hair. As long as he was alive she feared him. Her future husband, Hal Benton would surely understand and protect her.

It occurred to her a time or two that she may not like her future groom, but it was a chance she had to take, considering it was a life and death situation regarding Culley.

She couldn't think about Culley now. Other, more pressing problems plagued her. Finding food, shelter and whatnot was the main, current hassle.

No one showed for her arrival, much to her chagrin. Another major problem had occurred. With a groan, she threw up her hands. "Dear Lord. What am I to do now?" Her brow ruffled and concern gripped her. She looked up and down the length of the train and toward the station hoping for a miracle. Her gut wrenched with negative feelings. She stepped down, hoping to see Mr. Gibbons with Hal Benton, rushing to her side apologizing, because something or someone kept him away.

The train whistle screeched and she breathed the acrid coal smoke. All around her people greeted their loved ones. They chatted and seemed happy, making her feel abandoned and forgotten. Departing passengers boarded. The train soon slowly chugged away and gained speed. The caboose shrunk to a speck in the distance.

Several minutes passed and still no one arrived to meet her. Shaken by her abandonment, she swallowed hard and fought stinging tears. As each second ticked by, it became more and more evident that her future husband and Mr. Gibbons weren't coming, even though the letter from Mr. Gibbons reassured her they would be there. "Oh dear, dear no," she muttered. *Who could she ask for help?* If she had to go stay with Aunt Patricia she'd literally die. She'd rather wed a stranger than...she didn't want to think of it. *I must be a very, very stupid person for coming here.*

Holding the parasol high with one hand, holding a bag handle with the other, she bit her lip and approached a large woman who wore an old-fashioned dark bonnet and asked, "I'm sorry to bother you, but have you seen two gentlemen who were looking for someone?"

"No, I'm sorry I haven't seen anyone like that here."

She frowned and said, "Thank you." Panic constricted in her throat; desperation beat in her chest. She walked past a barrel and a pile of trunks. Three women peered her way and whispered out the sides of their mouths.

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She would scream, if it would help. *What will I do when I run out of money? I'm in big trouble.*

Another idea formed. Nellie crossed to the ticket counter asked a gentleman, "Excuse me, but do you know a Mr. Gibbons? He's supposed to be here to meet me."

"I'm sorry, Ma'am. I do not."

"This man, this Rod Gibbons arranged my marriage. Do you know him?" she asked frowning.

"No Ma'am. I'm sorry I don't. But I'm new here, too. I don't know very many people myself."

"What am I going to do?" Tears stung her eyes. *I must not panic, not just yet. I must be brave. There are women of the west who are strong ladies. I must be one also. Things have a way of working themselves out.* She approached and questioned another person.

"I don't know them, Ma'am," said the young man who picked up two suitcases and carried them toward a carriage for an elderly gentleman who followed.

Maybe her only living relatives, her Cousin Sarah and Aunt Patricia had been correct, that becoming a mail order bride to a total stranger was not a smart idea. *I had no choice. I had to get away and fast.* "Oh dear." She went back to retrieve her luggage and regained her composure. It was not good to let strangers see her angst. She told the ticket agent as she left, "If Mr. Gibbons comes here looking for me, tell him that I went to get a room at a hotel."

"Yes, ma'am." His head and eyes lowered to his paperwork, effectively shutting her out.

Thunderstruck, she lugged the heavy baggage to the Emperor's Hotel, up the steps as several male eyes turned her way. "Let me get that for you," said an elderly cowboy who wore a black suit and tie. He dressed like many of the western men on the train.

"Thank you so much."

He carried the bags to the front desk where she checked in. The stay would take a good part of the last ten dollars she had to her name.

Many men walked about fully armed, she noticed later when she went downstairs to supper. Some looked like desperadoes wearing their big hats, buckskin shirts and chaps. Many wore belts that held bullets and knives. Boston folks would think they were uncivilized, but she knew a few well-dressed men who were also uncivilized and she didn't want any part of them. That was one of the reasons she went west to get away from the stuffy ways of the east. Cowboys, the good ones, like the ones she read about, intrigued her.

Tomorrow I'll look up the man who arranged my wedding. A Mr. Gibbons. After all, I paid him seventy-five dollars. I don't like being abandoned in a strange town at all.

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As she ate supper, she decided that after getting a night's rest she would look him up the next day in hopes that she'd find the right future groom.

* * *

The next morning, after she washed, downstairs and entered the street, she asked the first cowboy she came to on the street, "Do you know where Rod Gibbon's business is located?"

The dark, tall cowboy, dressed in buckskin, chaps and large hat looked down at her with his smoldering blue pools, causing her heart to skip a beat. "Yes?"

She brought her emotions under some semblance of control when she had his full attention, and asked, "Excuse me, I didn't mean to interrupt you."

The cowboy nodded and removed his hat showing his thick black mane. He held it at his midsection in respect. "Yes ma'am," he said in a calming tone. "It's quiet all right."

"I wonder...could you direct me to where a Mr. Rod Gibbons business is located? You see, I'm new in town and—"

He interrupted her mid-sentence and said, "No problem. My partner and I will escort you there, ma'am." He made a motion to another handsome, long legged and rugged cowboy who stood less than five feet away. He seemed to be admiring her profile, unless she was mistaken. She had no time for frivolous thoughts.

"Thank you very much..."

He introduced his friend and himself. "Ben Haggerty is my name. And this is my partner, Raddigan Holloway." She diverted her attention to the second tall, strong cowboy who accompanied Ben and smiled as an engaging expression she could muster.

"We own the future cattle ranch outside of town, the Double H. And your name is..." Ben started. His proud, sparkling blue gaze lowered to the top button at her throat then rose, sending delightful sensations spiraling through her system.

Feeling heat rising in her cheeks, she cast her line of vision across the street. *Now is no time to be gazing at a cowboy either, like a misguided schoolgirl.* She cleared her throat and said, "Nell Anne Brigham, sir." She extended one hand and grasped her parasol a bit more tightly with the other. Afterward, experiencing a moment of shyness, she dropped her gaze downward to the toe of her shoe that peeked out from under the hem of her gray gathered skirt. *Then again, considering the stupendous bind I'm in, it wouldn't hurt to be friendly.* "My friends call me Nellie." Her voice lowered; she didn't mean to sound sad, but knew she came across that way. "I don't have any of those here...friends." Ben's eyes reflected what appeared to be concern.

"Why not?" he asked, taking her arm. Raddigan dropped his cigarette onto the

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road while exhaling smoke and joined them as they strolled up the road.

"I came out here at Mr. Gibbon's insistence. He said a man living here in town needed a wife. Don't ask me why, but I traveled here."

"You like the call of western adventure, ma'am?"

"Actually, I don't know why I consented. I paid him good money to do this."

Raddigan's spoke up. "We thought about contacting Mr. Gibbons in the near future."

"Oh really?" she asked and stepped over a mud puddle. "You gentlemen were wanting a wife?"

They grinned her way, making her wonder why such handsome men didn't have wives already. Then again women were few and far between in Sheridan, she'd heard. One in every five or six faces she saw was female.

Her gaze returned Ben's face and slid over to Raddigan's mouth, before it shot down the road. *Their smiles are so white and perfect.* Not that she was interested, but they would make perfect grooms. Call it women's intuition, but they seemed like men who treated women respectfully, unlike the animal Culley Wheelin. *I don't know how I know, but it seems I can trust these men.*

"Actually, yes, Miss Brigham."

"I see." She looked at the sign in the window. "Well, it looks like I've arrived at Mr. Gibbons' door. Thank you gentlemen for escorting me."

"If you need any help, don't be afraid to call on us. We're at your service for however long you need it. We'd be more than happy to help you out miss."

"I appreciate it."

They tipped their hats like civilized men and walked away. The man named Raddigan turned back again and winked causing after effects to undulate through her body. She didn't know which man was more handsome and likeable. They exuded masculinity.

She opened the door and a bell overhead rang. "Hello? I'm Miss Brigham."

Quiet hung heavy in the air. She stepped forward to a glass counter and pressed a bell, making it ding once. "Mr. Gibbons, are you here?"

"Come in, Miss. I have some news for you."

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Nellie stepped farther inside the store. Her anger had built up so high that she could slap the man silly. “Mr. Gibbons, I really do beg your pardon, but you didn't meet me at the train station. It was in the contract, sir.” She gripped the handle of her parasol more tightly. “You and my future husband were supposed to meet me. What happened to him, may I ask?”

He slipped his gold-rimmed glasses off his wide nose and held them aside to speak. “Nellie Brigham?” he asked, with a troubled expression shaping his features.

“I'm her.” *I cannot believe this.* “You saw my photograph. I sent it last spring, remember? From Boston—does that ring a bell?”

“Oh yes.” He raised his hands to calm her down.

She continued her angry tirade by talking through clenched teeth, “Your letter clearly stated that you'd be there to meet me. I should tell people you're a swindler of the worst sort.” She raised the back of her hand to her forehead and let it linger there for a moment. “This has been traumatizing to say the least that—”

The tall, blond man who wore a gray pinstriped suit and black tie, stepped behind her and pushed the door shut so passersby, she assumed, couldn't hear her. To him, she believed thought they were potential customers and he didn't want them to hear the commotion. “Excuse me. I'm so terribly sorry. I have so many things going on at once. I'm such a busy man.”

She frowned and rolled her eyes toward the ornately decorated ceiling. The room smelled musky.

“Okay, let's see. The man that I matched you with has unfortunately married another.”

“He did what? That's preposterous.”

“It happened when you were in route to Sheridan,” he said hesitantly. “There was nothing I could do.”

Nellie blinked and drew in a ragged breath. Her brows drew to the center of her lower forehead. “You are lying, right? And this is an awful joke?”

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“No, I'm not lying. He's married another woman from Laramie, I'm afraid. He was in such a hurry that he—”

Nellie stabbed her hands onto her small waistline of her deep red dress and tapped her shoe on the wood-planked floor. *I could just throttle someone over this!* “Well, what can I do? Where can I go now? You took my money! I'm out in the wilderness with no family. Now what? You've really put me in a bad situation, Mr. Gibbons!”

“It's seventy-five dollars I took for your contract to marry. I'll return it now. Shhh, please. I run a respectable business. This is not my fault.”

She had him at her advantage. He definitely didn't want a bad scene that drew a lot of attention. The money could keep her until she thought up a better solution to her problem.

He stepped behind the counter, ducked out of sight and shuffled through a drawer below. When he rose to his feet and brought out several bills, red-faced, he counted them into her hand and added, “I'm sorry, but I have no power over prospective grooms getting married while their prospective bride is in route. None whatsoever.”

After she left, angry, stinging tears welled in her eyes, run down her cheeks until she tasted salty tears. *Perhaps it isn't Mr. Gibbons' fault.* She tied her dark red bonnet more tightly under her chin, braved the late March wind and tromped toward the hotel muttering to herself the entire way.

Of all the actions she did not want to take was to ride the train back to Boston and live with her nagging, hateful old mean Aunt Patricia. Just barely she had enough money to make it back. She'd rather be shot and lying in a graveyard than go back there. *Or maybe, I should just use that gun that I'm carrying on myself and end it all.* “Grrrr.”

* * *

Taking their time, they rode toward the Double H late in the day. He figured they'd make it home before dark. Raddigan smoked his cigarette down to a stub and flicked it away. He spurred his horse and caught up with Ben. The ride seemed pleasant enough. Aspen leaves shimmered in the cool wind and spring appeared to be in full swing.

The few moments they escorted Nellie to Rod Gibbon's store replayed in his mind. His body ached with weariness as he thought about it. He didn't know why he said it. It was as though the words just bubbled to the surface. “She would have made a nice bride. Her eyes held a mystery.”

“Who'd make a nice bride? That Nellie Brigham?”

“Yep.” Her dark hair and slender build interested him more than any woman had since he couldn't remember when.

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“What brought that subject up?” Ben asked, incredulous but gently, his face flushed.

Raddigan shrugged, looked over at his partner and smiled slyly. “Never you mind.” He had a deliciously evil thought and as usual, stated what was on his mind. “Why couldn't she be a bride for both of us? Share and share alike. We're open in other areas. Think about it. We're way out in the middle of nowhere. No one would know what went on behind closed doors. The men would see us go inside at night and wouldn't know a thing unless we told them. And we wouldn't do that.” A cold chill of the coming night set in the air. Raddigan buttoned the top button of his coat while he waited for Ben's response.

“One bride, two grooms you mean?” He chuckled in obvious disbelief.

“Well? What do you think?”

Ben swallowed and looked uncomfortable. “I dunno.” His eyes fell to the rocky ground. “We'd get talked about and I sure as hell don't know about bein' jailed,” said Ben.

“There's men who has more than one wife. Besides, according to the laws in Wyoming, women are our equals now. They serve on juries, haven't you heard?”

“But are there women who has more than one husband anywhere in the world?” he asked with disdain.

Overhead a hawk banked and shrieked, catching their attention for a minute or two. Raddigan's eyes sharpened as he watched the bird's soaring sky dance. The bird disappeared and it seemed a signal to them to continue their conversation.

“Women don't have more than one man nowhere, I don't think.” Raddigan lingered on the thought of having her in their bed. Maybe it was a foolhardy idea, but it was also an exciting to consider. “She's got herself a husband by now, so we don't need to worry about it.”

“Prob'ly so.”

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CHAPTER EIGHT

By April 15th, Nellie depleted most of her money for food and a hotel room. Buying a ticket back to Boston loomed impossible. She'd meet her fate in Sheridan. The hotel clerk gazed at her over the rims of his spectacles and frowned, his facial features and expression put her in mind of a hawk that was ready to pounce on prey. The friendly desk clerk she once knew no longer existed. The tall, skinny man who wore a dark suit demanded, "You must leave today. Now, in fact."

An hour later, she emerged in the lobby of the Emperor Hotel with her suitcases. A small man who sported a pencil thin mustache over his upper lip, carried her bags to the front door and outside to the dirt road. A red-brown horse trotted by pulling a creaking wagon with wobbly wheels and a dog barked. Fearing the unknown, she glanced around her and moved up and down the street. She turned toward the man who just ejected her from the hotel and pled, "Please. I'll work for my room and food. I'll work hard. I don't have anywhere to go. I'll die in the streets." Thinking of the cold winter that was coming, she shuddered. Her future seemed bleak and she wanted to break down and bawl like a baby.

"We're not into charity. This is a hotel. Get her the hell out of here. We've a business to run." He dusted his hands.

"Out, out, out!" shouted another, stronger man who came into view. He reached and put his hands on her shoulders. "We don't allow freeloaders in here. It gives the place a bad name."

"No!" she wailed and pounded her fists on a man's back. He effortlessly picked her up, threw her over his shoulder and carried her out into the street, where he dropped her next to her luggage.

He clicked his tongue and turned to go back inside.

Sitting on the road Nellie spat out, "I don't have anywhere to go. You all are not humans. You're devils in disguise." As a horse drawn carriage passed, she cried loudly. "I'm in deep trouble. What am I to do?" The pain of abandonment hurt every bit as much as it did the day Mr. Gibbons and Hal Benton didn't show up to meet her at the train. This

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time it felt as bad as if someone had taken a knife stuck it in her stomach and twisted. Tears streamed out of Nellie's eyes, glossing her cheeks. She rifled through her handbag and located a lace edged handkerchief. She should find a ledge and throw herself off of it.

“Get out of the road!” a man yelled from the seat of his wagon.

“Go down to Madame Caulley's,” another stranger said as he passed by on horseback. “She needs women there.”

A whorehouse? Me? “Never!”

Nellie got to her feet, picked up her suitcases, a defeated and broken homeless person, and began walking while she wept, down a rat infested alleyway. If she banged on Mr. Gibbons' back door, maybe he'd have mercy on her and take her in for the time being, until she got back on her feet. *Will I meet with rejection again?* Just when she raised a hand to knock on his alley door, Culley Wheelin rode up and wasn't too far away. He dismounted, looked around and not seeing her, he tied his horse.

Nellie gasped, turned away, hiding her face. Her heart beat quickened. He'd located her! She recognized him by the scar on the side of his face that went from his ear to just under his chin. She'd heard he'd received the wound because a woman tried to slit his throat in his sleep. He'd raped her and left her for dead. “If he finds me, I'm good as dead. I have to hide. Where can I go?” she muttered to herself, putting as much distance between herself and Culley as humanly possible.

She inwardly cursed her father's name for losing money to the monster of a man. She could have been living in the lap of luxury back east with not a worry in the world if he hadn't lost the family nest egg. Within minutes, guilt turned in her stomach for thinking such horrible thoughts about her deceased father.

A church and graveyard loomed large, she passed it and it disappeared behind her. A horse carrying a rider clopped by. The last of the houses and buildings behind her, Nellie began walking southwest, toward the mountains. Mud felt soft under her shoes. The hem of her beautiful dress had been dirtied already. She carried her luggage and her arms tired under their weight. The baggage contained her life's possessions. Nighttime neared.

The men...what were their names? They said they lived on the Double H Ranch. Ben and Raddigan seemed friendly. I feel some sort of an unexplainable connection with them. I shouldn't stop a rider along the trail and ask for directions, though I'm so weary.

* * *

A chilly breeze rustled through the pines overhead as Ben and Raddigan rode over their property slowly, taking their time. Ben figured they rode two miles from the cabin, maybe a little less. They searched for scrubs to add to their growing herd. The cattle left

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behind from someone else's herd could legally be taken in and branded with the Double H irons. They followed the trail that weaved back and forth down the side of a canyon on the Sheridan side of the ranch. Yellow warblers cheeped in the tall grass nearby. The spring sun beamed down warm, so Ben pulled in the reins, removed his hat and wiped his forehead with the sleeve of his dark green shirt.

Inexplicably, he knew that someone stood nearby watching. He saw dark red, moving form among the willows and heard a woman's cry. *Did she cry out help?* Ben took a deep breath. It could be an Indian or a dude. Their new hands wouldn't come out this far today. He didn't know really who the hell stood out there. He was glad that he had his rifle in his saddle boot and a gun on his hip.

The flash of red had caught Raddigan's eye as well, Ben knew, when he heard, "This way!"

"Heard it too, eh?" His spurs gently touched his horse's side and they went off in different directions. Ben pulled his Remington out and rode toward the sound not wanting to excite any hostility.

"A woman, it sounds like."

"I thought I heard one, too," said Ben, squinting into the sun.

"Careful. I don't know what in hell a woman'd be doin' out this way."

"I'm always careful." Ben glimpsed his partner, knowing they'd try to meet where the stranger stood among the copse of trees. Ben walked his horse through a stream and come up on the opposite side, going to the left of the individual. Raddigan, two hundred or so feet on the other side of the stream looked Ben's way. A cigarette hanging off his lip went to the right, ready to shoot if it was a trick.

"It's probably nothing."

"Prob'ly not," agreed Ben. "It's better to be safe than sorry."

Raddigan flicked away his cigarette. "You betcha."

The trip back into the brush among the willows took several minutes. His way led east and north. When they sat on their horses near one bush hat intermittently jiggled, and showed bits of dark red behind it, ready to fire, Ben yelled, "Come out now! We've got our guns on you."

"Don't shoot. Please don't. I'm Nellie from town."

Ben bit his lip to keep from bursting out laughing. "Get your ass out then and tell us what the hell you're doing out here."

Nellie gazed up at the two men on the tall horses. They looked friendlier than Culley Wheelin. "Just a minute," she said. "I'm stuck in these brambles and I don't want to ruin my dress." They seemed honest. She had to go with them because she didn't have much choice.

The one named Ben muttered, "This ought to be good."

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“Hold on, Ben. She's been through a lot from the looks of it.”

“We usually shoot sneak thieves who come on Double H land.”

“I'm not a sneak thief she said and shoved one of her bags aside. “I'm running away from a real bad guy in Sheridan. He wants to kill me.”

“Who'd be tryin' to kill you?” Ben asked, his eyes squinting in disbelief.

“Culley Wheelin. At one time he wanted to kill my daddy, but now since he's dead Culley wants me.”

Raddigan heaved a sigh. “Come on. Get yourself out of there. Hop on back and I'll have one of the boys send out a wagon to fetch your belongin's.”

“I don't have any money to pay you. I can keep house or do something like that.” She stepped up to the horse and took Raddigan's hand and he pulled her up onto the saddle.

Once settled in the saddle with Raddigan, the three of them rode slowly toward their cabin.

Ben asked, “I thought you were going to wed some guy that Gibbons hooked you up with.”

“That fell through. He married someone else, unfortunately. Gibbon's gave me my money back.”

“Why didn't you go back east?”

“It's a long story. But the main reason is that I can't see myself living with my dreadful Aunt Patricia.”

“Well damn, Ben.” Raddigan laughed. “It looks like we've got ourselves a misplaced mail order bride who has a big problem with a fellow named Culley Wheelin. Don't worry,” he turned her way and continued, “You'll be safe with us.”

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CHAPTER NINE

Ben followed Raddigan and Nellie back to the cabin and dismounted near the front door. Men walked over from the corral. Coolie and a few of the boys emerged from the smokehouse. A twisting mass of contradictions churned in his head, regarding Nellie. Ben cared for Raddigan, but he found Nellie, pretty and was the most enticing woman he'd ever met. Her heart-shaped face enhanced her cute pixie nose. Her personality and beauty engaged his imagination. Her brows and chin lines were delicate. He loved the way her raven hair swept back into braids at the nape of her neck.

No woman out west looked as good, in his opinion. The soft curves of her breasts under the bodice of her dark red dress set his heart on fire. The woman in Laredo wore a similar dress on occasion, but Nellie appeared sexier. The lines of her slender hips flared slightly under the long gathered skirt and gave promise of giving a lover a tight pussy during a heated session of lovemaking. She sat in the saddle straight and held her chin high and proud. Her expressive eyes drew his affection more than her other attributes. They glittered like the Yellowstone River in the afternoon sun. A sight to behold. She seemed worldly, in an innocent way. *Did Raddigan find her as attractive as he did?*

As they escorted Nellie up to the front door of the cabin, three workhands' heads turned and cast admiring glances her way. Ben looked toward one of them and said in a pleasant tone, "Ace, go get the wagon and fetch her luggage. It's sittin' near the willows at the mouth of Fry Canyon."

"Yes sir," he said, almost falling over his own feet. He steadied himself and strode toward the barn to hitch up the wagon.

"Go on inside, Nellie. Make yourself at home. We'll get you some water goin' for a bath. Or food maybe, if you're hungry." Ben pointed toward the kitchen. "Cook, get her food. Or whatever you need, just let us know," Ben said.

"Thank you," she said visibly touched by the hospitality. She walked inside, leaving them behind, blinking.

"I'll take a bath, if it's okay."

"We'll fill the tub. It's outside." Raddigan turned and pointed toward Cook, "Put

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somethin' up around the tub so she can have some privacy.”

Cook nodded turned and hurried toward the back of the cabin.

Gill, a short leather-faced man, perhaps thirty-five years old or so, later told Ben at the corral away from the men, “I've seen her at the hotel in Sheridan. A real looker. What's she doin' way out here?”

Ben shrugged. “I'm not sure.” Since they trusted Gill more than the other workers, and someday would make him their foreman, he said, “We were the only ones she could turn to. It seems a fellow who just rode into town is wantin' to kill her over her daddy's gamblin' debt years ago.” He let what he said sink in for Gill. “Why don't you ride into town and find out anything you can and get back here by tomorrow. Here's a couple of dollars. Play a game of poker while your there for me. See if you hear anything.”

“Will do. I'll just go in and nose around and find out what I can about this fella, Culley Wheelin.”

* * *

After she'd bathed, eaten and gone to bed, word came to the ranch by way of a messenger from town, asking for Raddigan and Ben.

They came out of the barn, fresh from sleep, crossed to the man on horseback. Ben asked, “What's goin' on?” The night air was warm and mosquitoes were thick. Nothing prepared him for the shock that came.

The stranger dismounted and waited for them to step closer. His high, quick voice woke gave away his excitement. “One of your men's been killed,” he said, his chest heaving.

“Crap.” Raddigan's body visibly tightened.

Ben couldn't believe the horrible news. They'd just seen Gill a few hours earlier. “How can he be alive one minute and dead the next?” Vaguely, he was aware that Nellie stood in the open doorway and heard about Gill's death.

“What?” asked Raddigan. Silver light from the full moon outlined his profile. “Can't be.”

“Gill. He's your man, right?”

“He is.”

“Well, he was your man. Some sidewinder shot him in the back out behind the saloon. One of the old whore's upstairs said the shooter was a Culley Wheelin. She said he spoke with an eastern accent. She wanted to turn his ass in because he was real rough in bed. Gave her a black eye and slapped her around before doing it, if ya know what I mean.”

“Thanks.”

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"That man's bad, very bad!" Nellie cried.

"Yeah. Thanks for coming all the way out here," said Ben, aching for Gill's family, whoever and wherever they lived.

"I rode here because I needed the money. If ya have any I'd be mighty obliged to accept it."

Ben noticed that he lingered, wanting a small payment for riding out to the Double H. "Oh. Hold on." Raddigan reached down in his pants and pulled out a dollar bill. "Here. Thanks."

Raddigan gazed toward Nellie. "I'm sorry you had to hear it."

"It's okay. I figured he was capable of it."

Ben nodded then shook his head. "You'd better get some sleep ma'am."

She hurried back inside and closed the door behind her.

The rider disappeared into the night.

Watching, Raddigan leaned against a tree and gazed up at the stars. Ben ambled across the yard and joined him. "Don't that beat all? That son of a bitch who is after Nellie killed Gill. Since Sheridan doesn't have a sheriff, I s'pose we ought to track the son of a bitch down and kill him before he gets to her."

"Damn that pisses me off."

"Yeah me too."

"I have a feelin' we'll meet up with him soon. Call it a hunch."

"I have that feelin' too."

"Let's sleep on it and talk on it tomorrow," said Ben. He walked alongside Raddigan back to the barn. "I'm not likin' sleepin' in the barn too much. I'd much rather be with her in that bed in yonder."

"Dream, Ben, dream."

"What're you plannin' on us doin'?" asked Ben when they reached the barn door.

"As far as Culley?"

"Yeah."

"I don't rightly know."

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CHAPTER TEN

Two weeks slipped by. Nellie felt safe, especially at night at the Double H. Raddigan had posted a couple of men on the property looking out for Culley or other unwanted intruders.

She spent days cooking, keeping the cabin clean and well-organized. She worked hard and pulled her share of the load. The men appreciated all she accomplished and told her so at every opportunity. Bit by bit, she became better acquainted with Ben and Raddigan. They made her feel at home by speaking to her politely, bringing her flowers and making her laugh. Their kindnesses touched her heart. Occasionally they would wink, flirt and stop by the kitchen to wish her good day, or just tell her they enjoyed her noodles or roast the previous meal. They bought her necessities for the house to lighten her load. They treated her well and she began to call the Double H home.

If she'd ask for the money for a train ticket to return to Boston, they'd give it to her without question, she knew. She also believed that they'd be hurt by the request. After searching her soul, the bottom line crystallized. Nellie didn't want to go back. Her love for the wilderness grew and she felt the Double H was her new home.

At night, Nellie slept in the cabin on the double bed while the men slept outside and in the barn. For lunch and supper, Ben built large, outdoor benches and tables for the eight ranch hands. The hired help worked and ate at the Double H almost every day except Saturday and Sunday. Nights the three of them sat around an aromatic fire that lapped heavenward and dreamed about their future. The number of head of cattle grew with each passing week and the men talked of carpenters coming soon to build the main house.

Nellie took on many other duties. She fed the chickens, washed clothes and hung them out to dry. The men smiled warmly when she saw them or she passed by as she happily went about doing her chores. They kept their distance, though. Nellie sensed that Ben and Raddigan shared a close relationship, and at times, wondered about it. To her it was a mystery how two men could operate a ranch together so smoothly without ever having arguments or disagreements. Both men attracted her more than any other man

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ever had. They seemed honest, good-looking and were well on their way to earning a good living if not rich, running the Double H.

In fact, she didn't know if she liked Raddigan or Ben the best. A wagonload of carpenters and builders rode in and began laying the foundation for a larger home located not too far from the small log home. The foundation complete, they built the walls. From daylight until dark, she heard the tapping of hammers in and outside the new two-story home. Workers put on the roof.

When moving day arrived, it felt magical to take up residence in the beautiful, white ranch house. Over dinner, they explained that it wasn't finished in certain areas, but enough of the home was inhabitable and would provide shelter through the winter. The winter crew moved into the log cabin she had abandoned.

Now Raddigan, Ben and she had their own bedroom. The three of them slept upstairs, each in his or her room. She loved her bedchamber with a shiny wood floor. White lace curtains covered the tall, slender windows. From her window, Nellie could see for miles. It had a lovely view of the hazy, purple mountains in the distance.

Soon summertime neared an end but the air was hot and humid. The leaves turned golden and red. Ben looked in the open kitchen window and watched while she washed a skillet. "Hello, Ben."

"Hello, sweetheart." Ben winked. "You look mighty pretty today." *He is such a tempting flirt.* She bit her lip, hiding her attraction but failed and turned away. She put the skillet she'd been holding on the back burner.

"Want to go with us?" he asked in a deep, resonant tone that she felt to the marrow of her bones.

"To where?" She closed a cupboard door, smiling to herself and reached for a wooden spoon.

"We found a swim hole."

She frowned. "I can't swim."

"It's not that deep. It comes to right here on me." He pointed to his waist.

"Oh, really? What would I wear?"

"At the deepest here." He touched his chest, shrugged and smiled. His eyes sparkled with mischievousness at her last question about what she should wear. *Does he want me to go skinny-dipping with the two of them? I want to, but I won't. It's immoral. And there are two of them.* "Nooooo-no."

Raddigan approached Ben from behind, slipped a hand lovingly over Ben's shoulder. She'd never seen one man give another one affection. The action stunned her. She managed to keep her surprise to herself. He looked over Ben's shoulder at her, his chin rested on the slope of Ben's neck. He also smiled a haunting smile. "Wear your underwear, then."

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For a second or two, she thought about it. Her underclothing didn't reveal too much skin though swimming with two men wearing nothing but her under-things was unheard of. "No. You're kidding, right?" she asked, feeling her expression twisting into one of shock.

"No we're not."

"In an hour."

After a moment's bout of nervousness she said, "I dunno." They walked away chattering secretly and she wondered what they'd wear swimming. When they'd reached the edge of the yard Raddigan lit a cigarette, grinned her way and suavely tipped his hat, the cigarette hanging off his lip. His ways and he exuded masculinity.

Within the hour, as promised, they stopped near the front door riding two horses. She came out the door and said, "I'll go, but I won't swim."

"Hop up with one of us. Take your pick."

She walked up to Ben and raised a hand. "Okay."

They rode to the clean, quiet pond not far from the house. Frogs croaked and small fish came to the top seeking an insect to eat. They let go of the reins and helped her down into the soft, cool grass. They stepped back and without a thought, it seemed, right before her eyes they stripped bare-naked, ran toward the water and dove in with a big splash. Ben shouted when his head popped out from the pond. He spit out water, recovered, and asked, "Aren't you coming in?"

"Not with you guys. You're naked."

"We won't hurt you."

"That's what Culley says every time I see him." After she groaned with disapproval, she began undressing. Just as promised, she left her underwear on.

"Let me be crystal clear," Ben shouted with glee. "We won't hurt you...much."

"Haaaaa-haaaa!" Raddigan said with devilish determination. Raddigan belted out another evil laugh. They ran ashore. Ben slipped a hand around each of her ankles and Raddigan grasped her wrists.

"Noooo!" she cried at them.

"Haahahahaaa!" They carried her to the shallow water. "It's time for your swimming lessons to commence!"

"Ahhh!" She screamed with delight when they tossed her into the water. They belly laughed when she surfaced, drenched. She whooped with happiness, vowing revenge. For the rest of the afternoon they splashed, floated, kissed her and carried her piggy back in the water. Wet, laughing and bragging about their exaggerated swimming abilities, they gave her a ride home and she wore nothing but wet underwear, carrying a dry dress.

Raddigan's soothing voice teased. "It seems like some handsome gent would have

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already snatched you up and whisked away long before you came out west. I've a mind to do that now." He cupped a hand around her ear and whispered. "Right into my bed."

Surely Raddigan joked when he says he wants me. Once she regained her composure she retorted, "I haven't found a special man."

"I would be a good man for you," said Ben. He drew an extended finger down her chin and between her breasts. His eyes lingered before he turned away.

Ben's looks and compliments embarrassed, flattered and aroused her, too. Heat rose in her breasts; her hidden nipples positively peaked during his alluring gazes and attention. She gathered her dry clothes to her face to hide her embarrassment. Although, she secretly yearned for them to kiss her then immediately afterward feared they could read her mind.

Once they stopped in the front yard, their heated gaze swept over her curves, causing her to stir slightly. Raddigan couldn't seem to shake his mesmerism.

"What is it?" she asked, penetrating Raddigan's studious state.

He shook his head and turned away. "Nothing at all. Sorry."

Ben still looked upon her wet clothed body, spellbound, for a few seconds longer and then cast his line of vision to a mountain in the distance.

"Is something wrong?"

"Not a thing," Raddigan started. "In fact, it's the opposite of wrong."

Ben grinned then muttered under his breath, "I'll say." He leaned over and plucked a long stemmed weed and parked it in the corner of his mouth. "It looks like you have both our attention."

Experiencing a dark need for their intimate touches, she flushed deeply at the unheard of thought of having both of them.

"Where are you going?" Ben's voice called as she hurried alone to the house.

"Nothing at all."

* * *

All took part in fixing supper and setting the table. They changed into dry clothing, ate and washed the dishes. Darkness came. Weary, they scooted the tables together and lay out under the stars, gazing heavenward, dreaming. They spoke of the miraculous skyscape that spread before them wondering aloud if someone or something lived up there.

"I think it's possible," she answered, in awe at the twinkling big dipper. "It makes my problems seem so minute. You know what I mean?"

"When you're with us, you'll have no problems." Raddigan leaned her way. Ben looked on, grasped her chin. Easily, as if he didn't want to scare her, Raddigan's mouth

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softly came down on hers. His massaging hand moved over her ample, clothed breasts. The kiss continued and he pinched her nipple. Sensation spiraled through her, she closed her eyes and let it continue, knowing and feeling the heat from Ben's gaze as it lazed over her curves, his face inches from hers.

Raddigan's tongue slid back over hers toward her throat. She felt another set of hands, Ben's hands, on her hips and still she didn't resist because she enjoyed their slight aggression. Their hands moved down her body and massaged her clothed pussy. "Mm," she said moving her hips on the table. Clearer thinking overtook her hazy desire.

"I must go in."

Immediately, like gentlemen, they stopped and sat up. Raddigan apologized. "I'm sorry. I guess we got carried away."

She hopped off the table. "It's okay," and walked toward the house. "I had fun. See you in the morning." *I can't believe I'm falling in love with two men.*

Before she went inside Ben said, "Nellie?"

"Yes?"

"We're courtin' you."

"Who?"

"We are."

Baffled, she blinked at them. "There's two of you."

"Yep."

Later, sometime after midnight, one a.m. maybe, she tiptoed by Raddigan's open bedroom door when going to the outhouse outside. Between the door's edge and the jamb, she peered inside Raddigan's yellow, glowing room. She saw Raddigan and Ben, standing beside the bed. "What?" she whispered to herself. Their arms were entwined and their kiss seemed deep and passionate. They were nude. Her gaze and body halted with the shock, but she managed to tear her gaze off the sultry scene, continue downstairs and outside. Owls hooted, but she vaguely heard them.

I can't imagine that Ben and Raddigan can be lovers. Men did have sex with men, did they? She knew they both liked her, but each other? When the chance occurred, she would question them about it.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Wearing a white muslin nightgown, the neckline decorated with tiny, pink ribbon bows and an ivory robe, Nellie slipped out the back door. Feeling secure, she sauntered away from the back side of the house. Humming a song, she stepped carefully along the dark path over the soft pine needles that tickled the soles of her feet as she meandered toward the outhouse.

It seemed like just another Saturday night at the ranch. The cowhands had ridden into town before dark and would be gone for the night, except for the guard, elderly Vince, who stayed on lookout duty. A barn owl hooted in the treetops nearby. A horse whinnied. Cattle, a smoldering campfire and skunk scented the air.

She turned and peered up at Raddigan's lighted bedroom window perplexed. Picking up her pace, she recalled their love scene. Of course, she had no business peeking into his bedroom. It was none of her business, but the image of their embrace stayed to intrigue and arouse her.

In whispers, she'd heard of men having more than one wife, but she'd never heard of a woman having more than one man. She entered the dark outhouse, closed the door, within a few minutes emerged, and walked toward the house.

Twenty feet down the path, a hand and arm descended from behind. It came from the shadows and caught her off guard. The burly man pulled her into the brush. He firmly clasped her head, covering her mouth, wrenching her neck. His action stifled her screams and mashed her upper lip against her teeth, until she tasted blood. He had to be the devil himself. Brutally he held her backside tightly to his chest and abdomen and moved her into the woods. The smell of liquor and sweat exuded from his body and sickened her. He limped.

Who is he? Oh no!

They stopped beside a tree. A familiar voice said, "Well, well, well. Look who we have here." His hands hurt her arms. A whiskey laugh followed his comment. He jerked her arm, forcing her to leave the cover of the tree and pick up speed, walking toward his waiting horse.

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She recognized him and the danger he presented. Frightened out of her wits, she considered dying. *I'm too young. Culley Wheelin! I can't leave with him! He's promised to kill me. I must fight.* She spun and kicked back at him, again and again, in vain and screamed as loud as she could. *If I can find a rock to hit him with...* Using rough force, he grabbed and guided her off the path to the house and off into a different direction.

She dropped the ground making it more difficult for him to take her. He effortlessly picked her up and put her over his shoulder, carrying and cursing her all the while.

“Raddigan! Ben! It's Culley Wheelin! Help me!”

“Shut up, bitch. I owe you for shootin' my foot, for one thing. You owe me your pa's gambling debt too, don't forget.” He put her down and backhanded her hard across the mouth. “You think you're going to escape payin' me somethin' for your daddy's debt. Well, you ain't. It's been a long damn ride from Boston to this godforsaken dung hole and I'm going to get my time and gamblin' money's worth out of you. Walk bitch, walk, or you're dead meat, hear?”

“Madman!” She drew in a ragged breath. *There has to be a way to get loose! I'll bite him hard, if I get the chance.*

She heard the click-click of a cocking trigger. Metal touched her temple. A gun! Her knees weakened and she stopped fighting.

“I've been watchin' this place for days. Just waitin' and waitin', real patient like. Now won't you look at this. Just look. I got you.” His voice cut into the air like the crack of a bullwhip. “Fight me, you little bitch. Go ahead, I like it when you fight. I'll shoot you through the eye and drop your body where you stand, maybe. Now be like a good woman and go toward the fuckin' horse.”

From the house Double H guard fired a round. *How did he miss seeing Culley? Why hadn't I brought my six-shooter with me?*

He pulled her more tightly to him, aimed and fired two shots. Fire flared from Culley's pistol. The bang sounded, causing her to jerk. Gunfire returned. A bullet skimmed a nearby boulder.

Ben's voice cut through the air, “Quit shootin', damn it! He's got Nellie.”

She peered toward the house, but it was too dark to see Ben or Raddigan.

“Smart move cowpokes! You might kill your own girlfriend and save me the bother.” he whispered hoarsely, “I just want to get some fun out of you is all.”

“Let me go!” she cried and twisted away, but found she could not wrench herself free of his grasp.

“I think a little torture's in order when we get to our destination. I'll tie you up and have my way,” he blared furiously and roared with laughter. “How would you like that?”

“Aaaah!” She stiffened and quieted when he drew a finger up and under

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her chin. "You'd better get used to me. We're goin' on a long fuckin' ride."

Fear and pain ate at her sense of well-being like acid. She spit at him, but failed to stop him. He slapped her face again, but this time she fell down into the stabbing, sharp rocks. He picked her up.

He's such a horrible animal. Hot tears stung her eyes.

His hands on her ass, Culley pushed her up on the horse.

"Get your filthy hands off me."

He stepped in the stirrup and sat behind her. With a kick of the spurs, the galloping horse took them far away from the Double H, Ben and Raddigan. His rough trousers and boots rubbed against the soft skin of her calves. Her face and body ached from being slapped and manhandled.

"I'm going to cut you up in little pieces and feed you to the bears. Maybe I'll feel better even though I never did get that money your daddy owed me."

* * *

They seemed to ride for miles and miles. Despair built within her more and more with each passing mile.

The next day Culley pulled in the reins near a stream, pulled her down off the horse and tied her to a small tree. Slumped, her back pressed against the rough bark. She had stopped protesting long ago. It seemed useless. Vaguely, she realized he made camp, ate and slept on a pallet some ten feet away, holding on to the butt of a Colt .45.

In her life, she'd never felt more contempt, hate and fear for one man. *Am I living the final hours of my life?* Shocked and aware of her probable destiny, she closed her eyes and passed out, into a fitful sleep.

For the next two days she stayed quiet, waiting for the moment he'd try to hurt her...or worse...she didn't want to think about it. She didn't want to go out of the world with a whimper. The third night away from the Double H, they again stopped to rest and he again tied her to a small tree. She had no idea where they were, but knew it was far away from the Double H. It seemed she stepped out of a wonderful life, into the throes of a nightmare.

It was growing late in the day when he muttered, "We may as well eat." He started a fire.

"I don't want to." *It's of no use to plead.*

"Be that way, then." He limped toward her and stopped, unfastened his pants in a threatening manner, reached inside and fondled himself, victimizing her in a visual way this time. "You don't know what you're missin'." Much to her relief he walked away before he made himself cum. "One day I'll let you meet 'muh snake. Women's said it's

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big.”

So why such a small brain, Culley? Nausea quivered in her stomach. “I’d rather die...than...” She silenced her fury, not wanting to have one word or semblance of a discussion with the mad animal. *Who knew how he’d react.*

He crossed to the fire, looked up and grinned a snaggly smile just for her. His dark auburn hair had to have insects living in it. It was evident he rarely bathed because he stunk of old whiskey and sweat.

At one point, she fell asleep and awoke to a single gunshot in the distance. Nellie squinted and saw him a few minutes later approaching camp. Walking at a proud gait, he carried a dead rabbit, holding it up by its feet.

Kneeling a foot away, he gazed at her and grinned. “Maybe we can be lovers if I was to clean up and treat you nice like a lady. I wouldn’t force you into fuckin’. Then what?”

“In all seriousness, Culley, I’d rather die.” In desperation, she blotted the unpleasant picture of having him in her bed, out of her mind.

He skinned the rabbit, leaving blood all over his hands and knife. The knife clicked when he closed it, causing her to jerk. His boots clicking on rocks, he carried the dripping animal’s carcass to a gushing stream and washed it off.

A few minutes later, he stepped back in front of her and gazed down. “I’m takin’ you over to see the Yellowstone. We can have our fun there.”

“I don’t want to go.” She gazed down at the filthy pink ribbon bows on her dirty gown, vowing not to show the acute angst she suffered.

“I’m ‘fraid you don’t have a choice,” feral anger sounded in his voice. He cut the rabbit up some more, speared its pieces and began roasting it over the fire. “You’d better eat, if you want to stay alive for now. I can’t promise nothin’ later.”

The itching didn’t bother her as much as the ropes that cut into her bruised and bleeding wrists. That evening he again had tied her hands behind her and to the tree. She gritted her teeth, staying silent. *God, he’s crazy,* she thought, and peered down at her dirty, torn gown on her battered body. Insects, maybe mosquitoes bit her legs arms and chest. So very much she missed her new home and Raddigan and Ben. Her brush with death caused her to yearn to be back with them. If she ever returned to the Double H, she would welcome them into her bed and body with open arms...both of them at the same time. Call it women’s intuition, but she knew they both wanted her making it a threesome. With them, sex seemed so natural and inevitable...if she had stayed at the Double H. An elongated sigh of frustration left her lips.

The wind picked up and birds screeched and flew overhead. The meat cooked over the crackling fire. He rose, walked to rock pile and relieved himself.

In the distance, she saw something glitter and blurred movements near the woods.

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Is it an animal?

Culley glanced her way with an evil gleam in his eye when he finished peeing.

Did he notice her interest at something in the distance? She looked south to throw him off their trail. When it was safe to redirect her gaze, she searched for them, praying. *It'd be such a blessing if it was them coming to save me.* Much to her relief, she saw the two cowboys, her two lovely men, Raddigan and Ben, run forward and crouch. They inched toward four large boulders that would hide them from Culley's view. *I can just kiss them.*

The horse whinnied, alerting Culley, causing her heart thudded in her chest. For a split second, he looked toward her, assessing her facial expression and eye movement.

A puzzled look twisted his expression. He turned, leaned and grasped his rifle from its boot. “What's goin' on here?” He looked toward the tree line. “Who's out there?” He aimed a Colt .45 toward her head and one into the distance. “If you come one step further I'll shoot the bitch.”

Sensing something was about to happen, she bit her lip and squeezed her eyes closed, worried about the outcome of the building, possibly deadly situation. A shot cracked through the air. Then two sounded. His knees bent and he triggered two shots before he dropped to the ground. As Raddigan and Ben ran toward her and again, she passed out.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Her heart thudded with joy upon waking from fainting. She remembered in intricate detail how her heroes, Ben and Raddigan saved her. Life was grand...until the negative thoughts returned. *Maybe he's pretending he's dead. He'll kill Ben.* "Make sure he's dead!" she screamed fitfully.

"Don't you worry, Nellie." Ben placed his hat on a rock, dropped to his knees in the dust aiming his six-shooter at Culley's heart, while Raddigan continued to hold his six-shooter on him too. Wind blew the tie around Ben's neck as he paused, making sure he died, gazing down. He leaned over, pressed an ear to Culley's chest and checked for a heartbeat. "He's not breathing."

Raddigan strode up to Ben and knelt beside the body. "Dead, huh?"

"Yep. As a fuckin' door nail."

Nellie breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank God."

Ben reached over and gave Raddigan's forearm a squeeze, took his hand away and rose to his feet. "He gets buried right here."

"I agree. He doesn't deserve a good grave in no cemetery. Let 'em stay out here with the buzzards. Then again, he'd poison the buzzards if we did that. At least we got justice for Nellie."

"And Gill, too."

"We're civilized. We'll at least put the son of a bitch in the ground."

They put their firearms back into their holsters. Ben grabbed his hat and put it back on his head. They went to Nellie and took her into their hard-muscled arms, welcoming her with hugs and kisses. Raddigan picked her up, her feet left the hot ground and put her gently down. She again felt the hot rocks pressing into the soles of her feet. They pressed gentle kisses to her forehead and neck and reassured her that the Hell she just endured had indeed ended.

"Come this way." Ben took Nellie's hand and escorted her toward a shade tree twenty feet away.

"Ouch...ouch. My feet."

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He picked her up and carried her the rest of the way. "Sit here and we'll be right back." Leaning, he put her down in the soft, long grass at the thick base.

A pained sigh left Raddigan's lips. His eyes hooded and his line of vision dropped to the dead man. He raised his hat off his tousled raven hair and rubbed his tanned forehead with his brown plaid shirt sleeve. "I guess we'd better get to it." He glanced over at Ben and Nellie.

Ben sighed. "I guess so." He stepped back and took his hands off her forearms, leaving her to sit in the shade while they completed the grim task. Ben leaned and ran a reassuring hand over her shoulders. "Hold on for a second and we'll get out of here."

"Okay, good." *She couldn't get far away fast enough.*

"I hope his body doesn't jinx this land for someone," growled Ben.

"I'll spit on his grave every time I pass it," muttered Raddigan.

They turned and walked away in solemn silence. Each of them located a sharp rock, got on their knees across from each other and stabbed the earth hard with the pointed edge over and over, digging a shallow grave. Within the hour, they pulled his body into the hole, covered him with dirt and rocks in a three feet high mound of rocks.

The task complete, they ambled hand in hand toward the three horses and stopped three feet away from Culley's mare. Raddigan murmured to Nellie, "I'm so glad we found you."

"It's over," said Ben. He took his hat off and placed it on a waist high rock and went to her too. Ben stepped behind her, kissed the skin below her hairline.

"I've never been so glad to see anyone."

In relief, her heart rate quieted, but her body ached with bruises, cuts and insect bites. Dozens of times, bloodthirsty bugs had bitten her arms, legs and breasts. Her hair clung to her head and needed a thorough washing. "I need to soak. I probably smell to high heaven. A tub of hot water sounds heavenly," she said half laughing and half crying.

"I've brought some of your things in my saddlebag. You can clean up and put some liniment on those sores."

"Thank you."

Ben's grasped her chin, turning her head. His mouth found hers and he administered a sweet kiss to her parted lips. His other hand curled at her waist and pressed the harsh fabric to her sensitive skin. His tongue slid back toward her throat and seemed to be searching all the crooks and crannies of her mouth.

Raddigan looked on, smiling inches away.

Upon withdrawal, Ben murmured, "You're beautiful."

"You are." Raddigan chuckled, "And you're ours."

"Oh yeah."

"Let's ride on in to town," Ben said. "Our woman wants to clean up."

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* * *

They rode toward the next town. An hour after they had buried Culley, they dismounted near a shaded stream outside of town. Emotion threatened to overcome her as she recalled the relief she felt when she saw them approaching camp. She got down on her knees and washed in the cold white water. Birds chirped overhead and an eagle soared. In the distance purple mountain peaks stretched toward heaven. Relief lightened her mood and her thoughts returned to the two men—her protectors. Words could not begin to do justice to just how much she cared for them. They demonstrated caring consideration and bravery for her that day. She scooped water in her hands to her face, arms and legs, washing the fears and worries away. They had risked their lives for her. Their rescue left her hopelessly in love.

She peered over at them as they lounged on a rock shaded by a lodgepole pine. Maybe it was the wrong time to think of it, but their butts and legs looked so glorious in their trousers. Talking quietly maybe of business, they ambled up stream observing at the scenery and nature. Judging by their previous lusty looks they gave her, they enjoyed their sight of her also. *Let them touch, handle or do whatever they want to me. I'm ready for them.*

Her lip curved in a tearful moment. "I'm so lucky to have you two." She sniffed and wiped away a tear with a finger after she met them near the three horses.

They walked to her, curled their hands around her arms then her body and hugged her. Ben stepped behind her and Raddigan pulled her close to his front side. "It's going to be okay, Nellie."

"I know. You're here." She climbed up on Raddigan's horse while he mounted Culley's horse and they trotted into town.

In silence, they dismounted in front of a hitching post. A rider on a gray mare trotted past.

"I wonder...what's the name of this town? Livingston?" asked Ben, searching in his pocket and brought out a matchstick.

"Yep, I think," she said.

Raddigan lit a cigarette. "Hold on. Let me cover you." He exhaled smoke.

Nellie stopped. "Okay."

He took a shirt from his saddlebags and buckled it closed. He draped the clean garment over her shoulders and said, "There you go."

A few sets of eyes outside a barber shop turned their way. They crossed the dirt road and stepped up onto the boardwalk. "This is the place I had in mind. Good. It's still here." They strode inside causing a bell over the door to tinkle.

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“My name's Charles Gray. Nice to meet you,” the clerk said.

She read a sign that hung from the rafters, ‘Weddings Performed’.

“You all ready to marry?” Charles drawled and chuckled. “It's a lovely day for it.”

Ben nodded and took the matchstick from his lips. “Yes it is.” He glanced first at Ben then at her.

“It's a warm, sunny day,” she said.

“It's extra for the piano. We have a lady come in and play for a dollar more.”

“We don't need it,” said Nellie.

Ben and Raddigan's boots clunked on the wooden floor as they walked around the room. Bouquets of wild flowers filled vases and a player piano occupied a corner. The room smelled of roses and shave lotion. Looking proper and well dressed, the business owner smiled and asked, “May I asked where you're from?”

“Near Sheridan,” she answered.

“Marry the three of us,” said Raddigan with a cigarette hanging off his lip. He reached into his pocket for a wallet. “This is Ben, my partner. And this is our lovely bride to be, Nellie.” He cleared his throat. “The three of us want to be married.”

Charles gasped and froze with a frown on his face momentarily. His hair parted down the middle of his head. His gold-rimmed spectacles attached to the end of his narrow, long nose. With his mouth gaping, he gazed at each of them. His eyes returned to Raddigan. “Uh, sir. We just marry one man and one woman.” He blinked and added, “It's the law, I do believe.”

Raddigan took out an extra five and a ten. “No one needs to know what you did today.” The sight of the money caused the man's eyes to widen. His lower lip trembled. He counted the money into the man's hand while Ben looked on and laughed.

“Charles, you might not want to turn this down. I'll make it worth your while,” Raddigan said. “I'm warnin' you, if you tell one person about this, I'll come back here and—well, you don't want to know.”

His hand and eye moved erratically. “Make that one more ten and I'll perform the wedding and not say a word.”

Raddigan placed the last bill in his spread hand. “There you go.”

Charles fetched a Bible and led them in a simple, three-way ceremony. They exchanged vows and kissed afterward. “Congratulations,” the shop owner wished them when they left with their certificates of marriage.

Ben tipped his hat. “Thank you, Charles.”

They crossed the street and stopped at their horses.

A swinging sign read, ‘Hot Baths’’. “And this business is still here too.”

The men each held an arm, escorting her inside. They carried a saddlebag over their shoulder. Ben touched Nellie's elbow and guided her toward a glass counter. He

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removed the matchstick and whispered into her ear, “We brought you a change of clothes and your hairbrush.”

“You're so thoughtful. I'll take a bath and we can be on our way back to the Double H. I'll be glad to get home.”

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

One warm night he couldn't get to sleep, contemplating Nellie's plight. She'd been through a lot because of Culley. The sun had not come up, Raddigan noticed as he peered up at the sky. It changed to a pale flesh color. Birds twittered outside the window of his upstairs bedroom. It was located across the hall from Ben's room and down the hall from Nellie's room.

Two weeks had passed since their wedding. Nellie healed from the mental anguish she had suffered. The insect bites on her body scabbed over and healed. Daily, Nellie had worked in the cabin, withdrawn and quiet. At times, one of the ranch hands relayed that she had broken down and cried for no reason.

Raddigan offered her a shoulder to lean on, if and when she needed it. He said, "I'll stop whatever I'm doing and come to you." In many words and actions, Ben offered her identical support.

Thirsty, needing a cigarette, Raddigan climbed easy-like out of bed, being careful to not crunch the springs, awakening Ben or Nellie who slept in nearby rooms. The sheet slipped off his body when he rose. Padding lightly, he left his room and traipsed naked down the hallway toward the stairway. The door to Nellie's bedroom stood ajar a couple of inches. His curiosity abounded. He peeked in. His gaze stayed and he couldn't bring himself to pull away and continue walking down the hallway.

Nellie peacefully slept in her feather bed under a colorful patchwork quilt and white sheet. The soft, dark lavender pastels of dawn filtered through the lacy curtains, veiling the bedroom window and making the scene hazy and soft. He imagined her scent of wild flowers. Aroused, he slipped his hand down his abdomen to his growing cock and stroked himself. Just the sight of her excited him. The past few days it wouldn't have taken much for him to pull her close and bring her to full term to passion.

However, he wanted to make sure she was ready for them. He leaned against the doorjamb and dreamed of how damned good it would be to climb under the covers with her and rouse her desire. He envisioned thrusting his nine inches deep into her tight, damp canal. With the patience of a monk, he contented himself with letting his eyes trail

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up her exquisite, smooth, and well-shaped leg that remained uncovered. All the while, he caressed his tight ball sacks and moved his hand back to his member. His eyes stopped at the shadowed apex of her thigh, where the shadows hid her pussy. She reminded him of an ethereal goddess who lie in repose and he couldn't wait to experience having her fully. Deep in his body and soul he could feel that the much anticipated moment neared.

God, I love everything about her. Her body was slender and curvaceous, capable of turning powerful men's heads and eyes her way. She always smelled of soap and wildflowers. Most of all he loved her personality. Nellie was always ready with her quick wit, a white flash of a smile and a heartwarming laugh. She seemed comfortable them and herself.

Raddigan held his cock proud that it stood to just under his navel. He ran his palm up and down the thickened, velvety length, thinking he had to have her soon. The stroking continued. Stinging cum welled in his scrotum and threatened to shoot from his cock. Up and down the foreskin moved by the friction of his hand. His heartbeat and breathing rate quickened. He continued until it oozed pre-cum. His breath caught, he removed his hand and stopped short of bringing himself to a climax. He wanted to save his climax for her.

The previous evening she said that she was feeling good and told them that her monthly ended two days ago. It had been a difficult keeping his distance, but he didn't believe it wouldn't serve anyone's purpose to try sex before she was ready. Ben didn't make advances toward her either and let her heal from the ordeal with Culley.

Raddigan stepped down the stairs, out the front door and pumped himself a glass of water outside, not worrying about his nudity. He scratched a match, put a cigarette on his lip and sucked in smoke. A rooster crowed. He smelled the clean scent of pine and the smell of money—cattle manure. Remembering all the help had left the ranch the previous night to go into Sheridan for a weekend of relaxation, he returned to the porch and gazed out to the brightening the eastern horizon.

Once he flicked his cigarette into the dirt, he went inside and up the steps. On his return to his bed, he stopped at her door, unprepared to see Ben who knelt beside the bed, his hand under the sheet at her crotch. The sheet moved over Ben's hand as he massaged Nellie's pussy.

Her head moved side to side on the pillow. A soft moan left her lips. Ben's hand moved from beneath the sheet. The covers slipped down her naked, pinkish beige body, revealing an ample, inviting breast. The bedroom had lightened somewhat since he'd stood in the door a few minutes ago. The rosy areole lifted its hardened nipple inviting him to suckle it. Ben pulled the sheet all the way down her body, slipped a finger into her glistening, wet hole.

"Mmm," she murmured and spread her legs further apart.

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Hot and ready, she tore the rest of the quilt away and lightly moved her palms her own breasts. Raddigan stepped into the room, climbed onto the bed beside her. He had become more aroused than he could remember being for a long, long time.

Ben drew his finger from her pussy and climbed onto the bed on her other side, opposite Raddigan. Ben grasped her ankle and nibbled on her inner calf, eliciting moans and sighs. He nibbled her toes and feet. The mattress and bed frame moved as Raddigan, in Ben's full view now, lay down on his side, his nose in her ear. She turned her head toward him. His mouth captured her parted lips and he placed his fingers on her chin and ministered her with deep and searching kisses. His mouth left hers and he whispered, "You want us both here?"

"Yes."

Heaviness burned in his scrotum. His mouth dipped to her nipple while Ben tantalized her below with caresses and deep licks. "You sure?"

She sucked in a breath and winced. "I am."

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I'll live out a sexy dream if I have these two handsome cowboys make love to me.

Raddigan gazed down into her eyes and traced the curve of her lips with his thumb. He separated the slick folds and touched her sensitive clitoris. His mouth went down on hers. The light flick of Ben's tongue moving up on her inner thigh caused strong pangs of inner turmoil.

When Raddigan's mouth left her, she moaned and murmured, "Ben...oh, Raddigan, yes." A shudder of sheer pleasure unleashed and undulated throughout her system.

"I'll bet your pussy's tight," Ben smoothed his hand over her lower abdomen and brushed through the carpet of pubic hair on her mound.

"Find out then," she said.

Raddigan whispered, "We intend to."

She loved how he said "we".

A smile breezed over Raddigan's expression. He brushed a loving, light kiss to her lips and to her slightly raised lids. A husky chuckle rumbled deep down in his throat. He feathered kisses to the side of her mouth and neck while his erect penis pressed into the side of her thigh. His splayed hand smoothed over her taut belly, nearing Ben's face who breakfasted on her pussy.

Raddigan whispered, "I love you. Both of you."

"Mmm." The question caused heat to sear through her body. "I love you, too."

"You'd like two cocks, wouldn't you?"

The question stimulated her interest. "Yes."

The image of two men arousing and coming inside her at the same time played in her mind. "Mmm-hmm."

She raised her head off the pillow and gazed down at the top of Ben's head as he licked her vulva. Raddigan leaned down, slipped a hand under Ben's chin and covered his mouth with his own. They separated. Raddigan and Ben continued their heart stopping quest. He nipped her labia in various places. Her pussy contracted, needing a cock. A

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raspy moan bubbled up from her being and her head dropped back into the soft pillow. “Yessss, mmm Ben.” She loved their hands and mouths and the wonderful things they did to her with them.

It was such a struggle to refrain from crying out with joy. They aroused her so much that dark feelings surfaced that she didn't or couldn't begin to describe. She writhed on her back as they nibbled, nipped and suckled the hot, waiting spots of her body. Her heart raced and blood pulsed through her veins. Reaching down, she grasped Ben's head by his hair, giving him a show of affection, telling him she liked what he was doing. His face was positioned squarely between her upper thighs and on her pussy. His tongue fucked her. She raised her head off the pillow reached down and threaded her fingers through his raven hair as he ministered her needs.

“Ben...ohhhh, Ben.”

His mouth left her pussy and he rose on his knees between her parted legs. “I can do this all night to you,” Ben said, his voice soft and loving. She glimpsed his hard cock. He resumed feeding on her but this time slipped a finger into her ass. His taut lips clasped her clit then left it to resume applying short flicks of the tongue to her hotbed. He successfully fired up the level of heat another degree, causing her knees to gel and the blood to surge through her veins. The walls of her canal clenched, in her yearning for his cock. A bit of pain added to her experience when Raddigan pinched her nipples.

Powerful ripples of delight breezed through her like wind in a valley. Pure, liquid pleasure washed through her; Ben caused her need to peak until tiny screams formed and released in her throat. With desperation, she spread her legs farther to aid his quest. The wildfire within raged out of control and her need to cum welled to capacity deep in her core.

Ben mercilessness continued, wreaking more havoc while Raddigan fed on her ample breasts.

She wanted more of them, not only for one night, but forever.

When the climax subsided, Raddigan said, “I'm going to turn you on your side.”

“What for?” *Take me any way you want. Hard soft or both at the same time.*

Raddigan said, “So I can fuck your ass?”

“Mmm.”

Ben moved back. With an effortless move, Raddigan positioned her on her side. His front touched her back like a hot bar. He reached down, slipped his hand under the bend of her knee and lifted her leg, giving Ben further oral access to her pussy. Ben leaned into her crotch and continued feasting on her throbbing clitoris. Raddigan's cock pressed into her lower back then into the cleft of her ass. His hand slipped between them, to the ring of her hole. His fingers slipped inside and slid in and out. The sphincter muscle squeezed, promising to grasp his cock tightly. She gasped and winced in a

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moment of pain, pleasure and anticipation, knowing that any moment he'd push his cock into her.

“That's it, Nellie. Two more fingers to go.” He kissed and breathed into her ear when his second finger pushed inside and stretched her a bit more.

His action caused her ass to sting a little, but if she moved, Nellie feared he'd think she didn't want him and that he would quit. His cock in her ass would feel so good.

“Are you okay with this?” Raddigan asked and pulled her leg higher for Ben below.

“Oh yeah. I'm fine. Mmm.” Her pussy spasmed as Ben hit a new hotspot.

Submitting to their delightful assault, she moaned. Her senses absorbed the many nuances of sexual pleasance the men induced. She enjoyed the sinister acts.

Ben, in a world of his own, it seemed, was content to separate her lips and lick from the base to the top of her genitals. Occasionally his pointed tongue dipped into her moist center. He ran his tongue across her nerve bed. Sucking air through clenched teeth, she squirmed, pushed her pelvis forward, and asked “Ben...please. Do me with your tongue.”

Ben's mouth left her pussy. “No, no. Not yet.”

He's teasing me.

Raddigan's third finger entered and stretched her anus. After a pause, she recognized the instant his cock replaced the fingers. He moved his pelvis forward and thrust his shaft between her butt cheeks until it entered her tight hole and their bodies fit flush. The pressure jarred and pressed her pussy toward Ben's mouth. Ben moved up her body and took his place in front. He kissed her waiting lips as she accustomed herself to Raddigan's entry. The head of Ben's cock paused at her slit and barely entered, causing her breath to catch.

“Raddigan's in?”

“Ben, I need you, too.”

She didn't have to ask twice. With a solid thrust, he pushed into her too. Undulating, liquid excitement flowed through her. The men fit into her like a pegs fit into their intended slots. Panting, she cried out her gratitude and sucked his lower lip as though it was a stick of sugar candy. Raddigan and Ben impaled her deeply with their erections.

Exhilarating! Loving the union and the lust it ignited, she sought Ben's open mouth again and thrust her tongue back toward his throat.

Ben began to move. “You're so damned tight.” His movements affected not only her but Raddigan.

“Ahh yes,” Raddigan exhaled noisily and said.

Ben stroked her squeezing pussy, its lips engorged with desire, with his potent

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cock. In and out of her he pulled and pushed its ridged length. Their breathing rasped from their lungs and each movement aided their struggle as a threesome toward completion.

“You likin' this Nellie?” Raddigan asked under his breath.

She closed her eyes and smiled. “Oh yes. Mmm. Very much. Don't stop.”

“Good,” said Ben. “We won't, then.”

Whimpering her gratitude, she reached around and attempted to hold Ben's bunching and relaxing butt.

Raddigan's spread hands cupping her hips while he drew wet circles on the nape of her neck. She felt his breath warm in her hair as his wondrous cock continued filling her. Their actions and hunger was so raw and hot that her body begged for release.

She needed them to replenish her. They were doing a great job and in fact, saved her life. The repeated shove of Ben's cock, sliding in and pulling out, moved her emotionally and physically—up and back on the bed. The headboard rammed into the wall and she felt the friction of her back on the sheet.

A fiery, ravaging inner hunger that could melt a snowcapped mountain of Alaska, readied her for the three-way climax that neared. The headboard whacked the wall. She barely noticed the rest of her surroundings. She knew one thing for sure; she wanted to cum with them. A few pushes and groans followed and he got her wishes. Their bodies dampened with sweat. Ben's body stiffened and with a heavy exhalation, he unleashed his seed into her. A noisy exhalation escaped Raddigan's lips and he too shot his juice. A forceful climax wracked her body, she strained to arch her back. She joined them in riding the plateau, recuperation, and the slow return to reality. They shot a steady stream into her. It was followed by two or three lesser streams, until the sticky liquid leaked out of her and ran down her legs.

Her breathing calmed. She turned her head and gazed toward the window. Fleishy pink of dawn's light filtered through the lacy curtains.

“You okay?” Ben asked, his tone sweet, a couple of minutes later. His hot breath tickled her cheek and he pressed a loving kiss to her throat.

“I could spend a week non-stop in bed with you two,” Raddigan said.

Ben whispered, “I'm going to grab a little more sleep before I go out and feed the horses.” Ben took a deep breath and turned his back to them, facing the center of the room.

“Me too.”

Nellie laughed and said, “Sleep tight. I may join you.”

Such magnificent, thoughtful men! Her love and passion for them had become strong. Their sex, in fact, addicted her. *I've found my place in life.* She locked her arms around Ben's waist and held on until fatigue loosened her hold. Raddigan, behind her,

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held on to her and lazily nuzzled the curve of her neck. Soon they dozed for another hour.

After their first session of lovemaking, weeks evolved into months and their love and passion grew. On occasion, she slept with Ben alone and other times, with only Raddigan. Most of the time, they ended up sleeping three to a bed. For a while, no one except them knew about their relationship.

Although one day, the Double H foreman caught Raddigan and Nellie kissing in the kitchen. Later, to quell the gossip, she framed Raddigan and her Certificate of Marriage and placed it on an end table in the parlor downstairs. When visitors came in the house, they peered at the framed document thinking Raddigan and she were married.

It made her smile that they didn't know a second marriage license existed beneath the first.

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