

A shirtless man with a cowboy hat is the central figure. He has a serious expression and is looking directly at the camera. The background is a vibrant sunset with a bright sun on the right side, casting a golden glow. The sky transitions from yellow near the horizon to a darker blue at the top. The man's chest is hairy, and he has a dark cowboy hat with a wide brim.

**WINNER
TAKE
ALL**

Denyse M. Bridger

WINNER TAKE ALL

...It was warm and cozy when awareness returned to Maggie, and she was still drowsy with sleep. There was still a hint of sunset filtering through the small cabin window, casting soft light into the small sleeping space. She smiled and snuggled closer to the warmth that enveloped her, sighing softly when she was eased off the straw and sat astride a hard, masculine body. Her eyes opened wide and she put her hands out, encountering the solid wall of Dylan's chest. He caught her wrists when she would have pushed him away, and she stared at him, confused and wanting, and afraid of the force of both emotions.

Dylan's fingers loosened their hold on hers, but he didn't release her entirely. His arms went around her waist, hands smoothing well-known curves until he cupped her bottom and pulled her down on top of him as he lay back fully. Her gold-tinted hair fell like a curtain around them, and his fingers tangled in the heavy, silken mass, forcing her to look at him as he read her turmoil in the seconds that held their gazes locked. A minute later he twisted and pinned her under him, his mouth closing over hers in a ruthlessly passionate kiss.

The storm raged in heartbeats—as it had the last time he'd held her this way. She tried to push him away—once—then lost herself to his hunger...

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The Hunt
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Winner Take All

WINNER TAKE ALL

BY

DENYSE M. BRIDGER

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WINNER TAKE ALL
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For Maggie Lawlor

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Sparkling Springs, Colorado wasn't a large town, by anyone's reckoning, but it would suffice for the moment. Riding along the dirt track that passed for the main street, Dylan Coulter allowed his casual gaze to survey everything and catalogue it as a matter of routine. Denver was still a few days ride northeast, but he was in no real hurry to get there. This little backwater would be an interesting diversion, and a welcome respite from his long weeks on the trail. A brief stay in Sparkling Springs, and then he'd move on to Denver.

The first substantial building he encountered as he went farther into the settlement was, typically enough, the saloon. This one had the colorful moniker of The Silver Spur emblazoned on the false front in letters that were three feet high if they were an inch. The familiar sounds of men shouting amid raucous laughter drifted onto the street, and Dylan decided to stop and see what the biggest saloon in town had to offer to a more refined taste. He wasn't expecting much, and doubted

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he'd be far wrong of his estimate.

He left his horse at the hitching rail and strolled inside, touching the brim of his flat-crowned, wide-brimmed hat in polite greeting when two young women passed him on the wooden sidewalk, their smiles turning to giggles as he pushed open the bat-wing doors of the saloon. It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the change in light, but once the shadows receded, he was able to take in the traditional decor. A long, highly polished bar ran the length of the place, brass spittoons were strategically located, and occasionally used, and the remainder of the spacious room was filled with tables and straight-backed chairs. A couple of card games were in progress, and he took note of the men who played as he walked to the bar and ordered a whiskey.

He turned to watch the room, and noted his presence was attracting the usual attention a stranger was accorded when he walked into the midst of the town's men. At least two of the saloon girls were casting looks his way, and he offered each of them a slight smile when his glance connected with theirs.

"You're certainly a different breed for these parts," a soft, faintly amused feminine voice observed.

Startled, Dylan turned back to the bar and was surprised to see the bartender had been replaced, and was vastly more appealing now than mere minutes earlier. The instant she spoke, he took his hat off and held it, long fingers smoothing the brim.

"How can you tell?" he asked, his smile genuine now. His eyes moved over her, discreet but thorough in his perusal. She was barely above five feet tall, had striking, wide-set gray-blue eyes, and a full-lipped, smiling mouth, with tiny dimples at the corners. Her skin was sun-kissed, not ivory pale as so many women were, and the gently sloping contours of her cheekbones added yet another element of beauty to a completely arresting face. She dressed for comfort, not fashion, though there was an elegant cut to the snowy white, lace

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trimmed blouse she wore. In contrast to the stark white was the rich, heavy gloss of a deep blue velvet skirt. There was no sign of a wedding ring, and he wondered in a detached part of his mind if she was simply a higher class of saloon girl.

“Do you have a name, cowboy?” she asked, bristling a little at the audacious appraisal that she hadn’t been meant to notice.

“Dylan Coulter, ma’am,” he replied with his best smile solidly in place. She’d caught him, and that didn’t happen often. His interest was piqued further. “And who might you be?”

“Margaret Watson. Most people call me Maggie.” She leaned on the smooth bar top and poured a second shot for him before she crossed her arms and looked around the room. “I run the Spur for Ed Madison. If you stick around for more than a day or two, you’ll learn who he is quick enough.”

Dylan nodded. He knew the type well. He didn’t need an introduction to the “big man” in town. No doubt Madison figured he owned the people of this budding community, and they probably all owed him for one thing or another. It was a common occurrence.

“Maggie!” a new voice enthused, and Dylan watched a good-looking young man dart behind the bar and slip his arms around the pretty bartender. She didn’t appear remotely comfortable, and he watched, gauging what he might be stepping into if he offered his assistance.

“Billy, I’ve asked you before not to do this kind of thing.” She disentangled his arms and turned to face him. “I work for your father,” she said softly. “That doesn’t mean I belong to you.”

Billy decided to ignore her protest and he made a second reach for her. Dylan’s voice interrupted the action when he noted with soft, drawling mockery, “The lady doesn’t seem much interested in you, son.”

Maggie sighed quietly, a sound Dylan heard, but apparently was

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missed entirely by the stubborn young man who was now glowering at the stranger.

“Who the hell are you, mister?”

“A customer,” Maggie interjected angrily. “Your father pays me to see that they’re left in peace to have a good time here, remember?”

“I don’t recall seein’ you round these parts before,” Billy went on, no longer interested in Maggie so much as he was spoiling for a fight with the stranger. His eyes swept over Dylan in a quick, nervous scan. From the corner of his eye, Dylan noted that Maggie Watson was doing precisely the same thing, and it was lighting fear in her slate blue eyes.

“Mr. Coulter.” She stepped to the side and he turned, deliberately leaving his left flank exposed. The action made her frown; she saw it for the subtle disdain it implied. “Would you like a room upstairs, or at the hotel?”

Dylan offered her the dazzling, ingratiating smile that had charmed and won the hearts of many women over the years. Maggie scowled at him, and he actually laughed in delight.

“I’ll take a room here, ma’am,” he said, then glanced over his shoulder. “But right now I think I’ll join the game in the corner.” He strolled away without a backward glance.

“Don’t like him much, do you, Maggie?” Billy remarked with satisfaction.

She turned her sour expression to him, and he straightened from his casual slouch on the bar top. “Was there somethin’ you wanted when you came in here, Billy?” she asked, hands on hips, her attention still drifting erratically to the stranger who approached the corner table.

“I wanted you to have supper with me,” he answered, watching her closely. “But I think I’ll join that game, too.”

She groaned inwardly at the foolhardy impulse, and wondered if it might be wise to send for Ed Madison. Coulter had just seated himself, back to the wall, and his smile reflected sincere amusement when Billy

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Madison pulled up a chair and sat directly across from him.

* * *

It was well into the night before Maggie was able to herd the last of the night's customers out of the Spur and lock the doors behind them. When she dropped the key in her pocket and turned around, she was startled beyond reason to find herself face to face with Dylan Coulter.

"Mr. Coulter, I thought you'd gone upstairs," she said, feeling instantly foolish when he grinned at her discomfiture.

"Where am I supposed to go upstairs, ma'am?"

Her annoyance with herself went up another notch. "I'm sorry. I'd forgotten that you've just arrived. I'm on my way to my rooms, so I'll show you the way."

"You stay here?" He sounded surprised and she gave him a sidelong glance.

"Of course. It's comfortable, and convenient."

"Yes, ma'am." He nodded, still smiling broadly.

He took the oil lamp from her hand and gestured for her to lead the way. A slight scowl marring her face, Maggie set her jaw and headed for the stairs, the soft pool of golden light steady at her back as heavier steps trailed hers up the plain flight, and along the shadowy corridor.

"Your room is number three, Mr. Coulter," she told him, pointing. "At the end of the hall, on the left. I had your things sent up earlier. Your horse is stabled across the street."

"When did you have time to do all that?" he challenged, pleased, but also curious.

She laughed. "While you were busy taking money from foolish drunks."

"Thank you."

"You're quite welcome, Mr. Coulter."

"It's Dylan, ma'am." He handed her the lamp and touched the brim of his hat before walking away, humming softly to himself.

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Before she could think about it, Maggie stopped him by calling out quietly, “Dylan, have you had any supper?”

He turned, watched her for several indeterminate heartbeats, then shook his head.

“Would you like to join me?” Some inner voice was already laughing at her, and Maggie ignored it. She *never* socialized with customers. This was not only uncharacteristic, to her mind it was absurd. Yet... “Jonas Wilkins runs the café a few doors down, and he often stays late for me,” she said by way of explanation.

The amusement in Dylan Coulter’s blue eyes was already making her regret the impulsive invitation, but she bit back the tart words that would retract her cordiality, and waited for him to walk back to stand in front of her.

“I’d be delighted to have supper with you, Miss Watson,” he assured her and offered his arm.

“Maggie,” she said. “If you wouldn’t mind waiting for just a few minutes, I’d like to tidy up before we go.” She knew full-well that she looked more than a bit harried after a long shift in the bar.

“I’ll meet you downstairs in twenty minutes, ma’am,” Dylan said with a smile.

* * *

Fifteen minutes after they’d separated upstairs, Maggie was waiting in the main room of the saloon. She heard a heavy footfall on the stairs and swung around to look at him.

For the second time that night, Dylan Coulter just about took her breath away. He’d changed from his riding clothes into a suit of rich, dark blue. His shirt was pale blue, ruffled at the cuffs and down the front. His silk tie was black, and the jacket he was pulling on drew her attention to broad shoulders and the undeniable impression of strength and power. He hadn’t bothered with a hat, and his dark brown hair was neatly combed, the deep waves gleaming when he passed under a lamp.

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As he continued his walk toward her, her eyes drifted over him. Narrow hips flowed into long legs that were muscled from many hours spent on horseback. His boots were polished black leather, and the silver spurs were more ornate than functional. A gold chain dipped gracefully from the pocket of his burgundy vest, and the watch fob was a small, exquisitely carved replica of an old-fashioned flintlock pistol. At his hip, once again, rested a polished black gun, holster and shell belt were also black, and lacked ornamentation.

A tiny sliver of ice formed at the base of her spine and began a swift ascent, chilling the back of her neck in heartbeats. *He knows how to use that gun, too*, a tiny voice murmured inside her head. The knowledge scared her a lot more than she wanted it to, though she wasn't sure why it should.

“Maggie?”

She actually started at the sound of his quiet, richly timbred voice. His accent, like so much else about him, was something of a mystery; it revealed lingering traces of the south, but also the precision of an education obtained abroad. There was a subtle, growling purr in the texture of his speech, a sound that made her feel awkward and vaguely disoriented. She'd felt a shadow of that kind of feeling only once before, and the reminder of it unsettled her further.

“Mr. Coulter.” She tried to smile, and knew it was only a partial success when his eyebrow rose, curiosity lighting the deep azure gaze that studied her. “Dylan,” she corrected softly. “Shall we go?” It was safer than standing around looking at him. She was distinctly certain that too long in his presence would not bode well for her peace of mind.

“Ma'am.” He nodded and offered his arm. “How far is this café?”

“A few doors down,” she said, and waited while he locked the saloon and pocketed the key. She opened her mouth to question the action, then chose not to bother.

“How much money did Billy Madison lose to you?” She asked the

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question carefully, a deep reticence about the answer stirring something akin to dread in her heart.

“A fair bit,” Dylan replied, his tone casual. “He assures me his daddy will be happy to pay the debt.” He looked down at her, a tiny smile lifting the corners of his mouth. “Is that true, Maggie. Or is the boy really as stupid as he seems?”

She sighed and shook her head. “Unfortunately, both.”

Dylan nodded. “Is this the place we’re looking for?” They’d stopped outside a small building with several windows in the front, and a sign above the door that read *Wilkins Café*.

She glanced at the door, with its shutter down but a light clearly burning inside. She smiled. “Yes, this is it.”

* * *

“She’s pretty friendly with that stranger, Billy,” Gil Horner noted as they watched from the concealment of an alley across the street from the café. He wasn’t much interested in Billy Madison’s attempts to win Maggie Watson’s heart, but Billy’s father paid him well to keep the kid alive. He had the feeling this would be one night when he had to earn his pay by more forceful means than the threat of his presence. If the kid went after Coulter, Gil knew they didn’t really stand much of a chance. Coulter had an air about him that Horner had encountered before; he was dangerous, cool, and confident. All the things Billy Madison wasn’t, of course. “Why don’t you just leave it, kid?” he advised, knowing as he spoke that the boy wouldn’t be deterred.

“Maggie and me have an understandin’, Gil,” Billy objected. “I don’t aim to leave her alone to face the likes of Dylan Coulter.”

Grinding his teeth in frustration, Horner grabbed the young man by the shoulder and spun him around so he could look Billy in the eye.

“What you and Maggie Watson have is a misunderstandin’, kid,” he snarled softly. “She’s out of your league, Billy. Leave her alone before it gets you killed!”

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He waited, and in a detached corner of his mind, he gave the kid a once over. Billy was a good-looking boy, with light brown eyes and hair as black as his Indian mother's had been. He carried the best features of both his parents, and there wasn't a girl within a fifty mile radius who wouldn't be eager to marry him. Nature being perversely absurd, the only woman he'd ever expressed an interest in was the one who didn't want him. Maggie was twenty-five to Billy's nineteen, and Gil had wondered a few times if that wasn't her primary objection to the kid. Horner had made a play for her once, and like others, had been shot down with kind but firm words.

"You still hankerin' for her yourself, Gil?" Billy asked with a sneer. "That why you want me to give up?"

"I'm not a man who likes to be turned down more than once, kid," Gil snapped. "She said no, and I'm willin' to leave it at that. Unlike you," he added pointedly.

"Go home, Gil," Billy ordered. "If I need backup, I can find Boyd."

"Billy," Horner began with forced patience. "The Sheriff's out of town. Boyd ain't in a position to be doin' you favors. He's the deputy, let him do his job."

Billy started to object, just as Horner knew he would. Gil's closed fist rose straight up, clipping the boy soundly beneath the chin, snapping his teeth together and knocking him out cold in a matter of seconds. Sighing heavily, Gil caught the kid's weight, hefted him onto one broad shoulder, and headed down the alley to the waiting horses. Billy would be madder than a caged bobcat come morning, but that was better than dead. At least in Horner's book.

* * *

"What are you looking at, Mr. Coulter?" Maggie asked, seeing his intent gaze shift to the window for the third time in fifteen minutes.

Jonas Wilkins and his wife Martha watched them, less discreetly than they intended, she was sure, from the kitchen doorway. Martha's

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eyes had widened with surprise and, Maggie laughed inwardly, no small amount of appreciation when she'd brought Dylan into the café with her. They were a kindly old couple who had taken her in when she'd first come to Sparkling Springs, and she was very fond of them both. No doubt there would be plenty of questions the following day, the first instant they were able to get her alone.

“Probably nothing.” He smiled.

To her chagrin, when she tried not to look directly at him, his dazzling smile mutated into another of those low rumbling chuckles that made her blush so furiously she was angry at herself for something she couldn't control. She feigned indifference and concentrated instead on the delicious meal Martha and Jonas had served them. She knew, in her heart, that she might as well have been swallowing sawdust for all the impact the supper was making on her taste buds.

“Mr. Coulter,” she remarked a few minutes later, when she caught his head turn toward the window again. “If my company is keeping you from something, feel free to leave.” It sounded peevish, even to her ears.

“On the contrary, ma'am.” He inclined his head. “You have my complete attention.”

She dared to meet that mesmerizing gaze and discovered she did, indeed, have his complete attention. The experience was disconcerting, to put it mildly. His blue eyes tossed candle flames back at her from their sky-like depths, and she was acutely conscious of every tiny line that fanned outward from their crinkled corners. He was laughing at her, she was certain of that, but with no outward indication of humor, she couldn't lash out at him for making her feel like a foolish school girl in the throes of her first infatuation.

“Tell me about Sparkling Springs and the people here?”

“Why?” she asked, studying him closely. “Are you planning to stay longer than a few days?”

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“There is that possibility, Miss Watson,” he replied with a lazy drawl to his tone. His speculative stare drifted over her flushed features and she bristled, but made no attempt to answer him. She turned her concentration to the meal in front of her, and he watched her with real interest. She was an intriguing mixture of graciousness and defensiveness, and he was curious enough to wonder why.

Once they’d lingered over coffee, and an awkward silence he made no effort to breach, Maggie went into the kitchen area to speak with the remarkably absent couple who owned the charming little café. He could hear the rush of quiet words being exchanged, punctuated periodically by Maggie’s exasperated sighs. Shortly after she’d vanished into the back room, she returned, and told him they could leave. Dylan, his grin solidly in place, walked past her and into the kitchen where the old couple were seated at a small table. He inclined his head in a small bow and went directly to Martha Wilkins.

“That was the best meal I’ve had since I left ’Frisco, Mrs. Wilkins,” he assured her with a broad smile. “I wanted to thank the woman who prepared it.”

Martha Wilkins, a short, pleasantly plump woman with graying hair and dark green eyes that must have been the beauty of her face once, giggled like a girl when he gallantly kissed her work worn hand.

“Thank you, Mr. Coulter,” she answered with a beaming smile lighting her face. “Be sure to come by with Maggie for breakfast. I’ll have something special prepared for you.”

Dylan didn’t have to look over his shoulder to know that Maggie had followed him and overheard the woman’s invitation. She was no doubt glowering at him, and he ignored it.

“That would be my distinct pleasure, ma’am,” he said. “You’re a lucky man, Jonas,” he added as he glanced at the café’s owner. “Hang onto this lady, or I’ll be taking her away with me.”

Jonas gave a hearty laugh and shook his hand.

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“You can try, son,” he said with mock ferocity. “But ain’t no man makin’ off with my Martha. Not even a dandy like you.”

“Dandy!” Dylan repeated in horror. “You offend me deeply, sir.”

“I’d like to get to bed some time tonight, Mr. Coulter,” Maggie interjected, and almost fainted with embarrassment over her choice of words when he turned his insolent smile on her, and the undercurrent of innuendo filled the space between them like a tangible presence.

“Far be it from me to keep a lady out of her bed,” he murmured, his eyes dancing with amusement as she glared at the three of them when they all laughed at her.

“Good night!” she snapped with ill-grace and strode from the café, the solid thump of her shoes on the wooden planks testimony to her annoyance.

When Dylan caught up with her, she was waiting outside the Spur, and a glance told him that her mood had soured considerably in the brief minutes she’d been forced to wait for him. He unlocked the door, handed her the key, and tried to keep the smile off his face as he trailed her to the upper level. When the door to her rooms slammed shut with a bang that probably woke every other person in the place, he let himself laugh quietly.

Entering the clean, tidy room, Dylan loosened the leather thong that kept his gun held close to his thigh, then unbuckled his gun belt and hung it on the peg next to the door. He tossed his jacket on the bed, unbuttoned his vest and slid his tie free of his collar. Continuing his trek to the door that opened onto the balcony that ran along the entire upper floor of the saloon, he stepped outside and lit a cheroot.

He was leaning against the wall of the building, smoking in silence a short while later, when the door at the other end of the balcony opened and Maggie came out into the night. She wore a thin cotton nightgown, and her sun-kissed golden hair was loose and cascading in heavy waves down the curving length of her back. She closed her eyes

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and leaned forward, hands braced on the solid wooden railing. She tilted her head back and Dylan's breath caught in his throat as he let his eyes caress the delectable line of her profile as it flowed down to the much too enticing shadow between her breasts. The moon had risen and bathed the night in silvery white, turning everything it touched to shimmering frost. Maggie's lips parted and she drew in a heavy breath that he felt so acutely it was as though she'd drawn the air into his lungs as well as her own.

He flicked the butt of his cheroot into the night, pushed away from the saloon wall and walked toward her. "Beautiful night, isn't it?"

Maggie turned to stare at him, and whatever she'd been thinking about had left her dazed and dreamy-eyed. She didn't answer, and Dylan stepped closer, making her tilt her head back to hold his gaze as he let his body answer its own need rather than think about what he was doing. His fingers slid under the heavy mass of her hair and he cupped the back of her head as he bent to cover her mouth with his. Her lips parted. Whether it was to object or accept him he didn't know, but he let his tongue slip into the sweet warmth of her mouth and he deepened the kiss to an erotic, exploring caress that made him want to go on kissing her forever.

Still allowing instinct to rule good sense, Dylan pulled her closer, pressed her soft feminine curves to the lean contours of his body. He hadn't wanted a woman as desperately as he suddenly wanted Maggie since he was a teenage boy, and his hands began to move with the same demand as his mouth against hers. Whatever need was driving him came to an abrupt and painful halt seconds later when she pushed hard against his chest and freed herself from the intimate embrace. She was gasping and staring at him in shock, something too near fear lurking in the deepest recesses of her eyes. Dylan shivered, chilled to the bone for no apparent reason where only heartbeats before he'd been swept into an inferno.

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“I’m sorry, Maggie,” he offered, his voice harsh with denied need. “I am,” he repeated, and quickly turned away and headed for his own room.

* * *

Maggie watched the stairs, wary and shaky with anticipation in equal measure. It had been a tension-filled day, and every footfall had made her heart go crazy inside her until the instant of disappointment that Dylan Coulter wasn’t the person she’d heard slowed her breathing to normal again. She’d been awake most of the night, thanks to his kisses, and while she tried to hold onto anger and outrage, she was honest enough inside herself to admit her own response was what really annoyed her. He’d reduced her to a quivering mass of nerves and need—and the last thing Maggie wanted in her life was a man who could disrupt her entire existence by merely walking into a room. Unfortunately, it was too late to avoid the condition. Dylan Coulter had proven that with shocking simplicity the previous night.

“Evenin’, Maggie.”

Her fingers suddenly lacked any strength and the bottle she’d been replacing on the back counter slipped from her grasp the second he spoke. Cursing softly, she bent, and was disconcerted further when she discovered he’d come behind the bar and was helping her mop up the mess of glass and spilled whiskey.

“I don’t really need help to do this, Mr. Coulter,” she said, her voice sharper than it needed to be.

“Yes, ma’am.” He nodded and retreated with the speed and grace of a cat shying from burning coals.

Maggie closed her eyes, only then realizing that tears stung them and a sob had risen in her throat.

“Miss Watson?”

She swept the last of the glass into a wet towel and dumped the lot into a bucket at the far end of the bar. Then she turned to look at the

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man who took her place in the saloon when she wanted some time away from the place. She'd forgotten, until that moment, that she'd asked Charlie Carter to come in for the evening.

"I'm fine, Charlie," she assured him with a weak smile. "Just a little tired. Would you mind working until close tonight?"

"Not at all, ma'am." He smiled, then took up residence behind the long, polished bar.

"Thank you," she whispered, and this time her smile was genuine. Charlie was a big man, and well-liked. He'd come back from the war a changed man—quiet, brooding, and solitary. He had few friends, and fewer loyalties. Something in Maggie had won his support almost from the day she'd arrived in town, and while he had no pressing desire to work for Ed Madison, he'd accepted a job from the man to be close to Maggie and protect her. Most nights his presence was all that was required to keep order in the busy saloon.

Maggie's gaze was drawn to Dylan on the other side of the room and her heart did another of those devastating plummets when she saw he was watching her intently, his blue eyes guarded.

"Maggie?"

Billy Madison's voice stirred an entirely new annoyance in her mood and she turned away from Dylan's stare with near painful reluctance.

"What is it, Billy?" She asked the question with real curiosity when she spotted the bruise on his chin.

"How about havin' supper with me tonight?" he suggested. "And don't tell me you're workin', I just heard you tell Charlie to lock up."

"I've already had supper," she evaded. "But thank you."

"Do you happen to have the money you lost to me last night, Mr. Madison?"

Maggie's nerves jangled further when Dylan's quiet, soft drawl came from just over her shoulder. She saw Billy's scowl begin.

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“Give him his money, Billy,” she ordered quietly. “I know your father gave it to you, he was in the bank earlier today.”

“How about another game, Mr. Coulter?” Billy asked. “Double or nothing.”

Dylan laughed, and Maggie was surprised by the undercurrent of ice that layered the sound.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Billy,” she interjected, hoping, somewhat vainly, to put an end to the matter before Ed Madison was forced to intercede.

“I don’t recall askin’ your opinion, Maggie,” Billy snapped. “Stay out of this, it ain’t yer business.”

Maggie smiled, an expression that was faintly mocking. “Maybe not,” she admitted. “But you can’t win a poker game with me, honey.” She went on with exaggerated sweetness, “What makes you think you stand a chance with the likes of him?”

“Maybe I should consider a game with you, then, Miss Watson?” Dylan grinned.

She turned slowly and smiled, the shift of her pretty features telegraphing nothing but pure animosity. “You don’t have anything I’d want, Mr. Coulter.”

“Well, ma’am...” He leaned one elbow on the bar, and his eyes gave her a thorough perusal. “You’ve certainly got something I want.”

To her utter mortification, Maggie felt the scarlet blush flood over her, and she took a step closer to him, intent on smacking the grin off his handsome face. Heat was replaced by ice in the space of a heartbeat. Dylan’s gun was in his hand and he was shaking his head, his eyes focused past her shoulder.

“Don’t even consider it, son,” he advised softly.

She looked back at Billy, saw his hand hovering near his gun, and closed her eyes.

“Kill each other, then!” she snarled in exasperated fury. “At least I

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won't have to put up with either of you any longer.”

Dylan's laughter chased her up the stairs and she was shaking with rage and humiliation when she slammed the door to her rooms. For several minutes she paced and muttered a colorful and eloquent stream of obscenities she'd heard a hundred times from the men in the saloon.

Once some semblance of calm penetrated her mood, she went to her desk, intent on doing some of the bookkeeping in an effort to regain control of her erratic thoughts.

* * *

At some point in the evening, Maggie had fallen asleep at her work. She was jarred from slumber by the familiar sound of gunshots, but instead of casual interest, this time the sound made her blood run cold. She rose and went to the door that led onto the balcony above the saloon. She opened it cautiously and looking out. Lights were beginning to spark to life in the buildings across the street from the Spur, and the sound of running feet grew louder. She peered at the shadowy alley across the street from Wilkins' Café, the alley that had drawn Dylan's attention so many times the previous night, a voice inside her head reminded her. There was someone there now. She caught the briefest glimpse of white, then it was gone.

Heart pounding in her chest, Maggie ran for the door that would take her down to the saloon. She'd just stepped off the flight when there was a low knock on the rear entrance door. Without thinking of consequences, she went and twisted the lock, then opened the heavy panel of wood. Dylan Coulter slipped past her and closed the door.

“What have you done, Dylan?” she asked before she could choose a more tactful way of making the query.

“Do you have any experience pulling bullets out of men, Miss Watson?”

Maggie's knees suddenly felt inadequate to the task of keeping her standing upright.

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“Dylan?”

He stumbled, and she caught him awkwardly, offering what little support she could as he propelled her into the saloon and back to the stairs. Once they reached the short flight, the lamp on the wall halfway up gave her a clear look at him. He was dressed in dove gray tonight, and the pristine white of his shirt was marred by a horrible, expanding stain of crimson.

“You need a doctor, Dylan,” she whispered, feeling the color drain from her face.

“They won’t send a doctor, Maggie,” he said through clenched teeth. “A lynch mob maybe, but not a doctor.”

“Why?”

They’d made it to her rooms and he pushed the door open and went to the bed, where he promptly collapsed into unconsciousness. Before she could think more about what was happening, insistent pounding began on the main floor doors. Her gaze went back to Dylan and she obeyed instinct rather than reason. Until she knew what had happened, she didn’t intend to let him be killed. If the dread in her heart was any indication of how serious things might be, he was in real danger, and he’d come to her for help. She tossed a heavy velvet dress onto the bed and over him, messed up the linen and pillows, then grabbed for a dressing gown. She was shouting and running a minute later, dragging fingers through her hair in an effort to look like she’d just been awakened from a sound sleep. She yanked open the saloon doors and stood back when Ed Madison stormed inside, followed by no less than a dozen men.

“Where is he, Maggie?” Ed asked, his dark eyes vivid with rage. Madison was a tall, lean man, with graying hair and angular features. He had an air of authority about him that commanded respect in many men, and fear in many others. He was armed with a rifle now, and to all appearances was fully prepared to turn it on anyone who stood between

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him and his quarry.

“Where is who, Ed?” She feigned ignorance, figuring it would be attributed to her being a mere woman.

“Coulter,” he snapped. “Dylan Coulter. He just gunned down Billy and Gil.”

“That’s ridiculous,” she objected before she could think about what she was saying.

“Ridiculous!” Ed repeated with real menace, his hand closing painfully around her upper arm. “My son is dead, Maggie! And my foreman is probably not going to be far behind him.”

She staggered when he released her with a push and headed for the stairs. “What room was he in?” he demanded.

“Three,” she answered, chasing him up the stairs, overly aware of the guns at her back as his men trailed after them. *Dear God! They’d shoot Dylan while he was unconscious if they discovered him.*

The door to room three was torn from its hinges when Ed Madison’s foot crashed into it and sent splinters showering over them. At his back, she stumbled into him when he stopped suddenly inside the room.

“Where is he, Maggie?”

“How the hell should I know, Ed? I run this place and rent the rooms, I don’t keep track of the guests. You know that.”

“Gil said you and Coulter seemed pretty cozy.” His eyes ran over her in speculative consideration. “He an old *friend* of yours, Maggie?”

The snide tone galled her, but she kept her temper in check with determined effort.

“Until he rode in yesterday, I’d never set eyes on him before,” she replied with a calm that surprised her.

“Search every room in the place,” Madison ordered over her shoulder.

“Ed, for pity’s sake,” she snapped. “I will not have my home

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invaded by strangers!”

“Get out of the way, Maggie.” He pushed her aside and strode down the hall, on a direct course to her rooms. She ran after him and reached the door ahead of him.

“Ed, there is no one in my rooms!” She swung the door inward and gave him a full view of the disheveled bed and the rest of the empty room.

He looked for several moments, and she wondered if he was suspicious or waiting to hear or see something that would prove her to be the liar she was.

“Get inside,” he shoved her into the room, closed the door, and she heard him walk away.

She went to the bed and sat on the edge, her hands shaking uncontrollably in her lap as she considered how she was going to get Coulter out of the Spur while he was still breathing. After a few minutes, quiet returned to the saloon and she knew the hunt for Dylan had moved on. A gentle rap on the balcony door almost made her wet herself, and she ran to bolt the door before anyone could force their way inside.

“It’s Charlie, Miss Watson.”

She closed her eyes, thanked God for kind souls and brave men, then opened the door and let him into the room.

“I thought you might be needin’ some help, ma’am.” His eyes moved to the heap of tumbled velvet and bed linen. “Coulter under than mess somewhere?” he asked quietly.

“He’s been shot, Charlie.” Her voice was tremulous with fear. “And I don’t know what the hell went on tonight.”

“Billy Madison lost big again, ma’am,” he informed her as he tossed aside the layers of material that concealed Dylan. “Heard him talkin’ afterward, sayin’ he wasn’t gonna hand over anymore o’ his daddy’s money to the likes o’ Coulter.”

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He finally had Dylan uncovered and was tearing open his bloodied shirt. Maggie's sharp gasp made him glance over his shoulder. "I'm gonna need your help with this, Miss Watson," he said, tone neutral.

"Maggie," she said. "Call me Maggie, please." She went to stand next to him and swayed just a little. "Can you take the bullet out, Charlie?"

"Yes, ma'am. But right now, you're gonna have to do it. Get some whiskey, pour it into him, and get the slug out. He'll survive it. I *borrowed* a few things from the doc," he added, indicating the black bag that had been placed next to the door.

"But—"

"Miss...Maggie—" He nodded. "—I need to get Coulter's horse from the livery and hide it someplace before Madison and his gang discover he's still in town."

A small measure of composure returned to Maggie, and with it came clarity. She nodded. "Get his things from room three. Take everything to your place, and I'll get him out there as soon as I can." He smiled encouragement and she touched his arm as he rose and turned to leave. He looked at her, waiting. "Thank you, Charlie."

He nodded again, and was gone before she could say anything further.

"Maggie..."

She was startled by Dylan's voice, weak though it was, and she sat next to him, her hand pushing back his hair to smooth his forehead. There was a flush of heat on his skin already.

"Stay quiet, Dylan," she advised softly. "I'll be right back."

Within five minutes she'd gathered up what few suitable things she had for the task ahead of her.

Dylan watched her with a mixture of worry and macabre amusement as she laid out the meager medical supplies and the doctor's borrowed instruments, then opened a bottle of the best whiskey she had

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on hand.

“Here,” she said holding the bottle out to him. “Do you need help?” She didn’t wait for a reply. Pouring a generous amount of the amber fluid into a glass, she leaned forward and put her hand behind his head, unintentionally giving Dylan an unimpeded view of her cleavage. He was in pain, but he sure as hell wasn’t dead, she realized when she saw the direction of his gaze. Apparently even a bullet in his shoulder couldn’t put a damper on his lust.

“Mr. Coulter, under other circumstances I’d slap you for being so rude,” she informed him, and resisted the urge to do it anyway when his answering grin made her blush scarlet yet again. “Drink!” she ordered, none too gently. He took the glass and downed it, then passed it back for her to refill. They repeated the process until he was drunk enough not to care what she did to him. Or so she hoped...

Maggie shuddered as another ripple of agony shook Dylan in the bed. She almost vomited from the amount of blood she was spilling as she dug into his flesh, trembling violently each time she considered what she was doing to him. To her immeasurable relief, she finally encountered the small object she’d been hunting for and a steady pulling pressure withdrew it from the ragged hole in his shoulder.

She dropped it in the small basin of bloody water and whiskey, then looked down into his pain-tensed features. He was conscious, but hadn’t made a sound as she’d worked. The knots of bed linen twisted around his fingers were mute testimony to the pain he was in, and she shook visibly for a moment before bringing herself under control again.

“Dylan?” It was a choked gasp of sound and he nodded.

“Pack the wound with flour or gunpowder, Maggie,” he instructed in a voice that was ragged with anguish.

“I don’t have flour,” she told him, barely keeping the sob from her voice.

“Take a couple of the shells from my gun belt.” His growling voice

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was deeper than usual. “Work the powder until it’s fine dust, then pack the hole with it.”

She stared, highly doubtful of what he proposed. He managed a weak smile, in spite of his pain. “Trust me, I’ll survive. It’ll stop the bleeding. Dump some whiskey into it, then the powder, and bind it as tight as you can manage.”

The instructions took the last of his strength and he faded into oblivion on the last words. She did exactly what he’d told her to do, and when it was over, she cried; deep, soul-draining sobs that gradually lulled her into restless sleep next to him.

* * *

Charlie Carter arrived before dawn and she woke with a start when he touched her shoulder.

“He’s all right, Miss Watson,” Charlie told her immediately when her look went to Dylan Coulter’s ashen countenance. “Breathin’ steady, and sleepin’ deep.”

“What’s happening out there?” Maggie asked once she’d climbed off the bed and splashed some fresh water on her face. She deliberately ignored the sensation of sand in her eyes and tried to bring some order to her appearance.

“Madison’s tryin’ to scare up a posse to go after Coulter.” Charlie smiled a little. “He ain’t havin’ much luck just yet.”

“Can you stay with Dylan while I go to the café, Charlie?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He nodded. “I told Martha and Jonas you’d be along. They know he’s still here, Miss Watson.”

“Thank you.” She smiled wanly. “Again. I seem to be saying that to you quite often now,” she added, tone mildly self-deprecating.

“If he killed Billy Madison,” Charlie declared with a glance at Dylan, “then the kid gave him no choice.”

“I hope you’re right,” she whispered, and slipped out of the room.

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* * *

“Maggie!”

Her heart sank the instant she heard Ed Madison’s voice greet her in the main area of the saloon. He was already well ensconced, surrounded by men with varying expressions of annoyance and eagerness for the hunt ahead of them. She continued into the room, weary, exhausted, and very worried.

“Did Coulter show up here after we left?” Madison asked.

She stood, hands on her hips, determined to at least appear calm.

“Why would he come back here, Ed?” she asked with a clear note of irritation in her voice. “You searched every room in the place. He’s long gone, no doubt.”

“Where would he go?”

She glowered at Deputy Sheriff Boyd Randall. “Why would I know that, Boyd?”

“Billy said you had supper with him the night he arrived in town,” he informed her, tone accusatory.

“Is that true, Maggie?” Ed Madison demanded angrily.

“Yes,” she snapped. “He had supper with me. At Wilkins’ Café. I didn’t realize there was a law against having supper with a guest!” Her anger was making her reckless, and she had to pull back from the urge to shout at them.

“It sure as hell ain’t like you to have supper with anyone,” Boyd noted, and there were a disturbing number of nods of agreement among the younger men present.

Maggie was beginning to understand what it felt like to be cornered and the target of too much unwanted and dangerous attention.

“Ed?” she asked, and waited for him to look at her. “Am I expected to explain everything I choose to do now? If that’s the case, I’ll be leaving today.”

“Not so fast, Maggie,” Madison said, standing up and walking over

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to face her at the bar. “No one’s leavin’ Sparkling Springs until I find Coulter.”

“Why? Are you afraid I might have shot Billy, or do you just want to keep everyone handy in case you can’t find Dylan Coulter to blame.”

Madison’s hand rose and he would have landed a solid blow to her face if Charlie Carter hadn’t appeared at that moment. They’d been so intent on their exchange that no one had noticed him coming down the stairs.

“Trouble, Miss Watson?” he asked when he had come to a halt next to her.

“Not at all,” she replied. “I was just on my way to see Jonas and Martha. Give Mr. Madison and his men a drink before they leave, please.”

She cast a final look at Ed Madison, then made a quick exit via the back door.

* * *

“What’s going on, Charlie?” Maggie asked an hour later when she returned to the Spur and found that he’d opened the saloon, but it had far fewer customers than usual.

“Madison’s put a bounty on Coulter’s head,” he answered. “Every cowboy and fool with a gun is out huntin’ him now.”

She sighed heavily.

“That ain’t the worst of it, ma’am,” he went on with clear reluctance.

“Go on, Charlie.” She eyed him warily as a heavy coil of dread began to tighten in the pit of her stomach.

“He’s sent a wire to Denver, askin’ for a Pinkerton man to be sent here.”

“Any idea who he’s asked for?” The knot in her gut became a genuine lump of solid, unforgiving pain.

“Cord Danner,” Charlie told her, his sharp eyes measuring her

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reaction.

Maggie felt the color receding from her face and wondered if the sudden gray mist in front of her eyes meant she was about to faint. She didn't have time to consider it further when the sound of shuffling feet drew her gaze to the stairs. Dylan was partly dressed and stumbling along the corridor, he was swaying at the top of the flight and she was running before she realized what she was doing. When she reached his side she was furious.

“Are you tryin’ to get yourself killed, Dylan?” She put her arm around his waist and veered him back toward her rooms. “There’s a posse out looking for you, and Ed Madison is going to measure up another noose or two if he finds out Charlie and I have been hiding you!”

“I need to get out of this town, Maggie.”

He made the statement with a lot more steady determination than she'd have believed possible a few hours earlier. Her eyes drifted, the need to look at him something she no longer shied away from. Charlie had brought clean clothes, the ones he'd worn when he'd arrived the previous day. Her look drank him in, from polished black boots, up long, lean legs presently encased in dark brown pants, and her heart pounded with wild fury when she permitted her stare to linger over the broad expanse of tanned, contoured chest that was visible between the open panels of his shirt. The light dusting of dark hair over bronze skin fascinated her, and she wanted to touch him.

“Where are my things, Maggie?” He asked the question as he crossed the room to look out the partly open door that led to the balcony.

Her guilty eyes shot upward to meet the amused interest in his deep azure gaze.

“Charlie’s place,” she said in automatic response. “Dylan, you need to rest. You were shot last night.”

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“I need to get out of this town before Ed Madison hangs me for killing his son,” he snapped harshly. “Now, much as I’d like to stay and get to know you better, I’m leaving.” There was just enough insinuation in his tone to make her scowl.

“I know you as well as I want to, Mr. Coulter,” she snarled with unwarranted vehemence. “So by all means, leave. Bleed to death on the trail for all I care!”

“You’d care, Maggie.” He grinned and walked the few steps that would put them face to face. Her head went back and she held his look, frowning her annoyance.

“Dylan...” Her voice was barely more than a whisper of air and sound between them. “Ed’s already put a bounty on your head. At least wait until it’s dark.”

“And what are we going to do until then?” he taunted, tone evocative.

“I have a saloon to run,” she reminded him, while some distant part of her mind questioned her lack of desire to move away from his spellbinding presence.

“And a good man to run it.” His smile flashed white teeth and far too much charm at her rapidly disintegrating resistance. “I’ll stay put, if you’ll stay with me,” he proposed. “We’ll play poker,” he added with a grin. “I recall hearing you’re pretty good.”

“Poker?”

“It’s going to be a long day.” He shrugged, winced a little at the pain it caused his shoulder, then waited, watching the conflict play out over her expressive features.

“No.”

“Why not? Afraid you won’t beat me as easily as you did Billy Madison?”

She glared at him. “I told you last night, Mr. Coulter,” she gritted out from between clenched teeth, “you don’t have anything I want.”

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“I’ve got a lot of money,” he drawled. “Most of it belongs to Ed Madison. If Lady Luck is with you, you’ll have everything you need to leave this backwater.”

“And what if you win?”

He grinned, the expression a combination of wicked humor and mocking incitement.

“If I win,” he murmured, leaning close to purr the words into her ear, “you spend the night in my bed.”

Maggie actually stumbled back, shock and outrage vying for dominance on her pretty face. “What?”

Coulter stifled a laugh at her gasp of near horror.

“I think you heard me just fine, Miss Watson.” His eyes never left her.

“You’ve got some nerve, Mister,” she said, tone savage with indignation. “I may not be some chaste virgin, but I sure as hell have never been any man’s whore!”

“I’m very happy to hear that, Miss Watson,” he went on with insolent charm, completely unaffected by her wrath. “Now—” He smiled again. “—what about our wager? Do you accept the terms?”

* * *

It was late in the afternoon when a knock on the door made Maggie almost jump out of her skin. Dylan’s impudent smile made her feel even more foolish, and she glowered at him before rising from her chair and going to see who was on the other side of the locked panel of wood.

“Who is it?” she asked.

“Martha Wilkins.”

Maggie chewed her bottom lip for a moment, considering her options, and whether or not Martha was alone in the hallway. Martha Wilkins wasn’t a woman who had ever willingly stepped foot in a saloon. It was possible Ed Madison had brought her to lure Maggie out.

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“Maggie,” the older woman scolded. “There’s no one with me, girl, now open the door. I’ve got a meal for you and Mr. Coulter.”

Maggie let her in and smiled her thanks as she took the dish-laden tray from Martha’s hands and brought it to the table that was presently littered with cards, money, and Dylan’s gold cheroot case. He graciously pushed everything aside and nodded to Martha in greeting.

“Good to see you again, ma’am.” He started to rise, but Maggie kept him in place with a firm hand on his good shoulder.

“Stay put, Dylan,” she ordered softly. “Martha knows you’re a gentleman, you don’t have to impress her further.”

“I’m glad to see you’re still in one piece, Mr. Coulter. And a mighty handsome piece, at that,” she teased warmly.

“What’s being said about last night, Martha?” Maggie interjected, restless and agitated. It was a condition that had prevailed most of the day thus far, with rare, brief periods of concentration on their poker game the only respite her mind had.

“Ed Madison is still out hunting for Mr. Coulter,” Martha said, her eyes glancing off Dylan for an instant while he dug into the plate of steak and eggs she’d brought. He poured coffee, winked at her, and she shook her head with fond exasperation.

Watching them, Maggie could practically see Martha’s thoughts about the man in front of her. Despite the fact that she barely knew him, Martha’s judgment was clear—whatever they cared to call him, be it murderer or outlaw, she saw a good man when she looked at Dylan. She turned to speak to Maggie again.

“According to Jim Dawson, there’s been an answer to Ed’s wire, too,” Martha added.

Maggie nodded and sighed. “Cord will be arriving in a few days, I gather?”

“That would be my guess.” Her nervous gaze held Maggie’s for a few instants.

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“Who’s Cord?” Dylan asked.

“None of your business, Mr. Coulter,” Maggie snapped. “But I think you’re going to live a whole lot longer if you’re not here when he arrives.” She turned to Martha. “Tell Jonas I’ll be in touch as soon as I can. Charlie will know where to find me once I get settled. I don’t want you worryin’, Martha.”

“Are we heading out so soon, Maggie?” Dylan asked.

“Mr. Coulter,” Maggie began with forced patience. “I have no idea where you’re going, be it heaven, hell, or someplace in between. *I* am leaving Sparkling Springs as soon as I clear up a few things.”

“I’ll tell Charlie you’ll be needing your rig, Maggie,” Martha said. She hugged the younger woman close. “We’ll visit, honey,” she whispered, close to Maggie’s ear. Both women were in tears. Jonas and Martha were old. Maggie knew she’d probably never see either of them again, and it hurt, deeply.

“Tell Jonas I’ll be by before I leave,” Maggie requested as they walked to the door. A quick peek into the hallway told her it was safe, and she kissed Martha’s cheek before shooing her into the corridor and watching her dart down the stairs with surprising agility.

“What’s all this about leaving, Maggie?” Dylan asked the moment she turned around again. For a few brief moments, she’d actually forgotten about his presence.

“It’s a long story, and one I don’t have time to tell if I was inclined to.”

“Then maybe you’d like to finish this game before we go our separate ways?” he suggested, and set aside the tray of half-eaten food. “I hear it’s bad luck to walk away from an unfinished card game.” He gave her a teasing grin.

“My luck couldn’t get any worse,” she snapped.

“I’m counting on it.” He forced his expression to remain neutral when the familiar ire rose in her slate-blue eyes.

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“Deal,” she said, voice tight with annoyance when she sat across from him again.

“Well,” he drawled, “since you’re in something of a hurry, let’s make it interesting. Winner take all,” he proposed, eyes locked intently with hers.

“Dylan...”

“Unless you’re not prepared to honor the terms of the bet.”

He leaned back and Maggie tried not to fidget in the face of his casual indifference. She felt a sense of leashed-in tension mounting inside him, but was out of her depth trying to discern the reason for it. When she chewed her bottom lip for a few seconds, then drew in an audible breath before nodding, she saw his mouth twitch and knew he was subduing a huge grin.

“Deal,” she repeated, adding softly, “I want to be done with this.”

He shuffled the cards with his long-fingered elegant hands and her eyes watched every tiny movement he made as he laid out the two small piles of cards. She felt her stomach knot with apprehension, then she lifted the five cards and looked at them. A small whisper of relief drifted the length of her spine and cooled some of the anger that had taken up permanent residence in her throughout the past two days.

“How many cards?” Dylan asked. The moment of relief vanished when she was faced with the guarded, unreadable blue of his eyes.

“Two,” she murmured. He tossed them across the table and discarded one of his own and replaced it.

“Call,” he purred in a seductive whisper.

She placed her cards face up on the table and waited, her effort to breathe strangling her rather than easing the sudden constriction in her throat.

“Full house, kings high,” he noted with a tilt of his head and a smile. “Impressive.”

“Are we done, Mr. Coulter?” she asked, suddenly eager to escape,

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though not certain precisely why.

“Not yet,” he said with the same purring quality to his deep, gravel-textured voice. “You haven’t seen my cards.” He began to turn them over, one at a time.

Maggie’s heart stopped for an instant, then began to pound at what felt like twice its normal rate. Each flip of the card drew her closer to the edge of a dead faint, and when he turned the final card, she was certain she was losing consciousness. Four aces and the queen of hearts blurred before her and she was distantly aware of Dylan’s chuckle fading into a shout of concern when she started to slip from her chair.

“Maggie!” He shook her gently, and the haze cleared from her vision. When she could see him again, her fury at him fogged his handsome features with a cloud of red and she slapped him so hard across the face that her hand burned.

“You arrogant bastard!” she choked out in a voice that was shaking with humiliation and rage, and any number of emotions she wasn’t ready to analyze too closely.

Instead of anger, his laughter spilled out in sensuous waves that pummeled her already battered senses.

“Does this mean you don’t intend to make good on our bet, Miss Watson?” He stood and went back to his chair. He sat, lit a cheroot, and watched her through the smoke that hung in the air over the table.

“You can go straight to the devil, Mr. Coulter,” she snarled, enraged well beyond reason.

“I fully expect to, Miss Watson,” he replied amiably. “But you still haven’t answered my question.”

“Why?” She asked the question with a combination of genuine wonder and exasperation. “I can’t believe you have to resort to gambling to lure any woman into your bed. Why not find someone who wants the pleasure?”

“I have,” he answered with a grin. “You just don’t realize it yet.”

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Humor glittered in his deep blue eyes.

“Dylan.” She hissed his name in her annoyance. “I don’t want you, or anyone else. I just want to be left alone.”

Quite unexpectedly, she saw his eyes grow still as a placid mountain lake, and the sudden, soft introspection was more unsettling than his mocking amusement.

“I don’t think a woman like you is meant to be alone, Maggie. I think a woman like you needs to be cherished, loved, and...” The challenging laughter shifted into his gaze again as he concluded, “...bedded often. And by someone who knows how to do it right.”

She flushed from her toes to the roots of her heavy, unbound hair, the heat sweeping over her in a rush of longing and unwanted vulnerability. She felt alone, frightened, and much too susceptible to Dylan Coulter’s dangerous charm.

“You win.” Her shoulders sagged in defeat, and she rose. His eyes followed her as she went to her small, plain dressing table, brushed her hair, then turned to look at him. When she reached for the row of tiny pearl buttons on her blouse, he shook his head.

“Not like this, Maggie,” he growled, sincerely angered by her resigned capitulation.

“I intend to leave this town tonight, Dylan. If you want to collect your winnings, this is going to be your only chance.”

He rose and walked across the room to stand in front of her. The gray-blue of her eyes made him think about stormy skies and restless streams that ran deep and dangerous. He touched her face with the backs of his fingers, the whisper of touch smoothing the silken slope of her cheek before he smiled with real gentleness.

“You’re a spirited woman, Maggie Watson,” he said with indulgent warmth. “I have no desire to douse that fire, or be burned by it.”

She dropped her eyes, hid the sudden race of her pulse beneath the curtain of lowered lashes. She caught a glimpse of the bandaging she’d

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wrapped around his shoulder the previous night.

“How does that feel?” She reached up to push back his shirt and get a clear look at the injured area. To her immense relief, no blood seeped through the layers of white cotton that covered his sun-bronzed skin.

“In a few days I won’t know I was shot. You should have been a doctor,” he teased.

“And you should have been—”

He cut off whatever caustic comment she was about to make when he bent and pulled her head forward, his kiss ruthless and hungry. He wasn’t interested in the on-going verbal sparring that was defining their time together. There were far more pleasant ways to spend the next few hours. She tensed against him, and he loosened his hold just enough to allow her to relax. His lips continued their relentless, persuasive exploration and she sighed, her mouth opening to the light pressure of his tongue. Dylan’s response was intense and instantaneous, he pulled her close, fitting her ample curves to the lean length of his body as he deepened the kiss into an erotic duel of their entwined tongues.

Maggie relaxed against him and slowly slid her arms around his waist as the kiss lengthened and grew in intensity. Dylan sucked her tongue deeper into his mouth and shuddered as her fingers smoothed over the broad expanse of his back, waking sensations he hadn’t felt in a long, long time. It went beyond sexuality, and stirred something buried away inside him. He was suddenly treading dangerous ground; equally sudden was the awareness that it didn’t frighten him as much as it might have. His hands moved, fingertips tingling in eager anticipation as he finally traced her lush contours, stroking fingers making their way inexorably upward until he finally cupped the heavy swells of her full breasts.

Maggie clutched at his shoulders, drowning in sensuous quicksand as Dylan pressed her hips more snugly to his. The hard lines of his body were lighting fire in her, and she didn’t want to know how totally

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she could burn before losing herself to him. The slow, coaxing glide of his tongue entwined with hers, stroking and exploring, making her want him like she'd never wanted anyone before. This, she reminded herself, was why she'd been so afraid to be near him. Some inner instinct had recognized him as a threat to her carefully structured world and the cultivated, cool detachment she had created for herself.

Maggie gasped softly as Dylan's mouth left hers and began a slow, provocative trek down her neck. His hands were smoothing caresses over her body, learning its curves and weaknesses while igniting a profound and deeply repressed hunger in her soul. The room was swirling around her, and she shook her head, closed her eyes and tried to calm the tempest that raged inside her. The effort was futile when Dylan's fingers opened her blouse, slid beneath her thin camisole and glided upward to cup her bare breasts. His mouth had settled in the hollow at the base of her throat, and the insistent stroke of his tongue over that responsive area was lighting a turbulent flame that fanned outward, flooding her entire being with desperate need.

She placed her hands against his chest and tried to catch her breath, staring intently at him when he eased away from her neck.

"Dylan..." She shuddered violently when his thumbs began brushing leisurely across her nipples and hardened them against the warmth of his palms when he started kneading her firm flesh in gentle strokes and squeezes. Whatever she'd been planning to say vanished without being voiced, and Maggie leaned eagerly into his kiss again. Her hands moved across his chest and started to wind around his neck. She pulled back instantly when she encountered the bulk of the bandage that covered his left shoulder.

"Dylan?" Uncertainty and concern were obvious.

"Forget about it, Maggie," he reassured her. Before she started to object wholeheartedly, Dylan silenced her. The kiss was ruthlessly sensual, and he had a split-second to wonder if he'd be able to exert the

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control he wanted to make love to her properly. She pushed closer, and the surge of response in his groin was almost painful.

Sensory enjoyment defined time as they kissed and explored, hands and mouths feverish with excitement.

“This isn’t going to work, honey,” Dylan murmured a long while later when he drew away and glanced at the tangle of half discarded clothes and limbs they’d become while trying to find a comfortable position on her small settee.

Maggie laughed, her normally clear voice husky and sensuous with the breathiness of passion. She squirmed out from under him and extended her hand. Dylan’s fingers closed around hers and she led him through the suite’s small sitting room and into her bedroom.

In the bedroom, Maggie lit a single lamp, creating a soft, warm pool of golden light that illuminated the bed. As Dylan watched, she slowly removed the rest of her clothes. His eyes followed every motion, however minute, and she smiled, feeling deliciously wild and sexy. Her knees threatened to buckle when he kicked off his boots and reached for the buttons on his pants. He was naked and smiling seconds later.

Dylan caught her in his arms, groaning when he finally felt her naked skin next to his. They fell back to the mattress, and Dylan swallowed her laughter in a kiss that made her arch beneath him. Her legs tangled around his and her hips rose in wordless entreaty.

“Not so fast,” Dylan whispered against her ear. He felt her tremors; the shaking that wracked her was beyond her control. He was experiencing the same urgency, but he wanted to savor it; and he wanted her to belong to him when they finally consummated the hunger that had been building between them from the moment they’d first seen each other.

Maggie tried to control her body; something she’d never been challenged to do before. Dylan’s sensitive, knowing hands began to stroke soft, feathery caresses over her skin, making the ache inside her

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a bittersweet pain that she never wanted to end. Her arms went around his shoulders, and one hand smoothed the dark silk of his hair, guiding his mouth to her breasts. She cried out, a throaty moan of pure elation, when his tongue finally licked the swollen bud, tracing it repeatedly while his hands molded her hips and thighs. When he began to suck, her back curled in ardent eroticism. He repeated the seductive torment on her other breast, and her eyes closed, her concentration focused only on the blissful sensations Dylan's touch was teaching her.

Time became infinite as Dylan lingered and lingered at her breasts, drawing tiny, muted sounds of agonized pleasure from her. His name was a plea when he finally slipped lower in the bed and she lost the feel of his solid muscles beneath her hands. When his lips touched her inner thighs, she was certain her body was melting. She opened her eyes and watched in fascination as he drew closer to the center of her passion. His hands slid under her, cupped her buttocks and lifted her hips off the bed. She choked back a cry of ecstatic pleasure as his tongue probed into her.

His name was a whispery gasp of air, and Dylan slowed the tantalizing pressure of his tongue as he drank in the taste and feel of her. Maggie was writhing, caught in an arousal that he wanted to maintain for as long as possible. Everything about her was intoxicating to him, the scent of her passion, the satiny texture of her skin, the hoarse, shallow rasp of her breath as he made love to her. His body was screaming for gratification, but he wasn't ready to revel in his own satisfaction yet.

Her hands tangled in his hair, and he stroked her soft folds with slow, arousing purpose. Her breaths were rapid and feverish now, and he pressed harder to her wet heat, feeling her orgasm tear through her in waves. He continued to tease her, as excited by her shattering climaxes as she was. When he finally drew back, she was flushed and limp on the snowy white bed linen.

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Maggie arched again as the last spasm of passion shuddered through her. She twisted toward him when he moved and stretched out beside her. She kissed his chest, felt the furious pace of his heart against her lips, and smiled. The lethargy was leaving her limbs, and she wanted to touch him, to taste and feel every inch of him.

She bent over him, kissed him with raw, blatant lust. The taste of her aroused body on his lips was alien, but stirred the hunger to greater need. She broke their kiss, and began a slow, deliberate exploration of him. Dylan's chest was smooth, contoured, and well muscled, as was the rest of him. Her hair fell like a curtain around them as she suckled and bit at his nipples for endless minutes. She moved, kissed the inside of his wrist, his palm, took each long finger into her mouth and sucked intently before moving to the pale, flawless hollows of his hips.

Dylan's head was spinning as she avoided his erection with studied purpose. Her head ducked between his thighs and he hissed with pleasure as she began to kiss and whisper against him. He spread his legs wider, gave her easy access to every part of him. She didn't leave anything untouched, from his ankles upward. He finally caught the endless streams of her hair and his fingers tangled in the thick tresses, then guided her mouth over him.

For several seconds, neither of them moved. Maggie's fingers drew patterns over his hips, and she began a steady, torturing rhythm on him. Dylan's low moans of blissful satisfaction encouraged her, and she kept him hovering at the edge of orgasm, but didn't push him over into release.

Oblivious of the wrenching pain in his shoulder, Dylan pulled her away and rolled with her, pinning her beneath him on the mattress. He kissed her, lips hard and crushing, then stared down at her, asking. He felt his heart roar when she smiled and nodded.

Trust. She was trusting him with her heart, and he knew it. Just as he knew, intuitively, that he was the first man to have known her like

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this in a very long time. He lowered his head, caught her mouth with his, and positioned himself more comfortably between her thighs. He raised his head and held her face in his hands as he eased into her wet, tight heat. Maggie's eyes closed, tears slid across her cheeks, and she clung to him.

His rhythm was slow and gentle at first, working them both into a frenzy that quickly became ravaging need. Her legs wrapped around his waist and she clutched at him with a strength that surprised him. When her orgasm caught her, he rode out the wracking shudders with his own shattering release.

The room came back into focus gradually, and Maggie's legs slipped away from their fervid grip on him. Her arms remained wrapped around his back and she kissed his temple, then his lips when he lifted his head from her shoulder and smiled down at her. Carefully, Dylan moved off her, and collapsed beside her with a groan. He lifted his arm and draped it across his forehead, holding her to him.

"Winner take all," she murmured softly, and watched him absorb the words, their myriad implications, then finally turn his deep blue gaze to hers.

"What?" It was rasp of sound that conveyed confusion, anger, and genuine shock.

"The bet," she said softly. "You won, and I've paid you, Dylan. In full."

He twisted, and she resisted the sudden urge to bolt from the bed as she faced the eruption churning to life in his blazing eyes.

"Is that what you think this was?" he roared, unconcerned with who heard him, or the fact that he was now a wanted man in danger of being shot on sight.

She flinched and despite the regret that plagued her conscience, she refused to back down in the face of his fury.

"What else would it have been, Dylan?" she retorted. "Now, is our

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business concluded, or do you really expect me to spend an entire night with you?"

When his only response was a glower that made her knees wobble, she nodded and slid from the bed.

"Where are you going, Maggie?"

It was whipcord taunt, his voice, and she stopped in her tracks, but didn't dare to meet his eyes when she answered. "I have to get ready to leave Sparkling Springs," she said, and ignored the disturbing quaver in her voice. "I suspect if anyone heard you, you should get ready to swing from a rope."

Dead silence leeches all the warmth from the day, leaving only cold space that suddenly filled the room. Maggie shook under the pressure of it, and chewed her bottom lip in an effort to hold back a sob of misery and despair. A second later, she gasped in fright when Dylan's steely fingers closed on her arm and he whirled her around to face him. For a single heartbeat, Maggie was certain she was about to faint at his feet, then it passed, and all that remained was sorrow, and a deep sense of profound loss.

"We're not anywhere near through," he assured her in a voice as icy as the air had become. "Get ready to leave, and I'll meet you at the livery stable in thirty minutes."

"Dylan." She grabbed his arm when he started to brush past her. "Your things are at Charlie's place on the edge of town. I'll take you there, but you have to wait until it's dark or someone will try to kill you." She didn't bother informing him that she had no intention of going anywhere with him. She had plans that would take her many miles from him, and that's what she held onto as he stared down at her, his expression filled with enough wrath to numb her spirit permanently.

"I didn't realize you cared if I kept breathing, or not," he noted dryly.

Her gaze dropped from his and her heartbeat accelerated as she was

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faced with the broad expanse of his naked chest. Her look darted lower and she shivered when she saw that he hadn't bothered to cover himself with a sheet, his pants, or anything else. What she was staring at was rampant male, the most potent example of masculine perfection she'd ever seen. And, with that awareness came the knowledge that she'd never touch him again, not as she had so short a while earlier. He'd never let her that close to him after what she'd just done to destroy their tentative trust.

Dylan's hand on her chin jerked her head up again and he laughed at her, a mocking sound that made her want to curl up in a corner and sob.

"Don't worry, darling," he drawled, "I won't keep you waiting too long for the next ride."

Mortification stained her cheeks scarlet. She took a step back and lifted her hand. He caught her wrist before she landed the blow.

"Not again, sweetheart," he murmured in a sibilant hiss of sound. "I didn't earn that one."

He released her with a casual disdain that shamed her further, and went to gather his scattered clothes. Maggie choked back her self-disgust and went about packing her meager belongings, all the while trying, vainly, to ignore his presence.

* * *

Dusk settled over the agitated town with painful slowness, and Maggie wondered how she'd survive the next few hours. There was a storm rumbling ominously in the nearby mountains, but it was tame compared to the tempest that roiled in Dylan Coulter's eyes each time their gazes locked. The distant flares of stark white light in the sky made her uneasy, and she wondered how she was going to escape Coulter's constant watch. Part of her wanted to go with him, and she desperately needed distance to regain the control of her life that had been shattered so fully the moment he'd walked into the Silver Spur.

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“How much farther?” Dylan asked, his edgy look scanning their surroundings in a continuous search for trouble. They’d left the Spur via the rear, and Charlie Carter had brought a small surrey around to meet them. Dylan thought the carriage a ridiculous rig, but he was also quick enough to realize it was the easiest way to exit the town and hide in plain sight.

“About half a mile,” she whispered, and kept her eyes on the dark trail that served as a road.

“As soon as we’re clear of the town, I’ll take over,” Dylan said, distracted by the rolling peals of thunder moving closer to the settlement. The lightning flashes were intensifying, as well.

“I’m quite capable of handling this buggy, Mr. Coulter.” Nerves made her tone shrill and unpleasant to her own ears.

“I don’t doubt it, ma’am,” he drawled softly. “But the horses are getting skittish, and I’d just as soon not die crouched down here like a rabbit hiding in a hole.”

She scowled at him and concentrated on making the rest of the journey as quickly as possible. To her complete dismay, by the time they were drawing near to Charlie’s small house, rain had started to pelt from the murky, churning skies.

“This is going to last for several hours,” she said, concern and real fright creating a heaviness in her tone that made him peer intently at her through the darkness.

“Do storms scare you, Maggie?”

“No.” She shook her head for emphasis and gulped down her trepidation. “But we’ll be blind on a night like this. Anything could be out there waiting, including Ed Madison’s posse.”

“A man like Madison isn’t going to keep tracking a ghost.” Dylan moved to sit next to her on the seat. He took the reins and, notably, she didn’t object or attempt to take them back. “He’ll hire men to do that for him.”

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“That’s what worries me,” she mumbled and looked straight ahead at the blackness of the road. They continued on for a short time without further conversation.

“Is that Charlie’s place?”

Startled out of her wits, Maggie glanced in the direction he was pointing. A lamp had been lit inside the house, and its golden light drew her heart like a beacon. “Yes. Charlie said he’d left a light on. Your things are inside, Dylan. Guns, clothes, saddlebags. All the way you left them.”

“Where’s my horse?”

“In the barn. Mine is the mustang,” she added. “Charlie said he was ready to go.”

Dylan leapt lightly from the seat of the surrey and turned to help her. She was staring at the house, and he glanced over his shoulder, frowning unconsciously. “What’s wrong, Maggie?”

“I don’t know. I feel like someone is watching us.”

“Someone is,” he confirmed, though he hadn’t particularly wanted to share the knowledge with her. Someone had been watching their approach for the past five minutes. “We’re gonna have to hope whoever’s in that house is a friend, not the enemy.”

“Charlie’s at the saloon,” she said, looking him squarely in the eye for the first time since they’d left Sparkling Springs. “Maybe it’s Martha or Jonas?”

Dylan didn’t believe it for a second, but he nodded, offering her whatever comfort there was to be had in their present situation. He rummaged under the seat of the buggy, tucked something in his jacket pocket, then pulled her close to his side. As they made their way to the house, the rising wind began to whip cold rain at them in earnest. Maggie unlocked the front door and went inside. Dylan hesitated, then followed her.

“I figured you’d be headed here,” a new voice greeted them the

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instant they'd closed the door.

Maggie's shoulders sagged and she cast a look of real apology toward Dylan before she faced the young man who stood in the kitchen doorway, a Colt .45 held in a steady grasp and aimed at them.

"Dylan," she said in a weary tone, "this is Deputy Sheriff Boyd Randall."

Dylan's smile was faintly amused. He nodded at the young deputy. "Mr. Randall," he said by way of greeting. "I can't say it's a pleasure to meet you, son," he added with a smile.

"What are you doing here, Boyd?" Maggie asked.

"Apprehending a killer." He came far enough into the room to toss a sheet of paper into her lap when she sat on the arm of a nearby chair. She read the page and her heart sank.

"Ed didn't waste any time, did he?" she murmured and passed the page to Dylan.

It was a wanted poster, the banner boldly proclaiming the familiar phrase "Wanted: Dead or Alive," and under it was a sketch of Dylan, his name, and the reward amount of \$5000. That kind of bounty money was going to make him a sought-after trophy for some men, and his expression was grim when he looked into her storm-sky eyes.

"Who's paying the bounty, Deputy Randall?" he asked, still watching Maggie closely.

"Ed," she supplied with a bitter smile. "No doubt he's doubled the official amount for anyone who does the job his way. Which means," she met his eyes and finished, "anyone who's willing to kill you without questions is a likely candidate."

"Is Cord Danner a bounty hunter?"

"No. He's a Pinkerton field agent. One of their best."

"What's he to you, Maggie?" Dylan asked, hearing the worry in her voice.

"Probably some poor bastard she laughed at the way she did Billy,"

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Randall sneered, reminding them of his nearly forgotten presence.

“I didn’t laugh at Billy,” she snapped. “He just didn’t understand that anyone could say no to him and really mean it.” She glared at the young deputy, and he had the good grace to look sheepish. “That,” she added with a glance at Dylan, “was Ed’s biggest failing with the boy. And Billy got too used to his daddy’s money getting him out of the messes he got into. You know that, too, Boyd.” She shifted her attention again, and the Deputy Sheriff nodded reluctantly. “You’ve had to settle him down on more than one occasion since you pinned that star to your chest.”

“That still don’t make what you done right,” he accused.

“What did I do, Boyd?” She resisted shouting, just. “I never led Billy to believe I loved him.”

“I think we’ve had about enough of this, son.” Dylan stepped into the conversation again, and to Maggie’s eternal wonder, and no doubt Boyd Randall’s eternal confusion, Coulter had a gun in his hand, a small Derringer, in eerily steady fingers. Randall’s weapon had been all but forgotten in the midst of their heated exchange of words. Dylan shook his head, expression rueful when Randall tried to raise the Colt and take aim. “It’s not worth dying over, Deputy,” he advised. “And, I promise you *will* lose.”

Randall sighed heavily and sat down with a thump, passing his gun to Maggie. “Billy loved you,” he told her softly.

She smiled, and shook her head. “No, Boyd. He thought he did because I didn’t want him. Billy was determined to change my mind. If he’d done it, he would have moved on.”

Dylan stepped closer and took the gun from her loose grip, swinging it casually as he turned. Randall crumpled to the floor when the barrel of his own gun connected with the side of his head.

“Was that really necessary?” Maggie dropped to her knees to check on the young deputy.

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“He’ll live,” Dylan assured her with a hint of amusement. “If he’d tried to stop us, that might not be the case.”

She rose slowly and faced him.

“What now? I don’t want to go with you, Dylan.”

“Sure you do,” he said with a laugh. “We’re going out back, to the barn. Once we get to Denver, we’ll take the train to Abilene, then go on to Dodge City. The marshal there is a friend of mine, and he’ll get this mess straightened out.”

“I don’t want to go to Dodge City!”

“Don’t be tiresome, sweetheart,” he chided. “Let’s go.”

* * *

“They have at least a full day’s head start on you, Mr. Danner,” Deputy Boyd Randall told the Pinkerton man a day and a half later.

Cord Danner nodded. He was an imposing man, almost six feet tall, well muscled, fair haired and sharp eyed. Randall figured he was a few years younger than Coulter, but in every other respect, the two men were evenly matched. Danner’s shrewd hazel stare locked on him, and he tried not to visibly squirm beneath the probing gaze.

“Is Maggie with him of her own volition?”

“I don’t know, sir,” Boyd replied. “I thought I heard her say she didn’t want to go with him, but I’m not really sure.”

“Any idea where they’re headed?”

Randall shook his head, and Danner adjusted his hat a little more firmly on his head, then left the Sheriff’s office.

For a long time Randall sat watching the door, wondering if Danner would be back.

* * *

“I’ve made some inquiries, Mr. Madison,” Cord told the older man once he was seated across from him at a table in the Silver Spur Saloon. “If Coulter is headed northeast, he’s likely to be heading for Dodge

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City. He has friends there.” He didn’t bother adding that one of those friends happened to be a Marshal who was respected and influential with the judge of the Kansas circuit. He doubted it would be welcome information.

Madison looked skeptical. “I’m paying you a lot of money to bring this man in, Danner. So far all I’ve seen you do is send a few wires and waste a day’s riding time.”

“It rained the night Coulter left Sparkling Springs,” Danner reminded him easily, taking no offense to the thinly veiled criticism. “There’s no trail. If you’ve got a better way for me to proceed, I’d be happy to listen, Madison.”

“I want results, Danner,” Ed answered, with no pretense at friendliness. “That son of a bitch killed my only son.”

“What about Maggie Watson?”

“What about her?” Madison scowled. “She ran off with Coulter. As far as I’m concerned, she’s as guilty as he is, and she can swing from a rope right next to him!”

“She may believe he’s innocent,” Cord suggested, and watched the anger build in Ed Madison’s eyes.

* * *

“I’ve been wondering...” Dylan said, watching Maggie from across their campfire. They were less than two days outside of Denver, and it was a glorious, early autumn night. “Why do you think I’m innocent, Maggie?”

She looked at him for a few moments, eyes glittering in the flickering flames. Her smile, when it came, was mildly derisive. “Innocent isn’t a word I’d ever associate with you, Mr. Coulter.”

“Touché.” He nodded and smiled with real enjoyment. “Not guilty, then,” he amended. “Why do you think I’m not guilty of murder?”

“You’re assuming a great deal, aren’t you?”

“I doubt you’d have dug a bullet out of a man you believed to be a

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killer.”

“Touché.” She tilted her head to one side and laughed quietly. “I knew Billy Madison pretty well. He probably tried to ambush you and it went bad. Gil Horner was too good a man to die taking a bullet for Billy, but that’s what Ed paid him for, and he just about lost his life doing it.”

“Horner’s going to make it, then?”

She nodded. “Doc Parrish thought he might. He didn’t know for sure.” She looked a little more closely at him and smiled. “And, since we’re discussing injuries, isn’t it time to change the bandaging on that shoulder of yours?”

“How’s your sewin’, Miss Watson?” he asked with a crooked grin.

She was instantly suspicious. “Just fine, why?”

“You’re going to have to clean the bullet hole, Maggie,” he told her, serious again. “Then, if you have a needle and thread in that case of yours, get it out. If you stitch up the wound, it’ll heal a lot faster and cleaner.”

Stomach churning, she nodded and went to get the necessary things. An hour later it was done, and Maggie was still shaking. Dylan hadn’t uttered a sound while she worked, but there were tiny spears of pain etched at the corners of his eyes, and his breathing was taking a long time to even out.

Silence had engulfed them, and she rose after a short while, then settled on her blankets. The sky above them was a tapestry of black velvet, studded with winking shards of diamonds and ice. The moon was only beginning to make its trek westward, a shining silver sickle preparing to slice into the inky cloak of the night. The sounds of crickets, rustling pines, owls and night birds added their euphony to the earth musics that vibrated from the ground under her. She recognized an almost alien emotion in her soul when Dylan stretched out beside her, and smiled as she named it: peace.

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“Good night, Dylan,” she whispered.

“Night, Maggie,” he murmured, voice low and textured with just a hint of gravel-rough sensuality mingled with the strain of discomfort from his abused shoulder.

Ignoring the pang of longing that his presence stirred, she closed her eyes and silently pleaded for sleep to grant her deeper serenity.

* * *

“Let me get this right,” Jack Holt said with a crooked, leering grin, “you’re gonna hand over \$10,000 to the man who kills Dylan Coulter?”

Ed Madison nodded. “I want him as dead as he left my son.”

“Do you know anything about Coulter, mister?”

“He killed my son,” Madison snarled. “What else do I need to know, Mr. Holt? If you don’t want this job, I’m sure someone else will be more than happy to take it.”

Holt laughed. “Not too many men would want to tackle Coulter, Mr. Madison. But I’m sure I can handle it to your satisfaction.”

Madison looked over his latest candidate and figured he might just have found the man who was mean enough and wily enough to actually locate Coulter and get the job done. Danner was too law-abiding for Ed’s taste just now. He wanted to bring Coulter back to stand trial. Madison wanted him swinging from a rope, no questions asked. If he finished with a bullet in his head, so much the better. Dead was dead.

Jack Holt was an ugly man, and it wasn’t just his physical appearance that made him that way. Danner and Coulter had one thing in common, Madison reflected, they were gentlemen. Ed had no time for gentlemen. If it took a weasel like Holt to put an end to Coulter’s breathing, then so be it. Billy had never been much of a man, but he was the only son Ed was likely to ever have. As long as Billy’s killer was still alive, Ed wouldn’t rest.

“What about the woman he took with him?” Holt leered.

“Maggie Watson made a fool of my son, then hid his killer,”

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Madison answered heavily. "Do what you want with her."

Given the lecherous gleam in Holt's eyes, he didn't have to stretch his imagination much to know how Maggie Watson would fare once Holt found them.

* * *

Morning was cool and bright when Dylan's eyes opened. He blinked, then stretched the kinks out of his muscles as he rose and glanced at the glowing sphere of the sun rising in the eastern sky. His second glance fell on Maggie's sleeping features, and he smiled. She was soft, beautiful, and trusting in sleep, things he rarely brought forth in her waking hours. He planned to change all that, in time. If they rode hard today, they might make it to Denver a day earlier than he'd hoped. It was worth the attempt if it meant getting back to Dodge City quicker. The last thing he needed was a price on his head, especially in light of his as yet unspoken plans for his future. A future that included the safety of the pretty woman next to him.

He rose, washed at a nearby creek, then prepared a meager breakfast. Maggie turned and looked at him, smiling, just as he was walking over to wake her.

"Breakfast is ready," he told her with a grin. "While you eat and get ready, I'll take care of the horses."

Less than a half hour later, she was packed up and in the saddle. Dylan was giving his saddle a final check when a tingle of apprehension created a chill on the back of his neck. He looked around, hand dropping automatically to his gun. He peered intently at the wooded area that surrounded him, seeking some reason for the sense of being watched. It was a useless effort, he knew. Anyone could be hidden in the heavy growth and he'd be helpless to spot them unless they wanted to be seen.

Maggie wisely stayed silent, and he nodded his thanks to her. He looked again at the surrounding forest.

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Nothing stirred.

He watched and waited.

Eventually, the tension began to bleed into his body as well as his mood. The near silence was unnerving. Forcing himself to motion, Dylan gathered up the reins and swung into the saddle. Sounds were growing louder now; the trill of birds; the rustle of the trees that were all around him. Nothing out of the ordinary, he told himself.

The ice on the back of his neck still screamed warning at him. He gave the small clearing another sweeping glance before spurring the animal into motion.

“Can that little horse run, Maggie?” he asked as they left the clearing behind.

She smiled. “Try to keep up with us, Dylan. His name is Spectre. I named him that because if he has to, he can move like a ghost.”

“Glad to hear it, sweetheart,” he said as he raced ahead of her. Not for long, though, he noted, as the brown and white mustang rapidly gained ground and soon sailed past him. His laughter rang out, and some of the tension eased from his bones.

* * *

Cord’s sixth sense tingled a warning that was becoming infuriatingly familiar to him. He reined in his horse and slid from the saddle. He’d been forced to abandon the road to Denver, and wasn’t entirely certain of his whereabouts. Tracking Dylan and Maggie wasn’t difficult, but he was beginning to understand that Coulter knew the country a lot better than he did. For the past day, Danner had been certain he was being followed, and was equally sure he’d been irrevocably steered into a circle that was taking him away from the couple’s trail.

He led his horse to the edge of a stream and kept a vigil, eyes continuously scanning his surroundings. He was tired and jumpy, his body beginning to object to the lack of sleep and the imposed tension.

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Impossibly, he missed the telltale whisper of movement until his pursuer was very nearly at his side.

A flash of black was all Cord had time to discern, then his awareness exploded into brilliant pinpoints of diamond-white stars. Pain, raging outward from the side of his head, was a distant knowledge as darkness enveloped him.

* * *

They covered a lot of ground, but didn't make it to Denver's outskirts. The following morning dawned with dark gray storm clouds cresting the snow-tipped mountains in the distance. Maggie shivered when she looked up at the rain-laden swathes that coiled and writhed amid the spires of the Rockies.

"How long do you think we've got before we'll need to run for cover?" she asked when Dylan came back into their campsite. He dropped the small bundle of wood he'd gathered and pushed his hat back on his head, peering intently at the heavy sky.

"Noon," he answered thoughtfully. "By then we'll need to find someplace where we can wait out the storm."

Nodding, Maggie cast an uneasy glance at the darkness hanging over the nearby range.

By midday, the sky had grown steadily darker as they rode, and the threat of imminent, heavy rain scented the air, making it feel thick. Dylan also knew they were being followed. He searched out another track and headed in the new direction. The path was damp and spongy under the horses feet, muffling the animal's hoof beats as he focused his concentration on the soft sounds of the forest, consciously tuning out the rumbling in the distance as he sought the inner pulse that warned him they were no longer alone on the trail.

After another hour, Dylan was beginning to have serious doubts about their continuing the trip. Another loud, ominous rumble drew his eyes skyward again.

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“We’re going to have to stop, Maggie,” he told her. “There’s a prospector’s cabin a couple of miles up ahead. We can wait out the storm there.

The wind was rising rapidly, whipping branches into their path as the trees swayed with the constant buffeting of the cold, rain-laden gusts. Maggie swatted at another branch as it slapped her in the face, leaving a painful stinging on her cheek. Her teeth were chattering already as the icy rain seeped through her lightweight duster and chilled her skin. The wash of rainfall was gaining strength as they tried to keep on the fading trail, and she was finding it more difficult to see through the steady torrents of rain and the growing impediment of the woods themselves. Her horse missed his footing and she went down with a yelp of surprise. The ground was soggy and soft, and the pine needles and leaves acted as a cushioning blanket.

“Maggie?” Dylan was on his knees beside her in seconds, concern etched into tense features. “Are you all right?”

“Dylan, we’re never going to reach that cabin at this rate,” she said once she was standing again, and looking around in the growing gloom.

Dylan nodded, trying to get his bearings through the shadowy grayness that had settled over the afternoon. Rain streamed down his face and neck, working its way into his clothes, and he shivered unconsciously.

“I think there’s a clearing a short distance from here. It’s surrounded by a rock ledge we can use for shelter.” They mounted their horses and continued onward, side by side.

“How much farther do you think it is?”

“Five or ten minutes, no more,” Dylan replied.

“There’s someone tracking us, isn’t there?” Maggie asked, seeing the worry that was now an ever-present fury in his eyes.

Coulter wanted to offer her some kind of hopeful response, but he felt the lie lodge in his throat. He nodded, dismounted, and lifted her

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from the saddle. The horses would have to be led the next bit of the way; they were getting too nervous to be easily controlled. When Maggie's feet hit the ground, he drew her close, holding a little tighter when she nodded and closed her eyes. Storm or not, Dylan knew there were tears on the beautiful face nestled against his shoulder, and his temper flared again. With a gentleness completely at odds with his mood, Coulter eased Maggie's head back so he could look at her. He smiled and placed a light kiss on her forehead. "We're gonna be all right, honey," he murmured. "I promise."

When they reached the clearing, Dylan let go of her to have a look around, searching automatically for the spot that would offer the greatest protection. The rain was pouring down in torrential sheets now, and with each new gust of wind, the shock of cold grew more numbing.

"There's not a whole lot of shelter here," he observed once he'd returned to where Maggie was huddled next to the horses. "Maybe we'd be better off trying to make it to the cabin?"

"Do you think you can find it?" Maggie asked through clenched teeth.

"We can try." His expression was grim.

A nearby sound roared above the storm, and in the split second it took to register, Dylan was already moving, instinctively reacting to something his brain hadn't fully identified yet. He recognized the sound as a gunshot in the same instant that he grabbed Maggie and she fell forward onto the rain-drenched grass and underbrush.

"Stay down!" The directive was hardly necessary; she wasn't moving.

With an uneasy glance at Maggie, Dylan turned away, his eyes seeking the direction of the shot as if tuning into some inner homing mechanism. He slipped into the growth that thrashed wildly from the force of the storm, his gun held in a grip that cramped his hand with its intensity. He could feel the strain in his breathing, the hammering of his

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heartbeat temporarily blotting out the storm around him.

The shadow flitting through the trees ahead of him was barely discernible. In fact, if he hadn't glanced in that direction at the right moment, Dylan would have missed him entirely. He didn't think, he merely reacted, the reflexive action fine-tuned by years of necessity. He aimed and fired, struggling to see through the wash of rain that blurred his vision. The tingling that ran the length of his spine warned him he still wasn't alone in the thickly wooded area, but he could see no telltale movement. He crossed the short distance to the body of the man he'd just shot at. His aim had been accurate, as always. The man was dead, the bullet lodged somewhere in his skull from the look of the hole in his temple.

Dylan waited the few seconds it took for the rain to wash the blood away, then he had a clear look at the assailant. He felt a shudder of dread and fear flood in with the shock of recognition. Jack Holt. The man was a bounty hunter, and one of the worst. Holt had bushwhacked as many men as he'd ever caught, and he'd been trailing them, obviously intent on killing him, possibly Maggie, as well. Dylan didn't care to consider what Holt would have done to her before ending her life, but he suspected she would have ended up as dead as the bounty hunter had intended him to be.

He turned and began making his way back to Maggie, arriving just in time to see a second man emerge from the opposite side of the clearing.

"Easy, Coulter," the man called out the moment he stepped into view.

The renewed rumble of thunder overrode any possible answer Dylan might have made. It faded away for a few seconds, then the flash of incandescent white lightning momentarily illuminated the landscape to a stark, brilliant clarity. The thunder rolled above them again, this time culminating in a deafening crescendo of noise that felt like it was

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reverberating in the rocks around them.

“This is Cord Danner,” Maggie said, stepping between the two men, effectively preventing any shots being exchanged. “Can we get to this cabin you know about, Dylan? We’ll talk there.”

He nodded, and noticed that Danner had already holstered his gun and was bringing his horse, a large bay, into the clearing. He mounted and turned impassive eyes to Coulter.

“Lead the way, Mr. Coulter,” he offered.

Still uncertain of the wisdom in allowing Danner to come with them, he took his reins from Maggie and they were headed away from the clearing minutes later.

As they rode, the storm slowly began to abate, but it refused to ease graciously. Lightning streaked the sky, illuminating the trail for them at erratic intervals, something that was both a blessing and a curse as it also left them exposed to further threat for precious seconds at a time. The rolling booms of thunder lingered so long sometimes that Dylan’s jaw ached as he clenched his teeth against the tension and chill that wracked his body. It seemed to take hours to finish the short journey to the old cabin that Dylan had known was tucked up against the side of a mountain.

“I’ll take care of the horses,” Danner offered when they pulled up to the rundown structure. There was an equally ramshackle, smaller building a short distance from the dilapidated cabin that served as a barn. “Get Maggie inside before she catches pneumonia.”

Dylan considered arguing, then decided to leave the horses in Danner’s care. Maggie bore a distinct resemblance to a drowned kitten. He caught her as she dismounted, and carried her inside the cabin. It was pretty much unchanged from his past visits, and he left her sitting on a chair at the table in the center of the room while he fired up the stove. The wood box was, mercifully, almost full, and there were some basic food supplies and coffee in the place.

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“Let me make the coffee, Dylan,” she said, startling him when she spoke from her position at his side.

“Behind that curtain is a bed and an old chest that might have something dry in it.” He pointed to the darkest corner of the place.

Smiling with a great deal more gratitude and warmth than she realized, she nodded and headed toward the curtained off area. Once she’d peeled off her wet garments, she rummaged around in the chest and found a well-worn nightshirt. She looked at the narrow bed, with its straw mattress, and decided to lie down for a few minutes. Just long enough to stop shivering, she told herself.

It was warm and cozy when awareness returned to her, and she was still drowsy with sleep. There was still a hint of sunset filtering through the small cabin window, casting soft light into the small sleeping space. She smiled and snuggled closer to the warmth that enveloped her, sighing softly when she was eased off the straw and sat astride a hard, masculine body. Her eyes opened wide and she put her hands out, encountering the solid wall of Dylan’s chest. He caught her wrists when she would have pushed him away, and she stared at him, confused and wanting, and afraid of the force of both emotions.

Dylan’s fingers loosened their hold on hers, but he didn’t release her entirely. His arms went around her waist, hands smoothing well-known curves until he cupped her bottom and pulled her down on top of him as he lay back fully. Her gold-tinted hair fell like a curtain around them, and his fingers tangled in the heavy, silken mass, forcing her to look at him as he read her turmoil in the seconds that held their gazes locked. A minute later he twisted and pinned her under him, his mouth closing over hers in a ruthlessly passionate kiss.

The storm raged in heartbeats—as it had the last time he’d held her this way. She tried to push him away—once—then lost herself to his hunger. The urgency was as overwhelming as the intimacy, and she lifted her hips when Dylan began to haul the thin nightshirt up over her

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hips. She reached for his pants, fumbled with the buckle of his belt and heard his low chuckle. He took her hands away, then stood to get rid of the last of his clothes. His shirt was already on the floor, and the rest quickly added to the pile. He bent long enough to pull the nightshirt completely over her head, then he joined her on the bed again, covering her body with his.

Maggie's low moan was muffled against Dylan's bandaged shoulder as he slid into her, and their rhythm was as furious as the tempest of lust that immediately consumed them. She clung to him, urged him to a force that was almost brutal; her hips rose and her spine arched as the crashing euphoria of orgasm shook her in his arms. Her nails dug into him, fingers knotting against the smooth working muscles of his shoulders, and she spasmed again when Dylan shuddered and groaned softly into her ear, his release filling her with warmth and momentary contentment.

It took a long time for the pounding in her ears to fade. She closed her eyes, biting her bottom lip and trembling violently when Dylan eased free of her and rolled onto his back. She didn't want to look at him; couldn't not look at him. She was deeply angered at herself, and vaguely ashamed of her behavior. Something that was distinctly against her nature, *except with this man*, she mocked herself. Memory emerged from the fog of passion, and she glared at him.

"Where is Cord?" she asked in a voice that was little more than a hiss of sound.

"Asleep out there," Dylan replied, gesturing absently toward the main room of the cabin.

"So you thought you'd come in here and..."

He grinned. "And what?" His voice was low and filled with amusement. He stopped any rejoinder she might have been preparing when he pulled her head down to meet his kiss. His hands closed over the lush fullness of her breasts and before too long, she was willing and

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eager beneath his sensuous assault.

* * *

“Where are you two headed?” Cord asked when they joined him at dawn in the cabin’s main room. He’d made coffee, and Maggie was now preparing breakfast. She was edgy, and her hands fumbled frequently.

“Denver,” Dylan replied quietly. “From there, Dodge City. Marshal Taylor is a friend of mine, and I think once we talk, we can straighten out the business back in Sparkling Springs.” He looked closer at Cord Danner. “How did Jack Holt find us so quickly?”

“My best guess is he followed me,” Danner said with sincere regret. “I knew someone was tracking me, but I hadn’t figured on Ed Madison sending out bounty hunters quite this soon. Holt bushwhacked me a few miles back. After I came ’round, it took me some time to locate his trail, and find you and Maggie.”

“Holt was always a bloodhound, Danner,” Dylan remarked, more at ease now. “And a mean one if anything, or anyone, got in his way.”

It seemed to close that particular topic of conversation. But Danner had a new line of inquiry to pursue, and he didn’t hesitate. “Did you kill Billy Madison?” Cord asked, eyes serious.

“Yes,” Dylan admitted. “He didn’t give me much choice about it.”

“His father thinks you murdered him so you could run off with Maggie,” Danner informed them with a wry smile.

Dylan’s smile was equal parts humor and irony. “Maggie’s a woman worth killing for,” he agreed. “But in this case it was more a matter of self-defense. If Gil Horner lives, he can testify to that.”

“Horner’s dead,” Cord told them, and Maggie’s hands fumbled again, dropping the plate of biscuits she was bringing to the table. Both men reached to help, and she backed away from them as though they’d tried to brand her with a hot iron.

“When?” she asked Danner, her eyes locked with his shifting hazel

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gaze.

“Night before I left there, two days after you and Coulter disappeared.” His smile was tender, soothing.

“That makes it my word alone,” Dylan interjected, drawing Maggie’s look from Danner’s face with his angry tone.

“What’s your take on this, Maggie?” Cord wondered, still watching her closely.

“Billy was only brave if he had someone to back him. Gil couldn’t always make him see reason, so if he went after Dylan, he probably did ambush him. It’s the way he did things.”

“Thank you for that ringing endorsement,” Dylan noted with faint sarcasm.

“I wasn’t there, Dylan!” she shouted with unnecessary vehemence. “What do you want me to do, lie for you?”

Cord bit the side of his cheek to keep his smile from showing.

Maggie tossed the remnants of the plate of biscuits onto the table and headed outside.

“Easy, partner,” Cord said quietly when Dylan would have followed her. His gun was in his hand, and he smiled. “I’ll talk to her, then we’ll decide what happens next.”

Furious, but not foolhardy, Dylan forced himself to relax, and ground his teeth while he waited for Cord and Maggie to return to the cabin.

* * *

“Do you love him?”

Maggie whirled at the unexpected question, and the equally unexpected sound of Cord’s voice. He completed the walk to her side where she leaned on what was left of the corral railings.

“There was a time when I thought I loved you,” she said sharply. “What the hell would I know about love, Cord?”

He shrugged and let it be. “Do you believe what he says about

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killing Billy Madison?"

She sighed heavily, gave it a long minute of serious thought, then nodded. "Yes. I took the bullet out of him that night, Cord. He walked away from Billy's prodding the night before. Dylan is a grown man. He wouldn't take advantage of a boy's hot-headed bravado."

"We'll work it out, Maggie," Cord promised softly. He pulled her close and held her for a long time. When she looked up at him and smiled, he bent and covered her mouth with his, kissing her deeply. She broke away quickly and stared at him, surprised.

"What was that about?"

"I've missed you," Cord replied.

"I'm sorry," she said, shaking her head to emphasize her words. "But I don't belong to you anymore, Cord. I won't belong to any man ever again."

Danner watched her walk back to the cabin, hips swaying enticingly. For a long while he stayed where he was, and wondered why he'd ever left her behind.

* * *

Two weeks later...

"Thank you, Marshal." Cord Danner shook hands with the tall, lanky man who kept what peace there was in the frontier town of Dodge City. The Marshal had known Dylan for the better part of twenty years, and he'd been adamant in his assertion that Coulter wasn't likely to have killed any man in cold blood, much less an inexperienced boy of nineteen. Between them, they'd sent wires and notified the nearest judge of their findings. Dylan was a free man. At least as long as none of Ed Madison's wanted posters fell into the wrong hands. Cord would see what he could do about that, too, once he returned to Sparkling Springs.

"My pleasure, son," Marshal Josiah Taylor replied with a broad

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smile. He nodded once, then turned to head off on his afternoon rounds of the town.

Danner went in the opposite direction, to the hotel a few doors down from the Long Branch Saloon. He met Maggie Watson in the lobby.

“Are you leaving?” she asked when she saw him paying his bill.

“Yes.” He smiled. “Marshal Taylor and I have straightened things out. Dylan’s a free man, Maggie.”

“I doubt he’d tell you there was ever any question of that,” she remarked with a touch of ironic humor in her tone.

Danner laughed and nodded his agreement. “Tell him I said goodbye.” He grinned. “I’m sure it’ll make his day.” He slung his saddlebags over one broad shoulder and was surprised when she walked out into the blazing sunshine with him. “Where is the infamous Mr. Coulter, anyway?”

“Saloon.” She shrugged. “Probably getting into more trouble.”

“You two haven’t said much to each other since we left that cabin in the middle of nowhere. Why is that?”

“Nothing to say.” She tried to smile. It was a dismal failure.

“Coulter’s not an easy man to like,” Cord stated softly, and tried not laugh when she took more offense than she could possibly know she was revealing. “But you haven’t made any move to leave him.”

“Where do you suggest I go, Cord?” Maggie asked icily. “Run off with you? That’s what Dylan thinks I’m planning. Frankly, the two of you deserve each other. You think the same way!”

They reached the livery stable and Cord stopped her with a hand under her chin. She stared up at him, suspicion in her gray-blue eyes.

“You love him, Maggie. He’s not going to let you down the way I did.”

“I wish I could be sure of that.”

“Love doesn’t come with a guarantee, honey.” He smiled. “You’re

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a gambler. Ante up and take a chance.”

“Thank you, Cord.” She hugged him close and when he kissed her, she knew she was no longer afraid of what he made her feel, because it no longer stirred anything more intense than the warm affection of friendship.

* * *

The sudden knock on her door warned her, and Maggie almost choked on the cup of coffee she’d brought to her room minutes earlier. They’d been in town for nearly a week, and every night she’d waited until well into the darkest hours, ears attuned to the sounds of the hotel. Every night she was torn between fear and hope as she listened for a familiar footfall outside her door. But, until now, Dylan had avoided her as deliberately as she’d avoided him.

Apparently, something had changed. Tonight he’d left the saloon gambling tables long before midnight.

The second rap, expected as it was, still made her twitch and she managed to spill a few drops of coffee down the front of her nightgown before she landed the cup on the small table next to the bed. She drew her knees up and hugged them tightly to her chest, defensive posture an involuntary response to the force of his rapping on the door.

“Come in, Dylan,” she called.

He entered the room and stood looking at her for several minutes before he put his hat on the rack of hooks next to the door, then unbuckled his gun belt and hung it on the peg next to the hat.

“What are you doing?” she asked, torn between fascination and growing indignation. He didn’t bother answering her immediately and she continued to stare as he began to undress. “Dylan!”

“I’m getting ready for bed,” he told her casually.

“Then I suggest you go to your room first!”

He smiled. “This is my room. At least for tonight.”

“What?”

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“The bet was a night in my bed,” he reminded her. “I’m collecting.”
“You’ve already collected. More than once!”

He was down to his pants, with his shirt front and cuffs open, hanging off his broad shoulders. His injured shoulder was almost fully healed now; all that remained was an angry scar that would fade over the course of time.

Maggie couldn’t take her eyes off him, and the familiar glow of heat was warming inside her. She tried, desperately, to disregard it.

“How about another hand then?” He laughed. “If I win, I stay. If I lose, I go.”

“No,” she whispered, voice hoarse with conflict.

“Don’t tell me you’re afraid, Maggie,” he chided softly and sat on the edge of the mattress, his hand curling loosely around her ankle. When those bewitching fingers began to stroke, she jerked away from him and left the bed.

“I want you to leave, Dylan.” In her head, she heard laughter and her own voice correcting with mocking, “*You want him to stay!*”

His boots were pulled off and tossed to one side. He slipped his shirt off and draped it over the ornate brass railings at the foot of the bed. He did the same thing with his pants, then sat back on the bed in his underwear, watching her with a decidedly wicked grin.

“Your call, Maggie,” he told her, voice taunting. “It’s the only way I’ll go.” His grin widened. “*If I lose, of course.*”

He didn’t.

* * *

“I saw you with Danner,” Dylan said once they’d put the cards away. He was standing next to the bed, wrapped in a sheet, fresh from a bath. Maggie was watching him again, eyes wary.

“What did you see?”

“You, in his arms.” There was an edge of anger in his voice and she peered a little more intently at him.

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“You’re jealous of Cord?” She was genuinely shocked.

“Do you love him?”

“I did, once,” she confessed. “At least I thought I did.”

“Now?”

She refused to answer, and chose instead to slip between the sheets and try to forget he was only a few feet away, asking questions she didn’t want to answer anyway.

“Is he still your lover, Maggie?”

She turned to face him again, and her surprise grew when she saw the depth of his anger, and his seriousness.

“No.” It was a squeak of sound that made her wince.

He sat, his back to her as he considered her denial. “Why were you kissing him?”

“Dylan...” She closed her eyes for a moment, gulped in a deep breath, then dared to look at him again. “I was angry at you. And afraid, and even a bit lonely. It was stupid, but...” She stopped speaking again, then obeyed instinct and need and slid across the mattress to put her arms around him, resting her head against the back of his shoulder, kissing smooth, warm skin. “I needed to know he didn’t matter to me anymore. That I didn’t still love him.”

“You don’t make sense, Maggie,” he observed after a long pause.

“I rarely do when it involves you,” she said without anger. “I’m sorry, Dylan. I don’t know what else to say.”

“And he fought you off, did he?” Anger and sarcasm dripped in his tone.

“What difference does it make?” She drew away until she hit the headboard. “We didn’t...” She hesitated, sighed heavily, then looked intently at him. “He’s my friend, Dylan. Don’t take your anger out on him because of me.”

“Do you want Cord?”

“No,” she replied with complete honesty. “The only man I want is

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you.”

She continued to stare at him for a few minutes, waited for him to accept what she'd told him, or leave. When he remained motionless and thoughtful, she spoke again. “He asked me if I loved you.”

Dylan nodded, a tiny smile quirking one corner of his mouth. “And what did you tell him?”

“Nothing.”

“What are you going to tell me?” He turned his brilliant blue eyes to meet hers.

“Nothing.” She smiled, forcibly subdued the twitch of shyness she suddenly felt, and reached for his hand. She kissed his palm, then guided it to the wetness between her thighs, gasping softly when he grinned, then slipped a finger into her and began a slow, tantalizing rhythm. She spread her legs farther and pushed her hips forward, leaning back on her arms as her spine curled with pleasure.

When Dylan's hand withdrew a short while later, Maggie watched as he stood and dropped the bath sheet from his waist.

She shivered, eyes caressing the raw, naked beauty of his body. She slid off the bed and to her knees in front of him, hands gliding up the backs of his legs as her mouth eagerly engulfed him. Her tongue stroked soft caresses over the rigid velvet heat of his shaft, sucking gently, then releasing him to explore further. The tremor in his legs was ample testimony of the effect she was having on him.

Dylan brushed her hair back from her face, held her head gently as he watched her mouth covering him again. The pressure increased and he thrust carefully, moving deeper into her throat. She sucked harder and he knew if he didn't pull her away soon, she'd bring him to orgasm sooner than he wanted. He eased her back and tugged her to her feet, stripping her of the nightgown as he climbed onto the bed with her.

There was a haze of dreamy-eyed anticipation in her eyes when he leaned over her and kissed her forehead. Dylan felt his breath leave him

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for a moment, then return with a rush of intoxicating happiness. He lowered his head, kissed her with the tenderness and passion that had made being with her so different from the other women in his life. Caught in the languorous mood, he held the frenzied lust at bay, and turned their lovemaking into something exquisitely sweet and gentle.

* * *

Maggie woke at dawn, and stretched lazily in the bed. Dylan was flat on his back next to her and she grinned, then pulled aside the sheet that covered him. Still smiling, she shifted in the bed and straddled his hips. She bent to kiss him, and his hands rose, palms covering her breasts, pressing firmer when her nipples hardened in response to his touch.

“Good morning,” she whispered against his lips, shivering when his hands continued their sensual stroking of her breasts.

“‘Mornin’ ma’am,” he murmured with a grin. He hauled her closer, and his teeth closed over the rigid point of one nipple, biting gently. She made a tiny whimper of pleasure, then gasped when he bit a second time, harder. She pressed her hips into his and he held her breasts as his tongue began to play over first one nipple, then the other.

“Aren’t you tired this morning?” she asked, voice hoarse.

“I’ll sleep later,” he muttered, then closed his mouth over one breast, sucking hard. Her back arched, and she moved over him, hips pushing frantically into his. Dylan’s hand slid between them and his fingers quickly found the wetness between her legs. She fell forward, hands on either side of Dylan’s head as her hips pressed into the motion of his thrusting fingers inside her.

“God! Dylan...” She closed her eyes, moaning low in her throat.

Dylan withdrew his hand and grasped her waist, twisting until she was lying flat on her back, gasping loudly. Disentangling himself from the bed linen, he rose to his knees and smiled at her. Still holding her gaze with his, he spread her legs wide and lifted her hips off the

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mattress as he bent to stroke hot, wet flesh, his tongue probing into her repeatedly as she trembled. Her fingers tangled in his hair and she bucked against him, holding him to her as the first orgasm tore through her spasming body. His name was a near scream, and the waves of pleasure poured over her as he continued to lick and suck.

She was still shuddering when Dylan lifted his head and crawled over her. Maggie's legs clamped around his waist and her spine curled into an arch of pleasure when he finally thrust into her, burying himself deeply for several seconds before he began to move with her. Their voices were rasps as they exchanged barely coherent words, and each answered the need of the other. Dylan felt her fingernails bite into his back, then she curled her hands into fists and he thrust harder, establishing a rhythm that was creating near pain. Maggie cried out and her body tensed, then clutched with a force that left him groaning in her ear as release finally sent him reeling into the ecstasy that had swept her away seconds before.

Dylan collapsed over her, gasping for breath, feeling the tremors fan out to encompass every part of him. Maggie's body, beneath him, was hot and slick with sweat. Her heartbeat thudded wildly in his ear when he rested his head against her chest.

"I could get used to this," Dylan murmured a long while later, when he could speak again without feeling like his lungs were starved for breath.

"Really?" She twisted onto her stomach and looked at him. "This was a bet, remember?"

"This is a damn sight more than a bet, Margaret Watson," he growled.

"How is it you won with the same hand last night?" She asked the question with casual curiosity as her fingers stroked the hard contours of his chest, her fingertips tingling as they brushed over the soft dusting of dark hair, and began to track it downward.

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“I cheated,” he said with a laugh, then looked closely at her. “I thought you knew that.”

She was sincerely startled, then anger began to flare to life in her eyes.

“You bloody bastard!” she snarled, and started to pull away from him. Dylan’s hand on her wrist held her in place, and tightened when she tried to break free.

“Maggie! Settle down,” he said, unable to entirely keep the laughter from his tone.

“You cheated! I believed that I’d lost to you. Why, Dylan?”

It was the sudden thickness of tears that chased the amusement from his mood and he touched her cheek, eyes locked with hers.

“I’m sorry,” he offered in a soft voice. “I really thought you knew.”

“If I’d known, do you think I’d have slept with you?”

“I needed to believe you wanted me as much as I wanted you, Maggie,” he said quietly.

She held up her hand, still in his grasp, and silently asked him to release her. When he did, she turned away and stared at the wall.

Looking at the smooth curve of her back, Dylan was only now considering the possibility that he’d forced her into a liaison that she really wouldn’t have wanted otherwise. He’d never taken advantage of any woman, certainly never pushed his attention where it really wasn’t wanted. Could he have misread Maggie Watson that completely?

As he chewed that one over, he also wondered if walking away was now his only option with her. The thought of leaving her had the distinct impact of a mule kick to his gut, and he was given pause to evaluate that astonishing response, too.

“I wanted you, too, Dylan,” she told him in a low, steady voice. “I still do.”

Coulter accepted the peace she was sharing and he curled up to her back, spooning their bodies together as he held her tight to his chest.

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“Cord told me you wouldn’t let me down the way he did,” she whispered.

“Is he the reason you wouldn’t let anyone close to you?”

She nodded, and he kissed her shoulder.

“I love you, Maggie,” he assured her, recognizing the truth as he spoke the words. “And he was right.”

“He told me I loved you.” She smiled and lifted his hand to kiss the long, tapered fingers that created such magic on her skin. “He was right about that, too.”

“How did he ever lose you?” Dylan wondered as he eased away enough for her to settle on her back and look up at him.

“Well, for a start, he never cheated at cards,” she grinned and their shared laughter filled the room for a very long time.

DENYSE M. BRIDGER

Denyse is a native of Atlantic Canada, born in the country's Easternmost province, Newfoundland, and raised in Nova Scotia. A lifelong dreamer, she began writing at an early age and can't recall a time when she wasn't creating in some artistic form.

"My first published story was, oddly enough, a media based tale written for the TV series *Miami Vice*, first published in 1986. Up until that time I had never heard of fanzines and fandom. It's proven to be an immensely valuable training ground for professional writing in that it teaches discipline and attention to detail. There's no tougher critic than a fan who knows their show or movie down to the tiniest nuance, and they're not shy about telling you when you've missed the mark!"

An active interest in the American West has been a lifetime obsession, too. Cowboys have been a love-affair that began at the tender age of three, and eventually expanded to encompass an equally timeless passion for pirates, Greek Gods, and Ancient Egypt. The other side of the Old West intrigue is an affinity for Victorian England, particularly the 1885-1895 part of the century.

The American Civil War has also been a source of avid interest. "How can anyone not be moved by the tragedy that defines that conflict? There are endless stories of courage and honor, and each man and woman who lived through America's greatest turmoil was left scarred in some way. Those who rose above their losses and went on with the

stoicism and utter bravery of eternal legends really have to inspire and humble anyone who reads about them.”

At this point in her career, Denyse has had published in the vicinity of 400 stories and novellas, in almost any genre you can name. “The only thing I haven’t tried yet is hard-core science fiction, and horror. Since I don’t consider vampires as I write them to be the fodder of horror, I classify those stories as Dark Fantasy.” Many of her vampire stories have appeared in Margaret L. Carter’s anthology, *The Vampire’s Crypt*, and *Night To Dawn*, published and edited by Dawn Callahan. Her poetry has been published internationally.

Denyse has also been the recipient of numerous awards, most notably the Fan Quality Award, which is given annually for excellence in fan fictions based on film and television. As of May 2004, there are four awards in her collection, and no less than a dozen nominations to her credit.

What’s next on the agenda? “I hope many more stories for AQP. A home for my ‘labor of love’ Greek fantasy novel. And more time to get all the ideas in my head down onto the written page...”

* * *

***Don’t miss Blood Wine And Pale Roses, by Denyse M. Bridger,
available now from Amber Quill Press, LLC***

Eden Colbourne has spent most of her life pursuing dreams that never quite came true. Running from yet another failed relationship, she

seeks solace in the familiar surroundings of England's countryside, and her art. Drawn to the remnants of the abbey, she spends her days sketching the face of a man she believes is a ghost haunting both the abbey and her heart. The reality is even more disturbing...

When Sean Rourke finally reveals himself to her, Eden discovers the ghost is a creature of myth and dark dreams. Turned into a vampire by the man for whom his wife betrayed him, Sean is tormented and lonely, and more afraid of Eden's power to make him love than she is of his nocturnal curse. It isn't until the ancient vampire who made him returns to claim Eden that Sean is forced to decide once and for all if he can let go of the shade of his wife, and permit love to heal what remains of his humanity...

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