



Impassioned
STRANGER

SHANNAH BIONDINE

IMPASSIONED STRANGER

by

Shannah Biondine

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cover art by Jenny Dixon

ISBN 1-58608-274-4

Gemstar Edition 1-58608-391-0

New Concepts Publishing

Lake Park, Ga 31636

Other NCP books available by Shannah Biondine

Impassioned Vagabond

Chapter 1

"Sure picked yourself the wrong day to arrive in town, ma'am."

Why did they all keep saying that? Marone!

Lucia Montessano reminded herself to think and speak in English. Whenever she became confused or nervous, her mother tongue pushed the new language right out of her mind, making it all the more difficult to cope with American strangers like the station master or this wheezing driver for hire.

"You know the farm of Crockett?" she asked with a hopeful lilt in her voice.

"Yep. Outside town a piece." He reached to help her up into his rig. "I'll get you and these goods out there, if my axles can hold out."

He mopped his brow with a spindly forearm and clambered up onto the seat beside her, tossing a wary look over his shoulder at the overloaded bed of his buckboard. "No help and the most dog-gone baggage I ever laid eyes on," he muttered. He released the brake lever and the wagon gave a crooked lurch as it rolled forward. Lucia watched the buildings and depot pass by, studying her surroundings in silence.

She could see this was not a big city, not like the one she had come from. But she hadn't known anything about this place, and certainly hadn't expected she'd arrive on the day of some big event, which had all but emptied the shops and streets. She had fully anticipated her bridegroom would meet her at the station. True, when her brother Vincenzo sent his wire, he got no answering message back, but she had thought surely any man who would advertise for a bride would be anxiously awaiting her arrival. She never dreamt he'd leave her to fend for herself in a strange place.

The farmers and tradesmen she'd known back in Italy were much more considerate of their wives and families. But then, she reminded herself with a sigh, Italy was only a memory now, dimming with each passing month . . . right along with America's promise of a better life. Hers had not improved since her family emigrated. It had recently grown more complicated.

Yet she couldn't complain. She'd say nothing about the rude oversight today. She couldn't risk angering the stranger she rode out to meet, couldn't risk having him think her ritroso.

English, Lucia.

She concentrated, squinting, her full, dark brows drawn into a frown. In English that word meant . . . difficult. Nasty or shrewish.

No, this man Crockett must not think this of her. He was her only hope. She wouldn't cause trouble or ask him to buy her new clothes or bonnets and bows. This she knew American wives did. And she would try not to talk so much. Her father always said she talked too much. But she had grown quieter, more somber in dress and manner--had

stopped seeing reasons to laugh or chatter happily since the carriage accident that had killed two of her friends.

Now Lucia looked at the rolling landscape, realizing this town was not much more than a few clumps of buildings, not truly a city at all. What would her future husband be like? Would he be good-looking, patient, kind, soft spoken? Old, young? It truth, it didn't matter. She just needed his name. No fancy things, just a home and a man's name. The man who'd advertised for a bride sought to wed as soon as possible. He hadn't asked for that woman to be a great beauty or bring a dowry, only that she be clean and honest.

Lucia was a good Italian girl. Very, very clean.

Travis Conley's lips halted in their descent to capture a taut rosy nipple. "Did you hear somethin'?" he panted, tensing with more than lustful desire. He could have sworn he heard a door slam. "Thought you said it was the butler's day off and nobody was around."

Beneath him, sultry as the humid afternoon itself, Pearl Sweeney arched her back. "Nobody is."

"Ain't no wind today," Travis hissed. "And even if there was, we didn't leave the door open. Your front door can't shut itself."

A booming masculine voice penetrated the walls of the musk-scented bedroom. "Pearl. What's come over you, daughter? You ailing?"

Travis didn't know when he'd last moved so quickly. At the sound of Patrick Sweeney's stentorian voice, Travis had somehow vaulted from the rumpled bed and gotten half dressed in one blur of movement. Fumbling with his jeans--clutching his boots, shirt, and hat in one fist--he tried to close his fly and simultaneously unlatch a double-hung window.

"Pearl." The voice was harsh and rising up the stairs now.

"Lock the damn door," Travis ordered in a hiss.

Pearl sat up, gloriously naked, and casually shook out tumbled blond sausage curls. She gave Travis a triumphant smile that sent his belly crashing down to his knees. "Sorry, the lock's broken."

Oh Christ.

Then, in a clucking, verging-on-mocking tone, she turned to add, "And you're not going to climb out that window. It's a long way to the ground. My father will understand. This sort of thing happens more frequently than you might imagine." She got up and pulled on a gleaming pink satin dressing robe. "Why do you think Mary Sue Baker had to marry Tommy so suddenly last year?"

Did she teach a class in how to trap your fella into marriage?

By now Travis had his ass perched on the windowsill. He gauged the distance to the section of roof below, overhanging the covered porch. It wasn't that far, even if he fell. And compared to the alternative she had in mind, definitely the lesser of two evils. He'd take a broken leg any day over a ring through his nose. He glanced back at her before tossing his boots down to the dirt. "Tommy must be chicken of heights. I ain't. Say howdy to your pa for me."

Thank God he'd tied Ole Rye around back, near the corral. Cursing and limping, with sharp little rocks digging into his feet right through his thick cotton socks, Travis crept around the side of the house and stopped to jerk his boots on. He leaped into the saddle of his bay gelding and whacked the horse's rump.

"Damn that gal, anyway," he muttered to himself as he cleared the main lawn area of the Flying Fist ranch. Now he knew why Pearl had asked to leave the town picnic early, why she'd been so eager to slip upstairs. Why she'd seemed more wanton than usual, claiming to need a second helping of his lovemaking.

Travis hadn't expected Patrick Sweeney to come waltzing through his front door looking for his daughter less than an hour after they'd gone to her place. But Pearl obviously had. It was a good thing she hadn't bothered to act surprised. Travis would have horsewhipped her next time he met up with her if she'd thought him that darned gullible. She had a talent for displaying emotions she didn't feel, but surprise wasn't among them.

He couldn't totally lay the blame for this at her feet, though. He'd known she was a scheming flirt almost from the first.

Oh, not when they met that day outside the general store. Then he thought she was a porcelain statuette come to life, a pure angelic vision in satin and lace. He'd never seen anything like her. He could still see her in his mind's eye as she'd appeared that day--lace parasol spinning, her bustle twitching as she walked away, leaving him gaping in her wake. He'd bolted right back into the store to ask the proprietor who that incredible lady was.

Travis had been astonished to learn the new debutante in Pueblo was none other than the only child of his neighbor, Patrick Sweeney.

Sweeney was a beer-bellied, pugnacious Irishman with a walrus mustache and dangerously fanatical views. He owned the larger cattle spread across the creek from Travis' own ranch--laughingly named Crockhead Rest. True to its moniker, stupid horses and their riders sometimes had little to show for a day's work, yet somehow Crockhead had come into its own. It wasn't as big or impressive as the Flying Fist, but it was modestly successful. Travis had started it from nothing and made it a going operation--without charity from his affluent neighbor, whose "benevolence" would have carried too high a price.

Sweeney was a man of powerful influence around these parts, despite his often radical political opinions. Travis knew he'd only been permitted to purchase the parcel abutting Sweeney's because Conley was a good Irish name and he was Presbyterian. Sweeney detested Catholics, Irish or any other variety, and made sure every banker and businessman in Pueblo and Canon City knew it. He didn't want Papists settling within ten miles of his spread.

It was said this was because he'd been a two-fisted brawler in Dublin, who was forced to leave Ireland when the Ribbon Society--an equally radical group of Irish Catholics--swayed the laws to prohibit Protestants from owning land in Dublin town. Sweeney swore prejudice had claimed the life of his fragile young wife and driven him from his homeland. And because today he was a wealthy cattleman, nobody much questioned the other side to his story.

To Travis' mind, Sweeney was a bloated, dictatorial, overzealous bigot. Truly an ugly man, through and through. Travis was taken aback to discover Sweeney's only child was the prettiest gal this side of the Rockies. One look at Pearl outside the general store that day and Travis had begun to pursue her, chasing her down until she caught him.

It was only after they'd been keeping company for a time that he realized she'd meant for him to become her steady beau. He'd stepped right into a pile of cow dung, too infatuated at the time to recall the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Pearl had a grasping, calculating nature of her own. She was darned fetchin', but knew it. Which made her darned snobbish, too. And he'd discovered in the last few months just how crafty she could be.

Always a popular gal, Pearl had served as bridesmaid in three weddings over the past year. Tired of being one of the visions in pastel headed up the church aisle, she'd obviously decided to take her next stroll in white. And Travis was supposed to stand there in his Sunday best as Pearl slipped the noose around his neck. She wasn't above arranging for her pa to catch them in bed to make sure things turned out her way. Hell, she probably didn't care if the whole town knew she'd been compromised, as long as she got that wedding ring she was hankering for.

Travis turned Rye along the worn perimeter track toward Crockhead's ranch house and sighed, tugging his hat brim down to block the fading sunlight on the horizon.

It wasn't as though he'd never thought about marrying Pearl. Christ, he wasn't an idiot. But he was young still and unsure what he felt for Sweeney's daughter would last the rest of his life. Not that he believed in that hogwash of love at first sight or the grand, sweeping passions in theater melodramas. He just knew he didn't have close to what his brother felt for Sparkle. Of that Travis was certain and damned glad. He'd witnessed firsthand how hankering over a gal had damned near killed Rafe, when no knife or bullet had. Travis didn't need Pearl that way. Neither did he have the abiding trust and faith his sister Miranda had for her husband. His siblings were both married now and happy

about it.

But when he thought about settling on one gal for life . . . oh, Travis freely acknowledged Pearl was exciting sexually. She was fine to look upon or kiss, every inch--from her dainty little toes to her fragrant blond curls. But the truth was, Travis didn't like her. They got along best when she shut pan and minded her own business. When she just stood on his arm at local gatherings, like at the picnic today.

But she was nearly as opinionated and bossy as her pa. Travis could just picture her, setting down to breakfast every morning, listing his chores for the day. Nagging at him. Fussing with his shirt collars or ordering him to see the barber. Always talking. Maybe if he kept a chicken leg stuffed in her mouth . . . or something else.

But that was just it. He couldn't spend all his time in bed with Pearl. He had a spread to run. And problems with it just now that were a hell of lot more important than taking pleasure with his gal or her yen for flowers and a wedding dress.

That brought a rueful smile to his lips. Some fellas would figure marrying Pearl would solve his problems. Travis could quadruple his holdings overnight. There weren't many ways a young rancher could do that, short of a miracle. But he knew Miss Sweeney was no emissary from St. Peter's gleaming gates, despite her name and outward appearance. He'd always been able to handle her, obstreperous as she could be.

He'd pictured the Double F brand on the flanks of several hundred head. That image was a damned good one. He could handle a big spread. But the thought of Patrick Sweeney as his father-in-law . . . that Travis couldn't swallow. He literally shuddered at the notion of putting up with that sonofabitch on a daily basis.

Hellfire.

Travis might consider marrying Pearl some day. Might. But he sure wasn't about to be danced up the aisle at the end of a shotgun barrel. If he married her, it wouldn't be because Patrick ordered it or because Pearl had too many bridesmaid dresses in her closet. He'd ask her when and if he was ready to take on a wife, when Patrick was ready to pass the torch--if that day ever came. But Travis knew it wasn't about to come soon enough for Pearl, and he didn't have time for her schemes.

He needed to find a cook for his ranch before he lost his whole crew.

Travis had started Crockhead with two employees, Joshua and Clara Abbott. Josh had been an experienced trail boss, the ideal ranch foreman; Clara managed the household chores and cooking. Josh had helped Travis expand his herd from a couple dozen steers to several herds. Eventually Josh had hired other wranglers. Travis built a separate bunkhouse along with a small cabin his brother had erected and used during the winter months.

Travis had always wanted his older brother to go in as a partner with him, but Rafe wanted no part of being a rancher. It turned out Travis hadn't needed his brother. With

Josh Abbott's experienced judgment and his own hard work, Travis had built Crockhead into a spread employing over twenty men, even more during cattle drives.

Things would have been just fine if Clara Abbott hadn't died in her sleep one night.

Josh had come to Travis after the funeral, hat in hand, openly wiping at streaming eyes. He'd explained that everything about the ranch was too painful since Clara's passing. He saw her everywhere. He couldn't stay on, had decided to join his only brother out in Connecticut. In one fell swoop, the two people Travis had always relied upon were gone.

Replacing the ranch foreman had been simple enough. He'd promoted Randy Shea, his best cowpuncher. And Travis thought he'd been lucky about finding a ranch cook. Sourdough Freiling had volunteered for the job, asserting he'd earned his nickname years before down in Texas, working on a chuck wagon.

Toting the bucket of axle grease, Travis surmised after being forced to subsist on what Sourdough termed "chow."

Freiling claimed his cooking skills were legendary.

Travis couldn't argue with that. Legends were spun from life's horrors. Three men had quit in the last month alone, another the month before that, all of them citing bellyaches or weight loss as their reasons. Biscuits, chipped beef on toast, fried eggs--Freiling incinerated them all. It was a compliment to call the sludge he brewed "coffin varnish." Once Randy Shea had literally checked the battered tin coffeepot for dirty boot socks. Travis had lost a five-dollar bet when they didn't find any lurking inside.

They'd endured the awful food over the summer. Travis hadn't been concerned about losing a few hands along the way. It was early autumn. He might've been forced to lay off several men soon. There just weren't chores enough in snow season to warrant a full bunkhouse. But his priorities had shifted after Randy Shea began talking about greener pastures. Travis wasn't about to replace another ranch foreman. If he didn't want to end up the only man left at Crockhead Rest besides old Sourdough, Travis had to hire an honest-to-goodness cook.

Serving on the Canon City planning committee for the big picnic, Travis had asked several of the town elders for a recommendation. There had been suggestions in response, all of them ludicrous. One man nominated his mother-in-law, a half blind old crow who literally couldn't see to open a can of beans and pour them into a pot without spilling them all over the place. And Carmichael's thirteen-year-old daughter, a girl too young and so scrawny, she couldn't heft a basket of dirty work pants, let alone carry it to the creekbed.

Unable to find a local woman, Travis had resorted to ads in big-city papers. He was certain some widow or spinster would take the position. He'd find someone who knew her way around a stove. He only prayed he found her soon.

"Boss, you won't believe it. Glory be, but we got us a cook!"

Travis snapped out of his reverie as Mick Keenan rode straight at him, waving a battered hat in the air, hooting and hollering. Mick's excitement didn't count for much. He'd shout if they got corn snow or a prairie dog farted. "Travis! There's a gal down at the main gate."

"You mean she's already here?"

Now that was something. Travis had received only two inquiries from his ad. He wired details on working conditions to one Bostonian blue-blood, only to get a wire back that she'd turned down the job. The other gal had given an address in Wisconsin. Travis had written there three weeks ago and heard nothing more.

Had the danged woman just shown up here? Might have been nice if she'd let him know she was coming, so he could tidy up a bit. The irony of cleaning his house to impress someone hired to do it didn't escape Travis. He simply couldn't help himself. He'd always been compulsive about some things. His older sister had raised him with strict standards and a certain measure of pride.

"Yessir, she's here, all right." Mick panted, out of breath. "Big as life. Got a stack of goods . . . size of an elephant. Ain't never seen a body travel with that much claptrap. Must be related to a . . . junk dealer. And--"

Travis cut in, knowing it was the only way to keep Mick focused on the point. "So she brought everything she owns, indicatin' she means to stay on?"

"Yep. Oh, and one of them crate's makin' strangulated sounds. Reckon she's got somethin' alive inside, but I didn't get none too close. And, uh--the gal's real . . . well, she's kind of what you might say . . ."

Mick pushed his hat back over his scraggly thatch of brown hair and seemed to search the horizon. This was a bad sign. Real bad. Rare for Mick to be at a loss for words. Usually they spilled out, end over end, until someone shut his yap.

"What? What is she?" Travis demanded. "Wrinkled? Covered in liver spots? Disgusted by the sight of you cowpokes? Don't tell me you figured I'd hire some ravin' beauty, who'd be dyin' to make your personal acquaintance."

"Wouldn't quite call her that, but she sure as hell ain't wrinkled or got no liver spots. No sir."

"I don't get it," Travis mused aloud. "She wrote she was on the far side of fifty." Travis slowed his horse as a peculiar sensation crept up his spine. Something about this whole business felt wrong.

Mick spat a stream of chaw. "Reckon that can't be so, Boss."

"Maybe she lied about her age. Womenfolk'll do that."

"Could be. This gal's old enough to do the job, but young enough we'd all want to watch while she does it--if you take my meanin'." Mick waggled an eyebrow suggestively.

Travis swore under his breath. He got the meaning, all right. The women Mick ogled were usually worth slobbering over--buxom and curvaceous, long of leg. Anything but spindly housekeeper material. "But I thought you said she ain't pretty."

"Not Pearl Sweeney pretty. Packaged like a gol-darned painted cat. Kind you'd pay to unwrap, only not so gaudy." At Travis' scowl, Mick coughed and added, "Not you personally, Boss. Didn't mean that. But most of us fellas ain't got a steady gal, so we visit bawdy houses and--ahem. Anyhow, this here gal, she ain't from these parts, no-how. She's some kind of ferner."

"Some foreign whore's lookin' to work on my spread?"

"Now I didn't rightly declare her a fallen angel," Mick clarified, looking indignant. "I said she got a figure like one. Think she's Greek, or maybe Portuguese or some such. Couldn't make out most of what she spouted, but she waved a pot at me and Gilmore, so she means to cook. It's that other part we ain't too sure about."

Travis nudged his gelding forward faster. "Ran an ad for a cook and housekeeper. Anybody can figure that means she's expected to do the wash and mendin' along with cleanin' house."

Mick spat the last of his chew. "Has a broom, 'long with every other damn thing a woman could own. Don't reckon she's skittish about chores. Nope. Now, you'll probably say I gone loco, but Gilmore thought the same thing. Danbers, too. They both heard when she was rattlin' at me in that weird talk of hers. Could be we misunderstood."

Turning in his saddle, Travis gave a final warning glare to the idiot beside him. Mick had worked at Crockhead long enough to know that look meant Travis was nearing the limits of his patience. Tugging his hat back down, Mick inhaled and spit out something nastier than chew.

"She mentioned the newspaper, rightly so. But I swear she says she came to marry up with you."

Chapter 2

Travis pulled sharply to a halt near the base of the drive and slid down from Rye's back. A shapely woman beneath a crown of thick dark hair yammered and gestured toward the men standing around her. Half a dozen hands had gathered in a semi-circle. They listened in rapt fascination, rooted inside Crockhead's gate like trees in a windbreak. Just about as mobile and helpful.

From somewhere amid the mammoth heap of boxes and containers blocking the drive, a crate yowled. Travis bent down to inspect it. He could tolerate just about any furry critters except cats. Glowering from inside the dark crate were two sets of unblinking, feline eyes. Both animals hissed in unison, no happier to be visiting Travis than he was playing host to them.

A few of the men noted the arrival of their boss, who they should realize would disapprove of untended nags nibbling the front lawn. Travis planted his feet in a domineering stance. He folded his arms over his chest and eyed the masculine assembly. "Picnic's over. I better see every one of your scrawny butts in those saddles past twilight if you expect to be paid for the day."

He tried to ignore the female and keep his gaze trained on his men, but it was nigh impossible. Not only did she edge over to stand between him and his crew, but she was exactly as Mick had described. Not a filly any virile male could overlook.

Travis saw at first glance she was indeed young, close to his own age. That was the first factor against her. Then there was that peculiar, exotic look about her. Dusky coloring and penetrating dark eyes clashed with unremarkable garments. The effect was to make her all the more compelling. And as she lowered her arms, Travis gulped. He'd never seen breasts the size of hers that weren't a trick of whalebone and padding. Gals just weren't naturally endowed like that.

Yet the uncomfortable sensation in his jeans said this gal was. His parts instinctively knew her parts were genuine, not padded. Her flesh would be firm to the touch. Jesus, did he hear what he'd just whispered in the back of his mind? Firm to the touch? Tarnation, there'd be none of that!

Besides the fact he couldn't make out most of what she said . . . besides her damned cats and four tons of luggage . . . besides her being in the wrong place entirely if she came as somebody's mail-order bride. Besides all that, she had to leave because every man there was staring at her in reverent awe. All of them bemused. Completely at a loss. She might not be classically beautiful, but a cougar could sit down to dinner if she wasn't breathtaking.

Definitely not what Travis had advertised for.

One of the men slapped him on the shoulder, grinning. "She cooks, Boss. Ain't that somethin'?"

Travis sensed it was important to sound blasé. "Yeah, somethin', all right." One female corraling him with matrimony on her mind was bad enough. He sure as hell didn't need one who looked like a Dodge City madam and made a man go hard as a cottonwood getting the same idea.

"Ma'am, excuse me. I don't know where you got the notion anybody here's itchin' for a wife."

"You are Big Crockett, yes? No? Sorry . . . my English has mix me wrong." She laid a hand to her bosom as if to still her beating heart. A collective sigh rose from the men. Travis saw Mick reach over to physically restrain Danbers.

"No ma'am, I ain't Crockett. I'm Travis Conley and I own this spread." He pointed to the wooden sign hanging over the gates. "My ranch is called Crockhead. There's nobody here by the name of Crockett. I'm afraid you've come to the wrong place. If you'll wait while my fellas hitch up the wagon, they'll take you back into town and--"

"No, no." She gave an emphatic shake of her head, sending lush brown tresses swirling around her shoulders. "Today bad day for town."

Her reaction suggested others had informed her of that, probably owing to the big picnic. He wanted to stay irritated, but he couldn't help a twinge of guilt. She was out of her element. He glanced over at the fidgety row of men behind her. The threat of lost pay still hadn't prompted anyone to mount his horse. Damnation.

"Any of you fellas know someone named Crockett in these parts?"

"Was a Tony Crockett over at the Bar M," Lawson offered. "But he left Canon last year. Maybe one of the miners."

Travis moved closer to the gal, using sheer force of will to keep his gaze on her face, though he suspected she must be accustomed to men conversing with those magnificent breasts of hers.

"This fella who advertised for a bride, did he dig for gold and silver?" She looked confused. He pantomimed using a shovel. "Dig, in the ground or a mountain to make money?"

She shook her head as Travis overheard someone make a comment about two mountains he'd like to explore. "Next fella to make a crude remark mends fences for the next two months."

"Uh, Mr. Conley." It was his newest man. Only the new ones called him mister. "I met a fella at the Jug who said he'd advertised for a bride. Before his luck ran out. Had a drink together, then he went to the train depot. Said he was headed for Taos or Santa Fe."

Travis inwardly groaned, struggling to keep his features impassive. The poor gal had come too late. She barely spoke English and had been abandoned. He was trying to figure out how to explain matters when she gasped out loud.

"Marone! Me misero! This can no be. He was gone? Not here, yes?"

"Yes. I mean, no." Travis was beginning to wonder if he actually knew anything at this point. Had he done something to warrant all this misfortune being heaped on him in a single day? First the near-miss at Sweeney's with Pearl, then riding home to find all hell breakin' loose with another troublesome female. Maybe he should give up ranching and become a monk.

"They say you need kitchen," she blurted, suddenly brightening. "I am good kitchen, see?" She seized a covered tin from her stack of paraphernalia. "I make. You like these, yes?" She thrust the tin forward, approaching each bemused man in turn, bobbing her head as they sampled the proffered cookies. Looks of pure ecstasy stole over their faces.

She held out the tin to Travis. He glanced down. Cookies. She couldn't have had jerky or moldy biscuits in that damned tin. It would have to be cookies, a treat Sourdough wisely hadn't even attempted. "Look ma'am," Travis huffed, disdaining her offering. "Miss--whatever your name is, I--"

"Lucia Montessano." She smiled and stepped closer, twisting Travis' stomach into a knot. She had an incredible smile. It lit up her whole face, which--now that he really got a good look at it--wasn't as outstanding as her breasts, but wasn't displeasing. "Happy please you meet me."

"Yeah. Well, Lucille, what--"

"No." She frowned and reached up to mold his lips with her fingertips. "Lu-chee-ah," she repeated slowly. "Lu-chee-ah."

Travis jerked back from her touch as he heard the men begin to snicker. Mick was shaking with suppressed mirth. Danbers looked as though he was suffering an apoplectic fit. Travis knew why. He probably looked like a horse's hind end.

"Whatever. The point is," he informed her with a dark scowl, "I'm lookin' for a housekeeper. I want to hire me a spinster or a widow woman. You know what that means--widow? Somebody a lot older'n you."

She dashed to a battered valise and pulled out a black shawl. She covered her head and turned back to him, looking downcast before she spoke. "Vedova." This came with another emphatic nod. Travis began to suspect she knew only too well how her bosom jiggled when she nodded like that. "Lady with no marito."

Aha! Now they were getting somewhere. That last part sounded close to "married," so he knew she'd grasped his meaning. "Right, no marito. Exactly."

"Yes, I keep no marito! Me, yes. Thank you, yes."

The crate yowled again and Travis saw the men grinning. "Nope. You no," he countered, firmly shaking his head. He knew what she saw here: a passel of eager wranglers; a ranch house with a recent coat of paint; a big natural rock chimney, and windows of

glass, not oiled paper or cowhide; a young buck as boss of the outfit. He wasn't wealthy, but to a foreigner with her whole universe piled in a sorry collection of crates, he probably looked like quite some prize.

He was about to explain that, for a variety of reasons, she couldn't stay on. But his men chose that moment to mutiny. They formed a solid wall, standing shoulder to shoulder to block the drive, faces set in grim determination.

Damned cowards.

Mick was the only one with gumption enough to speak his mind. "Taste them cookies, Boss. Imagine what one of them would be like, dunked in genu-wine coffee, not Freiling's mud."

It was over without a fight.

Travis agreed to one week's trial. He explained as clearly as he knew how that there would be no wedding. She was staying as a hired hand, just like the wranglers. He explained that she and the men were not to get on friendly terms. He had her belongings moved into Rafe's cabin, situated between the ranch house and the bunkhouse. Rafe wasn't always sociable, and though the cabin had been sitting empty for over a year, the hands knew the place was taboo.

The yowling cats got relegated to the barn. This Travis stipulated as they talked the first evening after supper. Lucia and her new employer sat across the trestle table in his spacious kitchen, Travis trying to clarify every minor detail. He didn't want her confused about the rules. Especially the one about nobody getting "maritoned" at Crockhead Rest--except the foreman, when he sent for his gal back East.

"Chow was pretty good, and this is real good coffee," Travis admitted. It was the best damned coffee he'd ever had. She offered a shy smile, but said nothing. "That's supposed to make you happy," he pointed out.

"Yes, but you nervous me."

His earlier twinge of guilt came back as a full-fledged pang. It wasn't her fault she'd turned up on the wrong spread or that her intended had lit out of town. Travis grinned. Stupid fool would hang himself if he could see what he'd missed.

"Come on," Travis teased, "I ain't as bad as all that. Just don't take surprises real well. You showin' up was definitely a big one. Got my way of doin' things around here. You shook it up."

"I am so mistake, Mr. Crockhead. Sorry."

He couldn't help a soft chuckle at how the title came out like "Mee-ster" and she'd confused his name with that of the ranch again. "Name's Conley. But you can call me Travis or Boss like the fellas do. We ain't formal here. So, where do you hail from, the East someplace?"

She was staring through the open doorway into the parlor. "Would you rather sit out there?"

She turned and blushed. "No. But is most pretty, this it . . . your house. The big fire for rocks and your . . ." she paused and pointed, "That. The sitting thing."

"Sofa," he supplied with a genuinely warm grin. The sofa was old and losing its stuffing, but had belonged to his folks. His sister had crocheted a bright throw for the back, but it only partially disguised the shabby condition of the couch. "It's old, but comfortable."

"Nice, I think, like you." She suddenly looked thoughtful and gazed right into his eyes. Travis was oddly disconcerted. Usually he winked or had a glib comment ready for a gal who looked at him that way. Tonight he was tongue tied, transforming into marble in at least two places--one of them his skull.

"You growl, like Enrico's dog," she informed him, "but no bite."

Travis woke up enough to slurp more coffee. "I don't bite, although I can," he warned, wondering why he felt the need to do that. "But most times I can get by with growlin'. Where'd you say you were from?"

"Santo Luigi." That told him nothing. "Misery," she offered, her eyebrows raised.

He blinked as understanding dawned. "Missouri?" When she nodded, he pressed further. "You got family there?"

"Familia, yes. I have brothers." She held up her hand, splaying her fingers.

"Four brothers? What about your ma and pa?"

"My mother is the cemetery. Pa with all brothers. Him cut cows, make them shoes."

Travis assumed this meant he turned cows into shoes, rather than the more amusing alternative, of outfitting bovines to wear them. "Leather workers."

He hesitated with his next question. "In Missouri, and even before that . . . back in Spain, or Greece . . . there must have been fellas. Doesn't seem right, a pretty gal like you havin' to answer some stranger's ad in a newspaper to find herself a bridegroom. What made you decide to take a chance on that fella Crockett?"

She mumbled something he didn't quite understand. "You had a fella in Missouri?" She lifted her hands in a helpless gesture. "Then why don't you go back to him? If it's train fare, I'll --"

"I no go back. He was Italiano, like same." She pointed to herself. "But I not like. No. Padre and Benito, they like. They can have him." She shuddered. "I no pazza. I no want. Crockett much better. American good, yes."

Apparently her kinfolk had chosen some Italian suitor, but she didn't cotton to him because he wouldn't buy her no pots. Maybe he'd seen the mountain of what-nots she already had. Crockett must have made it sound like he could support a wife. Maybe he'd

promised dozens of pots and a new teakettle to boot.

Travis cleared his throat. "You should probably go back home and explain. Tell your brothers and your pa how you feel about that Italian skinflint."

"My padre is not dog without bite."

With those cryptic words, she was out of her chair and the house, leaving Travis to draw his own conclusions.

Lucia brushed her hair and said her prayers before climbing into the cabin's crude bunk. Glancing around the log building with its sparse furnishings, she wiped away a tear. God must be angry. Why else would He put so many obstacles in her path?

It was to have been simple. She knew her duty, had only sought to perform it. Pietro had been the first impediment. Pietro the butcher--blood on his apron and a cleaver always in his thick, hairy hands. Lucia had been friendly with his sister, Anna, in St. Louis.

Ah yes, Saint Loo-is. That was what Americans called it. She had told her new employer the name in Italian. In St. Louis she'd discovered ugly bruises on her friend Anna's face. She'd guessed who and what caused them. Pietro in one of his rages. Didn't Padre know about Pietro's temper? It seemed everyone else in their neighborhood did. The hairy butcher was said to beat his sister when she dropped a dish or scorched one of his shirts while ironing.

Lucia's father had called her foolish to worry about such talk or Anna's bruises. Pietro could provide for a wife and family. A butcher's child would never go without meat on the table. Was she so stupid she did not see the importance of that?

Her father had encouraged the butcher to consider himself betrothed to Lucia. But one afternoon at the butcher shop, a stranger spoke to Lucia and lingered though she tried to politely dismiss him. Pietro had burned with jealousy. Before she could depart after the stranger, Pietro locked the shop door. He began shouting and calling her vile names. Then he struck her, knocking her to the floor.

Her brother had come to walk her home. It was Vincenzo's arrival and his pounding on the locked door that had saved her. He had helped calm Lucia, helped smooth her rumpled garments. Spoken only six words: "You will not wed that man."

The next day he'd packed half the family's goods and shoved a newspaper under her nose. An American advertised for a bride out West. Vincenzo had already bought a train ticket for her. He would deal with the other men in the family.

"You must marry soon, Lucia. You know this. But you will go away, for I think Pietro would kill you. This American has a farm. He will be a better husband than the pazzo butcher. Marry this Crockett. You write me, I come eat at your table."

"My table, Vinny?" she whispered with a caustic laugh in the dark cabin. "It is big plank

of wood. On it I will set many places, much food. For money, not for a husband to eat. No marito. I have failed."

Unless, she suddenly considered, she could win the right to stay permanently. Travis said she could not bother his cowboys. Lucia had seen the bunkhouse where they lived. It would do no good to marry a man with no place of his own, nothing but a bed.

But Travis, the boss . . . he was young and strong, the owner of the big house and barn. Horses. Many fat cows. Travis was boss of everyone here. Tall, well formed, pleasing to a woman's eye. And best of all, he had no sposa.

Perhaps all was not forsaken.

She would cook the best food he'd ever tasted. She would clean, work hard. She would try to speak better English. She would show him she was just what he needed--the perfect wife.

Chapter 3

Despite his early misgivings, Travis had to admit the little Italian had proven herself in only a few days at the ranch. His furniture gleamed with fresh polish, the kitchen and parlor floors had been waxed, his laundry was done, his shirts and boot socks mended. The ranch hands swore they'd died and gone to heaven. He wasn't so sure. He couldn't honestly say he was wild about the strange vittles she prepared, but the fare was better than anything he'd eaten since Clara Abbott's death. He just couldn't identify what was on his supper plate most of the time. At least, he thought, it wasn't because the food was charred beyond recognition, Sourdough's "legendary" trademark.

The men performed their assigned chores without complaint, even volunteered for extra duties. They chopped wood, hauled buckets to and from the creek, and hung out the parlor rug for beating. He knew damned good and well what inspired their generosity. The same wranglers who'd scarcely lifted a finger to help Mrs. Abbott dropped everything for Lu. They gawked at the female every chance they got. But they were respectful and kept their distance from the cabin--all Travis could ask of them. His eyes wandered in her direction more often than he cared to admit.

She was pretty shy most of the time, but she'd assured her place at Crockhead Rest. Without being told, she kept a pot of coffee warming on the stove and had discovered her boss had a serious sweet tooth. Whatever his qualms about the meals she put in front of him, he had none about dessert. Lu had an almost magical way with custard, pastries and such. Even Clara Abbott had never ensured Travis could always step into a warm kitchen, fragrant with the aroma of something sweet baking in the oven. She'd never troubled herself to make sure pie or cake and a mug of black coffee awaited him every night after he'd gone to check the barn.

But his new housekeeper did, and Travis began to look forward to quiet ranch evenings in a way he never had before.

The days fell into a routine, unsettled when a minor incident pointed out a major flaw in Travis' thinking when he let Lu stay on. He'd never stopped to consider that being Italian was practically synonymous with being Roman Catholic.

Sourdough had taken Lu into town for supplies. She ordered eight dozen cans of tomatoes, seeds for a vegetable/herb garden, three tins of oil pressed from olives, chicken wire, and lumber. She informed Sourdough she'd bartered some baked goods for a rooster and three hens from a local farmer. She believed the ranch needed its chicken coop expanded to a full henhouse. She used fresh eggs for the dough she made every day and served boiled at practically every meal.

There had been some questions raised by the storekeeper, Sourdough informed Travis, pointing to Lucia being a Catholic. Travis cursed himself as a lunkhead. He'd asked Lucia about her background, but never given a thought to religion. He'd naturally assumed she'd attend the Presbyterian church with the rest of his crew. The fact she

wouldn't didn't much matter to him, but he knew it wasn't likely to be overlooked by Patrick Sweeney and his Orange Society cronies.

And sure enough, a few days after his housekeeper's visit to the general store --just long enough for rumors to circulate--Travis found himself in Sweeney's paneled library. He tried to focus on the expensive diamond-paned windows and mahogany bookcases, rather than the unpleasant topic of conversation and his host's bigotry. He let Sweeney rave for a spell, then tried to explain how he came to have the foreign girl on his spread.

"She just showed up at my place by mistake the day of the town picnic. Everything she owned was in satchels and crates. She had no money, nowhere to go. I needed a cook. Put yourself in my place, Patrick. What was I supposed to do? I offered her train fare home to Missouri, but she didn't want to go back."

"Sure and she should go back to her own soil, with the rest of the Papist peasants. Foreign trash, begging charity from decent folk." He made a disgusted sound.

"My pa recalled people sayin' the same of us Irish," Travis reminded. Patrick's attitude grated on his nerves. Travis had been born in America, but Patrick had floated over, just like Lu. What gave him the right to look down his bulbous nose at somebody else?

"You came to America lookin' to make a better life for yourself and your daughter. What do reckon her pa had in mind, if not the same thing? Same as my folks, same as hundreds of others. Lu ain't takin' charity. She's workin' for room and board and a wage, same's any cowpoke. Her bein' a Catholic shouldn't matter."

"Ha! Papists never stole your land. That harpy will bring calamity, sure and you'll see, I speak the God's honest truth. Catholics are evil minions of Rome. I heard your men forced the situation."

"They wouldn't let her off my property after tastin' some cookies she'd made." Travis chuckled at the recollection. Stony-faced idiots blocking his front gate. He sighed and scratched at his palm. Patrick wasn't amused.

"To be honest with you, I don't know that I like most of Lu's vittles. She doesn't make plain green peas in butter or potatoes and gravy. Everything's got weird names and comes buried under red sauce. Thing is, the wranglers like it. So long as they're happy and keep up on their chores, things should be fine."

"Fine! You don't care, do you?" Patrick nearly thundered. "Faith, you don't mind that you've humiliated my darlin' girl?" Blue eyes narrowed as he leaned closer to Travis. "Or I'm thinking you've been shilly-shallying right along, letting my daughter get her hopes up for no reason."

"Patrick, I know Pearl expects --"

"She expected a marriage proposal the day of the picnic. Instead, you pushed her face in the muck, hiring on that worthless foreign trash. Penniless, some stranger's ill-used harlot. You've no regard for Pearl or my life's principles, Conley."

Travis had heard enough. It was either hit the porch steps or bash in Patrick's fat face. There was only so much bile a man could keep tamped down before it spewed out. Travis was dangerously close to his limit.

"Your 'principles' are hogwash. Your canoe's gone round the bend, Patrick. My cook keeps to herself and does her job. She ain't set foot on your land or said a word to a soul on your spread. She ain't out talkin' against Protestants, and I ain't packin' her off because you and Pearl dislike Catholics."

Patrick rose from his maroon leather chair, his face almost the same oxblood hue. "She doesn't have to stir up trouble. Papists bring it. The men working my back fifty are already ogling the slattern when she does your wash at the creek. I've had them suggest I hire some fleshy whore to cook here!"

"She ain't a whore." Travis felt his jaw clench. "She works hard, sun-up to sunset. I need her, and she's stayin'. Sorry if you don't like her." He was almost out of the library when Patrick's words stopped him.

"Not half as sorry as you'll be, for it's plain you do. Flesh is Satan's lure. Be warned, Conley. Naught but trouble."

Travis couldn't decide later why Sweeney's final comment irritated him so. True, he was tempted by Lucia's looks, like any red-blooded man would be, but it wasn't fair to say he liked Lu. He found her downright aggravating. The new hen-house, strange food, goddamned cats . . . Heck, they were only the beginning of how she'd altered life at Crockhead. Which wasn't at all what Travis wanted. He'd expected a new cook to be Clara Abbott all over again, to do things the way they'd always been done.

Beans, for instance. What cattle spread didn't serve beans eight out of ten meals? His. He asked for them, and been served beans in vegetable soup or mixed with her boiled bits of dough. He got beans in oil and garlic sauce. But no regular, stick-to-the-pot baked beans.

Bread was another oddity. Lu mixed dough every day. But sometimes she cooked bread flattened out and covered with sauce and cheese. Or she fried dough in a skillet, then dipped it in sugar at breakfast. Her loaves and biscuits had herbs or cheese cooked into them.

Not that her cooking was bad, but it wasn't what a fella expected on a cattle ranch. Just like the woman herself wasn't what a fella expected.

Travis had learned to adjust his thinking where Lu was concerned. He worked to correct her grammar errors, but their conversations still left him confused half the time. He never knew whether she understood his orders. She kept the house and cabin spotless, yet sometimes Travis was uncomfortable in his own home. He had the peculiar sensation that it didn't feel like home any more. There was an indescribable something, like a faint lingering perfume, that reminded him of Lu even after she'd gone to the cabin for the night.

And he never knew when an ordinary situation would go awry. Like the other morning, out in the barn. He'd gone to saddle Rye and found Lu sitting on the floor, a big orange feline curled in her lap. Lucia had glanced up with shining eyes. Travis fought to curb his dislike for the animal she was petting. Her two critters had been rubbing against his boots for over a month--he almost suspected the gal trained them to--but Travis silently prayed a wild predator would make a meal of the varmints. Stinking cats.

"What are you doin' out here, Lu?" he'd inquired without rancor. "You know I don't like you gettin' underfoot of the men."

"I visit my cats. I think she is incinta."

"Innocent of what?" he teased, trying to overlook the way his cook filled out her bright yellow blouse. Next to impossible, with it pulled taut across those overripe young breasts. Travis tightened the cinch on his saddle, thinking there was no justice. A rotten furball got cosseted and pressed against that fine bosom. Men would murder for the privilege. She sat stroking a worthless cat that didn't even appreciate how lucky it was.

His focus on her breasts and how her hand languidly stroked the animal had Travis rigid as stone. Maybe there was an underlying message behind his joking about innocence. The wanderings of his mind were anything but.

"Not in dent. Incinta," Lu repeated. She gestured with her hands in front of her stomach.

The obvious, repellent thought dawned--not that it was any great leap, considering his carnal musings. He was certain he'd misunderstood, though. Lu couldn't mean that. "You got a couple of girl cats, Lu," he reminded. "And there ain't any more within a mile of my ranch."

"This one is girl, but Occupato is man."

Somewhere in the barn was a big gray cat. A big gray cat Travis would truly enjoy skinning right now. "Occu-What's-it's a male? You got a boy and a girl cat?"

"Yes," she nodded. He nearly groaned at the irritating bust-bouncing enthusiasm. A part of his lower body nodded right back. "Occupato," Lu smiled. "It means 'busy one'."

"Yeah, and I know what he's been busy at!" Travis exploded. "How could you let this happen?"

She blinked, gawking as if Travis had just set his scalp on fire. "How did I? This happen is what boy and girl do, no?"

"Hell, yes. That's what I mean. Now we'll have kittens all over the place!"

She seemed to realize he was genuinely upset. She got to her feet, dark eyes blazing in defiance. "Kitses yes, but no rats."

"The parents are enough to keep away rats," Travis replied in exasperation. "Nothin' but danged cats underfoot, trippin' me. Shoot, I'll have Mick put the kittens in a sack and

take it down to the creek. I ain't --"

He was cut off by a shriek and two fists pummeling his midsection. Lu flailed and kicked, calling him a bastard nine ways in Italian. He caught her wrists and burst out laughing. His anger was gone, replaced with amusement at her protective, fiercely maternal reaction.

"Lu." He smiled broadly, hoping she'd read the truth in his eyes. "Much as I dislike 'em, I've never drowned a cat in my life. Doubt I can pay my hands to do it, neither. I'm the dog who doesn't bite, remember? I was just foolin'. But dogs don't get along with cats."

She sniffed and tried to pull her arms free. Travis held firm, intrigued to discover how delicate the bones in her wrists were. He thought of Lucia Montessano as robust, buxom. Stalwart and determined. He'd never noticed how frail she was in some respects. Pleasantly startled, he released her and stepped back.

"Why Lu, you're no bigger than a little bird in some places," he noted, studying her narrow throat, where a pulse beat steadily just above her collarbone.

"Ha. You have the mind of a bird," she announced, storming out of the barn.

Travis had ridden clear to the front gate before he realized she'd meant to insult his intelligence.

He was awakened by loud shouts somewhere in the distance. He bolted out of bed, yanked on his jeans, and grabbed the rifle he kept in his room before he was fully awake. Barefoot, he dashed to the kitchen, skidding into the room as Randy burst in through the back door.

"Big trouble," the foreman panted, clad only in long underwear and scuffed boots. "We caught Gilmore . . . in the cabin with Lu. She was screaming. Woke half the bunkhouse."

"Christ, just what I was afraid of," Travis mumbled. "I'll put on my boots." He padded back to his bedroom, the memory of Lucia gesturing about a swollen belly etched clearly in his mind. The talk about what males and females naturally did together. He steeled himself for the worst and followed Randy out to the cabin.

Three men held Gilmore pinned against the far wall. A lamp burned low on a side table. Lu was sobbing quietly, perched on the edge of the bunk in her night-dress. Travis was relieved by that, that at least she was wearing something. There would have been total chaos if the men had found her without a stitch.

"She all right?"

He barely waited for someone to nod before he seized Gilmore and shoved him out into the darkness. Travis ordered Randy and Danbers to take Gilmore to the sheriff. He asked Mick Keenan to bring Lu and her things into the main house.

Travis didn't trust himself to deal with anyone right then. He stalked back into the kitchen, his temper white hot. Snatching the bottle of rotgut he kept in a cabinet for medicinal purposes, he took a long swig. He'd never come so close to killing anyone with his bare hands. He'd never felt such intense fury.

Had Lu defied the rules and invited Gilmore into the cabin, or had he forced his way inside? Technically, it didn't matter. His presence there violated the strictest rule of the ranch, and they'd all been warned about the penalty. Gilmore was out of a job as of this second.

Could it have been a tryst gone wrong?

The notion squeezed Travis' insides into a tighter knot. He'd warned her, by God. He lit a blaze in the rock fireplace and turned as Keenan came in, carrying a bulging satchel and a pillow. Lucia trailed in his wake, eyes downcast, face puffy.

"You ain't blamin' Lu, are you, Boss? I told her you wouldn't kick her off the spread, account of that goat takin' it in his mind to . . ."

As usual, Mick was rambling when Travis didn't want to hear it. "Whether she stays past tomorrow or not, she's not safe out in the cabin. Get her settled in one of the spare rooms. I'll decide the rest after we talk."

Mick motioned to her and they disappeared down the dark hall. Mick came back out seconds later. "Travis, you oughtn't be wrothy with her. Gilmore's been sniffin' after her from the first day. He probably tricked her. You know she don't understand half of what fellas say. She made a mistake."

Travis looked at the deep furrows in Mick's brow. The cowhand wasn't pretending his distress. The whole crew would feel the same. Gilmore had never been popular, while Lu certainly was.

"A mistake. If she didn't want him there . . . Christ, do you think he actually managed to . . .?" Travis let the question hang there.

Mick shifted from foot to foot. "She ain't said three words since we kicked the door open. Her nightdress was on, but--hell, Travis, how can we tell?"

"I'll have the bastard strung up if he raped that gal," Travis snarled, shocked to realize he meant it. Mick went back to the bunkhouse. Travis found Lucia in the bedroom nearest to the kitchen.

"Come out here by the fire," he encouraged. She'd put on a robe. Her eyes were red, but dry. He led her back to the sofa. "I got to ask this, Lu. Did you open the door, or did Gil break it in?"

"I let him inside. Wrong, yes. I did not think. I see now. Again I make same mistake."

"Same mistake? This happened before? Is that why you left your last job and came lookin' to marry a stranger?"

She vehemently shook her head. "I never have job before."

Travis sighed. "Didn't you understand about the men? I warned you straight off there'd be trouble, told you never to let anybody in the cabin alone with you."

"Trouble." Her lower lip trembled.

Travis felt his gut muscles clench in response. "Did Gilmore do to you what your gray cat did to the orange one?"

Lucia's cheeks burned hotter than the hearth flames at his question. Travis was looking at her strangely, perhaps uncertain whether she understood. She understood, only too well. "No," she whispered. "Marone, no. I never want him, Travis! You must believe, yes, please."

"All right. I didn't say you wanted him doin' that, but you knew you weren't supposed to open the door. Why'd you do it?"

"Gilmore said you were sick. I come to kitchen. I knew he lies when I opened the door. His eyes, his face--same like the other, before."

"Some other wrangler tried to touch you?" He grabbed her by the shoulders and jerked her to her feet. "Who? Why the hell didn't you tell me? I'll run him off, too."

"Not here. In Misery. The butcher my father gave for marito. He tried to . . . hurt me. But my brother, Vincenzo, he say I come here, marry Crockett."

"Lucia, I'm sorry. Really sorry."

It was the first time he'd ever pronounced her name correctly. She held her tears at bay, but couldn't think. Not one word of English came into her mind. Confusion, shame, and frustration washed over her. She dropped to kneel on the rug before the hearth, heedless of what Travis thought. She clasped her hands in prayer. Once again, she failed. She would be forced to break her solemn promise. She had no plan, no idea what to do. Could do nothing but ask God where to turn.

Travis doubted he'd have been more stunned if she'd pulled a pistol and blown a hole through the roof. She'd appeared to have herself pretty much in control. Her English was jumbled, typical when she got upset. But this prayin' couldn't be a good sign.

What if she'd lied? Gilmore must have--no sir, Travis couldn't allow his mind to complete that picture. He'd make sure Gilmore never forced himself on another woman. But he'd deal with the law and charges tomorrow. Tonight there was Lu and her pain. Travis hadn't caused it, but maybe he could lessen it.

"Lucia." He knelt beside her and gathered her against his chest, then slowly pulled her back with him onto the sofa. With her in his arms, he settled onto his back and snuggled them both under the throw from the sofa's back.

Lucia was horrified. She immediately recalled the blond she'd seen on Travis' arm. Mick

had explained the pretty girl lived across the creek, at the big ranch. She was a rich and beautiful lady. The cowboys said Travis had courted the blond for some time.

"No, Travis. Your lady would not--" Her words were cut off by soft lips moving against hers. Lucia's breath caught. Her handsome, virile boss was kissing her. Marone, had he lost his senses?

Travis hadn't meant to actually kiss her--at least that's what he told himself. He'd been thinking about taking away her shame, lessening the wound to her pride. He'd let himself imagine a soft kiss, a gentle caress. He'd never intended to actually let their encounter drift quite this far.

But, like every other red-blooded male at Crockhead, he'd speculated about having Lu in his arms. He'd had a dream about kissing her. The reality was nothing like those male fantasies. She didn't resist when his lips settled over hers, but neither did she let the seam of her mouth open. Not like Pearl would have done. Eagerly. Kissing Lu wasn't erotic. That was his first surprise.

The second was that their kiss was soothing. Serene and calming. So peaceful, Travis never wanted it to end. Kissing Lu was a lot like riding through a fragrant spring meadow.

Which made no goddamned sense, his inner voice cautioned.

Everything else about this particular female--from her clothing and talk down to her cats and menu choices--didn't mesh with his tastes. Kissing a gal with Lu's attributes should have been pure lustful indulgence, not sweet. It should have sparked dark, carnal desires, not had him thinking of wind and wildflowers. It should have fanned his needs, not answered them in some unique way.

Sweeney actually had a bit of intuition, Travis admitted. For alone, here in the firelight with her in his arms, he did like Lucia. Not as a shapely female, but as a person. As a friend.

His lips slid to her damp eyelids and cheeks. "Don't cry, Lu," he whispered. "Please don't. He ain't worth it." She stopped struggling to extricate herself from the couch and relaxed, lying against his shoulder with her eyes closed. Only after he'd kissed her face in several places did he realize she was holding her breath.

"Hey, take a deep breath. You're all right. You're safe here with me, I promise. Gilmore won't hurt you ever again. I'll make sure."

"But this not good." This was said in a raw whisper. Her eyes, dark and large enough to swallow him whole, searched Travis' face. "Your lady across the creek would not like this, not stand under it."

"Reckon she just might," he lied, smiling at the fractured English. "But I don't give a damn. Ain't frettin' over what other folks think, includin' Pearl and her pa. Does it feel wrong, just bein' together?"

"No," she responded slowly. "It feels good."

"That's what's important. What you think. Except I got a notion you're confused about something. Just about any fella who even looks at you can't help but notice . . . well, let's say he ain't likely to forget you're all woman. But that don't give a man the right to view you as his for the takin'. You know what I'm sayin'?"

"I look like a good lady?"

Travis smiled and caressed her cheek with his fingertips. He couldn't have said it better. "Yeah, that's right. Gilmore and that fella in Missouri didn't respect you. They were wrong, not you. But it's important to remember --" He tipped her face up and brushed her lips with his again. "We're not all like that."

Lucia's arms wrapped around him. She clung to him. She never said a word, just held him. Travis took it as a sign she needed his strength, that she understood he was trying to make things right the only way he could. He'd curb his randy urges and be what she needed. He wouldn't touch her in a sensual way.

Even though he'd never embraced a woman with such magnificent curves.

He didn't have a wealth of experience where the fairer sex was concerned. Before Pearl, there had been a couple of entanglements with local gals, but he hadn't actually bedded either of them. A few hot caresses out in Mary Ellen Masterson's barn one night, stolen kisses from Emmalou Whitcomb at the Easter dance one year. That was about it. Until the cattle drive a few years ago that took him down the road to manhood. He'd lost his innocence in a cheap hotel. Where the gal, as well as he could now recall, had been plump and curvaceous. She'd taught him how to worship a woman's body in all its glory, helped him discover its sensitive places and delights. She'd been a giggly, wild young thing, not much older than he was. A vision of naked thighs flitted across his mind's eye. She'd been filled out in all the right places. Yet seemed poorly endowed in comparison to Lucia. Lucia was a goddess.

He consciously slowed his breathing as his thoughts mellowed. He settled both arms around Lu and felt her gradually relax in his embrace. Her respiration became deep and even to match his. She was calm in his arms and he was glad, even though the niggling voice of his conscience argued he had no business lying there with his housekeeper. Pearl was his a steady gal and certainly wouldn't approve.

But he didn't feel genuine remorse. Maybe he should, because Pearl never felt so warm and wonderful in his arms. She wasn't the serene type. She was always fidgety. She could get him hotter than a pistol, but it wasn't her way to linger, to enjoy the sensation of just being cuddled up together, without talking or spooning.

Then it occurred to him he shouldn't even compare the two gals on that level. He wasn't supposed to be shopping--he was spoken for, and everybody in town knew it. He couldn't pretend Lucia had enticed him. This had been his idea, and though he was

managing to be a perfect gentleman, he knew it wasn't a real bright one. He should send Lu off to bed.

"Lu?" She didn't answer. Leaden contentment crept up his limbs, and he gave in to the feeling, closing his own eyes. He'd have to try this with Pearl some time, now that he knew what he'd been missing. It felt so deep down good. And holding a woman now didn't count, not if he and Lu didn't do anything but sleep. "You're safe now," he whispered, stroking Lu's dark hair. It was softer than it looked, and springy to his touch. Sort of like her breasts, he imagined with a smirk. He just couldn't help noticing their firmness up against his chest. Damn, but she did have the world's finest bosom. He briefly wondered about her legs and backside. Could be they were fine, too. Yep, Lu was one hell of a woman

He inhaled slowly. The rest of his thoughts eluded him. Slipped right out of his mental lasso like wily trick ponies. Another deep breath and he was lost, too slow, too contented to do anything but sleep.

Chapter 4

Lucia awakened with a kink in her neck. She tried to sit up and found she couldn't. Something had caught her nightgown, pinned it to the --

Startled, she opened her eyes to discover she wasn't in a bed, but huddled on the parlor sofa before dead ashes in the rock fireplace. She remembered she'd been beside the fire with Travis the night before. She glanced down. She was in her nightdress and robe. The something trapping her was her his left thigh. Travis was asleep on the sofa also, lying half on top of her.

Santa Maria! She'd spent all night in a man's arms. "Pazza, what have you done?" she gasped aloud.

Her voice awakened Travis. He winced and got to his feet, looking around the room. He reached under the sofa and produced his cowboy boots. "Mornin'. Were you mumblin' about pots? Maybe you could fetch my favorite out in the kitchen and get some coffee brewin' in it." He winked at her.

She gaped at him. They had slept together and he had the nerve to wink while talking of kitchen pots? Then she realized he'd mistaken her Italian for English. She began to laugh in spite of herself. "Not pots, bowls for cooking. I called myself pat-zah. Crazy woman. I must be crazy to sleep here. Perhaps I still sleep and this is only dreaming."

"Nope." He shook a pant leg down over his boot top. "It was a . . . rough night. Guess we both fell asleep out here by the fire."

She stood up and jerked her robe closed, keeping her back to Travis. She heard a deep chuckle. "Lu, in case you didn't notice, we're both decent. I slept with my clothes on."

"Perdinci! Your clothes on, yes. But me madre spin inside her coffin from what we have done."

"Think you meant she'd roll over in her grave. You're gettin' closer with those phrases, though. Now how about that coffee?"

"Coffee? You talk only of coffee after you spend all night with me?"

Travis had the uncomfortable sensation that all the guilt he'd set aside last night had somehow seeped from him into her. A full-scale ruckus seemed about to erupt. Over nothing. Well, not quite nothing, he amended. But he didn't owe her any apologies. If anybody had to answer for his behavior the night before, it was that sonofabitch Gilmore.

"I need some coffee before I head over to see the sheriff. Gilmore's the one you should be upset with. You're sure he didn't really hurt you?" She shook her head, but wouldn't look up at him. "Even so, I'm havin' the law run him out of town. He ain't stayin' around, to hire on somewhere else and mistreat some other gal. Got to shave and wash up."

He hurried off and didn't give Lucia a chance to say anything when he came back out to

the kitchen. She saw he'd changed clothes and shaved. His manner was preoccupied and abrupt. He poured coffee into a tin cup, grunted something at her, then banged out the back door for the bunkhouse. She was forced to go through the motions of a typical day on the ranch, though she avoided the cowhands, unwilling to face the curious or knowing looks they gave her.

She kept busy, but still watched, waited anxiously for Travis to return. It was after dark before the men cleared out of the kitchen. She found herself alone at last with her employer. She picked up a dishtowel and began drying the stack of clean plates on the sideboard. "We were together last night," she reminded. "You kissed me."

"Kissed my horse once, too." He poured more coffee into his mug with one hand and crammed a butter cookie into his mouth with the other. He grinned around it, like a small boy, innocent or unconcerned about the topic she'd brought up.

"We are not married," she huffed, planting her fists on her hips.

"Hey, your English is clear as a bell. Darned if you ain't right. We're not married. No marito around here, just like we settled when you hired on." She glared back at him, not surprised when his expression turned hard.

"Now just a dad-burned minute, Lu. You don't think--well, I don't give a damn if you do, because you're one hundred percent wrong. Nothing happened last night."

"You touched me, kissed me."

"Aw, heck. I kissed you a couple times and had my arms around you, that's all. Ain't nothin' improper about what went on."

"The priest will say--"

"Your old priest doesn't need to know. Nobody does. Just keep your trap shut about last night. I asked if it seemed wrong. You could have told me to let you be. We both know it wasn't like . . . Land sakes, we fell asleep. Now, I'll allow that folk might get the wrong idea, especially Pearl. If she gets wind of it--that's all we'd need! Her pa's already lookin' for your hide."

She interrupted, frowning. "This means skin, no?"

"Yeah."

Her eyebrows shot up. Her voice rose a notch. "That fat man does not look at my hide. Men always want to see skin. You say some are not like that, but I think you lie. All of you same." She clucked her tongue in disgust. "Licenzioso!"

Travis banged his coffee mug onto the tabletop and glowered at her. "Now you hold on right there. I've let you call me names I can't even understand and insult me every which way, but I'm not like Patrick Sweeney. Who, by the way, is not lookin' to take a gander at your bare skin. I meant he doesn't like you. He wants you to leave Pueblo. He hates Catholics, and he's got Pearl against you on account of your bein' one. If she thought you

and I had any romantic inclinations, she'd--"

"What 'nations'? America is nation. You make no sense. You sleep with me on your sofa and laugh that this is like kissing horses. You pazzo, Boss man. And if this fancy Pearl hates me, I hate her also. She can keep bird-mind cowboy who kisses horses."

Travis gritted his teeth and counted to ten before he spoke. The confounded little ingrate had just called him crazy, then stupid, then tossed him to Pearl with her blessing. Even though he already belonged to Pearl, which had been his whole point, if she wasn't too dense--no, too damned Italian--to get it!

"Fine, this cowboy will just go see Miss Pearl. Who happens to be my steady gal and has been for over a year. One night sleepin' under a blanket with you doesn't change that. Reckon you figured after lyin' next to them oversized mounds of yours, I'd feel compelled to drop to one knee and beg you to be my lawful wife. Got news for you, Miss Lucia Mont-Whatever," he emphasized coldly. "Pearl's been trying to wrangle a proposal out of me for as long as I've known her. Has her rich pa tryin' to buy me. Ain't proposed to her, and I've done a lot more than kiss her. So what in the name of all that's dear would make me propose to you?"

He was shouting by the time he reached the end of that spate. He didn't know why exactly, or what answer he expected. Not from Lucia. A fella never could anticipate what came next with her.

She studied his face for half a minute. "I think you know." Every word came out in flawless, haughty English. "Even if you still have only the mind of a bird."

"Goddamn it, it's the brain of a bird!"

"Yes, that too."

Ten days went by. Lucia had believed--rather she'd desperately hoped--Travis might see her as a desirable woman after their night together. He had kissed her and held her tenderly. Acted as if he cared something about her. But little had changed. She was still the cook, ordered now to sleep in the guest bedroom with her door locked. Now instead of being relegated to the small cabin on his property, she lived inside Travis' home. Instead of becoming closer for that proximity, she found it impossible to talk with him.

Every time she saw him, she either became angry or distraught. Then nothing but Italian or jumbled English flowed from her lips. She gave up attempting conversation, began consciously avoiding him and his inevitable teasing. He sought to return to their former bantering ways, but Lucia knew they could not go back. She did not feel the same and could not accept that he did. Not after that night in each another's arms.

She recalled vividly the feel of his firm shoulder beneath her head, the strength and vitality in his arms. The promise in his whispers to protect her. The feel of his lips on hers and the tingle in her breasts. Wicked woman. She had longed for him to bare her

flesh, to caress and kiss it. He was not just some American with a ranch, not just her boss. He was a handsome man she wanted, as a woman craves a man's touch.

She was ashamed of having immoral thoughts. Even more ashamed to find she'd been alone in entertaining them. Travis hadn't tried to undress her, did not thrust his tongue between her lips, as Gilmore had done. Travis' cold attitude, his casual laughter at her obvious distress, only proved she had been foolish to hope he could find her desirable.

She timed her daily routine so she wouldn't be alone with him. Yet he purposely seemed to taunt her by standing around the kitchen, laughing and joking with Randy Shea and the men. At such times she had to put down her rolling pin for fear she'd whack Travis over the head with it. Then who would be laughing, Mr. Horse Kisser? she silently glowered.

In the lonely exile of her new room, she lay in bed night after night, reviewing everything that had befallen her. She tried to pinpoint just when and how things had gone so awfully far off track. One night an intriguing thought pricked at the back of her consciousness. Travis had said his rich lady's father wanted to buy him.

She had heard Americans speak of the terrible war which had torn their country in two. Men had spilled blood--the blood of their friends, neighbors, even their own families--over the right to buy people and own them. Travis had taught her how to say things better. He did not mix up his words. He helped her straighten the order of her English words, told her when she said the wrong thing.

He had said the beautiful girl called Pearl wanted to buy him.

Had said it very clearly. Yet because of that big war, Lucia sensed he didn't mean for a slave or forced worker. He had said it while shouting about being marito--a husband.

Did a woman buy her husband here in America? Could she also buy a child?

Lucia sought out Mick Keenan the following afternoon, pleased to find him in the barn playing with the new litter of kittens. Scorza, short for Scorza ti'arancio-- Orange Peel--had presented them with seven balls of fluff. One was all gray like his father, two were orange striped like their mother. The rest had motley splotches of color all over. Mick said these were called calico, like the cloth women sewed into dresses and blouses.

"Mick, Boss told me rich Americans can buy people. But no slaves now anymore, no? I do not see what this means, to buy someone."

Mick continued twirling a forefinger for one multi-colored kitten to chase and nibble.

"Travis don't mean literally own nobody. It's a sayin', is all. This here's a country where they say anybody can become rich and powerful. Ain't that what your pa hoped, when he brung you all over here?"

"Yes," she nodded. "He says my brothers work hard, will be rich. Yes. Someday have big houses and much money."

"Right. Course it ain't really that simple. Ain't never gonna happen to most ordinary fellas like me or Danbers. But you take Travis himself. He's a good example. His grandpappy died and left him some money, then his big brother stopped ridin' with outlaws--" At her confused frown, he slowed down. "Lawbreakers, bad men."

"Oh. His brother is bad person?"

"Naw, not for a long spell. Used to be a wildcat, but he quit his ways and started turnin' the others in for the reward money. The law pays fellas to help get the evil ones off the range." She nodded.

"Anyhow, Rafe helped the boss. Travis bought this piece of dirt and worked to make it into a decent spread. First he only had a couple cows, then more and more. He's goin' up to the cattle auction next week, buy some more breedin' stock."

"So a man is rich and he buys cows. But how does a woman buy him? This is what he said, that Pearl's father will buy him to be her husband."

Mick flushed and got to his feet, dusting off his jeans and mumbling an excuse to leave. Lucia sensed his disapproval of the personal topic. Their boss maybe did not like workers to talk about him and his lady. This Lucia could understand, but she needed the answer to this strange American custom of purchasing people.

"Did Pearl's father give Travis money, like his brother? Travis will get new cows with the fat one's money?"

"Heck no. Now you got this all backasswards, and none of it ain't your business, anyhow. Skeedaddle on back to the kitchen. Travis would pitch a fit if he catches you followin' me to the bunkhouse. And that's where I'm headed, 'fore you get either one of us into trouble with your danged fool questions."

"Please, wait. You are my friend, Mick. I will not tell him we talk about this. Always he says I learn better English, talk good. In Misery, I stay in the house. I did not talk to Americans there."

"It's Miss-oooh-ri," he corrected softly.

"Yes, Missouri. You see? I cannot talk American if I think always as an Italian. I know little of new, American ways. You say fool questions, but I am stupid of this. How do I learn these things, if no one tells me about American ways? I do not want to know about the woman, only about how she buys Travis for her husband."

Mick removed a tin of leaves from his shirt pocket. He stuffed some into his cheek.

"Why do you eat leaves, like a cow?" Lucia frowned.

His head jerked up. "If that ain't the beatin'est question. I don't eat 'em. You don't swallow. It's chaw. A fella's pastime. Just work on the lump a spell, then spit the mess back out."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "Cause it tastes good. Cause the moon's round. I dunno, Lu. You got a question for every danged thing, you know that?"

"The moon, sometime she points. My brothers do not spit leaves. This is also American, yes?"

"Maybe so, but it ain't American to go sayin' a gal bought herself a man. Women don't rightly . . . uh, well, maybe sometimes. But it'll just make everybody mad, you go sayin' that. Because even when they do, you're supposed to pretend like they don't."

"Could I do this? This not buying with money women do to get a husband?"

"We back to you gettin' hitched again?" Mick shook his head. "Hellfire burn the soles right off my feet, ain't never seen a gal more anxious to get herself hog-tied. You know what, Lu? It's like you're already married to twenty fellas at the same time. You cook and do chores all day. It'd be the same if you had only one man around. You don't need--"

"Can I use money to get someone to marry me?"

Mick groaned in exasperation. Talkin' to Lu was like chasin' tumbleweeds. Just wore yourself thin and got a fistful of dead sticks for your trouble. But he couldn't lose his patience. He liked her sponge cakes and her way of always smiling at him too much to alienate her.

"What the boss meant was a rich person--gal or fella, don't really matter--a rich person can use money to make other folks do things. Pearl's carryin' a torch for Travis. You got a sayin' like that, for when somebody's sweet on somebody else?"

She nodded. "Okay, then. You seen Sweeney's big house, size of the Flyin' Fist. Three times this place. Sooner or later Travis will marry Pearl, cause he ain't gonna cross her pappy. Sweeney can make things easy for a fella 'round here, or he can make 'em real hard. Like with the bank or storekeepers."

Mick patted the top of her head as though she were a child. "Get you enough money, you can have whatever you want. You can hire lawyers and bankers, make everybody see things your way. You can order the rest of us to talk Eye-talian like you do."

She smiled at the jest, but was inwardly saddened. Now she comprehended what Travis had actually told her. He did not truly love the pretty girl across the creek, but she was rich. He was resigned to his fate.

Lucia had seen how possessive Pearl was, too. Although Lucia didn't attend their Protestant church or the parties in the hall connected to it, she had seen Pearl hang on Travis' arm. She'd been in town and heard Pearl talking to other ladies. They all stared at Lucia and whispered. She did not have to speak good English or understand American customs to know they said unkind things. Their cold eyes told her she would never be welcome.

Pearl's father would force Travis to propose, although it was clear Travis did not wish to

spend his life with the pretty blond. Lucia had been confused by his rantings on the subject of marriage. Now she understood the words of frustration. Because of rich Pearl. A pity, but Lucia couldn't waste time worrying about Travis' predicament.

She was no closer to solving her own dilemma. She'd written to Vincenzo, admitting she still had no husband. He had written a short note back, urging her to humble herself and find a man, any way she had to. She'd spent nothing of what she'd had been paid so far at Crockhead, but knew she didn't have nearly enough money to have influence as Mick described it. To make lawyers or businessmen do what she wanted and needed done, she would need much more. Too much more.

She sighed and began rolling out egg dough on the kitchen tabletop. She now understood American ways, but also understood it would be many years before she'd qualify as a rich woman. She didn't have years. She didn't have months. Perhaps weeks, and time was getting shorter every passing day.

It was early December. A light crust of snow covered the ground. Lucia was baking dessert when Travis and the foreman burst through the back door, not even acknowledging her as they poured coffee and plopped into chairs at the table.

"I'll be gone three or four days," Travis announced. "I'm taking Keenan and Lawson. Expect you to put Danbers on creek duty. Have him keep an eye on our renegade rider. Fool's lettin' too many Double F steers ford the creek onto my land. Don't want Sweeney accusin' me of rustlin'."

Randy said something in answer that made little sense to Lucia, but she knew the men didn't care whether she understood or not. She moved past the foreman, who suddenly noticed he and Travis weren't alone in the kitchen. "Hey there, Lu. Whatever you're makin' sure smells good."

"Thank you, yes." She smiled at Travis, but he was up and through the open doorway to the parlor without returning her greeting. He came back with a metal box.

"I keep this in the bottom drawer of my nightstand," he advised Randy. Lucia continued to putter by the stove.

"There's enough cash in here for payroll and incidentals, in case somethin' comes up while I'm gone. There's more'n usual just now, account of the Christmas bonuses. Lu over there keeps makin' fresh coffee and those sweet cakes I like, maybe she'll get one."

She glanced over her shoulder and was rewarded with a wink and a grin. The first warm smile he'd offered since their harsh words after the night on the sofa. Truly the growling dog did not bite . . . but he was still trapped in the rich man's cage. Lucia grinned back. Poor dog. Stupid dog.

"Anyhow, I'll be leaving tomorrow. Should be pretty quiet. Used to have this small auction in the spring, but everybody bitched at Samuelson last year that it's always too

hectic then. And I want my new stock settled, ready for breedin' when spring rolls around."

Lucia left the men talking, her mind whirling in deep thought. She went to her room and sat on the edge of the bed. Time was running out. It would soon be Christmas. It was imperative that she do something. This might be her final chance to put things right, yet to take the risk meant turning her back on all she'd been taught, all she believed in.

She said a novena; waited for an answer, some sign. The only point that crystallized into clarity was her father's frequent admonition that the Lord helped those who helped themselves. Laziness and fear brought no one glory. No purpose would be served by ignoring this opportunity.

Taking this last resort would be deliberately hurting Travis.

Lucia knew this. The thought stung. Whatever may have come between them in recent weeks, she still had to acknowledge that he'd allowed her to stay when she'd had nowhere to turn. He'd chased off that brute Gilmore . . . but he'd also refused to do the honorable thing after their stolen night together. While he hadn't actually compromised her virtue, what they had done was nonetheless improper. Sinful. An unmarried man and woman did not sleep in one another's embrace. Lucia didn't care that no one else knew. She knew. Travis knew. God knew.

God also knew what Travis had done with Pearl. By his own admission, his behavior with the rich blond had been far worse, and he did not care for her. He secretly mocked her. Yet he tolerated her on his arm. He would someday marry her and beget children by her. If he didn't feel shame for his actions, why should she? Lucia asked herself. If Travis could be swayed by money and proud of owning this ranch, why should she not take this step?

She might not speak English well or understand much of what Americans said or did. She made mistakes, but she was learning. She had come to understand that Americans valued independence and wealth. These things brought power. Being meek was not the way to achieve or succeed. She was a poor immigrant, this was true, but she was neither helpless nor afraid. She could do what had to be done. Alone. Soon the men and their boss would learn how strong and determined she was.

When it was too late for any of them to stop her.

Chapter 5

Travis was cold, bone tired, and in no mood to play games. Danbers, the idiot, had shown up at the train depot with two horses tied behind his. He was supposed to have brought the wagon. "Where's the buckboard?" Travis demanded.

"Got a busted wheel, Boss. Looks like her axle's bent, too."

"So? Didn't Shea get that old rummy wheelwright out to fix it?"

"Not yet. Maybe the wheelwright's on a bender someplace. Foreman told me to come meet you with Ole Rye and a mount for Keenan."

Mick tossed his best pal a glower. "You know me and that Huckleberry ain't never gotten along. Nag tried to bite me once. Why didn't you saddle up the dun?"

"Dun's gone lame."

Before Mick could react to that news, Travis spat a string of curses loud enough to make the other disembarking passengers cringe. "I was only gone four days. Four lousy days, and my whole spread's gone to shit! Is my goddamned house still standin', or did that burn down too? Rest of my men got the plague? Creek swollen or land overrun with locusts?"

Danbers shook his head. "Naw, it ain't as bad as all that, Boss. But--"

"Shut up," Travis bellowed, swinging up into his saddle. "Lawson's ridin' the fresh stock out with another fella I just hired. That means I got a stud bull and two healthy cows, plus a handful of cowpunchers. Glory be. Now all I want is to get home and get things put right. Come on."

They'd no sooner ridden through Crockhead's gates when Randy rode up on his black gelding. "Travis, I need to talk to you in the main house. Right away."

Travis assumed he was about to get his troubles spelled out in depressing detail. "You fellas see to the horses," he ordered, "assumin' we got hay and feed left." He followed his foreman inside, slamming the front door. He shrugged out of his sheepskin jacket and headed for the kitchen. "Some of Lu's coffee would sure hit the spot."

But the stove was cold, the sideboard cluttered with heaps of dirty pots and dishes. Encrusted flatware and abandoned cups inundated the tabletop. The kitchen looked like a tornado had hit. The empty tin coffeepot lay abandoned on the floor.

"What the hell's goin' on around here, Randy? Where's Lu?"

"She ain't here. That's what I wanted to tell you. She ran off."

"What? You mean with some fella? Who?"

Randy's shrug and facial expression were helpless. "I don't know. The day after you left, I was in the barn shoeing one of the geldings. Everybody else was tending chores. She told Frank she needed to ship part of her things back home, asked him to drive her to the

train depot. He didn't ask me, because he figured it was no problem. Seems Lu gave him the slip in town. She hasn't been seen since."

"She boarded a train?" Travis heard the foolish incredulity in his own voice and tried to speak in a calmer tone. "She snuck out of town? What the hell for? If she wanted to go home for a visit, she could have--"

"Cash is gone too."

Travis snatched up the empty coffeepot and flung it across the room. It flew against the wall behind Randy.

"Goddamn it," Travis roared. "That bitch stole all my money?"

Randy shrugged again. "She heard us talking, knew where you kept it. It's the only explanation that makes any sense. Can't be a coincidence, her taking off at the same time the cashbox disappears. Nobody was out at the spread. I feel like shit about this, Travis. You left me in charge and I let you down. Wagon's busted, we got no way to fix it. The fellas are expecting to be paid come the end of the week. I didn't tell anybody else about the theft."

Travis clenched his fists. "I'll pay 'em somehow. It's too late today. I'll ride into town tomorrow and go see Gant at the bank. I can't believe she did this. All I kept hearin' from Sweeney was how Catholic's are nothin' but trouble. Christ, I defended her!"

Randy interrupted the tirade. "Travis, I know you'll want to tap your savings, but maybe you shouldn't. If you want me to explain you can't afford Christmas bonuses this year, I'll talk to the men."

"Ain't right to cheat them out of money they worked to earn, all because some connivin' gal hoodwinked me."

"She left a few things here," Randy asserted. "So I pretended she's gone for the holidays. I didn't want to let on we couldn't afford to get the buckboard repaired or the horse doctor out."

"Yeah. Hell, you did what you could under the circumstances. Ain't your fault Lucia hoodwinked us. You were plannin' to send for your sweetheart, weren't you?"

Randy nodded. "Come the first of the year. Figured my bonus would be enough for train fare, but don't worry about it, Travis. This has set you back enough."

"I'm not thinkin' just about your personal life, you know," Travis advised. "We're back to the old problem of no cook. Need you to send for Mavis. I'll dig up some funds somehow. You surprise her with a ticket for Christmas. You two can both work for me, like the Abbotts did. You as foreman, your bride as housekeeper."

Randy colored slightly. "Appreciate the offer, Boss, but--"

"Randy, this spread was so placid, life was downright boring. Remember? Except for

that brief spell when Rafe and Sparkle carried on like two coyotes in heat, and that stranger came gunnin' for him, days here have mostly been so quiet, a fella could hear the cows think." Travis glanced around the kitchen. "My kitchen didn't look like a cockroach festival, nobody busted into the cabin. Didn't have a crazy danged female playin' like she didn't understand plain English. I never got robbed."

"Got a point," Randy agreed ruefully.

"You know what else? Was a time I fancied Lu wanted into my denims." Travis seized his belt buckle with both hands. "Ain't that a hoot? I was right. Only it wasn't my brandin' iron she was after, it was my damned wallet."

Both men laughed. Harsh male laughter appropriate for a situation that wasn't the least bit funny.

"Don't beat yourself up over it," Randy got out. "There's not a man on this ranch who didn't secretly hope the same thing. She knew it. She probably makes a good living playing the sad little stray. She turned up, supposedly lost and alone. What were you supposed to do?"

Travis' voice was pure sarcasm. "Marry her, remember?" He started down the hall. "Ain't hungry, after all. Think I'll turn in. Start cleanin' out the cabin tomorrow. You and Mavis can settle in there, where you can keep an eye on the bunkhouse. You teach your bride how to use a pistol, have her to shoot where it counts if anybody tries to pull a Gilmore on her. Although I wonder now if that wasn't part of Lu's scheme. Sympathy ploy, so I'd move her into the house. From now on, I'm boltin' my front door. And God help the next female who darkens it."

But Travis didn't sleep, despite his exhaustion. He stared at the ceiling of his room, trying to ignore the conflicting emotions tearing at him. The Italian had cleaned him out. It would take months to recoup his losses. He should hate her. Instead, he felt oddly relieved--yet wounded. And that wounded part made no sense.

He should be gleefully envisioning her swinging from a cottonwood, or shackled to a stone floor with nothing but moldy bread for the next fifty years. If anybody could see her locked up, Travis could. He had only to contact Rafe's detective agency in Denver, and she'd be as good as on her way to face a judge.

She deserved whatever misery she got. She was a liar and a thief.

So why didn't bitter images of her comeuppance make him feel any better? Why did he have the peculiar twinge of guilt that wouldn't allow him to be vindicated? Why did he feel partly to blame?

The notion was patently ridiculous, he told himself. She'd come looking to marry some lunkhead named Crockett. No kin to him. He'd kept her on, paid her a decent wage. She'd betrayed him. The incident with Gilmore had been unfortunate, and whatever happened with the fella back in Missouri had nothing to do with

Christ, what if she'd been in trouble? What if she'd genuinely needed, not merely wanted to get married? If that Missouri fella'd left her in the family way, she could be afraid to face her Catholic pa. That made a certain sense--as much as anything he knew about Lucia. He suspected she'd wanted him to believe they'd been intimate that night on the sofa. So he'd marry her and accept the child as his own? Yep. Gals tried shenanigans like that all the time. Look at Pearl's ruse the day of the picnic.

It sickened him to reflect on that. He was strapped for cash now. Strapped right over a big, empty barrel. He'd have to go crawling on his knees to Patrick Sweeney for help. And they both knew Patrick would keep him on his knees until Pearl got her marriage proposal. He'd been able to evade the inevitable step until now.

Wherever Lucia had gone, he wondered if she knew what she'd done. He hadn't offered the protection of his name; she'd all but shoved him headfirst into matrimony with another gal. If Lucia had only told him the truth about her situation, he could have helped her. Could have found some man willing to make things right. Keenan, Danbers, Lawson--hell, just about any of his men, except for Freiling or Randy Shea--would have probably been willing to marry her. They'd all liked Lucia. But it was too late for speculating about such things now.

Now everything was busted to pieces. All Travis could do was try to pick them up.

Travis was dressed before dawn the following day, off to town bright and early. His first stop was the telegraph office, where he sent a wire to his brother. After a bitter night's reflection, Travis faced his own part in the debacle. He shouldn't have been off buying stock. He shouldn't have cut his profits so thin and gambled on the future. He shouldn't have left a relatively new foreman in charge, knowing he also had a crazy female cook on the spread. A female who might end up on the couch with somebody and decide she heard weddin' bells.

He'd also accepted that since that first day, he'd wanted her. That night on the sofa, it wouldn't have taken much encouragement from her for him to have taken things way past sympathizing. Shea was right. Lucia knew how men reacted to that fine figure of hers. Couldn't blame her for capitalizing on male stupidity. The West was awash in it.

At the bank, Travis discovered the size pill he had to swallow. There wasn't enough in his savings to cover payroll, bonuses, the necessary repairs at Crockhead Rest, and train fare from Ohio for Shea's fiancée. He'd have to sell the prize stud bull he just picked up at the cattle auction to raise more funds.

So there it was. Time to pay a visit to the Flying Fist.

When he arrived at Sweeney's massive ranch house, he'd decided how he'd present his case. To hell with scruples; a man had to fight fire with fire. Travis wasn't about to admit Lu had swindled him. Better to let old Sweeney believe Travis had run her out of town or she'd left voluntarily, gone in search of greener pastures farther west. Point being, they all could rejoice in being well rid of her.

Pearl acted coolly disinterested when the butler escorted Travis to her father's library, but when he came out twenty minutes later, she'd changed her frock and wound a red velvet ribbon into her platinum curls.

"You look festive," he remarked with a forced smile. "Prettier'n a picture window all decorated for the holidays."

"Why, thank you, Travis. I'd begun to wonder if you were ever going to come calling again. What did you and Da find to talk about?"

You're transparent as window glass, too, he silently admonished. "We had some business to discuss."

"Well, come sit by the fire and visit awhile," she insisted, sashaying ahead of him into a small sitting room off the main entry. "You don't have to rush." She perched on the edge of a settee covered in emerald brocade. Would she expect him to buy her seasonal furnishings, too? In spring and summer, a pale blue sofa graced this same room. Travis couldn't imagine ever having that much money. Swapping furniture to match flowers or frost. What horse manure.

"I heard you'd gone off to buy some cattle," Pearl prompted. "Things are going well at Crockhead, I take it?"

No, Pearl, I lost everything this mornin' and I'm damned close to destitute. But thanks for askin'. "Yes and no. You know the cattle business. Your pa's buyin' the new bull I picked up at auction. Good animal."

"You came here to sell a silly old cow?"

Nope. To buy one. "Among other things," Travis murmured. He would've loved to grin and play it up like he was thrilled about the next part, but that good an actor he wasn't. Playacting was Pearl's specialty. In a few seconds, she'd do enough false gushing for both of them.

He cleared his throat and set his cowboy hat down on the tea table. "Like I said, your pa and I had a few things to talk over. My Italian housekeeper decided to move on, so your pa's adopted a more liberal view of me as a future partner. Didn't have any objection when I asked for your hand. So Pearl, want to get hitched?"

It was probably one of the least romantic proposals in history, but that didn't make any difference to her. All that mattered to Pearl, he knew, was that he owned a cattle spread, instead of merely working on one. That and the fact she'd just gotten her own way. Again.

She flew off the couch. "Oh Travis, why, this is just the best day ever! But you awful man. If I'd known you were going to come calling and do something like this--I mean, propose--well, I certainly would have dressed for the occasion." She threw her arms around his neck. "Of course I'll marry you."

Travis summoned the grit to kiss her with a modicum of passion, but he couldn't help thinking he should have dressed for the occasion, too. In black.

Chapter 6

"Merry Christmas, Pearson," Travis announced as he mounted the steps of Rafe's mansion in Denver.

"It's good to see you again, sir," the dapper houseman replied warmly. "Your sister and her family arrived yesterday. Mr. Rafe's with his partner and another gentleman at the moment, but--Good heavens! Mr. Conley, whatever have you got there?"

Travis grinned from ear to ear. "Always hard to know what to get my nieces and nephews. This year I believe I've plumb outdone myself."

"That's one way of putting it," Pearson conceded, reaching for the handle of the slotted crate tied with a gigantic red bow. "I assume there are live creatures of some variety inside. Might I take this to . . . er, what would be most appropriate, sir? The barn, cellar, or kitchen?"

The crate gave a lusty mew. Pearson accepted Travis' coat and hat. "Kitchen it is, Mr. Conley."

The butler started down the marbled hall. Miranda wandered into the foyer and beamed at her youngest brother. "Well, my, my. Look what the cat dragged in."

"No madam," Pearson muttered, "I'd say it's the other way around this time."

Young Kayla overheard and began screeching. "Ma, did you hear that? Pearson has something tied with a ribbon--a big present, and I think there's a cat inside. Uncle Travis, did you bring us a cat?"

Miranda's brow furrowed. "Oh, I doubt that, honey. Uncle Travis doesn't like cats. Dogs, horses. I think I recall once there was even a pet pig back on the farm, but he never really--"

"I wanna see!" Skylar chimed in.

He seized a fistful of his mother's skirts and yanked on them. His younger twin cousins came toddling into the front hall. Sparkle hunched behind Simon, fussing to reattach his suspenders. "Kitty, kitty." Simon shouted in glee, clapping his hands.

"Travis Conley, I hope you're happy." His sister-in-law's angry tone was in marked contrast to the welcome in her aquamarine eyes. "If you didn't bring something alive and furry, we'll have an uproar on our hands."

For half a second Travis recalled his men blocking Crockhead's gate a few short months ago, their petulant demand the buxom foreigner stay so they'd have fresh-baked cookies. Big kids, a ranch crawling with them. He'd indulged that bunch. What could it hurt to spoil his nieces and nephews just a whit?

"Pearson," Travis called loudly. "Bring that crate back out here." Glancing down at the upturned faces gathered around his lower legs, Travis softened his voice. "You know, it

was the strangest danged thing. I wound up sittin' on the train next to this big fat fella in a red fur suit. He had this special somethin' wrapped up, but it wouldn't fit in his flyin' sleigh. He asked if I'd bring it along, maybe give what's inside to any good little children I knew. I said I knew four young-un's who might qualify."

Pearson was promptly overwhelmed. By the time he got the crate open, his vest was askew and his grizzled hair stood up straight in several places. Sparkle and Miranda collapsed into peals of laughter. Travis stood chuckling at the hapless butler. For that one moment, there was no ranch, no Pearl, no Lucia, no missing money.

They were all enjoying Christmas Eve supper when the big gray kitten came tearing into the formal dining room, a long hank of gold ribbon stuck to his tail. The appendage provoked his littermates into chasing him. They tumbled over one another, wreaking havoc wherever they went. Sparkle dashed for the parlor and let out a shriek. Rafe got up to see what she was yelling about. Zach, Miranda's husband, offered to corner the kittens. Pearson crawled on all fours behind the Christmas tree, attempting to give Zach a hand.

Miranda lectured Travis on the lack of judgment that prompted a man to bring four young kittens into an elegant home decorated for Christmas. One also hosting four excited and unruly youngsters. He shrugged and glanced at the kids in the dining room. They were the only ones left at the table, happily throwing food.

"You know, Trav," Rafe intoned two hours later, as the women went up to wash yams and pie out of the children's hair, "if I didn't know you better, I'd suspect you brought those infernal cats here knowin' we'd have bedlam. Got a parlor drape hangin' in shreds, cat piss on the rug, and my wife all perturbed. You were the fella who kept his place so tidy, things just so."

Travis uncrossed his boots on the footstool and nodded. "Yep, just so. That's me. Everything accordin' to plan. Mind of a bird. Think I'll get me some air out on the front porch, along with your partner."

Rafe frowned as Travis went out. Travis had never been particularly friendly toward Wil Bregon. Odd he'd prefer the man's company now.

Rafe was disappointed, too, for he'd looked forward to arguing with Travis. They'd been scrapping over nothing for years, always out to prove who was the bigger man. But how could Rafe argue if Travis was going to talk gibberish or agree with him? It wasn't supposed to work like that. The ribbing about being so predictable had been a gauntlet flung down purposely to set Travis off. What was going on?

Rafe glanced up as Sparkle sat down beside him on their velvet sofa. "Somethin's ailin' Travis."

"I think you may be right. Did you notice he never touched the mince pie? He barely took two sips of coffee. I heard Pearson offer to refill his cup. Travis said no. He adores

Pearson's coffee."

"Jesus, better get Rannie down here. If Travis ain't drinkin' coffee or pamperin' his sweet tooth, it must be bad. Maybe he's stove up, or needs to see a dentist."

"Or maybe," Sparkle winked, "he needs his fortune told."

Travis squirmed in his seat and silently cursed himself again. He was beginning to suspect women were his downfall. Here was another one turning on the charm, luring him into something he wanted no part of. He should be upstairs in the spare bedroom he was to share with Wil Bregon, not sitting in Sparkle's card parlor having his tarot cards read.

"Dear me," she mumbled as she laid out the last card. "I see trouble all around you. Serious trouble."

Travis rose. "Yep, that about sums things up."

"You don't want to talk about this? You know I can be a good listener." Travis mutely shook his head. He wasn't ready just yet to talk about it with anybody. Even though he'd come knowing he should probably talk to--

"Rafe," Sparkle supplied, right on cue. "Talk to your brother. He can help. And Travis," her lovely eyes were troubled as they searched his. "Listen to your feelings. Your own, no one else's."

Christmas morning was the usual flurry of activity: gasps of delight, laughter, hugs and kisses, torn paper and ribbon strewn everywhere. Travis aligned himself with Pearson and Wil, the other bachelors in the house. The three of them slipped off to Rafe's gaming room for some Christmas cheer while the families enjoyed time together. Rafe had abandoned visits to saloons after his marriage. He didn't need to visit saloons nowadays. He had a poker and a billiard table as well as a liquor cabinet in the room he affectionately called the "he-bear's lair."

Soon Zach and Rafe joined the others in the masculine retreat. Conversation turned randy and far too irreverent for a Christian holiday. Miranda would have had a conniption fit. It was just what Travis needed.

Christmas dinner found all eleven of them, including Pearson, devouring a juicy turkey washed down with apple cider. Rafe sat at the head of the table like some English nobleman, his young daughter curled in his lap asleep until Sparkle announced the children were going off to bed. Zach and Miranda decided to turn in early. Pearson disappeared to tackle kitchen clean up.

Travis and Wil followed Rafe to his study. The room served as Rafe's private office, a fitting backdrop for talking about theft and chicanery. Travis took a chair across the desk from Rafe, who reached into his vest pocket and withdrew a wrapped box. "Sparkle found this under the tree for you, Little Brother." He handed the small package to Travis, then addressed Wil about a case they were working on.

Travis unwrapped the box and sat staring at its contents. It held a note and a gold wedding band. If anyone but Sparkle had given the ring to him, Travis would have thrown it back in her face. He studied the note.

He knew the history of this gold ring. Rafe and Sparkle had pretended to be married for a time. This was the band she'd worn to keep up the pretense. She'd returned it to Rafe during a rocky patch in their relationship. Later, when they actually exchanged wedding vows, Rafe had put a diamond on her finger. A very expensive diamond. Sparkle had written that although she'd never take the diamond off, this bit of plain gold from a pawn shop would always be special. She wanted Travis to have it. She had a premonition he'd have need of it soon.

He glanced up to find his brother and Wil Bregon studying him. He stuffed the box into his pocket and started his tale. Having explained about his missing cook and payroll, he asked for Rafe's help, then went up to bed.

There was a long silence after he left. Wil quirked an eyebrow at Rafe. "Is Travis one to tell whoppers?"

Rafe laughed. "He was always the one who'd fess up and take Pa's strap. Naw, he ain't makin' it up."

"So what do you think, the gal's a trained bilk artist?"

Rafe looked thoughtful. "Damnedest illustration ever of the fella who bottles snakebite tonic gettin' bit on the backside himself. Travis nagged me to stay out of saloons and bagnios, avoid fallen angels. Sniped at me when I took up with Sparkle, certain she meant to fleece me. What happens? He sets over on that ranch, runs to church every Sunday, and gets hornswaggled by a gal himself."

Wil finished his bourbon and frowned. "I don't have a problem with taking the case, even though he can't pay us. We've got Driscoll working that train robbery, Mason tracing the heiress. But it's a bad idea to let him come along. Clients are more aggravation than help. No good comes of letting the victim confront the swindler. Doesn't matter the victim's kin."

"I'd hunt her down if she'd done it to me."

"Yeah, but you'd be looking for revenge. You always had a taste for that. He's not acting like a man out for vengeance. If she actually resembles his physical description, you better ponder what I'm saying."

Rafe nodded slowly. "Reckon bein' a foreigner with a body like an angel's how she reels in her marks."

"Imagine so," Wil agreed with a sigh of resignation. "Big tits and a foreign accent. Hard for a man to ignore. Which is why, if you look close, I think you'll spot our problem. She's still doing some reeling. Went off and left the hook in your brother's mouth."

Chapter 7

"Be nice to have a little more to go on than shoemakers and half a last name," Wil grumbled. He'd come back to the hotel room in St. Louis for the second day without a break in the case.

"Could be worse," Rafe pointed out. "You could be using Travis' method, wanderin' the streets hopin' to spot some big jugs." He gave a rueful shake of his head. "I tried a couple more employment agencies, but they ain't placed any cooks or housekeepers from Italy. Gal from Scotland, a prissy English thing named Fogbottom, but nobody fittin' Lu's description."

"We don't know for certain she came back here--or ever was from St. Louis originally," Wil said. "The whole story about family in this area could have been fabricated. Your brother seems to think her being a devout Catholic means she wouldn't lie. Didn't stop her from lifting his payroll."

Rafe had promised not to reveal this, but now he felt compelled to give his partner more information. "Travis thinks she told the truth. Seems one night one of his cowhands broke into the cabin and attacked her." Rafe shrugged uneasily. "It could happen. Travis couldn't tell whether she'd actually been raped that night, but she said somethin' to make him think it had happened before. Here, supposedly, before she turned up at the ranch. His theory is she found herself pregnant and lost her head. That's why she took his money."

This brought a noncommittal grunt from Wil.

They went to the hotel's dining room and waited for Travis. Rafe silently endured the fawning attentions the waitress directed at his partner. Wil had that effect on womenfolk. Young and old, pretty or uglier than a horned toad, they all gathered around him. Stood to reason. The man had been favored with height, an angular face and the rumply, thick hair gals liked. Broad shoulders, lean muscles and a killer smile. Gleaming teeth that promised a slow descent into ecstasy, as one gal described it.

Funny thing was, Wil hardly ever smiled at females. Hardly noticed them. They dropped gloves or hankies in front of him; he ground them under his boots and kept going. Rafe had teased him about his allure when they first met. Rafe was one of the few men alive who dared taunt Wil Bregon. They were nearly even when it came to the draw. They'd both been gunslingers in their early days, competitors with a healthy respect for one another.

When Sparkle insisted Rafe give up his dangerous way of life, he'd approached Wil about starting their own detective agency. Like Pinkertons, on a smaller scale. For the past couple years, Wil was the one who worked complex field cases, Rafe the partner who met with clients and negotiated fees.

Rafe knew his partner well enough to understand what the women didn't. They were

wasting their time and efforts flirting with the fella. He'd been married at one time, to a woman he completely adored. She'd passed on and taken his heart with her.

"I got a line on her, Rafe."

Travis was still out of breath as he dropped into a chair and began stuffing his face with bread and butter. Rafe took that as significant. Travis had only picked at food for the past week.

"You did? Somebody's seen her?"

"I don't know, but I found out where her family lives. I found that butcher fella named Peter Something-or-Other." Travis paused long enough to swallow a big wad of bread. "And I don't mind tellin' you, it was all I could do not to go for his throat. Hairy bastard. The thought of him puttin' his hands all over Lu--"

"You don't know he did," Wil quietly informed him. "Although his very existence lends credence to your theory."

"What theory?"

"About her being in the family way."

Travis glared at his brother. "Sorry," Rafe muttered. "But Wil wasn't turnin' up any leads. He didn't understand why you were so sure she'd headed this way, or if St. Louis was home."

"I think she's nearby, someplace," Travis announced with conviction.

"Is this one of those divine flashes like your wife has?" Wil asked Rafe. "Runs in the family, huh?"

"Shut up, Bregon. Tomorrow you're the dummy."

Being the dummy meant Wil got to follow the butcher's tip and comb the neighborhood, wearing his worst pair of boots. He worked both sides of several blocks before he finally hit on an elderly lady who pointed out a small house farther down the street. Wil signaled to Travis and Rafe. They were strategically lurking a half-block behind him. They moved in together on the approach.

A slender foreign man with a mustache answered Wil's knock. Wil affected a polite stance on the porch, explaining he needed a shoemaker for some special leather boots. His friends wanted custom-made boots also. Might they come inside to talk? They were admitted. Wil kept feeding the appropriate bait lines and measuring responses, while Rafe scanned the cramped front room for clues.

Things were going fine, Wil thought, until another foreigner walked in and Travis blew everything sky high.

"Vinny? This one's named Vinny? Hell, he knows about me." Travis shot off his chair and seized the newcomer by his faded orange shirt. "Where in tarnation's your scheming

sister? Get her out here with my money."

Vinny swung wildly at his attacker, who flung him up against the wall. Rafe tried to pull Travis away and got punched by Angelo, the brother who'd let them in. Wil watched it all and calmly pulled his gun. He walked up and pressed the barrel to one Italian's forehead--which had the effect intended, of making the other Italian nearly piss his pants.

"We couldn't do this my way," Wil growled. "All right, everybody plunk their butts down, and let's have a little talk." He glanced at the fellow Travis had mauled. "You know this man?" he asked, pointing to Travis.

The terrified foreigner mutely shook his head, wild eyes fixed on the weapon in Wil's hand. "Travis," Wil intoned with all the patience he could muster under the idiotic circumstances, "why did you think he'd recognize you?"

"Lu wrote him a couple times. She talked about him, how he's the one who sent her to Colorado in the first place. The whole scheme was his idea."

Vinny's brows drew down. "I not know this idea. You are Crockett?"

"Of course I ain't Crockett. You know damned good and well there never was any fella named Crockett."

"No, yes! Man of that name wanted a good wife. I sent Lucia to him."

The other Italian exploded. "Bastardo! Che mentitore! You lied to Padre, tell us she is at a convent."

The next second the two Italian brothers began rolling on the floor, kicking and gouging. Wil had to admit the case was becoming more interesting, even though they weren't any closer to knowing the female's whereabouts. It had been sometime since he'd cornered several buffoons in one place, and usually he needed a poker table to do it.

"Hold it," he admonished loudly, brandishing the pistol. He gestured to neutral corners with the barrel. "You, Vinny. Take a seat. Angelo, over there. Now which one of you speaks the best English?"

"I," Vinny asserted with obvious, if misplaced, pride. "My name's Vincenzo. I send Lucia to Colorado, as this man said, but I do not know why you look for her here. She is not home again."

"You haven't seen her?"

"No, some months."

"He would say that," Travis snarled. "She payin' you half the money to keep lyin' for her?"

"What money? Lucia has no money," Vinny replied. "I pay for train. She has only clothes and cats and--"

"No, I'm stuck with the damned cats! She took my payroll, all the money for the cowpunchers at my ranch. She worked for me there, cookin' and cleanin'. She disappeared almost a month ago with my cashbox."

This brought a renewed spate of shouting back and forth in Italian between the foreign brothers. Wil gave Rafe a sardonic look. "Well, nice to see somebody knows something. Now if only we did."

Angelo gave Wil a look of desperate entreaty as Vinny spoke up. "My brother wishes to get our father and brothers from the shoe factory. Please, he can do this? We no see Lucia. We did not know she did this bad thing. We need to talk together."

Wil glanced down at the six-gun on his left hip. "I got another weapon, in case the rest get on as well as you and Ange over there. Sure, let him go fetch everybody. This should be fun."

Angelo scurried out the front door. Rafe pointed to Travis, looking at Vinny. "This here's my little brother. You know, Vince, sometimes we get to scrappin', too. And we got an older sister who thinks she knows everything. Usually it goes two against one, them against me. Tough bein' the odd one out, ain't it?"

Vinny nodded. "Angelo is like Padre. What Padre thinks, Angelo too." He tapped his forehead with one finger. "Benito is Little Padre, even worse than Angelo. Giuseppe sometimes is like me."

Travis spoke up. "Lu said Benito and your pa wanted her to marry some local fella. That hairy butcher named Peter somethin'?"

"This is so. My sister not bad. You must know this. If she took money, she did it for ragazzina. Big trouble."

"Who's this Rag person?" Wil asked.

"Little one . . . baby."

Travis gasped. "Christ, Rafe. I told you. Knew there was a baby mixed up in this!" He looked at Vincenzo. "She's goin' to be a mother, is that what you're sayin'? She took the money for her child?"

"Just as you say." A vigorous nod accompanied this assertion. "Lucia would not do bad if another way. Why did no American marry her? This not hard in West, I have heard this. Not so much girls, much lonely men, yes?"

"Yep, but stupid men, too," Travis sighed.

"I lie to Angelo, tell him leave. I not want him hear. I maybe can find Lucia."

All three men stared at Vincenzo. He squared his shoulders. "Padre and Benito, the others will fight. If they find Lucia, more fight. I take you. Please, you arrest me."

"Naw, we're not--"

"Shut up, Travis," Wil hissed, nudging him with a grin. "You're the one who organized this posse. I recommend we do just as your friend here suggests. Take him into custody." To Vinny he ordered, "Leave your kin a note saying you'll be back in a day or two."

Vincenzo was thoroughly confused when he spent the night with the three Americans in a hotel room rather than a jailhouse. Wil assured him it was standard procedure in such cases. Vincenzo surprised them all after breakfast the next morning. He claimed they were headed to the far side of the city, to a place he'd visited once with Lucia, nearly a year before. A place for people without names.

Chapter 8

The Highwater Children's Home reminded Travis of the old saw about hell or high water. He wouldn't let any of his kin end up here come either of those. Anybody would feel that way. The brown two-story wood building was dilapidated, in need of paint, somber to the point of depressing. Crockhead's bunkhouse was a fancy hotel by comparison. There were four windows on the front of the big building, all covered with dark curtains. The wrought iron gate squeaked as the postman came out and continued on his way.

"I don't understand, Vinny," Travis said in a low voice. "You sure Lu knows somebody inside there?"

"Yes," Vincenzo asserted. "Small girl, I told you. Lucia will come to see her. We must wait." Travis had assumed Lucia might be pregnant, but now he saw he'd misjudged things. She must have already birthed a child out of wedlock and had it taken from her. To live here. Jesus.

He turned to Wil. "You think he's right, she'll turn up?"

"He's right. She's probably staying somewhere not far from here, comes by regularly. Let's find a place to hole up ourselves, and we'll stake it out." His expression was grim. "At least there's several of us to take turns keeping watch."

Rafe and Vinny were on surveillance when Lucia visited the orphanage two days later. They trailed her to a small restaurant only a few miles away from the children's home. She went around back, up a flight of rickety wood steps, into what appeared to be a rented room. Before they could decide whether to pursue her, she flew back down--this time without her coat--and dashed through the back door into the restaurant. Her brother, naturally, was in favor of plunging in after her.

But Rafe convinced him to stay put, using his parlor gun when strong persuasion seemed wisest. Then Rafe crept up to the back door for a peek. The gal wasn't seated at a table. She was hopping back and forth in the kitchen, stirring pots bubbling on the wide stove.

The woman was still working as a cook.

She had her back to him now. Rafe hadn't caught a good look at her up close. He saw she had thick dark hair--but so did nearly all Italians, from what he'd seen in her old neighborhood. She looked like her brothers and a lot of folks he'd seen in her neighborhood. He failed to grasp what was so remarkable about this Italian.

Maybe Travis had been looking at steers too long. Naw, Rafe quickly amended. Travis never missed a church social or town gathering. There weren't too many belles in Pueblo from what Rafe remembered from his winter visits there, but enough womanhood to keep a man's tastes straight.

Then Lu turned around and untied her apron before lifting it over her head. Rafe's mouth went dry. Even in saloons, a man didn't often see a pair of breasts like those--enough for

two men. This Lu wasn't dainty and pretty like Sparkle, but she was definitely something to gawk at.

She smoothed her skirts and went through a doorway. He saw her heft several plates on her arm, then hurry to deliver them to a table of patrons. Cook and waitress. Judging by the way the men in the place were looking her over, Rafe figured she must make good tips.

Which led him to naturally wonder what had become of the cash she'd taken from the ranch. She'd stolen almost a thousand dollars. Her kid was living in a ramshackle foundling home, she stayed in the room upstairs. Not expensive living quarters. So what had she done with the money?

He collected her brother and went back to the hotel, where they hooked up with Travis and Wil. Rafe announced his progress and waited for Wil's reaction. The man was slick. Being a fast draw and accurate with a gun were talents Rafe obviously appreciated, but they hadn't inspired him to seek Wil for a partner. Wil had a fine mind, one forever unraveling skeins of yarn and figuring what else they could be knitted into. Now Rafe waited for Wil to solve this new puzzle. "What do you reckon she done with Travis' money?"

"Maybe it wasn't enough for the ransom. Her kid's locked in a prison for babies. If someone you cared about was locked up somewhere, why would you need to get your hands on a shitload of cash?"

"I don't give a damn," Travis scowled. "I say we go into that stupid restaurant and get it back. If she ain't got it on her, we find out where she hid it."

"So it's just the money you're after?" Wil asked in a deceptively smooth tone. "We've come all this way, wasted a week and half to get you what, several hundred dollars? We keep two thousand in our office safe, Travis. Rafe would have given you a thousand, but you probably knew that."

Rafe gave Travis a quizzical look. "He's got a point, Little Brother. I could have sent you back to Crockhead the day after Christmas if you'd asked for a loan. But I kind of got the notion--and I think that's what Wil's drivin' at-- that you wanted to straighten out this mess with the gal. Get to the bottom of her motive."

"Raford, I don't want a loan. I don't exactly need that. There's somethin' I didn't tell you. Right before Christmas, I asked Pearl Sweeney to marry me. Ain't sure I'm ready for marriage, but she'd been hopin' I'd ask for months. I sold her pa a stud bull to raise what I needed after Lu took my operatin' funds. Covered everything, between what Sweeney paid and my savin's."

"Travis, that was a damned fool way to deal with it."

"Wasn't much point in kidding myself any longer. A loan from you or the bank would only delay the inevitable. I made my bargain, I'll stick to it. Just want my bankroll back."

Whatever went on between Lu and the man who fathered her child, it ain't my problem."

"No, you're not goin' anywhere near there," Rafe hissed through clenched teeth the next evening. He couldn't believe--after assuring Wil the night before that Travis would be objective and let them handle things as professionals, after Travis had firmly stated the girl was not his problem--they were standing here, debating about Travis confronting her.

"You ain't listenin'. I know she'll fess up to me. Then we can--"

"Nope. Good night, Travis." Rafe hit his brother with a solid right cross that knocked him unconscious. "Sometimes it ain't worth wastin' my breath," he told Wil, rubbing his knuckles.

"Funny. Sometimes I feel that way about you."

Rafe straightened his lapels, spit on the toe of his left boot and rubbed the leather surface with his thumb, cocked his hat just so, and walked into the noisy eatery. Travis was sleeping off the knock-out punch in Lu's room. Vincenzo and Wil were positioned front and back outside. Lucia might try to bolt, but she wouldn't get far.

Sure enough, she emerged from the kitchen carrying a load of plates and started toward Rafe. When she saw him, she dropped every dish. "Howdy Lu," he intoned, wishing the resemblance between him and Travis wasn't quite so strong. She clutched at her throat, then turned and tore out the back door.

He sprinted after her and found her struggling in Wil's arms. "Another gal rushin' up to you? Can see where a man could get weary of that."

"Oh, I don't know," Wil replied with a sly grin, as Lu's struggles caused her ample bosom to rub against his white shirt. "Don't tell her brother I said so, but this time I kind of like it. I could go back to earning bounties if outlaws were this plump and pillowy."

"You can say that again. Hell, I thought Travis was funnin' me, but she could collect wallets in--Ouch!" Rafe had been following Wil and the girl up the back stairs. She kicked Rafe in the shin and was looking to bite Wil. "Watch it. She's a nipper, too."

"Add 'treacherous duty' pay onto our fee," Wil grunted with sarcasm as he flung the kicking woman over his shoulder. He set her down inside her room. Rafe slammed the door behind Vinny, then leaned back to block it. Nobody was going anywhere until they sorted this out.

"Travis." Lu flung herself onto her knees, embracing Rafe's brother, who was still out cold on her narrow bed. She felt his brow and opened his collar, then glared up at Wil. "What did you do to him, you pig?"

"That English was pretty clear," Rafe chuckled. She got to her feet and rounded on him, puffed up like an angry cat.

"And you. You are his brother, this I see. You laugh when he is hurt?"

"He's the one who hurt him," Wil remarked.

She slapped Rafe's face, then folded her arms over her heaving breasts. Quite a feat. Rafe grudgingly allowed a measure of respect for her, even if she was a sneak thief.

"Yeah, I'm his brother. And that fella there's my partner. We're detectives. You know what that is?"

"I know," she spat in disgust. "You are rich American, you helped your brother before you hit him. Mick at ranch told me. Now you will sell me to the sheriff."

Rafe raised his eyebrows. Apparently his legend continued. "You broke the law when you stole my brother's money. He could have gone to the sheriff. Instead, he came to me."

"Where's the cash, honey?" Wil had begun searching through her things. There was no wad of money.

"I don't have it." Her chin jutted forward. "I buy a city lawyer. I rich American lady, soon I will have my figlioccia. I need much money to do this."

"But the money you gave that fella wasn't yours," Rafe argued gently. "We might be able to help about the orphanage, but you got Travis mired clear up to his knees in debt. Because of you, he had to borrow from Sweeney."

"Good! The fat one's daughter will marry Travis now. She gets husband she doesn't want anyone to know she buys. Your bird-mind brother gets what he has."

"You got any notion what language we're talking now?" Wil asked Rafe. Before he could answer, Travis groaned and sat up.

"Lucia! Goddamn you." He tried to leap from the bed. He tripped over Wil's boot and landed half in Lu's arms. "Stop pawin' at me and give my friggin' payroll back."

"She not have it," Vinny said quietly.

"What?" Travis grabbed her by the shoulders and started shaking her.

"Calm down, Little Brother," Rafe commanded. "She--"

"You thievin', no-good, gibberish-spoutin' Catholic."

Vinny jumped up. "Stop this."

"Kiss your horse!" Lucia shouted back at Travis.

"I think you meant 'my ass'," Wil quipped.

She whirled to face him, aghast. "I would not kiss any part of you." She snarled at Travis. "Why do you bring this stranger? For my hide?"

"Yes ma'am," Wil agreed. "Must be worth at least fifty dollars to a lawman someplace." When she retorted back at him in angry Italian, he winked and chuckled. "Sorry, I

forgot. You are unusual." His eyes raked her bosom. "Make that a hundred."

"Pazzo, you no can buy people hides."

Travis shook his head. "No, he doesn't mean it like that. You're mixed up again. Lu?"

She'd thrown herself into his arms and was sobbing against his chest, mumbling in broken English. Travis smoothed her hair and consoled her. Consoled her? Rafe rubbed his eyes and looked again. His brother had apparently lost a hell of a lot more than his cash. His mind must have been in the box with the ranch funds.

"Travis, we'll wait outside while you try to make sense--if there is any--of what's gone on here." He motioned to Wil, who scowled in disapproval.

Vincenzo intervened. "No. Lucia cannot be alone with man in room. I not go out to wait while he touches my sister."

At those words, Travis dropped his hands. Lu noticed for the first time her brother was present. "Vincenzo!" She threw herself at the Italian.

"Stoic little gal," Wil observed dryly as they retreated to the bottom of the steps.

Rafe gave his partner a long, measuring look. "Might be onto something with that ransom idea. You saw that insanity upstairs. He was cuddlin' her. After she went and stole him blind."

Wil nodded. "Saw that."

"How much you reckon it'll cost me to get my brother's mind back?"

"I don't think that's the part of his anatomy he's missing."

Rafe had been afraid of that.

Travis appeared on the landing a short time later and summoned them inside. Having met with no luck in finding a husband, Lu had stolen the ranch funds and gone to a lawyer to get the child released from the orphanage. The lawyer had accepted her cash as a partial retainer, but insisted upon additional funds to take the case--hence Lu's job in the restaurant.

"Blasted pettifogger," Wil spat. "Two chief detectives from Conley & Bregon will pay this paragon of the legal profession a visit come morning. Ten dollars says Alma can get him to cough back up that retainer."

Rafe grinned. Alma was the pistol Wil had been waving back at Vinny's house. Her counterpart was Betty. A bright man paid attention to A before Wil got to B--but not all fellas were that bright. Rafe knew better than to take wagers on Alma and Betty.

Travis spoke up. "Fine. I'm going with Lu to the children's home and talk to the man in charge. She says he's been rough on her."

He glanced at the crestfallen woman sitting on the edge of the bed. "I don't know that we

can do anything, Lucia, but we'll try. I promise. Wish you'd spilled this before, back at the ranch. But what's done is done. You ain't pazzo enough to try runnin' again. But just in case," he grunted as he seized Vinny by the collar and propelled him toward the door, "he'll be stayin' at the hotel with us."

Rafe didn't ask Travis why he'd taken to speaking Italian himself. Rafe recognized this wasn't a case of theft. More accurately, it was a horse trade. Travis, fool that he was, figured he could find a way to still come out on top. But if there was anything Rafe had learned about women in his twenty-nine years, it was never to enter into negotiations or make trades with one. Women were born knowing how to best a fella in any swap. Something Travis was about to learn the hard way.

Chapter 9

Travis sat in the austere private office of Mr. Vernon P. Highwater and ignored the impulse to murder the bald little asshole. He ignored everything the twit said and stared through the dingy windowpane to his left at Lucia, waiting in the poorly-tended garden. Its plantings were either dead or overgrown, a chilling reminder of what life was probably like in this place.

Sitting on the stiff guest chair, Travis no longer blamed Lucia for stealing. He watched as a door opened and a toddler in a tattered coat and pink mittens approached Lu. She swept the girl up into her arms. Travis felt his insides pour onto the floor of the stuffy office.

The man had sat behind his desk and watched similar scenes before. Lucia had admitted visiting at least twice a week. Apparently the imperious Highwater could live with himself. He was still breathing.

"You don't feel sick, keepin' those two separated?" Travis demanded, nodding toward the window.

"Certainly I can appreciate Miss Lucille's affection for the child."

"It's Lucia," Travis corrected. "And you damned well better appreciate her love for that girl. Do you know what she's gone through because of you?"

"Not me personally, I assure you, Mr.--Er, what was the name again?"

"Conley. Travis Conley."

"Yes, well . . ." The officious sonofabitch paused to adjust his polka dot necktie. Travis thought about adjusting it for him. He'd loop the bottom around one of Highwater's curtain rods and watch the monster twist. "Our regulations are in accordance with accepted standards and practices. I've explained to Miss--to the young lady numerous times that we simply cannot permit a child to be released to an unmarried woman. You can understand, we have the child's welfare at heart."

"Heart?" Travis scoffed. "You can look out there and claim you got one?"

"Now see here, there's no call to take that tone with me."

"Reckon you got your reasons for bein' prejudiced against a woman lackin' the benefit of a man's name, but--"

"I couldn't care less what her last name is. Though in her case, a new surname would be an improvement, since I've never been able to pronounce the one she has. However, that's beside the point."

"What the hell is your point?"

"A woman alone cannot possibly offer a child adequate security. How will she provide for that little girl, Mr. Conley? I can see she bears great affinity for Stefania, and

admittedly this affection is clearly returned on the child's part, but a child cannot eat affection, can she?"

"You're worrying about Lu feedin' her?" Travis couldn't help laughing at the idiot.

"Mister, Lucia Montessano's about the best cook I've ever run across in my life. My ma was one fine cook, but Lucia puts her to shame. And I ain't the only man who thinks so. Lu cooked for me and twenty hands on my ranch. The pure truth is, my hands would've up and quit if I hadn't kept her on after just one taste--one taste of her vittles."

"How fortunate for all of you. However, skill in preparation is not what we're discussing."

"That girl's future is what we're discussing," Travis thundered. "All you seem to care about are your rules and regulations. Lucia's got a job, workin' for me. I pay her the same wages I pay my cowhands, twenty-eight dollars a month, plus room and board. We got horses and cows, a chicken coop, even cats in the barn. The girl can have her own kitten, a pony, and much as she wants to eat. Let Lu take her home with us."

"Absolutely not." To the weasel's credit, he'd found some steel in his backbone. It glittered now in his eyes. "You just described a setting in which a spinster lives under the same roof with . . . two dozen men, did you say? And you think I'd send an innocent child to be raised in such debauchery?"

Travis blinked. It took a second for the true depth of the man's insinuation to hit home.

"You mean you think--with all of us? Are you out of your cotton-pickin' mind?" He shot out of his chair. "I'll be back, with my brother and his business partner. They've got powerful connections, and they know a thing or two about the law. I'll bring them down here and we'll see--"

"Bring whomever you please," Highwater sneered. "But I'd suggest you also bring a marriage license, if you expect me to release that child to Miss Lucille."

Travis didn't even bother correcting the name this time. "A marriage license," he repeated tightly.

"Yes. A marriage license showing me Miss Whatever is someone's lawfully wedded wife. Out of those twenty men who so admire her . . . culinary talents, I should think there would be at least one willing to make an honest woman of her."

The only thing keeping Travis from smashing the weasel's face in was the knowledge they needed him to sign the adoption papers. Once they got his signature and Travis saw Lucia's daughter safely in her arms for good, he'd shove Highwater's hat tree so far up his ass, his barber would have to use linseed oil for scalp treatment.

He left the office and headed down the corridor toward the courtyard, forcing himself to take several deep breaths. He halted as he stepped into the garden. Lucia talked softly in Italian. The little girl had her mother's wavy dark hair and brown eyes. Seeing them together on the stone bench in the wintry gloom, Travis had absolutely no doubt where

that child belonged.

He knew Rafe would think he'd gone loco. Wil already seemed confident he was dealing with a lunatic. The hands back at Crockhead, everybody in town would think he'd lost his marbles. But Travis knew he still had them, and Christian ethics.

He didn't hate Lu, didn't want to see her punished or make her pay. Not any more. He hadn't wanted that since he'd seen the concern in her eyes, since she'd cried in his arms and admitted she'd had a child in this hellhole. She'd suffered enough. The superior attitude and cutting words of people like Highwater were punishment enough. Lucia had to know what the man thought of her. He'd probably used his high-brow talk to intimidate and confuse her all the more, enjoying the misery on her face as he dangled her own flesh and blood out of reach.

Highwater and his kind saw a poor immigrant girl.

Travis knew Lucia was a lot more than that. She was a warrior. She'd known stealing was both illegal and morally wrong. She'd sinned against her church. She'd endured the insults of people like the Sweeneys and Highwater, yet still tried to learn "American ways." Travis wasn't sure there was anything folks here could teach her that she needed to know. Lu should be teaching them--about kindness and dignity. About compassion.

She should be teaching her daughter. Every day, with words and loving gestures. By example. She couldn't do that with the kid locked up here.

"Lucia," he laid a hand on her shoulder. "We have to go talk with the others. We'll come back again tomorrow."

Worry etched the face she turned to him. "There is a problem?"

"Small one," he admitted, "but I think we can fix it."

She beamed at him, then glanced down at the girl. "Stefania, this is Travis. Belloccio."

He frowned. "You shouldn't ought to teach her words like that. Ain't respectful toward her elders."

Lucia blushed. "Yes, you say true. We must go, Stefania. I come again domani. You go inside now. Addio."

Travis recognized the word of farewell, being close to the Spanish adios. He watched Lucia reluctantly pull the small arms from around her neck. She mumbled soothing words in Italian. At last the child slid off the bench and went to a woman watching from the far side of the grounds.

"Addio, Matrina." A little hand waved as soulful brown eyes turned first to Lu, then to Travis, then away with resignation.

"Rafe, can we take a walk?"

"Sure," Rafe answered easily. He'd been waiting for his brother to return from the orphanage. "Wil, why don't you and Vinny have somethin' to eat? Travis swears Lu's the world's best cook, so I'm sure you'll enjoy any grub she serves up." For his compliment, he got a tremulous smile from the Italian woman. She really was kind of fetching in an exotic way, Rafe decided.

"She likes you," Travis mumbled when they'd left the restaurant and started up the street.

"That's no surprise. I'm a lot like you, only not quite so good lookin'. Once we got past that business about me havin' laid you out."

Travis stiffened. "Yeah, that's right, and I never thanked you for that, did I?"

"No thanks are necessary. Just doin' my job. You would've rushed in there like a hothead and made everything worse."

"Maybe so." Travis fell silent. Rafe waited until they'd taken stools at the oak bar of a small drinking establishment to offer his input on the case.

"Wil and I had a delightful time socializin' with that lawyer Lu hired. Wil's always had a way with lawyers. 'Specially the damned pettifoggers, who'll take any case, no matter how awful or pathetic. You introduce Wil to a pettifogger, and in nothin' flat he'll have the fella rethinkin' his law practice."

"Alma?" Travis inquired, taking a sip of his beer.

"And her sister Betty." Rafe reached inside his coat and withdrew a wad of bills. "Happy New Year, Travis. Sorry it's too late for Christmas." He grinned as Travis accepted the money and began counting it. "I don't reckon it's all there, but that's most of it."

"Thanks."

"We're even now, ain't we? For Sparkle and all. You did me a couple of favors. I hadn't forgotten I owed you. That's why Wil and I are traipsin' around St. Louis in the winter freezin' our butts off, when we could be sittin' back in Denver, nice and cozy by the fire. My account paid up now?"

"Shit." Travis kicked his brother's stool.

"I'll take that as affirmative."

Travis finished his beer and started turning the glass in his hands. Rafe watched and waited. Travis hadn't made them walk eight blocks just to have a glass of beer.

"Speaking of Sparkle," Travis mumbled.

"Yeah? Mother of my twins. Woman I ain't slept with in almost two weeks--thanks to your foolishness. What about her?"

"Remember that little present she had you pass on?"

Rafe deliberately furrowed his brow, pretending he didn't know exactly what Sparkle had wrapped up. "Oh yeah, that. What'd she have in there, anyhow?"

"That cheap ring you bought her from the pawn shop in Wichita."

"Odd choice. Probably won't fit you."

"I'm fixin' to use it tomorrow."

Rafe rubbed his chin. "Now that you're up to scratch again, guess you can go back home and get hitched like you planned."

"Not to Pearl."

"Well, now. That's interestin'. Since there's only one other gal been in your arms lately, and you spent the whole damned mornin' with her, I take it you must be referrin' to Lu."

"Lu," Travis confirmed, studying Rafe's face.

"Is this where I'm supposed to offer somethin' profound? Give you marital advice or such?"

Travis flushed. "Well, you are my older brother . . . and you been hitched for a spell now."

"Uh-huh."

"You know what happened and who the gal is. I figured you'd have an opinion. Never said I was thinkin' of marryin' anybody before, did I?"

"We countin' Pearl yesterday?"

"Aw, for pity's sake! I'm sorry I ever opened my damned mouth."

Rafe chuckled and gave Travis' shoulder an affectionate squeeze. "Maybe you ought to consult Rannie. You're always in favor of bringing her into discussions like this, havin' her order everybody around. I say we send her a wire and--"

"I don't want to send Miranda no wire."

Rafe grabbed Travis' right hand and shook it, hard. "There you go. Now we're closer to even."

"You think this is funny? My life's gone to shit, and you're sittin' here thinkin' this is some comic farce?"

"No funnier than when the situation was reversed. Once it was me holed up at your place, lickin' my wounds, hidin' from Sparkle. Recollect you found it pretty hilarious at the time." He sipped at his beer. "Why would you up and marry a gal who robbed you? Just out of curiosity."

"The man who runs the orphanage won't release her child unless Lu shows up with a marriage license. When I tried to tell him she had a job workin' on my spread, it only made things worse. He used flowery lingo to basically call her a whore to my face. Said the child ain't goin' anywhere, 'less some fella makes an honest woman of Lu."

"You're definitely 'some fella'. But you ain't the 'some fella' who fathered that kid. What

do you figure to do about old Sweeney? His daughter won't take kindly to you comin' home hitched to your cook . . . let alone with a kid in tow. Ain't likely to be congenial neighbors after that."

"Maybe you could shoot Pearl."

"Did she rob a bank or steal some horses?" Travis shook his head. Rafe chuckled and downed his bourbon. "Then I reckon I can't shoot her. Now that I hearken back, weren't you wild over that Pearl when Sparkle was stayin' with you at Crockhead? If you're so hot for her, why would you want to complicate things by gettin' into a family of Italians? No offense, Travis, but those Italians are the jabberin'est bunch I've ever met. Lu's brother never shuts his face all day long."

"If you could've seen Lu with that little gal on her lap . . . The little one looks about Skylar's age. What's he, now, three?" Rafe nodded. "And she's got dark hair like your twins. Maybe it's cause I'm an uncle, but I couldn't stand it. Ain't right, a child bein' taken from her mother. If we did get Rannie meddlin' here, she'd agree I'm right about this."

"Are you?"

"You're askin' me? I'm askin' you."

Rafe gave his brother a hard look. "But I ain't the fella doin' it. You are. If you're sure about this, I'll stand up for you. If not . . . maybe you ought to talk to Rannie and Zach, even Wil, 'fore you go and get yourself hitched."

"I can get unhitched later."

"So it wouldn't be for real, this weddin' tomorrow?"

"Well, yeah. It would be legal and all. But once I get the gals home to the ranch and things settle down, Lu would have signed papers sayin' she's got legal rights as the child's mother. There'd be nothin' anyone could say when we later file for an annulment."

"Will she understand that?"

"I can explain it so she does. You're right, Pearl and her pa will be about as happy as soaked cats--especially with Lu bein' Catholic. But that's exactly why she'll probably see things my way. She ain't supposed to wed anyone who ain't Catholic too."

Rafe snorted in derision. "All that church-goin' you do ain't enough? Now you got to do it at a certain one?"

"It's her religion says so, not mine. I got the money back, but I can't just forget this ever happened. I'd never be able to live with myself, knowin' I could've helped Lu, but I didn't."

Rafe got down from his stool and tossed a half-eagle onto the bar. "Best get Wil and

head on back to our hotel to start polishin' my boots, then." They were halfway back to the restaurant when he stopped. "This is one hell of a knotted lasso, Travis. On the face of things, what you're plannin' might seem like the answer, but I suspect there's a snag somewhere you ain't spotted. Wil could probably put his finger on it, if you run it by him. As he's my partner, not yours, I'll respect your privacy if you don't want to confide in him."

Travis shook his head. "I don't want anyone else to know."

"All right, but I sure wish we had either Sparkle or Rannie here. I'd rest a hell of a lot easier tonight if we had somebody else to blame tomorrow on."

Chapter 10

Travis dragged Lucia into Vernon Highwater's office without waiting for anyone to announce them. "There," Travis pointed to the gold ring on her finger. "She's been to the justice of the peace and got hitched. Here's the damned marriage license." He threw the paper in the older man's face.

Highwater scanned the license and returned it. He wore a nasty smile on his face. Lucia was baffled by his look. Why wasn't he pleased? Wasn't this what he'd insisted she must do, bring a husband here?

Travis released her hand and glared at the man across the desk. "Wipe off that snide look, or I'll do it for you." Lucia's breath caught. But Travis wasn't finished. "You get that little gal in here, and you sign the papers Lucia needs without so much fuss as a fart. If that child ain't out your front door in the next ten minutes, I got a buddy who'll come in with two of his closest friends. One's named Alma, the other's Betty. My buddy's a freelancer so fond of his weapons, he gave 'em pet names. Doesn't have a pet name startin' with C. If he did, I doubt most fellas would live long enough to meet her, anyhow. What do you think, Vern?"

"I think it's a pleasure to remand Stefania over to her new parents' custody." He ducked into the hall and shouted for someone to bring the girl and her things to his office. "I'll . . . just complete the required documentation," he stammered, dropping back into his chair to begin fumbling with forms on his desk.

Lucia tugged on Travis' coat sleeve, offering a triumphant smile. She knew he could read the admiration in her eyes. "I see you do bite sometimes. Thank you, yes!"

Her breath caught when Stefania was delivered to the office. No one would take the child away through the orphanage doors ever again. She hugged the little one close, mumbling in Italian--to Stefania, to herself. To Travis and the others, as they climbed into a rented hackney. The three men didn't understand her words, but they seemed to sympathize with her rush of feelings. Wil and Rafe got out with the luggage at the train station. Travis ordered the driver to take him and his new family across town.

Lucia gazed at him, differing emotions warring in her soul. She would be eternally grateful for what he had done. Because of Travis, she had kept her vow. Stefania would now be raised in a home, with people who cared for her. Lucia had seen the look in Travis' eye as he'd spoken quietly of a child's needs. Of his decision to wed Lucia solely to help her get Stefania to the ranch.

Lucia understood his explanations. She knew he meant for their marriage to be a formality. Later, he would see a lawyer and sign more papers to end it. She would return to her position as cook at the ranch, working to repay him, for not all of what she'd stolen had been recovered.

She'd been unable to do more than mutely nod as he detailed his plan. She had no right

to ask anything of him after what she'd done. He was helping her out of his own sense of Christian charity, his dislike for the man Highwater, and his desire to see Stefania raised with a loving mother. He had told her this. He'd also told her they would not be intimate. He was betrothed to Pearl. So he would remain, until this false marriage was dissolved, and he was free. Then he would send Lucia and Stefania away and marry the rich girl from across the creek.

Lucia had been unable to speak, English once more deserting her when she needed it most. Travis didn't understand, and she could not shame herself further by admitting she longed to be a real wife to him in every way.

She loved him.

She had suspected it for a long time. It was part of why she'd run away from Crockhead, afraid to bear the hurt of seeing him wed Pearl from beyond the creek. She'd feared he'd always laugh at her--Lucia, his silly foreign cook.

From the instant she saw him lying on her rumpled bed in the room above the restaurant, she'd felt no terror, no clutching fear that he'd followed her and located her, that he would seek retribution. She didn't think of the money, didn't notice her brother Vincenzo. Her sole thought had been her belloccio had somehow been injured. Any doubt of what her heart had whispered for weeks was gone as it thundered its message: the one she loved was here.

But Travis did not love her.

The driver pulled up in front of the small house where Lucia had lived for almost five years prior to Crockhead Rest. She'd not been back to this house since leaving it months ago. She was grateful Travis found her brothers and brought Vincenzo to see her. She'd been too frightened of her father's wrath to come here and admit her failure. Vincenzo had lied, pretended she was a nun.

She glanced over at Travis. Maybe when Padre saw him and Stefania with her, maybe it would not go so badly

Travis rapped on the door. Her brothers came spilling out of the dim interior of the house, chattering like magpies. Lucia's mind spun as she tried to greet them all and answer their excited questions. But suddenly there was an abrupt silence. An ominous, oppressive silence. Her father had come to the door.

Travis introduced himself as her new husband and stuck out his hand.

Marco Montessano ignored it. He turned his stony gaze first to the child, then to Lucia, as he spoke in Italian.

"You trespass here, woman. Leave and do not come back. You have wed a stranger." His eyes narrowed as he glanced at Travis. "He is not Italian, not of our faith, eh? You shame your family, your mother's memory. Today I have no daughter." As the last word left his

lips, he silently closed the front door.

Lucia's father did not threaten. Marco Montessano did not raise his voice, shake his fist, or slam doors. He spoke softly and expected absolute obedience. Always, without question. He gave an order once. His displeasure brought no warning growl, no second chance. Only a final, neck-breaking snap.

Lucia had defied him. She had lied, cheated, stolen. Believing the repercussions for Stefania's future more important than blind obedience, Lucia had run away to Colorado, ignoring her father's wishes. Now she was *morto marcia*, the walking dead.

Travis said nothing, but the tension in the air signaled something was very wrong. Rafe handed over the tickets. The Conleys and Wil Bregon boarded a westbound train. Soon they were on their way back to Pueblo, Stefania's new home.

Lucia could never go home.

"What?"

Travis had nudged her. She straightened and looked around in confusion. Scenery flew past the train window. Stefania was across from her, sound asleep against Rafe's chest. When had that happened? She hadn't felt the girl move out of her lap.

Travis seemed to expect an answer, but she had no idea what his question had been. "I have head pain," she muttered.

Travis spoke just above a whisper, his eyes intently studying her face. "You mean a headache?" She nodded, but he frowned and stubbornly shook his head. "Nope, don't reckon you do. You're upset. What did your pa say back there, Lu?"

"It no matter. Thank you, forget me, please."

His frown deepened. "Your English is horrible again, so it matters one hell of a lot to you. To me, too. Fella wouldn't even shake hands with me. What did he say to you? He doesn't approve of me, is that it? Cause I ain't Catholic."

She started to deny it, but a sob escaped her lips. Travis wrapped his arm around her and pulled her head onto his shoulder. "Dammit, I'm sorry, Lucia. You're about the bravest gal I've ever known. You've faced up to a lot of hard judgments from folks, your own pa among 'em. You know Pearl and her pa ain't never been fond of you, neither. I'm afraid there's likely to be more hardship when we get back to town. The main thing is, you got Stefania now. She's got a future because you stood up for what you believe in."

Lucia began to weep, despite her resolve to remain calm in the face of all that had happened; to be the strong person Travis seemed convinced she was. As if he knew her, knew how her heart was breaking.

His rough palm caressed her cheek. He nudged her face up and kissed her. "Lu, try tellin'

yourself that words can't really hurt you. They're not rocks or bullets. They can't hurt if you don't let them."

"Yes, they will." She paused and swallowed. "My father, if he would beat me or break my arm, it would get better, yes? This today will not. Inside me the badness will stay."

Now Travis stiffened. "Just what the hell did he say about me? I ain't all that bad of a husband."

She shook her head. "Not you. Me."

"Oh. Your big-mouth brothers told how you'd run off with my money, I suppose."

"I do not know. He's very angry because I left the house, did not marry Pietro. That Vincenzo lied about the convent. He knows I sinned, break our faith."

Travis snorted and glanced out the window. "You didn't break your faith, Lu, you just bent it a mite. Everybody does sometimes. We're all sinners, ain't we? Besides, it wasn't like you had much choice."

"He told me I am dead to him."

"Jesus." His eyes widened as he released his hold on her. "Reckoned he might not welcome the idea of an Irish husband, but I never figured on European curses. Your pa takes things a mite too serious, if you ask me. Darned lucky you never thought to rob him."

Lucia said nothing. Once again, he didn't understand. She had robbed her father--of his hopes for her. He'd wanted her wed to Pietro, a man from the old country. He'd wanted to witness the ceremony, performed by a priest. To hear mass said for his daughter's future when she became a bride. Those hopes had been taken from him.

And what was Lucia to have done? Explained that she was married only in the eyes of the American law, to a man who did not love her--who planned for her to leave him, so he'd be free to marry another? Another woman he also did not love, but who had a big dowry? Her father's wrath would hardly be appeased by such news.

Helplessly, Lucia saw too late her folly. She'd been so brave before, so rash in her actions. She'd known there would be a price for them. Only she didn't anticipate how great that price might be. She hadn't expected it would be this--to find herself *marcia morto*. She hadn't expected to gain Stefania at the cost of everything else she held dear, yet it had come to that.

Chapter 11

Travis didn't look at the woman beside him.

She'd been crying into his handkerchief for half an hour. Rafe and Wil kept a light banter going as Stefania slept peacefully in Rafe's lap. Everybody else on the train seemed to be having a reasonably pleasant ride. Lucia was the only passenger sobbing and miserable. He should have been able to ignore her sounds of distress, but couldn't. She was crying because he'd made her his wife.

He glanced at Rafe and scowled. His brother had warned him there might be a hidden snag to his plan, but naturally, Travis had chosen to ignore the wisdom. It was pretty darned simple. They got Stefania out of the foundling home. Lu would bring her back to the ranch, work there until Travis recouped his losses, then they'd go their separate ways.

He'd thought the plan through. It was workable--at least it should have been. But he might have known better when it came to dealing with Italians. The whole race just didn't understand logic. Travis hadn't counted on Papa Montessano tellin' his only daughter to hop a train bound for the blue Pacific and go drown herself in it. Now Travis felt as if he'd somehow cheated her. If that wasn't ridiculous.

And he knew he'd be mired in guilt when the time came to announce the paper marriage was over. How was Lucia going to leave Crockhead Rest? Where would she go with the child? She sure as hell couldn't pack up and head back to St. Louis.

"Hey Travis." Rafe motioned to him to take the child from his lap. "My leg's about to fall off. You're her pa now. You be the pillow."

Travis settled Stefania on his lap, tucking her head in the crook of his arm. She'd stirred a bit, then gone right on sleeping. Poor little thing seemed exhausted. Probably shared a lumpy pallet with a crop of rats, judging by the look of Highwater's Home for Children, Travis mused darkly. Well, he'd make that up to her. She'd have a clean bed with plenty of blankets, a warm house, all the food she wanted.

A protective feeling washed over him. So this is what it feels like to be a pa, he silently told himself. From Rafe's grin, he guessed his brother had been imagining his mind's workings and concurred. Travis found he kind of liked it, the notion this child needed him and would look up to him.

If only her ma felt that way.

She isn't supposed to, he reminded himself sharply. It's a business arrangement. She wasn't truly his wife, and he best keep his mind focused on that fact--or he'd be swamped by frustrated sexual desire. No point in considering marriage pleasures he wouldn't get to enjoy or pondering how many men would be eager to have a body like Lu's between their sheets.

He noticed two fellas across the aisle were ogling Lucia. He didn't like that much, that or the fact that even Wil Bregon seemed to admire the way her bosom rose and fell as her

breathing grew more regular.

It dawned on Travis that if theirs were a real marriage, he'd probably sport a black eye and bruised knuckles nearly every day. It was best he wasn't really involved with the buxom filly--if playing pa to her bastard child and having her masquerading as his wife qualified as "not involved."

Crazy as it might be, he'd made his decision and had to stick by it. Somehow everything would work out. But it occurred to him that he could use some assistance. The kind that was his brother's stock and trade.

"Rafe." Travis kept his voice down. "Her pa wouldn't shake my hand. Didn't invite me in, wouldn't come out of the house. Just stood in the doorway and talked to Lu in Italian. He disowned her. Not cause I'm Irish. Cause I'm the wrong kind of Irish. Not Catholic."

"Ain't got no sense of humor, I take it."

Travis shook his head. "Never figured he'd react so badly. Hell, if she was my daughter, I'd be relieved my grandchild finally had a name. I'd be grateful to a son-in-law, whatever sort he was. But I never saw how deep the religion issue runs with some people. Sweeney might retaliate against me or try to hurt Lu."

"Don't let one Italian taint your view of fathers the world over. Those Italians are all plumb loco."

"Rafe, it won't be just a difference of opinion to Sweeney. He absolutely can't stomach Catholics. He swears they drove him out of Dublin. I don't know if it's true they wouldn't let Protestants own land there, but he believes that--and he ain't forgiven a single Catholic since."

Rafe glanced at Wil, who'd been blatantly eavesdropping. "Looks like you'll be handling agency business without me for a few days. Explain to Sparkle I won't be home just yet. Kiss the twins, tell 'em pa says howdy. I'll get off in Pueblo, 'stead of Denver. Ought to be somebody with a steady hand and cool head at the ranch."

No one argued when Travis announced they were stopping at the general store on the way home from the depot. He'd checked the small grip with Stefania's belongings and found it held only a few patched dresses and some underthings.

"Pick out some wool socks, a new dress, pair of boots, and a muffler for Stef," he told Lucia, nodding to the young clerk behind the counter. Smith wasn't in. Travis didn't recognize the gangly boy in the apron, but saw he seemed to know his stock. He immediately began showing Lucia the garments Travis had asked for. Boisterous voices and clumping boots entered the store as the clerk tallied their purchases. Travis turned as the other customers came in.

"Conley," came a gruff acknowledgment from the Flying Fist's foreman--a blowhard Travis had dealt with on various occasions, to their mutual distaste. There were few men Travis genuinely disliked, but Jake Russell was among them. He had no respect for

anyone but Patrick Sweeney. A sure sign how unbalanced Russell himself must be. He took thirty seconds to assess the scene before him, then his piggish eyes narrowed even smaller.

"Heard tell you got rid of the Pope's quim."

Rafe's derringer appeared in the next instant. It was pointed at Russell's chest. "Stranger, nobody insults my kin. Never could abide a lickfinger thinkin' he'll look big by disparagin' some gal. Believe you're done shoppin' today."

"Who the hell's this?" Russell demanded of Travis.

"His brother," Rafe replied.

"Don't push your luck, Russell," Travis warned. "He's a freelance gun. Known for his word and his aim, not for leniency or patience."

Travis watched Russell and another Fist hand get into their rig and snap the reins. "He'll race to spill his guts to Sweeney. Never has been able to stomach me. Come on, Lu. We got to get you and Stefania home."

Rafe slipped his parlor gun back under his coat. Neither man spoke as they rode home in a hired carriage, but both harsh faces wore similar grim expressions. The first skirmish was coming, they both knew it. Travis asked Rafe to get the females settled safely inside. He paid the driver and headed straight for the barn. He'd just finished gathering his men and explaining the situation when Randy arrived. The men had been dismissed before Randy spoke up.

"I went ahead and sent for Mavis." His voice and expression were tense. "She's only been here a little over a week. We're newlyweds. I haven't even had a chance to take her on a wedding trip, with you being away."

"Congratulations," Travis mumbled as he saddled Old Rye. "I'm goin' over to have my say with Sweeney, see if I can nip this in the bud."

"Travis, it's not only your family at risk here," Randy pointed out. "I've got a wife of my own to think about."

"I know," Travis sighed. "One thing I didn't tell them was--" He didn't have to finish his sentence. As he and Randy emerged from the barn, Mick and several cowboys had spotted the visitor and were shaking hands with him.

"Rafe's here?" Randy's expression went from one of deep concern to something bordering on amusement. Until the men closed around Rafe and began to laugh and make jokes. The laughter died when Rafe's stern visage and calm voice cut the revelry.

"Ain't funny to Lu, now is it? And won't be high times when that fat sonofabitch across the creek decides to make things ugly for your boss and his new bride. Not to mention it ain't good for the little one to hear such talk. Whatever you thought of your cook, you just remember she's the boss' wife now. You ain't ready to back me and be loyal to my

brother, pack your ass up and get out."

"Good heavens. Have you been replaced, Randolph?"

It was a female voice, clearly stunned, coming from behind Randy and Travis. They turned to find a plain woman standing there, staring at Rafe in shock. Randy grinned as he replied. "Nope, Mavis. That's the boss' older brother, Rafe Conley."

"Rafe." Travis beckoned for his brother to come over. Randy made the introductions, then they all went into the cabin for a private talk, out of earshot of the ranch hands.

Mavis had honey-brown hair and small features. Her clear blue eyes and gentle air suited Randy Shea, Travis thought. They both had a directness about them Travis would need now. He explained in detail exactly how he'd come to find himself the head of a small family, including the fact that Lucia had stolen his funds. He finished by telling Mavis that Rafe had come as a temporary reinforcement, should there be trouble with the neighbors.

Mavis offered a weak smile. Travis could see from her eyes she was frightened, but not about to admit it. "I think what you did is most commendable, Mr. Conley. Poor Lu is a European, struggling to learn our language and ways. Lord knows, the West is hard enough to absorb for those of us from the East, let alone for someone from a whole different culture. It's wonderful that you forgave her and helped her."

Having her gush over him made Travis feel anything but noble. He'd left out the minor detail of his intention to later dissolve his union. He kept the focus on the need for extra precautions and security for everyone on the spread.

"The main house is the best place for you and the other womenfolk. My brother will keep an eye peeled. He'll see you to the kitchen. Reckon Lucia'd be hurt if I didn't put her back on stove duty, but maybe you can help with the other chores. Randy'll oversee ranch operations. I'm headed to the Fist to meet with Sweeney."

"Not alone, surely. Randy, do you think that's wise?" Travis ignored her protests and strode quickly to the barn and Old Rye. Randy set off right behind him. Mavis gave Rafe a look of reproach. "Well?"

"Yes'm," he sighed. "You know, you remind me of my own wife. Must be somethin' about that danged cabin"

Travis only made it a hundred yards or so on his big gelding before the drumming and dust behind him indicated he was being followed. He slowed his mount and turned to find Rafe astride a two-year-old sorrel--one of several sired by Rafe's stallion, Snatch. Travis noted his brother wore his gunbelt and peacemaker. "Thought I told you to stay at the house. I'm positive Sparkle told you to hang up that Colt. Don't you ever listen to anybody?"

"Real closely. 'Specially when they're talkin' about trouble and bloodshed, and it's Conley blood up for spillin'. I'm just along for the ride. Besides, I never met your fancy

lady friend. Figure I should at least lay eyes on her, compare her to Lu. Put me in a better position to give that marital advice you wanted."

Travis was secretly grateful Rafe was along. This was definitely a visit he dreaded making, but he owed it to Pearl to tell her what had happened before gossip distorted the tale out of all proportion. He left Rafe waiting on a deacon's bench outside the library and followed Pearl into the small salon. The same room where he'd proposed to her only a few weeks before. She was dressed in pale blue today, and didn't look pleased to see him. She gestured for him to take a chair.

"Pearl, we need to talk," he began, turning his hat in his hands to even out the curved brim.

"About how you were seen in Smith's buying things for that Catholic trollop you claimed had run off last month?"

He ignored the slur. "Yeah, about Lucia."

"I assume you lied to get my father's blessing on our engagement. Knowing how Da feels about Papists, I can understand, but I wish you'd been honest with me."

"I was. She left my employ, but after she'd gone I learned there were some . . . extenuatin' circumstances."

"Is that what they're calling babies from the wrong side of the blanket these days?" Travis noticed the balled up handkerchief in her left hand.

He exhaled heavily. "Lucia was raped and had her child placed in a foundling home. She came out here answerin' an ad for a mail-order bride, but the fella was gone. His name was Crockett, so she was misdirected to my ranch. I didn't know when I hired her she was about to lose a child. She needed a husband to get legal custody of the girl."

"My God, it's true!" Pearl paced before him. "Our foreman told Da she had a wedding ring. Please tell me that man with you--your brother, so they say--tell me he married that wretched harlot."

"He's already married and a father of two. He--"

Her palm connecting with the side of his face snapped his head up. "You disgusting animal! Wiping the filth from that cheap European tart all over yourself, all over this town, all over me. I've announced our betrothal. It was written up in the paper. What am I supposed to do now, demand a retraction?"

"Look, I'm not married for real. Not 'forever after'. Just went to a courthouse and spoke vows so Lu could get the paper she needed to claim her daughter. I'll have it annulled in a few months. She's willin' to stay on as my cook and raise her daughter on the ranch." He saw the shock on Pearl's face. "If you don't want her workin' for us afterward, she'll move on."

"If I don't want her? Why on earth would I want that slut around? I doubt anyone raped

her. She probably let a man plant his seed. I can't believe you brought her back here." Pearl's voice was bitter and scraped his ears. "Regardless of what you say, there's no way to avoid the talk or the humiliation. I look like a fool. This is the worst thing you've ever done."

"Reckon so." He rose to leave. "But I asked you to marry me and you agreed. If you care, you'll wait. We hadn't set a date, so a couple month's delay shouldn't change our plans. She's my cook. She needed a special favor, that's all."

"A ranch owner doesn't go chasing after some cook." She blocked his exit. "I want you to look me in the eye and swear you've never laid a hand on her. Swear you've been faithful."

"You're not thinkin' straight. I told you, it's a business deal. Lu understands that, why can't you?"

"I want your word you've never kissed her or touched her. Never spent a night in her bed."

"I won't give you my word, Pearl. This is horseshit."

"You won't--or you can't?" He read the hurt and spite deep in her blue eyes. He reached past her for the doorknob.

"It wouldn't matter what I said," he shrugged. "You're set on hatin' me. Maybe when you calm down, you'll see I felt it was my Christian duty to help her out. If some fella'd forced himself on you and you'd had to give up a child, wouldn't you try to get the kid back . . . any way you could? If you were settled somewhere and had a life you could share, wouldn't you fight to get your flesh and blood back?"

Pearl never flinched. "Maybe you won't admit that. Or maybe you can't." He squared his shoulders. "In which case, could be there's nothin' more for us to say, and no reason to worry about a weddin' date."

Travis and Rafe started to leave, but Patrick appeared. "Whoreson! You've destroyed my daughter's life. Listen to her in there, keening like a banshee. You've broken her heart. I told her she could find better than the likes of you, Conley. Foul Papist lover. I knew perdition was upon us all when you let that schemin' baggage inside your gates."

Patrick swung his fist and sent Travis flying against the closed front door. "I want you off my land. If I ever see you here again, I'll have you shot."

Travis wiped at the blood trickling from the corner of his split lip. "Sweeney, calm down. My brother doesn't like boxin' exhibitions. Prefers quick gunfights, with only one man left standin' when the smoke clears." Travis nodded toward Rafe's gunbelt. "I'm legally married to the Italian, but it's temporary. I only did it to help her out of a jam. I mean to keep my betrothal promise to Pearl. I told her that. In a month or so, I'll--"

"Convert to Catholic scum yourself?" Sweeney demanded.

"Hell no. You know I've been Presbyterian all my life. Ain't married for good, Patrick. I'll file for an annulment come spring and Lucia can leave."

"What about your bastard daughter?"

"She ain't mine. For Christ's sake, the kid's Italian, like Lu."

"Half," Patrick corrected, glowering. "Where'd you meet that fleshy tart, in some trailhead on a cattle drive? Sniffing after chuck wagons with the other doxies? I knew something was rotten when she turned up. That cock-and-bull story of some fellow jilting her!" he scoffed. "It was no accident she came to Canon City. Wager it was you she was after, all the time. There was no Crockett fellow."

"You've got this all wrong."

"Liar! Do I have to go inside for my rifle? Your devil's spawn brother doesn't frighten me."

Travis opened his mouth, but before he could form a syllable, Rafe had blown a hole in the boards of the porch right between Sweeney's toes. "I ought to."

Rafe and Travis started toward their horses, tethered to the porch rail. "Go in and talk to your daughter," Rafe advised. "Have a drink of somethin' strong and cool off, Irishman. I've known hotheads good with their fists," Rafe continued as he and Travis swung up into their saddles. "Buried a couple, too."

The men rode home in silence. Rafe sat up late in the parlor with Travis, the two of them cleaning and polishing their guns. Lu spent the evening scrubbing pots and cleaning. Travis set his rifle down and silently went into the kitchen. He found Lu on her hands and knees, fiercely pushing a rag back and forth across a stain low on one wall, muttering to herself in Italian.

"Lu, you don't have to kill yourself cleanin' up. Let it go until tomorrow. You must be tired." Travis reached down to pull her to her feet.

She glanced up. "I'm sorry, Travis. Everything ruined, everything." She gestured at the spot on the wall. "Everything. My fault."

She began to cry, and Travis knew she wasn't talking about the mess in his kitchen. She was talking about the mess in his life and her pa. How uncomfortable they both felt being back at the ranch. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her temple. "No, it ain't. You've been strong for a good long spell on your own. Anyone would have a hard time strugglin' against the Highwaters of this world, but you did it. May not be easy with folks in town. But you're not alone anymore. I'll help you, Lu, any way I can." He tilted her face up. "You're not alone, and neither's Stefania. I'll help you face whatever comes."

Out in the parlor, Rafe watched the tender exchange with a wry smile on his lips. Clear in the next room he could see the look in the woman's eyes. Didn't Travis? There was admiration, fear, need, and something a whole lot deeper in her dark eyes as she looked

at his brother. And as Rafe watched Travis hold her close and lower his lips to brush her face, Rafe realized he'd never seen Travis act this way. Always in demand at the barn dances and church socials, Travis had held many a gal in his arms. But not without a clever flirting remark or a silly grin.

Not as though she were the most important person in the world.

Rafe went off to the empty guestroom down the hall from the room Lucia and the child were using, thinking how foolish his brother was. He'd never let Sparkle share a bed with their daughter instead of him. Rafe wrote a letter to Miranda, knowing Travis probably wouldn't. He rode into town next morning and took it to the post office, then visited the telegraph office. The operator groaned audibly as Rafe walked in.

"Howdy, Anderson. Long time no see. Want to send a wire to Denver. And no, this time there ain't a wanted outlaw involved. It's worse than that. It's a woman."

Chapter 12

Rafe lifted Stefania into the buckboard when church services were over. Everybody from Crockhead Rest was in town attending one church or the other, except him. He'd spent an hour dozing on the wagon seat waiting for the Italians.

"I want to stop at a store near here, please," Lucia informed him. She pointed to a small apothecary. He waited with Stefania outside while Lucia walked down to the little shop. The storekeeper was busy with another customer, so she helped herself to a cake of perfumed bath soap and a tin of talcum powder. To her surprise, the proprietor refused to write up the purchase, insisting she'd have to send Travis in. She went back out, frowning in confusion.

"What's the matter, Lu?"

"I buy same things from this man before, no problem. Today he says he cannot sell to me. Only to Travis."

Rafe got down from the wagon, bringing Stefania with him. "He does, does he? We'll just see about that. Come back inside and show him what you need."

Lucia didn't understand what Rafe said to the shopkeeper, but soon they were on the way home, her purchases in a bundle on her lap. Rafe wore a taut expression. Lucia sensed he was very angry. When the men came home from their Sunday services, Rafe pulled Travis aside and led him out to the barn.

She was serving the midday meal when Travis reached for a plate and caught her elbow. "My brother says you had some trouble in town. I'll talk to Cogswell over at the apothecary and straighten things out."

"I don't know why he was angry with me. I bought things before on your account. He was not friendly before," she admitted. "But he was never mean until today. He looked at me very cold, like I break something there. I didn't."

"Hush up," Travis hissed. "I told you, I'll handle him." He squeezed in around the crowded table, joining the men's conversation about cows getting stuck in bogholes. Rafe made a joke, and all of them began laughing. Lucia sensed Travis was deliberately closing himself off from her, excluding her.

She was his wife now, but clearly that meant nothing to him except aggravation. She'd been left out of conversations many times before. It hadn't hurt the way it did today. Today she'd also been snubbed by a merchant in town for unknown reasons. Rafe seemed to know something. Perhaps the storekeeper had called her a thief. Travis and his brother would believe that, wouldn't they? They'd never forget the stolen payroll. But she had not stolen from anyone else, ever. Nevertheless, it seemed she would be condemned. Her husband obviously chose to talk to the merchant, but didn't want to talk to her.

She waited until late that night, when she thought everyone would have gone to bed

except Travis. She had donned her nightdress hours before and tried to sleep, but she'd been unable to overlook the day's events. She padded down the hall on bare feet. Rafe and Travis were seated beside the fire playing checkers. "Oh, I'm sorry. I did not mean to bother you. I wish to speak to you, Travis."

"I'll be finished here in a little while," he replied without looking up.

"You know," Rafe suddenly announced, rising from his chair and stretching both arms above his head, "reckon I could use some fresh air out on the porch. We'll take a break, Little Brother. Meet you back in ten or fifteen minutes. Oh, and it's my move next." He grinned at Lucia and banged out the front door.

Lucia took an unsteady step forward. What she'd come to say should have been easy, but Travis wore an unreadable expression that intimidated her. "I would like to know how long until I can earn back what you lost. Until I might get the papers you said you would give me . . . to be free."

He scratched his chest. "I don't know exactly. Would have to do some figurin' to work it out. Probably two or three months. What's the hurry?"

"I was thinking before. Your brother will leave soon. You said he is big man in Denver. Maybe he can help me find work there. I will take Stefania to Denver. We can go on the train with Rafe."

This seemed to startle him. "That doesn't seem like a wise idea. Stefania just got moved in here."

"I cannot stay here now. Like this."

Travis scowled at her. "As my cook? Why the hell not? You lived here before. Christ Almighty, I rip up my whole life to get that girl to come live with you, and now it ain't enough? Why, because folks in town ain't polite to you? You met up with the likes of Vern Highwater and snobs before, Lucia. Warned you there'd be people with that outlook here. It'd be the same thing in Denver."

"No. In Denver they would be strangers. Not my husband."

"What? You sayin' I'm not nice enough to you?" His eyes widened. "Wait a minute. I wanted you to shush up at dinner 'cause I didn't want you talkin' about what happened in town in front of the men."

She shook her head. "You do not want me here, Travis. I have made too much trouble. You think I stole from the man in town, I know this. You think always how I stole from you, that I have no honor. But--"

"The heck I do. You've been a peck of trouble, but it comes down to that little child in the other room. I know that, and I'd have done the same thing in your place. Don't hold it against you. If anything, I admire you for it."

"This is how you feel?"

Travis heard the uncertainty in her voice, saw the fear in her eyes. She was talking big about going to Denver, but deep down she was scared to death. Of being alone? Or of his rejection? "You could have given up on her," he replied softly. "Let Stef go to strangers, gone on with your own life, tried to forget. You could have married that fella Peter. Your pa would still be speakin' to you."

"No, Pietro would have hurt Stefania," Lucia whispered, shuddering even as she stepped closer . . . into Travis' waiting arms. At that moment, he couldn't explain the sudden need to hold her. It was like the other time, with Gilmore, yet different. That time he'd felt compelled to offer her safety and protection. He still offered those things, but now they came with genuine respect.

There was something awesomely powerful in a woman putting her child first. It was supposed to be natural instinct, but that didn't stop some gals from puttin' their own desires ahead of everybody else's--gals like Pearl, for instance.

His lips sought hers, and before he realized what he'd started, Travis found himself kissing Lu with a hunger that had no part in lofty admiration. A need dangerously close to plain, unvarnished lust. Her arms around his neck and fingers interwoven into the hair at his nape were part of it, he told himself. Along with mammoth breasts pressed against his chest. It would be so easy to reach up and caress them, take the heft in each hand as his tongue explored

He stepped back, breaking contact. "Things'll work out, Lu. Just got to be patient. I'll deal with the merchants and folks here in town, and I'll keep track of what you still owe me. You just take care of Stef and keep the chow comin', okay? Good night." She went down the hall.

Rafe came back into the house and went to warm his palms by the fireplace. "You settle your hash? Got her moved into your room?"

"Ain't doin' that, and you know it. Let's finish the game." Travis plunked down on one side of the checkerboard, giving Rafe a pointed look.

Rafe was grinning. Travis inwardly groaned. "If I was hitched to a gal with a bosom like hers, I sure as hell wouldn't be wastin' time tryin' to beat my brother at checkers. Particularly since he always wins, anyhow," he winked. "Of course, now I know a thing or two about women."

"I know what to do, Rafe. I just ain't about to do it with that woman."

Rafe knocked the checkers off the board. "Hate to break it to you, Travis, but you're married to that woman. While there may be parts of marriage I'm still figurin' out, I know for certain havin' a wife means the only gal you're supposed to do things with is that one."

Travis stood up and spoke through clenched teeth. "You know I'm not layin' a hand on her--and why."

"Reckon so. Shame to admit that about my own brother."

Travis went granite still. "Just what's that crack supposed to mean?"

Rafe looked him straight in the eye. "We had a few conversations about gals in saloons, my visitin' bawdy houses. You probably can't lay eyes on Lu without recollectin' she had another fella between her knees already."

"It's not my first thought. But I'd say it's relevant--seein' as how the proof's followin' her around my kitchen all day."

Rafe snorted. "You're a damned snob."

"And you're a nosy sonofabitch," Travis grumbled.

"Ain't as though Lu wanted it. Even if she did, but won't own up to it, that's not standin' in your way now. He ain't claimin' Stef as his. He's long gone, And Lu ain't like a gal from some bagnio."

"I know her good and bad points, Rafe. I explained how things were. Why you stirrin' up the molasses now?"

Rafe's expression was as somber as just before a gunfight. "You explained how you saw things unfoldin', but you didn't take into consideration her feelin's. That gal's sweet on you. You're wastin' the love of a willing, bosomy female over a point of pride. Ought to take you in for reward money. Scarce as womenfolk are around these parts, that's a crime."

Patrick Sweeney was in a black humor. He sat in the back room of a saloon operated by one of his friends, McNabb, a wizened Irishman who was also an Orange Society supporter. A man who disliked Catholics almost as fiercely as Patrick did.

McNabb poured another shot of Irish whiskey and set it down in front of Sweeney. "Ambrose has a new teller. He was in here day or so back, had a bit too much beer. Dandy, no head for liquor."

"So?"

"Thought you might be interested in what spilled out of his gullet besides a belch or two. Seems the fellow'd only been on his job a few days when a local boyo walked in. Travis Conley. Dandy remembered because he wanted information before performing the transaction. Gant chewed him up over handling a customer that way. Fellow worried Travis was some poor relation to old Lewis Conley."

Patrick chuckled without mirth. "I thought so too, at first. No kin t'all, it turns out. Just worthless mule spit from Nebraska."

"Appears right before he left town, Travis emptied out his savings," McNabb said with meaning.

"Cattle auction."

"No, this was after that. Travis had made a big withdrawal just recently. That's what the records showed, why the teller was nervous. Don't you wonder why Conley would withdraw his savings and leave town, only to return with a wife and child out of nowhere?"

Patrick studied the other man's face. "I'm not certain I see a connection, McNabb. Traveling funds."

The saloon owner laughed. "Patrick, me hearty, think. Little one's got brown hair and eyes, like her mother, but so does Conley. He boasted he'd run the foreign Catholic off. Then he closed his bank account and caught a train. No one knows where his foreign housekeeper was from . . . or who she might be connected to. Fishy, I'm thinking."

"I accused him of fathering the brat. He denied it. Might be lying, like when he claimed to be shed of that foreign piece of trash. He's ruined my Pearl. She even fears coming to church on the Sabbath, so upset is she over what folks think. Afraid to show her face in town. My Pearl, proper belle of our fair town. 'Tisn't right."

"What concerns me," McNabb said in a tone assuring he wouldn't be overheard by other patrons, "is what if the foreign whore's got relatives or friends--more Papists like herself? What if she blackmailed Conley into marrying her? And what if she's got friends among the Ribbonmen?"

Patrick stood up. "There'll be none o' that, McNabb. I let the bloody Catholics run me out of Dublin, but they'll not do it again. Conley will pay for what he's done to my Pearl. I'll see to it she stops behaving like some lovestruck imbecile and finds herself a decent young man with prospects. I must marry her off. The sooner I get her wedded good and proper, the sooner we can put this whole episode behind us."

She was resistant when he went home and broached the subject. Patrick wanted to paddle her rump but good. How could she be such a stupid lass? Clinging stubbornly to pathetic hopes Conley meant to have his marriage annulled.

Patrick had tolerated enough of the hog slop. She'd only gone into town when he forced her on Sunday morning, then whined all the way home to the Fist. Carping how dreadful she'd felt sitting without Travis beside her in their pew. She imagined every eye in the place on her. Not only that, but she actually missed the young blighter.

It was more than any father should have to bear, Patrick told himself. He'd indulged his daughter far too long. He hadn't wanted to make her face the unpleasant reality of her situation. But it was high time she did just that.

"You listen to your da, Pearl Samantha Sweeney," he thundered as she started up the stairs to her room. "I've had all the self-pity from you I can abide. You think Conley's a strapping young fellow with fearsome good looks. You've told me so a dozen times. Half the young scalawags in the world are devilish handsome, lass. That means nothing.

Appears certain practical things got neglected in your fine education. I must speak plainly, even crudely, or you'll not see the light."

"What?" Pearl demanded, her tone once more haughty and peevish. "Am I supposed to fancy myself married to one of the dusty cowhands in the bunkhouse, Da? Or maybe some dry goods clerk? Please. You make me out scarcely a notch above that foreigner Travis has taken up with."

"It's precisely that bit of rubbish we need to ponder, my girl. Your young man claims he never met her until the day of our town picnic. Claimed she'd come by mistake. Lies."

Patrick drew his daughter into his library, where he positioned himself behind his massive desk. He was well aware he looked and sounded authoritative sitting there. "I've learned Travis depleted his savings. He's all but destitute. He emptied his bank account immediately before he left town. The same day he came here, asking for your hand. Sold his stud bull to raise capital. He only wanted your betrothal to secure his financial future, Pearl."

"I don't believe you. Travis wouldn't do that."

"It's been suggested he might have paid some type of blackmail, perhaps was forced to take his illegitimate spawn in. Forced to give the foreign whore his name. My guess is he wanted naught more to do with her after taking up with you. Might have paid hush money to prevent a scandal . . . until his money ran out. The child's his, I'd stake my life on it."

Pearl went stiff. "Then you're admitting he truly prefers me."

"Haven't you listened, lass? 'Tisn't his heart driving him to make you promises of tomorrow, it's his empty bank account. The man's been forced to pay for his dalliance. That's as it should be. Now he expects to rid himself of this European tart and his misbegotten brat, then settle down nice and cozy . . . with you and my money. What man wouldn't favor a beauty such as yourself, a good and proper Irish miss, unsullied and dowried, over that bit of trash and snot-faced tot?"

The harsh words seemed to sink in. Patrick watched the last of her faith in Conley crumble right before his eyes.

"Da, what can I do?" she whispered. "I don't want to end up an old spinster, but there's no one in this town I can bear to think of as a prospective bridegroom. Travis has made me a laughingstock. Now it's even worse. There are whispers, some of the girls act standoffish. Even the new banker and the seamstress look down their noses at me. I've seen them."

"I believe the answer lies in broadening your circle. This is but one small town in Colorado. Colorado but one state in the Union."

"You mean someone outside . . ." Now she brightened, rallying to the idea. "I believe that might be just the thing, Da. If I went to visit Aunt Louisa in Chicago or that third

cousin of Mother's in--where was that, again?"

"St. Paul. At last you've grasped what I'm saying. You'll have naught more to do with Conley or the men on his ranch. Your word on this, Pearl."

"I promise. I'd love nothing better than to give Travis the cold shoulder."

Patrick nodded sagely. "I've associates in Denver. I'm also known to men in Texas. Wealthy men. A word or two should garner the social invitations you need. I didn't spend all that money on fancy schools and a wardrobe of satin gowns for you to sit home, pitying yourself for the loss of a no-account scoundrel."

She was more than eager to accept when an invitation arrived less than a fortnight after that conversation. She and Patrick were being asked to a fancy dress ball in Denver. Her father noted the local Army captain and some of his officers planned to attend. The host was a tycoon running for political office. Some of Patrick's other cronies planned to put in an appearance.

It would serve the whole town right if Pearl put on her best gown and made a spectacular debut at that ball, Patrick told himself. He'd love to boast of Pearl's conquests, remind a sniveling Conley he'd lost any hope of ever getting his hands on the girl's inheritance. Pearl was too fine for the likes of that rancher. Patrick had sensed it from the first.

His daughter became obsessed now with planning her ensemble. The ball was less than a month away. Pearl had begun shopping in earnest. For a new corset and silk stockings, plumed bonnet, satin gloves, and new slippers.

Patrick looked over the receipts strewn across his desk.

Let her fuss over what to wear. He was busy planning his revenge.

Severing the relationship between his daughter and the young buck across the creek was only the beginning. Denying Conley his chance at becoming a partner in the Flying Fist or Patrick's financial holdings wasn't enough. Neither were destroying the man's herds or costing him cowhands, but Patrick would set those things in motion, too. He wouldn't just make life difficult for those at Crockhead Rest. He'd make it impossible. He wouldn't rest until he'd broken Travis Conley. Until he saw the bastard and his slut wife run clear out of town.

Chapter 13

Rafe had gone home the morning after the sharp exchange of words over Lucia. He'd insisted he'd outlived his usefulness at the ranch and his detective agency would suffer if he prolonged his absence. Travis hadn't argued.

He had business of his own he'd neglected. He'd ridden over to the fort to sell the Army a couple dozen head, then visited a local mining camp. As usual, he'd left with an order for thirty steers. He then rode straight for the bank to replenish his account and was wheeling Rye around to start back for the ranch when a woman stepped off the boardwalk, directly into his path. He had to rein in sharply to avoid her. He gallantly started to offer concerns for her safety--until he saw who it was. Pearl Sweeney.

They hadn't spoken since that bitter day in her salon. He'd seen her in church on Sundays, but no longer did he share the Sweeney pew. He'd glimpsed her in town on another occasion. She'd been with several of her female friends. Now they stood alone on the street.

"Why, if it isn't Travis Conley."

There was no geniality in her eyes, no smile on her face. She'd spoken his name with the reverence she might display toward an outhouse or pig sty.

"Howdy." He slid down from his saddle and doffed his hat. "Reckon neither of us planned on meetin' up like this, but maybe it's to the good. We should talk."

"My father doesn't think so. He's forbidden me to speak with you, in fact. Seems there's a rumor you're flat broke."

"That rumor's wrong," he countered stiffly, "but then, most rumors are. You know your pa's started a range war with me? Several of my cows were turned away from the creek on Russell's orders. He's probably followin' Patrick's orders. No sense in our hands battlin' each other or cattle dyin' over this, Pearl."

She adjusted the button on one kid glove. "God forbid a cow should die," she scoffed.

"For somebody so concerned about money, you don't seem to understand cows are valuable. They're our stock and trade. But I'm worried about more than beef gettin' hurt by this foolishness."

"Foolishness?" she hissed. "Is it foolish to believe your intended would be faithful to you? Is it foolish to feel humiliated when instead he shows up in town with a wife and child, and everyone knows he jilted you for some servant? You destroyed our future plans. It's not some minor inconvenience."

"Ain't the end of the world, neither," he shot back. "Your pa and I each got men workin' our spreads. This argument could end up costin' somebody's life. I say some fella dyin' over whether you get to put a ring through my nose is beyond foolish, it's downright despicable."

"You rotten--why of all the ingrates!"

"What the hell am I supposed to be grateful for? The chance to have you on my arm, tellin' me what to say, when I can sneeze, and how you wish I'd get a haircut? That's all I ever was to you, Pearl. Some beau to parade around."

"That's not true, and you know it. We were--oh, what difference does it make? You've ruined my whole life."

"Jesus H. Christ. Your life ain't ruined unless you want it to be. I told you, my situation's temporary. There are a couple wrinkles left to smooth out, then we can get the knot untied. You and I can still have that big church weddin' you want."

"I'm not sure marriage to you is what I want now." Her gaze met his full force. Travis noted how flinty her normally china blue eyes could turn. When Lucia was angry, there was fire in her eyes; in Pearl's, Rocky Mountain ice.

"I'll talk to my father about the cowhands, but I doubt it will serve any purpose. My father's a proud man, and it's worse than what you've done to me. There's that Catholic and her brat. Da told you when you first settled here how he feels about Catholics. You brought his enmity on yourself. Now I really must finish my shopping."

Travis hesitated as though he had something more to say, then seemed to change his mind. He vaulted back into his saddle and gave his horse a taste of his spurs. Pearl stood in the street and watched him ride away, trying to calm her shaky breathing. She recalled her father's horrible intimations about Travis. Her father could be right. Travis might have courted her solely because she'd eventually inherit the Flying Fist. Any man could be a fortune hunter or opportunist.

What her father didn't comprehend was, even if she'd known that all along about Travis, it wouldn't have mattered. Pearl sensed from the start she was to be a pawn between the two men. They viewed her as a human symbol of the creek itself--the dividing line between two empires. If Travis married her, the division would disappear. Her father was intent on keeping things as they were. Pearl had never deluded herself about male pride.

There was an abundance of that same masculine pride displayed at the dress ball in Denver.

Pearl stood in the large drawing room off the main ballroom and studied the gathering with a critical eye. There were perhaps a handful of possible suitors who'd danced or flirted with her, all of them arrogant buffoons. They had little enough to be so puffed up about. All Pearl could see they offered was the ability to wear a suit well. Did all men have to be so dreadfully boring?

There was one exception, she noted at that very moment. A rakish dandy stood conversing with her father. Whoever the stranger was, he was breathtaking. Tall and

lean, impeccably dressed. This one did more than wear a suit--he commandeered it. He had incredible sunstreaked tawny hair, hair she itched to walk up and feel. And his smile--for pity's sake, his smile should be outlawed.

She accepted a glass of wine from a passing server's tray and edged closer to where the gorgeous devil lounged against a door frame and listened to her father blather. There was really no other word for it. Pearl's father could be a perfect horse's ass. Easily the most didactic man in any crowd. Pearl heaved a sigh of disgust. She'd escaped his rantings while away at school. Geometry lessons had seemed enthralling in comparison to Patrick Sweeney's political dissertations.

The fact that the singularly handsome stranger appeared so engrossed almost deterred her from gazing at him any longer.

But he glanced in her direction and smiled. She promptly forgot about geometry and politics and cows, or whatever her father might be droning on about. Pearl determined to find out who the marvelous dandy was.

"Pearl, sweetheart," her father boomed, crooking his forefinger. "Come over and allow me to introduce you." As she joined her father and met the spark of blatant interest in the stranger's eyes, Pearl felt her color rising. Was she too transparent?

"This is my daughter, Miss Pearl Samantha Sweeney. She's making her debut this evening," Patrick bragged, hitching his thumbs into the slash pockets of his waistcoat. "Just returned from schooling back in Delaware. Your original neck of the woods, wasn't it?" The man nodded. "This is Gavin Wilburne. He's interested in land development in Colorado and Utah. Turns out we have some mutual business acquaintances."

"How nice," Pearl commented, lowering her lashes. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Wilburne."

"Gavin. Might I hope you'll favor me with a dance later this evening?"

That simple question had launched Pearl into a fantasy. One dance led to two. They waltzed and chatted, then excused themselves out to the garden for some air. There Gavin kissed her and told her she was the most unusual woman he'd ever encountered. Because she'd admitted her father was a deadly dull bore of a cattle rancher.

She couldn't hide her flush of excitement when Patrick announced he'd decided they should stay on a few days in Denver. Pearl had a little card in her reticule with Gavin Wilburne's hotel and room number written on it. She'd been trying to figure out how to maneuver things so she could see him when Gavin turned up at lunch the following day. He'd joined them in the hotel dining room to talk business with Patrick Sweeney.

Patrick silently applauded the instant attraction he detected between Pearl and the land speculator. The young whip knew several financiers and tycoons. From their brief conversations, Patrick already sensed this dandy was a comer. Sharp as brass and just as bold. He said as much to Pearl.

"I approve of this fellow Wilburne. Didn't I say you could do better than that worn-at-the-heels cowherd back home? Wilburne's a real man, someone going places in this world. Mark my words, lass, I know a fellow destined to stake a claim when I meet one."

"He asked me to supper," Pearl admitted on her third day in town. She was aware her etiquette instructors would have denounced the suggestion as highly improper, that Gavin was rushing things. She didn't care. She wanted to accept. "I didn't know if you thought I should go."

"I'll be out myself this evening," Patrick asserted. "There's a chapter of the Orange Society here in Denver. I've been asked to the meeting tonight."

Pearl rolled her eyes. Not those dratted Orangemen and their battles against the Ribbonmen and Hiberians again. Her father had an absolute fixation with militant religious organizations--both pro and con his own beliefs. It wasn't a healthy preoccupation. But tonight, Pearl didn't care how ridiculous her father behaved. If he wound up in jail for inciting a riot against Catholics, she'd be glad. For she'd be alone with Gavin Wilburne.

They dined in a wonderful private club, then went for an open carriage ride in the moonlight. She was enthralled. She'd known Gavin only a few days, yet already knew she'd miss him when she returned to Pueblo. She admitted that to him.

"But I'll be coming there to conduct a survey for your father," he replied with a laugh. He took her gloved fingers in his as they strolled the walk in front of her hotel. "He mentioned you were having some problems with a neighboring rancher. Your land and his are divided by a creek."

"Yes." She tried to repress her negative reaction to the mention of her former beau, but something must have shown on her face.

"Have I hit on a sore subject? Is this more than a disagreement over where cattle are grazing?"

"He was--we were engaged. He chose to marry someone else." Her lower lip curved into a sneer. "A woman with an illegitimate child. His, I suppose."

"Good Lord. I can understand your father's open animosity. I'd be furious too, if someone had treated my lovely daughter so shabbily."

He'd called her lovely. "It was shabby, wasn't it? He'd courted me for over a year, then tries to fob me off with a claim he intends to annul his present marriage. That it's a temporary marriage of convenience for the woman's sake. What about mine?"

Gavin paused. "Indeed. You'd be getting her cast-off husband. Hardly an appetizing thought, if you'll pardon the pun. A divorced man is certainly less than an educated, attractive young lady deserves."

Pearl saw her chance. "What sort of man do I deserve, would you say, Mr. Wilburne?"

Again came that dazzling grin, knocking the air from her lungs. "A man who can appreciate your finer points and talents. Someone like yours truly." He drew her close, into the shadows around the corner of the hotel building. There he kissed her with a thoroughness she found delightful. "I think this is one of those points I mentioned," he murmured as his hand slid into her bodice. Tanned fingers brushed her nipple.

It hardened at once. A jolt of desire shot through Pearl's lower belly. She wanted Gavin to make love to her. Now, tonight. Which meant, of course, that she had to act horrified. Outraged. Then he'd work at seducing her.

"Oh Gavin, please. This really is most improper." She tried to wrest free of his embrace, but he kept his arm around her waist.

"You know I find you beautiful," came his silky murmur against her throat. "And since your father's away at his political gathering until late this evening, why don't I see you upstairs safely to your room?"

"You're a wicked man, Mr. Wilburne. You know I can't permit that. Why, it would seem almost an invitation to--Well-bred young ladies certainly do not welcome such suggestions. Besides, the hotel management frowns upon male escorts on the upper floors."

"Not when the male in question has taken a room in this establishment himself. If you won't let me escort you to your room, perhaps you'd like to enjoy some champagne and the view from mine? It's on the top floor."

Pearl's heart gave a solid thump. The rooms on the top floor of this hotel were elegant and quite expensive. Gavin Wilburne must be prosperous indeed. "You're staying here too?"

"Seemed more convenient," he mumbled, nibbling a trail of moist kisses along her chin and exposed throat. "Since I fully intended to make love to you tonight. Dances and suppers are fine, but I want more from my fine exquisite Pearl. Are you going to pretend you haven't thought of us together? Was it only in my dreams I imagined you looking at the cut of my trousers and wetting your lips with a hint of feminine desire?"

"I'll have some champagne in your room, but that's all. I must return to my own room before it gets too late and Da comes back."

She offered the same weak protest an hour later as Gavin began undressing her. She stood in the pale light spilling from a bank of diamond-paned windows overlooking the city. He'd peeled away her gloves, had her slippers off, and now was snaking a hand up under her skirts, intending to remove her stockings and garters.

"Gavin, really," she laughed, slapping at his bold fingers. "My father will--"

"Never look for you in your room tonight. I took the liberty of leaving a folded note at

the desk for him, saying you'd made friends with a young lady here in Denver. You accepted her invitation to stay at her town house this evening."

"Oh, but Gavin, I couldn't stay here. It's too . . ." Pearl was certain she should have some reason in mind, but the pleasant combination of sensual arousal and champagne had fuddled her thinking. Along with Gavin's heated kisses. "I really can't abide this pawing," she announced, weaving slightly as she drew herself up before him. "Just get the gown off and be done with it."

"Yes, ma'am." He stripped her bare and carried her to the bed, where she lay in a stupor, watching him disrobe. God, the man was hung like a stallion. She was hot and ready for him.

She brazenly parted her milk-white thighs, but remembered to act coy. "Gavin, will you be gentle with me?"

He climbed onto the bed and gathered her in his arms. "Is that the way you like it, gentle and slow? I thought you'd favor adventure. Was your rancher gentle? Slow? Did he let you order him from spot to spot, dictate when and how fast? That's disheartening. Is that what you thought of me? That I was another man you could control?"

She murmured something in answer. Gavin's fingers slid into her slick channel, making her arch against him with a low moan. "I'm sorry, Pearl. You were mistaken, then. I'm the sort who likes to be in control."

"Gavin."

"Ah, I knew you'd like it my way. Yes, let yourself go, sweetheart. Give it over to me. Wrap your legs around my waist. Good girl. How do you feel about my teeth? Women generally seem to admire my teeth."

"Um, they're very nice. Perfect," she panted. Then she gave a sharp cry, almost like a bark, as they came down smartly around her nipple. It was beyond erotic--almost painful, in truth--but the heat was building inside her as Gavin filled her. His staff was big and hot. It stretched her until she was mindless.

Several hours and experiments in pain and pleasure later, Gavin stood nude beside the bed, frowning down at her. Pearl shook her head, noticing what a jumbled mass of tangles her blond curls had become. "No. I won't do that. I don't care that you find it exciting. It sounds degrading."

"As degrading as having your fiancé throw you over for some harlot?"

"It's ungentlemanly of you to remind me about that," she sniffed.

This brought harsh male laughter and a powerful hand gripping her backside. "By now I'm sure you understand I'm no gentleman. But then, I've realized you're not exactly a lady, so we're fairly matched. Now do like I told you, Pearl."

"I won't."

"You will, or I won't help your father get that survey he needs, proving your neighbor's encroaching on your water rights. If we obtain a land use survey to support that claim, your neighbor's ranch becomes a worthless section of useless dirt. His ranching days will be over. Don't you want to help your father? Don't you want to spite the fiancé who made a fool of you?"

She hesitated, then began to cry softly. But she did as he'd commanded, rising on all fours on the mattress to present her buttocks.

"That's a start," Gavin said. "What else did I ask you to do?"

"Ask you to please kiss me," she whispered, squeezing her eyes shut. "There."

He knelt down to comply, but she flinched and pulled away before his lips could brush her taut, sensitized flesh. "I see we'll have to get this understanding clear," he growled, sliding two fingers deep into her. He curled them and used them to direct her pelvis back. "Say it again."

She did, choking on the words as she uttered them. It was horrible, what he was forcing her to do, tearfully humbling herself this way. But as Gavin's tongue began to explore and his fingers to stroke her, the mortification dissolved. Desire took over.

Soon Gavin needed no instructions or threats to make her grind her bottom against his face. She barely heard her own moans, barely realized she was wantonly gasping and pressing his free hand to her left breast. When he pinched hard on the nipple as his tongue swirled over her slick folds, Pearl felt shards of raw pleasure spear her again and again.

Her father paid no attention to her slightly disheveled appearance when she joined him for breakfast in the hotel dining room. She wanted nothing more than a long soak in a steaming hot tub of scented bubbles, but propriety demanded her soothing bath would have to wait. She was supposed to be back from an evening of girlish prattle. The truth was it hurt to sit, her nipples were nearly on fire, and food was the last thing she wanted. She accepted the coffee her father offered, telling herself last night had been a mistake.

Her father had trusted her to behave like a proper young debutante.

She had trusted Gavin to behave much like Travis did in bed. She'd been with Travis several times. She'd been well aware lovemaking involved touching and mouths in various places. It had always been pleasant with Travis.

But nothing like what she'd experienced with Gavin Wilburne. His lovemaking was savage, relentless. He left no illusions, no part unsullied, nothing unetched by his masterful touch. He had well and truly violated her. He'd stolen her pride and wishful delusions.

For as she sipped at the strong black brew, the last aching part was revealed by the light of this new day. Pearl remembered what she'd done . . . and what had been done to her. Every last detail. And discovered that she liked it.

Chapter 14

Travis grimaced at the sight of the bloated carcass of a dead steer partially blocking the water flow in the creek. He tilted his hat brim back and cursed aloud. The animal had been in fine shape, part of a beef shipment he'd planned to drive outside of town in less than two weeks. Its hide bore the distinctive brand of Crockhead Rest: a big C with a small straight bar and a dangling R.

Danbers knelt on the muddy bank and poked gloved fingers into the shaggy reddish-brown fur. "Bullet hole, Boss. Right there. 'Nother one lower on the chest. Ain't the first I've found deliberately shot or slaughtered. I told Shea about the trouble a few days back. He said you wanted chores as usual."

"Yeah, those were my orders," Travis sighed. "Shit. Been tryin' to keep things from simmerin' over into a full-blown range war, but I'm gettin' fed up with hay bales disappearin' and fences bein' cut. Nobody saw anything, I suppose?"

Danbers lassoed the steer's horns and climbed up onto his mount, urging the horse to pull back until he'd dragged the carcass clear of the water. "Had two men on watch all night. We never actually catch Fist men doin' this mischief. That's the problem. You could go to the law, if we could prove what Sweeney's doin' to your stock."

Travis knew they'd never be able to prove charges against Sweeney. The man had half of Colorado in his blasted hip pocket. "Keenan holdin' to his story about wolf tracks along the back forty?"

"Yessir," Danbers nodded. "Swears there's a pack somewheres nearby. Claims he spotted a huntin' pair one night last week."

"Tell him to make damned certain it's wolves before he fires his rifle. Can't have him shootin' some Fist cowhand. He could end up at a necktie party for murder."

Danbers didn't say anything to that. They both knew it was true. Travis grimly acknowledged to himself that talking to Pearl in town hadn't accomplished a thing, except possibly to aggravate matters. She and Patrick used to have Travis share their pew at Sunday services. Now they silently glared at him, at Randy and Mavis, at all the Crockhead folk during hymns and worship. Travis wondered if the Sweeneys didn't fold their hands and actually pray for the Lord to strike him dead right there in church.

Waiting an hour in an empty barbershop or finding the Crockhead supply order unaccountably delayed became common occurrences. So was getting the cold shoulder from town matrons and Patrick's cronies at socials. Crockhead wranglers were turned down for dances, found their bids weren't taken on box suppers, made as welcome as skunks on front parlor settees.

Which brought out the orneriness in the cowboys. Someone swapped a box supper of fried chicken the Fist's foreman bought for a box filled with cow dung. Luellen Ramsey collapsed in a dead faint when Russell nearly stuck his fork into the mess. With

Crockhead's men laughing like hyenas, it wasn't hard to figure who'd pulled the switch. But just like whoever was stealing Crockhead hay or snipping barbed wire, there was no witness. No way to prove any real harm done. The same was true when two pairs of Flying Fist nippers turned up missing, then were found rusted or bent. The Fist pliersman went to the general store to buy another pair, only to learn Conley hands had bought up every pair Smith had in stock.

That Sunday's sermon was a lecture on the dangers of excess. A masculine voice in the back rumbled that if a certain pliersman hadn't been cuttin' and snippin' too much barbed wire, he'd still have his tools. There was an ominous silence in the house of worship for a heartbeat, then the Widow Brown began to play a hymn and sing in her creaky voice. Every female in the church except Pearl Sweeney joined her. Gradually the men followed suit. But even as Travis raised his own voice in song, he felt Pearl's accusing blue eyes stabbing the back of his head.

The following Friday night there was a barn dance, hosted by one of Patrick's friends. Everyone from the Fist was invited, while Crockhead's men were pointedly ignored. Travis realized that while the snubbing got his men's goats, they'd overlooked an obvious advantage to the situation. None of the Fist's hands would be drinking in the local saloon.

So Travis announced an evening of poker and drinks in town. The saloon was quiet until a sodbuster came in and started running off his mouth about the tense atmosphere in town. Seemed the fella couldn't understand how cowpunchers could get so distraught over such stupid differences. One of Travis' hands pointed out that a lack of understanding might be expected from someone who spent all day long gazing at the hind end of a mule.

Travis stepped in to break things up. Hearing the wrangler address his boss by name, the farmer turned his ferocity on Travis. "Conley, eh? You're the one everybody talks about, the one who started all this. Married some cheap whore, don't dare show her face at church, way I heard it."

"You don't know what you're talkin' about, friend," Travis warned. "So you best keep your opinions to yourself."

"Got my rights, too," the farmer countered, scoffing. "Settled here when it was a decent place for a godfearing family. If I wanted to live with the likes of you, I could've settled in Abilene or some other Devil's outpost."

"Why doncha pack up then?" Mick Keenan demanded, waving his beer. "Don't need your mouth 'round here. Got a big mouth and a serious lack of guts, stranger."

"Think so, huh?" the red-faced farmer shot back. "Well, I've got guts enough to say what nobody else in this town has come out and admitted. There's a rumor you boys enjoy more than hot chow from the boss' wife."

Mick exploded. "You take that back, goddamn it! Nobody ever laid a hand on Lu Conley. She's a decent woman, no matter what them Fist liars say about her."

The farmer chuckled, glancing at the barkeep. "They say she's got tits to rival my best milk cow."

Travis sent a right into the farmer's midsection even as Mick seized him around the shoulders. The sodbuster was taller than Mick by several inches--which didn't faze him as he tried to ride the stranger piggyback, hooking both arms around the man's throat.

The bartender hefted a length of oak from behind the bar. "Hey, you got a score to settle, you take it outside."

Danbers ducked as the whirling farmer spun with an empty bottle clenched in his fist, swinging wildly. He missed both Danbers and Mick above his shoulders, and knocked the bartender out cold. "Damnation," Danbers laughed. "Mick, can you ride that buffoon back to Crockhead? Maybe we could aim him at old 'Fatricks'."

"Try it," came a low growl. Jake Russell seized the back of Mick's work shirt and used it to heft him up and off the stranger's back. He threw Mick against the wall, where he crumpled like a rag doll.

"You sent him in here to start a brawl," Travis accused, rounding on Russell. "Always wanted an excuse to punch your ticket, Russell." Russell swung first, but Travis feinted left and let loose a solid punch that connected with the side of Russell's jaw. Bedlam erupted as more Fist hands poured through the saloon's swinging doors.

The wagonload of groaning men rattled towards home much later. To a man, each of Crockhead's cowboys had sprouted a cut lip, bloody nose, or bruised ribs and knuckles. Their shirts and vests were tattered and bloodstained. They reeked of whiskey, beer, gin, or noxious combinations of all three. Travis doubted they'd ever made a more pathetic sight, even after miles of dust on cattle drives. He was embarrassed to pull up next to the barn and find Lucia awake and headed straight toward them from the back porch.

"Go on back inside, Lu," he ordered, trying to sound authoritative despite the slur in his words.

"Perdinci, what have you done? Oh, marone! Never have I seen . . . Mick, your face is just blood." She tucked her shawl more securely around her shoulders, then pressed her palms together in supplication. "I pray all night tonight," she informed them with a dark scowl. "I ask the Blessed Mother, please do not let the men go to town if more trouble. I pray to the saints, and look!" She was still clucking her tongue in reproach, but had lapsed into pure Italian as Travis limped into the dark house.

"This is horrible, what you do," she informed him archly an hour later. He'd bathed and undressed. Now he lay against his pillows with his quilt pulled up around his chin. He wasn't being modest, though he knew Lucia would have avoided the sight of his bare chest. He didn't want her to see the darkening purple bruises on his ribs and left

shoulder.

She sat at the foot of his bed, frowning. That didn't bother him. Lucia spent a good portion of each day frowning at him lately. But now she was clutching her prayer beads--rosaries, she called them--and purposely fingered them for potent effect. Travis had credited his sister Miranda with a talent for milking guilt. Hell, Miranda could take lessons from this stiff-spined Italian. 'You should not hit,' Lucia carped. "You know this. Is not God's way to turn other face?"

He was too tired, half drunk, and too sore to bother fixing that broken phrase. Instead, he groaned in weary exasperation. "Lu, your jawin' ain't helpin' my head none. It's late. You should go on to bed and let me get some sleep."

"No, I will not do this. And you do not sleep until you say yes, this is horrible."

"Yep, it's horrible. Happy now?"

"No, you kill those men over me."

"I didn't kill anybody," he winced, gingerly feeling the side of his face. "Not for lack of tryin', though."

She shook her head. Travis ignored how that small action made him suddenly aware of her unbound bosom in the pristine cotton nightgown or how he'd caught the fresh scent of her hair. Lucia was big on taking regular baths and washing her beautiful, thick mane of dark hair. One uninjured part of him was entirely too aware of the unwitting attraction he felt for his new bride.

"Why do you never listen?" she demanded.

"Me?" he chortled without any real amusement. "Didn't I just ask you to stop naggin' me? You sound like a real shrew."

"You think I am ritroso? Because I do not want you, or my Mick, or the others hurt in your silly fighting with the men beyond the creek?"

"I don't know what the hell that 'oso' word means, but yeah, I think you sound like an ungrateful pest . . . if you want to know the truth. I knew what we'd be up against. I warned you folks wouldn't be kind, but I'll admit I didn't figure Sweeney would start an actual range war over me bein' hitched to you temporarily."

"You--"

"Ain't done," he interrupted harshly. "Your Mick, as you called him, damned near strangled a fella for insultin' you. Don't reckon it's ever dawned on you, but those fellas in my bunkhouse would stand up for you, even if I didn't pay 'em to. Never paid 'em to take your side when you turned up here the day of the town picnic, but you stayed because of them."

"Perhaps you wish one of them, like poor Mick, was my marito and not you," she

replied softly.

"Actually I do," he sighed, closing his eyes against the desire to throw his arms around her and prove his own loyalty--which seemed to count for nothing compared to her dear Mick's. "Wouldn't ache all over or be warrin' with Sweeney if you'd married one of my men." He opened his eyes just in time to see the stab of hurt register in hers in the low candlelight. "Aw, go on, Lu. You got to fix grub early in the mornin', and we promised Stefania we'd take her for a ride tomorrow afternoon."

Lucia stood up to leave, fighting back tears of hurt and anger. He'd just confirmed her suspicions. He'd never wanted the burden of her or Stefania, that was clear. And after all but saying so, he dared pretend he had a fatherly concern for the little girl. Lucia curled into a tight knot of anguish in her own bed, and stifled a sob of frustration as she punched her pillow. She wished it was Travis' face. But some stranger had already smashed that.

A pang of guilt stung her. She shouldn't wish Travis ill. He honestly was kind and considerate toward Stefania, and if it weren't for him, the child would either be in that horrid dark place with the cruel headmaster or living with total strangers. Travis understood that, and seemed to genuinely desire to see the sadness of Stefania's past erased. He tried to make her smile. Lucia had watched him at the breakfast and supper table, clowning, his dark eyes glowing as he spoke to the girl. He was good with young children, as Rafe had explained. Though only in his early twenties, Travis had four nieces and nephews and the advantage of watching his siblings strive to be good parents.

He'd obviously learned from them, for the role seemed to come naturally to him. It made Lucia want to scream, the easy way he had with Stefania after such a short time. He detested her cats, as he'd often reminded Lucia, yet he'd taken Stefania by the hand to visit with them in the barn.

Lucia hated to admit it, even to herself, but she was jealous of the child.

Stefania got patience and softness from him, things he rarely offered Lucia. He was quick to scowl or get angry with her. She could laugh with Mick and the other men. Even old Sourdough, who had not liked her at first. She could touch Mick's arm or pat his shoulder. He would smile, knowing she meant the gesture in friendship. If she did the same to Travis, her husband, he'd jump as if she'd thrown cold water in his face. She tried to be his friend, but it was very difficult. Like tonight. She'd been concerned about his welfare, but he'd told her he wished she weren't such a bother.

She recalled those harsh words the following day as they departed on the "family" picnic with Stefania.

Travis' face was puffy in places, his jawline dark with bruising. Lucia could hardly bear to look upon him, so avoided his gaze and concentrated instead on the beauty around her. The weather was clear and bright, the air fresh and crisp. The meadow was verdant green speckled with wildflowers. The tall grass rippled and whispered with the changing

breeze. Birds twittered as they flitted past overhead.

Stefania asked questions in Italian. Though the child struggled to learn English, much of the time Lucia allowed her to lapse into their native tongue. Lucia enjoyed the opportunity to speak fluent Italian herself. English still did not come easily, and the odd sayings of the men often confused her. She had learned that often they said one thing, but actually meant another. It was a relief not to have to worry about sounding foolish on such a fine afternoon.

No, Lucia replied, rabbits did not keep tiny houses with furniture under tree trunks. Rabbits, she explained to the child, made big holes under the snow and frost. Beneath, the dirt was warm and protected them. Wolves and foxes could not find them there.

Yes, there would be wildflowers growing for some time. The snow was almost done now. Spring had arrived. Yes, they could pick some. And so they wandered away from the blanket where Travis reclined on his back with his arms folded beneath his head. He'd put his hat over his face to block out the bright sun. Lucia was glad, for it also covered the hideous marks of his fight the night before.

While they strolled and chatted, bending to pick flowers here and there, Stefania continued to question her mother. Yes, she answered, Travis was the head cowboy, the best one on their ranch. He owned it. The others he paid to help him. When Stefania's little face clouded because she'd seen his bruised chin and feared someone had hurt him, Lucia confirmed that strangers had, but assured the girl Travis would recover.

They returned to the blanket and basket of food. Stefania squatted and lifted Travis' hat. He opened his eyes and grinned at her. She studied his face for a moment, her head cocked to one side. Then she kissed the undamaged portion of his forehead. "I'm sorry you hurt. I love you, Padre Travis."

Lucia's eyes burned. Again tears threatened, and they would only weaken her in her husband's estimation. Would she never learn? She should not allow the small gesture on the child's part to affect her so. She intended to hide her foolish notions from Travis, but he abruptly sat up and pinned her with a searching look. "You tell her to do that?" he inquired in a quiet but urgent tone.

"No." Lucia got out only that one syllable. The lump in her throat grew beyond her ability to disguise it. She picked up her skirts and hurried across the knee-high grasses, as far away from her employer as she could get.

Travis had sworn off drinking establishments for at least a month. Randy'd gone out to the cabin to join Mavis, the men were settled in the bunkhouse for the night. Travis remained alone in the parlor. He spied the checkerboard housed under the coffee table and wished Rafe was still staying with him. Though they often disagreed, evenings were companionable times. Times when they laughed and sipped bourbon or coffee. They

yanked their boots off, settled beside the fire, and did nothing together. Just as they'd done years ago as boys, sitting on a tree limb or dangling their bare feet in a stream.

Travis told himself he was an imbecile for feeling morose and lonesome. He got a bellyful of men and cows during the long days he put in on the range. After that fistfight last night, he should be savoring the peace and solitude. But he wasn't, and he couldn't really say why. Except his mind kept going back to that afternoon and the surprising turn of events out in the meadow. Stefania had approached all on her own and shown him affection. He'd been so stunned by the light kiss to his forehead, he'd had to check with Lu to make sure he hadn't imagined it as part of his daydream.

He'd been spinning reveries, visions of how things might be different. If Lucia had been a real wife to him and Stefania his own dark-haired daughter. He'd worked to cultivate a relationship with the moppet for weeks. Usually he only got Stefania up on his lap if he cornered her, and she never tolerated it for long. He'd accepted the little filly was skittish, reckoning she hadn't been given much affection at the orphanage. She'd spent so little time with her ma, Stefania probably didn't know a body thrived on hugs and physical touches.

That's why he'd been so startled by her quick peck. Strangely proud the child would approach him with a show of gratitude. He knew that's what it was, and it made all the hardship worth it--even the whole town's censure and asinine range war. He knew in his heart the girl never would have behaved that way toward any man if she'd surrendered much more of her childhood at Highwater's Home for Children. Those places killed a little one's spirit.

But thank God, Lucia didn't treat her daughter with any awkwardness or hesitation. She was warm and loving all the time.

That knowledge was part of what gnawed at him. He could hear Wil Bregon quipping about what a "stoic little gal" Lu was. She'd walked up to Travis her very first day and put her fingers to his lips, helping him pronounce her name. So why the funny reaction this afternoon? Lu ought to be pleased to see Stefania break out of her timid shell.

Maybe she had been, he amended, staring at the flames on the hearth. Gals could shed tears of joy as easy as tears of misery. But Lu had gone running off like a madwoman. Almost as though she'd been looking for a place to plop down and sob good and hard. Travis had been raised much of his own life by his older sister. Womenfolk went off to "have a good cry" pretty often, it seemed to him. And half the time there was absolutely no explanation for it, other than the obvious one of being a danged female to begin with.

He'd almost sold himself on that when the nagging reminder came from the back of his mind that Lu had never been one to swoon or have the vapors. Pearl Sweeney and half the gals in town indulged in female foolishness like that, but Lucia wasn't like them. She didn't bat her eyes at fellas or primp for hours or do hardly any of the things other gals did to get men panting. She'd likely never had to resort to wiles to get masculine

attention. It hadn't been a ploy, dashing off, disappearing for over half an hour.

Then it hit him. Lu didn't like seeing Stefania form a bond with him. She knew one day it would be severed. Dammit, why hadn't he thought of that before?

What could he do about that? It wasn't as though Sweeney wasn't just beyond the creek, wasn't as though Travis could change decent folks' thinkin' about an unwed mother or her illegitimate offspring. In the best of all worlds--one in which things like nationality and upbringing, religion, or social classes didn't matter--Lucia and Stefania would stay for good. Stefania would have her own pony and grow up as buxom and pretty as her ma.

It wasn't the first time Travis had admitted to himself he found Lucia exceptionally attractive. His pensive mood made him turn that thought over and examine it from all sides. He hadn't thought she was pretty at first, he remembered. Alluring, because she was so curvaceous. No man could miss that. But when a fella got to know her, he found she'd stubbornly fight for anyone or anything she cared about. She made a damned fine pot of coffee, and understood it was part of turning a house into a home. She understood it gratified Travis to work hard all day, then step into a warm kitchen filled with heavenly aromas. To find his parlor cheered by a crackling fire and his battered old coffee table polished till it shone.

Then there was Pearl.

A woman like her didn't give a damn about her fella's comforts. He was supposed to see to hers. If he wanted a fire lit or a cake baked, he could pay servants. While courting her, he'd begun to suspect if he wanted to lie naked in bed and share his dreams or darkest fears, he'd have to pay some gal for that, too. Pearl used sexual intimacy to further her own purposes . . . even while making love to her, Travis had felt an odd detachment. As though she'd been his in the flesh, but not in spirit.

Any man lucky enough to get Lucia naked would never experience that. Travis would stake his life on it.

Christ, he'd screwed everything for all of them, and it was too late to rectify the disaster. Even if he hadn't given Pearl his promise to dissolve the paper marriage and wed her--and despite her words to the contrary, he'd seen in her eyes that was still what she wanted--there was the problem of Lu being a social pariah. If he dishonored his promise to Pearl, she'd set out to destroy Lucia. Who already had so many factors against her it wouldn't take much to send her packing out of mortification.

There was only so much Travis could do. He didn't have Sweeney's clout, and he knew there was no way Pearl or her bigoted father would ever accept the Italians. Travis couldn't go on indefinitely fighting a hostile range war he could never hope to win. Patrick had more men, more land, more steers--more resources of every kind. Travis couldn't make things right for Lu.

Even though tonight he wanted to, wanted to with a fierceness he hadn't felt until now. Rafe's ominous warning about unforeseen hitches in his plan echoed in Travis' mind. It had been easy enough to plot it all out when Lucia was just a desperate employee, Stefania a mysterious waif. Today they'd changed. Travis was acutely aware both were flesh and blood females with feelings. Feelings that would be hurt no matter what happened next--all the more deeply if he was fool enough to act on his impulse.

For along with the uncharacteristic loneliness, Travis was tormented by a more dangerous desire than lust. He could fight that. The new temptation was deadlier. He didn't want Pearl. He wanted Lucia, but not in a purely sexual way. He was sorely tempted to seek another night in her arms because the world was such a godawful, cold and miserable place . . . and he knew he could forget that for a few hours, if he could just hold Lucia.

Chapter 15

Patrick Sweeney pushed back from his big cherrywood desk, a smug grin on his florid face. Pearl had advised her new suitor'd offered to arrange a survey--one which would establish water rights lay solely with the Flying Fist. Conley's land would be declared a dry parcel.

Patrick had set his foreman to the task of driving Conley out of Pueblo. Russell had tried everything, from stealing cattle and feed to the full-scale brawl that night in the local saloon, but Conley persevered. The foreign bitch and her child persevered. No annulment had been sought. Travis Conley just refused to get the message.

It was time for Patrick to escalate his scare tactics. He'd written Gavin Wilburne in care of his Denver colleagues, giving permission for the survey. Inside the envelope with that official request, Patrick had tucked a personal, unsigned note. This asked Wilburne to dig into Conley's financial situation and the true history of the immigrant slut. He'd mentioned blackmail and other possibilities. Pearl knew nothing of this special request, which was as it should be.

Giving his butler instructions to see the letter posted to Denver, Patrick went out to spend another day in wanton disregard for his neighbor's property and welfare.

Lucia came through the back door with a full basket of eggs. Mavis accepted it with a groan of disgust. "I don't know how you do it. Those hens flap at my face and carry on so I can't get but two or three eggs in that henhouse. Do they giftwrap them for you, too?"

Lucia frowned at the unfamiliar term. She wasn't certain what Mavis was asking. "Maybe. They sit. I reach under and pick eggs up."

Mavis laughed and put away the mop. Next she began tackling the windows. Lucia was at the large trestle table, mixing dough with flour and the eggs. Mavis watched as Lucia cut the dough into small sections, then made deft movements with her fingers to curl the little pieces into distinct shapes. "What do you call that kind?"

"Cavatelli," Lucia muttered, intent on her work.

Mavis rubbed at a resistant streak on one glass pane, then scowled as she saw Travis and Randy checking their rifles, apparently reloading. "I wonder sometimes if this trouble will ever end. You'd think by now the Sweeneys would just accept what's happened and forget it. There's talk Pearl's already recovered."

Lucia glanced up. "Stefania and I will leave before summer ends. The fat rich man will like Travis again. Pearl will marry him, so no more trouble."

"What?" Mavis dropped her rag in shock. "What in God's name are you saying? You're planning to take your daughter away and divorce? How can you say that so calmly, as if

we're discussing the weather?"

Lucia dusted the excess flour from her hands. "Travis said we would divorce before we married. We have understood."

"You mean you have an understanding?" Lucia nodded and crossed to a cabinet to dig out a deep stockpot. Behind her, Mavis was still gaping. "I don't know what to say. Here I thought Travis was so generous, taking in an unwed mother and giving her illegitimate child his name . . . It's not a real marriage, is it?"

"This was not for a name," Lucia interrupted. "Stefania has good family name. Lombardi."

"I don't mean your name, Lu. A father's name."

Lucia stared at the other woman in confusion. Of course the child would have her father's family name. Was this not also how Americans were called? Perhaps not. She decided to clarify, in case this was another peculiar custom she didn't comprehend.

"Lombardi is not my family name. That is Montessano, as you hear. Lombardi is other, the name of Stefania's father and mother."

Now Mavis looked as confused as Lucia felt. "The name of her father and mother? But--you mean she isn't even yours?"

"Yes, mine. Now. Because Travis helped me with orphan owner man."

"Oh God." Mavis wrung her hands and came across the kitchen. Her eyes searched Lucia's, and Lucia began to feel peculiar. Had she done something wrong again?

"Orphan man? Who were Stefania's parents, and what happened to land her in an orphanage?"

Lucia's patience snapped. Why was this important now? "The Lombardis, I told you. Bianca Lombardi was my friend. Her husband was a good man. They were killed in a coach going too fast. It fell over, they spilled out. Stefania was with me, thanks to God."

"Stefania's your friend's daughter, not your own?"

"Yes she is mine, now," Lucia insisted once more. "Why does this keep going crooked in your mind? I have work to do. The men will be hungry soon."

"I don't understand why you didn't let her be adopted by some family or married couple unable to have a child of their own."

"Stefania is my daughter in God."

"You mean goddaughter?"

Mavis seemed to find this peculiar. "Yes, do Americans not know this? I swore to God and a priest I would--" Lucia stopped as Mavis suddenly raced from the kitchen, mumbling about needing to see her husband right away. "Pazza," Lucia told herself before turning her attention back to fixing the midday meal.

It was only after Mavis had returned moments later that Lucia reviewed the strange conversation in her head and began to get an uneasy feeling about what had been said.

"Why did you think Stefania was my birth child? I would never let my child go to such a place, and the home was for children with no parents."

"I thought . . . I mean, we naturally assumed you must have sought the release of your own child." The evasive tone and unconvincing false smile on Mavis' face told Lucia something was not right.

"If I was her mother, Stefania would not go there. You don't know this?"

"Well, certainly, in some cases. But you and I both know women have babies they can't keep sometimes. The mother may have no choice, especially if she's unmarried. Like you were."

Now Lucia all but slammed down the lid on the pot. "You think I was some woman with no husband, a woman who does not keep her baby?" Her eyes widened as the full implications of that question struck her. "You think I let some man get a child on me, but we are not married?"

"It happens."

"But that would be a terrible sin, what you speak of. Your church allows this? Is that why Travis does not marry the rich one across the creek after he has done things with her?"

Mavis' face drained of color. "Uh, I'm pretty sure it's a sin in every church. I wouldn't know about Travis, but I know it's why folks aren't sociable toward you here in town. They think . . . Oh, it's all been a mistake." Mavis clucked her tongue.

"What is 'sociable'?" Lucia asked.

"Being friendly. Folks here aren't nice to you. They don't smile, don't want to sell you things because--"

"Because they think I am a wicked, sinful woman." Lucia understood all of it then. Things that had never made sense began to--in a horrible, inescapable way. The townspeople thought she was a donnaccia--a woman without shame.

That was why they treated her coldly. Why they regarded her and Stefania with hatred burning in their eyes. And Travis had known.

She had spoken about it after the trouble at the apothecary, saying perhaps it was because they were Italians. He had said it wasn't that, that it could be because the fat man hated Catholics and many in town supported him. But Travis had known the true reason. He was a smart man, very good at American ways.

She tore off her apron and banged out the back door, marching straight to the barn. Mick was nailing a ring of metal back onto the bottom of his horse's foot. "Mick."

He glanced over his shoulder. "Um," he grunted, pushing the nails held between his lips aside to talk. "Howdy, Lu. Somethin' up?"

"Do you fight with the men across the water because they say I am . . ." she hesitated, unsure of the word for it in English. It was not something good people said. She decided to maneuver Mick into saying it first. "What do they say about me? Do they say I am a bad woman?"

Mick instantly flushed scarlet. Lucia knew her fears were correct. He pulled the nails out of his mouth. "You can guess, can't ya? Fallen woman and such. But we don't let nobody get away with it, Lu. Anybody says that gets a fist right in his nose."

"Fallen woman?" she repeated, testing the words. "This means I sit in mud?"

He choked on something that might have been a laugh. "Not really, though you might have a point. It means--Lu, why don't you go ask your husband about such things? I ain't supposed to be jawin' with you, and Boss sure wouldn't want me talkin' about this."

"Travis said you could not talk about the names people call me?"

Mick squared his shoulders. "That's just what he said when he first brought you and Stef back. We done heard 'em all by now, but--"

"Travis knows what it means to be a falling woman?"

"Fallen," he corrected. "Course he does. You had yourself a baby, Lu. You weren't married. You had to know people would be nasty about it. Ain't that why you gave her up?"

"No, I never give her up, you imbecile." Lucia stomped deliberately on his foot, then stormed out of the barn.

Travis nailed a loose section of corral fence back together, wondering if Sweeney had changed strategies. There hadn't been any dead cows found in the past week or two, but Travis was beginning to think Sweeney had put something in the creek water. Everybody around him was acting like they'd gone loco. First Randy Shea had approached him, insisting he had to take a few days off to take Mavis on a wedding trip. Right then and there. Mavis was already packed.

Travis himself was out mending fences, which had been assigned to Mick Keenan. But he was in the bunkhouse, nursing a bruised instep. He'd come limping up to Travis, saying he couldn't work after Lu had tried to break his foot. He swore she'd been in the barn talking calmly one minute, then tried to murder him the next, without provocation.

Mavis had been behaving strangely, too, while serving chow at noontime. She hadn't been able to look Travis in the eye. He'd attributed it to embarrassment over marital relations with her husband and their sudden "need to go off alone." But now Travis wondered if there wasn't something else going on. Lucia had been locked in her room

since the barn episode.

He and the crew fairly destroyed the kitchen at supper. Travis asked Stefania about her mother twice, and both times got a mumbled response with an unfamiliar name. All he could make out was Lucia wasn't feeling well. He became concerned when she didn't come out, even to tuck Stefania in bed that night. He kissed Stefania and put out her lamp, then went to knock on Lu's door. "You all right, Lu? Ain't like you to hide like this. You need a doctor?"

The door swung open. She stood in her nightgown, glaring at him. He knew in that second she wasn't sick--unless a rabid wolf had bitten her. She was furious with somebody. And he had the uncomfortable suspicion he was wearing Somebody's boots. "What's wrong, Lu?"

"Everything. You. This stupid cow farm."

"Fair enough, but could you narrow that down some? What exactly about me and this ranch--ain't no cow farm. Ranch. What's wrong with it and me?"

"You own it."

"Come here," Travis urged, seizing her upper arm. He dragged her out the front door, across the porch to the base of the steps. He pointed at the main gate, just visible at the bottom of the slight bluff in front of his house.

"Remember the first day you came, lookin' for someone named Crockett? We stood out there and I pointed to that sign. I told you then who I was and that I owned this ranch. Nothin's changed."

"Yes, things changed! I know why you marry me, but not marry me," she hissed. "You still have the mind of a bird, and now I see also lower than a serpent's bottom."

"Are you tryin' for lower than a snake's belly?" Travis actually hoped he'd translated her nonsense incorrectly this time. She had no call to be insulting his character.

"Thank you, yes!" She jerked free and stomped back into the house. Travis came in behind her and closed the front door. She was pacing and ranting in the most rapid Italian he'd ever heard. He caught 'madman' out of it, but not much else.

He folded his arms. "Does it bother you at all that I can't understand a goddamned word of what you're sayin'?"

"No, I wish I never stand under any words you Americans say."

"On behalf of Americans everywhere, kindly accept my apology if we somehow offended you. Now what in the name of Christ has your tail tied in such a knot?"

She stared at him, then plopped down in the armchair. "You will suffer for saying God's name when you don't pray. To hurt people is bad, but you must not up end God."

"That's offend, and what people did I hurt? You? When? I ain't even spoken to you since

breakfast! I'm tryin' to figure out what I could've done to have you so upset that you smashed Keenan's foot, won't eat, and you couldn't even put our daughter to bed."

"She is not yours. You sign American papers tomorrow and give her to me. I want to go away from here, Travis. Now. We will not stay more, I do not care that you say Stefania has rooted up before."

Travis took a deep breath, then spoke slowly and distinctly, so she couldn't say she hadn't understood. "Lucia, you're really not yourself tonight. When you don't act like yourself, I don't want to act like myself, neither, so I'm goin' to bed. We'll talk about this in the mornin'. If you don't feel up to comin' out of your room or cookin' then, that'll be too damned bad, cause I let the Sheas go on vacation. You know what that is?"

"Yes, on the train or boat. I go on vacation, too. Soon, you'll see."

"I said we'd talk about that tomorrow," he growled. "The point is, Miz Shea ain't here, so you got to fix breakfast." Travis itched to reach out and shake her, but he was too afraid to touch her. She was beautiful in her defiance, with her cheeks flushed and her eyes bright. Her bosom heaving until he had to tear his gaze from the sight of those ripe breasts. Such very ample breasts.

"We'll talk after breakfast tomorrow," he barked. "Now go and take another bath. I'd recommend a cold one this time. Go scrub some dirty dishes or do whatever you need to, but calm the hell down. I'll talk to you after we've both had a chance to cool off."

Unfortunately for Travis, it took hours for that to happen.

Chapter 16

The next morning Travis found Lucia in the henhouse. She glanced over as he stepped inside the small outbuilding and greeted her. Offering a weak smile, she continued with her chores. "What happened yesterday?" he inquired.

"Nothing."

"Then what was all that talk of leavin' here? We haven't filed for the annulment yet. Don't you think you're rushin' things?"

She straightened and looked at him with some emotion he didn't understand, but he suspected there was hurt lurking behind it. What had he done to put a dent in her feelings? "You married me, but you never wanted me. It was only because of Stefania."

"You knew my reason, Lu. I told you at the time, but it's not so much that I don't want you as there's more to it than what I want."

"You think--" She stopped and covered her mouth with her hand.

"Lu? You fixin' to be sick? Come back outside." He pulled her out of the henhouse into the open air. "Take a deep breath. That's better. You got a bad stomach?"

She shook her head, keeping her face averted. He tipped it up and saw tears in her eyes. "I do not cry," she insisted, breaking into racking sobs.

"Okay, if you say so. But I wish I knew what you weren't cryin' over," he teased gently, enclosing her fingers with his own. "I can't help if I don't know what I've done, or what's upsettin' you. Whatever it is, I'm sorry. I never mean to hurt you, Lucia."

"You do not think I will be hurt to hear what people say in town? What you think?"

He frowned, uncertain of the connection. "Ain't polite what folks say about either of us. Hurts me too, sometimes," he admitted. "Everyone's got pride, Lu. Ain't easy havin' people talk behind your back, but I warned you on the train when we rode into town from St. Louis folks would probably act like this."

"You feel bad also from their words?" Her eyes studied his. "Oh, I did not think of that. Ah, they say you are a bad man because you married the bad woman."

He shrugged. "Some have, yeah. But I know they're wrong . . . about both of us. It ain't polite nor fair, but I don't fret over it. I know the truth."

"You know I am not this bad woman they say?"

He shook his head firmly. "You're not wicked, Lu. Crazy as a bedbug, but you don't have meanness or evil inside you anywhere." God, if you did, I'd have you sharin' my bed, you can bet on that, he silently finished.

"Travis." She hugged him tightly, sobbing against his chest. Holding her in his arms was too much. If he didn't move away from her, she'd discover he had a form of evil in him--the kind that drove a man to seduction.

He pulled away and started walking her toward the back door. "All right, now that we settled . . . whatever the hell that was, can we see about breakfast? The coffee smelled real good. Reckon I should help you clean up in the kitchen."

She made scrambled eggs with seasoned potatoes and toast. Travis ate like he'd been starved for weeks, relieved that he'd somehow diverted impending disaster without understanding its cause.

Lu had been serious about leaving. That much he sensed. She'd been serious about whatever was eating at her, but he couldn't let her go. Not now, while Mavis Shea was nowhere around and he had problems with the Fist. There was only so much he could deal with at one time. Losing Lucia right now would be too much. He needed her.

"Lucia." He set his dirty plate on the stack she was going to attack next. "If you want me to see the lawyer about our annulment, I could try to ride into town next week. But it takes time to get the papers filed you know. You'll have to stay on here for a spell," he warned, hoping she'd say she'd changed her mind.

"Next week is good."

It is? he almost demanded aloud. He couldn't believe it. Didn't want to believe it. She wanted her freedom, all right, and didn't seem to give a damn about him or the spread. She wasn't angry now--but suddenly he was. Irrationally, since they'd discussed this very occurrence back in St. Louis before they'd gone to the courthouse. It shouldn't have come as any big surprise that she'd bring it up.

But despite his boast about not letting words hurt, those four out of her mouth stung. Next week is good. The sooner the better.

He strode out to the barn, fury building until he opted to split some firewood before he took his ax to Sweeney's scalp.

Travis' ungrateful, selfish little "bride" could hardly wait to leave him. He could have had her arrested for helping herself to his payroll. Could have left her daughter to rot. Instead, he'd tried to do right by her, right by her child--and look at the thanks he got for it.

He swung the ax, neatly dividing a log of mountain mahogany. A few more swings and he rolled up his sleeves, deciding he didn't miss his coat despite the crisp morning air.

She wanted to leave him.

No hesitation about where she'd go or what she'd do, how she figured to support herself and Stefania. Did she assume she'd work as a cook and waitress in some eatery again? Who'd watch the child while the ma hustled tips? Maybe Lu figured she wouldn't have to worry. She probably thought some fella would happen along, take one look at those phenomenal jugs of hers, and offer to take care of everything. Or maybe, Travis told himself with shaking rage, she'd already met someone. Maybe that explained her mood swings and hurry to be shed of him.

He flung the ax into the stump and stalked back to the house. "Lucia," he thundered, bursting through the back door, "if you think you're lightin' out with some other fella and I'll just forget about how --" Feeling nine times a fool, he realized he stood yelling at empty air. Lucia wasn't in the kitchen or the parlor. Neither was Stefania.

He jerked open the front door, intent on going after them, and was nearly knocked flat by Kayla and Stefania coming across the porch. "Kayla? What on earth are you doin' here? Miranda?"

His sister was getting out of a rented carriage. Lucia turned around to reveal Skylar squirming in her arms. He wore remnants of the purple lollipop in his fist all over his cherubic little face. "Morning, Travis," Miranda called out. "I'm so sorry about Sky. He's such a handful. The only way I could keep him quiet on the train was to give him some candy, but I never stopped to think he'd arrive all gooey. Land sakes, child." She took him back from Lucia and came up the steps to hand him to his perplexed uncle.

"What am I supposed to do with him?" Travis asked, afraid he could guess Rannie's answer.

"Wash his face, of course," she replied, smiling as she embraced Lucia. "You must be my new sister-in-law. I've so wanted to meet you."

Travis hastily made the introductions, then hurried out to the kitchen to wipe a damp rag over Skylar's sticky cheeks. He turned the tot loose to find the other children. By that time, the two women were in the parlor, being followed by a sweaty driver wrestling with several bags. Travis frowned and paid the man. "Not that it ain't fine seein' you, Rannie, but you've never been one to show up without writin' first. Where's Zach?"

Miranda gave Travis a strangely uncertain look. "I don't believe he'll be coming. He's very busy." Travis didn't like the premonition of more trouble that started climbing his spinal column. Zach had never been too busy to visit before.

Travis kept his voice low. "You hintin' somethin's not right between you two?" Miranda nodded. He was instantly beside her, his arm around her shoulders. "How can that be? Just saw y'all at Christmas. You seemed perfectly happy. Zach, too."

"People can seem fine," she responded with a piercing look that deepened Travis' unease. "That doesn't mean they don't have problems. You may recall Zachary also disappeared in the middle of your holiday visit. He had to meet some businessmen at a Denver bank. Business. It's all that matters to him."

Travis led his sister to the couch and glanced at Lu. "Some coffee would be great, Lu. Rannie takes a little sugar in hers."

Lu nodded, but her eyes were questioning as they met his. He tried to signal that he was as disconcerted as she was at their unexpected guests, but kept his tone light. "Men have business worries a lot of the time, Sis. Zach's made a mark for himself through his hard work. He's a big man now. You should be proud of him."

"I am, but he's never home. I didn't tell him I was coming here. I just packed up the children and left a note. I'll bet it takes him a week to even notice."

"Hog spit," Travis argued. "He'll be on the next train. Reckon he'll turn up tomorrow or the day after, and he'll figure I helped you pull this stunt. Thanks a lot," Travis grimaced, handing her the cup of coffee Lucia brought on a pewter tray. "You sip that and settle in for a minute. Lu and I will check on the kids."

He jumped up and caught Lu's hand, pulling her down the hall. The three children were in Stefania's room, playing quietly on the floor. Travis ducked into his own room, his voice a hushed whisper. "This is a problem, Lu. I can't go see a lawyer or do anything until we get her out of here. Don't say anything about us not bein' hitched for real."

"Why? She doesn't want her husband. She'll be ho-kay."

Travis ignored the mispronunciation. "Naw, you don't understand. Miranda loves Zach. She just wants him to miss her. But my sister's a first-class busybody. If she finds out how things really are with us, she'll go meddlin' into our lives. We can't let her know we--that we ain't . . ." He swallowed. "You got to sleep here with me while she's around."

"I cannot share your bed. We have our understanding."

"I know, and you can stay in a separate bedroom any time Miranda ain't under my roof. The Sheas are away, but they're due back in a couple of days, so I can't lend out the cabin. We'll put the girls together in Stefania's room, let Sky bunk with Rannie in the room you've been usin'."

Lucia stared at the double bed, shaking her head.

"Lu, you got to sleep in here," he insisted. "Just for a couple nights. Her husband will come fetch his family back home. I know him. He'll patch things up with Miranda soon, but in the meantime, we got to seem like ordinary married folks. I'll go see the lawyer in town, but I need this favor first. Please, will you help me?"

"Yes . . . I'll help," she agreed slowly. "I owe you much--for Stefania. Always you are good to her. To me."

"She's got cousins to play with," he smiled. "And I got a wife who's an amazin' cook." He gave her a playful squeeze. "That's all my meddlesome sister needs to know."

As he expected, Miranda had nothing but praise for Lucia's cooking and compliments on their efforts with Stefania. "Well, it's time I put my little ones to bed," Miranda noted as the clock struck eight. "The girls together in Stefania's room, you said, Travis?"

He volunteered to help round up the children. Stefania was last to brush her teeth and climb into bed. Then she insisted on having Travis tuck her in and kiss her twice before he could return to the parlor. He flushed to find Miranda seated in the armchair, leaving a big space next to Lucia on the sofa--clearly reserved for him. He took it and casually

placed his arm on the back of the couch behind Lu's shoulders.

Talk turned to the children's antics, and Miranda regaled Travis and Lucia for an hour with her anecdotes. Travis forced himself to chuckle and nod where appropriate, but in truth, he couldn't concentrate on anything but his proximity to his bride. He tried unsuccessfully to focus on the conversation, too aware that Lucia would be spending the night in his bed . . . too conscious of the fact they'd slept together before--right on this very sofa.

He remembered the feel of Lucia's ripe curves, her warmth and femininity in his arms. How badly he'd wanted those innocent kisses to lead to a more powerful connection between them. Lucia hadn't been his lawful wife back then. Hell, back then he didn't have any inkling Stefania even existed or that he'd forge his life with Lu's to give the child a home.

Still, he'd done it. He wasn't sorry--even though things hadn't turned out nearly as simple as he'd imagined. He'd made a solid business decision, seen the union with Lu as a way to both recoup his funds and solve Lu's dilemma. A temporary way station in all their lives. And she'd understood. So why did it eat at him now that she'd started talking about moving on?

He glanced down at her left hand, which lay idly on his thigh. He knew she'd put it there for Miranda's benefit. Proof they were a happily married couple, like any other rancher and his new bride. But Travis' gut clenched at the sight. It was anything but typical for Lucia to touch him. And only a man with ice water in his veins could sit there and withstand the affectionate demonstration without reacting in typical male fashion . . . by getting stiff as denims dried on the washline at the sight and feel of a woman's hand so near his groin.

"Well, got to turn in," he abruptly announced, interrupting the women in mid-sentence.

"It's only a little after nine o'clock," Miranda protested.

"I know, but we're up before dawn around here. Lu has to fix breakfast for fourteen men come daylight, and I need to be on the range early. Come on, honey." He stalked down the hallway. He waited until Lucia followed him into his room, then turned to speak in a hushed whisper. "Look, I know this is awkward. I'll go check the stove and take care of a few things while you get ready for bed. "

Travis had just poked at the cooling ashes in the stove's firebox when Miranda spoke up in the dark kitchen. "She's quite a girl, Travis."

"Stefania? Yeah." He glanced out the windows and noted the bunkhouse was pitch dark.

"I meant Lucia," came Miranda's soft laugh. "Sparkle came as a complete surprise. I never dared hope Rafe would find a beautiful woman like her, or that she'd be totally devoted to him."

Travis inwardly cursed. His wife was so devoted, she was probably packing a valise

right now.

"But Lucia's exactly the sort of woman I always imagined you'd end up marrying."

"She is?" Travis realized too late his comment had come out as a snort of disbelief. Best to keep up the joking tone. "You figured I'd go for some foreign gal with broken English?"

Miranda stepped forward to lay a hand on his shoulder. "This ranch is the most important thing in your life, and Lucia knows it. She's warm and kind. A good mother. She seems to have buried her grief--I mean, I assume she's widowed."

"Yeah." Travis winced at the lie, grateful Rannie couldn't see his features.

"Because it's obvious she adores you. I couldn't ask for anything more . . . except a wedding invitation. It's too late for that."

"Wasn't like we had a--it wasn't no fancy ceremony. 'Night, Rannie. And don't fret about Zach. Things have a way of workin' themselves out."

"I'm counting on that."

Travis found his bedroom dark. He closed the door behind him and silently undressed. Lucia was huddled on the far side of his mattress, her back to him, about to fall onto the floor in her attempt to avoid physical contact. His lips curved into a wry smile. Where was the woman who'd been so bold with her hand on his leg just half an hour ago?

"My sister likes you," he offered softly.

"I like her, too. She is very funny and wonderful with the little ones."

"We got her fooled. Appreciated you acted so friendly toward me. She said--"

"What did she say?"

Travis couldn't bring himself to repeat Miranda's false assumption about Lu being a widow or that she loved him. He felt ridiculous. Dragging up Lu's past would only embarrass them both further.

"Listen, we need to clear somethin' up between us. I don't want to hash things out in front of my sister, and I know we agreed to certain things back in St. Louis, but now I ain't sure we made the right decision. I don't--Sorry, maybe I'm expectin' too much from you."

She suddenly rolled over and faced him. "You say you're sorry much today."

"Maybe I don't know what else to say. The truth is, I don't want you to leave now. Maybe that makes me a horse's ass, but I don't see the need for you to go."

"Because you need me here to cook for you," she finished.

Travis instantly saw red. She was determined to make this tough on him. "No, because I'm your husband. Because I'm supposed to be Stefania's father. Because it hurts to think

you hate livin' here. I know it ain't easy, fightin' with the Sweeneys and folks treatin' you snobbish, but--"

"It is not that."

Travis would rather eat a live rat than ask, but he'd kick himself for the rest of his life if he didn't. "Is there somebody else, Lu?"

"No, of course not."

"Then why are you doin' this? Just to hurt me? Because your pa and other folks shun you, so now you can shun me and it somehow cancels out?"

Her fingers reached out to brush his bare shoulder. "I never wish to hurt you. I wish to go because . . . you will marry Pearl. There will be no place for me and Stefania anymore."

"I don't want to marry Pearl. I never really did. Besides, I already married you."

"Yes, but --"

"I don't want you to leave. Please give it a few days. At least think things over," he whispered, silently wishing she'd move her fingers up his shoulder toward his neck. If her touch became a bit more like a genuine caress, he could put his arms around her and reciprocate.

"You are saying we should change what we decided, yes?"

"I don't know," he ground out, jerking away from her arousing fingertips. Didn't the woman know she was driving him crazy? "We can think about it and talk things over like two sensible folks once Miranda leaves. Can't see any reason for you to be in such a rush if there's no other fella."

She said nothing. Eventually her steady breathing told Travis she'd fallen asleep. He envied her that, for he didn't rest much at all. Every time he closed his eyes he was entrapped by the scent of her hair. Or he imagined her in a thin cotton nightdress, with her hand on his thigh now--now that his thigh was bare and they were alone under bedclothes. Thoughts that did not help a man sleep.

It was the longest night of his life.

Soon followed by one of the longest, most irritating days he'd had in a long while. Nothing seemed to go right. His cowpokes grumbled about herdin' strays and pulling stupid steers out of bogholes. Everybody felt his own chores were tougher than the next fella's. Travis located another section of fence that looked suspiciously as though it had been deliberately cut. And some ladies from the church Assistance League chose that afternoon to pay a social call.

By the time he entered his bedroom after supper, he was in a foul humor and made no attempt to hide it. He deliberately undressed within full view of Lucia with the bedside

candle still lit, all but daring her to react.

She colored and glanced away. He got under the covers, but left the candle burning.

"Why, Miz Conley. Can it be you're gettin' used to your husband, after all? Reckoned the sight of me without my jeans would have you scramblin' for your bags and the train depot."

Lucia frowned. "Why did you say this? You said it hurts your feelings when I speak of leaving, but you try to hurt both of us. Why can you never treat me like Stefania?"

"Stefania's three years old."

"Yes, and I am forced to close my heart while you are gentle and loving to her, or laughing and nice with your men. You cannot be friendly to me unless to fool your sister."

"Close your heart?" he repeated in a choked voice. "That day on the picnic, when you were bawlin' your eyes out . . . was that--"

"That was one time, but there have been many," she admitted, her chin trembling. She wouldn't meet his gaze. Instead, she stared at the wall. "Times I would have given anything if you would see me as a fine lady like Pearl."

"Pearl's no lady. She dresses fancy as hell, but it ain't about whether a gal wears gingham or lace. You're ten times the woman she is in the ways that count."

His own grim mood was completely forgotten as Lucia covered her eyes and began to silently weep. The confounded female had just been paid a compliment, and acted like he'd drowned her cats.

"Lu, what are you . . ." He let his voice trail off, realizing he'd better not accuse her of crying. She insisted she didn't do that. He didn't reckon what folks called it when moisture ran down your face in Italy. Maybe an act of God.

"What are you mad about?" Replaying the words in his head, he considered she might have misinterpreted once again. "I didn't mean that to sound like I was comparin' what a gal has under her gingham. Not like--in that way. Oh hell, now you got it comin' out all wrong."

He slid closer and pulled Lucia into his arms. "I'm sorry if I made you feel that I don't like you. I do, it's just sometimes I'm pigheaded and --" His words were cut off when Lucia abruptly kissed him on the mouth.

His arms tightened around her. He caught a tiny moan from her throat, and right then and there, everything changed. He forgot his rotten day, his sister just across the hall, Pearl across the creek, and any thought of the future. There was only Lucia and her raw nerves. She needed him. As much as he needed her, in a way his engorged shaft made it impossible to forget or deny.

"Lucia, I do want you."

She gazed into his eyes without speaking for a long moment. Travis held his breath, awaiting her decision. They both knew he wouldn't force her. "I have waited for those words. I am your wife, and it is my duty to please you, no?"

Travis shook his head slowly. "As the husband, I'm supposed to pleasure you. And right now I want to so bad, swear I'm about to burst. Been about to boil over all day from thinkin' about your hand on my leg last night."

She offered a shy yet knowing smile. "You liked that?"

"Too damned much."

Before he could slow things down, Travis was kissing her deeply and stroking her breasts through the fabric of her nightgown. They were firm and delectable as he'd so often imagined they would be. Travis couldn't stop himself from untying her nightgown and tasting a pale brown nipple.

Lucia had never experienced a man's touch, never known it would bring such deep pleasure or stir her desires. But as Travis stroked and kissed her breasts, she arched beneath him, encouraging him to explore with his mouth and hands. She in turn did the same, marveling at his sleek skin and rippling muscles. It seemed they kissed and touched, whispering of their mutual desires for an eternity--yet in the next moment the sensual haze was ripped apart by stabbing pain.

And Travis had stopped moving. He no longer rocked his hips against hers, but captured her face between his palms and stared at her in confusion. "Lu? Did I hurt you? But--"

"Shh, it is nothing," she gasped, writhing beneath him. "It can be good again. Kiss me, Travis."

She was vaguely aware of him shifting on the mattress, urging her onto her side just before he withdrew and penetrated her again, more deeply this time. Something flared in Lucia's belly. Something hot and wild and undeniable. But Travis was not about to deny it, or himself. He continued thrusting until Lucia cried out his name and clung to him. He gasped and shuddered, muffling a cry of his own, then held her pressed to his pounding heart.

"Marito, I love you," she whispered as they lay together, fighting for breath.

"Yeah, you loved me so well it could've killed me," he chuckled, smoothing the hair from her sweaty brow. "But the real question is whether I almost killed you. You okay, Lu?"

"Very good, thank you. Happy."

"Me too," he smiled, giving the tip of her nose a peck. "What we just did puts us about as close and honest as two people can get," he whispered, studying her dark eyes in the candlelight. "Wouldn't do to lie after what we've done tonight."

"No," she agreed. "That would not do. What do you wish to say to me?" She looked

fearful, so he pressed another kiss onto a magnificent breast almost reverently, trying to communicate the depth of his regard.

"You've never been with a man before. That's why it hurt you. There'll likely be some blood on the sheets. Couldn't be helped, but if I'd known . . . "

"You thought I--"

"I thought," he interrupted forcefully, determined not to get sidetracked into one of their semantic debates, "that butcher fella from St. Louis had done like Gilmore, except the whole thing. Had part of him inside, like I am now. But I was mistaken."

"I would die before I let him. You must not think I wanted him. I told you I ran away so I would not have him for my marito."

"Yeah, you did," he answered softly, keeping her wrapped securely in his arms. So safe and secure that even though he withdrew from her body, she couldn't get out of his bed . . . because he was beginning to get a dark suspicion about why she'd wanted to leave.

Obviously, it wasn't lack of physical attraction. They'd been too danged good together, and a virgin just didn't understand about faking things for the sake of manly pride. Nope. Her reason probably had something to do with another matter entirely. One she knew she'd have to face, but maybe wanted to run away from.

"Nobody ever made love to you before. I'm the only one, which is a good thing. A thing most husbands set store by. But in our particular case--which I'm beginnin' to see is never going to be like any other case anywhere--that brings up one hell of an interestin' question. Just where did Stefania come from?"

Chapter 17

Lucia sighed. "She's my daughter to God. I stand up for her when her name was first spoken in church with holy water. You know this blessing? I do not know the word for it in English."

"A christenin'. Stefania's your goddaughter, not your own kin?"

"She was born to my good friend, Bianca Lombardi. I promised her and her husband, promised God that I would care for Stefania if they could not. The Lombardis died in a crash of carriage and horse."

Travis fought to control his roiling emotions. This woman had stolen his payroll, had him stand up to that weasel Highwater, and let him go through with their farce of a marriage--all for a little girl who wasn't even her own. "What about Stefania's godfather? She's got one, doesn't she? Why couldn't he raise her?"

"No. You are father to God now. Bianca knew I would have marito someday."

Travis let her think he was mulling that over. In reality, he was pondering two other points. The first was that she might be destined to go through life forever as a mixed-up Italian. She just didn't think the same way other folks did. The second was that their marriage--as of about ten minutes ago--was no longer a farce. He'd taken her maidenhead. They were as married as hitched could get. In light of that realization, he wanted to take a good long look at what he'd gotten himself into.

He'd always known about her hair. She only covered it half the time. He'd known it was thick, reaching past her waist in gleaming waves. He'd judged through her clothes that her shoulders were narrower than her hips, discovered in the barn that day her collarbones and wrists were delicate. Her fingers were short, the nails always clean. But now he stared in wonder at the sum total that was Lucia.

Starting with those incredible breasts. So big and firm, rising and falling with each breath she took, crowned by perfect dusky circles that he now knew were very sensitive, responding instantly to a man's tongue. Full breasts set above a narrow ribcage and a flat belly. He hadn't begun to explore the mystery of the navel in that belly. Then there were the dark curls at the apex of her thighs, her flaring hips. Wide enough to provide resting spots for a man's hands during sexual adventures and make him think about her carrying his get.

"You stare at my hide," she accused.

He leaned over and blew out the candle, then reclined against the pillows. He reached for Lucia and pulled her down onto his chest. "That's because you're mine to stare at, woman. You're truly my wife now, Lucia. No more pretendin'. The law calls what we just did consummatin', and it's the most important part of bein' hitched. I can't go to a lawyer and ask to have the marriage dissolved. We'd have to get a divorce now."

"Oh no," she gasped and tried to pull away. "That is not allowed, no. My church

would--"

"Hush up. Ain't sayin' I want one. I was starin' at your hide, decidin' I like it. What about mine? You mind keepin' me?"

"You are much man. Always I have thought you are most handsome, Travis. But I am not pretty like your Miss Pearl with beautiful dresses and much money."

He couldn't resist laughing at her. She was so darned precious. He tightened his hold as laughter rumbled in his chest. "Honey, you're pretty enough with no clothes to more than make up for whatever any other gal wears. Why do you think all the fellas want to do what I just did?"

"Ah, the consuming." Her palms slid along his chest to his shoulders. "Will we do that again?"

"You can count on it."

"Now?"

"Reckon we can if you want to," he murmured, kissing her. His hands moved to her full globes and she pulled away, arching her back.

"You will kiss them again for me? Yes? Please?"

Where he'd silently cursed it earlier, Travis now appreciated the full advantages to his wife being a foreigner. She had a scant few prissy notions, unlike Pearl and the local gals. Lu didn't know certain words or reactions were considered too bold or improper for a female.

Travis spent that night teaching her many aspects of physical love. In the process of appeasing both their lusty appetites, Lucia said exactly what she thought. She enjoyed without hesitation, she returned pleasure to him eagerly and without guile. She made Travis feel manly and strong, proud, protective. And uncharacteristically possessive.

Which was what had been subtly gnawing at him for weeks, only he hadn't been willing to examine it. After a night of divine sexual excess, enjoying Lucia in almost every way imaginable, Travis wasn't surprised to feel a sense of ownership towards her. She was, after all, his wife. He had every right to feel a twinge of jealousy over the way other men perceived her.

Yet he'd felt a measure of that before making love to her. The sickening thought of her running off with another man had sent him out to chop wood he didn't need, since he already had a huge pile stacked up outside the kitchen. Jealousy had driven him to shout at his empty parlor, to imagine she'd stolen Stefania from him and

Stolen Stefania from him?

God, it wasn't Lu's breasts. It wasn't just Lucia and his twisted-up feelings for her. He loved them. Both of them. Probably had from the moment he saw them together on that

bench in the garden of Highwater's orphanage. He'd wanted more than to know they'd always be together as mother and daughter. He'd wanted them with him.

Travis rolled over and pulled Lucia into his arms, cradling a plump breast in one palm. "You can't leave me, Lucia. Promise you'll never leave me."

"No, belloccio," came her drowsy murmur.

"What does that mean, that word?" he whispered.

"Beautiful man." He barely heard her as one slim arm slipped around his neck. Travis closed his eyes, grinning. She thought he was beautiful. She had no idea what beautiful was. Abundantly beautiful. The woman was definitely more than a handful.

He awakened to find the bedding rumpled and sunlight glaring into the room. He fretted about how late it must be, making a mental note to put up some curtains. Then he fumbled into a pair of jeans, shrugged into a shirt, snatched up his boots and fresh socks, and hurried down the hall.

Miranda was on the sofa. She tossed him a wicked, knowing smile.

He fastened the last button on his shirt and cleared his throat. "Where's Lu? She let me oversleep."

In that second, his bride magically appeared with a mug of coffee in her hand. Her features wore a womanly, satisfied glow that had his manhood up and prodding at the fly of his jeans. He longed to gulp down the coffee, strip Lucia bare and take her again, right there on the braid rug. While his nosy sister watched, if she had nerve enough.

Lucia generally looked perky and fresh scrubbed in the mornings. First thing, anyway, before she ended up dusted with flour or frazzled after a day's chores. Today she'd blossomed into a rich, full woman--a woman with intimate knowledge of him as her lover. Their eyes met and held. Travis felt the charge pass through her into him, like a lightning bolt jumping from cloud to cloud. Her fingers brushed his as he accepted the coffee, and he went weak in the knees. "Mornin', Miz Conley."

Lucia smiled. A secretive smile filled with promise. His loins tightened. He watched her return to the kitchen, burning his tongue on the hot brew.

Miranda heard his mumbled expletive and laughed. "Men get arrested for the sort of things you're thinking."

Travis ignored the dig. He was feeling much too pleased with the world today to let Miranda get his goat. "What time is it?"

"Not nearly dusk, cowboy. Almost ten, and Lucia and I would like to go into town for an hour or so."

Travis glanced back toward the kitchen. "What does she need in town?"

"Maybe a little time away from her amorous better half. I know some of what's been

going on here, Travis," Miranda informed him. "One of your men has to drive us and keep watch. The children are out chasing chickens. You may want to transplant them to the barn, so you or the others can keep an eye on them while we're gone."

"Miranda, I ain't some baby-sitter," he growled, looking past her through the kitchen doorway. Lucia was drying the breakfast dishes, just like she did every morning. But this wasn't just any old morning, and the abrupt request for the women to go into town made him nervous. "Fellas have chores they need to get done and--"

"Travis, Spring's already come. There are no icicles hanging from your roof. Lu mentioned something about a garden. I think she wants to get some seeds. You're not going to be difficult, are you? I'd like to do some shopping without the kids myself, and spend time with my new sister-in-law."

"Hell, I can't say no, can I? Stay where my man can keep his eyes peeled, and don't be all afternoon. I'm gettin' a late start on the range as it is."

"Uh-huh," Miranda nodded. "And unless you want everyone to know why, I'd rebutton that shirt."

Travis flushed and started on the buttons as he went out to the kitchen. Lu was just coming in the back door with a pail of creek water. "Missed you when I woke up. Shouldn't have let me sleep so late."

Lucia blushed and dropped her eyes. "You didn't sleep so much."

"Nope, I was otherwise occupied." He dropped his voice. "You okay? I didn't leave you sore, did I? Ain't makin' this trip into town to go see the doc, are you?"

"I don't like doctors," she replied, wiping down the trestle table. "I'm fine. You are well, yes?"

Only Lucia Montessano Conley would ask her husband such a ridiculous, utterly charming question. "Me? I'm great. And maybe I ain't such a bird-mind anymore about a couple of things." He reached for her hand, rubbing his thumb over her wedding band. "Come outside for a second."

He pulled her out the back door and nodded toward the children, playing chase and giggling near the henhouse. "Stefania's not your goddaughter now. She's legally your child. Mine too. I thought I'd be willin' to part with her before, but I know deep down I can't. I can't give up either of you."

"I know." There was a strange finality in her tone.

"Lucia, you promised me last night that--What happened didn't change your feelin's?" Travis felt like someone had just whacked his midsection with a two-by-four. "You were half asleep, but I asked you not to leave and you agreed to stay."

"I cannot leave. I know this. I never wanted to go. You said I would have to because of Sweeney and his big money."

Travis brought her fingers to his lips. "You don't have to worry about that. I'll work somethin' out with Sweeney. He's got the wrong idea about how things are. Maybe if I explain?"

"He will not listen."

"Maybe not, but I can try. Hell, I don't need more land or Sweeney's money. I just need to know you're not plannin' to run off like the other time. I might not find you next time. You can't do that to me or Stefania."

"You mix yourself all up now," she replied, reaching to caress his unshaven cheek. "I'm not going to town for the train. You said I am truly your wife in American law now. I am not some outlaw. I will not go, even if fat Sweeney and his daughter wish to buy me away. You are my husband. This is my home and Stefania's also."

Travis wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her, long and hard. He didn't care who saw them groping each other on the back stoop. He was tired of worrying about what other people thought. Tired of keeping his heart corralled from what he really wanted and needed--Lucia.

Miranda was at the mercantile, looking over bolts of cloth and a new shipment of bonnets. Lucia said she needed to visit with one of the nuns at the church school. She would hurry to St. Ignacius and return quickly. Danbers had been assigned to drive them. He argued when Lucia tried to leave the store, but at last agreed to let her go alone to St. Ignacius.

She slipped inside the apse and lit a votive candle. She approached the altar and genuflected before entering the front pew. There she offered silent prayers, as usual, first for the souls of Stefania's dead parents, then for her own father and brothers. After a few moments, she went to inquire after Sister Aurelia.

Lucia had met the nun shortly after arriving in Pueblo. The sister had helped Lucia adjust to frontier life, and quickly became a dear friend. When English and Italian failed them, they sometimes conversed in Latin, though neither was particularly fluent.

"Lucia." The nun approached. "Shall we walk?" Smiling, she led Lucia to a small garden surrounded by a high wall. The ground was warming, no longer frigid. Small green shoots pushed toward the sun. "Soon our flowers will be in full bloom. You must bring Stefania to see our garden."

"Yes," Lucia nodded.

"You are different somehow today," Sister Aurelia commented after a long silence.

"What troubles you?"

"Oh, Sister, I perhaps sin. But my husband says this is American law--this consuming. So it should not be wrong. Yet I fear it is."

"Travis is the man who married you and adopted Stefania," the sister responded slowly. "I'm clear about that. But I'm not sure what you mean by 'consuming'. Consuming what?"

"Each other," Lucia answered, noting the nun's deep flush. Indeed, it must be sinful to so discomfort the pious sister. "His sister came to visit. Travis said she is curious, that she would make trouble if we are not like others. So I share his bed. But last night we did not sleep. You know what we did instead, yes?"

"I can imagine. But you wear a wedding ring, and though it was not in a house of worship, you are joined to him. And it's true, the law says a marriage is complete when it has been consummated."

"So this is good, that I let him touch me? But he's not Catholic. We were not married by a priest. So I sin when I lie with my husband, do I not?"

"Ah, now I perceive your concern. Is your husband a Christian?"

"Yes. He goes to the same church as the other men on our ranch and the neighbors. They all go to First Presitarian."

"You mean Presbyterian? I see." The sister paused, taking a deep breath. "He could convert. He would have to take the catechism with Father Alphonse, then you would both be able to receive the holy sacrament of marriage."

"But he does not want to be Catholic, and the men across the creek make fights. They don't like Catholics. I do not think Travis will do this for me. But I would feel better if the priest blesses us."

"Well, you might withhold his . . . privileges until he understands that your immortal soul is of utmost importance. Your place in eternity. If he wishes to discuss the matter, have him come see Father Alphonse."

Lucia thanked Sister Aurelia and rushed back to meet Miranda. She thought about the nun's words as they rode to Crockhead Rest. She knew what needed to be done. She should not be close physically with Travis until he converted to her faith and they were married by the priest. In her heart, Lucia had dreaded the nun would say that.

Travis would not agree. He would be angry that she even asked such a thing of him. He was a religious man--he went to church every Sunday--but not her church.

He had taken her in, married her, taken in Stefania, joined their lives with his. In exchange he had only asked Lucia to stay and give him time. He would try to stop the fighting with Sweeney. If he did so, and after Miranda had gone back home, perhaps Lucia could ask for the favor she needed.

Yet she must tell him the truth right away, tonight. She felt a stab of guilt. If she told Travis it was sinful to let him touch her, he might not love her. If she did not tell him, God might not love her.

Always she was forced to choose. Always it seemed her heart was in conflict with her soul. Again she had to do wrong to make things right--for she felt making love with Travis was right, no matter what Sister Aurelia said. God put obstacles in Lucia's path, testing her. This frightened and confused her.

She hadn't failed Stefania. Travis had helped assure that. She would not fail Travis. There had to be some way to resolve their problem.

At long last Lucia had won gentleness and tender gestures from him. Warm feelings were not bad. Lucia remembered little of her mother, but this lesson the woman had taught her. Kindness and love were repaid a thousandfold.

Lucia wanted Travis. She loved him. She could not stop herself from feeling as she did. Could not stop her body from craving his lips and touch. His man part buried to the hilt in her woman part. The two of them as one.

This morning the look in Travis' eyes had been worth more than any ranch, a wardrobe of beautiful clothes, a fine house. To see that look in her man's eye was a woman's deepest joy. Madre Montessano had spoken this truth many years ago. This morning Lucia had witnessed the veracity with her own eyes.

God would understand.

Chapter 18

Lucia ignored the sideboard piled high with dirty plates. Instead of doing the dishes, she paced back and forth with worry. Travis hadn't come in for supper. He was out on the range somewhere. It was long past nightfall. Miranda had assured Lucia there was no cause for concern, but Miranda was also checking the front window every now and then. Lucia knew Miranda was also worried--the unspoken thought hovering between them that Travis might have encountered trouble with the men of the Flying Fist.

"Lucia, who's that?" Miranda demanded, peering out across the porch.

Lucia joined her at the window and spotted a rig approaching from the main gate. As it pulled to a halt, Lucia recognized the occupants. "Mr. and Mrs. Shea," she explained. "They live in the cabin near the barn." She went to the front door and greeted the pair. "Welcome back. You had a good trip, yes?"

The couple came into the parlor, Randy carrying twin grips. He flushed as he met Miranda's assessing gaze. "Howdy there, Mrs. Donaldson." He reached up to jerk his hat off his head. "Didn't know you were coming to visit with Travis. Is he around?"

"No, and we're getting a little anxious. He missed supper. That's not like him, is it?"

Mavis darted a look at Lucia, then glanced up at her husband. "Not when Lucia's cooking it. Everything's all right, I hope."

Randy slapped his hat back on, his jaw set. "I'll saddle up right away and send a couple of men out. I don't like this. Boss wouldn't let anyone else ride alone past dusk like this. Not with all the unrest around here lately."

Lucia grabbed her shawl from the back of a kitchen chair and followed him to the bunkhouse. Miranda waited until the back door closed behind them to address Mavis. "I'm afraid we didn't have a proper introduction. I'm Travis' older sister, Miranda Donaldson. And those are my children, Kayla and Sky." The formalities out of the way, Miranda's tone hardened. "It seems as though you suspect a problem here."

"Well, it is unusual, Travis staying out on the range so late. I wondered if--well, it occurred to me he might have intentionally stayed out."

"Why would he deliberately avoid coming home to his wife?"

Mavis' cheeks stained a deep pink. She glanced down at her coat and began fiddling with a loose button. "You believe that's the case," Miranda insisted.

"Excuse me, ma'am. It's really none of my funeral. I shouldn't get involved in the boss' family matters."

"I asked you. If my brother's in danger--even from his own muleheaded stupidity--I mean to know about it. What reason would he have to ride off and abandon a wife and child?"

"The child herself." It was a whisper. "Travis thought--and everybody else did, too," she qualified defensively. "That she was Lucia's daughter. But Lucia admitted to me in private that the girl's just her goddaughter. Randy and I didn't know what to do. We didn't feel it was our place to inform Travis about something so personal, so we asked for some time off and took our honeymoon trip. I guess that wasn't the honorable thing to do, but neither of us would have been comfortable telling Travis what I'd learned."

"I can see why," Miranda muttered, her thoughts in turmoil. The child wasn't Lucia's? Perhaps--Miranda's train of thought derailed as something in Mavis' ramblings struck her.

". . . and with the whole town believing the worst . . . I'm sure you know what I mean. Folks hereabout all thought Lucia had born the girl out of wedlock."

Miranda nearly choked. "But--you mean she wasn't a widow?"

"Why no. She told me herself she'd never been married before, and it seemed Travis was bound to find out --"

The door burst open and Travis blew in. "Find out what? That you and Randy are back? Great. So where is that no-account foreman of mine?"

Miranda puffed her chest out. "Out on the range looking for you, along with half the bunkhouse. Lucia's frantic and I don't blame her. She's probably gone to the barn to talk to her cats about it."

Travis' face split into a boyish grin. "Yep, if she's ticked at me, she's probably out tellin' them felines about it. I'm startin' to recognize certain words and phrases, though, so Lu can't trick me the way she thinks. I'll go see her." He leaned sideways to peek behind his sister. "You-hoo, Mavis. Have a nice weddin' trip?"

"Er, lovely. Well, I'd better take our things--" Travis snatched the bags. Miranda tried to pull a handle back. "Thank you, Travis, but--"

"No bother. I'm headin' that way anyhow. Got to call off the search party. Didn't reckon everybody would get so stirred up over an hour or so. Plumb forgot how late it was gettin'. Lead on, Mavis, I'm right behind you."

Miranda gawked at her brother's retreating back. He'd forgotten how late it was getting? Travis was never late for anything. You could set your clocks by him, he was such a slave to routine and ritual. Last night, when he'd insisted everyone retire even though they weren't the least bit sleepy, that was Travis. But then getting up late this morning, missing supper, being so irritatingly cheerful about it all . . . What in the name of St. Jude was happening?

Did he know the truth about the child, Miranda wondered. She gazed at Stefania's dark curls and olive skin. The girl certainly resembled Lucia in coloring. Everything Miranda had witnessed thus far indicated Rafe was mistaken--or if he'd been correct that the marriage was one of convenience for the sake of their adopted child, circumstances must

have altered. Miranda felt certain Travis and Lucia were lovers. Surely then, he had to know the truth about the child.

The back door opened and the couple stepped into the kitchen. Travis had his arm around Lucia's waist. A blind person could have felt the palpable concern radiating from Lucia as she listened to him explain his tardiness. Miranda watched as her brother's wife poured coffee, shoved a plate under his nose, and asked him a dozen questions. Travis wolfed down his chow, talking around forkfuls of pasta and sauce, chuckled in between sips of hot coffee. His eyes never left Lucia. Not even when she began putting away clean pots and utensils.

There was no way Travis had entertained notions of abandoning his wife. Miranda released the breath she'd subconsciously been holding. Travis himself had assured her things had a way of working out. Whether he knew the truth about Stefania's origins or not, Miranda was confident the marriage was solid.

She was even more convinced as she watched Travis bid Stefania good night with genuine affection. "Out of curiosity, brother dear," Miranda asked casually as she began gathering up the scattered toys littering the braided rug, "what kept you so involved this afternoon that you forgot the time?"

"Huntin' wolves. I got a big male, but not before he'd taken one of my best breed cows. She was defendin' her calf. Calf got bloodied a bit, but he'll make it. Was nearly weaned, anyhow."

"Wolves?" Miranda gaped. "Oh Travis. You have no business riding on your lonesome and undertaking such--"

"No business?" he repeated. "Who owns this spread and the floor under your feet there, Rannie? If it ain't my business, whose is it? I'm not your baby brother anymore. I can take care of myself."

Miranda glanced at Lucia, who was quietly mending a checked shirt by the firelight. "It seems that's true. And a family, too." She saw her brother correctly read the acquiescence in her gaze.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

Miranda decided to try a little experiment. "One of your hands mentioned his lumbago's been acting up. He thinks it's a sign of rain. You don't go out and ride around in the mud, do you?"

Travis gave her the look of disdain he generally reserved for city folks. "Me personally, or cowpokes in general?"

"You personally."

"Nope. That's what I pay a foreman and crew for."

Miranda picked up Sky and headed for their room. "Then I won't expect to see you up

early if it's raining in the morning. Lucia, either. I can make pancakes for the kids and your men."

Travis pondered his sister's offer as he moved through the darkened house, checking the new bar on the front door and the latch on the front window. He could have told Miranda it was fixing to rain. All afternoon he'd seen his steers huddled together on the ground, often a sign of approaching bad weather.

But Miranda's comment had nothing to do with weather conditions at all. Nope, it was a sneaky hint--as only Rannie could drop one--that he was expected to spend time with his wife in bed. He certainly had no qualms about the suggestion, other than its source. Rannie wasn't known for being so indulgent of a fella's baser instincts. Had Lucia said something?

His room was dark, his bride in a nightgown, tucked under the blankets. Waiting for him. He undressed and slipped into bed, pulling Lu immediately into a warm embrace.

"Did you admit to Rannie we just started sharin' a bed?"

"No. She did not ask me such a thing, thank Jesus. I would not like to tell lies to your sister." She gave him a perfunctory peck on the lips, then tried to roll free of his arms.

Travis wasn't about to let Lu off so easily. Not when he'd done nothing all day but think about their lovemaking the night before . . . nothing but anticipate more of the same tonight. "Somethin' happen while you gals were in town?"

He felt Lucia's exaggerated shrug. "Miranda bought cloth for dresses. We have a nice time. I think she will go home soon. The bedroom will be empty again."

"Yeah, it'll be empty, all right. You're sleepin' here from now on. Stef will get used to the notion. All kids accept that their folks share a bed."

"Perhaps it is not a good idea."

"It's not a good idea," he agreed, grinning. "It's a wonderful idea. Umm, but you feel good, sweetheart." His hand slid under the hem of her gown, lifting it to bare her buttocks.

She pushed his eager fingers away. "Things have changed, I understand, but we must talk."

"You're right. Been ponderin' on a few aspects. Only right we go over how this alters our lives. First, I ain't payin' you from now on. I'm wipin' the slate clean. We'll forget about St. Louis and the money you still owed me, all right?"

"Yes, thank you. But--"

"It doesn't matter. I don't want you frettin' none about money. If you want new things for yourself or Stef, you go into town and buy whatever you need. I got accounts with the merchants, and I'll take care of costs."

"They will not sell to me. You know this."

"They will now. I'm goin' into town myself tomorrow. I'll straighten out any misunderstandin's. You're my wife now, not my cook. My land and herds are partly yours too. This is your house as much as mine. But you got to change how you think of me. I'm not your boss anymore. I'm your husband and your lover."

Lucia felt a sharp stab of guilt. This was the crux of it, just as he'd said. "Yes, I see about money and your house, but you cannot be my lover until --"

"What the hell does that mean? Until what? I took your virginity last night, Lu." He rose and struck a match, lighting the lamp on the dresser. Lucia dropped her eyes, knowing he intended more than to shock her with his nudity. He'd turned the lamp up to its full brightness so she'd see his fury--and she had no doubt he was indeed very angry.

She spread her palms in a helpless gesture. "You are husband by American law because of what we did. But you are not of my faith. You must come with me to the priest. You must leave your church and let the father marry us at St. Ignacius. Then you will be my husband before God and can again be my lover."

"Says you," he snorted in derision, folding his arms across his chest. "I don't have to marry you in any church. I got a marriage license and signed adoption papers right here in my bureau drawer sayin' we're husband and wife and Stefania's legal parents. Mr. and Mrs. Travis Horatio Conley."

"Yes, but I cannot do like last night again until you become Catholic. What I did was wrong."

"The hell it was. There's nothin' wrong in bein' with the man you married. Don't try to corral me into turnin' Catholic. You're wastin' your breath. I don't care what your pa wanted. Don't punish me for his hare-brained notions."

"This is not punishment. I wish nothing more than to be with you and share like last night, but this is the law of my church. I told you before we went to the court place in St. Louis, I should marry in church. A man who is Catholic like me and Stefania."

"Things were different then."

"Yes, you think Pearl is best wife then."

He came back to sit in the bed, bunching the blankets over his hips. "That ain't so. I didn't plan for this. That's all." No, Travis thought grimly, he certainly hadn't planned on falling in love with this woman. On wanting to spend forever with her. But he wasn't about to confess his deepest feelings. Displaying them last night had gotten him into this muck. Heaven only knew what she'd dream up if he actually admitted the depth of his emotions. Maybe trial by fire or some torture designed to promote him to celibate sainthood.

"Everything just sort of happened to us. We didn't figure on Miranda turning up without

warnin'. Damn, I spent a long day in the saddle wantin' you. Never expected to be havin' this conversation instead."

He ran a hand through his hair. The shaggy, dark hair Lucia thought made him look wild and wonderful, almost like one of the horses he so often broke. He was too handsome, with his bare chest exposed and dark eyes boring into hers. Lucia knew her resolve was slipping. In truth, she'd also thought of little today besides his arms and seeing him nude.

He swallowed and spoke in a rough voice. "All right, you did tell me about this Catholic stuff before. But I don't see what difference it makes. I go to church. You know I'm a godfearin' man. Don't see how suddenly I'm the villain here--particularly as you're the one who stole my payroll and let me think that girl was yours."

"I did not say she was my daughter. You thought that. I told you she was my daughter in God's eyes, but I did not know the English word. You decided she was from my body, that I must be fornicatrice!"

"That sounds like 'fornicate'."

Now she'd crossed the line. All right, if she wanted to sling mud, he'd give her a faceful. "And if you want to get down to the bone here, I did think you'd been fornicatin'. Everybody in this whole damned town thinks so. Stefania looks just like you, Lu. Me runnin' to see your priest won't change what people think. I'm the only one who can do that."

"The townspeople are not what keep us apart."

"Your stubbornness is keepin' us apart. I've been a Presbyterian my whole danged life, Lucia. Ain't no way I'm changin' my faith, so just put that pitchfork right back in the hay and quit wavin' it at me."

Lucia was stung by his words and tone, but also frustrated. She knew she could make him see how crucial it was if she could explain better, but her English was still weak. "I want to be your wife. I want to give you children. But if we lie together without the priest's blessing, you make me sin."

"There's no sin in a marriage bed," he growled, trying to keep his voice down. He wanted to roar in exasperation, but Miranda would likely get an earful as it was. "I can see you believe that horsesh--" He stopped and changed tacks. Maybe if he put this in simple terms Lu could envision, she'd get his point.

"Maybe you think all of us bein' Catholic and goin' to church together is somethin' we should all hanker after, but I don't. You and Stefania are just fine attendin' your own church, while the boys and I go to mine. I couldn't risk becomin' a Catholic, even if I wanted to."

"Why, when you know it will save me from ruin? The priest will tell you --"

"How to keep Sweeney from drillin' my back with a bullet? Does your priest know the

answer to that?" She blinked and Travis saw he finally had her full attention. "You were scared when I was late comin' home tonight, not because I was huntin' wolves, but because you know the danger from the Fist. Want to find out how terrified you'd be if Sweeney and his men took to huntin' me? That's what would happen if I converted."

"No. Surely the fat one would not shoot you like animal?"

"Lucia, I swore to him I'd never turn Catholic. That's the only reason Jake Russell ain't gunned me down yet. Sweeney can't abide Catholics. Only reason I got a loan and could settle here was because Sweeney vouched for me. There's lots of Irish Catholics. If I'd been one, Sweeney would have made damned certain I couldn't get a bank loan. I can't convert. You got to get that notion out of your mind."

"Oh Travis." She hadn't expected him to agree without a fight, but she also hadn't realized the dire consequences of her request. She wouldn't ask him to risk his life. "I do not want you hurt. Perhaps it does not matter so much . . . I think God understands we must live with our neighbors. You are certain it is not evil to be together?"

Travis sensed her capitulation and heaved a sigh of relief, but tried not to let it show.

"There's a weddin' ring on your finger. You took my name. It's not wrong." He caressed her face gently between callused hands. "Unless you lied about wantin' to give me other children. Not that Stefania ain't the best kid ever. She is, but I kind of had my mind set on a couple strong boys to work the spread with me later on. Maybe cause I never convinced my brother into a partnership."

Lucia couldn't deny him. His desire was bare in his eyes, in his voice. A need for physical love, for the bond of family. "It would be good for you to have sons."

Travis wrapped his arms around her, pulling her almost onto his lap. "I can't turn Catholic for you and get hitched all over again by your priest. Sorry. Those are things I can't give you. Don't believe you need 'em, though. Seems to me deep down we're a lot the same."

Lucia laughed. "I am foolish Italian."

His face softened, a warmth she'd seldom glimpsed in his gaze. "You're not foolish. Mixed up about some things. Here's the difference between you and someone like Pearl. She'd want five sofas, each one done up in fancier colors and fabric than the next. You'd never ask for such frippery. You'd sit on my same old, battered couch for years without complaint. Instead of five new sofas, you'd want five babies to play around the old one."

"Yes," Lucia admitted, fighting to keep her eyes from filling with tears.

Travis loved her. She might not follow lengthy words or the confusing way Americans strung them together, but she could map the human heart. Travis had spoken in simple words. Telling her he understood she wanted a simple life--the kind he led. He believed they'd do well together.

"You did not marry me only for Stefania," she whispered. "This is good."

"Partly, I did. I couldn't bear to see you two kept apart. Somewhere down inside myself I was tired of missin' that warmth and devotion, too. It sounds loco, I know. But ever since my ma died, I haven't felt a certain closeness. Bein' safe and cared for, givin' that in return. Until that night on the sofa with you in my arms. Don't shut me out, Lucia. Please don't take away all we have."

When Travis awoke it was morning. He lay in a cocoon of thick covers beside Lucia's nakedness. She was fast asleep on her stomach beside him, her hair fanning across onto his pillow. He heard rain on the roof. Well hell, it appeared he'd be forced to spend the morning in bed with his bride, just as Rannie recommended. What a notion.

He slid a hand onto Lucia's fleshy bottom, noting his usual morning erection grew even stiffer as his fingers met her skin. Her dusky complexion was smooth as coffee laced with rich cream. Though her breasts were undeniably the fullest he'd ever seen on any gal, he actually found her derriere more enticing. Any fella layin' eyes on Lucia could appreciate her exceptional bosom. But he was the only man who got to enjoy the details of her rounded backside--including the fact her right cheek had a dark beauty mark smack in the center of it.

He lifted the covers enough to glimpse his target, then gave the spot a pinch. As expected, Lu came awake immediately, squawking in surprise.

"It's about time you woke up," he taunted. "Your husband wants breakfast, and today that's you." She stretched, provoking him by lifting her hips off the mattress and raising her bottom. Travis covered her body with his own, reaching beneath her stomach to stroke between her thighs.

Lucia whimpered and muttered something in Italian. Travis interpreted it as an invitation. Foreplay with Lucia was a sensual banquet. She began to moan and writhe as his fingers delved into her damp core.

"Marito." Lucia arched beneath him, tossing her head. Travis knew she wanted his kiss. His lips trailed across her bare neck toward her mouth, teasing, tantalizing, making her stretch to meet him.

"No fair. I can't sound so exotic, unless you teach me to say 'wife' in Italian."

"Sposa. Do you want me?"

"You know how badly, Lu."

He plunged his tongue into her mouth and captured her full breasts in both hands, squeezing, kneading. "Mmm yourself, sposa." He impaled her with a single thrust, glorying in Lucia's gasp of pleasure. "Give it to me. Give it up."

He ground his pelvis sideways and was rewarded with a sighing moan from deep in Lucia's throat. He rolled her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, then slid his

hands down to take command of her hips. He withdrew slowly and entered her again, plunging and withdrawing without urgency. He'd been well sated by the time they'd fallen asleep last night. Today he wanted to prolong Lu's enjoyment, to erase any lingering doubts she might have that this was right and good.

She responded with abandon, telling him how her body burned, urging him to go deeper and thrust harder. He'd just begun pumping faster when a brick shattered the window, peppering the room with broken glass.

"Sonofabitch! You all right?" He flung himself off her, ignoring a stinging sensation in his back. He roughly shook out the bedding, sending glass tinkling to the floor. Lucia immediately scrambled to the far side of the mattress, clutching a pillow in front of her in sheer terror.

"What happened?"

"Goddamned Sweeney, that's what. You stay put," he ordered, already jumping into the jeans he'd left by the door.

"Travis, no. You must not go after the men who did this."

Somehow he managed to get into his boots without cutting his feet. He tossed Lucia her nightgown. "Put that back on." As soon as the gown slipped over her body, Travis scooped Lucia into his arms and carried her to the parlor, stunning Miranda. "We got more trouble," he growled, depositing his wife on the sofa beside his sister. "You two keep your butts on that sofa and keep the kids away from my room."

Making certain the door was closed and no one else would see, Travis bent to retrieve the brick and the note tied to it with a hank of twine.

Does she kiss your cock like it's the Pope's ring?

He wasted ten minutes arguing with the womenfolk before saddling Old Rye, but half an hour after the brick sailed through his window, Travis stomped across Sweeney's front porch. He banged on the polished oak door with his rifle butt.

"You were told to stay off this spread," came a snarl behind him. Travis spun to face Jake Russell, who stood pointing a shotgun at him. Unflinching, Travis leveled his own weapon at the Fist foreman's head.

"You're one sick bastard," Travis drawled, giving his best imitation of Rafe, who seldom displayed emotion in taut situations. "And if you dare try another stunt like that brick, you won't need to worry about catching the French pox from the local sluts. You won't have a pecker left to use on a whore. That goddamned brick could've hit one of us."

"Don't know about any brick, but if you came looking for trouble . . ."

"I know you threw it, Russell. Sweeney's the only man who'd write filthy hate words like the note attached--and you're the only lickspittle who'd sneak up durin' a rainstorm to deliver 'em. You and your horse are soakin' wet."

The door abruptly opened. Patrick Sweeney stood in the doorway. "Come inside, Conley."

Travis was breathing too hard and far too incensed to enjoy the fact he'd tracked mud and water all over Patrick's expensive carpet. He followed his host into the library and watched as Patrick splashed whiskey into a glass--the same Irish whiskey they'd drank together in the past--and held it toward Travis. He knocked the glass aside, spilling whiskey across Patrick's desk.

"I've put up with cut fences, my steers turnin' up dead with bullet holes in their hides, you and Pearl glarin' at me across the aisle in church, the saloon fight, and everyone in town treatin' my wife like garbage."

"If you suffer ill luck, consider the source. That misbegotten wife of yours," Patrick sneered, clucking his tongue. "I warned you, Catholics bring naught but woe and misery."

"She's brought me nothin' but happiness. You and that ape-in-chaps you call a foreman are the cause of my problems. I'm filin' a report with the sheriff if you don't call this bullshit off, here and now. Whole shootin' match has gone too far. Ain't about religious differences or creek water. You're forcin' me to retaliate, Patrick."

The big man only laughed. He idly watched the whiskey soak into the papers on his desk, watched it spread over the polished cherrywood and eat into the varnish, and simply laughed again.

"Funny you'd bring up the creek. I've consulted authorities myself, because you're openly violating my water rights. There's going to be a new survey, Conley. Once I obtain proof you've no right to my creek, you're finished here in Pueblo."

"You don't own that creek, you fat pustule. We each got rights to it. You agreed to share the water."

"Agreed to share my Pearl, too. One way or another, I'll run those Papists out of town," Patrick vowed. "If Crockhead's destroyed, so be it. You made a fool of my only daughter. Thank God, she's seen the light and has a new beau."

"Hell's bells. As if I spent half a heartbeat worryin' what would become of Pearl Got-a-Parasol-Stuck-Up-My-Ass Sweeney! That's a real joke. Made a fool of that gal? The only fool in this house is you. You can't see how ruthless she is, how she'll manipulate anyone who comes within a mile of her."

"How dare you speak of my--"

"I screwed your precious daughter right upstairs in her room. It's blue. The bedcovers are made of satin. She's got a big picture of some ugly fruit on the wall over her washstand. I bedded her there more than once, at her invitation. Might even say insistence. And I wasn't the first. Your sweet, innocent daughter's nothin' but a hussy, so I wouldn't go slurrin' other women if I were you."

"You foul degenerate."

"My turn to speak my peace, Sweeney. I only proposed because Pearl was hot for what's in my jeans and you got a lump of cash. I would've honored my word and gone through with that disastrous weddin' if you hadn't started this range war. In the midst of it, I found I'm happy. Nothin' you or Pearl do will get me to give up my family."

Patrick curled his lip in distaste. "Now you're admitting the brat's yours?"

"Not by blood, but I got legal adoption papers. You can go see a fella named Highwater in St. Louis who'll tell you all about the child's parents and how she came to be in the orphanage. Lu's the child's godmother, not birth mother."

The library door opened. "What's going on? It's barely daylight, and there's such a commotion --" Pearl frowned at her father. "What's he doing here?"

"Telling me about your bedroom decor," Patrick replied with a glare.

"Oh, he's a such liar! You know he'd say anything to cause me further humiliation."

Travis ignored Patrick, who was rising from his chair, and started toward Pearl. "I'm here to tell your pa I'm formally withdrawin' my offer. Don't want any part of you ever, Pearl. Take some new buck between your legs. I got a wife and family and my land to think about." He glowered now at his host. "And I'll fight to keep what's mine. The next time a brick comes through my window, bullets just might come flyin' through yours."

Chapter 19

Lucia sat down on Travis' bed and began brushing out her hair. She was finally recovered from her fright. All dressed, ready to face Miranda. Ready to face another day's tasks. Glancing at the hole in the outside wall that had been sealed by a glass window until an hour before, Lucia shuddered. Travis had come back from the Fist and sent word to the house that everything was fine.

Lucia knew better.

Two cowboys nailed boards temporarily over the window opening. Danbers went into town to order more glass. The men supposed Lucia would play along with their act of calm normalcy. They expected her to behave as though being attacked at dawn and the boards as reminders didn't upset her. She would pretend that was so, if that was what Travis wanted, but she couldn't ignore how powerfully the Sweeneys detested her.

She tried but couldn't understand. Virtual strangers, people who'd neither broken bread at her table nor exchanged a half-dozen words with her--how could they hate her so? Enough to launch a missile into the ranch house, a brick that might have hit her or Travis, causing serious injury. What kind of human being did that? Hated with such ferocity, scrawled horrible words Travis hadn't wanted her to see? Lucia didn't read English well, but concerns for her literacy were not what had compelled him to crumple the scrap of paper in his fist and deny its existence. The words had been so bad he didn't want her to read them.

Here, then, was the truth, blatant and inescapable as the hole in the wall.

If Travis converted to her faith, there would be reprisals. Fat Sweeney or his men would hurt Travis or Crockhead's men. People capable of such hatred and violence might set fire to the house next time, or worse. Images of Travis dead and bleeding, of Stefania screaming rose behind her eyes.

Lucia couldn't ask Travis to risk Sweeney's rage. Yet God's message was not lost on her. The Lord had known what was going on in Travis' room that morning. Had He not sent the rider exactly when He did to stop Lucia and Travis from sinning again?

Lucia believed so. She did not accept coincidences or quirks of fate. Things did not "happen" for no reason. God always had a plan. It was clear what His plan had been today. Now her duty was to fight the desires of the flesh. She could not give in to temptation again. Too much was at stake.

There was just enough buck left in the bronco for it to kick the corral gate away from the wranglers fighting to swing it shut. Springtime and open fields beckoned. The horse tore off at a full gallop for the main gate and freedom. Travis cursed and shouted, giving Rye his spurs as he sent a lasso whistling overhead.

Rye streaked across the open ground and effectively cut off the runaway near the base of

the drive. Travis roped the smoky--and narrowly missed entangling his brother-in-law in the process.

"Zach? What the hell--that wild smoky could've killed you."

Danbers and Wilson rode up to lead the recalcitrant bronco back to the corral. Travis shook his head at Zach's disheveled state. The banker's bowler had tilted to a crazy angle, his necktie was askew, and Travis hadn't seen such a dazed look on Zach's face since the man's wedding day.

"What did you do, walk from the depot?"

"Caught a ride with a farmer. I've come to --"

"Fetch your family? Took you long enough."

Travis walked Rye to the house, looping the reins around the porch rail. Stepping through the front door with Zach, Travis found the parlor stacked with luggage. Kayla and Skylar came bounding from the hall, shrieking at the sight of their pa, Miranda on their heels. "Rough trip?" she inquired, quirking a brow.

Travis looked from one adult to the other. There was no wariness or stiff formality in their manners. Rannie didn't look surprised to see her husband. On the contrary, Travis spied a welcoming glint in her brown eyes. "Did you wire him to come?" Travis demanded.

"No. We agreed from the outset a week would suffice."

Leave it to Rannie to plan everything, down to the length of a disagreement. "For what?" Travis snorted. "A coolin' off spell?"

Miranda embraced her man. "Exactly the opposite. To force a thaw."

Lucia appeared in the kitchen doorway. Travis grinned. Her face was splotched with flour. "Lu, look who turned up. This is Miranda's husband, Zach. Zach, that's my wife, Lucia."

She came forward shyly. Travis watched, unable to keep from grinning wider as she politely informed Zach she was pleased to meet herself.

A short while later, the Donaldsons and their bags were loaded into the buckboard.

Travis drove them to the depot, fighting Old Rye's reluctance to serve as a draft animal. "He'd rather be out ridin' my back acres," Travis told his sister. "Normally I would, too, but it's honestly a pleasure to make this trip. Been great seein' you and the kids, but it will be nice to have things back to normal. I'm sure Zach missed y'all."

"Back to normal?" Miranda repeated with obvious scorn. "Travis, I have to tell you Rafe wrote me about your sudden nuptials and rather convoluted arrangement. He asked me to visit you. A busybody under your roof might get your wife into your bed."

"Dammit, Miranda. You had me thinkin' you and Zach were driftin' apart."

"I do believe," she went on, "this is the first time I've been asked to get one of my rascalion brothers into bed with a woman. I won't apologize for meddling."

"As if you ever would," he mumbled. Rannie and Rafe had stuck it to him this time, but good.

"The day will come when you'll thank me for this. Rafe suspects you didn't care for that Sweeney girl. You were obligated to her, due to business with her father. Whatever the underlying entanglement, find a way out of it. It's clear what kind of individual that man is. A monster."

"I'm not doin' business with Sweeney."

"Good. And I'd remind you of another fact. When you marry someone, you also marry into a family. Rafe and I have been very fortunate. Our spouses are a lot like Conleys themselves. We stand together, whatever comes.

"Those Sweeneys want someone to own, but one doesn't own an ally. Allies fight at your side because they choose to, because someday you may be needed that same way. You're a fool if you abandon Lucia for that horrid Sweeney woman. A fool. Lucia is the best kind of ally. If you ever turn your back on her, I'll never forgive you. I mean that."

Miranda hadn't spoken to him so harshly since he was fourteen years old. Travis pulled to a halt near the platform. "What if keepin' Lucia means I can't be a Presbyterian any longer? Lucia and Stefania are Catholics. Lu wants me to convert."

"Goodness me, this is some fix you've gotten yourself into, Travis Horatio. I'd have to say that doesn't seem wise--unless you plan to sell out and move to greener pastures." She paused to reflect on her words. "Which might be the most prudent course of action. What's happening here is insane. I didn't want to let Lu or the children see how it affected me, but I'm worried for all of you."

"Sure, Sis. It ain't a gunfight, and I ain't Rafor."

She frowned. "Just be careful, Travis."

Travis rode home in silence, thinking about his sister's warning. Oddly enough, he almost felt like Rafe later that night, carrying a protesting and kicking Lucia down the hall to their room. She'd moved her clothing and things back into the room Miranda had vacated that morning--in direct defiance of Travis' instructions. Lucia knew he wanted her sharing his bed from now on.

He set her down and blocked the doorway. "Your place is here. We ain't discussin' it." He started on the buttons of his work shirt.

"Travis, I do not think so. It's best I go back to the other room. Stefania misses her cousins. She is confused that Miranda and the children have gone. If I am here with you, she will be more confused."

"She'll get over it. You best shut pan, because I ain't backin' down. You're sleepin' in this

room, in that bed." He locked the door and continued undressing, frowning sternly at her when she made no move to get under the covers.

"Why do you do this?" Lucia demanded.

"What, expect you'll lie with me? Because you're my goddamned wife."

"I was before also, but I slept in the other room. Always slept fine, no problems."

"Sleepin' ain't what this is about, and you know it. Last night and early this mornin' everything was--You're upset about the brick. I confronted Sweeney and Russell. They ain't about to try another stunt like that, but I'll trade sides with you and sleep near the outside wall."

"You said this is not about sleep. Perhaps. Your sister is not here now, so I do not have to play wife for her."

Lucia had been prepared for his anger, but not the obvious hurt in his dark eyes. She couldn't have felt any worse if she'd hit him in the gut with her rolling pin. His expression said her rejection had nearly the same effect. "It was all just for Rannie, huh? A show? Guess I thought things were different between us. My mistake. Yeah, maybe you should go on back to --"

His words broke off as she came around the bed and framed his face with her palms. She bent close and whispered. "Can we not just hold each other and rest? Is lust all you have in your mind when you see me, like other men?"

His features flushed ruddy in the lamplight. "It's nigh impossible to ignore that part, but no. I got other notions besides ruttin' urges. Holdin' you is pretty fine, too."

"I would like that. Thank you, yes."

She was unsurprised when he blew out the lamp and pulled her into bed beside him. They kissed. He sighed, his face buried in her hair. At first his body was stiff and unyielding. Gradually Lu felt the tension ease. She was drowsy and nearly asleep when he cupped her breast.

"I need to touch you," he whispered. "Please don't argue, Lu. Maybe I'm no better than the next randy cowpoke, but I like to think it's more than feelin' my oats. You were scared today. I was so pissed off, I couldn't think of anything but gettin' in Patrick Sweeney's bloated face. Maybe I shouldn't have gone. I probably should've stayed here, to comfort and protect you. I want to do that. Wrap myself around you, keep you from all the nastiness in the world."

"The world is out there," she answered softly, wrapping her arms around his neck. "In here, there is only you. I am safe."

Travis wanted to tell her a thousand different things, but words escaped him, especially when his thumb stroked at her breast and the nipple puckered in response. Response to her lover's touch. Just holding her wouldn't do. He had to possess her, make her

understand that for him it may have started as playacting for Miranda, but now their union was very, very real.

So he began to make love to her, swept by relief and possessive pride. Then by passion, when she didn't rebuff him. She kissed him back. She arched and wrapped her legs around his waist, clasping his body to hers. He'd wanted to take things slow, but as she met his deep thrusts, his control snapped and he came. Seconds later, his body still quivering and jerking, Lu came, too.

He withdrew and stretched out on his back beside her. "That wasn't out of pure selfishness, Lu. Hope you understand that. Sweeney would love to come between us and keep us from being happy together. We can't let him, can't give up power over our own lives. We're so good together."

Her fingertips brushed his jaw. "Yes, I know this. I love you."

He yawned. A peaceful languor stole over him. He held her close, silently marveling once again at the serenity having this Italian woman in his arms always brought him.

Emotionally and physically drained as he was, he still couldn't seem to sink down into slumber. For nearly an hour after Lucia breathed evenly beside him, something nagged at him, keeping him awake. It was something she'd said, and something to do with that day out in the meadow . . .

The day she'd run, seeming in need of a good cry. The first time Stefania had walked up and kissed him. Then he recalled what had been so peculiar that day. Stefania had also told him she loved him.

He could almost smell meadow grass again as her little voice piped, "I love you."

Why would that keep a man awake nights?

He hadn't taught her those words. Back then, Stefania had spoken very little English. In fact, those were the only words of English she'd uttered that day. She'd been rambling in Italian, Lu answering in their native tongue. He'd felt left out for that very reason, he recalled. So he'd decided to nap in the sun. To let Lu and the child he believed then was her daughter have time together.

He now knew Stefania wasn't blood kin, but it didn't bother him. That wasn't what kept gnawing at his innards.

No, it was what Stefania had said and done, kissing his forehead like that. He hadn't taught Stefania to say, "I love you." He doubted anyone at Highwater's Home had, either. Not in a mausoleum like that. Lu must have been the one to teach the little child that expression of affection.

Which meant she herself understood the phrase.

Christ Almighty. She hadn't been commenting on the act they'd engaged in. She'd told him straight out how she felt. He'd had the chance to reciprocate. She wouldn't have

laughed at him. He felt awful, realizing he'd probably embarrassed her with his cavalier manner. But he wouldn't again. Somehow he'd show her how much she meant to him.

Miranda had warned against doing anything to jeopardize what he had with Lu, unaware he'd already sworn his oath to Sweeney that nothing could convince him to give up his new family. He'd spat it at the burly Irishman out of malicious spite, but fully intended to keep his promise.

Not just because he'd fret about Stefania's future. Not because he'd quite legitimately worry what would become of her and Lu if they left him. Not even because the thought of any other man enjoying Lu's curves and warmth made him twist up in knots. He'd keep his vow because she loved him.

"I don't understand why I had to come here," Pearl huffed. She untied the ribbon on the oversized bonnet she'd used to cover her hair and pulled off the patterned shawl obscuring her satin dress. The man had her sneaking around town incognito. If anyone but Gavin had sent it, she would have scoffed at the note her butler had delivered that morning.

"A well-bred gentleman goes to whatever extreme is necessary so that he is inconvenienced, not his lady."

"Breeding aside, I can't be seen here in Pueblo just now. You should understand that."

"Well I don't. This is balderdash, typical of my father and his warped ideas. Next, I suppose, he'll have you calling on Crockhead Rest with torches at midnight."

"Ah Pearl," Gavin sighed, his fingers working the first few delicate buttons on the front of her bodice. "We can't have Conley being tipped off to my involvement. The men I hired to conduct the survey will do so while I'm working other angles. Planning, Pearl, not torches." He tapped his temple. "Wits. Much more effective, believe me. I assure you, we have complete privacy here."

His hand swept the trappings of his rented room at the Lindall Hotel. "I'd hardly enjoy stolen moments of groping my intended in her family's parlor, where her father or butler might interrupt any moment."

Pearl's heart skipped a beat. Did he just call her his 'intended'? Best not to seize on the phrase right away. She'd circle around and come back to it. "I suppose there is that consolation," she demurred. "And it's true, we must be cautious. I don't want my father to suspect anything about how far our association has progressed. My former betrothed paid a very nasty social call to him recently, spouting some vicious untruths about me."

"Another uncouth wretch," Gavin remarked dryly.

Pearl ignored the sarcasm. "Anyway, Da's all the more watchful over me because of it. I had to claim I was visiting a married lady friend to get out this afternoon."

Gavin slipped off his suspenders and crossed to a table by the wall. "Would your lady friend offer tea and jelly cakes?" He turned his back on her. Pearl used the opportunity to smooth her hair.

Then she frowned, realizing he'd undone the front of her gown to expose her corset and chemise, then wandered away. The nerve of the man. Any local fop would be at her feet, begging to make love to her. She grudgingly acknowledged this was a pitfall in having such an incredibly handsome suitor. Gavin didn't truly appreciate a woman's charms. He had too many of his own. "Naturally she'd offer tea and cakes."

"Then how fortunate that I've got better. Champagne and roast ham. Bread and cheese. I believe there's even fresh fruit here."

"Oh."

She realized too late she should have made it a question, the innocuous kind that reeked of boredom. She'd let herself sound pleasantly surprised. Gavin should be lulled into thinking that being plied with quality food and drink made no impression. She concentrated on her garters and stockings, glancing up when she heard a discreet deep cough.

The color drained from her face, then her cheeks suffused with angry color. He'd turned to face her. He'd rolled up his sleeves and removed his tie. He looked like a banker or attorney who'd been scrutinizing documents all afternoon. Except Gavin's fly was open and his erect member jutted boldly from it. The head was slathered with cream cheese.

"Cracker, Pearl?"

Good God. Should she act offended? Eager? Titillated? Ignorant was impossible after their previous hotel room encounter. What would put a leash on this devil? she asked herself. Disinterest.

"I don't care for cheese. Perhaps you ought to use the basin to --"

"You'll like this," he encouraged with a leer. "There's a piquant aftertaste you'll enjoy. I guarantee it." He reached in his trouser pocket and pulled out a pair of earbobs. Large teardrop pearls dangled from round topaz stones encircled with tiny seed pearls.

She arched a brow. "Trying to buy my favors?" At least the price was right.

"Think of these as a sample of what you can look forward to as Mrs. Gavin Wilburne," he responded, coming to stand directly before her.

"Are you asking me to be your wife?"

"Only if you've changed your mind about the refreshments. I need a wife who can be a gracious guest, as well as the perfect hostess. You know I have political aspirations. The woman I wed truly must have a flair for entertaining, Pearl." He flashed her his brilliant smile. "It's a prerequisite I insist upon."

"I accept," Pearl muttered, reaching for the earrings. She pressed the cool topaz gems into her palms and closed her eyes, taking Gavin into her mouth.

"Why Pearl," he grunted. "I do believe you have a natural talent for . . . socializing. Yes, Miss Sweeney, I think you'll do."

Chapter 20

Lucia was up in the loft, talking softly to Scorza, trying to stop hiccuping. The cat didn't mind Lucia's tears, nor did Lucia feel foolish allowing the cat to see them. It had been a horrible morning. She had attended mass but not taken communion, for she continued to live in sin, allowing Travis full husbandly rights.

Going to mass when she'd fallen from grace was not easy. But the cruel words of the women in town made it all the harder. As did the discomfort on her left side. She hadn't been feeling herself lately. Perhaps she'd been working too hard. Travis and the men had been branding the cattle, sweating like plowhorses. Which in turn made more dirty laundry and work for her and Mavis. Yes, that must be it, she told herself, using her apron to wipe her eyes. She got to her feet, then flinched as the pain flared in her lower abdomen.

"Lu, you all right?"

She hadn't heard Travis come up the ladder. "Yes, I--yes, it's no--"

He reached for her upper arms to steady her. "Mavis said . . ." He stopped. "You've been cryin'."

There was no accusation in his tone, just surprise. She started to deny it, but his arms closed around her. Lucia was tired and miserable and very glad to have his strength. She didn't know how long he simply held her and let her soak the front of his tan work shirt. She cried until the hateful faces from town receded, until her guilt and discomfort seemed small, the need for Travis' understanding all that mattered as his lips covered hers.

He'd pulled off his leather gloves and now used his thumbs to dry her cheeks. "What's wrong, sweetheart? Why were you hidin' out here?"

"It's not important. I'm silly woman."

"I don't think you're silly. Did I do somethin'?"

She shook her head, dropping her gaze. "It was not a good day at church. Some ladies saw me come out. Friends of Pearl. They were rude to me, but I think maybe I need to rest. Usually I am not so bothered."

"What do you mean, usually you're not? Pearl's friends go around insultin' you all the time and you never said anything?"

Lucia broke free and turned her back. "You have much on your mind. Of course, she would hate me. They shoot your cows, sent the brick. I think there is more and you do not tell me. Maybe we should not talk about these bad things."

She started toward the ladder, but Travis was too fast for her. He caught her and pulled her into his embrace. "Maybe we shouldn't, but we've got to stand together in this. Same as you're behind me, I'm always behind you. You can tell me if things get too hard."

Though she tried to mask her surprise, he saw it. "I mean that. Reckon you do need some extra rest. You're lookin' kind of pale. Come on." He helped her down the ladder, then led her back into the house. "Mavis can handle the meals and clean up. You go on and lie down for a spell."

"I'm fine, Travis."

But Lucia had to admit it felt wonderful to be off her feet and be able to relax. Travis finally dragged himself into their room at midnight. He looked exhausted and explained it was because he'd been supervising the branding and round ups. Only after he'd fallen into a sound sleep did she realize what that meant. He'd abandoned ranch operations in the midst of critical chores to come checking on her.

The man truly cared.

It was several nights later, after a bout of intense lovemaking. She was startled by his hand sliding over her belly. She thought he'd drifted off to sleep well sated. "Lu, it seemed like I hurt you just now. Are you sure everything's okay?"

"Yes, I am good," she responded without hesitation, though she'd experienced another twinge of pain earlier that day and dull throbbing now. She wouldn't tell Travis the truth, he'd only insist she see the doctor. She didn't trust doctors, and a doctor could not help. She was being punished her for sins. She had given up meat and enjoying her own desserts for Lent. She had said the rosary every day. Still she had the pains. They would abate when Travis married her in the Catholic church or she stopped being intimate with him.

"You're sure?" His whisper was husky with desire. His free hand cupped a breast, kneading the nipple into a taut peak, all but guaranteeing she would react heatedly. She could not help it when he caressed her so. She craved his touch, his mouth, the friction. She should push his hands away, but the hand rubbing her stomach dipped lower.

"Yes, I am--oh Travis. Please."

"I'll go slow and gentle, I swear," he promised, drawing the stiff nipple into the warm cavern of his mouth. "Love me, Lu." He latched on and suckled.

Lucia was lost in the firestorm.

She awakened refreshed, blushing at the remembrance of the night's loving. Travis had made love to her a second time. Their coupling had been better than ever before, each moment its own pleasure worth savoring. Lucia could still remember the taste of him, her taste on his lips and tongue, the musky scent of their joining filling the small room.

Best to turn her thoughts to other matters, she told herself. She'd promised to stitch some new dresses for Stefania and needed to make a trip into town for cloth and ranch supplies. She convinced Travis she'd be safe with Mick. They had the barrel of molasses and sack of flour loaded into the buckboard along with the calico Lucia purchased when she heard noise down the street.

"I tell you there is no finer elixir available in all the West." Lucia gazed at a small crowd gathered around a brightly-painted wagon with lettering on the side.

"What is that?"

Mick squinted. "Travelin' medicine show. You heard of them?" Lucia shook her head. "Fancy alchemists, ride around sellin' liniments and bitters. Medicines to cure whatever ails a body. You feelin' poorly?"

"No." She waved to shush him as she struggled to make sense of the stranger's proclamations. He had cures, he said. For all illnesses. Lucia didn't recognize most of the words he used beyond those basic concepts. "What's he saying now?"

Mick shrugged and climbed into the wagon. "Boastin' he can cure gout and rashes, ingrowed toenails, headaches, sore throats, or constipation."

"What is that, 'consternation'?"

Mick picked up the reins. "Con-sti-pay-shun. Means when you can't go to the outhouse."

"Why? The door is stuck?"

"You can step inside," Mick clarified, flushing. "But goin' there's a waste of time, cause nothin' happens." He scratched the back of his neck. "If you ain't feelin' poorly yourself, this is silly. Them alchemist fellers--"

"I have been tired sometimes, a little," she murmured, still watching as the medicine man passed several bottles through the crowd.

"Maybe I ought to stop by Doc Sullivan's. Travis has him come out to the ranch if anybody's laid up bad, like that time Rafe got shot and almost didn't make it."

"I'm not sick. I only wonder if the drink can do what he says. Sometimes Travis has a bad head."

Mick dropped the reins and frowned at her. "Boss seems fit as a fiddle to me, but then again, the Fist men always raisin' Cain can be enough to--Lu! Where the heck-- Come back here!"

Lucia heard him shouting behind her, but rushed to join the knot of people around the wagon, digging into her skirt pocket for the paper money she had brought to town. Mick seized her by the shoulder. "You want Travis bustin' my chops? You ain't supposed to wander around on your own, and you know it. Heck, I left the buckboard. Hurry up. I'm gonna have my eyes on you every second."

She mumbled a reply, then peered up at the man standing in the colorful wagon. "Your liquid takes away all pains?"

"Indeed, it does. Why, I've cured the chronically ill from San Francisco to San Antonio. Folks with arthritis who could hardly get out of bed in the morning, their joints were so stiff. Earaches, toothaches, bodily woes. One tablespoon twice a day. Three dollars,

ma'am, or two bottles for five."

"Pain in the stomach or head, yes?"

"Absolutely! You take my elixir regularly, and you'll have the virtue of good health once more."

"Virtue?" Lucia repeated. "This means no sin. Your bottle takes sin away?" She held her breath, fearing she must have misunderstood. The man's English was mostly long words.

"It is my considered medical opinion, after years of training at the Eric Von Kreidelbaum Medical Academy in Duluth, that ills of the body are like Satan's minions, sent to torture and maim. My wonder elixir drives out those evils, restoring natural well being. How many bottles, ma'am?"

"Two," Lucia replied, another twinge cramping her stomach even as she handed over her money. She hurried back to where Mick waited in the wagon, barely able to climb into it as the pain intensified. She uncorked a bottle and inhaled deeply. "How much is spoon of table?"

"You mean a tablespoon? 'Bout one good swaller, give or take. But I thought you said that was for Travis."

She shoved the stopper back down. "Travis, yes. I smell, though, to make sure it's not so bitter. I think I mix some sugar or molasses and give it to him later."

Over the next few days, Lucia forced herself to gulp the vile medicine morning and night, keeping the bottles hidden in the lower kitchen cupboard. Her side still ached.

Stefania walked through the back door with a basket of eggs. "Papa Travis helped me," she announced. "See Mama? I can do it like you."

"Good. Now go find your dirty clothes. No more on the floor in your room. You bring them out. We'll go to the creek to wash clothes. But first, I will drink coffee and have some breakfast."

Lucia tried, but couldn't get much coffee down. Neither could she bear the thought of chewing anything. She was so queasy the medicine nearly came back up, and she felt most weary. Tired before she'd even started her chores. She returned from the creek and decided to dust the parlor furniture to conserve energy while Stefania took a nap. Travis and Randy came through the back door.

"Goddammit, I didn't think the sonofabitch had this kind of pull," Travis announced with a scowl, kicking a wooden chair out of his way as he moved to the stove to get coffee.

"Sweeney has a gripe, a team of surveyors magically turns up. Can't believe he'd go this far." Randy joined him at the kitchen table.

"What has happened?" Lucia went to stand beside her husband.

He wrapped an arm around her waist and gave her a light squeeze. "Sweeney sent men

to measure the land. It means trouble."

She wiped down the tabletop. "Why would he measure dirt?"

"He's hopin' to prove the dividin' line between our spreads is actually on his side of the creek. Then all the water would belong to him." He released Lucia and glanced over at his foreman. "I know those fellas will find in favor of the Fist. Patrick probably bought the friggin' judge who made out the writ."

"Maybe I should pay a call over there," Randy suggested. "Russell doesn't get under my skin so much I can't abide him, way he does you. If he and I sit down and talk, maybe we can work something out."

"Yeah," Travis snorted. "Figurin' he and Patrick will invite you right in for coffee, huh? Maybe serve up some pound cake with chocolate sauce? In a pig's eye."

"I'm not expecting them to be cordial, but it's not my wife and family at stake. I can be objective. It's Lu and Stefania for you, Pearl for Sweeney. That's the problem. It's personal on both sides. Let me try making peace. "

"All right, but watch your ass. Tie a white kerchief to the barrel of your rifle and take a couple point riders along. Don't go playin' hero. Got a wife yourself."

The next morning Randy entered the bunkhouse as the men were getting shaved and dressed. He selected his riders, and they set out to the Flying Fist. As the other hands set out for the barn, Sourdough narrowed his eyes. "You all know that Russell. He'll send Shea back with his tail between his legs. Waste of time tryin' to jaw with a sidewinder."

A wiry cowpoke shook his head. "Rustle our cattle, but we can't prove it. Now Sweeney's out to steal the creek. Don't blame Shea for trying whatever he can. Just wish there was something to tip the scales in our favor."

"You know what Boss said," Danbers scowled in answer. "Can't threaten nobody, can't even raise our rifles, or we forfeit a week's pay. Surveyors got the legal right to be here."

"Wonder if they also got a thirst for coffee," Sourdough mused. His features went from a mean scowl to gleeful as he beheld the youngest cowpoke in the bunk-house. "Timmy, you shore got you a baby face. If I hadn't see you shaving myself, swan I might take you for a sweet little gal."

"What?" Timmy was instantly enraged.

"Hold on," Sourdough cackled. "Just so happens Lu was washin' out some female duds yesterday. Snagged a blouse and skirt off the line."

"What for?" Danbers snorted. "Gonna dress your right arm up and pretend it's Saturday night?"

Everyone laughed at the reminder of Freiling's frequent nocturnal pastime, but Sourdough ignored the derision. "We can't threaten nobody, but we can doll Timmy up

and send him yonder with coffee for them city fellers."

"You nuts, you old coot?" Timmy demanded, backing away. "We got to stay away from the Fist. Boss said--"

"He didn't say the foreman's wife couldn't offer coffee to be neighborly."

Timmy had his fists clenched. "Mavis wouldn't give them skunks none of Lu's coffee."

"Not our foreman, you lunkhead. And not Lu's coffee. Mine. We'll disguise you like a gal and you can deliver my tin pot and some cups to Sweeney's monkeys. Slop's so danged bitter the way I make it, they won't notice the castor oil."

Timmy broke into a lopsided grin. "Castor oil? Hot damn, Sourdough, you are good for somethin'!"

"Yep," Danbers agreed, turning to his buddy. "And so's Keenan here. He'll keep the boss man busy out in the barn. Won't you, Mick?"

Mick did his best to get Travis sidetracked from his regular activities by claiming to have a question about tack and the mucking out of the barn stalls. Once inside the barn, Mick never let his tongue rest.

"Boy, them surveyors would crawl right back under whatever rocks they come from if Rafe was to handle the situation, 'stead of Shea. Too bad your brother ain't around now. Heard he blew a hole straight through Sweeney's porch and nicked his big toe while he's at it."

"Uh-huh." Travis muttered, checking the next harness on the row of pegs by the door. Mick nearly plowed into him with the wheelbarrow full of dung.

"Oops. Sorry, Boss. Reckon you would've needed another dose of elixir if I'd knocked you flat. Say, is it helpin' any with your headaches?"

"Headaches? Ain't had a problem with head pain."

"Well, see now, there may be somethin' to it. Never set much store by quackery myself, but with the range war and gol-darned Sweeney, reckon Lu did the smart thing. Fine woman. Surely dotes on you, she does."

"I wouldn't call it--" Travis broke off and cocked his head, then rushed out of the barn. "What in blazes is that ruckus?"

His men were gathered on horseback and on foot, all assembled within view of the creekbed. Most were holding their sides and guffawing like the circus had come to town. Travis glanced across the water. The surveyors were hopping around like madmen. They all but threw their equipment into a wagon. One fella was hunched over like he'd taken a knife to the gut, another raced the third man in the group for the Fist outhouse. He won, but lost his pants on the way.

Then Jake Russell and Shea appeared on their mounts. They looked to be in a heated

argument. Jake was pointing at the surveyor's wagon, shouting. Randy's hands went up in a helpless gesture. More words were exchanged, then the Crockhead men forded the creek.

Travis ran forward to meet them. "What was all that?"

Randy glowered back at the Fist hands behind him, then pivoted in his saddle to glare at his own crew. "Seems someone doubted I'd be capable of negotiating a truce. They ran the surveyors off."

Travis tilted his hat back. "Peaceful as a tomb over here. Nobody went--well, I was inside the barn for a spell." Now Travis cast the evil eye at his men. "Somebody threaten those city fellas?"

"No Boss," the men answered in unison.

"The surveyors accepted an offer of fresh coffee," Randy gritted through clenched teeth. "They couldn't refuse, since Russell's wife brought it to them."

"Russell's wife? He ain't married."

Freiling couldn't contain himself another minute. "Geez, Timmy's gonna be disappointed to hear that. Him lookin' so purty for that big ape. Lu's skirt looked right nice over his bony knees."

"Timmy," Travis bellowed. The slight young man edged forward, unable to look his employer in the eye. "You went over there in my wife's clothes?"

"It was Sourdough's idea. He's the one who said to trick 'em into drinking that castor oil."

Within seconds, every man present, including the disgruntled foreman, began chortling. Travis thumped his knee with one fist. "Castor oil in Sourdough's coffee? Christ, that's inhuman. Suspect it won't stop Sweeney from getting his phony survey map, but thanks anyhow, for stickin' up for Crockhead."

Danbers raised his fist toward the wide blue skies. "That walrus Sweeney might have been some tough boyo back in Dublin, but there's good Irishmen standin' here, too. If it's a fight Sweeney wants, it's a fight he'll get."

Travis knew that to a man, they shared that sentiment. He couldn't be too upset over a show of loyalty. "Hells' bells, hitch up the buckboard. Time for a visit to the Jug. First round and vittles on me."

Chapter 21

"Conley set us up, pretending his foreman wanted to meet with Russell to resolve our differences. Only sent that idiot Shea to distract my men. And those dullards Wilburne sent. Spineless whelps, I tell you."

Patrick reached for the platter of steaming prime rib, spearing the meat with a viciousness Pearl knew he'd like to unleash on Travis and his men. She knew about the afternoon's fiasco. Typical male posturing. No real concern of hers--except as it involved Gavin Wilburne.

"Those men couldn't know our foreman wasn't married, Da. And who would have suspected the Fist men to try such a wicked prank? It's not Gavin's fault. You pay Russell and his cohorts enough to keep a sharp eye out."

"Defending Wilburne, are you now? He can do no wrong, eh?"

"I didn't say that, but you can't fault him when he wasn't even here."

Patrick chewed a hunk of beef and gulped a swallow of beer. "Was a time you sounded like that about Conley. Thought the sun rose and set on him. So perhaps young Wilburne's been under your skirts, too."

Pearl let her fork hit her china plate with a loud clank. "I'm not going to dignify that remark. I told you that Travis lied. There are any number of ways he might have obtained information about my room."

"Including visiting it. You'd not be so 'humiliated' as you claim if you'd safeguarded your virtue. 'Tis all the more insulting to be tupp'd and cast aside, isn't it, my proud birdie? Yet you haven't learned a thing."

"Oh yes I have," Pearl shot back. "We're talking about someone who dressed up a cowhand as a woman to poison complete strangers. The same rancher who made wild accusations in the midst of a downpour. Travis is not a rational man."

"Your Wilburne was supposed to have him away from here by now, Pearl. Wilburne assured me he'd rid us of that Catholic-lover, leave him no way to hang on. But that accursed Conley's like a tick on a cur's back. The more I try to shake loose of him, the tighter he burrows in. And--"

Pearl glanced up from her end of the long formal dining table. "Da?" Her father was slumped forward, facedown in his supper. "Da! Hobson, go for the doctor! Da!"

News of Sweeney's fatal heart attack rocked the small community. A few of the more pragmatic town elders and merchants inquired whether his sudden demise inspired gleeful celebration at Crockhead Rest. Travis grimly denied the cruel jest, stunned as anyone else that Patrick had answered everyone's prayers by simply dropping dead.

But Travis was uncertain what Sweeney's death would mean. The true source of the enmity was Pearl, and Russell was still the Fist's foreman. There had never been any respect or friendliness from Russell. In all likelihood, the foreman would take the opportunity to usurp greater power in running the Fist his way. Travis sent a note offering condolences on Patrick's demise and requesting a personal meeting with Pearl to discuss the ranches and their respective water rights.

The recipient of the note was in no mood to deal with business matters. She'd sent Gavin a telegram advising of her father's untimely death. She'd watched an undertaker pick up Patrick's body, watched silently as the stately mahogany casket was slowly lowered into a grave. She'd thrown the first handful of dirt over its convex lid. Still, she couldn't accept that the house was now empty but for Hobson. That Patrick Sweeney, the opinionated, blustery, cantankerous man who'd been both mother and father to her these last years was forever gone.

Hobson tapped on her bedroom door two days after the funeral to announce a young male visitor. Pearl immediately leapt up from the moiré settee in her room and rushed down the curved staircase. She flung herself at Gavin, sobbing. "Oh Gavin, I thought you'd never get here."

"I had business matters to conclude, but naturally, I came as soon as I could, to offer my support and condolences. Come, Pearl, you must be near collapse." He drew her into the small salon and closed the door in the butler's face.

"I never got to tell Da about . . . about us," she sobbed. "I planned to tell him we were betrothed during that evening's meal, but he was so angry."

"Poor Pearl. My sweet, lost little Pearl. Had your father been ill?"

"Never! That's just it, he was always so strong. There was no warning. Oh, I don't know what I'll do. I'm sick of cows and Catholics. Sick of the childish range war with Travis." She sniffled and wiped at her puffy eyes with a lace handkerchief. "You know," she confided just above a whisper, "Travis insisted our foreman couldn't be trusted. Da never told me, but Russell bragged that he lobbed a brick into Travis' window with a hate message. I was appalled, truly appalled. I know Da must have condoned it."

"Not a particularly clever ploy," Gavin observed.

"I'm only thankful Travis didn't respond in kind. He sent a note, asking to meet whenever I'm able to shoulder the responsibility of managing the Fist. I'm not certain I'll ever feel able. I don't know the first thing about running a ranch. I was off at school for years. Besides, ranch operations are such a masculine pursuit. I paid no attention to the workings of this place. It's not something a lady's concerned with."

Gavin lifted a broad shoulder in a smooth shrug of indifference. "If you don't trust your foreman, let him go. You can easily hire some reliable fellow with experience and references."

"Can't you handle things?" She knew the raw plea was in her eyes as well as her voice. "I was hoping you would, Gavin. We're going to be married soon, so the ranch would be yours, anyway. After we set a date, I mean."

Gavin paced the length of the room, seeming to consider her words. She crossed to him, tugged at his lapels. "Can't I just sell this place? I don't really want to stay here. You don't want to manage a dusty cattle spread. You were thinking of running for the legislature here in Colorado, but you must have other connections back east someplace."

"Yes, in New York and Baltimore, but --"

"That's wonderful. I've always wanted to live in New York. Could we be married and take a house there? I would make a handsome profit off this place, and there are Da's stocks."

"You're certain?" He caught her hand in his. "I can get that survey completed right away, giving you exclusive water rights. Conley's spread wouldn't be worth a plugged nickel. He couldn't give his land away, while you'd be able to find a buyer easily. As a matter of fact, I know someone interested in ranching, if you're serious about selling out. I didn't want to suggest the notion if you had strong roots here."

"You know someone?" Pearl didn't care that she sounded entirely too thrilled. She was through playing hard to get. It was time to get out of this dustbowl and onto the train that would take her to New York and the glamour of being a politician's elegant wife.

"Of course, it would mean canceling other plans I'd already set in motion," Gavin mumbled, deep in thought.

"Plans?" she echoed.

"Well, while you generously mention my future stakes in this operation, you're also aware we haven't yet posted banns. I've really no assurance beyond your verbal guarantee . . . And forgive me for being so blunt, but debutantes are notorious for changing their fickle minds. I'd hate to forego a lucrative opportunity for an empty promise."

Pearl reached up to smooth the lace at her throat. The white froth at her neckline was the only break in the severe black of her mourning dress. "I've already agreed to marry you. What more --? Money. I could pay you," she offered with a sniffle.

He seized on that instantly. "To act as your agent?" She nodded and he smiled. "I don't see why not. I'm a known land speculator. It's reasonable to expect and receive compensation for my efforts on your behalf. No one would question you paying me a standard retainer."

"I need to give this some thought."

"Perhaps I should give our wedding date the same weighty consideration." His gray-green eyes narrowed in warning.

Pearl understood the implications. It was so like a man to tangle business dealings with personal feelings. Men and their business. She truthfully couldn't understand what they found so fascinating about investments and shares and the like. Women concentrated their energies on important things, like who they might find themselves married to for the next thirty or forty years. Pearl still had a few misgivings.

Gavin was handsome and dapper, but also cynical and completely self absorbed. Pearl didn't delude herself about his personality. She doubted the man could correctly identify her eye color if she turned her back. Still, his Eastern connections could get her out of Colorado, give them a promising future. She wouldn't need an attentive husband in some big cosmopolitan city. There would be parties, social rounds, the theater. Plenty of ways for a society matron to occupy her time. Pearl was hiding her light under a bushel here.

But then again, if she didn't get a reasonable offer for the Flying Fist, she might be forced to endure life in Pueblo's cattle business. God, how dreary a thought! She wasn't about to watch men brand steers or go to those dull auctions her father had looked forward to. For pity's sake, they were nothing but dusty cowboys and smelly beasts!

No, she'd definitely require a male to deal with all of that. Someone who'd believe he guided her . . . while all the while he'd be secretly led around himself, actually doing her bidding. She'd need someone shrewd, yet malleable. Like Travis Conley.

Decisions, decisions.

"How much would be required to 'compensate' you, do you suppose?" she demurred, lowering her lashes at Gavin.

"I'm afraid I rushed straight from the train station. I didn't even bother securing a hotel room. That cost factored in with--"

"You can stay here."

"Pearl, you're alone here, apart from that decrepit butler of yours. It would hardly be proper for me to stay under your roof."

"Impropriety has never hampered you before." Her eyes slid downward to his crotch.

"How much will you need, Gavin? I can see the banker tomorrow morning."

"I'll see how this evening progresses and let you know." The wicked gleam in his eyes left little doubt as to how he intended to lessen her grief.

The following day he was waiting outside the bank when the employees arrived to open for business. Ignoring the callow young teller, Gavin presented a note penned in Pearl's dainty script to the middle-aged bank manager. The note instructed a draft be prepared for two thousand dollars, payable to Pearl Sweeney's land agent, Mr. Gavin Wilburne.

"If you don't mind," Gavin mused, "I'd prefer cash for half of it. Patrick Sweeney hired me, prior to his untimely demise, to arrange for a team of surveyors. I need to pay the crew for their work hereabouts."

The mild traces of suspicion flitted out of the older man's eyes. He offered a thin smile. "I'm Ambrose Gant, president of this bank. Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr. Wilburne. If you'll just sign here," he pointed, "Fine and dandy, just dandy. Will there be anything else I might do for you, sir? Perhaps you'd like to open an account here in town--er, seeing as you're on retainer to Miss Sweeney."

"You know, that's not a bad idea." He handed back a hundred dollars of the cash. "Put that in an account for Miss Stefania Conley."

"Conley? I know a Travis Conley."

The stranger nodded tersely. "Right. Stefania's his daughter. Open a savings account in her name, and see to it this remains an anonymous gesture."

"Sir, I'm afraid I don't understand."

"That's all to the good, isn't it? My dear mother always swore Adam would still be living in Eden if he hadn't spent so much time trying to understand the proper way to sport a fig leaf. Appreciate your time, Gant."

"B-but--"

Gant saw he was too late. The impeccably-dressed young Easterner was already heading down the plank sidewalk. Like most other merchants and citizens in town, Gant was aware of the feud between the two local cattlemen. Peculiar. Why would a land agent for the Sweeneys want to make a gift to Conley's daughter? Guilt? Ambrose knew the survey could result in the child being thrown out into the street.

He scratched his neatly clipped beard. No, there had to be more to this tale. And guilt seemed an unlikely motive for Wilburne's eyes were like granite blocks overgrown with lichen. Icy, pale gray-green eyes. Gant had seen eyes with that gelid look before. The dandy could probably turn his own family into the streets without the slightest twinge of remorse.

Chapter 22

Lucia tipped the bottle straight up, wincing as the last slimy droplets hit the bowl of her spoon. She'd finished an entire bottle of the special elixir from the medicine wagon, but still suffered discomfort on her left side. Instead of diminishing, it seemed to radiate across her belly. She had been to church to make her confession yesterday, hoping the novena she offered would bring relief. Perhaps today

She moved to the warm stove, knowing it was time to start preparing the midday meal.

Stefania appeared, relating in Italian the fantastic tale one of the cowhands told her. Stefania remembered many things, but had never seen this. She wanted to know if it was true a man could lasso a tumbleweed and ride it across the great prairie. Had Papa Travis or Mick ever done this?

Lucia tried to deflect the childish prattle while setting her pots to bubbling on the stovetop. What was it she needed to do next? There was something, if only she could remember . . . It was difficult to focus and think clearly. The pain was worse today, and Stefania was still asking questions.

Suddenly Lucia felt a spiraling nausea take hold. The stove was too hot, the whole kitchen stifling. She couldn't breathe. She heard and saw a lid rise from one pot as steam and boiling liquid began hissing, but she was helpless. She couldn't reach for the kitchen towel, couldn't make her feet obey. "Stefania, get Travis to come in. Find him . . . hurry."

The room tilted. Lucia found herself stretched out on the plank flooring. It felt cool, inviting. She needed to rest. She was so very tired, too tired to get up. She closed her eyes and let the numbness seep into her bones.

Stefania skidded out the back door, hollering all the way to the barn. "Papa Travis."

He'd been in the middle of a conversation about the survey team returning to the creek. He turned his attention from the three cowpokes he'd been addressing. It was unusual for Stefania to be so bold. She was usually timid around the men. And except for the cats, she usually skirted any critters in the barn. Travis worried he'd never get her to sit a horse. She seemed terrified of them. He'd tried putting her on his lap atop Old Rye, but she'd squirmed and bawled and nearly slid right out of the saddle. Yet now she walked right by a gelding munching oats as if the nag didn't exist.

"What is it, Stef? I'm workin'."

"Mama needed me to find you. You must come inside."

"What for?" Travis cursed beneath his breath as soon as he asked the question.

Expecting a three-year-old to have a coherent reply was courting disappointment--particularly since the child in question didn't have any better command of English than he did of Italian. Whatever the hitch at the house, he'd have to see Lucia and straighten it out. He dusted off his jeans. Stefania grabbed his hand and began marching him toward the back door.

The hairs began to prickle along the back of his neck. Stefania wasn't the demonstrative type, either. He lengthened his strides, pulling the child along beside him. He jerked open the back door to be greeted by loud hissing and a mess all over the stove. His first thought was that Lucia might burn the place down if she'd gone off and left--

His boot nudged something. He glanced down. Lucia was lying on her side, her apron clutched in one fist. A dark crimson stain showed clearly on her faded cotton skirt--too dark crimson for tomato sauce. Maybe it was her monthly time. The thought didn't slow the pounding of his heart or calm his nerves. She'd never fainted like this before.

"Lu. Wake up, sweetheart." He knelt and tried to lift her into a sitting position. She lolled in his arms. His gaze swept to the sideboard, riveted to an empty glass bottle he'd never seen before. "Rejuvenating Elixir" was printed on the label. "Stef, fetch me that bottle there," he barked.

The child obediently handed it to him. Travis scanned the label's fine print. Something was seriously wrong. Lucia hadn't seemed like herself lately. She must have secretly been drinking this damned concoction. Now she was out cold. He didn't recognize the stuff, but some patent medicines were stronger than distilled spirits, or actually contained poison.

He commanded Stef to run back to the barn and tell the first man she saw to fetch the doctor. Travis cradled Lucia in his arms, praying Stef would find somebody who could ride like lightning, praying the doc wasn't off somewhere delivering a baby.

He wasn't, and arrived at the ranch a short time later. "I know this elixir and it's harmless. Won't do a bit of good, but it wouldn't cause swooning." The doctor squatted to peer at Lucia's lower body. "Doubt this is menstrual. Help me get her onto the table."

Mavis had already come from the cabin with lye soap and clean towels. Travis and one of the hands gently laid Lucia on the kitchen table.

"She's miscarrying. Could be a tubal pregnancy." Doc Sullivan's voice was grim. "I have to open her gut, Travis. Right away." He glanced over at Mavis. "I'll need your help."

Travis felt like someone had just kicked him in the head. "Oh Christ."

He repeated those words numerous times over the next hour. He sat in the parlor with his hands fisted. He barely acknowledged Randy's hand on his shoulder in a gesture of support. He blasted a cowpoke who opened the front door, curious what the excitement was all about. The front window of the parlor became a mass of anxious faces. Every man on Travis' spread abandoned his chores and came to keep a vigil as word spread Doc Sullivan was treating Lucia.

At last she was carried to the spare bedroom next to the kitchen. Travis stared down at her slack features. Her skin was no longer a healthy olive tone, but a frightening dull gray. Travis could barely make out the rise and fall of her large breasts, so shallow was her respiration. "I knew she hadn't been feeling so good," he began, glancing up at the

older man, unashamed that his voice quavered when he spoke.

"She was only a few weeks along," the doctor said kindly. "Likely didn't even know she was pregnant yet. The baby implanted wrong, in a tube instead of her womb. Tube ruptured. If you hadn't found her and summoned me when you did, I doubt I could have saved her."

Travis seized the edge of the wood bureau for support. "Holy Mother of God. Lucia was dyin'? Right there in my arms, on the kitchen floor? Dyin'?"

"The circumstances were potentially fatal, yes."

"Were." Travis exhaled a shaky breath. "So she ain't--She can't, Doc. We got us that young-un to raise, and I don't speak enough Italian. I can't manage without Lucia."

"Calm down," Doc Sullivan insisted, squeezing Travis' shoulder. "You know, I reckon folks picture a doctor's hand holding a scalpel or needle, but more often than not my hands reach out to give strength and comfort. I saved your brother a couple years back. I won't permit you to lose your wife now."

He started for the door, then stopped, his voice soft. "Sorry about the unborn child. There was nothing I could do."

"Don't suppose so," Travis mumbled, only half aware of what they were discussing. He still couldn't fathom that Lucia had been pregnant, had nearly died. How the sun was setting in the western skies, just like it did on ordinary days. How everything had seemed so damn ordinary one minute, terrifying the next.

"Her overall health seems reasonably sound," the physician went on. "Barring infection, which is the big danger now, she should recover without further complications."

"'Further' meanin' there's somethin' you ain't said yet."

The doctor's expression was mild. "Women have two fertilization tubes, just as we have two testicles. She's lost one tube. I had to cut away the lacerated tissue and sew the remnants closed to staunch the blood. Your chances for future conception are diminished--not eliminated."

He left Travis sitting on the bed, staring at Lucia through a haze of emotional pain. They were different in so many ways, and still had that hard place between them over religion. The one thing they'd always had in common was a love of children, hopes for a family together.

It wasn't fair, Travis railed. Part of the blood this morning had been a tiny living human created out of their loving. The doctor hadn't been able to save it. And more plowing couldn't ensure another tiny seed would take hold and grow. Lu was a good woman, a good ma. Decent to everybody around her, never said a mean thing. He remembered her crying out in the barn over the treatment she'd suffered in town. The woman didn't deserve to suffer, to lose so much, even her dreams.

Travis dropped his head into his hands and let the tears come.

Chapter 23

Mavis had convinced Travis his little daughter needed him. He knew Mavis was right. Stefania was scared, understandably shaken by two days of tense silence in the house, being kept away from the woman she now regarded as her mother. The child needed whatever strength he could summon.

He wasn't much good at stretching the truth, though. Lu had gone feverish and he'd personally ridden out in the middle of the night to fetch Doc Sullivan again. The doctor changed Lu's dressings and used a disinfecting agent. He remained until dawn, assuring Travis the crisis had passed. Lu was cooler now, but still unresponsive. Travis had begun to feel a deep despair. He wasn't sure he could put on the false front Stefania needed. His life seemed hopeless.

The surveyors were gone, which meant that any day the results would be forthcoming. Jake Russell would wave that damned survey map in Travis' face and fence off the creek. Travis would be forced to sell off his stock, his land too when he could no longer make the mortgage payments. His men would straggle off to other spreads. All that was too complicated for a young child to take in, even if she understood the words when he talked to her.

But more than that was the constant fear--eating at him from the wee hours of the morning, becoming more real as time ground onward--that before economic stresses sent him to ruin, he'd be forced to dig his wife's grave.

He swallowed the secret terror and beckoned for Stefania to follow him into the bedroom where Lu was sleeping.

Stefania silently crossed to the bed and grasped Lucia's hand between her small palms. The hand beneath Lucia's fingers held them firmly, the one above tenderly stroked. The child whispered in Italian, staring intently at Lucia's face. She went still for a moment, then turned to Travis.

"I told her to find my other madre and papa--there with God." She pointed at the ceiling.

Travis fell to his knees and pulled the child against his chest. "No, Stef," he choked. "She ain't goin' there yet. She can't. We love her and need her here."

"Yes," the girl answered, pulling back. "And she does not want to go away from us. I felt. She wants here."

"You could feel that, in her hand?"

Stefania nodded, defiant confidence glinting in her black eyes. Travis had seen that same glint when he helped her gather eggs and she'd proven she was big enough to do the chore. "Look," the child pointed. "I tell again. You see." She wrested free of him and caught Lu's fingers again, repeating the Italian phrases. Travis saw then what she'd glimpsed, so subtle he'd missed it the first time.

Lucia's fingertips curled just a bit, then relaxed. Stefania said some more words in their native language. The weak fingers flexed slightly again. "Papa Travis," she commanded, "you hold."

He took the clammy hand Stefania relinquished. Lu's skin was damp, but not fiery to the touch. "Lucia," he said in a hoarse whisper. "I'm here, sweetheart. Stefania says you're hangin' on, tryin' to get better. Go slow. I'll be here waitin', however long it takes. And don't you rush yourself about it. You know how scattered you get when you hurry."

He pressed a tender kiss to her fingers. "I miss you somethin' awful, Lu. Want your eyes open, for you to talk to me, but I won't understand if it ain't English, so you rest until you're strong enough. I love you, Lucia."

Stefania said nothing until Travis tucked her into bed. "You and Mama Lucia are God's parents for me," she announced proudly.

He smoothed a row of dark, gleaming ringlets. "You almost got the way of it. Lucia was your godmother, but we adopted you. We signed papers with a judge, and now we're your legal parents, just like the ones up there." Now he pointed at the ceiling. "Lucia's your ma, I'm your pa."

"You love Lucia, like me?"

"Yep. A whole lot."

"This is good," Stefania remarked. "But I do not cry like parents." Travis frowned, testing the words in his mind. He was trying to think of synonyms when Stefania tugged at his hand. "Mama cries on the picnic. You cry in your room last night. I do not like to cry, but I love all same." She leaned forward and wiped a forefinger along his cheekbone, then held the fingertip out for inspection. "See? Water again now."

He hugged the child, burying his face in her hair. For females who spoke so little English, she and Lu sure understood one hell of a lot.

Travis sat up all night in a chair beside Lucia's bed. He'd just massaged the kink out of his neck and pulled on his boots when he heard Mavis come in the house. Gray daylight was going dun, picking up tawny golden rays of early sun. "You'll need fresh water for the coffee," Travis noted as he walked into the kitchen. Mavis was lighting the stove. "I'll get some."

He was at the creek filling two large pails when a rider appeared on the opposite bank. "Brung a message from Miss Pearl." The wrangler had a boy's face and a shock of nearly white hair. He forded the creek and bent to hand Travis a folded scrap of paper. He was gone before Travis finished reading it.

Randy came up, cocked rifle in both hands. "What's up?"

"Pearl," Travis answered, squinting as he crumpled the note and shoved it into a pocket of his denims. "Summons to her house this afternoon." He kicked a rock into the creek

and hefted the full buckets. "She's got the results of the survey."

At three o'clock Travis was on the broad porch, reaching below the black mourning wreath to rap on the front door. Sweeney's butler escorted him to the library. Travis glanced around, recalling very clearly other times he'd waited in this room for Patrick to come blustering in. They'd shared short glasses of imported Irish whiskey, toasted one another over the big cherrywood desk--until the last time Travis had come here, when he'd dumped whiskey on it and Sweeney had laughed. The fat prick was probably still laughing from beyond the pale.

The door opened and a pinched oval face appeared. Travis' hostess was garbed in stark black. He searched his soul for the words propriety demanded. Personal feelings aside, she was a neighbor who'd lost her father. "My sympathies again. I know this must be difficult for you. Heard it was a nice funeral."

"Please sit," she replied stiffly. "This is no pleasure for either of us. Standing here swapping banalities won't make it any easier."

He took the customary chair facing the desk. Pearl chose a striped wingback near one of the floor-to-ceiling bookcases. She didn't mind speaking bluntly, it seemed, as long as she didn't have to look him in the eye while doing it.

"Thank you for sending the note after Da's passing. It was decent of you, and accurate. I wasn't able to cope with any of this ranch business just then."

"You got the survey results back."

"Yes, and you know why my father had it done."

"Yeah, because a brick didn't get me to pack up. Because smearin' Lu's name didn't send her down the railroad line. I know it came back in your favor. What's it gonna take to save Crockhead Rest, Pearl? You want me grovelin' on the floor? This is where I'm supposed to get down on my knees and beg your forgiveness. Tell you I rue the day I met Lu, apologize for the way things went."

"We both have regrets, Travis. One of my deepest is the brick incident. You warned me about Russell. I didn't pay much heed before that nastiness. But I knew nothing about it at the time. That's why I was stunned you'd come here in the rain and make threats against Da."

Travis believed her for once. He doubted Patrick scrawled his hate message, then asked her to check his grammar and spelling.

Pearl twisted a handkerchief between her fingers. "Jake Russell was involved in other incidents of wrongdoing. I should let him go, shouldn't I?"

"You're askin' the wrong fella, don't you reckon? I can't be open minded when it comes to Russell. I want him out of Pueblo. Hear Maine's nice."

"It's possible to get him out of town--if I go to the sheriff and disavow any knowledge of

his actions against you. I know you filed a complaint. I can hand over a scapegoat." She moved to stand behind the desk, pinning Travis with her cool blue gaze.

"It's also possible to persuade me to forget this land survey. I could tear it up right now."

Travis saw the familiar avaricious expression. She wanted something, and badly. "Ain't we played enough games, Miss Pearl?"

"I own this ranch now. I've considered the ramifications of that fact and investigated what's required to continue operations. I'm convinced Russell should go, but only if I have someone competent to replace him. Someone who knows cattle and could oversee my men, the payroll, hire more wranglers as we expand."

Travis lifted one shoulder in dismissal. "There's four or five states full of cattlemen to choose from."

"No, I'd need you to make it work, Travis."

"Me? I'm the fella you're tryin' to run out of town right behind Jake Russell, or have you forgotten the real purpose of that survey?"

"You don't have to leave town or give up your own spread," she countered. "Not if you get the divorce you promised."

Travis fought to control his rising anger. "I promised that months ago, before you and Patrick declared a range war. Before Patrick started calling Lu a whore with a bastard at her skirts. Before your foreman smashed my bedroom window, killed a bunch of my cows, and brought in those surveyors."

"Water rights become a moot point if we annex our spreads. Just imagine it, Travis. You can leave Shea in charge on your section, while you run things on this side of the creek. Your hands all stay on. Any profits from cattle now carrying the Crockhead brand are yours to keep. I won't demand a share in them. Next spring we'll develop a new brand for all the steers. We could have a ranch to put any other operation in Colorado to shame."

Shame. Now there was a word he didn't think she was familiar with.

Look at what she was offering him. Everything he'd dreamed about, until a few months ago. An ordinary man's every ambition, tied up in a nice, neat package. Her repugnant old man six feet under. Travis the new cattle baron. It was insulting, after all he'd been through--yet flattering too, for she was willing to pay one hell of a price to get him back between her white thighs.

"Certainly no one would blame you," she was saying in her most patronizing tone. "That Italian doesn't fit in and never will. I understand, too, there's some question about offspring. She miscarried, didn't she? How unfortunate."

"Unfortunate," he repeated. Pearl had spoken the words as though referring to the dry goods merchant being unable to special order the shade of gingham she preferred. How

unfortunate.

"Damned unlucky, all right," Travis ground out. "Sort of like your pa fallin' into his peas. A darned shame."

"You're trying to hurt me now. Well, I won't pretend it didn't smart to learn the doctor had been out to your place for a female problem," she sniffed in answer, using the white lace square to dab at eyes that were perfectly clear and dry. "Clearly it's no 'paper marriage' if the woman was carrying your child. It pained me to hear that, Travis. It did, despite everything. No matter what you may think of me."

"I think you don't mean any of this," he answered smoothly.

"Good God, that's cruel. I care for you. I always have. You were the one who only courted me in hopes of someday attaining all this." She spread her arms in an all-encompassing gesture. "I never deluded myself about what attracted you. I'm nice-looking, but it was never me. You were after this ranch. Now you can have it." She frowned slightly at his glower. "I still want you, Travis, and now I need you. You want this. It's a reasonable pact. One where everyone benefits."

He thought about Lucia losing the baby and Pearl's reaction. How unfortunate. He thought about Lucia running away to St. Louis after stealing his payroll and hiring a lawyer to get Stefania out of the children's home. He remembered her depressingly accurate notion of the affluent using their capital to buy anything they desired, even human beings. Clearly it's no 'paper marriage'. . . .

No, it sure as hell wasn't. Maybe it never was. Neither was Lucia actually mixed up about the way people wielded money and power. She'd described it all backasswards, but had it right enough in her mind. But Travis knew the Sweeneys couldn't buy judges or rig surveys if honest folk refused to put a price on their own integrity. No amount of money could buy what wasn't for sale.

That's what it came down to--personal honor and integrity. A man either had it or he didn't. The peculiar thing was, it had taken losing everything for Travis to see that so clearly. And to discover he still had a good measure of it he was unwilling to sell, no matter what Pearl offered.

He got to his feet. "Thanks for callin' me over here, but I ain't available. Not as your foreman, your husband, or your lover."

All pretext of softness and vulnerability dropped away from her then. Her eyes frosted over to the same glacial ice of her dead father's. "I hope you're planning to feed those immigrants in your house a bounty of false pride, then. Misplaced male pride is all you have left. Your parcel's worthless dirt now."

Travis started for the door without responding to her taunts. "I knew this could go either way," she informed his back. "Naturally, I would have preferred you being open to such an offer. But marriage to you and annexing the ranches was never my sole option."

"Good. Then fire your pit viper of a foreman and string up the barbed wire along the creek. That's what comes next."

"Actually, it's not. My other choice is to sell. I've already executed an option through a land agent. I dearly hope whoever buys this ranch strings up that wire and crushes you. You and that ignorant doxy you married."

"Whoever buys this spread has to be a better human being than the ones livin' on it the past decade. Pitiful excuses for humanity, you and your dead pa."

"That wife of yours is the one who's pitiful. She can't string three sentences together. Do you know how everyone laughs behind your back, Travis? My father was sure that brat's yours. Probably from a cattle drive years ago. You couldn't even do a decent job of disavowing it later."

Travis saw a chance to pay back a little of the misery the Sweeneys were so fond of dishing out. "The little girl is mine. I'm her pa and damned proud of it. Have a nice evenin', Miss Sweeney."

She followed him out of the library, still railing at him. "I'll be glad to leave. I've had enough of this hellhole and uncouth cattlemen like you. You were probably born in a barn, but I'm of better blood. I'm moving to New York. My land agent asked me to marry him. He's building a mansion and plans to run for public office. He's very well connected, not content to align himself with illiterate nobodies, like you do. He knows important people. As his wife, I'll be the toast of New York society."

"A real big bug. Big and showy and poisonous." Travis stepped out onto the porch, grateful to fill his lungs with clean air.

"I won't stay to watch you wallow in poverty and despair." Pearl gave a snorting laugh. "Travis Conley, the proud cattle rancher. Everyone will see what pride's worth when you can't unload your worthless piece of dirt and your cows all die of thirst."

"Patrick left you somethin' besides a cattle spread and money. His heart couldn't pump blood no more, it got so clogged with bigotry and hatred. The same intolerance that ran him out of Ireland became a part of him. That's what sent him off the face of this earth. That's your true legacy, Pearl. And I think it's pretty damned funny. You're an immigrant yourself, Pearl. Better blood, my ass. You with all your airs ain't really any different from Lu--except she's got a decency you'll never have. You can't buy it."

He mounted Rye and set out for home at an easy pace. He knew he should get back to check on Lucia, yet he needed time alone. Time for a last look at what was, to consider what might have been. He paused at the curve in the creekbed as it stretched westerly beyond the boundaries of the Fist and Crockhead. He tried to imagine the sprawl as one unified ranch.

Ah, it would have been grand to be master of it all. Would have been remarkable, havin' his name renowned from Kansas to Utah for fine beef and a clean, responsible cattle

operation. He could see himself dressed in a buttoned silk waistcoat with polished high boots. But coupled with that image was one of reaching to help Lucia out of a shiny closed carriage. He saw her step out, her hair pinned up under a stylish bonnet, her shapely curves accentuated by a fitted velvet traveling suit. And Stefania behind her, soft young fingers warmed inside a fur muff that matched the trim on a new winter coat.

He was better off struggling with the two Italians who had become such a pivotal part of his life--even if he lost Crockhead--than he'd be attaining material wealth without them. There had never been a moment of indecision. His heart and his gut said follow his instincts. His instincts said forget Pearl and get on home.

He arrived outside the barn to be greeted by Mavis running from the back door to tell him Lucia had regained consciousness.

He went to her, dropping to his knees beside the bed so he could hold her upper body. There were no words, just harsh breathing while Travis took a few moments to silently thank the Almighty and savor the warmth and life that still flowed through Lucia's veins.

"You scared the piss out of me, you know," he said at last. "Why didn't you tell me how bad it was, instead of pretendin' you were just a little tired and takin' that fool tonic?"

Lucia's hand was enmeshed with his. "I never like doctors."

"Doc Sullivan saved your life, woman. You'd best change your mind on that score. You would've bled to death if I hadn't sent for him. Thank God, Stefania came to get me."

"Mavis said the doctor cut me here," she motioned toward her lower body. "I'm frightened to see. I am not smooth now. A scar, yes?"

He had to smile. "Yeah, you got stitches, but the doc didn't think it would be too awful of a scar later. You ought to see my big brother. He's got a nasty knife wound on his chest and bullet holes. Looks like a patchwork quilt."

Travis hesitated, knowing he had to tell her the full import of her medical episode. "You were havin' pains because you were carryin' and it didn't go right."

"Not carrying anything," she disagreed, wincing. "I was near the stove, cooking."

"No, I mean carryin' a child, Lu. Pregnant. But the seed planted wrong and you got torn up inside. You lost a lot of blood, but--"

"No, no. I could not--Marone! Pregnant? He was certain of this?"

Travis took her hands in his and squeezed gently. "Yeah. You're doin' fine, healin' like he thought you would. And in time you might--"

"Madonna mia! A child. I killed your child."

"Horse dung. It was one of those freak things, like a tornado or a tree not growin' in a meadow for no reason anybody can figure. You had a bad spell, Lucia. You don't seem to be listenin'. You could have died. The important thing is you're alive and well."

"Perhaps that is the evil thing, that I yet live."

Travis couldn't stop himself from grasping her by the shoulders and giving her a small shake. "Have you lost your senses? I love you, Lu. Reckon I've felt like that ever since you stood at the base of my drive with a tin of cookies and wormed your way into my life. You charmed every man on this spread that day. It just took me awhile to realize you'd won me over, too. I know this is hard. I know you want children. We've got Stefania. God willin', we'll have others."

"But God is not willing. He curses me."

Travis sensed he was in much deeper than he wanted to be. The simple explanation of her medical condition was turning into a philosophical debate on religion and the meaning of life. "You miscarried. It happens. Doc's treated other women with the same thing. You ain't the only one."

"God has punished me. You know we sinned. You know it was a sin to make love together when you are not Catholic."

Travis had taken about all he could of females pointing out his deficiencies. First Pearl tried to break his spirit. Now Lucia was making him sound like a slaving animal--for wanting to bed his own lawful wife.

"Nope, I'm no Catholic," he snapped. "I'm Presbyterian, like Pearl. I still refused to divorce you to marry her, even though she asked me to. She's got the land survey back. She'll break me if I don't get shed of you. Could be I was hasty in turnin' her down . . . if you think all I am is a miserable sinner."

"You went to see her."

"Yeah, I did. Even though I lost a baby and damned near lost my wife, I got a spread to run--for the time bein', though it won't last long without water rights. I'll be forced to sell off my herds and lay off the men. I'm just about ruined, Lucia. Flat busted. Thought about that as I rode back here. I decided I could live with nothin', even the knowledge I could have had it all, as long as I still had you. But now it seems I ain't got nothin' left."

"Oh Travis--"

"Don't you 'Oh Travis' me. You listen real carefully," he ordered, stalking the length of the bedroom. "If I lose this spread, I'll take a job as foreman for some other ranch. We could work together someplace. Build a little shack for ourselves and Stefania. She could go to school with other kids. Hell, if it came to that, I could go back to plowin' fields. I grew up on a farm. I can start over and build a new life, but you have to be part of that. You said you loved me."

"Yes, I love you. As much as God, I love you. That is why this happened," she cried. "To love so much I forget my church is wrong. Now you will lose everything. We have lost a baby. You see how we are punished."

"I've seen cows seize up and die tryin' to push out a calf. I've had to shoot a horse with a broken foreleg. Was God punishin' those animals, too? Did that happen to my stock cause I ain't Catholic? You sound pazza now. We both go to church. God's benevolent. He wouldn't purposely kill an unborn child. When you're back to feelin' like your old self, you'll realize that."

"I will not share your bed again, Travis. It is wrong."

"Lucia!"

"No, please do not keep arguing." She had straightened up, but grimaced now and leaned back against the headboard.

"Come on, you're gettin' too worked up. Ain't good, so soon. We'll talk about this another time." He drew the covers back over her and tried to smooth her hair, but she caught his hand, entreaty in her dark eyes.

"You know many things. I have no smart answers. I see only that trying to love you and God, I fail you both."

"Naw, Lu. We can try for other children. Doc says it'll be harder, but not impossible. I'll think on this mess with Pearl, find a solution. That survey's crooked. There's got to be some way to prove it. But you got to get well and come back to my bed. Into my arms. I need you."

Her eyes closed. Travis knew she was exhausted, physically and emotionally. She wasn't strong enough to deal with his frustrations now. He'd give her time, then somehow convince her of the flaws in her thinking. They weren't livin' in the times of Moses, with plagues and locusts. She had to realize that and come around eventually.

But as he rode into town in search of advice regarding the land survey, Lucia's words kept niggling at the back of his mind. It was easy to dismiss her rantings as the nonsense of a sick person or silly superstition. What worried him was knowing that right or wrong, she believed everything she'd said.

Nothing he might say would change her mind. She had a counterpoint to every rationale he came up with. They'd argued about the religious question enough times for him to know his options were darned few. Going to the priest at her church would serve no good purpose--the priest and some Catholic nun had put the fear of retribution in Lu's mind to begin with.

Travis doubted having his Presbyterian minister to the ranch would help, either. Lucia would listen to his assurances that Travis was a decent, godfearing man, but she'd mentally dismiss the minister as yet another doomed sinner. Anybody who wasn't Catholic couldn't make it into Heaven. That was clear enough.

From here on out, Lu would blame every problem they encountered on their interfaith marriage. If Stefania didn't do well at school, if it rained instead of snowed, if one of Lu's cats got rabies from a rat, it would all be seen as another helping of divine

retribution and punishment.

He spat in disgust. It was almost so ridiculous as to be laughable. But it wasn't funny to think Lucia would deny him access to her body. Would he have to rape his own wife in order to impregnate her again?

He also was none too happy about the notion of Stefania being reared with such foolishness. Bein' told her pa was wicked, hellbound. He wanted to give the girl every chance in life. That meant raising her to be stronger than a body ruled by gossip or idle superstitions.

Travis saddled his horse outside a small saloon. Not the Little Brown Jug, where he and his men were well known. No, today Travis wanted to get rip-snorting, falling down, good and shit-faced drunk. The land survey could wait. Right now he needed to erase the ache of Lu's rejection, to blind himself to her reproach that somehow everything was his fault--because he was too driven by his own needs and lusts.

Two empty liquor bottles later, Travis trundled away from the rough plank bar and tried to shove his boot into the stirrup to mount Ole Rye.

"Should've packed that little Italian back to the depot," he scolded himself aloud, fumbling with the reins. "Soon as I laid eyes on the mound of luggage and heard her woes. Askin' for it, lettin' some gal built like a shit brick--no, that's brick shithouse anywhere near my cattle spread."

"Whatever you say, pardner," a homesteader agreed, opening his fly to send a stream of urine under the hitching rail.

"Sorry-assed Sweeney was right," Travis slurred, whirling in a complete circle before pointing Rye toward home. "Catholics just bring trouble."

Chapter 24

The door of the line shack banged open. "Travis, we have to talk."

Travis rolled off the cot and ran a hand over his face, wincing at Randy's ferocious scowl. The foreman's features wore that same expression so often lately, Travis hated to hear what was wrong this time. "Somebody else quit now?" Two of Crockhead's newest men had picked up their gear and ridden out after the rumor started in town that Pearl got all the water rights with her survey.

"You, the way I figure it."

"Me? What the hell?"

"You got a wife and so do I. Our women are spending nights together at the house, while I toss and turn in an empty bunk in the cabin and you make excuses to sleep out here or in the barn."

Travis flicked the shed's moth-eaten blanket aside and stood up to pull on his jeans.

"Lu's recuperatin'. You know that."

"She doesn't need Mavis sharing a guestroom with her now," Randy emphasized, "And Mavis wouldn't have to stay up at the house all night if you slept there yourself once in awhile."

Travis hadn't seen this side of Shea in a long while. Not since Mavis was still back East and Shea'd been a randy suitor cherishing memories between visits to see her. The man was frustrated enough to do mayhem. "Let me see what the doc says about Lucia, and if he--"

"Doc, hell!" Randy exploded. "He took out the stitches and said Lu could get up and move around. She's back in the kitchen. Can't do heavy chores, but Mavis and the hands help. You and I both know you don't need to be out here in the line shack or the barn. You been makin' excuses to stay out of the house. I don't get why you need 'em, Boss-- unless you're just chicken. What, you won't sleep under the same roof with the gal if she can't do wifely duties?"

Travis studied his shirt buttons, then scanned the shack for his rifle and dirty socks.

"Think you're oversteppin' your own duties now. Where I sleep's got nothin' to do with gettin' that herd rounded up and delivered."

Shea stood blocking the only exit. "I want my wife back in my bunk. Tonight. I can't abandon Lu into a child's keeping, now can I? And I don't much like hearing Mavis fussin' about how you and Lu plan to untie the knot in order to make peace with Pearl Sweeney. Lu told Mavis that Pearl's agreed to tear up the survey if you'd send Lu and Stefania away."

Travis didn't mean to do it. He honestly couldn't think what had come over him. One minute they were talking. The next he'd flung Randy through the shack's door onto his

ass. "You reckon after all the Sweeneys put me through, I'd even consider marriage to that calculatin' slut?"

Randy got up, rubbing his jaw. "Nope. But ain't easy convincing the hands of that, when they got evidence to the contrary right in front of their eyes. A man who loves his sick wife doesn't keep two hundred yards away from her."

Travis slid his rifle into the leather sheath and untied Rye's reins from the hook outside the wooden shack. "He does if that's the way she wants it, Randy."

Travis managed to keep himself busy most of the day, but by late afternoon he had no options left. He walked into the kitchen. Lucia was there at the stove, checking on a batch of biscuits. She glanced briefly at Travis, offering a tremulous smile, then busied herself with other tasks as he poured a cup of coffee and took a seat at the trestle table. "Randy's a little itchy about Mavis stayin' here," he said casually. "So she'll be movin' back out to the cabin. Maybe you shouldn't overdo, Lu."

"The doctor says cooking is okay," she cut in. A little sharply, he thought. And she was making damned sure she didn't have to look at him. So nothing had changed.

He gulped the last of the coffee and shuffled to the door again. "I got to ride into town, so don't worry if I'm late for supper. Won't be too long."

Lucia stared at the door after it banged closed behind him. Everyone had noticed his odd behavior. Mavis had remarked on it more than once, as had Mick and some of the others. Travis barely spoke to anyone, barely ate, barely acknowledged her existence. He was not much kinder to Stefania. As a teardrop slowly coursed down her cheek, Lucia admitted her attempt at marriage was a dismal failure. She never should have tried to be a real wife to him, never should have come between him and Pearl. Never hoped to change his original plan. She would always be different, not an American. He could not change the proud, virile man he was. He would send her and Stefania away. He only waited until Lucia was strong enough to travel.

He had told her about the meeting with Pearl, saying he'd refused her offer to share the big ranch if they married. Lucia knew Travis had long avoided a union with Pearl because of her awful father, but no one had to contend with that fat man now. Pearl had threatened to destroy Crockhead, all Travis had worked years to build.

The ranch was his whole life. Lucia had not listened when he'd talked of going somewhere else, to be a farmer or work on another ranch. That had been foolish, guilty talk. He did not truly mean he would leave this place. She knew his men were close friends he would hate to lose. Randy Shea was like a brother. At that thought, she wondered why Travis did not appeal to Rafe for help. Surely if Travis needed Rafe's help now, his big brother would come.

The folly of that struck her almost at once.

Travis didn't want to ask him. How many times had she heard Travis speak of his

brother, of Rafe's brave exploits? The other cowboys also told stories about Rafe, the gunfighter. Travis could not compete with that glorious character. Lucia didn't want him to try. But men being men, he felt unworthy and weak. Pearl had cornered him. Maybe broken him.

And being married to a poor Italian Catholic woman did nothing to bolster his sagging pride.

It was long past dusk when he returned. "You ate in town?" Lucia inquired when he came through the back door.

"Told you I'd be late. Didn't expect you'd hold the vittles on my account."

"Yes, but you do not eat much good these days. I baked a cake. I can get you a piece."

Travis swallowed hard. She was in her nightdress and thin summer robe, barefoot, her braid tossed over one shoulder. He wanted her to give him a piece, all right, but not of cake. He tried not to visualize exactly where her nipples were under the soft robe, tried not to think about that little dark mole on her backside. But alone with her in the darkened house, he couldn't stop thinking about how much he wanted, needed, to lose himself in her.

"Ain't hungry, but thanks. I best turn in. 'Night, Lu."

"Travis?"

Now she'd done it. Put her hand on his arm, burning his flesh through the sleeve. He stopped and glanced down into her worried eyes. "You go to town other times, yes?"

He blinked in confusion. "Yeah, for church, or to take care of business, send a wire and such."

"You have not been here at night. Mavis says . . . she tells of the ladies cowboys go see in town. Men pay money to . . . touch, to be naked for pleasure. Men always need this, she says. That is why Randy was angry. You are not angry like that, but very silent. Is this why you go to town, Travis? You do not eat or sleep here. Maybe you touch women there?"

For what felt like a half-hour, Travis stood there, stupidly gaping at her. It had honestly never occurred to him she'd ever think such a thing--imagine he'd been off whoring.

"No way, Lu. Ain't broken my vows. I can't believe you'd think that." Lucia had begun to cry, soft but audible sobs. Usually she tried to hide her tears. Not this time.

"Why does that upset you? You wanted me to be out catching the pox?"

"I did not want you to be going to the lawyer," she sniffed.

Jesus, but Travis couldn't visit the outhouse without everybody on the spread knowing before he got his pants back up. "Don't know how you found out, but that's right. I went to see that fella Prescott."

"Now you send us away." She let out a choking wail. For a gal who never cried, she was bawling louder than a baby calf.

Travis let a bubble of happiness swell and rise inside his chest. Lucia was still the same crazy, mixed-up Italian she'd been from the first. Talking in riddles, letting bits and pieces of what she saw and overheard sink in all disarrayed and cockeyed. Until she drove herself and everybody else loco with her weird interpretations of remarks and events.

But she didn't want to leave him.

And God he loved her. For being so faithful, for worrying. For her beautiful big breasts and hot-blooded nature. But most of all for this--the unique, mixed-up, amazing person she was. There wasn't another gal in the whole wide West like Lucia. He had to make her see he understood that, cherished the fact.

He started by wrapping his arms around her and kissing her. Softly, slowly, with the same tenderness he'd shown that first time in the parlor, the night Gilmore attacked her.

"Lu," he breathed, "I don't want a divorce. I don't want to send you anywhere. Went to the lawyer to see about the land survey. He wasn't real hopeful. Knowin' the thing's rigged and provin' that are different propositions. Said he'd do what he could, at least get a temporary order preventin' Pearl from closin' off the creek."

She pulled back, hiccuping. "You n-not talk to him about sending me away?"

He cradled her against his chest. "I love you. I'm never lettin' you or Stef out of my life. Got to stop worryin' about nothin' before you make yourself sick again."

"But I am not a good wife. Everything bad has come since I ride the train here. I love you so much, but not enough to make my heart bleed forever to save your ranch. If I go away, Pearl will let you keep it. So I think I should go, but I am too weak to do this. I would cry every day."

Christ, but she was beautiful. He bent to kiss her again, this time deepening the kiss, hoping to communicate more than words could. "You're exactly the wife I need. I don't want to hear you talk like that again, you hear me? That's your pa and his stubbornness. The Sweeneys of this world passin' judgment. Maybe my life ain't been easy since you came, but God never promised me an easy time. Did He agree to no troubles for you?"

Lucia stared at him, her dark eyes radiating something like awe. "No."

Travis felt her softening. He knew she'd taken heart from his words. "I'm sorry I've been so scarce. Didn't reckon you might see it as me hankerin' after no soiled doves. Gals who take money to give menfolk pleasure," he clarified, clearing his throat awkwardly. "It's you I want, Lucia. Even now, though you nearly lost your life tryin' to give life to my seed. Maybe I'm wicked to still want you. Damned humblin' to come to grips with the fact you had my child inside you. There's nothin' I could ever give you to compare."

"You gave me a home, a father for Stefania."

"Like to put in a pump and proper sink in the kitchen, so you wouldn't have to tote buckets. But I can't run pipes to a creek I got no rights to take water from."

Suddenly she favored him with a warm smile. "That is a lie. The water is yours, too. Maybe the lawyer or Rafe can make the bad papers with lies go away."

"Maybe. If folks pay enough, Raford's been known to make almost anything go away. But I only got a couple hundred cows left and a mortgage. Even if I sell off everything I can--"

"You will not do this."

He never flinched. "Might have to. I was serious about that. But I'm just as serious about startin' over, if it comes down to that. I can do it, long as you're with me."

"I will go wherever you say, but I wish never to leave here. This is your place. Always you should have this house and your men. I pray for you to keep this house, this ranch."

She kissed him now, parting her lips to tease his tongue. Her hands roamed over his back, soothing the tension in his upper body. Creating havoc in his lower region. He opened his eyes and pulled free.

"Lu, I can't . . . I got to turn in before things get any hotter. You're still ailin' and you don't want me to touch you. I know that."

"Can I sleep in your bed with you? Please, I've missed you. It is not wrong to hold and kiss."

Travis felt his hand shake as he ran it through his hair. "Reckon not, but a fella can't always stop at that. Reckon it's safer if you keep stayin' in the spare room."

"Mavis said there are other things a wife can do. To make her husband's need less. I will touch you, if you want these things."

Jesus. Travis knew he should throw up a new line of defense, but he was tired of straining his brain while that other part was straining to get free of his jeans. That part heard her loud and clear, wanted whatever her offer might include. Twice.

He pulled Lu down the hall and into the bedroom with him. He stripped and sprawled on his mattress. He waited, perfectly still, eyes closed, uncaring whether she had any particular plan of attack or technique in mind. It wouldn't matter. He was already close to bursting.

Seconds after her fingers curled around his shaft and began firmly stroking its length, he was spent.

Lucia cleaned him up and pulled up the covers, settling into bed beside him without a word. Travis was too embarrassed to reach for her. She'd obviously been given pretty good instructions. He did feel measurably relieved of raw sexual tension, but that was all

that had eased. The ache in his loins temporarily banished, he found sleep eluded him, just as it had so many other nights.

The ache in his soul throbbed worse than before.

Lucia had the most voluptuous body he'd ever laid eyes on. Generous breasts and hips made for bearing young. Marriage was about two people sharing total intimacy and begetting children. It wasn't about a wife manually milking the lust out of her mate, or a husband being unable to share himself completely. Their interlude tonight had been unexpected. Not unpleasant, but not enough.

In the days and nights that followed, Travis saw his personal opinion harden to stone. They were back to sharing his bed and meals, sitting in the parlor after supper, even going on afternoon rides with Stefania. No matter how enjoyable their time was together, it did nothing but make Travis long to make love to his wife. He might be forced to give up everything else, but he was not about to forfeit that.

He began making more frequent afternoon trips into town. He met with an Army captain about allotments of fresh beef. He went to the post office. He went back to consult with the attorney who awaited a ruling from a friend who'd been appointed circuit judge.

Lucia asked again why he spent so much time away from the ranch, her eyes narrowing when she happened to overhear one of the hands remark about a trip to the general store. Travis didn't like lying about his errands, but it was simpler to leave her in the dark than try to enlighten her as to how things worked.

That's why he hadn't told anyone he'd be in town this particular visit. His men talked too much. With Randy overseeing operations, it made little difference whether Travis personally was on the range. Lucia could assume he was on his own land. He needed to settle things, to make definite plans, one way or the other.

He nodded to an acquaintance and strolled into the empty bank. "Afternoon, Ambrose. Caught you durin' a lull, I see."

"Yes, yes. I was just finishing up with another customer when I saw you ride up. Been thinking about you. You heard your former intended left town, day before yesterday?"

Travis couldn't mask his surprise. "Nope, I hadn't. But it ain't as though Pearl and I've been on friendly terms. She actually did it--packed up and left Pueblo for good?"

Ambrose nodded. "Seems unnatural, doesn't it?"

"After all those years, both her and Patrick gone." Travis felt a rush of relief, but it was tinged with a strange feeling of loss. The Sweeneys had been fixtures in the area. "Yep, kind of peculiar."

The banker cleared his throat. "Speaking of peculiar . . . I didn't get a chance to speak to you alone last time you came in. Someone's made a gift to your little daughter. Opened a savings account with one hundred dollars in her name."

"An account in Stefania's name?" Travis repeated, not sure he liked the sound of this at all. "Who would give her a hundred dollars?"

"I'm not at liberty to say."

"Well, then, you just tell whoever it was no thanks," Travis growled. Probably someone from the congregation trying to slip him unwanted charity. "Ain't a hard luck case yet. Just because Pearl sold out doesn't mean I can't get that survey overruled. Got Prescott lookin' into it."

"The gentleman wasn't from around here. He requested the donation be anonymous. But I must confess, it struck me as quite odd, harking back to that saying about the gift horse. Er, have you met your new neighbor? The fellow who bought the Flying Fist? Came into town this very morning."

Ambrose Gant was a font of gossip and information. More talkative than a barber. Travis was still mulling over the gift to Stefania. "Huh?"

"I'm headed over to the Lindall Hotel to see him, as a matter of fact. Tiresome documentation, you know. Be glad to introduce you." Ambrose leaned closer. "Might be a way to start off on the right foot, as it were."

"I need to deposit these funds," Travis mumbled, emptying his pocket onto the counter. He felt as though he'd stepped off a cliff into some unseen chasm. Pearl was gone, a stranger was taking over the Fist, somebody had given Stefania a chunk of money for no apparent reason.

"Yes," Gant chirped, bustling behind the bars of the teller cage. He came around the partition with a large packet and motioned toward the door. "After you."

After me? Belatedly Travis realized he'd tacitly agreed to meeting the Fist's new owner. Right then, on the spur of the moment, like a damned fool. He should check back with Prescott first, find out exactly where he stood. Travis glanced down at his clothes. He was also wearing a patched dark green shirt. Hadn't planned on making a first impression on anybody.

Ambrose chattered about the upcoming summer picnic and how Miss Luella was keeping company with the new blacksmith. Travis only half heard the rumor as he found himself standing at the front desk of the Lindall Hotel, reluctantly awaiting his fate. Gant had probably filled the new rancher's ears with all the tripe about Lu, Travis' broken engagement to Pearl Sweeney, and the range war.

A noisy troupe of youngsters spilled down the hotel stairs into the lobby. Travis noted the age differences and strong physical resemblance between the jostling children. His suspicion that this was actually one big family was confirmed when a busty matron came down and began smoothing shirt collars. Travis couldn't help but grin, recalling his own boyhood.

His ma had always fussed with the cowlick that refused to lay flat on the back of his

head. Rafe's collar wouldn't stay straight, not even when Ma pinned it. Only Miranda had been the embodiment of polite decorum. Miranda and Simon--but it was hard to remember the eldest Conley, killed in the war between the North and South.

The harried matron in the lobby here wasn't having much better luck getting her brood assembled quietly. The children were inspected by an arriving middle-aged dandy in a dun suit with a flowered waistcoat. "Very nice, Mrs. McGill," he said before glancing over at Ambrose and Travis.

"Mr. Gant. Hope we haven't kept you waiting."

"Not at all. I only just arrived a moment ago," Ambrose replied, holding out the thick packet.

The dandy started past the large brood as one of the medium-sized boys reached over to waggle his fingers behind a smaller boy's head. "Thomas." The word was filled with silken menace. Young Thomas snapped to attention.

Travis pretended to scratch the side of his nose in an effort to hide his smirk. These parents probably couldn't get the rounds of taunts and foolery to end before every last one of their kids fell asleep. Standing around a hotel lobby or having their butts perched on a church pew would just inspire boisterous young-un's like these to mischief.

"I've brought along someone you've been anxious to meet," Ambrose informed the dandy as he studied the contents of the bank packet. "He's well known here in the Pueblo/Canon City area. Young as he is, this fellow's made a success of his place. Travis Conley, owner of Crockhead Rest. Travis, this is Mr. Clancy McGill, the fellow who purchased the Sweeney ranch."

McGill's face broke into a wondrous smile. He came forward and seized Travis' right hand in a firm grip. "This is indeed a genuine pleasure, sir. We're close neighbors, I understand."

"Pleasure's mutual," Travis nodded, wondering if McGill ever planned to release his hand or intended to keep right on pumping until Travis gave water.

Gant pulled his pocket watch. "Don't mean to rush you, Mr. McGill, but I have an appointment back at the bank. If you could just sign here," he pointed, offering the pen and inkwell from the hotel desk.

McGill scrawled his name and returned the packet. His gaze immediately riveted once again on Travis. "My wife, Mr. Conley. Mrs. Bridget McGill. And our children, too numerous to introduce by name standing here. Would you care to join us in the restaurant? We were about to have dinner."

"Now, Ma? We're starving!" somebody whined. Travis watched one boy tug at his sister's braid while a little girl gaped at Travis and deliberately poked her tongue out. Travis was trying to figure out how to decline gracefully when he spotted the baby crawling after Gant, on the verge of scooting out the hotel's front door. He dashed across

the lobby to snag the fugitive and return him to his mother.

Mrs. McGill blushed a deep rose. "Oh, my word. A fine picture we must make. You children are nothing but bullfrogs in a patch of daffodils, I declare!" She shoed the bunch toward the hotel dining room.

Clancy cleared his throat. "To be certain, you must be an enterprising lad with better to do. But if you'd spare perhaps thirty minutes or so, we might get acquainted." Travis hadn't heard such a thick brogue since his grandpa's days. "You'll excuse the missus and the children, won't you? 'Tis only that they're still so unsettled, I'm thinking. We came from Delaware on the train. Cooped up for days . . . well, they're not usually so rambunctious."

Travis saw the man's embarrassment and inwardly chuckled. He couldn't help being flattered. He'd been nervous about meeting this potential adversary, only to discover this Irishman was no rival. They'd get along fine, once the dandy quit trying to impress him, and accepted that Travis was just another cowpuncher.

"Oh, I bet they're a handful any time," Travis said with a laugh, watching Mrs. McGill struggle to get all seven kids peaceably in chairs at a long table. "Got a three-year-old daughter with a passel of cousins. Know how young-un's can be."

"Bless you for saying so." McGill mopped his face with a rumpled linen square. "My good wife worried so, certain you'd expect the children to be little angels, wee adults."

Travis guffawed at that. "Don't expect it's so in Delaware, but 'round these parts, adults don't behave all that much nicer. Wait until you see a bunkhouse full of cowpokes."

Travis decided he'd join the family for their meal. He'd pay for it, too, as a welcoming gesture. He took a seat next to McGill's oldest, a pretty filly of about fourteen or so. The girl blushed to the roots of her light hair and instantly became the brunt of jibes from her brothers.

"Hey, that ain't no way to treat a lady," Travis informed the boys. "I got a big sister too, and you know what? She reckons she's smarter than I am." The boys squared their shoulders and narrowed their eyes. Travis winked at the girl. "Half the time, I reckon she's right."

Clancy eased into the vacant chair at the head of the table and beamed at his wife. "Salt of the earth, isn't he, my dear?"

The waiter produced menus, bent to retrieve fallen napkins, and narrowly escaped getting scalped by a breadknife. Travis ate part of a roast beef sandwich, trying to concentrate on McGill's comments despite children squirming and arguing on every side.

The Flying Fist was now the Lazy Dog, in honor of the family's worthless coon hound. That indication of a sense of humor gave Travis the nerve to broach the subject of the creek. "Your spread and mine both back up to a creek. Of course, yours is the bigger

section by far, with larger herds."

"A challenge," McGill responded around a mouthful of food.

"I really must take Sean up to our rooms," Mrs. McGill suddenly announced, wrinkling her nose. "He's sorely in need of clean britches." She rose with the toddler in her arms and smiled at Travis. "Perhaps we'll see you Sunday at St. Ignacius. I'd like to meet your family."

Travis nearly choked on his coffee. They were Catholics. He turned to Clancy. "Most of my men are Irish Presbyterians, though my wife and our adopted daughter go to St. Ignacius."

"As you yourself do, surely."

Travis shook his head. "Nope, I'm Presbyterian, like my cowhands. Assumed you'd heard tell about the range war. Sweeney detested Catholics."

"Er . . . the agent mentioned there'd been a bit of trouble," McGill evaded. "Senseless, really. Two men sharing the same water and business should stand together. I hope we may rely on one another. You seem forthright. With your guidance, I can make something of that ranch, eh?"

"It's already somethin'," Travis admitted. "Quadruple the size of mine. You must've paid a hefty sum, your parcel havin' all the water rights, accordin' to the new survey."

"Survey?"

Travis blinked. "The land agent didn't tell you about the land survey Sweeney had done just before he died?"

McGill shrugged. "Not a word, but it's of no matter to me. God doesn't intend for us to lay claim to things like water or sunshine. Blarney, that is. We'll share the water, as I hope we'll share knowledge in breeding and selling stock. You're the expert."

Travis decided not to contest that point. "Glad I stayed to eat with you, McGill. I'm more than willing to work out a trade. Worried I'd be forced to sell out myself and move on."

"Surely not. My decision to buy the Fist was based on the agent's assurances that I'd be right across the creek from a man who knew cattle. Fellow had only the best to say of you, young Conley. As neighbor, community member, and friend."

There he went stepping off that cliff into nothing again. Somebody remotely connected to Pearl Sweeney had said good things? "Reckon that wasn't the land fella. Must have been Gant talkin' me up."

"Oh no. Only met him a few hours ago. I refer to Mr. Bregon. He convinced me to buy the Sweeney place. Guaranteed I'd be happy as could be there. Said you and he were well acquainted."

Travis reached into his pants pocket and tossed a wad of bills on the table as he got to

his feet. "We are. I just didn't know Wil Bregon was in land sales. First bit of advice about your ranch, Clancy: cut loose of the foreman."

McGill frowned. "But I'll need a responsible overseer."

"If Pearl kept Hank Smithers on her payroll, he'd do. Or Arlon Wells. I'll send my own foreman over to assess the situation for you. His name's Shea. You need any help gettin' settled, send word back with him."

Travis left the hotel and headed straight for the telegraph office. Miss Emily from the candlemaker's shop waved from across the street. Travis kept walking without returning the greeting. There was only one thing on his mind, and the message he planned to send would likely singe every telegraph wire between Pueblo and Denver.

Chapter 25

Travis hunched over the counter, pencil stub gripped in his fingers. He was so furious, his hand shook. He tried to string together a few choice words, but at this point most he could think of were foul.

The McGills were decent folks, Irish Catholics, right friendly, likable down to the chubby little baby fella. Travis could have done a lot worse for new neighbors.

However, results weren't the issue. Things were all out of kilter, teetered damned close to suspicions of dark betrayal. He just couldn't fathom how Rafe's business partner had gotten involved in the land transfer. They were detectives, for Christ's sake. True, Rafe had admitted Wil had Eastern ties, mentioned that years before Wil had been some kind of broker or lawyer. But that was way back when--and he hadn't been helping the Sweeneys.

"You could pay to send that," came a deep voice behind his right shoulder, "or you could simply have a drink with me and speak your mind."

Travis spun to find Wil in the doorway, Alma and Betty in a gunbelt slung across his hips. He tipped his black hat. "Howdy, Travis."

"You sonofabitch."

"Nice seeing you again, too."

"What brings you to Pueblo, Judas? Come to collect your silver coins on the sale of that ranch 'cross the creek from mine?"

"Already been paid," Wil replied smoothly. "Miss Sweeney generously covered my regular fee and expenses. I padded in the cost of a broken window and several rolls of barbed wire. This should help." He held out five hundred dollars. "That's in addition to the little savings account I set up for the girl."

Travis felt a pop as his jaw literally dropped. "That was you Gant told me about? Hell, if you've been here all this time, how come you didn't come out to Crockhead? I'd have-- Why? How'd you get caught up in this?"

Wil nudged Travis across the street, sauntering into a local saloon Travis usually avoided. Its owner was one of Sweeney's cronies. Wil ordered a bottle and two glasses, plopping down at a table near the door.

"First of all, I hired that survey team your men almost poisoned. I suggested a survey, planting the idea Sweeney might ruin you by usurping water rights. You got every legal right to that creek water. I checked. But if Sweeney believed he could make it look as though you didn't--"

"He'd be able to drive me out. Told me to my face." Travis was getting angrier by the second.

"I'm sure it was obvious someone would have to leave town. Rafe saw that after his first meeting with Sweeney."

Travis downed some of the rotgut, certain he was having one of those long, complex dreams that fill a whole night. First a comical Irish Catholic dandy and his brood moving in, now Wil Bregon sharing a drink and chuckling over it. Weirdest danged dream he'd spun in a long while. "You were here in Pueblo, helpin' the Sweeneys, and I never suspected. What the hell you got against me?"

"Nothing. Think this through. We couldn't let you in on it. You had to believe the survey presented a genuine threat, just as the Sweeneys couldn't know there was any connection between the man who ordered the bogus survey and the neighbor they sought to oust."

Wil raised his glass in a salute. "And that Pearl, quite the artful little flirt in a skirt. Got a lot to learn about confidence games, though. She'll be disembarking in New York in a day or two. Expects to meet up with her fiancé. Big man in politics, they say." Wil snorted and gulped a swallow of whiskey.

Some of Travis' anger dissipated. "I know," Travis scowled. "She bragged how he was some highfalutin' fella, real well off. How he'd served as . . ."

Travis' eyes bugged out. Her land agent--that's what she'd said. But McGill said Wil had been the go-between, and Wil had just confirmed being paid his commission. Wil Bregon and Pearl? "You. You were courtin' her."

Wil stretched out his legs and rubbed at a scuff on one leather boot. "I attended a prestigious Eastern university, and survived a brief stint as a lawyer in a big Boston firm. Long before I came West with these twin ladies or met your brother." He winked and patted his holster. "Anyhow, courting would be too polite a term for what I did with Miss Sweeney."

"Jesus Christ. She never knew, never realized she'd crawled into bed with a serpent." Travis had just grasped the reality of who'd been doing the maneuvering this time around. Rafe had remarked more than once about Wil's charm with the gals, as well as his total indifference to them.

Wil was detached when it came to females and definitely preferred life that way. Betty and Alma were the only ladies who mattered.

Wil glanced around the saloon. "Pearl knew me as Gavin Wilburne, a man of influence. Also an unredeemable libertine, I'm afraid." His laugh was pure disdain. "The spoiled Miss Sweeney does have a delectable pear-shaped derriere. Other than the land commission, which is significantly less than we usually charge, this case didn't pay much. But I enjoyed certain aspects of it. Pearl's cute little bottom in my hotel room made a nice gratuity."

Travis spewed liquor into the gouged wooden tabletop. "You screwed Pearl as part of your job? And she thinks--Damn!" He chortled so hard, he nearly fell out of his chair.

"All that time she tried to corral me. Took up with you out of spite. Thinks you're ready to see the preacher and set her up in some palace in New York City."

"A mansion," Wil nodded, chuckling. "Old college friend's an architect. I borrowed his surveyors and a sketch of a home he's building for a client. Pearl's not terribly sophisticated, despite all the satin and lace . . . or her obvious talent for theatrics. She honestly believed I was infatuated enough to gift her with expensive jewelry. Masculine honor prohibits me from saying exactly how she demonstrated her gratitude when I gave her topaz and pearl earrings. Too bad they were only paste."

Travis thought he might piss himself. "Wait until I tell my foreman. Pearl bragged her engagement up all over town. She still wanted me to leave Lu for her after Patrick's funeral. When I turned her down, she pulled up stakes and went after her new beau. A fella who doesn't even exist."

"I resent that," Wil countered, grinning broadly. "I most certainly do. My family bible lists me as Gavin Wilburne Bregon, the Third."

"Gavin? You don't look like any Gavin."

"Not any more, which is why I go by Wil." He got to his feet. "This ploy with the neighbors was your brother's idea. He knew you'd fight to keep your ranch, knew the Sweeney greed and prejudice would spur them to seriously consider an offer on their place. You can thank or berate Rafe when next you meet up with him."

"He'll definitely get a piece of my mind," Travis replied slowly, deep in thought. "No doubt about it."

Wil tossed an eagle on the table. "Got to collect those McGills over at the hotel. My last duty as their agent is seeing them out to their new home. I guess you understand I selected McGill for his religious convictions. He's also greener than the fabled Emerald Isle. He accepted my word that fair compensation for your guidance in the cattle business would be stud service from his prime bull over the next two years."

Travis was still rankled, but it was only right to thank Wil. He did then, commenting that maybe they'd meet up again soon in Denver.

The detective shook his head, dropping his hat back over tawny hair cropped shorter than usual. The image of Bregon as some Eastern dandy didn't seem so farfetched, after all. Yep, take away the gunbelt and dress the fella in a gambler's suit . . . it was easy to imagine how Pearl could have fallen for him. Hard.

"I'm headed to Nevada," Wil informed him. "Give my best to Lu and Stefania. I'll wire Rafe from my next stop, let him know everything worked out fine."

"Yeah, it did." Travis finished his drink, still feeling numb at the realization his words were true. He took the long way home, mulling over the past few months, the explanations he owed his men and Lucia. They'd all be relieved. Crockhead Rest was safe, the range war over. They could settle down to business once again.

Most of his problems were solved, but not his marriage troubles. Travis didn't delude himself that the sudden absence of the Sweeney hostility or financial security would send Lu back into his arms. She wouldn't change her tune just because Rafe and Wil had intervened with the Sweeneys. They hadn't been able to prevent her tubal pregnancy and miscarriage. She'd still see that as the Lord's vengeance.

By the time he reached the barn and put Ole Rye in a stall, he'd begun to view the day's revelations in a whole new light. Though he didn't set store by blind fate or the Almighty striking down sinners, his wife did. Maybe because of her faith or her father's strict upbringing, or just because she was Lu. It was her nature. She was a little like Rafe, Travis saw now. They couldn't be talked out of their natures.

But sometimes that nature could be used to get 'em into a bridle, same as working with a skittish horse. Travis hadn't been able to cope with Lucia, because he'd been going about it all wrong. He'd had years of practice dealing with Rafe. Nobody was more mule stubborn, yet Travis had watched Sparkle win him over. Truth to tell, Travis had played a role in that capitulation himself.

Now it seemed Rafe needed to be taught a lesson. He seemed to be under the mistaken notion that Travis needed coddling, that Travis couldn't look after himself and his family without Rafe's intervention. True, Travis had appreciated his brother coming along when he first brought Lu back from St. Louis, but this crazy swindle Rafe engineered . . . Brilliant and effective though it was, it proved how little faith Rafe had in Travis' ability to hold his own.

Travis would clear that up, pronto.

And maybe, just maybe, he could get his wife's head turned around at the same time. Back to where it followed her heart, like it had for Stefania. Stealing his payroll and hiring that pettifogger to try to break the kid out of the orphanage hadn't been real bright actions on her part. But Lu would do just about anything when she got desperate enough, if she really cared for somebody . . .

Travis would meet her halfway and then some, if she loved him half as fiercely as she did their little girl. If Lu would show him she cared enough to risk everything for him. It sounded crazy, when the woman had damned near died carrying his get. He shouldn't need any greater proof than that. But he did. Because it wasn't as if Lu had known. Wasn't like he'd courted her and won her. She'd only married him for Stefania. Maybe she only stayed with him now for the child, too.

Tarnation. Their lives were one big tangled skein of twine. If today had shown Travis anything, it was that sometimes important things in life had to knot up worse before they unkinked into anything better. Wasn't much fun, but it was necessary.

Travis patted his shirt pocket, squaring his shoulders as he started for the house. In his pocket were three train tickets to Denver. He was taking a risk, not a notion he was real easy with. This would be his biggest gamble yet.

Chapter 26

Lucia had held her silence through supper, though she could barely taste her own lasagna and at one point, literally bit her tongue to keep from lashing out at Travis. He had been gone almost the entire day, then reappeared to begin cracking out orders for Randy Shea and the men. He'd offered her no explanation for his unusual behavior. Had not said he'd been in town again.

He had been going there too often. He did not tell her, but she knew. She either watched him ride through the main gate to the road or overheard the men talking. They had also noticed Travis spent much time away from the ranch. They believed he was selling all his cows, meeting with big men, trying to save Crockhead Rest from the water problem. They were afraid they would lose their jobs.

But there was relieved talk after Travis had come back today. Pearl Sweeney had gone away, and new people would run the Flying Fist.

This much Lucia understood of what was said around her, and it made her angry. Why did she have to listen and struggle through awkward cowboy English to learn about this big change? Travis was her husband and should have told her himself. That he hadn't was disappointing and distressing.

But not as badly distressing as the visit from Abigail Rainey.

While Travis was gone, Frank Rainey's wife had come calling. The Raineys lived on a small farm not far from Crockhead. Mrs. Rainey brought jars of fruit preserves she'd put up the previous harvest, saying she always shared her best with the Crockhead men come summertime. Lucia could hardly refuse the nice gesture, or neglect to offer a cup of coffee and fresh cookies in return.

Which had prompted Abigail to settle into a kitchen chair and offer her observations about Travis.

Lucia had tried to disguise her surprise. Mrs. Rainey said her husband had seen Travis in town, coming out of the Lindall Hotel. Seen him again later walking with a stranger, ducking into Rory Sheridan's saloon. Mrs. Rainey's cousin worked at the apothecary shop. She'd seen Travis in town several times. The Rainey's, like everyone else, knew of the range war. They wondered if Travis had anything to do with Pearl's decision to leave Pueblo. It certainly had been a shock when he'd up and married Lucia instead of Pearl.

Mrs. Rainey paused at this juncture to refill her coffee cup. Lucia hadn't been able to stomach any more of the talk. She'd purposely spilled dishwater onto the stovetop, then begun fussing that the stove had gone out. She'd have to relight it, the soup might be ruined for supper. She really didn't have time to visit any more.

She had pushed the woman from down the road out the back door. She hoped the hissing steam and her harried state would appear to explain the sheen of perspiration on her skin, the glistening of her eyes.

Travis did not want her to know he went to town. He had said he did not want her to leave, did not talk to the lawyer about this. Said he did not visit bad women and pay them to do the things Lucia would not do with him now. Why then would he go to the town hotel?

She couldn't begin to guess why he'd been with a strange man going into the saloon his men did not like. Lucia had heard this name Sheridan. He was a friend of Pearl's father, a man who also disliked Lucia for her faith. Because of this, Crockhead's cowboys did not drink in his place.

Lucia was unsettled. None of this was good. It could not speak well for her future or Stefania's that Travis did these odd things without telling her. She stabbed her thumb with the needle and gave up mending the split knee of Travis' favorite denim pants. Let his fancy new friends patch his torn clothing or provide him with coins enough for new ones. Let Travis make do without her, if that was what he secretly planned.

"Lucia, I'm talkin' to you."

His voice intruded into her dark speculation. She looked up, frozen. Her tongue felt glued to the roof of her mouth. She was so hurt, so worried, so angry. She would only rant in Italian or ramble incoherently in English. Maybe babble in nothing recognizable as either language.

"Lu? Are they sewed up or not?" He reached down to pick up his discarded work pants. Lucia bolted out the front door, leaving it swinging open in her wake.

Now she'd done it, she realized an instant too late. He would come after her. The excuse she needed air on the porch would not do. No excuse would work, for she couldn't hold back the hurt this time. Tears began plopping off her chin onto her cotton blouse. Travis would see she was upset and demand an explanation.

But it was she who deserved one.

Lucia could think of nothing to stave off the inevitable except to delay it. She kept going, knees pumping, skirts flapping, running across the front lawn area for Crockhead's gate. She remembered Travis saying how a horse had almost run away, almost run over Miranda's husband before the men could stop him.

"Lucia, have you gone plumb loco? What the hell are you--"

He smacked into her back and almost knocked both of them face first in the dirt when she stopped abruptly. His momentum sent him flailing beyond her and onto his knees.

Travis whirled back to see if he'd hurt her. He saw Lucia rake up a handful of dust. He couldn't hardly believe it when she flung it right into his face.

"There. You have your precious dirt. I hope it tastes good, like the drunk saloon and that hotel you go to."

Travis rose and hauled her up over his shoulder. He began trudging back to the house. "I can see we got to get a few things straight, Miz Conley, right now. When a man can't ask to have his jeans mended without his wife goin' off like a Chinese skyrocket, it's high time we talk about the proper respect around this house."

He dumped her onto the parlor sofa. "Why are you spoutin' about the hotel and cryin' like that? You should be happy. The Sweeneys are out, some real nice Catholic folks moved onto the Fist land."

"How do I know this? Does this big boss, my husband, tell me? No, he goes to town behind me! Goes to places for whiskey and beer with strangers. Goes to the hotel, maybe for the ladies he lies to me about. I am stupid, yes? The farmer's wife down the trail comes with jelly to tell me what my husband does."

Damn. It was a scary thought to come to grips with, Travis noted in wry amusement, but he was actually beginning to understand Lucia. Perfectly.

"Abigail Rainey was here, stirrin' things up, eh?"

Lucia wouldn't look at him. "I have brought much trouble. Maybe too much. I am sorry I make you eat dirt. Only it is what you love . . . and I am jealous to know this. I do not--it does not make sense to me. My father, my brothers, they leave dirt."

Travis squatted in front of her and tilted her chin. "They left Italy's dirt for this dirt, to make a better life for you. That's what I'm tryin' to do, too. Make a life for you. But you know I don't love this ranch more than you or Stefania. Told you if I lost the spread we'd make a new start." He took her hands between his and spoke softly. "Told you I'd walk away and never look back, long as I had you. Told you I ain't seen no womenfolk in town, and that's the truth. You got no reason to feel jealous."

He saw hope flair in the depths of her eyes. God, she was darling. He'd never survive without this feisty wild filly in his life.

"You go to town and do not speak of it. Maybe--"

He stopped her flow of words with a kiss. "Maybe you ought to put on your nightdress and meet me in my bedroom. I want to hold you tonight, and talk to you. We're leavin' tomorrow to go to Denver for a few days. I'm takin' you and Stef to visit with Rafe's family. Planned to tell you about that, and a couple other things, once you were done stitchin' my pants."

She flushed a becoming shade of pink. Travis felt his manhood swelling at the nearness of her, the sheer perfection of this woman who was his bride--this human kaleidoscope of changing moods, colors, tongues, and whimsy that was his alone. She'd enchanted him. He craved the taste and feel of her wrapped tightly around him. He needed her warmth, her honesty, her angry fire. He'd sell his soul to be able to sink down and drown in her shifting patterns.

Yet he knew it had to be her choice. Not tonight. Not yet. He couldn't push her, had to

wait for the moment to come.

And it would, for he could see the woman loved him. Any gal jealous of dirt was either crazy in love . . . or just plain crazy. Though when they met he'd have bet on the latter, he'd come to know her now. And understood there was a convoluted order to Lucia's thinking. Everything she did made a bizarre kind of sense. A body had to speak Lucia-talk to find it, but he was getting more fluent in that every day.

She loved him, but he wondered if she understood what that meant. Knew how deep rooted it was, how potent and all-consuming their union had become, for both of them. Did she understand that they stood on the edge of a precipice? There'd be no turning back after tonight. Travis didn't want to turn back. He nuzzled her throat.

"You will not take my nightgown off if I share your bed?"

The question was asked with an unusual intensity, the answer obviously real important. But what answer did she want? Did she want him to bare her flesh, proving he still craved it and hadn't been with any bordello sluts? Or did she want his word and more proof she should trust him?

"I can't promise my hands won't wander or that you won't have to remind me not to take liberties. But I'm not askin' you into my bed for the sake of lust. I need to hold you close," he repeated.

She nodded and left the parlor. She padded into his room half an hour later. Travis smiled. She'd braided her hair--probably because he liked it down loose--and put on his least favorite nightdress. The ugly yellow one with the big prissy bow smack in the middle. The message wouldn't have been any clearer if she'd hung a "Don't Touch" sign on her forehead.

But he didn't say a thing. He quietly peeled of his duds, blew out the lamp, and held up the sheet. She slipped into bed beside him and lay there, breathing shallow and fast, as though she expected to be torn apart by wolves at any second. "Come on now, Lu," he crooned, caressing her face with one palm. "I'm the hound that doesn't bite, remember?"

She rolled toward him, going easily into his arms and cuddling against him. Christ, but he'd missed this. He said so. She admitted to enjoying the proximity as well and sighed against his throat. Despite his best efforts to be amused by her attempts to make herself frowzy and unappealing--which he personally suspected was impossible, no matter what she wrapped her incredible young body in--and his resolve to keep things on an intellectual level, her warm breath almost undid him. He loosened his embrace and opened a small space between them. Then he proceeded to tell her about the survey and Wil Bregon.

And he never would have believed it, not as randy as he'd felt for the past several weeks. But his eyelids drooped, the longer he talked. His words began to slur. Drowsiness overcame him near the end of his tale of the day's adventures. A drowsiness brought on

by the comfort of holding Lucia in his arms.

Before he could thank her or even remark on it, he realized she was already asleep.

"Raford." Travis bellowed at the top of his lungs from the marble foyer, noting the echo throughout the sprawling home. "You did say he was here?" Travis demanded of Dan Pearson.

The flustered houseman had no chance to reply. Rafe came barreling down the wood staircase. "What's the danged fuss about? Man can't even take a--Travis!"

Travis waited until his brother reached the bottom riser, then swung his fist up to clip Rafe smack in the jaw. Rafe caught himself by gripping the banister. "I'm overwhelmed enough by your unexpected visit, Little Brother. Ain't got to literally knock me down."

"Just who the hell do you think you are, sending that partner of yours to meddle in my personal business?"

"Your big brother." Rafe swung back, clipping Travis' left shoulder.

"I've been telling you for years, you're the little brother now," Travis ground out, punching Rafe in the chest this time. "I'm two inches taller and about fifteen pounds heavier, and it's time you accept that I'm a man. A man, Rafe, not that pissy-pants kid who idolized you all those years ago."

Lucia began berating Travis, Stefania demanded to know why her father was hitting her uncle, and Sparkle appeared in the foyer, yelling for Pearson to break up the fisticuffs. Travis ignored all the noise and swung again. Only to be knocked flat on his butt by a left cross he should have anticipated. The atypical was always Rafe's first choice. Rafe was right-handed. Travis should have expected a left and ducked. Now he'd have a black eye.

"Raford Conley, that will be quite enough."

The words weren't said loudly or with rancor. They were soft, but powerful. Both men paused to look at Sparkle. She stood glaring at her husband, flanked by their twins, and Rafe lowered his arm.

"We'll settle this in my office," he told Travis.

"Fine." Travis didn't wait to be shown the way or offered some of his brother's good Kentucky bourbon. He helped himself and waited for Rafe to join him.

But Rafe was still in the foyer, his sleeve caught tightly in Lucia's fist. "You came to the ranch because you are gunfinger," she announced.

"Slinger," Rafe corrected. "I was, up until a few years ago. Now I'm pretty much an ordinary henpecked husband." He gave Sparkle a dark look.

Lucia drew herself up to her full height, which wasn't more than a couple inches above

Sparkle's petite stature of just over five feet. "You make things right with your brother again now, or I kick your bottom." She poked the toe of her boot out from below her gingham skirt.

Rafe stared at the paltry little shoe, then up at her taut features. "Things are fine," he sighed. "Only Travis needs time to reconcile to the fact. Oh, I plumb forgot to introduce you ladies. That feisty big bundle between my two little bundles is my wife, Sparkle. Sparkle, this here's Lu and her daughter, Stefania."

He tried to follow Travis into his study, but Lucia wouldn't release his sleeve. "I'll take the burr out from under his saddle," he mumbled. "Why don't you folks get acquainted while my brother and I hash out our business?"

Lucia nodded and let go.

"Christ, that's some ornery female you're hitched to," Rafe observed as he poured his own glass of bourbon and rubbed at his jaw. Travis was on the couch, silently glaring. He gave no indication he'd heard Rafe's words. "Got to tell you," Rafe went on, "somethin' happened out there just now that I never thought I'd live to see."

"What? Your brother standin' on his own two feet?" Travis snorted.

"Nope. An Italian gal threatenin' to kick my ass."

Travis leaned forward. He knew of at least four rowdy men who'd made similar threats over the years. All were now pushing up daisies in boneyards somewhere.

"Naw, she probably meant somethin' completely different from how it sounded. She talks backwards when she gets upset."

Rafe shook his head. "She meant it. Showed me her shoe to make her point. And this was after she'd verified my previous career history. Must love you one hell of a lot to talk big like that."

There was a moment of silence before Travis burst out laughing. "A cougar come to dinner if I wouldn't pay to watch that. Lucia kickin' your bony, know-it-all gunman ass!"

"Huh," Rafe snorted. "And I'd buy tickets to an exhibition of Sparkle haulin' you out by the nose hairs for breakin' her favorite vase in the entry hall. You'll hear about that, I expect."

Two stubborn Conleys stared, then broke into guffaws of laughter. "Scary things, ain't they?" Rafe chortled. "How the hell'd we let ourselves get tangled with such cantankerous females?"

Travis sobered. "Sparkle would say it's fate. Does she know about your scheme to get rid of my neighbors? Wil said the whole deal was your idea. You let me think I was about to lose my damned ranch, when all along the survey and Pearl's fancy man were bold-faced lies! Both of you tricked her. Tricked me, same as you would some two-bit outlaw."

"So you ain't mad over the outcome, more the way I went about it."

"Hell, got to thank you for the outcome, don't I? That's real peachy. But I'm ticked you don't credit me with being able to handle things my own way. Fact you weren't honest with me about the scheme proves you don't have any faith in me, Rafoord."

Rafe settled into the chair behind his desk. "Just what could you have done to change that Irishman's view of the world and Catholics? He was bigoted back in Ireland, before he ever moved into Pueblo or met you. How were you fixin' to uncrook them bent notions?"

"I'd have thought of somethin'," Travis snapped defensively. "Maybe I would've failed and had to ask you to help. But the point is, I didn't. Not after those first couple days, and that was just for effect. I didn't ask you to get all caught up in the range war. You never gave me the chance to ask."

Rafe studied the Colt and holster hanging on the wall over his desk before he spoke. "Can you honestly say you'd have reacted the same way if you'd known who Pearl was seein' and who was really behind that survey? Would you have stood up to Sweeney or his foreman if you'd known there was no danger to Crockhead? Think on that a second. Then maybe you can tell me why I did it the way I did--without your knowledge."

As youngsters, Travis had eagerly waited for Rafe to conjure new games and activities back on their farm. If Rafe allowed a certain cloud resembled an elephant, Travis saw the trunk. When Rafe thought Pa's compost heap would make a good fort, Travis had taken up a defensive position behind it and gotten the strap for ruining his best Sunday clothes. Rafe saw possibilities in things, pointed where to look. Now, if Travis thought like his brother, he'd find the key to the puzzle.

In the next instant, he had it. "This was my gunfight, wasn't it?"

"There you go." Rafe tipped his glass in salute. A grim, knowing expression stole over his face. "Somethin' happens when a man has to fight for his life. When he has to fight to protect people he loves or his very existence. You're smart enough to know it ain't never been about glory, Trav. That's bullshit fellas spin myths about. The ones tellin' such tales are generally fellas who never faced a serious threat once."

"You'd be the man to know," Travis mumbled. The peculiar awe he'd experienced on occasion in Rafe's presence swept over him. Peculiar because it felt as though it emanated from one of those legendary men folks talked about, yet Travis knew the legend and the simple man who'd been a troublemaker back in Nebraska were one and the same. And this time the awe was accompanied by something more. A new respect for his own fighting spirit.

"Like I said, somethin' happens when a fella's up against it," Rafe reiterated quietly. "Somethin' primal. Wouldn't have been the same, if you'd known about the plan. Sorry if you think that means I saw you like jailhouse vermin. It was the only way. You

mentioned comin' to me for help, but we both know you wouldn't. We Conley fellas got more'n our fair share of pride. And it was life or death to Sweeney. Read that in his eyes that day on his porch."

Rafe pulled out his gold pocket watch and flipped open the case. "Got a client due in ten minutes." He glanced up at the gun on the wall again. "You recollect when I hung my Peacemaker up there?"

"Doubt any of us will ever forget," Travis said with a suppressed chuckle.

"So you also recall it wasn't easy for me, though everybody else reckoned it should have been my natural inclination. I'd damned near been killed a couple months before Sparkle gave me her ultimatum. I should've been ready to walk away from my days as a gunfighter. You always call me stubborn, but it wasn't tenacity holdin' me back. When a man gets good and fed up, he wants a change. But when it ain't his notion--when the world around him gets good and fed up--he ain't so likely to accept bein' told his ways got to end."

"Reckon not," Travis agreed, sensing now where Rafe was leading.

"Travis, you're worse than I ever was about lettin' go. Maybe cause you're the youngest, maybe because we lost Simon and our folks when you were still in short britches. Never could part easily with nothin'. You probably got Lu mendin' shirts you've owned for ten years rather than buy yourself a new one."

Travis had to chuckle at that. Some of his shirts were just about that old. He figured they had another five years left in them.

Rafe wasn't amused or grinning, though. "You can't keep the world predictable, little brother. Nobody can. How'd you feel when you were most afraid you might lose everything, afraid Sweeney might win? That's what you got to ask yourself. Every time I found myself lookin' down a gun barrel, my life about to be over in the next heartbeat, I always felt this dark terror. Might've stood still, never blinked, but inside I was shakin'. In that next heartbeat, a man forces himself to do what he's got to, even though he's scared shitless. Personally, I don't believe there's any such thing as brave. Fella's either scared or stupid."

"Why are you tellin' me this now? Why didn't you spout all this when we were on the train back from St. Louis? That's when I needed to hear it. When I had to face Sweeney startin' that range war."

"If you think so, you ain't learned enough yet," Rafe argued softly. "You had a pretend hitchin' to Lu. Were figurin' to throw Sweeney a bone by still marryin' up with his daughter. All that's wiped away now. Your life with the Italians is all you've got left. No silly-ass notions. Ought to frighten the daylights out of you."

Travis stood up and stretched, set his empty liquor glass on the edge of the desk. "Don't tell Sparkle about this, okay?" Rafe nodded. "Lu and I--well, you sent Rannie and it

worked. We got close. Lu got pregnant by me, lost it, and nearly died. When she was lyin' there . . . I worked things out in my mind. I'd do anything for that woman or for Stefania. Whatever's best for them."

Rafe smiled and held out his hand, pulling Travis into a rough embrace as he shook it. "Welcome to real life, little brother."

They broke apart as Pearson rapped at the door to announce Rafe's client was waiting in the foyer. Travis went upstairs. Stefania was playing happily with the twins. Sparkle and Lucia were in the blue guestroom down the hall from the playroom. Lucia immediately rushed over when she spotted him in the doorway.

"Everything is good with your brother now, yes?"

"Yes," he responded, pulling her against his side. "I'm starvin', though. What's it take for a man to get a meal around here, Sparkle Conley?"

Sparkle left off unpacking Lu's garments into the open armoire and hurried out to the hall, calling to Pearson. She requested cold platters for dinner and ordered the children to wash up. Lucia gazed at Travis with a worried expression. He laid part of her fears to rest. "Rafe and I talked. I was upset about some business from Pueblo that concerned him and Wil, but it's not important. It's all settled, so we can have a nice family visit. Sparkle's the best, ain't she? Did I ever tell you she lived on the ranch for a spell?"

He made certain Lu was occupied with meals and family activities for the balance of the day into the evening. He didn't want her arguing about Sparkle putting their bags together in the blue guestroom, or the natural expectation they'd share the bed. Travis didn't want to delve into the topic of their unorthodox marital situation until Lucia had been given time to appreciate the warmth of Rafe's home and family. Travis knew Lucia wasn't overlooking a single detail. She noticed small things, like little Simon's pugnacious attitude and the way Teal and Sparkle had the same amazing shade of aquamarine eyes. The way things were polished and refined, but none too fancy. Rough like Rafe, yet pretty like Sparkle.

Lucia had been surprised by the grandeur of the house. Travis knew it was a shock at first, saw she was almost afraid to sit on the furniture or touch a china plate or accept a crystal glass. Travis had felt the same the first time he visited here. But there was nothing stuffy in Rafe or Sparkle. They were friendly, genial hosts who shared their bounty and hospitality easily.

Lucia would unfurl in the cordial surroundings and open her heart to him. Travis was certain she would.

Chapter 27

Lucia took an immediate liking to Sparkle Conley. She sensed an underlying connection from the moment their eyes met in the foyer--despite their husbands' mortifying behavior. Perhaps because of it. They had much in common, Lucia and this woman with the shiny brown hair and beautiful eyes. Married to brothers similar in looks and temperament, mothers of dark-haired young children. But it was not these things which drew Lucia to her sister-in-law.

Sparkle was a strega. She possessed the gift of future sight and read tarot cards. A woman of powerful, benevolent magic. Lucia had learned this when her tour of the big home led them to a special room. Sparkle had called it her card parlor, and offered Lucia a reading.

It was perhaps inevitable that Sparkle would tell Lucia many things about herself and her life. See her past, her dead mother. Know that her father and brothers lived together in a small house. Know of the rift from Lucia's choice to marry Travis. But Lucia had been startled to realize Sparkle spoke of the rift in the past tense. Something had already begun a cleansing.

Lucia smiled when Sparkle admitted to having a personal secret. She was pregnant once again and hadn't yet told Rafe. Sparkle gazed into Lucia's eyes and told her she would have similar news to share, in the not-too-distant future.

Before Lucia could protest, Sparkle shook her head. She insisted that despite their recent loss of a child, Lucia and Travis would have two sons. Both would reach full manhood, first running Crockhead Rest at their father's side, then eventually would start a ranch in Texas of their own.

The women entered the card room virtual strangers, but left it as sisters. Each had been raised without female siblings. Each recognized the desire for unity thrumming in their hearts and smiled at the knowledge theirs was more than a bond of circumstance. Each acknowledged in the privacy of her own heart the strength and honor of their Conley men.

The women sat down to supper that night a little more in love with their men. Lucia was only mildly embarrassed when Sparkle's pregnancy announcement caused Rafe to jump out of his chair and pull his wife into his arms for a deep soul kiss. They were a most handsome, lucky couple.

Travis laughed and winked at Lucia. "Got to excuse my brother. He's got a habit of knockin' chairs over in excitement. Sparkle always seems to deliver important news smack in the midst of chowtime. It's a wonder the man ain't starved to a bundle of bones. Jumps up and plumb forgets to eat."

Pearson saved the day, ceremoniously arriving with chocolate fudge cake on dessert plates. Teal demanded to be informed where the new sibling her mother promised was

hiding. What sort of fool kid didn't want to come out for cake?

Simon took exception to his sister referring to their new brother as a fool, and flung a scoop of frosting into his sister's hair. The women spent the next hour bathing children and tucking them into bed. Then the adults retired to the parlor for coffee.

"You are much blessed," Lucia told Sparkle. "Your two little ones are so very pretty children."

"That's their ma's influence," Rafe replied, snuggling close beside his wife. "Always wanted me a little filly with the same turquoise eyes as her ma. Turned out both twins have eyes like Sparkle. Which means this next one'll probably be the spittin' image of me and Travis."

Lucia gazed at her husband's rugged features. "That would not be bad. A son who is strong and handsome with such dark eyes."

Travis flushed, but turned in time to catch a secretive look between Rafe and Sparkle. Abruptly she stifled a yawn that seemed forced. Rafe announced they were turning in early, owing to Sparkle's delicate condition. Lucia got up at once, nervously offering to keep watch over the children come morning. "Yes, I cook breakfast. You must rest."

"Thanks, Lu," Rafe nodded. "Believe she'll take you up on that." He escorted Sparkle up the stairs, one hand on the banister, the other cupping her swaying bottom.

Travis watched them disappear into the dark upper hall, then turned back to find Lucia blushing bright pink. "He is like you, I see," she huffed. "Always with naughty thoughts."

"His are generally a lot worse than mine, but Sparkle can take whatever notion he comes up with. She used to live and work in a saloon. That's where he met her."

This brought the expected intake of breath. "Yes? But she seemed so nice, not like this fall-down woman."

"Rafe seems a good fella, too, wouldn't you say?"

"Well, I not like when he hits you, but yes, nice to me and Stefania."

"But he hired out as a freelance gun. He told me you knew about that." Lu nodded, frowning in vague confusion. Travis pressed his advantage. "Sparkle used to read cards in the saloon. She didn't take fellas up to her room until Rafe came along. They were lovers before they took their vows."

"Oh, no."

"Yeah. Miranda came for a visit and we went lookin' for Sparkle. Found her and Rafe naked out in the cabin. You can bet Rannie threw a fit over that. She never could abide fornicatin' or folks givin' into temptation. Wasn't bad enough, Rafe out on the range killin' bad men--"

"Please," Lucia interrupted. "This is not right. You come to your brother's home, only to fight and talk about him and his wife with disrespect?"

"I don't disrespect either one of 'em," Travis contradicted gently. "Rafe's a hard man. Hard as nails when needs be. Sparkle's made of the same stuff. They don't attend church, but they got a nice life here. Not that they didn't have struggles or differences. Reckon everybody does. They did some bad things before, yet the Lord blessed them with those twins and now sees fit to give them another child. How come God ain't punishin' them? How come you're defendin' them to me, despite their sins? I wasn't makin' that stuff up, and you know it. Everything I said, they did. You don't say they're damned for eternity. Maybe because you can see they're just regular folk, like you and me."

"You try to fool me," Lucia murmured.

"Nope. But I'm tryin' to make you see everything ain't as simple as good or wicked, the world ain't just a matter of heaven or hell. People can be the salt of the earth and still make mistakes or be weak. Don't reckon God's as quick to punish or inflict misery as you think. I've always suspected He knows what's in someone's heart and that's what really counts."

"You say this because our things are together upstairs. You want me to --"

Travis pounced, wrapping her in his arms before she could move away. "I want you to give yourself to me, yes. Like you have in the past. Trusting that it's love between us. Believing God wants us to be happy, and that's why when we make love, it's so damned good."

"I don't know. I'm frightened, Travis."

Travis snorted aloud. "For pity's sake, Lu! If you need to believe God takes a pound of flesh for every pinch of pleasure, go on and tell yourself that. You paid to enjoy lovemaking already. You gave up your family and your life in St. Louis for Stefania. You lost our baby."

"I know."

He inclined his head and kissed her. He made sure his lips were pliant and gentle. He wouldn't rush her. But as their lips parted, he whispered, "I want the same thing my brother has: a loving wife, a family. You and I don't need fancy things around us. We're homespun and denim folk. Always will be, I reckon. I ain't never gone upstairs with a saloon gal. Never spent the night in a bordello. All I want is a night here with you. Inside you. Being free to touch you and let you touch me. To know you care for me as much as I've come to love you."

She leaned into his embrace and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Always I have cared for you, Travis."

He groaned and pulled her down onto the sofa, onto his lap, though he knew she'd feel his erection under her round bottom. She glanced down knowingly and he felt himself

go even stiffer. She didn't pull away or look insulted. She laid his hand over a full breast and closed her eyes. "I have needed your hands on me. I want you to give me another child."

It was all Travis needed to hear. He allowed himself a passionate thirty seconds or so to acknowledge her request with a fiery kiss, then led her upstairs.

He locked the guestroom door and stripped her clothes off, then drew her to the windows. A pale shaft of moonlight speared the curtains. On his knees before her, still fully clothed, Travis let the light fall on her triangle of dark curls as he gently reached up to worship her with his fingers.

Lucia moaned and began to work the buttons of his shirt open. He let her pull it off him, then ran his tongue up over her belly. He traced concentric circles around her dark areolas until her nipples stood out like hard little stones. He drew a nub into his mouth and suckled as he slid two fingers deep into her moist sheath. Lucia gasped and writhed.

He knew how badly she wanted him. She was wet and hot, tight, grinding herself down around his fingers. Her own frantically sought his belt buckle and the buttons on his jeans.

He tugged off his jeans. They stood together in the darkness as Lucia ran a forefinger along his length, then around the engorged head of his shaft. He grunted, jerked in response to the wicked game her fingers played. Pearl had toyed with him a time or two, but he'd never felt so close to bursting, to dying from the exquisite torture.

Travis clenched his fists. He yearned to grab Lu's hips and thrust deep up inside her, to plunge and stroke, plunge and stroke again until he couldn't think straight. He couldn't let her keep teasing him. He wouldn't have the restraint to pleasure her first the way he wanted. He needed his own release too desperately to wait.

"Lu," he croaked, "I'm about to split open. When you touch me like that, I--"

He never finished the thought. Lucia pushed him back onto the carpet and knelt over him, a plump breast on either side of his turgid shaft. She knew what she was doing to him, knew how much he liked stroking the channel between her fleshy mounds. She used her arms now to squeeze her breasts together, trapping his shaft inside her cleavage. "Oh, Lucia," he moaned, thrashing helplessly beneath her. "Help me, I need-- this won't be enough. . ."

He couldn't get out the words to beg for what he wanted. Needed. Lucia bent and took him into her mouth. He was suddenly enveloped by heat and suction, by wildly unbearable friction from her lips and tongue. Friction that had him coming and coming until he thought the top of his skull would open up.

He waited until his pounding heart slowed to open his eyes. Lucia was kneeling beside him, her eyes heavy lidded. She'd neatly seduced him, turned everything around, and enjoyed pleasuring him. That and the way she now cupped her own breasts in her hands

made his manhood start to lengthen and rise again.

"Come onto the bed," she whispered. She sprawled in the center of the mattress, arms and legs thrown wide. "Now touch me. Show me how wicked can still be good."

Travis drew a shaky breath. Triumphant, but shaky. His need hadn't been slaked by the short escapade on the carpet, and now she'd crossed the invisible line he'd drawn. Accepted his challenge.

There was no more Catholic or Protestant, no church versus temptation, no distinction between the needs of the flesh and needs of their souls. Tonight she was offering herself to him without reservation, holding nothing back. He understood he could ask for anything, do anything. She was completely, totally his.

He slid his hands under her buttocks and positioned her knees up over his shoulders, then probed with his tongue. First deep inside, then over her soft tissue folds and around the sensitive bud hidden within them. She moaned and pressed her thighs together, keeping Travis pressed close to her core. His fingers crept to her nipples, to begin kneading and pinching until she bucked her hips wildly. She caught a bed pillow and dragged it against her head, muffing her moans and sobs as he made a seal with his lips around her and teased the taut bud unmercifully with his tongue. She climaxed twice before he pulled his mouth away and laid her on the mattress to catch her breath.

He was warmed up now, ready to show her other delights.

He began by slowing kissing and licking her toes and feet. Then her calves, the backs of her knees. She giggled at first, but the laughter began to dissolve into little rapid pants of breath as he worked his way to key portions of her body. "I love your jugs, Lu," he marveled, hefting one in each palm as she sat up. "Every man on my ranch wants to do this. Touch them . . . taste them." She let her head drop back and closed her eyes, sighing as he explored each breast in turn as the wonder it was, adored each with his hands and mouth until she squirmed away.

"Please, you must put yourself inside, please," she whimpered.

"That's what you want?"

"Yes. I want you big and hard there, to give me another child in my belly, to make me one with you."

Oh Lord, but she had a way with damned few words. "All right, but I ain't quite stiff enough just this second. Can you touch me again, Lu?"

Her deft fingers found him and showed him no mercy. Travis had watched her work bread dough on his kitchen table with envy, imagining his favorite body part on that table, being kneaded by those sure fingers. He gave himself about two minutes to savor the mental fantasy before her ministrations had him too well aroused.

"Put me in," he commanded softly, stretching out above her with his weight balanced on

his forearms. He bent his head and watched as his sword slid home into her hot sheath. "Oh Travis, yes," she moaned, arching up, offering her breasts to his mouth. He pulled on a stiff nipple and felt the pace of their rocking motions change. She wanted to be ridden, captured, conquered. She pressed his head even closer to her breast, crying out when he sucked the entire ring of dark pigment between his lips.

Her legs wrapped around his hips, her heels drove his buttocks down and into her. Then Travis was spilling himself, nearly biting her nipple in his frenzy. The powerful spasms made him jerk and thrust harder. Lucia clutched him ferociously and gasped in pleasure too.

After what felt like an eternity of pumping and spurting, heat everywhere, Travis was able to open his eyes and rest his head on her breast. The nipple was still erect, and when he tested with a tiny flick of his tongue, Lucia whispered encouragement. He couldn't believe she was ready for more, but it was as though he'd tapped into some hidden well of lust in her.

Moments later he rolled her onto her belly and mounted her from behind. She grunted and raised her hips slightly to meet his slow, gentle thrust. Travis planned to stretch this coupling out, to drive her insane before he let her find release. Their bodies were slick with sweat, the room heady with the scent of their lovemaking, but Lucia was still burning hot. "Do you remember last time we tried this?" Travis breathed in her ear. "A brick ruined it. Nothin's going to ruin it tonight, sweetheart. You've got me for as long and as slow as you want. We should still go easy, Lu. Your insides."

"I am fine," she hissed. "Marone! Yes, like that. Deep. More and more, yes. I love you as I have never loved anyone, marito. You love me too."

"That's right, Lu."

"So deep, so good," she panted. "Oh, I cannot bear it!"

Travis felt her begin to quiver, felt the throbbing waves and noted how her little dark mole seemed to bob as she came around him. He rolled Lu onto her side and kept thrusting, moving slowly in and out, telling her in words and with measured strokes of his shaft and his fingers how he cherished their life together.

He lost count of how many times she crested that night. He spilled himself four times at least, until he hadn't a drop left. He sprawled over Lucia in sated exhaustion sometime a little after one in the morning. He heard the chime of the clock downstairs.

It was the last thing he heard until Lucia opened the bedroom door and walked in carrying a tray. He cracked his eyelids open to bright sunlight streaming through the slit in the curtains. His wife's hair was loose around her shoulders. She'd donned his favorite pink gingham dress. Ma and Miranda had been right all those years, he told himself. There truly was a heaven. He'd died last night and gone to it.

"You will need much coffee today, my virilmente one," Lucia teased, offering a steaming

mug.

He took it, but set it down on the bedside table. He pulled her onto the edge of the mattress beside him. "Did I hurt you last night?"

"No." In spite of her denial and hale outward appearance, Travis ran his hands down her ribcage in concern. He didn't remember everything, but the jumbled images in his mind of wild excess had him feeling abashed this morning. He'd never had such a carnal night. They'd done things together . . . well, Travis just wasn't sure that's how a man was supposed to treat a wife.

She placed a chaste kiss on his forehead. "You pazzo. I am very well, as are you. I think much loving is good medicine for body ills."

She was right. He'd never felt better or stronger. More alive. Capable and ready to take on the world. "Yeah, seems that way, but you're a little gal, and--"

"And I wanted the touching, even when it was not so soft and gentle. I wanted not to worry, to not think of Padre or sinning. Only to love, to be. To show myself a creature of desire."

Travis openly stared in shock. Hellfire and damnation. A creature of desire, was she? Built like a brick shithouse, and now he had to contend with a sexual demon inside it. Maybe he'd received more than he'd bargained for last night.

"Reckon you did that, all right."

"And also, we are used to hard work. You have no cows here. I have no cleaning, only the children and some little cooking. We must do something, so much loving in the dark is good, no?"

His face split in a lopsided grin. He must look like a real tinhorn. Naked and disheveled, with his little immigrant wife explainin' she'd been a wanton in bed to help burn off his excess energy. "I'll remember you said so, come sundown." He reached for his coffee and drained it in a few long swallows, then swatted Lu's rump as she set the mug back on her tray and headed out of the room.

He had to get cleaned up and dressed. He had a lot to do. Rafe was taking him into the city.

For the next two days, the routine was the same. Travis made love to his wife each night, then left with his brother for the agency office in downtown Denver. The women spent the day with the children, then everyone spent the evening together in the parlor after supper.

Travis sent a wire to Randy Shea and had gone back to the telegraph office to receive his answer. Things were quiet at Crockhead Rest. That was good. It meant Travis could send off other telegrams and make the arrangements he needed for when he and the family returned to Pueblo. He also spent time shopping. He bought himself a suit--the first such

dandified get-up he'd ever owned as an adult--a new dress for Stefania, and a traveling suit with a lace underblouse for Lucia. He'd bring his family home dressed in style this time.

The morning of their last day in town, Rafe announced his family was going off to fly kites for the twins, something he'd been promising for weeks. "Besides, Travis," he ventured after Sparkle herded the children away from the breakfast table, "Sparkle figured maybe Lu'd like a long soak in our tub. Says gals need to pamper themselves from time to time. Figured we'd let you folks have a bit of privacy." His facial expression was wolfish as he added the seemingly innocent question. "Think Stef might like to fly a kite at the park too?"

Chapter 28

Lucia had never seen anything like the gleaming brass tub in the master bedroom suite. Extra large to offer a rich, deep soak, it stood on clawed feet and had pipes connected, with handles one turned in order to fill the tub with hot water. Travis had explained the water was heated by a boiler in the basement. All she had to do was turn the handles sideways, let the water run, and she'd have a luxurious hot bath in a matter of moments. No toting multiple pails into the house from the creekbed or heating them on the stove. No dragging the tub into the kitchen near the stove for warmth, like back at the ranch. No long delays to enjoy the decadence of a hot bath, and no need to rush at her ablutions. Rafe and Sparkle had taken all the children on an outing, and Travis was downstairs.

She filled the tub clear to her shoulders and risked stealing a bit of Sparkle's scented perfume under the faucets. Ah, it was heavenly.

She was drowsing, almost to the point of drifting into actual sleep in the blissful warmth, when Travis strolled into the big bedroom with a large box. "Now ain't you a sight for a randy man's eyes," he remarked, giving her a bold perusal. She purposely sat up, ignoring the way his gaze fastened on her flushed breasts and their pointing nipples. She wanted to know what was in the package.

"What is that?"

He set it down on the big bed. "Bought you somethin' while I was in the city yesterday. Come on out and have a look-see." He held up a thick towel.

Lucia took it and quickly dried herself before wrapping it around her body, her curiosity still keeping her focus on the wrapped box. It was large, containing something Travis had purchased in the city. Lucia understood from Sparkle that city people weren't limited to the dry goods available at one or two general stores. They could browse in numerous establishments, many carrying fine ready-made garments. Lucia dared to hope perhaps Travis knew how much she had always longed for a dress stitched by a needle other than her own.

Travis untied the ribbon and removed the box lid.

"Marone! Travis, what have you done?" Lucia gaped at the cocoa-colored traveling suit with the beige lace underblouse. She'd never seen anything finer. "This must have cost lots of money. Thank you for thinking me worthy, but I have no need for such fancy things. You have said this."

"Ain't a matter of need. I want you to have it, Lu. For the train ride home. Bought myself a suit and Stefania a nice dress. We can afford one good set of clothes each. I'm keepin' the ranch, remember?"

Lucia laughed, but there were tears welling in her eyes as she reached to wrap her arms

around his neck. She forgot the towel. It dropped to the floor. Travis immediately scooped her up and laid her nude on the big bed before unfastening his jeans. Lucia was suddenly very embarrassed. "Travis, what if--"

"Why do you think they took the kids out and left us here? Why do you think Sparkle told you to use her tub? Don't suppose she and my brother need a bed this ostentatious for sleepin', do you?"

Lucia had to laugh. It was true. The brass bed was huge. Covered with a brocade coverlet and a mound of pillows. Pillows of all shapes and sizes.

Travis had shed his garments while she'd been admiring the bed. Now he stood beside it in naked splendor, clearly hungry for her. Just the sight of him made her insides clench with her own desire. Since their first night here, Lucia had known the true meaning of marriage. It was not sharing a home, but sharing each other's bodies that made older married women speak about years of bliss.

Lucia's husband was a voracious, yet caring, lover. He had discovered, as she had in the past few days, that she was very capable of enjoying sex play for extended periods of time and climaxing repeatedly. He usually tired before she did.

"I'm not sleepy," she slid her bare bottom over the coverlet until her back struck the heap of pillows. She reclined against them, knowing this would cause her breasts to jut up in invitation.

"Neither am I," came Travis' husky reply. He stretched out full length and began licking at her belly, flicking the tip of his tongue into her navel. In a matter of moments, Lucia felt the first orgasm gathering as he suckled hard on first one breast and then its mate.

He waited until it had subsided to suggest she rest her belly on the hillock of throw pillows. He began to caress Lucia's buttocks, massaging and warming her flesh until she opened willingly, offering him access. But at the first swipe of his wet tongue, Lucia jerked and nearly fell from the pillows. Travis ordered her to keep still, then assured she'd comply by holding her down as his mouth invaded her lower body.

Lucia thought she would die.

Travis let his tongue flick against her most sensitive spot, then moved away. His hands caressed and claimed her. Every so often he would nip at the dark mole on her bottom, telling her it was the sign she was his alone, and she laughed at his silly notion. Of course she was his alone. She had belonged to no one but Travis and never would.

But he made her say it again. Swear it, curse it, as his fingers speared her. Thrilling, torturing, lifting her until she rose fully onto her knees and shamelessly pressed herself against Travis' rotating palm. Only when she'd sworn her undying love for him, sworn delight in all they did together alone like this, did he withdraw his hand and replace it with his hard lance.

Lucia came so hard she had to bury her face in the pillows to keep from screaming.

Rafe's family had gone out, but what would their servant think? As Travis urged her to alter positions, she asked about the butler.

"Pearson's day off," Travis panted. "We're all alone. I want . . . you to learn how to ride, Lu. Can't live your whole life . . . on a ranch without learning how to . . . mount and ride."

Lucia stared at his engorged shaft. Travis now lay flat on his back. Lucia watched as his erection pulsed and strained. Sparkle had told her women did this, straddled men and rode them like stallions. Could she truly be this bold? Lucia asked herself. It was one thing to lie back and accept a man's manipulations, quite something else to climb on top of his body and absorb him. Control him. "You want me to sit on you?"

"Got a spike here to keep you from fallin' off," he announced with a straight face. The face is what told her he wasn't teasing her. Sometimes Travis said odd jokes. This was not such a joke. He reached for her hips and guided her down over him.

Oh no, not funny. Wildly exciting, having him so very deep, yet so still. Different. Lucia began to move, her husband to moan with pleasure.

Not funny. Freeing and powerful. Delicious, but not funny.

A new woman boarded the train later that same day.

A woman wearing an elegant traveling suit, looking prim and proper. But inside she knew she was a wife in every way, a lover and friend to the handsome man beside her. A good wife and lover, but after the morning in his brother's room, she could never be truly proper.

Lucia found the knowledge pleased her.

She had spoken to Sparkle privately the morning after the first night of lovemaking with Travis. All he'd related about his sister-in-law and brother's wild past was true. Sparkle had fallen in love with Rafe and believed for awhile that he'd corrupted her. But the day came when she realized it was not corruption to give her heart, her soul, her body to the man she could no longer live without. She had tried life without Rafe and been miserable.

Lucia never wanted to know that misery. She would sleep and make love in her husband's bed again, make peace within herself and take comfort from her faith and church as best she could. That decided, she dropped a weary head against Travis' shoulder and let the rhythm of the rails lull her into some much needed sleep.

Travis didn't have the driver head straight from the depot to Crockhead Rest. Instead, he'd asked to be taken to St. Ignacius. "Why would you wish to go there?" Lucia inquired, making no attempt to hide her surprise. "The priest says mass tomorrow morning. Stefania and I come back then. You can come too if you wish."

"Got to see your Father Alphonse about somethin' today." Travis adjusted his string tie as he climbed down from the buckboard. He spoke to the hired driver, then glanced up at Lucia on the buckboard's seat. "You and Stefania wait here. I'll be out directly."

He disappeared through the heavy wooden doors into the church, but returned a short time later with Mavis. He gathered Stefania in his arms and handed her to the foreman's wife. "You keep a close eye on the little one. We'll be comin' inside, but I want to talk to Lucia first."

Lucia glanced from one adult to the other, nonplused. Mavis wasn't Catholic. Lucia couldn't imagine what she'd been doing inside the Catholic church or why her presence there didn't seem unusual to Travis. It was almost as though he'd gone inside to summon her. But that was crazy.

"Did you know Mavis would be here today?" she asked.

"Yep. Sent her husband a wire telling him--Great, there he is now. Hey, Randy."

The foreman came over to shake his employer's hand and inquire whether they'd had a nice visit in Denver. Then a group of strangers swarmed around the wagon, most of them young children.

Travis beamed at Lucia. "These are our new neighbors, Clancy and Bridget McGill. Ma and pa to this army of young-un's. Good Irish Catholics, like I told you."

Lucia smiled graciously and nodded to the older couple. "Is our priest saying a special mass to welcome you, then?"

"Faith, no," Mrs. McGill laughed. "He's saying mass for you, of course."

Lucia went stiff as a horrifying suspicion dawned. Today the priest heard confessions. Had Travis purposely taken her to visit his brother with intentions of seducing her, then planned for her to confess with half the town present? Was that why he'd insisted on these new clothes and formality?

"Boss, they say it's time." This came from Mick, who poked his head out one of the main doors.

Lucia choked, "He is here also? And the others? Are there no cows to chase, nothing for them to do besides witness my shame before the priest?"

Lucia covered her face with her hands. She had trusted Travis, given him her body and her heart. Now he had crushed it.

"Lucia." Travis pulled her down from the wagon and set her on her feet. "We're all alone. Everybody's gone inside."

"Everyone knows," she wailed. "You buy me fancy clothes and dress me like I am a saloon woman."

"Everyone knows you're my wife," he corrected. "And they're here as part of a gift I'm

tryin' to give you. It's a surprise I rigged with your priest's help. You ain't fixin' to disappoint Father Alphonse or Sister Aurelia, are you?"

"Sister Aurelia is inside too?" Lucia wiped at her cheeks. For some reason, that thought was comforting. The sister was a true friend. Lucia knew that. Whatever Travis had done, it could not be cruel if the nun was part of it.

He took her left hand between both of his. "I love you so much, it seems impossible I ever lived any part of my years without you. I don't want to lose you, Lucia. And I been sore afraid I might. Maybe not tomorrow, but someday when you realize how fine a woman you are. How you could have any fella you want. Maybe when Stefania grows up and leaves home."

"No, Travis. I would--"

"Hear me out, okay? I need you at the ranch, Lu. I need you in my bed, in my parlor sewin' by the fire, in my kitchen cookin' up funny chow I can't even recognize. I'm tryin' to be what you need. I'm goin' inside. Somebody'll come fetch you in a minute. Tell me later if I guessed right . . . that this'll show you how I feel."

Before she could respond, Travis tossed his hat into the wagon bed and ducked back into the church. Mick came through the doors a few seconds later. He was also hatless, his hair all slicked down, and a silly grin on his face. "I get the honor of escortin' you inside, ma'am." He crooked his elbow.

Lucia didn't know whether to give in to tears or laugh at Mick. He looked like a rooster. But as she met his gaze, she saw how happy he appeared. Whatever Travis had planned, Mick was thrilled to be along. So Lucia summoned all the dignity she could muster and recalled Travis' words to her. He'd said he needed her, in his life and in his bed.

She needed him the same way. If that was sinful to admit, if wanting Travis inside her was wrong, then she would never maintain a state of grace. For she loved Travis--with every fiber of her being, with her last ounce of strength. And she did not regret anything that had transpired between them. God would judge her, but Lucia was not going to deny the truth any longer.

If God would not understand and forgive her, Lucia would at least have Travis' love and perhaps his child. She vowed to forgive herself for the sin of loving him.

Mick led her into the nave, where she discovered pew after pew filled with faces she knew. All the Crockhead wranglers were there, dressed in their best shirts and vests. Lucia recognized a few of the town merchants. Her gaze swept the church. She spotted the Sheas sitting with Stefania. But it was the row of faces in the front pew that made Lucia gasp.

Her brothers were waiting there. All of them. Even Benito.

Father Alphonse and Sister Aurelia stood near the altar with Travis.

"I will walk her now," a male voice announced. Lucia looked over her shoulder and nearly swooned.

Her father was dressed in the suit he'd worn to bury her mother. Marco Montessano had never looked more forbidding or more welcome to Lucia. She trembled as she took his arm.

"Always I told you to find a good man for a husband," her father said in Italian, quietly, for her ears alone. "I told you marry with the priest's blessing. Finally you listen."

"Padre . . ." Lucia's answer died as she realized what he'd just said.

"Your man waits." Marco walked her the rest of the way up the aisle, then relinquished her arm as Travis stepped forward.

"This is why I went to town, Lu," Travis whispered as the church fell quiet. "I saw Father Alphonse to take the catechism."

Sister Aurelia and Marco stood witness to the exchange of vows. Father Alphonse said mass during the ceremony. Lucia tearfully watched Travis kneel and pray beside her. He was a Catholic now.

She would later recall little of the actual wedding. She was numb as they left the church and rode home in the buckboard procession. The beds of the several wagons had been decorated with garlands of flowers. Those hands on horseback shouted their congratulations. Soon the entire gathering had moved to Crockhead Rest.

Mavis and Bridget McGill had prepared a mountain of food. Townsfolk showed up with more, unloading tins and plates and jugs of liquor from their wagons and carriages.

Everyone shared in the wedding feast. A McGill cowboy anxious to heal the breach between the men of the formerly feuding spreads broke out his fiddle. Timmy brought out his harmonica. Sourdough Freiling began calling a square dance. Lucia and Travis danced, then she watched Travis dance with Stefania--who proudly announced to everyone that hers was the world's nicest papa. She'd now be able to sit on his lap in church. She was a very lucky girl, very happy with her new parents.

A few of her elders had to wipe at their faces after her announcement, but Lucia did not wish to hide her joy. She caught Stefania in her arms and hugged her fiercely, then turned to kiss Travis. She would never have to apologize again for loving him, for what they did. As Stefania tripped off with the McGill children, Lucia whispered her secret fear to Travis, that she'd feared he'd taken her to church to make her confession after all the wickedness she'd displayed that morning.

Travis scooped her up into his arms and started for the house. "There's time before mass tomorrow," he grinned. "And I got a feelin' by then you'll have even more to tell."

It was long past dusk. Lucia stared at the closed bedroom door, praying Travis wouldn't

be furious when he finally came back through it. Their wedding night had been interrupted by Randy summoning his boss. There was some other trouble on the ranch. Travis had been gone for almost an hour now.

She jumped out of bed when she heard the back door slam. She hurriedly tied the sash of her robe and went out to the kitchen. Travis was at the trestle table. He dug a fork into a slice of the wedding cake Mrs. McGill had baked for them and motioned to a second fork. "Share some of this and a cup of coffee with me."

"Yes," Lucia nodded. "I left the pot on the stove." She poured two cups and slid into the chair across from her husband, watching his face closely. He did not look happy, but his voice betrayed no anger. "What has gone wrong?"

Travis saw the concern etching her face, admired the flowing dark waves spilling over her shoulders and saw there was nothing under the robe she'd put on. She was barefoot and charming as she dug right into his slice of cake. Not the least self-conscious about sitting in the kitchen at midnight with a glob of icing on her nose. He could imagine them years from now--Stefania grown and gone--still sitting in the kitchen sharing coffee together like this. Lu would have silver streaks in her hair, his face would have two dozen creases. Their hands would be gnarled from years of work.

He'd still think Lucia Conley was the most amazing female in the whole dang'd world. She'd still look at him with all her love there to see in her eyes. Tonight it fairly lit up her face.

"You didn't know about the weddin' or your family comin'," Travis sighed. "Couldn't have been you put the fool notion in your brother's head. Came up with this foolishness all on his own."

Lucia didn't deny the foolishness. Only wondered who got credit for it. "Which brother?"

Travis didn't want to get into it. He'd much prefer to lick that frosting off her nose. But not half as badly as he wanted to smear it in a few other places.

"Vincenzo. He doesn't like that shoe factory in Missouri. He plans on stayin' on here. Got into a shoutin' match with Timmy and Mick when he tried to claim a spot in the bunkhouse."

"Oh no," Lucia groaned. "I'm sorry, Travis. Vincenzo is . . . what you would call a little . . ."

"Lame-brained?" Travis suggested. "Backward?"

She smacked his arm, knocking the fork poised with cake aside. He ended up with frosting on his cheek. "You should not say such things," she admonished, knowing full well her husband had been teasing. "I don't tell you your brother is stupid."

"Probably cause my brother ain't," Travis countered. "You got icin' on your face."

"So do you."

"What can we do about that, I wonder?" Before she could answer, Travis had her out of her chair and in his arms. He kissed her hungrily and licked away the frosting, waiting impatiently while she did the same for him.

He could feel her robe slipping against her bare skin. Despite the fact he'd spent the past few nights and that same morning in heated lovemaking, his erection proved he was more than ready for an old-fashioned wedding night.

"Vinny plans on becomin' an American cowboy. Expects I'll gladly put him on my payroll. Has he ever set on the back of a horse, Lu?"

"Oh. Yes, I think. Long ago. I remember . . . he tried to ride the iceman's horse. In our village in Italy. But the horse would not move." Lucia tried to mimic someone digging their heels into a horse's sides. "Vincenzo fell and cut his leg. Much blood, I remember. My mother was angry, so Padre did not buy ice from that one with the bad horse again."

Travis groaned aloud. "I'm supposed to hire a cowherd who ain't never spent any time around a live cow? Fella who can't get a draft horse to giddy up? Oh, he'll come in real handy."

"Travis." Lucia slid a hand inside the neck of his shirt.

"Maybe McGill needs a renegade rider. I'll send Vinny over to the Lazy Dog tomorrow."

"You are teasing again."

"Naw, I'm serious. I don't need some city fella who doesn't know one end of a horse from the other."

"Please don't be angry, marito. Vincenzo is my brother. He is not so bad. Remember when you said you would drown the kittens in your barn? You do not bite, do not keep your mean promises."

"I'll keep this one. Kittens rubbin' my legs was one thing, but your brother followin' me around askin' a million fool questions in broken English is just more than I can take, Lu."

"Well, okay." She smiled up into his eyes. "But at least you are not upset about the cats."

"That's over with. I got--" Suddenly he pulled away and squinted at her. He didn't like the expression on her face. It was much too earnest, as if . . . "That orange one's not pregnant again? Tell me that goddamned cat ain't about to drop another batch."

"Scorza is very good at having little ones. You will let us keep the kittens, yes?"

"Some weddin' night this is turnin' out to be," he grumbled, pulling her back against his chest. "I'll think on it a spell, Lu, but--"

"And Vincenzo, too," she insisted. "He will learn. He is not stupid or lazy. You can teach him how to ride horses, do the work of the ranch. Say you will make him into the

American cowboy . . . and say we can keep the little cats. Promise me, Travis."

He'd told himself he wouldn't reveal what he'd learned to her, but somehow the assurances she asked for pried it right past his lips. "Lu, remember when you first came here, lookin' for some fella named Crockett? And one of my men said they'd known somebody by that name around Canon City a few months before?"

"Yes, Antonio Crockett."

"Well, he was the wrong one. Vinny was so proud of gettin' us together, he dug out the newspaper advertisement and gave it to me today. The fella seekin' a mail-order bride was named Crockett, but he lived in Provo. That's in Utah, hundreds of miles due West of here. Can't take back what I said about your brother. He's a nice enough fella, but a bird brain."

Lucia turned and started out of the kitchen and down the hall toward the bedroom. Travis followed behind her. "Perhaps the station man didn't hear what Vincenzo asked when he bought my ticket. Maybe because we talk with Italian accent. It doesn't matter," she announced in a casual tone.

Travis closed their bedroom door behind him and scowled at her. He wanted to hash this out. The woman removing her bathrobe at this precise moment wasn't helping. "It sure as hell mattered for you. He sent you to the wrong damned town, Lucia! If I sent him on a cattle drive, where would he take the herd, down the Chisholm Trail into Texas?"

"You are so stubborn," she sighed, stepping close to begin unbuttoning his boiled shirt. "I will cook the pots of beans you like. Once every week." She kissed the section of Travis' chest she'd bared. "And you do not tell my brother he is stupid for his mistake about the other town. I am here and your wife now. I wish to hear no more about it." The shirt slid off his shoulders to be replaced by stroking smooth fingers and palms.

"Yeah, but--God, that feels good, darlin'--but don't you even care that maybe this Crockett was a decent fella, and maybe he really wanted to get married? That instead of him waitin' there for you, all misty-eyed with his hat over his heart, you had to come here and go through all that mess to get hitched up with me to get Stefania back?"

"No. Always you needed a henhouse."

"What the hell's that got to do with anything?"

"You talk too much, marito," she interjected, kissing him with an urgency he understood all too well from the past several nights. She was already damp and ready for him. "You married me before the priest today. Stop talking and love me."

Travis did, but later as she lay drowsing with her head on his chest, the same thought kept nagging at him. "Did you mean that, Lu? You don't care how you ended up here, married to me instead of that Crockett fella? He probably waited for weeks out in Utah and got drunk every night, thinkin' you changed your mind about him."

"I cannot pity someone I never knew," she sighed. "I know only that Stefania loves you with all her heart, as I do. Your ranch and house are home to us, your men our friends. From the first day, when you growled like the dog who does not bite, I wanted no one else. Wanted nothing more than to stay here always."

He wrapped his arms around her, cradling her close. "That's all the thanks I'll ever need. For the church weddin' and for you and your pa back on speakin' terms. I do love you, Lucia. And I keep thinkin' maybe God will . . . maybe we'll have a child of our own someday. I'd like to give you that. Like to see you, all big and pregnant like your orange cat."

"Sparkle says soon," Lucia yawned. "Before another year has passed."

"She told you that?" His voice sounded like a hoarse whisper, even to his own ears. He hoped he didn't sound desperate. He didn't want Lu to know it meant everything to him, or she'd assume she'd failed again if it didn't come to pass.

"Yes, and that I was to tell you I was always meant to come here. To you. That is why Antonio Crockett or other Crockett does not matter. But Sparkle said you would not believe."

"Don't know if I do or not."

"You needed someone to clean and sew and cook. I needed a husband for Stefania. I am good cook, you are good father. Everyone is happy, yes? Even my cats."

When she put it that way, Travis could almost accept fate. That explanation made about as much sense as anything else. Travis couldn't deny he was pleased to have the Sweeneys out of his life. And that had come about directly because of Lucia, because she'd represented what they most hated. Yeah, in a sense, she'd been just what he'd always needed. Even when he didn't know it.

"I always needed cats in my barn and a passionate Italian sposa in my bed, hmm?"

"I do not have to be impassioned and share your bed, Travis," she reminded tartly.

"Now, hold on. You just forget any notions about sleepin' in the other room. I'm thinkin' maybe I better hurry up and make some babies to fill those other rooms and you won't have any choice."

"I would like that. Vincenzo never so good at the cow factory, for much time he wants different work. My other brother, Angelo, likes it here too."

Travis rolled them over, pinning her beneath him. "No way. One wrangler who doesn't know the first thing about steers is plenty. Tomato sauce every damned night of the week, cats in my barn! Ten or eleven, last time I counted. Brothers poppin' up. Nobody but Vinny can stay on. That's final." He ran out of steam and traced a fingertip along her lips, his voice softer. "You ever plan to stop turnin' my life upside down, Lucia Conley?"

The answer was a throaty laugh.

Travis cupped a lush breast in his palm and bent to kiss his wife, silently offering a prayer of thanks.

THE END