



*Impassioned*  
**VAGABOND**

**SHANNAH BIONDINE**

# IMPASSIONED VAGABOND

By

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## **Prologue**

### **Texas Plains, 1868**

Firelight flickered over the hard lines of the men's faces as they hunkered shoulder to shoulder and divided their shares. Voices hushed, though they were miles from the nearest town or homestead with no one to hear them but the night wind, they settled their business and shook hands for the last time. Jackson laughed as he kicked loose dirt over the fire, noting more than flames would be extinguished tonight. After tonight, Frank Jackson would cease to exist.

McAllister watched the other two mount up and ride off in two separate directions before heading north. He was moving at a good clip when his horse faltered and he discovered the nag had lost a shoe. McAllister cursed. He hadn't yet made Oklahoma. But he wasn't far from the border and a small town where he had an old friend who knew better than to ask questions--a friend who just happened to be one hell of a blacksmith and would let him lay low for awhile.

A few nights later, McAllister was nervous, wishing the smith hadn't insisted on bringing his young son along to the cemetery. Not all that young, McAllister corrected. Eleven, twelve maybe. McAllister himself had started riding with a gang at thirteen. But he'd been a tougher kid. The smith's son had a delicate quality that was disturbing. Christ, you're jumping at nothing, McAllister told himself as he dropped the last shovel full back over the grave and tamped the earth firmly into place. Couldn't tell a thing looking at the spot now, and the kid wouldn't talk. Didn't know what was in the box, anyway.

But someone did, McAllister realized when a bullet struck his upper left thigh, just missing the groin. Someone must have followed him. He rolled to his right and squeezed off two shots, aiming at the black void past the cemetery's white picket fence. The blacksmith shouted for his boy to get down.

McAllister fired again. Too late. The boy tumbled from the wagon, yellow curls gone crimson-black. McAllister cursed and fumbled to reload his six gun. A shot rang out and smashed a rib as it tore into McAllister's lung.

Jackson.

It had to be that son-of-a-bitch Jackson. He and Wilmont were the only ones who knew and could have come after him. Wilmont didn't have balls enough for an execution--and that's what it was, pure and simple. The kid was down, the unarmed blacksmith too. Tasting the blood on his tongue and feeling the weakness seeping through his muscles as he fought to wheeze, McAllister knew he'd never live to see another sunrise.

"Hope ya like diggin', Jackson," he shouted at the darkness. "There's thousands in it for ya, if ya can get your shovel to hit pay dirt."

McAllister's lips formed a ghastly twisted smile. He'd purposely disturbed the earth

over several of the graves, and there were dozens out here. He'd remarked about the size of the graveyard for such a small town when they rode up. The blacksmith said a bout of yellow fever the year before had claimed almost half the local population. Fire Thorn's cemetery was now the most crowded spot for miles around. Plenty of places to dig...

McAllister winced and pulled himself upright against a headstone. "I'll tell Slade and Old Scratch howdy for ya. I took out Murphy like ya wanted, earned my share. This is how ya pay me back? Well, no hard feelin's." This last came in a blasphemous snort.

"We'll all meet up again one day in Hell. Hope ya dig up every damned grave here before ya find the right one. Here's a hint--I won't be lying in it!" There was a short bark of sarcastic laughter before McAllister squeezed off one more shot.

Right through the roof of his mouth.

## Chapter 1

### Wichita, Kansas 1877

It happened in that split-second, feels-like-an-eternity way that sent a man's mind into a haze. Rafe Conley had taken maybe two steps into the street, thinking he'd mosey over to the saloon across the way. He wasn't a heavy drinker as a rule, but the reward was burning a hole in the pocket of his jeans and his throat was parched. The sign over the saloon read The Scarlet Lady. The implications of that allowed Rafe to be overcome by a mild thirst. He was looking right at the swinging doors when they exploded outward. A big man strode onto the porch with a girl slung under his arm. She was squirming there one second; hurtling through space the next.

She thudded at Rafe's feet, ruffled bustle virtually atop the square toe of one creased cowboy boot.

Damned remarkable. Women of any variety simply didn't fall at Rafe Conley's feet. He wasn't graced with his younger brother's good looks. Rafe wasn't taller than your average man, well off enough so anyone would notice, or given to spouting poetry or them flowery words gals liked. Rafe was a man other men noticed and gave a wide berth or grudging nod to. Because men spotted the peacemaker first. Saw Rafe as the human strapped to it.

Gals, on the other hand, didn't pay all that much attention. To them Rafe was just another drifter. Women hardly glanced at Rafe Conley twice. But the one at his feet slowly looked up at him now. And Rafe thought he must have been kicked by an invisible mule.

He'd expected she'd be some straggly, faded thing with that dead look in her eyes saloon gals had. Rafe was familiar with that expression. Every time he'd ever raised up on his elbows and gazed down as he pumped his hips into the woman lying beneath him, her eyes seemed to have that dead or bored look. He'd pretty much given up hope of seeing anything different in a woman's eyes.

But the eyes that raked up his legs and chest to his face now were different. Somewhere between blue and green, like the water in a mountain pool reflecting blue sky against the moss of the stream bed. Clear like that, too. Glistening--and snapping with anger.

Well, who wouldn't be ticked off after being thrown into the street? But what Rafe found most amazing was the eyes were clear and intelligent, full of vitality. Life. A saloon gal who hadn't given up on herself and the world. Even though she was wearing the most garish satin get-up Rafe had ever laid eyes on. And he'd visited dozens of saloons. They were where he sought female companionship for an hour or two.

Before he consciously thought about it, Rafe saw his hand and arm reach down to grasp her elbow and haul her to her feet. She broke free and instantly whirled to face the glaring man on the porch. "You still owe me, Frazer. Shall I go see the law, or you going to pay up?"

"You're finished in my place, bitch. Keep the dress as your final pay."

She told the hard case in graphic terms what she thought of his dress and just where he could stuff it. Her fingers fumbled at the fastenings even as she promised to tear it off and stand there stark naked just for the pleasure of throwing the dress in his face. Rafe reached out to stop her fingers.

"You don't want to do that, darlin'," Rafe drawled. She glanced at him and he offered an amused wink. "Though every man here would probably pay to see him shove it."

He shifted position, moving slightly to the side and in front of the girl. "Mister," he called out, "two things really piss me off. One's folks throwin' things at me. The other's a fella who don't treat a lady right. You got me doubly pissed off now." His right hand moved to rest on his hip. Lean fingers caressed the polished handle of his weapon. "You owe me and the lady here an apology. Let her back inside and we'll settle this."

Frazer snorted. "That ain't no lady, and this don't concern you, stranger. This is my place, and I'll throw out anyone I please--especially troublemakers like her."

"I just want my things and my pay, Frazer. I don't need to work for you. Big Jim at the Rusty Nail said he'd hire me to read cards over there any time. "

Feisty little thing, Rafe silently noted. Girl had balled those fists of hers up and set them on her hips. Nicely curved hips, from where he was standing. But Hard Case hadn't softened up one bit. The local deputy came out into the dusty street behind Rafe.

"What's the problem, Conley? Doxy fannin' you this early in the day?" He glanced at the man on the saloon porch. "You said there wouldn't be any more trouble once you took over, Benton."

"Doxy ain't the problem," Rafe growled. "He threw her out and nearly knocked me over. Asked him to apologize and let her back inside. Gal says he owes her back wages, but he won't ante up."

The deputy looked at the girl. His face broke into a grin of recognition. "You, Sparkle? What's the problem? You tell Benton there he was destined to be beefy all his life?"

Sparkle glared at Rafe and the deputy. "My new boss thinks a fancy name and red window curtains sewed over a bustle can give this place some class. Like this dump's ever going to impress anybody. He thinks I should entertain customers upstairs. I don't. He threw me out because Lily quit and I won't take her place."

The deputy crossed to the saloon porch and put an arm around Frazer's shoulders, drawing him aside for a private conversation. The onlookers dispersed, and moments later Deputy Thompson was back in his office. Frazer stared at Rafe a moment, then at the girl. He forced something friendlier than a snarl onto his lips. "Sparkle honey, bring your friend on inside and tell his fortune. You can stay on for the rest of the month. You earn your keep same as the others, you can stay for good. Drinks on the house inside, Conley."

The girl barely glanced back at Rafe before heading through the batwing doors. Chin up, backside twitching left and right, she was pure hellfire and temptation. Jesus, Rafe, he chided himself silently, you been on the trail too long. He saw this saloon was a bit nicer than most. Big wagon wheel lamps, fresh paint. A good long polished bar, both poker and faro tables. Some other gals in bright red dresses. The one from the street had gone to sit behind a smaller table on the perimeter of the poker area.

She pulled out a deck of cards and began shuffling. Rafe lowered himself into the chair opposite her and watched her fingers smoothly move the cards. Weird cards with unusual scenes on them. "Never seen playin' cards like that," he commented as a bottle of whiskey and a glass magically appeared at his elbow. The Negro who'd brought them shuffled off before Rafe could thank him.

"These aren't playing cards. They're tarot cards. They tell me about the forces surrounding you and the shape of your future. Unlike most men, " she announced with sarcasm, "the cards don't assume people are always what they appear to be."

Rafe chuckled. Uppity filly still had that tough edge to her voice. She'd been heaved into the dust at his feet, and everybody in the place knew it, but by God, she was still the queen. At least in her own mind. "Tear-oh? You a gypsy, Sparkle Honey?"

That tripped her up. She stopped laying out the cards in three piles and looked him straight in the eye. "My name's LaFleur. Sparkle LaFleur. And you're Mr. Conway--apparently with some influence over Art Thompson."

"Rafe Conley. Pleased to make your acquaintance. Deputy's a friend. Funny cards can tell you all about me?"

"I think you'd be surprised how well. Pick a stack," she ordered. He tapped the set in the middle. She quickly sorted them into a cross formation and began turning them over. The cards looked heathen or something. Not that Rafe had ever been the churchgoer his ma or sister hoped he'd be. He'd been--still was--a disappointment to his kin, yet he was God fearin' when it came right down to it. Enough so the weird cards rubbed him the wrong way. The fortune teller was frowning.

"Don't fret if you don't see much of a future. That's me, all right. Won't end up old and gray on some front porch in a rocker. Someplace a bullet's got my name carved on it."

The girl nearly jumped out of her seat. "Why would you say--? Oh, that." She pointed to the card picturing the Grim Reaper in a suit of armor. The card said DEATH on the bottom. "The cards aren't meant to be taken literally. That one can mean the end of a phase in your life, a new beginning or change. This," she pointed again, "is the Ace of Pentacles. Near the Ten of Cups like that means a marriage."

Rafe cleared his throat to disguise a snort of derision. "Don't mean to insult you, darlin', but--"

"You're not insulting me. I read your fortune, I don't decide it."

Rafe figured it was some bunkum scheme. She told customers they had all sorts of good things waitin', teased them on a bit. Men paid a fortune to be told they'd eventually make one, or some other hogwash. "Well," he drawled, "since I ain't payin' for this, don't guess it matters what you tell me, anyhow."

"You're not a trusting man, Mr. Conley," she observed, blinking those aquamarine eyes of hers at him again. Thing was, for a second or so, Rafe could almost imagine falling into the crystalline mountain pool they so reminded him of. Headfirst. He mentally shook away the image.

"Don't pay to be too trustin'. Reckon your hard case boss over there couldn't have tossed you on your ass if you hadn't trusted him too much. You let him come too close."

She stared at the cards a long moment. "A mistake you made once, but won't repeat if you can avoid it. You're surrounded by almost constant threat. Calamity on every side. No one gets close to you. Perhaps that's why you see the world with such a cynical eye. Goodness and light can be found, Mr. Conley. You may have to look deep into the well or climb a mountain to find it, but happiness does exist. You just haven't found it yet."

This act of hers was good. Rafe had to admit she was damned slick. It was almost as if she'd read his mind about that mountain pool. He tipped his chair back. "Seems you're better at tellin' other folks what to do with their lives than runnin' your own. A good day, though. You told me my fortune, and I got you back into your boss man's good graces."

"Your peacemaker and whatever Art Thompson said got me back in here," she countered. "Frazer won't regret it. I make good money. I'll prove my worth to him."

Rafe rocked his chair forward now and stood up, getting a nice view of her cleavage in the bargain. Her twin mounds weren't particularly large, but nicely rounded. She had a funny little turned-up nose and mahogany hair, sleek and straight, down to her shoulders. She was the prettiest card sharper he'd run across. "You're like a pretty waiter girl. You drink and dance with the customers, besides tellin' fortunes?"

"Yes, but that's all." Her tone was emphatic.

"So if I asked to go upstairs ...?"

She gave him a level stare. "I'd find you another girl, who'd take you to her room and provide whatever relaxation you desire. Do you like blondes, Mr. Conley? Plump women? Thin...does it matter?"

"Just wondered. Bit early in the day for me," he replied, not believing for a minute he couldn't buy her if he wanted to make an issue of it. Old Hard Case had likely tossed her for hiding part of her take. She was playing coy now, still the queen. Maybe by nightfall Rafe would meet her price, whatever it was, but he had unfinished business on his mind now. "Can I ask you a couple more questions before I head out, Miss Sparkle Honey?"

"What, Mr. Conway?"



He grinned. Damn, but he liked this filly. "First, I'd like you to call me Rafe. I mean, you got my whole life laid out in front of you and dusted the toe of my boot with your bustle. Seein' as how we're practically old friends, only seems right you call me Rafe. Were you really fixin' to take your dress off in the middle of the street to prove a point?"

"Were you really going to shoot a man just to make one?"

"Reckon not. But he didn't know that. I've got a reputation as someone you don't want to cross."

"I'll keep that in mind. But watch what you do earning that reputation, Rafe. Your cards say you're not immune to the danger you thrive on." She put her strange deck away. Now she offered him a smile set off by a twinkle in her eyes. "Maybe I'll see you again some time. I'll be staying on. Frazer can't get rid of me that easily."

Rafe glanced over at her boss. "Could give you a leg up on impressin' him with your value around here. How much you usually charge for a readin'?"

"Two dollars."

"And whatever a customer wants down here from you is all right?"

Sparkle shrugged. "Basically."

"Good." He abruptly pulled her out of her chair and into his arms. He planned to let his lips just brush her mouth, only to prove she was as cool as that mountain stream he'd been thinking about. But her lips were warm and soft, and parted too easily. Before Rafe knew it, his tongue was in her mouth, rubbing hers in a sensual caress.

She pushed against his shoulders and broke away. "Good-bye, Rafe Conley." She seemed flustered. Good. Nice to know something rattled the cool little number. She tried to pretend the kiss didn't matter, but gazed at Rafe in a way that made him want to kiss her again. And do a lot more besides.

He tipped his hat and tossed her a half eagle. "There's five dollars. See you again, Sparkle Honey."

Sparkle's boss wasted no time after the gunman's exit. "So, you've decided to be reasonable at last. Conley's partial to you. If he comes in again, you're going to take care of him. Whatever he wants."

"I told him I don't go upstairs, Frazer. Don't get your hopes up as high as the hem of my skirt." She glowered at him and purposely tugged down on the garment.

"Deputy says Conley's a gun for hire. Damned good one. Known from Nebraska to Oklahoma for bringing in outlaws and troublemakin' rowdies. You be nice to him, I'll be nicer to you. Man like that putting his brand on one of my girls would be a real coup. I'd have to keep you on then."

"So now I'm worth having around as some gunslinger's favorite?" She gave him a look

of disdain.

"Sparkle, I just told you who and what he is. The cowhands will think twice about raising Cain in here, thinking your friend might stroll in any moment. We've already seen how he takes it if a gent gets rough with you."

"Remember that, Frazer," she shot back.

But as Sparkle eased onto a bench on the saloon's porch, she wasn't feeling nearly as brave as the front she'd put up. Rafe Conley's dark brown eyes had unsettled her from the first. They were too dark, fathomless. His lean frame, the smug curl of his lips, the assured way he moved, the feel of his hard length when he'd held her close--those things said more than Frazer's tales of a menacing reputation. And that kiss...Sparkle had been kissed boldly before. What woman in a cow town saloon hadn't? But this time was different. Conley's kiss had left her shaky. Her usual composure had slipped, and she was having a tough time getting it back.

Not to mention how she'd nearly fainted when she'd laid out his cards. She'd never before encountered anyone with so many of the same cards in the same positions as her own readings. The man was a mercenary. A drifter. How could his tarot reading mirror her own that way? Not that she bothered reading her fortune these days. She knew where her future lay. One man held the key to her heart and a better life locked away inside him.

But Sparkle worried about the gunslinger. He'd be back.

The cards said he was a vagabond, a wanderer in search of something he yearned for without understanding what it would entail. A man trapped between yesterday and tomorrow. A lonely man. Someone who didn't belong to any person or place, but rolled with the tumbleweeds, looking for what tomorrow might bring. Spurred on by violence and loss...pain from his past.

Many of the same elements that frequently turned up in Sparkle's readings. Uncanny.

Sparkle's mother had taught her to read tarot. What some called a gift, Sparkle's mother had called an art. Foretelling the future was a skill the tarot reader practiced day after day. Her mother had also taught Sparkle about soul mates, saying every person had one somewhere. Their destinies linked, souls entwined, sometimes by forces beyond their control or awareness. Not for the first time, Sparkle silently wished her mother were still alive; Eliza would know what to make of the that last reading.

Sparkle was afraid to think about it. That dark-eyed stranger was nothing like what she wanted or needed. He was all wrong. Violent. No woman should give her heart to a man like that. He would only rend it.

Besides, Sparkle's heart was no longer hers to give. She'd given it away years ago to the man she privately adored and knew she'd one day marry. A kind and quiet man, who wasn't one bit like Rafe Conley.

## Chapter 2

Sparkle pushed the wheelchair into the shade of the arbor where Jace wouldn't be in the direct sun. They'd been in the garden awhile now. Jace looked pale, but the days of Indian Summer could give an invalid a sunstroke. Beads of perspiration shone on his brow. Some of his wheat-colored curls had dampened to amber. "I'll go get you some lemonade," she offered, smiling into Jace's blue eyes.

"Oh Sis, but I've missed your smile. I wish you could come home to visit more often." Before she could protest, he cut her off. "I know, I know. It depends on the school board. But it's a few weeks until the start of the regular session."

Sparkle sighed. "But I tutor several children outside of school, Jace, remember?" She let the screen bang shut behind her as she went for the pitcher of lemonade Majesta had put in the icebox. She was dismayed to find the nurse standing beside the open kitchen window. "We don't need an audience, Majesta."

The nurse had the grace to blush, though the set of her chin and pursing of her lips told Sparkle she didn't regret eavesdropping. "You complain I don't take him outdoors more often," Majesta said. "If I were to take him to the park or somewhere public, how long do you think it would be before someone set him wise about his sister's tales? Your brother's the only person naive enough to believe a schoolmarm could earn enough to afford a private nurse and this house."

"I've told you, the house is paid for. I only need to pay the taxes and Jace's medical care. Has there been any improvement?"

"He has his good days and his bad," Majesta shrugged. "It seems he's getting a bit stronger on his right side, but he still can't manage without the chair."

Sparkle poured two glasses of cold lemonade and went back out to sit on the garden bench near Jace. "I have to leave tomorrow, Jace. But let's not think about the time I don't get to spend here, and just enjoy the time I have."

"You're right, Sparkle. Tell me again about Fire Thorn and Miss Leticia."

Sparkle launched into the familiar tale of the old biddy who had the whole town of Fire Thorn in an uproar when she'd laundered risqué unmentionables and put them on the line to dry--only to have Jace LaFleur pull them down and model them for three of his friends. "You remember anything else about our childhood, Jace?" she asked when she stopped laughing about Miss Leticia.

"I don't remember Fire Thorn or any of it, Sparkle," he admitted sadly. "I cherish everything you tell me about the past. I wish I could remember Father and our growing up years."

"Well, I keep thinking sooner or later it will all come back to you." It has to. Sparkle's mind screamed. I can't tell you everything. You have to remember some of it yourself,

Jace!

Jace cleared his throat and Sparkle's eyes narrowed. When Jace did that, it usually meant he wanted her approval and wasn't sure he'd get it.

"Jace LaFleur, don't you start with me about some of those bizarre new therapies you've read about. No tobacco enemas. I don't care what sort of vile things people flush through their bodies or stick in some orifice, you're not--"

"It's not about me, Sparkle."

"Has Majesta said or done something to upset you? I can find another nurse, Jace."

"It's you, Sparkle. You said I look pale, but have you looked in a mirror lately? You look as though this is the first time you've seen sunshine in over a month, too."

His guess was right on the money, but Sparkle couldn't admit it. "Had a touch of ague a few weeks back. Working around children, there's so much sniffing and coughing, it's hard not to catch something yourself. I'm fine, really."

"I think you work too hard."

"I think you worry too much."

Majesta came out, starched apron immaculate, every strand of hair neatly tucked into a tight coil. Her nursing salary wasn't high, but it was constant, and then there were the other expenses of a household. Sparkle worked steadily to make sure Jace had everything he needed. Put up with crude men and their vulgarities, the spilled liquor and groping hands. The young cowherds with puppy-dog eyes. For Jace.

"You two stop carping and come in to supper. Fried chicken and mashed potatoes. I'll see to him, Miss Sparkle. You go on and freshen up."

Sparkle put on her best traveling suit for the stagecoach ride back to Wichita the next day. She usually took the train on her visits home to Kansas City, but she'd opted to take the stage back this time. She doubted anyone seeing her now would suspect her of being anything but the prim schoolteacher Jace believed she was. The elderly couple seated across from her dressed in their starched Sunday best looked inhospitable and prudish. The man said nothing. He wife offered only a thin smile and an innocuous comment about the weather during the first hours of their trip.

Sparkle didn't look like a dance hall strumpet now. Strumpet. Ugh, the word made her shudder. She'd promised herself she'd never resort to earning money the way other saloon women did. She hated bawdy houses, cowhands, gambling, and strumpets. Hated the men like Benton Frazer who ran the trailhead watering holes. But they were necessary for survival. When Jace's mother died, Sparkle had been left with few options. She found a nurse to keep house and look after her brother, had set out to earn a living the only way she could.

Her brother ...

Everyone, Jace himself included, thought that's who he was. Sparkle was the only person who knew there was no common blood between them. She was a bastard. Her mother had never spoken of the man who'd gotten her with child. Working as a laundress, Eliza Cummings had been so dirt poor they could only afford to rent a small back room in the Flowers' farmhouse. Flowers was the surname of Jace and his family before the trouble, when Mrs. Flowers found herself and two children the only survivors of a storm of violence. She'd changed her name and taken the children to Kansas City, passing Sparkle off as her daughter.

Sparkle sighed and shifted to a less uncomfortable position on the stage bench. One day Jace would remember Texas and realize Sparkle was only a longtime friend. Remember the night his father died and everything changed. When he told Sparkle about the trauma, she would ease his pain by confessing her love for him. They'd be married. She'd give up the saloons, let Majesta go, and care for Jace herself. Because along with the other memories, Jace had buried in the back of his mind the knowledge that would be their ticket to a new life. Sparkle's mother had told her about the beauty of Paris, and one day Sparkle planned to see it for herself. She and Jace would go to Europe, buy a cottage in some pristine valley, and live in harmony.

The coach took on a fresh team of horses and a new passenger at the way station--a young comer named Brooks, who sandwiched himself in beside Sparkle and began relating the story of his life. He'd just been hired as the head clerk at the Wichita drug store. Sparkle was an expert at listening to men run on about themselves. She knew when to smile, when to nod, how to affect the perfect tilt to her so it seemed she was actually digesting the speaker's words. The couple across from her hadn't had much practice. The scowling husband was openly unimpressed by the young clerk's braggadocio.

After an appropriate length of time, Sparkle yawned discreetly into her gloved hand and let her head rest against the side of the coach. She prayed Brooks would hush if she feigned sleep, but he continued to ramble about Washington politics and the price of coffee. Eventually he succeeded in boring her into a light doze. Sly fingers on her knee snapped her back to attention.

She brushed at Brooks' hand, but it settled right back into place on her leg. His voice changed, became silky in her ear. "What's a pretty little gal like you doing on this stage unescorted, Miss?"

"Going to Wichita, same as you," she informed him stiffly, removing his hand again. "Unless you've made an error. In which case, you should ask the driver to let you out. Put your hand on me again, Mr. Brooks, and I'll ask him for you."

"To the vast relief of everyone within earshot," muttered the man across the way. His jowls shook as he finally addressed the troublemaker. "I don't believe this lady's itinerary is your concern. I'd ask that you comport yourself like a proper gentleman."

"I don't believe our discussion is any of your funeral, Fleshy," Brooks retorted, glancing at the older man's paunch.

"Well, I never," gasped the man's wife.

"Imagine that's true," Brooks snorted. "I've seen plucked chickens with more meat than you, Missus. Luckily, not every female aboard suffers from the bony uglies." He winked at Sparkle.

Time for the lie that always got men's goats, Sparkle told herself. "Mr. Brooks, I'm a married woman, on my way to reunite with my husband. I hope you don't intend to make a pest of yourself. He isn't at all the understanding sort. He won't be pleased to learn you've made bold with me and pressed your case after I discouraged you."

"Ha, you don't look like a married gal," Brooks observed. "Married women don't appeal to me. I can smell the taint of a boring husband a mile off. You, on the other hand, are quite appealing, Miss ...?"

"I'm not going to introduce myself," Sparkle informed him, sidestepping the trap he'd laid for her. "As I will no longer be in your acquaintance as soon as this stage reaches town. I seldom visit the pharmacy."

Brooks contented himself with pretending to steady her shoulders and sitting entirely too close. Sparkle was irritated by every move he made, but grateful that at least she'd found a way to keep him quiet.

They pulled onto the main street and Sparkle craned her neck to stare out the side window. There were always men around this time of the afternoon. She could hear Dem Golden Slippers being played badly inside the Rusty Nail as they swept past. Dusty stragglers, the usual wiry cowpokes. Then she spotted a familiar profile. The answer to her prayers, just coming out of the bank.

He glanced right at her as the coach rattled by. Sparkle again noted the rugged features and square jaw. Wavy dark hair grazed the collar of a faded denim shirt. His movements were languid, yet somehow bolder than those of the other males ambling down the sidewalk. And there was the reason: the peacemaker slung low on his right hip.

Oh, but she was going to enjoy watching Joe Brooks run for cover when he met her "husband".

### Chapter 3

The instant the coach came to a stop, Sparkle flew out of it and jerked the handle of her satchel away from the driver. Hitching up her skirts, she dashed into the swirling dust of the street, dodging a throng of riders on horseback. She dropped her bag onto the wooden sidewalk and threw her arms around Rafe's neck.

"Lord, but I missed you, Mr. Conley."

She glanced back to find Joe Brooks watching. "I can't tell you how awful that stagecoach ride was! There was a codfish aristocrat seated next to me, making an absolute pest of himself. He didn't believe me when I said my husband was meeting me here."

Rafe flashed her a wicked smile, then curled his arms around her waist and pulled her against him for a long, slow, very friendly kiss. Sparkle was mortified, but had no choice but to play the adoring wife. She allowed Rafe to explore her mouth, then peered up into his eyes with a silent plea for help.

He followed the inclination of her head to check out the man watching them. Rafe picked up her satchel and pulled Sparkle close to his side. "Sorry you had a rough ride, Sparkle Honey. Got a friend owns a saloon here in town. Promised I'd stop by and pay a visit." He gave the stranger a frown, then grinned as the fellow scurried off to claim a faded valise. "Believe your admirer's seen the error of his ways, darlin'."

"Thank goodness. I was beginning to despair of ever being rid of him."

Rafe clucked his tongue in amusement. "You know, Miz Conley, seems you're always in one fix or another and needin' me to set things right. Maybe I better keep you glued to my hip, just to keep you out of trouble."

"I suppose you figure I owe you another free drink at the Scarlet Lady."

Rafe studied the dude again before meandering up the street. "Finicky little gal, ain't you? He's sportin' a fancy waistcoat and still breathin'. For some gals in a trailhead, that would make him man enough. Maybe you were too hasty... Or maybe you just like throwin' yourself at me. It's gettin' to be a habit."

"Ooh! You know damned good and well I had nothing to do with--" Sparkle closed her mouth as they entered the saloon. Frazer stood squarely before them, features aglow.

"Sparkle. Conley. Great to see you again. Come on in." The look Frazer tossed Sparkle set her teeth on edge. He hadn't missed Rafe's arm around her waist. Frazer was clearly reveling in the mistaken belief she'd cozied up to his new favorite customer. "Something to eat, Conley? I can have my cook rustle up something."

"Could use a meal," Rafe nodded, releasing Sparkle. "I'm sure you want to change out of them travelin' clothes. Go on upstairs, darlin'. I'll just visit with the boss here and have a bite."

"Thank you, Mr. Conley," she ground out. Ruby Ann and Delia greeted her upstairs, but Sparkle was in no mood to discuss either her trip home or the reason for her return with the gunslinger in tow. She prayed he'd grow restless and leave the saloon before she went back down. She took a leisurely bath and dawdled as long as she could painting her lips and powdering her cleavage.

"Damned red piece of trash." She tugged the saloon dress hem down and jerked the fabric at her bosom up higher. It didn't do any good. The boned bodice pushed her breasts up and made them look larger than they were. Seeing Rafe again brought back the battle she'd lost over the costume. The bright crimson flounces seemed all the more objectionable now, perhaps because in Kansas City she'd worn plain day dresses, dull but proper clothes. Here she couldn't avoid the image of the harlot in the mirror.

Fitting for a girl who'd run across the street in broad daylight to fling herself at a gun for hire. Rafe was bound to think she had some genuine hankering for him after that display. She hated to admit that in an odd way she did. She liked the thump of his spurs on the sidewalks and oak flooring. She liked the lazy drawl of his speech, his easy sense of humor. How did a mercenary find so much amusement in the world? Frazer had all but said Rafe Conley was a known cold-blooded killer! A killer who could wrap his arms around a woman and make her feel--

No, she wasn't going to ponder the sensations Rafe Conley stirred up. She wouldn't think back on his deep soul kiss or how she'd been so brazen. The hired gun had served his purpose. There was no point in thinking about him any longer. She had to get to work.

He was gone when she reached the gaming room, but a frequent customer was waiting for a reading. Sparkle forgot about the aggravating trip back to town as the evening routine began anew. The Scarlet Lady began to fill. She and the other girls laughed and danced with customers. Dan Small tinkered away on the piano. Frazer had hired a handsome new faro dealer, and Ruby Ann had more kohl than usual around her eyes. She also lingered near the new fellow's table, Sparkle noticed with a smile.

Ah, this would be a good night. Sparkle could feel it. The aura of the gaming room was happy-go-lucky. Customers were boisterous and in a spending mood. A big cattle drive had come into town; the men's high spirits infectious. She accepted the gold coin her next patron offered, sliding it into her bodice as she began laying out the tarot cards.

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Rafe hadn't planned on roving back into the Scarlet Lady, but hell, it was a nice place. A notch or two better than the Rusty Nail or the other bawdy houses along Wichita's main street. The fact a certain fetchin' little gal worked in this one didn't hurt, either. Not that he'd been fooled by her display on the street. She'd wanted to use him to get rid of a problem. Didn't everybody? Wealthy cattlemen, bankers, politicians, the railroads, even lawmen...They all used freelancers like Rafe to get rid of problems.

He eased into a vacant seat at one of the poker tables. His eyes were instantly drawn to



the small table where Sparkle sat reading fortunes. She'd changed her clothes, all right. He hadn't seen her primped for the evening herds before. She sure as hell did look pretty--all powdered and fresh, hair pulled up, lips painted nice and rosy. He grinned as she adjusted a shoulder strap on the hated red dress. If she knew the way it made a man feel to see her fine body wrapped up in it, she would've thanked Hard Case instead of cussin' at him.

The saloon was noisy and crowded, though. Rafe was tempted to get up and leave. He'd always been a loner, he didn't care for a lot of other men so close. He'd tolerate rubbing elbows for a spell. Sooner or later the little fortune teller had to take a break. Maybe he'd convince her to step outside for a chat...or another kiss.

"Your bride's quite a woman." It took a second for Rafe to realize the comment had been directed at him. He glanced up to find the chair beside him was now occupied by the dandy from the stagecoach. "What's she dealing over there, monte?"

"Tarot. She's readin' fortunes." Instead of the caustic laugh he expected, Rafe found the man beside him watching Sparkle all the more intently. Not good. The fella suffered from a serious lack of judgment.

"Fortune teller, eh? Believe she's the first I've ever met. She any good?"

The look in the man's eyes implied he wasn't asking about card reading. "You in or out?" Rafe asked with a deliberate edge of annoyance.

"That's an unconventional occupation. Particularly for an alluring young gal. Don't believe I'd allow a wife of mine to work here, dressed in a revealing costume and fraternizing with strangers. Of course, she's paid to, isn't she?"

Rafe threw down his cards. "Gettin' mighty sick of your mouth, friend."

"Name's Brooks. Joe Brooks. Don't misunderstand. It's only that when I spoke to your wife earlier, she seemed quite a proper woman. Not at all the typical soiled dove. A gent might be misled--"

"She don't take customers upstairs, Brooks. And it ain't healthy for you to be meddling in her business. I catch you moonin' over my wife, Sparkle--"

"What's this?" Frazer had come up behind Rafe, drawn by the edgy behavior of his customers. Several men at the table sensed Rafe's mounting irritation. A few patrons had begun creeping toward the door. "Your wife? If that don't beat all! She never said a word. So that's why she wanted time off. I knew you were partial to her, but never figured you two for tyin' the knot. Newlyweds, eh?"

Rafe immediately regretted his words, but he couldn't retract them without giving Brooks an opening to pursue the girl. "Yeah. Couple days back."

"Man alive. If I'd known that--Hell, Conley," Frazer slapped Rafe on the back.

Rafe fought the desire to pistol-whip the saloonkeeper. "She didn't want to make a big

deal of it," he coughed, noting Brooks was eavesdropping with more than passing interest. Tough figurin' which of these two's the bigger asshole, Rafe silently told himself.

"I planned to have her work late tonight, since she's been away, " Frazer announced with a speculative glance at Rafe's chips. "But it would hardly be decent to ask a new bride to keep her husband waiting. We need to have a chat, Conley."

Rafe rose from the table, leaving half his chips. "For the house."

Frazer smiled and stuck out his right hand. "Believe we're going to become good friends. Come on back to my office."

By the time Frazer was done bleeding him, Rafe had paid Sparkle's room and board a month in advance so she could finish her shift at midnight. Rafe was at the bar, nursing a bourbon and trying to figure out how he'd explain the mess when Frazer rushed over to whisper in her ear. Rafe felt himself flush as her eyes speared him. He'd had men gaze back at him with every dark emotion possible. Wanted men. Powerful men. Fearless men. It was still tough facing the fury in Sparkle LaFleur's aquamarine eyes.

She slammed her drawer shut and got to her feet, giving Rafe a beckoning look. A look promising almost certain death if he dared to follow her up the stairs. No doubt about the murder in those eyes. She wanted to kill him.

But there was nothing he could do except mount those stairs and face her.

Sparkle unlocked her door and lit the lamp before perching on the edge of her bed. "I'm sure you think this is hilarious. You're probably patting yourself on the back for having roped me in with the ridiculous story you fed Frazer. He says you paid my rent for the month and more, so I can have the night off to be with you. Thoughtful. But as I told you, I don't have customers in my bed."

Rafe locked the door behind them and moved to the window, checking the street through a crack in the curtains. Nervous habit.

"I didn't set out to lie, but your fella from the stagecoach is downstairs. He started askin' questions. Frazer overheard me say we're hitched. What was I supposed to do, take it back? If I did, Brooks would be here now. He'd pay Frazer for a roll in your sheets. You can bet on that. Whatever you did to that dandy, he's randy as hell to get at you."

"I didn't do anything." She sighed and shook her head. "But you're right, you couldn't very well take it back. Neither of us can now. Frazer would throw me out once and for all."

"So you got yourself a visitor for the night."

"What? I can't let you stay here. You've got to crawl out the window or something, Rafe."

"Don't reckon so, darlin'. Paid a lot down there to get you off work early. How would it

look? The fella that's supposed to be your husband goes creepin' out, like some busted cowpoke tryin' to get out of payin' for his fun?"

"I told you, I don't sell myself. I'll pay back what you gave Frazer. How much?" she demanded.

"Sparkle, I'd pay for a room in a hotel or saloon, anyhow. Promise I'll keep my hands to myself. We'd only be sharin' the bed this one night. I'll be out of your hair in the mornin'. Then you can get on like usual."

"You sell snake oil too?"

"Christ Almighty, woman! I'm only askin' for a place to sleep for the night." Rafe forced himself to take a deep breath and calm down. She had a right to be ticked. "Think on this a minute. With your boss and the others believin' I'm your husband, isn't this room mine, too? You'd have an advantage. Folks thinkin' you're mine should keep strangers from pawin' you. I ain't around Wichita often, but my reputation stays on."

She went as red as her dress. "It might help for now in that sense, but someday I plan to actually have a husband, and...well..."

Rafe unbuckled his gunbelt and laid it over an upholstered chair, noting the room was small, with faded curtains and a bed not much wider than his bunk at the ranch. She was either on the short end of the horn, or truly didn't entertain customers. The notion still seemed unlikely to him, though. No matter what she claimed. A fine filly like her, men like Brooks lining up...innocent? Like hell. "Darlin', you work in a saloon."

"Because reading tarot's all I know how to do, and I can't get a job doing that in a bank or tailoring shop. I haven't found a minister willing to pay me to tell fortunes on the steps of his church. Just where the hell am I supposed to work?"

"You're truly savin' yourself for marriage?" he snorted. "A virgin in a bagnio?"

Sparkle hadn't expected a simple pretense on the street to escalate into this wholesale disaster. And who the heck was this gunslinger to cast shadows on her morality?

"Are you saying it's impossible I could be?"

Rafe shrugged. "Folks are fond of sayin' anything's possible. Doesn't matter, since I already said I'd keep my hands to myself. I'm used to payin' a gal, Miz Conley," he sniped. "But never forced one who wasn't of a mind to oblige. I'll leave my jeans on."

"You actually think I'm going to let you share my bed?" She'd made her stand very clear and was irritated he seemed so confident she'd relent. "No, you can have the chair."

"That horse's ass you work for ain't about to keep his nose out of this," Rafe countered. "These rooms and you gals in red get-ups are his gravy train. He'll come snoopin' to make sure we newlyweds are gettin' along. Won't fix his flint till he's seen for himself. Husband sleepin' in the chair and you alone in the bed won't cut the ice."

"This is ridiculous. You don't listen. I've never had a man in my room, Rafe!"

Her statement was punctuated by a sharp knock. Frazer called out to Rafe. "Wife's not decent, Frazer," Rafe announced. "Give us a second." He jerked off his boots and turned his back, gesturing at Sparkle to undress.

She struggled out of her costume and pulled on her robe. Rafe unlocked the door and Frazer boldly entered, leaving the door ajar. "I came to see if you two needed anything. I overheard her. She's telling the truth. Never had a customer up here, Conley. Couldn't convince her it pays better than fortunes."

"What you heard's between me and my woman. Thanks for the concern. Ain't in town much, Frazer," Rafe stated with his dark eyes narrowed to a squint. "When I am, I'll be stayin' here. If I hear anybody else comes a-visitin' while I'm away, both you and the stranger could wake up minus your peckers."

"Good Lord! There's no need to take on so. Sparkle's never caused problems. I'll keep a close watch, you've got my word."

"Good." Rafe pushed Frazer back out the open door.

"Uh, Sparkle--" Frazer called from the hallway. "Congratulations, and take as long as you need in the morning. I'll see Ruby and the others don't come rousing you early."

"You do that," Rafe growled as he locked the door. "I'll keep my back turned until you're in bed. Then I'll put out the lamp and join you. This," he announced as he pulled the Colt from his holster, "stays on the table next to me."

"You make one move to touch me, Rafe Conley, and I'll use it." Sparkle warned as she peeled off her stockings and garters. She put on a sleeping gown.

He unbuttoned his shirt and eased out of it, laying it over the empty holster. The unnatural way he moved seemed to suggest he was leery of offending Sparkle by showing her his bare chest. "I've seen men without their shirts before," she advised, crawling under the bedclothes. "I'm ready."

Honestly. He had to be testing her, probably thinking if she were truly a virgin, the mere sight of a man's naked torso would send her into a swoon. Men! Their notion that women were either brazen sluts or complete ninnies made Sparkle want to scream. She put on her haughtiest tone.

"Mr. Conley, though I'm sure you've driven many a woman senseless by revealing your hairy chest, I promise I'll control myself. You can turn around."

Forgetting she was clad only in a thin nightgown, she got out of bed and moved toward the hurricane lamp.

"I said I'll get that," he barked, but Sparkle had already stepped in front of him. She glanced in his direction at the harsh words. Her thoughts went cold.

"What in the name of God happened to you?"

## Chapter 4

Rafe sighed and closed his eyes. He'd wanted to avoid this conversation. It was never pleasant. The inevitable question and its answer only evoked pity or revulsion, and Rafe didn't want to see pity or loathing in Sparkle LaFleur's eyes. Neither of those things showed in them yet. Only shock. That was always first.

"I was eighteen and still pretty green. Snagged me a man with a huge reward on his head. Didn't realize he had a Bowie hidden in the back of his overcoat. Guess he figured committin' another murder was better than swingin' from the gallows for his previous crimes. Sliced me open like carvin' a turkey."

Sparkle gaped and sank to her knees on the floor. Rafe thought she might pass out. He took a step toward her. She instantly dropped her gaze, her cheeks stained a deep crimson.

He knew that reaction, too. "Don't feel bad for gawkin' or what you said. You're embarrassed, but hell, you didn't know. I should have a hairy chest like other men, instead of a big ugly scar. Let's both be honest. You ain't the sort of gal who can lie with any success, or I wouldn't be up here. I look like a stick of dynamite went off in the middle of me. I'm hard on a gal's eyes, and I know it."

Sparkle recovered enough to blow out the lamp. She crept back under the covers. There was an awkward silence before she spoke. "You're lucky to be alive."

Rafe's soft drawl told her he was still where she'd last seen him. The image of the horrible weal of angry scar tissue hovered in her mind's eye. "Yeah, plum lucky," he repeated. "That's what the doc said when he patched me back together. Course, it ain't him walkin' around like a freak of nature."

Sparkle sat up and forced herself to take a deep breath. "Your recovery must have been terribly painful and lengthy. My brother was badly injured years ago, and he's never been the same. He's in a wheelchair. People stare at him, too, but I don't think they intend to be cruel. They're curious. I'm sorry I hurt your feelings."

Rafe's throat went dry. He stuck with saloons and women he could pay. Even then he'd met with hesitation and rejection. There were plenty of men in cow towns. Plenty of drifters and wranglers. A whore could always find another customer--one who was normal.

But instead of making him feel self-conscious, this woman was calmly talking about the pain of being different. Sparkle, his proud and pretty little queen, understood how it felt to be shunned. She understood. Could she also be telling the truth about being a virgin? He eased onto the mattress, stretching out on top of the covers. He tried to take up as little of the bed as possible.

"It gets pretty cold in here," she whispered. "I don't have an extra blanket. You're either going to need your shirt back on, or you'll have to get under the covers."

"Hey, were you gummin' me? Am I really the first man who's been in here?" There was a long silence. "I mean, I understand you don't want me touchin' you, especially now that you've seen the scar."

"It's not that. Rafe, I'm eighteen and greener than you ever were, " she replied. "Naturally, I've heard the girls talk. That's all I know of such things. From some of what they say, I'm not sure I want to ever do them."

Rafe had heard too many lies not to recognize bald truth. Lies from whores who pretended he was the best. Lies from wanted men who swore they'd been framed. "Sorry the first man in your bed has to be an ugly cuss with a deformity."

Now she laughed, but there was no rancor in it. The sound was light and actually warmed him in the cool room. "It's not as though you've got three heads growing out of your neck. It's just a scar, Rafe. Everyone has them. I've got one on my left ankle from skinning it on a fence when I was a little girl."

"Just a scar? Bring one of the other gals in to take a gander and ask what she'd charge me. It's just a scar, but anytime I let a gal see it--"

"Rafe, I've just seen it."

He groaned and rolled onto his side facing the wall. Yeah, she'd just seen it. And she wasn't upset. Typical of his incredible luck. The only woman who hadn't made him feel ashamed of his nakedness in years, and she had to be a virgin. Now he was more ashamed that she might discover the stiff brandin' iron in his jeans. She had him tied in a knot. He'd thought she was amazing from the second he laid eyes on her. Her shiny hair, her fierce pride, those damned gorgeous eyes... Now, talking with her, smelling the clean, flowery scent of her room and her body, he wanted her more than ever. He was about to burst from it, and there was no way she'd understand.

He silently cursed. What kind of jackass promises a saloon gal he won't lay a hand on her? Now Rafe wished he'd kept his big trap shut. Wished he could just hold her, feel her softness close beside him...Be able to tell himself one pretty woman--one he hadn't paid for--had seen him shirtless, and hadn't turned away.

Sparkle misunderstood his groan. "If any of the girls here would shun you because of your scar, I'd tell them outright that's more shameful than anything they've ever done. No one has the right to make you feel bad over something that was a horrible ordeal--"

"Sparkle," he interrupted in a rough voice. "Do me a big favor. Stop tryin' to be nice. Ain't comfortable talkin' about this."

They lay in the darkness for what seemed like an hour, neither of them speaking, neither of them asleep. Every nerve on fire, each aware the other was still awake. Finally Rafe released a long exhale. "This ain't workin' out, huh?"

"Because you're angry. You probably think I should have thanked you for staying here and keeping up the lie. Instead, I insulted you. I barely know you, so I should have

realized you wouldn't want to talk about something so personal."

"You didn't insult me. You're the first gal in a long time who hasn't."

"So why are you angry?"

"I ain't. Well, maybe a little. Hell, I don't know. Why can't you just go to sleep like you would if I wasn't here?"

"Because you are," she snapped. "And you're tense, and I can feel it, even though I don't know why if you're not angry."

A deep chuckle filled the room. "If you don't know why a man lyin' in a bed beside a pretty gal would be tense, you must be pure virgin."

Sparkle's cheeks instantly flamed. "Sorry. I don't know anything clever to say. I've never been one of those flirty sorts who charms the men. I don't know how to act alone with a man--I mean, not telling his fortune."

"You don't need to be flirty," he replied in his easy drawl. "You talked with me and that was fine. I'd be obliged if you'd let me put my arms around you. Part of the problem is it's damned unnatural tryin' to sleep when you're so worried you might move and the other person will think it means something. Be easier if we each knew where the other one was. Then we could stop fussin' about it."

"Maybe so. But you're not going to kiss me," she cautioned, her voice shaky.

"Something wrong with the way I kiss too?"

"Nothing's wrong with it. You're quite good at it. When we're both standing on our feet in the light of day, it's fine. But I don't think it's a good idea to let you kiss me here in the dark. Not a good idea at all."

He moved closer and wrapped an arm around her waist. "Expect you know your own mind." He grinned. Nothing was wrong with his kissing. Everything was right with it. She didn't trust herself to let him. Interesting.

The grin faded as he realized any hope he'd entertained of taming the monster between his legs was gone. He was both blessed and cursed by being allowed to hold her. She felt wonderful in his arms. So tender and soft. She smelled like lavender water. Christ. He decided to concentrate on his next bounty. Money was a safe thing to ponder. He kept on pondering about his next case until they both fell asleep.

Rafe dimly became aware it was morning, and he was on his side with a piss proud jabbing uncomfortably at the fly of his jeans. He'd never been a man who favored drawers beneath his denims. Sometimes the creased fabric made the head of his shaft sore. He was used to waking up like this after sleeping all night on the trail. He rolled onto his back and was startled to feel something peculiar and warm on his chest.

The something was moving. His eyes flew open. He was momentarily disoriented,



finding he wasn't in his bedroll on the ground, but in a hotel room. With a woman asleep on her stomach next to him.

The warm thing on his chest felt almost ticklish, though he couldn't say for sure what the sensation was. Most of the nerve endings in his chest were deadened from the stabbing and had never fully come back. Some of what he could detect, the doctors said, was like when a man had his arm or leg hacked off, but still thought it itched. Phantom something. Rafe never listened too closely to that part of the doctors' pronouncements. He just knew his skin deceived him. Sometimes he felt things that weren't there. Other times he didn't feel things that were.

He lifted the blanket and discovered the woman's hand resting on his scar. Her fingers were moving ever so slightly, stroking the hardened central ridge where the Bowie's blade had cut deepest. The girl murmured something as Rafe's fingers closed over hers, quieting them. His nostrils caught the scent of lavender. He blinked. Something about that scent and the shiny hair was familiar. He knew this woman.

But he rarely slept with women he knew. He generally took care of his needs, then left the whore to her next customer. And he slept naked when indoors. So why was he jabbin' his jeans?

Then everything came back in a rush. He'd spent the night with Sparkle, the fortune teller. This was her bed. It was Sparkle touching him intimately in a place no woman ever wanted to caress him. Rafe could remember his jealousy when he'd seen Mary Ellen Swanson lay a dainty hand on his brother's chest at a social, thinking that simple gesture was forbidden to older brother Rafe.

But here was Sparkle, asleep, touching him that way. Gently. With trust and reassurance oozing from her fingertips. Rafe wasn't wearing his shirt, and this gal knew the horror beneath her hand.

It was damned hard not to wrap his arms around her right then and kiss her. Harder still not to move her hand down a foot to the swollen piss proud, a genuine arousal now for all the right reasons. He knew he was crazy for risking it, but somehow Rafe couldn't keep from pressing his lips to her hair. And then to her temple and her cheek. When she opened those clear turquoise eyes, not the least filmy or bloodshot from sleep, Rafe bent closer and kissed her lips.

The kiss was slow and gentle. Carnal, but he didn't kiss her with urgency. She wouldn't have sighed and met his tongue with her own if he'd frightened her by being demanding. When he finally broke away to look into her eyes, her voice was scratchy. "You weren't supposed to do that."

"Not in the dark, you said. It's mornin'."

"Yes," she sighed. "And now I have to face the others. I won't be able to bear the supercilious look Frazer's bound to have on his face."

"Be back directly." Rafe gathered his clothes and gunbelt before slipping out of the room. Sparkle used the opportunity to dress. He was back a few minutes later. "Sparkle, been ponderin' our situation. Always do my best thinkin' when nature calls." She smiled at that revelation, but his tone was solemn. "Reckon I better buy you a weddin' ring."

She was certain she couldn't have heard correctly. "A wedding ring?" He nodded. "Rafe, the joke's gone far enough. Too far already."

"Remember how you said Frazer would react if he found out we lied? I think you're right. Don't know why you're here at all, unless you need the job and money badly. You explained part of it last night, but what you ain't explained is how your pa or your brother can let you do this."

"My parents are dead," she answered simply. "And I told you, my brother's an invalid. He's why I need the money. We have a small house in Kansas City. I have to pay the taxes, buy wood and matches and food. Because I can't be there, I also have a nurse looking after him. Someday I'll get out of saloons. Just now, I don't have much choice."

"Then it's best you go on callin' yourself Miz Conley and wearin' my ring. Let's get something to eat across town. Saw a place I can buy you a cheap weddin' band."

"Rafe, you don't want to do this," she protested softly as he led her out of the saloon onto the street.

"Sure I do. I'm hungry."

"I don't mean that. You should buy a ring because you love the woman. I told you the cards say you'll marry one day. You shouldn't buy a wedding ring for a lie, Rafe."

He didn't say anything. He just tucked her arm through his and strolled along the sidewalk, down a few blocks to a small restaurant. After the meal, he crossed to a pawn shop and bought the cheapest plain gold ring the pawnbroker had in his case. Sparkle didn't react when Rafe slid it onto her finger. He led her back outside and donned his gray felt hat.

"Got to head out, darlin'. Don't know when I'll be back this way."

"Thank you for being so kind and decent last night. And now. Is there someplace I might write you?"

"Why, to tell me how much you love me and miss me, or I'm going to be a papa?"

Sparkle blushed and stammered in reply. "I meant because I should return the ring eventually. You paid for it. You may want to give it to--"

He interrupted, grasping her upper arm. "Naw. Got to get my horse at the livery, then I'll give you a ride back to the Scarlet Lady."

Sparkle dug her heels in and refused to budge until he met her eyes. "Rafe, there's a wife in your future, whether you believe it or not. There must be a friend or relative

somewhere who could get this ring back to you or get a message to you. I'd like to think we're friends, that if I ever needed to reach you--"

Rafe tugged his hat lower. "Got a younger brother named Travis, has a ranch outside Pueblo. I spend winters there. You could write care of Travis Conley at Crockhead Rest. It'd get to me."

He paid his stabling fee and mounted a big star sorrel. Then he reached to pull Sparkle onto his lap. "This here's Snatch."

"That's the most offensive name I've ever heard in my life."

"He ain't offended by it. Considerin' he helps me round up trouble for reward money and the lack of certain comforts when a man's on the trail, it's a right fittin' name for my horse." He slid her down to the wooden porch outside the saloon. "Bye, darlin'. Thanks for the use of your bed. Better make this look good."

He swung down from the saddle and pulled her into his arms for a long kiss, noting she didn't push his shoulders away this time. She fit him like a snug winter coat. Damned shame she wouldn't be wrapped around him after this.

"Goodbye, Rafe. Oh, and be careful. I forgot to tell you, the cards also said you could meet up with a snake."

He laughed and gave her backside a pat. "Don't hardly need mystical cards to warn me about that. Met up with my share of snakes, and I'm still around."

But Rafe wasn't laughing a few days later as he watched the horse doctor run his hands over Snatch's foreleg. Rafe had been riding flat out when Snatch suddenly reared and threw him. Rafe was unhurt, but as he dusted himself off he heard the distinctive dry sound of a rattler. He looked for the snake, but couldn't spot it amid the loose sand and rocks. Snatch danced back a few paces and suddenly the rattler struck at the horse. The fangs missed, but Snatch had pulled his leg avoiding the strike.

Now Rafe would be holed up outside of Tulsa for several days. He paid the horse doctor to tend and stable his animal, then set out on foot for a boarding-house or hotel. He found a hotel with a clean room and hot bath. He stripped down and lowered himself into the steaming tub. His tensions ebbed and a shudder ran through his body--both from the delicious heat of the water and Sparkle's caution to him when he'd left Wichita. Could she really have the gift?

It certainly seemed possible, or Snatch almost being bitten by a rattler had been one hell of a coincidence.

It was late summer. Rafe had some unfinished business here in Oklahoma, another fella to see in Texas. He'd be headed up through Kansas by mid-autumn. Maybe he'd stop in Wichita and see Sparkle again. She might be able to tell him something about Elusive Dave Hoffman--the one man Rafe had hunted without success for years.

Rafe closed his eyes and soaked in the steaming tub, letting his head loll against the rim as he thought again about Sparkle's aquamarine eyes and shiny hair. The smell of lavender, the way she'd fit so perfectly within the circle of his arms. He'd slept like a baby cuddled against her in that soft bed of hers. Then awakened to find her fingers on his scar. Stroking him.

The water was steaming hot, heating his blood.

Sparkle. Dainty fingers on his bare chest. God, he'd wanted to feel her hands on the rest of his body. Wanted her to close her fingers around his length and stroke as she had his chest. Even now he felt the ache of need. Sparkle saying everyone had scars. Sparkle had rested peacefully beside him, content with her hand on his battered and whealed chest. Like it was the most natural thing in Creation for her to touch him and for him to accept it.

Hell, it wasn't Hoffman or a need for information. He could make that excuse to see Sparkle again. But that's all it was, an excuse. He wanted to see Sparkle because she was in his blood. He'd ridden away before and forgotten the women--most of them, anyhow. But not this one. He wanted to kiss Sparkle again, wanted her in bed again. She liked him, maybe more than a little. She'd asked how to get a message to him. When had a woman other than his sister or ma ever given a rat's ass about Rafe Conley? But that didn't mean Sparkle felt like he did.

He told himself not to lose sight of that. She was unsullied, despite working in saloons. Men were after her all the time. Fellas like that Brooks. Probably dozens of men like him, a hundred drifters like Rafe himself. She wasn't intimate with any of them. Which meant there could be a damned good reason: like she was sweet on somebody or some man already had a claim to her. But if so, why wasn't he takin' care of her so she didn't have to work in a saloon? Why wasn't she settled down with him, sleepin' beside him, with her hand on his bare chest?

Rafe didn't like the image of her like that with anyone else. And he knew there couldn't be anybody in Wichita, or she wouldn't have asked him to play her charade. Her boss wouldn't have tossed her out if some fella would get wind of it and march into the saloon to grab him by the short hairs. Sparkle wouldn't be the ice queen if she had a man to defend her.

The more Rafe thought on it, the more he felt baffled by the whole business. One thing he knew for sure, though. Sparkle LaFleur was gnawing a hole deep inside his chest--and this one would take more than some half-drunk country doctor's stitchin' to close it up.

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Sparkle wasn't surprised to find the gold band and Frazer's tales had a definite effect on customers. She was busy as ever telling fortunes and hustling drinks, but the men no longer asked to dance with her. Whatever Deputy Thompson or Rafe himself had

divulged, Frazer had embellished the stories. Until Rafe Conley's exploits were beyond bold to practically legendary.

Rafe himself was conspicuously absent. Weeks went by. Then months, and still there was no sign of him. No word. It was absurd that she found herself feeling slightly dejected. What had she expected from a hired gun? Maybe he'd lost a gunfight. That was a definite possibility, she realized, "legend" or not.

But in early December, a tall stranger walked through the swinging doors and immediately drew the eyes of every girl in the place. He was over six feet and lanky, with blue-black straight hair past his shoulders and an almost savage look. Sparkle suspected he was part Indian. So did Benton Frazer. He reacted the second he spotted the man at Sparkle's card table.

"Take your cards to the bench outside if the breed wants his fortune told," Frazer asserted, scowling. "Don't cater to his kind in my place."

"Oh, that's just dandy, Frazer," Sparkle replied, reaching for her tarot deck before taking the newcomer's arm. "He probably doesn't cater to your kind in his place, either." She dropped her voice and glanced shyly up at the stranger. "At least I wouldn't."

They stepped out onto the porch. "Conley sends his good wishes. He cannot come now, but thinks of you often. He asked that I see you are well."

"He's all right, then?" Sparkle realized she'd asked in a tone that sounded too eager. "I mean, I worried when so much time had gone by--"

"He is strong, a good man. We ride together from time to time. He does not like the one inside, that man who makes life hard for you. He worries. You worry about Conley, too, I see. This is good. Good bond."

Sparkle coughed, "Well, I suppose you could look at it that way. Conley's a friend. Mr... ?"

"Parker."

"That doesn't sound Indian."

"My grandmother married a white. My father was raised with your book of the Great Father in Heaven. He liked the tale of the one called Samson, who had great power in his hair. I am Samson Parker." No smile. A stiff bow from the waist.

That explained the looks and strange speech, Sparkle thought. "Would you like to sit down, Samson Parker?" There was definitely a lilt to the name, especially applied to someone so formidable in appearance. She couldn't help smiling. "I can take a break and read your fortune, if you'd like."

"My destiny is already known to me, wife of Rafe Conley. You must help Conley find his."

Sparkle felt ashamed flaunting the ruse to this man. Hadn't her mother spoken of Indians and other peoples as having prophetic abilities of their own? Lying wouldn't do. "Rafe isn't my husband. He bought this ring and pretended he was, because of my boss and to protect me from other men."

"But you are Rafe Conley's woman."

"Rafe is --" Sparkle stopped and tried again. "Here, in this saloon, I'm Rafe's close friend. He stayed with me here one night, but--"

Samson Parker abruptly stepped off the porch into the street and solemnly glanced back. "Everywhere you are Rafe Conley's woman. The signs say this. I will tell him you are well and send your regards in return."

"Thank you," Sparkle muttered, watching him disappear into the swirling dust and chaff as an overloaded wagon filled with lumber rattled by.

Ruby Ann was braiding her ash brown hair as she stepped onto the porch to stare after the tall stranger. "Take it he's a friend of your husband's. What'd he tell you? Rafe due back anytime soon?"

"I don't know, Ruby. It didn't sound like it. We better get back inside."

"Spark, I know it ain't my place to say, but shouldn't he be comin' for Christmas, at least? It's been months since you got married, and you ain't had no time together. Rafe must seem a huckleberry above a persimmon to you, but I always figured you for a different type. The steady sort, fella who'd work down at the bank or the general store. Not some gun out to prove who's fastest in a bullet pissin' contest."

"Sometimes the strangest people turn out to be the right type, Ruby," was all Sparkle said before she went back inside. She wished she couldn't hear her mother saying cryptic words about Indians. She wished Eliza Cummings had never spent time in Europe or met the strege who taught her about tarot and developed Eliza's sight. And just now, Sparkle vehemently wished she hadn't understood exactly what Samson Parker had come to tell her.

## Chapter 5

Travis Conley was two inches taller than his older brother and even leaner. His legs reminded Rafe of a wood stove's flue pipe. Nineteen and positive he already knew everything, Travis was used to bossing other men around and accustomed to his men--most much older than Travis was--following orders without question. The bluster wasn't working on Rafe, though. He smoothed the saddle blanket and tightened the cinch on his sorrel, barely acknowledging his brother's anger.

"You know, Trav, I don't get what the gals see in you sometimes." Rafe stepped past Travis to lift his bedroll. "Might have Pa's looks, but you got his cranky disposition too."

"Rafe, you know damned well I was countin' on you to stay on at least until March. You never leave this early. If I'd known you'd be headin' out so soon, I wouldn't have let three hands go this winter."

"Your bunkhouse ain't empty."

"No, your damned head is! There's still more than a foot of snow out there."

"Should've seen somebody in Wichita before I came this time, but I never made it. Got sidetracked with Henry Tate Watkins. If I don't go to Wichita now, body's liable to think I ain't never comin' back that way."

"Body's liable to think?" Travis repeated, snorting in disgust. "A damned filly. You're leavin' me shorthanded to chase some skirt?"

"So maybe it is a filly. Maybe you can understand why I'm itchin' to get out. Been holed up in the cabin for weeks. Don't go to them dances and socials like you, little brother."

"You're shorter, Rafe, and probably weigh less than I do. You're the little brother now. And there's no reason you can't go into town with me. Hell, if it's companionship, I can--"

"No gal at your town socials is hankerin' after the likes of me. This spread and every other's crawlin' with men folk. A woman can take her pick. Not by a jugful am I lettin' you drag me to one of them barn dances so's I can watch while the gals make eyes at you and Mick Keenan. Don't belong in no boiled shirt at the meetin' hall."

"The gals don't know you got a scar under your shirt."

"Ain't my scar. Just time to mosey."

"Saloon cats givin' their payin' customers orders now, huh? You really got someone to see, or is it a case of French pox needin' a doctor?"

Rafe's right hand balled into a fist. "You'll always be the little brother, Travis. I can still whip you. Watch your tongue."

"I know you're never with any but rental gals. This painted cat--"

"She ain't a whore. She works in a saloon, grant you, but she's a pretty waiter gal. She

had some trouble, so I...we started puttin' on like she's my wife."

"Your wife? Jesus! You got a soiled dove in the family way?" Travis visibly winced.

"I just told you she ain't no soiled dove. She ain't expecting, just claimin' we're married so she won't have to fight with the saloon owner about whorin'."

"So she's not some pregnant harlot. Just a sneak and liar who favors the notion of bein' hitched to a mercenary. Sounds like a slice of pure heaven, this filly."

Rafe ignored the sarcasm. "Screw you, Travis. All I tried to do was saddle Snatch and get out. Don't remember invitin' your big nose into my life. But as long as we're on the subject, the gal asked where she could get in touch with me. I told her she could write me here. You hear from a gal named Sparkle, let Zach know. He or Miranda usually know where to wire me, since I transfer funds to the bank pretty regular."

"Sparkle?" Travis took two steps back, shaking his head. "Why not go whole hog and make it Golddust? Ain't too bold, is she?"

Rafe glared at his brother. "You say one more thing like that, I'll take my whip to your back. Ain't funnin', Travis."

Travis scowled. "Sparkle. If she ain't a regular doxy, she must be a singer or dancer--with a name like that."

"She reads fortunes."

Travis snorted and slapped his thighs. Rafe swung up into the saddle, frowning. "You won't be laughin' when she helps me find Hoffman and put a bullet through his skull."

"Never gettin' past that, are you? Uncle Tom rode with Slade's gang. He could've stayed a smith, but he went lookin' for pie in the sky. It ain't up there, Rafe. Most of the time, fellas lookin' for manna from above just find trouble here below. Miranda's always frettin' you'll meet the same end Uncle Tom did. Reckon I want to set next to her at your funeral after you've taken a couple slugs in the back? Been offerin' you half this spread the past two years."

"Ain't the kind who can stay in one place long. You know that. Winter's enough, I couldn't do this all year round. Ain't in me to grow roots in one spot."

"Is she at least pretty, this fortune teller you're sort of hitched to?"

Now Rafe grinned. "The finest. Little bitty thing, doesn't even come up to my shoulders. Boss threw her in the street right on top of my boot. She got up and gave him hell. Then I got him to reconsider his rude actions."

"The Colt got him to, you mean."

"Yep. She's got these incredible eyes, aquamarine, all clear and sparkling...Guess that's why the name. And Sparkle LaFleur is her real name." He winked as he nudged the



sorrel's flank. "Think I'd let some ugly hag claim she was my wife? I got a reputation, you know."

"And she knows too, so what the hell does she see in you? Can't be your plug-ugly face or disposition," Travis taunted back. "Told her you had a handsome younger brother, did you?"

"Didn't tell her spit, except your name and you own this spread. What's she see in me? She's a fortune teller, remember? She can see what other folks can't."

Travis watched his brother ride off, mulling over Rafe's revelation. Then he went back to the main house, straight to his desk, and took out a pen and paper. He settled at the kitchen table with a mug of strong coffee to write Miranda. He knew Rafe would be furious, but Travis felt their sister ought to know Rafe had gone loco over some doxy. Travis would just bet she was a whore, no matter what Rafe said.

Maybe she was everything Rafe thought she was. Maybe. But saloon gals were known to judge a man by the gold in his pockets. If she had the smarts Rafe credited her for, she could figure he must have reward money piling up. Travis prayed this Sparkle genuinely cared for Rafe. Because Rafe sure had it bad. He'd never been sweet enough on a gal to ride three acres to see her, let alone three hundred miles. Rafe had to have it bad for this gal in Wichita, whoever she truly was.

And Lordy, she'd better be someone mighty special. If she wasn't, Travis warned Miranda in his letter, their brother might just turn into quarry stone. If Sparkle La-Dee-Da was just another calculating saloon slut, Rafe was headed for a world of misery.

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Rafe strolled into the Scarlet Lady, his hands and lips chapped, his lower body stiff from riding nearly two days straight without stopping. He'd been on the trail for weeks, heading straight here from the ranch. One of the red dresses he recognized from his previous visit detached herself from the little clump of employees hovering near the bar and sashayed over.

She had curly light hair and big doe eyes. The same dress that made Sparkle look trim had this gal resembling an overstuffed pillow ready to bust its seams. "Howdy, y'all. Sparkle ain't back yet. Won't be, till day after tomorra. My name's Delia. Sparkle and I are friends."

Rafe interpreted that to mean she'd know where Sparkle had gone. "She gone home to visit her brother?"

"Well of course, silly. She took the train to Kansas City last Monday. How come you don't know where your own wife is? Out playin' Goldilocks, testin' other beds?"

"Been workin' in Colorado. Got here sooner than I figured. Recollect she wanted to go home for a spell," Rafe lied.

"Frazer wouldn't let her go for Christmas, even though it was so slow round here, we damned near had to start givin' the faro dealers free rides upstairs, just to keep in practice." Delia wet her lower lip and gave Rafe a slow smile. "She didn't get to spend the holidays with you, neither."

"I work in five states. Can't always make it back when I want."

"Saw the ring you bought her. Funny, she's never talked about how y'all happened to get hitched or nothin'. Not that she tells me everything--like how much she enjoyed her weddin' night."

Rafe caught the key significance of that comment. Those doe eyes were fastened on the crotch of his jeans, making him mentally squirm. He hadn't been with a woman in--shit, he realized it had to be several months. Any other time, he'd have been halfway up the stairs with this one. He wasn't a man to disregard an open invitation. But he wasn't about to risk dippin' his ladle in this particular well. Frazer would make sure Sparkle heard all about it before the doors stopped swingin' behind her bustle.

Rafe tipped his hat. "Got other business hereabouts. Tell Sparkle I'll be lookin' for her."

He headed down for Sadie's and had a drink while sitting in on a few games of faro. Gambling usually kept his mind off women. He took it seriously, almost as seriously as his business contracts. Luck wasn't with him today, though. The house changed dealers, a buxom female taking over shortly after he'd begun a brief winning streak.

Her eyes kept going back to him and holding his a second or so before drifting toward the other players. An hour later, the male she'd relieved for his meal break returned. She pocketed her tips and invited Rafe to have a drink. Four sips later, she led him upstairs. He entered a room nicer than the one Sparkle had across town.

He watched the woman strip down and spread herself across the bed, parting her thighs to give him a view of her wares. She was one fleshy meal, with abundant full breasts. Her nipples were the size of half-dollars. Rafe imagined they'd tighten up to look like twin bullets when he started sucking on them. He'd take his time with this one.

"Got to put your gunbelt over there, Sugar," the whore pointed. Rafe shook his head.

"I'll put it on the floor here beside my boots and spurs--unless you'd like me to wear 'em." He gave her a randy grin, then reached for the buttons of his fly. She watched with interest until he removed his shirt, then her expression changed.

"That sure is nasty. You get burned with lamp oil or somethin'?"

"Accident years back. Don't worry, it won't rub off on you."

She sat up. "But you'll be rubbing it all over me." They could have been talking about a dead rat from her tone.

Rafe put his clothes back on and picked up his gunbelt. "On second thought, don't reckon I will." He tossed a half-dollar at her. It landed between her pendulous globes.

"There. Now you got three of them. Thanks for nothin'."

He silently berated himself as he wandered back out into the street. He shouldn't have let the bitch get to him. He ought to be used to women gapin' and the distaste on their faces. What had he expected? That things would have changed just because...He stopped and wiped his coat sleeve across his face, the cold stinging his cheeks. Christ, Rafe, you can't let a stupid slut get you to thinkin' you ain't a man. Can't let Sparkle's reaction get your hopes up that other women will see you any different. They don't.

Suddenly the craving to see Sparkle became unbearable. He'd thought about her almost constantly back at Crockhead Rest, until he'd been driven to pack up and come back here. He'd give anything to see her face, talk with her. She'd laugh that throaty laugh that warmed his insides, remind him everyone had scars. She wouldn't make him feel worthless. Not that Rafe didn't believe Sparkle LaFleur could flay the hide right off a man if she put her mind to it, but flayin' a man wasn't her way. Oh, she put on that tough act, but he sensed she'd sooner hurt herself than somebody else. She had a big soft spot inside. That's what the act was protecting.

An hour later, after a hot meal and a tall bourbon at the Cowcatcher Saloon, he aimlessly prowled the town, reminding himself there was one sure way to get past what had happened. Work. That always made him feel better. Few people understood why he'd chosen to earn his pay as a freelance gun for over five years. Few understood what the profession could offer.

Hiring out was much like what everybody assumed: perilous, intermittent, intense, difficult at either extreme--long hours of waiting, brief split-seconds of life and death. But goddamned satisfying. And it paid so very well. Rafe could buy most anything he wanted, but his needs were simple. He helped Travis out with money for stock and supplies for Crockhead Rest. He drank and gambled some. He wired the bulk of his earnings to his brother-in-law Zach, an Omaha banker who managed Rafe's investment portfolio.

But folks didn't understand the years he'd devoted to perfecting his skills. He'd learned tracking and hunting from his father and uncle, learned to shoot a rifle, then a Colt peacemaker, learned to use a bullwhip. When he began hiring out, he had his Colt's action smoothed and grip honed to fit his right hand perfectly. Other gunmen favored the shorter barrel, but Rafe liked the classic Colt model. He'd had the trigger removed years ago and spent hours thumbing the hammer. Firing the gun was a reflexive action now, so he could draw and hit in the literal blink of an eye. His right hand was virtually wired straight to his eyes. No precious seconds wasted on morality debates.

Rafe gave every man a fair chance to let things go down easy, but if the fella didn't opt to take that chance, Rafe took him down hard.

He knew someday his reflexes would be too slow; quarry too fast. That's why he had Zach putting money away and making it grow. Someday Rafe would have to find

another way to occupy his time. He didn't like pondering that, for he suspected there wouldn't be anything more lucrative or satisfying. Most people followed their instincts for self preservation. Rafe deliberately taunted death, faced it, conquered it. Every time he prevailed, he proved his mettle and earned more than money.

Work had given him the scar, but it was also the answer for the darkness in his soul the scar inspired. There had to be someone in a cow town worth a bounty. Rafe began to hunt.

He spent the night in a cheap hotel and was up early the following day, scouring Wichita. He checked with Art Thompson and pored over Wanted posters. He familiarized himself with the descriptions of every lawbreaker suspected of being in Kansas or Nebraska, visited the saloons, barber shop, general store, and pharmacy-- where he was disgusted to find the irritating dandy, Joe Brooks, dispensing patent medicines. He even checked the doctor and dentist's offices. One never knew where a desperado might turn up.

The next day his diligence paid off in a lucky coincidence. Bowlegs Barker and the Poe twins came sneaking around the side of the livery stables. One of the twins had Snatch's reins in his fist. In the countless times Rafe had gone after outlaws, it was the first and only time he'd caught them stealing from him.

"You three are about the dumbest pukes I ever did meet," Rafe announced, peacemaker aimed at Barker's head. "Not only stealin' horseflesh in broad daylight, but that sorrel's my horse."

"Do tell," the Poe with the reins chuckled. "Ain't we got taste?"

"Nope. What you got's a fondness for thievery and rustlin' stock," Rafe contradicted.

"Along with about two seconds to ease your guns into the dirt. Try to be some pumpkins, Barker'll be nothin' but a pair of bowed legs without a place to hang his hat."

"Good seein' you again, too," Barker sneered as he gingerly set his pistol down. "Makin' a mistake this time, Conley. Sorrel's mine. Bought him yesterday from a rancher."

"What's his name?"

Barker shrugged. "Hell if I know. Didn't give a crap. Fella just sold me the horse." The Poe twins eyed Rafe. The one leading Snatch was unarmed. His brother made no move to put down his pistol.

"Not the rancher," Rafe drawled. "The horse. If he's yours, you must call him somethin'."

"What's it to you what I call my horse?"

"Nothin'. But the sorrel ain't yours, he's mine. And you made a big mistake singlin' him out." Without shifting his gaze, Rafe spoke to the animal. "Snatch, johnnycakes."

The horse reared and kicked viciously at the twin holding his reins. Pandemonium broke out. By the time Art Thompson and the marshal arrived, a group of local vigilantes were

gathered at the livery, threatening to string up the horse thieves. The young stable hand had been knocked unconscious by the twins, and finally came back to his senses. Barker sat bleeding from the bullet Rafe sent through his shoulder. After giving his statement to the two lawmen and making certain Snatch was safely back in a stall, Rafe reluctantly agreed to visit the doctor's surgery.

The town was abuzz with the news of a shoot-out and the valiant gunman who'd been taken with the stable boy to Dr. Stone's surgery. Swanie Johnson swore he'd been at Doc Stone's and witnessed the gunslinger's refusal to be treated until after the doctor saw to the youth. Then the stalwart fellow had given the stable boy a gold eagle and sent him to find some johnnycakes, instructing him to feed them to the star sorrel. He politely tipped his hat to the lad and ordered him to keep two cakes and any money left for himself.

Sparkle heard the gossip at the depot as she disembarked. The train butch and baggage handlers were talking to some men about the ruckus at the livery. Apparently, the episode had occurred less than an hour before. She found her bag and began walking briskly toward the saloon, grimacing at the thought that Benton Frazer would be agog like the rest of the businessmen in town. As if trail head weren't the rowdiest places on the prairie or lawbreakers were something rare.

Oh, but that Frazer was the epitome of a capitalist. He sold liquor and women to cowboys, took farmer's crop and milk money at his gaming tables, all the while trying to convince the Wichita citizenry his saloon was a decent establishment, a cut above Saudi's or Bodices Jones' Regally. Convince them pigs and Arkansas mules could fly.

He barked at her as soon as she stepped through the swinging doors. "Your husband's been shot in some ruckus. He's at Doc Stone's surgery."

She dropped her satchel, numbly realizing the man everyone had been talking about was Rafe Conley. "How bad is he?"

"Hell, I don't know. But I'm telling you right now, LaFleur--Excuse me, Conley--you can't have another night off. I don't care if he's yin'. You been out a week. Go see what's up, then get your behind back here right quick."

Sparkle dashed the few blocks to Dr. Stone's, fighting a stitch in her side by the time she stumbled through the door. "Doctor? It's...Mrs. Conley."

"Back here."

She followed the voice to a small room, where Rafe sat calmly on a table watching the doctor suture his upper arm. "He's lost some blood and a section of muscle." The doctor never looked up from his task. "Bullet missed the bone, though. If you can keep it from suppurating, he should be fine. Provided no one else tries to steal his horse." Dr. Stone gave Sparkle a look of wry amusement.

She moved closer to the table, and felt her throat go dry.

"Hey, darlin'," Rafe smiled in greeting, reaching for her just in time. Her knees buckled.

"Got some smelling' salts handy, Doc? She's looking' a mite peaked. Probably the blood."

Sparkle steadied herself, gripping Rafe's good forearm. Some dim part of her mind wondered why he'd bothered to put his hat back on. He was sitting there naked from the waist up, and his denims were stained deep crimson in several places. He did indeed look like a man who'd just been in a gun battle.

"I'm all right," she mumbled. "It just came as a shock, learning you're the hero everyone's talking about. Three outlaws?"

He chuckled and shook his head. "Three turkeys. Good thing I taught Snatch to work with me. Them three pukes--sorry, Doc. No offense meant, case you're from Missouri." When the doctor only released a soft laugh, Rafe drawled, "They didn't stand a chance."

Sparkle followed the doctor to his front reception room while Rafe collected his gunbelt and coat. There wasn't anything left of his shirt. Her voice was a hushed whisper. "Is there anything you can do about his big scar? He's very sensitive about it, though I've tried to tell him it's not significant."

Dr. Stone shook his head. "I'd advise to let it be. He's a strong fellow, excellent recuperative powers. Here's some laudanum. There'll be pain in that arm. Give him a spoonful or two every few hours if it gets bad. Watch for signs of fever, redness or puffiness around the sutures. Any problems, get him back here or send for me."

Rafe joined them. "Won't be no problems, Doc. There's twenty dollars. Thanks again." Rafe wrapped his good arm around Sparkle's shoulders and led her outside. They hadn't gone ten feet from the doorway before he pulled her against his chest and kissed her soundly.

"Transition, it's good to see you. Came into town a couple days ago and went by the saloon. Gal there said you'd be common' back in a few days."

"So you decided to keep busy killing people until I got here," Sparkle snapped, jerking away from him.

Rafe saw the fire in her eyes and couldn't help laughing. "I didn't kill anybody, Sparkle. I caught a known rustler and two of his pals stealing horses from the livery. Turned 'em over to the law, very much alive. Made four hundred dollars while I was at it."

"Terrific. Do you have even the slightest notion what I thought when Frazer told me you'd been shot? I was afraid you were dying."

"Disappointed, huh?" He couldn't keep the smirk off his face.

"You're--Oh! I have absolutely nothing to say to you," she announced, striding off toward the Scarlet Lady, bustle twitching.

Rafe stared after her for a few seconds, thoroughly confused. When she'd walked into the doctor's surgery, he'd seen concern on her face. The second their eyes met, Rafe had

experienced that same amazement again--that her eyes were so alive and penetrating. That a pretty woman could possibly be gazing into his twin muddles with something akin to genuine caring. His heart soared for an instant at the softness around the edges of those eyes. Before she went weak in the knees, she'd looked about to cry. Perhaps she'd missed him, same as he'd missed her.

But now she was storming off, acting like she barely knew him. A horrible thought struck. Maybe he'd misunderstood her expression. Maybe she was disappointed. She might've been hoping he'd solved her dilemma of how to get out of their "marriage." Maybe she'd prayed never to set eyes on him again. What seemed like wrath could be chagrin. Could be she wasn't at all glad to have her wayward "husband" back in town, looking to share her bed. Someone else could be sleeping in it these nights.

He caught up and stepped in front of her to block her path. "You sorry to see me again? Something's got your bustle all twisted. If you don't want me common' over to your saloon, I'll go back to the hotel where I spent the past couple nights. If I'm in the way, just say so."

"In the way?" Sparkle repeated, awestruck. How could anyone be so dense? "You're not in the way, Rafe. You're hurt. And it's your own fault, because you carry that gun and look for trouble. You keep looking until it finds you. I'm sorry you were shot. I'm sorry you carry a peacemaker. But your decision to risk your neck has nothing to do with me. I have to get back to work."

He wouldn't let her past. "You're mad because I got shot? If I'd had those idiots arrested without a nick on me, that would've been just fine? This is nothin', Sparkle. I've had worse."

"Indeed," she answered dryly.

She couldn't admit how terrified she'd been at the news he'd been injured or her overwhelming relief at learning he was all right. She certainly couldn't say she was thrilled to see him again. Yet it was true, against all logic. Her heart had begun to beat faster the moment their eyes met. It was insane. Seeing the toll of his profession firsthand, she should be running down Main Street as fast and as far from this lunatic as she could get.

But one look at Rafe's dark eyes, his square jaw and slightly crooked nose...one touch from his damned talented lips, and she was limp as jelly. Every other man just faded into obscurity, ceased to exist. Phenomenal, since Rafe wasn't exactly handsome. The new faro dealer at the Scarlet Lady was better looking. For pity's sake, so was Joe Brooks, if a woman measured by facial features alone. But she didn't, and Rafe was pure male animal. Too much male animal.

She dodged his grasp and struck out again, ignoring his footfalls beside her. Pretending she wasn't secretly pleased he was headed back to the saloon, despite the fact she hadn't given him even the slightest encouragement. Telling herself step by stubborn step that

she shouldn't feel attracted to a man so deceptively ordinary. She had no business with this man--whose speech rippled and flowed like a wide creek in the summertime--because it was a lie of the most insidious kind. That same man was likely to blast a stranger to Kingdom Come without a second thought.

She shouldn't feel drawn to Rafe. And she certainly, absolutely, definitely shouldn't consider allowing him to spend another night in her bed. But she was.

The whole town believed he was her husband. Everyone would expect to see them together. Frazer would expect it. She had myriad thoughts swirling through her mind, none of them framing a cogent explanation as to why Rafe would be up and walking around, but not staying with her at the Scarlet Lady. None of them adding up to a tale Frazer would buy.

She inhaled and let her tongue loose. "What do you want me to say? That if I'd walked into that surgery and the doctor had pulled a sheet up over you on his table, I would have torn it back and wept over your dead body like a real wife?"

Rafe thought there was more sarcasm than reality in that remark. Best to sidestep the gunshot argument. Womenfolk could be damned unreasonable about firearms. "Maybe we should talk about this later. My arm's throbbin' and you'll be late. Hard Case gets after you about this, I'll either have to shoot him or pay him to lay off. Got a preference?" He grinned even before she gave him the answer he expected.

"I think there's been enough shooting for one day. Come on."

Rafe chugged back three shots of straight Kentucky bourbon at the bar while Sparkle changed into her costume. He wasn't feeling much pain or anything else by the time Frazer and a faro dealer carried him up to her room, stripped him, and tossed the blankets over him.

Sparkle found him sound asleep when she came upstairs after her shift. She was exhausted, but pleased to tuck a nice roll of bills into her cache box. She'd donned her nightgown and settled beside Rafe when she heard his hoarse whisper. "Darlin', my arm's killin' me. Can you get me some more whiskey?"

She brought the bottle of laudanum and he took a dainty sip. "You can do better than that," she scolded mildly. "I don't want you waking me up again in an hour."

"Don't like medicine, but I don't want to trouble you." He grabbed the bottle and took another drink.

Sparkle put the vial on the bedside table near him and sighed as she climbed back under the covers. "Rafe Conley, I swear I'll divorce you one of these days if you don't hang up that goddamned gun."



## Chapter 6

Sparkle opened the bedroom door at the soft knock. Ruby Ann stood in the hallway with lunch on a tray. "How's he doin', Spark?"

"He'll be all right," Sparkle yawned. It was almost noon, but she'd only awakened moments before Ruby Ann's arrival. Rafe was still sleeping, thanks to the heavy dose of laudanum she persuaded him to drink just before dawn.

"Don't it scare you, him goin' up against desperadoes like that?" Ruby set the tray on the dresser and glanced back at the sleeping form in the bed.

"Yes, Ruby. It scares the hell out of me."

Ruby twirled her braid in nervous fingers. "Listen, Spark, you know enough to use a preventative, right? It wouldn't be smart to get knocked up. Little one growin' up without a father cause he got himself killed, ma workin' in a dump for some greedy bastard like Benton. Give him this if you ain't already wearin' protection."

Ruby produced an indescribable bit of something too disgusting to contemplate after just waking. Sparkle wasn't sure she'd ever be awake enough to want to look at it. Bad enough having the slimy object in her palm. "Finest sheepgut," Ruby asserted proudly.

"Sheepgut." Sparkle decided it was best to pretend she had full knowledge of what men and women did with animal parts in the bedroom. "Gee, uh thanks. I'm still sort of tired. Maybe we can visit later."

She pushed Ruby out and locked the door before burying the indelicate offering in the back of a drawer. She took up her hairbrush and ran it through her hair, surprised to find Rafe sitting up, watching her.

"Sparkle, would you tell me somethin'?"

"Not about what I just tucked away. It's personal." Her cheeks burned, but Rafe didn't smirk. He seemed troubled or in pain. Before she could ask, he spoke again.

"Why'd you get upset over a bullet gougin' a little piece out of my arm, when this doesn't bother you?" He glanced down at his chest.

"I didn't know you then. I'm sure I would have been--" Out of my mind with grief and terror. "Don't try to tell me I'm stupid for being upset. A few inches over, that bullet could have killed you."

"Bowlegs couldn't hit a bull's ass with a handful of banjos. He was aimin' for my heart, hit my arm instead."

"Damn you, Rafe, the point is he did hit you!"

Rafe shrugged. "Lucky wild shot."

"Next time you might not be alive to say that. Are you really so impressed by your own reputation that you don't realize sooner or later one of the men you go up against will be

more ruthless or faster than you are?" She sat near him on the mattress, legs tented under her nightgown.

"Naw, I know. Hope to be standin' in my own saloon by the time I meet up with that fella."

"You're risking your life to buy a saloon?"

Rafe heard the sharp disapproval in her tone. "Is that lunch over there?" He eyed the tray, hoping to shift the topic. Sparkle brought it over and set it between them, tucking her legs back under. Rafe was reminded of Miranda. He and his big sister had shared tea parties until he'd wised up that it wasn't considered manly to drink from little toy cups.

"Yeah, I want to buy a saloon," he admitted, stuffing cold turkey into his mouth. "Or build one."

"Your brother's got a ranch. Why don't you work with him?"

"Now you sound like Travis. Cattle ranchin' ain't for me. Dust, cows. No, thanks. Even when I can't see the barbed wire, I know it's there. Don't like bein' fenced in or starin' at the same plot of land day after day. This room's hard, now I see how small it is in the daylight."

"You don't like being confined," Sparkle nodded, chewing thoughtfully. "Well, there must be other things you could do--where you'd still be able to go outdoors or move around from place to place. Maybe become a sales agent."

"I like what I do now. Like saloons and gamblin', wanderin' from town to town when I feel like it. If I didn't, we wouldn't be havin' this conversation, Miz Conley."

"You're hinting I don't have the right to nag you."

"Amen, darlin'."

"Well, as I'm not really your wife, maybe I don't have the right to nag--but I'm the closest thing you've got to anyone who gives a hoot. Other than your brother."

"Got a big sister, too. She's never liked my way of life, either. She and Travis can't understand that I ain't like them. Bein' tied down to a place and their routines makes them happy. Same thing would make me miserable. But what about you?" he asked, studying her closely. "You don't belong in a saloon. You could take up with some banker or doctor, have a nice home and a passel of kids. You're after money, same as me. So what are you savin' for?"

"To see Paris."

Rafe nearly spit out the wad of food in his mouth. "Should have guessed it would be somethin' ridiculous like that. You women. What, you got relations there, your ma a Frenchie?"

"No, she just spent time in Europe when she was young and visited France. That's where

she learned to read tarot."

"And met your pa. LaFleur. He was the Frenchie."

"I want to see the River Seine and watch the boats go by. I want to eat lunch like this out in the country. Bread and cheese spread on a cloth in the grass. See the fabulous chateaux--those are big fancy country estates--and hear people speak the Language of Love. That's what some Americans call French."

What was it about gals that they liked giddy talk? Rafe wondered. Never known one yet who didn't go mush-headed over fancy words. Like words ever settled any hash. He made a mental note to try flowery talk next time he came up against a Bowlegs Barker and see if that knocked him on his butt.

"After you see France, then what?"

"Settle down somewhere and never set foot in another saloon again."

Rafe eased against the pillow, his face blanching. The pain was getting worse in his arm.

"If you wouldn't mind fetchin' another bottle from downstairs, I'd truly appreciate it."

"You'd rather be drunk than take laudanum?"

"I can handle whiskey. Don't like laudanum. Never took more'n nine or ten swallows of it durin' all the months after the stabbin'. Just need some rotgut. Knowin' your boss, the cheapest watered-down bourbon is all I'll get." He realized she might not care for the sight or smell of a passed-out gunslinger in her bed. "I hope you don't mind me stayin' a spell. Arm's pretty sore, but I should be out of your way tomorrow."

"Rafe, I told you, you're not in the way."

"You're still wearin' the ring," he said without looking to see if it was so. "Whore was talkin' like I was your old man."

Sparkle's face instantly went pink. "You were listening?" She jumped up, fidgety all of a sudden. "I have to...you know, get cleaned up and dress for work. I'll get your bottle and whatever else you need before I go down for the evening." She paused to press her fingers to his forehead.

Rafe stared up into her eyes. "Damned glad to see you again. Glad you don't make me feel funny when I'm not wearin' a shirt. Be tough doin' that right now."

She shrugged noncommittally. "Get some rest. You don't feel warm, and so far your eyes look normal. If you start feeling hot or dizzy, make sure you let someone know so we can send for the doctor."

The whiskey bottle was nearly empty and Rafe was out cold when Sparkle came up to bed late that night. She undressed in the darkness and hesitated, nude, keenly aware there was a man just a few feet away. How would it feel to undress if he were awake? To truly have a husband and let him see her unclothed, see him the same way?

She donned her nightdress and struck a match, and reached to turn back the covers. She was ashamed for peeking, but sensed she might never get another chance to appease her curiosity. She'd never seen Jace naked. She'd worked in saloons for years, but hadn't seen a grown man without his pants.

Rafe was on his back without a stitch on. Male nudity was startling. Men certainly didn't look a thing like women. They were hairier and...well, peculiar. She didn't find his appendage frightening or offensive, just strikingly different. He was well proportioned. Not too thin, but not at all fat. If not for the scar, Rafe probably would have been considered a fine example of masculinity, she decided. His hips were narrow and--

Gasping as the match burned her fingertips, Sparkle clambered into bed. Rafe rolled onto his side, curling himself around her. Her bottom was now pressed directly against the area she'd just been studying. She tried to slide over, but he tightened his arm around her middle. "Don't," came a low mumble. "Please, I just want to hold you, darlin'."

She relaxed and heard a deep sigh. He probably didn't even realize he'd been talking in his sleep. She prayed he hadn't been aware of her bold scrutiny. Heavens, now she was in a most unladylike position. Only the thin fabric of her nightgown kept their embrace from being absolutely scandalous. Not that felt at all unpleasant or wicked. Quite the contrary, it was comforting, as before. If not for how improper it was, she'd have to admit she was extremely comfortable there in the naked gunfighter's arms. So comfortable she yawned and promptly fell asleep.

Rafe awakened the next morning early, claiming no signs of a hangover or need for pampering. He was itching to be up and out of bed. Sparkle argued that he shouldn't be walking around yet, but she couldn't persuade him to rest another day. He left the saloon in pursuit of his reward money and told her he'd see her later.

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Sparkle also had business across town, Rafe discovered when he followed a small knot of customers out the back door of the general store. She'd set a checkerboard over a barrel and was giving free tarot readings. Local women were literally lined up for their chance at hearing their fortunes.

"Priscilla, you and your husband will have a baby within the next year."

"Oh, Sparkle, are you certain? We've been trying."

"I'm sure. Now let someone else have a turn. You know I can't stay long," Sparkle teased, patting the matron's hand.

Rafe leaned against a post on the porch a few feet behind Sparkle to watch and listen. The womenfolk had plainly been coming to Sparkle for some time. She knew a lot about every one of them. Rafe smiled to himself. She could never tell folks their fortunes for free within a mile of Old Hard Case. Frazer would've insisted she charge to tell a body the time of day. Wasn't likely any homesteaders' wives would be caught walkin' into a

place like the Scarlet Lady, anyhow. Sparkle was here bein' neighborly.

"Elmira, get away from that witch!" A man with a florid face shouted to the woman who'd replaced Priscilla at the makeshift table. "I've told you I don't hold with such mischief. It's deviltry, and that harlot's from one of the bagnios. Nothing but a no-account whore. You'll not associate with that heathen woman."

"She's my wife," Rafe spoke up. "And I don't hold with folks callin' her names. Your woman came seekin' advice. Sparkle gave it as a kindness. You'll apologize, or answer to me." Rafe shifted his weight, but hadn't even reached toward the grip of his pistol before a woman shrieked.

"Oh, my God! Do you know who that is, Bertha? He's the one they took to Doc Stone's the other day. The one who caught the horsethieves and saved Dan Tucker's son." She glared at the unfriendly husband. "Michael Malloy, you should be ashamed of yourself, acting like that! Especially after what Sparkle's husband did for this town."

"Sorry," Malloy choked out. "Come on, Elmira, we're going back to the boardinghouse." They left. Mumbling excuses, the other ladies wandered off too, leaving Sparkle and Rafe alone on the store's rear porch.

"I thought you had business," she chided. "Did you follow me here?"

"Nope, I came to buy a new coat with some of my reward. The old one's missin' a sleeve."

"I've encountered men like Elmira's husband before. I can handle his attitude. I'm used to it. Every card reader hears it at some time or another."

Rafe rubbed his boot sole along a protruding board on the porch. "Didn't like hearin' him call you a whore. I know better than anybody you ain't, even though you work in the saloon. Couldn't let him insult you without speakin' up."

Sparkle was bemused by that admission. His face was partially averted. Was Rafe Conley embarrassed? It didn't seem possible. He'd taken on three rowdies at once. One small-minded bigot surely couldn't faze him. It was probably his recent injury bothering him. "You should go back to my room and get some rest, Rafe. I warned it was too soon to be up and about."

He stopped her from gathering up the tarot cards. "How much of what you see is in those? They tell you everything, or you got second sight? I heard what the ladies said, how you're right most of the time. Snatch almost got bit by a rattler right after I rode out of here, just like you'd cautioned me. How much can you see?"

Sparkle saw he looked disturbed by more than Malloy's outburst. Had she foretold anything disastrous in Rafe's future? His reading had been so long ago, she honestly couldn't recall. "Sit down, and we'll look at your cards again."

He dropped onto the rickety stool across from her and watched her reshuffle the cards.

"Them things look heathen."

"They are." Seeing the furrow beneath the brim of his hat, she softened her manner. "But I don't know that the ideas of older religions and folklore can't be compatible with Christian teachings. Why would God give us abilities if we weren't supposed to use them?"

He chose from the three stacks of cards before him. "How much of it's these cards?" he asked again.

"How much is your gun?" she countered. "I'm sure you keep it oiled and working perfectly." He nodded. "But if you didn't practice to develop your aim and skill in using it, even the best gun in the world wouldn't be of much value."

"Ain't the same." Sparkle was relieved to hear the slow rhythm back in his speech. He'd been too intense before. Now he was relaxing, becoming the Rafe Conley she found almost charming--though she doubted others appreciated this man the way she did.

"I need my thumb on the Colt. Got a strange feelin' you could look me in the eye and tell me things all on your lonesome. You don't need fancy painted cards. I don't recollect a card with a snake."

Sparkle laughed, scanning the unused cards. "I doubt you can remember every card in the deck after one sitting, Rafe. This card has a serpent. You see the snake is behind Hermes, the figure with the jackal's head. In tarot, left represents what's behind you or what may come unexpectedly."

"So any time that card's in someone's readin', he'll get snakebit?"

"No. Part of it does come from intuition. It takes a long time to read tarot and learn what the signs mean. I've been doing this for years, just as you've been a hired gun for years. I'm sure you trust your gut feelings about outlaws."

"That's why I'm talkin' to you. Been trackin' a certain man for nigh on five years. Was hopin' you can tell me where to find him."

"I can't do that," she sighed. "I can't tell you where your lost moneypouch is or if Aunt Tess went to Purgatory. I can't simply lay out cards and get an image of your criminal sitting in a train station in Baltimore. It doesn't work that way." She saw Rafe didn't believe her.

"One snake took you from thinking I was a charlatan to believing I can predict everything." She folded her arms across her chest. "You didn't believe it was real when I read your cards before. I knew that, so I didn't tell you everything. Now you believe too much, so I still can't. You won't like what I see."

"Shit, I told you I'll die young. Ain't no big surprise. This is somethin' I got to do. You can help me, I know you can. You're just bein' contrary."

"I'm sorry. You're asking me to aid in your pursuit of this man, but judgment's already

been passed."

His eyes became huge dark pools. "How do you know that?"

She tapped JUSTICE, which had come up inverted, positioned beneath the primary subject card. "You're pushed by a desire to continue something wrong or biased. You believe an injustice was done."

"It was, dammit! Dan Hoffman shot my uncle in cold blood and got off. The very next year he gunned someone else down. So, of course, the local folks decided they made a mistake. Too late for my family."

"As I said, I'm sorry." Sparkle abruptly gathered up the cards and rose to leave. "I'm not going to help you kill someone. God will judge him."

Rafe bolted off his seat. "You don't agree that acquittal was unfair? How would you know?"

"I don't care," she answered slowly. "I've seen things happen, Rafe. Some of them cruel and unjust. But it's not for us to judge others, and I truly can't see a given person's whereabouts, anyway."

"Sparkle, listen. You got lots of folks passin' through this town. Cowhands, drifters, homesteaders come from the East, all manner of strangers. Someone might know Elusive Dan Hoffman, could maybe pass on a tip. You could ask, let me know if you hear anything."

"I won't do that, either. You don't expect to live very long. Why? Because you were just shot. Because you're out for blood. You live violently, which can only lead to dying the same way. Don't ask me to help you get more blood on your hands."

"It's my choice, ain't it? Don't I got the right to choose how I live, same as you or anybody else? I told you why I do what I do. You ain't got to hold with it. What gives you the right to decide how I should live? You live like a sleazy two-bit whore."

"A minute ago, you were ready to push Mr. Malloy's face into the dirt for talking like that. You know, I actually thought you were different, Rafe. That underneath all that harshness--Oh, what's the point? I've got to get back." She pulled up the hood of her cloak and moved to the edge of the porch.

"Sparkle, hold on. I'm sorry. Please, will you just ask some of the men about Hoffman for me?"

"No."

His whole expression changed, turning rock hard. "Thought you were different, too." He pulled a fistful of gold eagles from his jeans pocket. "Here, I'll pay you! You owe me somethin'--Miz Conley. Since the first second we met, I been gettin' your ass out of one scrape or the next. Bought you that gold ring. Paid your sonofabitch boss not to give you a hard time. He's gone easier on you, hasn't he? Only cost me a hundred dollars."

"You paid Frazer a hundred dollars? My rent's only twenty a month."

Sparkle could easily imagine such extortion from Benton Frazer. But Rafe was no imbecile or green dandy fresh from East. He must have believed he stood to gain from the transaction. You owe me somethin', Miz Conley. Then she remembered. Humans were just another commodity to Rafe Conley. He traded in their hides.

"You're an idiot, Rafe."

"Yeah, beginnin' to see that myself. You don't admire me or what I do, but you sure admire the fearsome reputation that goes with it. Don't pretend you don't know what I'm sayin'. Saw the damned card that sums us up--the one called STRENGTH, with a pretty gal pettin' a lion. I'm just some animal you like havin' around cause I frighten everybody else away. Like totin' your own peacemaker, without havin' to worry about it goin' off and shootin' you in the foot.

"But I ain't supposed to lay a hand on you, or expect nothin' from you in return. You're lookin' for somebody a whole lot finer than some scarred, ugly freelance gun, ain't that right?"

"You're ridiculous. I --"

"Nope, I'm honest," he growled, grabbing her and pulling her close. Their faces were mere inches apart. "I admit I want somethin' from you. I don't play like I just want to be your friend," he simpered. "We ain't friends, Sparkle. I want what any man would want, to make love to you. So bad I can taste it--even standin' here arguin' with you. Why the hell did I kiss you that very first mornin'? Why'd I ask about goin' upstairs? You know how it is, but you won't let it happen, cause you figure you're too good for the likes of me."

"Rafe, let go."

"Hell, wouldn't want my dirty hands on you, would you? Just want to flutter by somethin' dark and scary and pretend none of it'll rub off on you. Pretend none of it's in you. You're full of horseshit, Sparkle. Look down your own well sometime."

"If you'd calm down a minute--"

"I won't. Don't help me find Hoffman. Don't help me find myself. I didn't ask you for that. Asked for one favor, in return for the couple I've done you, but forget it. I don't need nothin' that bad. Just forget it. Forget me."



## Chapter 7

Sparkle was busy; still she found time between tarot readings to raise her eyes to the batwing doors. Not that she actually expected a certain pair of spurs would come through them. Rafe had told her to forget him, and he seemed to be very much the kind who meant what he said. He's not coming back here, she silently whispered. Do what he said and forget him.

He'd left her too flabbergasted to respond to his outburst. She didn't know how she would have replied if he'd given her the chance. Some of his accusations were true. She did like thinking she could associate with him and remain untouched. There was no chance she'd change her mind about helping him destroy himself or harm some man he'd sworn a vendetta against, but she realized she'd made a tactical error. Tried to take a spirited wild thing and cage it. Then been foolish and selfish enough to be surprised when it turned on her.

But Rafe was also wrong, because she didn't think she was above him. She wished she could have at least explained that, and that he'd listened about his impossible quest for justice. There was no such thing in this world. Sometimes bad things just happened. Not always to those who'd earned them.

You couldn't spend your life wondering why you'd been a victim or plotting to set things right. You couldn't spend your future trying to undo the past. Yesterday was gone. So was Rafe, and he'd departed without realizing that Sparkle hadn't condemned him for his chosen profession. She just couldn't fully support it. She shared his family's view, and could see what his relatives couldn't: Rafe was headed for a cataclysm. She'd failed to sway him from his path.

She looked up again an hour later and felt her mouth go dry. He was seated at one of the poker tables with the newest addition to the staff on his lap. The strumpet had come from Abilene, and either hadn't been informed or didn't care that Rafe was supposedly married--to a woman employed in this very same establishment.

As Sparkle watched, the redhead gave Rafe a juicy kiss on the mouth. His hand slid under the carmine skirt to caress a stocking-clad thigh. His fingers probed higher. The whore broke their kiss and giggled, squirming against Rafe's upper body, then leaned closer to whisper in his ear.

Had Sparkle just been berating herself for being unfair to this lewd, selfish beast? She began to seethe.

Rafe had obviously come here expressly to humiliate her. Playing her for a fool, embarrassing her before her coworkers...and getting plenty of help from the new girl. Sparkle rose. Her eyes were focused on the scene across the room. She never saw Frazer watching her with snorting glee, never saw Ruby's eyes widen in horror, never noticed the customers edging out of her path as she crossed to the poker table. She rudely shoved the redhead off Rafe's knee.

"You've got the wrong man, Dixie," Sparkle hissed to the woman sprawled on the floor. She waived her gold band in the whore's face, practically rubbing it on the tip of her nose. The girl actually went cross-eyed trying to focus on ring. "You can throw yourself at any other man in this place, but not this one. He's mine."

Ruby Ann arrived to drag Dixie away. Sparkle spun to discover Rafe was out of his chair, features taut. "Yours, am I? That works both ways, Sparkle Honey. Reckon it's high time we settled this hash."

Before she could say anything, Rafe caught her and tossed her over his shoulder. He carried her upstairs and set her down outside her bedroom. "Where's your room key?"

"Just because I didn't want you embarrassing me down there doesn't mean I'm going to play whore in the redhead's place."

He set a palm against the wall on either side of her so she was pinned. "Don't worry. We're done playin'. Give me the key, or I'll kick that door in."

"Just get out. Go over to the Rusty Nail or some other bawdy house. Wichita's full of pleasure palaces."

"My wife works in this one." His eyes narrowed and Sparkle realized he wasn't drunk, but certainly furious. "Come to ponder on that," he drawled in a deceptively easy tone, "I'm goin' to want that lock workin' once I get you on the other side, so I can't bust your door down." Now the gleam in his dark eyes made her shiver. "Can't be but one or two places you could hide a key on you."

He tore the camisole straps and jerked the top of her bodice down. Whalebone and stays were no match for his ire. "No key," he announced, his breath hot and sour in her face. "But a better set of tits than the other gal had. Now give me that damned key, before I decide to do you right here, up against the wall."

Sparkle only glared back at him. He expected her to cover herself, break down and cry, act mortified. Stand there quaking in fear of his bullying tactics, prove he'd been right about her. Too bad. There was no way in hell she'd give him that satisfaction.

She made no attempt to cover her breasts. She was breathing too fast and too hard. They both were. Fury and lust burned in Rafe's eyes. Sparkle was aware on a subconscious level that with every heave of her naked bosom, she skittered across treacherous ground. But damn the man, she'd worked in saloons and put up with men's foolishness too long to let Rafe grind her under his boot heels. She was not going to act some a frightened child. Rafe had come looking for trouble--now he had some.

Even Rafe Conley, gun for hire who took on three outlaws single-handedly, wasn't going to make Sparkle back down or beg his forgiveness. She hadn't stirred up this hornet's nest. If he thought he could intimidate her--no, especially because he was sure he could--Sparkle wasn't about to mollify him.

"You'll pay for this dress, Rafe. I have to replace it. That bastard Frazer makes us pony

up to have them made by some dressmaker."

Rafe gave a caustic laugh. The ice queen was bein' stubborn again. Plum asinine, too, if she didn't know she was playing with fire by this time. Shouldn't have let her know you're so sensitive about that scar. Shouldn't have been such a gentleman with her before. Now she thinks she can control you. Frustrate the hell out of you, and you'll just take it.

Well, he wasn't taking crap tonight. Not from anybody. Least of all from Sparkle La-Goddamned-Fleur.

He reached down and pulled his Colt, raising it slowly until the muzzle touched the point of her chin. "I'll pay for the dress, but I already paid for you." No drawl. Just harsh words bitten off crisp and clear. "Unlock the door."

"Or what? You'll shoot me?"

Delia had come up with a customer. She burst into hysterics at the sight of Rafe holding his gun to Sparkle's chin. "Oh, my God. Frazer! Somebody get Frazer up here. He's going to kill Sparkle. Fra-zerrrr!"

The customer took one look at the pistol and left Delia screaming in his wake. Frazer appeared seconds later and stepped in front of Delia. The Winchester from behind the long bar was now leveled at Rafe.

"Put it away, Conley. You and the missus got an argument, take her outside and settle it. Don't want trouble in my place."

Sparkle's heart pounded in stark fear. She'd been perfectly safe until Frazer showed up, but now the situation was out of control. Rafe never would have hurt her. She was certain of that. He'd meant to force his will on her, frighten her. But now that a man stood pointing a weapon at him, everything had changed. You didn't face down a man like Rafe. No one so cavalier about his own demise could be intimidated. But he could be provoked into unleashing his lethal nature on those around him. Something she'd prayed never to witness firsthand....

Matters weren't improved by Deputy Thompson appearing out of thin air to point a shotgun at Rafe's chest. "Conley, I don't want to take you in, but--"

Sparkle broke in. "It's all right, Art. He won't hurt anyone. We play a sort of parlor game sometimes. I'm the outlaw; he has to bring me in." She thrust her two wrists together toward Rafe. "Come on, honey, tie me up."

Frazer lowered his weapon. "Wipe my ass with a busted shingle! Sparkle likin' it rough. Kee-rist! Last cursed female I'd figure for them 'parlor games'."

"You're sure there's no problem?" Art said, trying not to look directly at Sparkle. The flushed, peculiar look on his face reminded Sparkle that now all three men were being treated to the sight of her bare bosom.

She felt her own cheeks flame in response. "No, it's all right."

Rafe slipped his peacemaker back into its holster as he pressed himself against Sparkle, shielding her from view. "No problem, Art. Ain't figurin' to shoot nobody, least of all my lady here." His voice softened and his eyes melted over hers.

The room key magically appeared in Rafe's palm. He had no idea where it came from, but he unlocked the door and pushed Sparkle into the dark room, turning back to the other men.

"She got a mite upset with me, and I wanted to set her right. Little harmless fun down at the poker table, all it was." Rafe knew Frazer had witnessed the scene with the redheaded whore. "She ain't been entertainin' gents, has she, Frazer? Could be she's so quick to take on like she's jealous cause she's been busy herself. Swore you'd keep an eye on my wife while I was away. But I see now there's another way up here."

Art Thompson's face and neck flushed even darker as he cleared his throat. "There's a flight of steps on the outside of the balcony. The windows don't lock in the monkey hall rooms. Couple fellas came running over babbling that you'd gone crazy. Figured I'd better calm things down. Didn't know you and Sparkle were married, but I know this barkeep's no match for you."

"I'd recollect those words--" Rafe squinted at Sparkle's boss, "next time you feel inclined to pull a weapon. Don't give many second chances."

He entered her room to find Sparkle had taken off the torn dress. She wore a pale yellow robe covering every inch from her chin to her bare feet. In the dim lamplight, she looked all of about fourteen, pure as the driven snow. But also mad as a peeled rattler. She crammed some folded things into a valise. A bulging satchel was already beside it on the floor.

"What the hell do you think you're doin'?"

She sighed without turning to look at him. "This job's been sour ever since Frazer took over. Thanks to tonight's little exhibition, it's time to move on again. Maybe Ellsworth."

Dammit, she couldn't take off. Well, she could, but he didn't want her to. Nothing had gone right with this woman since he'd ridden into Wichita. He had to turn things around. "He'll forget the uproar in a day or two."

"You think so? Will Art Thompson forget it, too? And the other girls? I should have let the deputy cart you off to jail."

"Reckon that's what I would've done." Rafe surprised them both by admitting aloud. "Sorry I frightened you."

"You didn't." She stopped packing and turned to face him. "I'm not afraid of you. I know everyone else is. They probably have good reason to be."

"But you don't." She continued folding clothes. Rafe eased onto the edge of her bed,

trying to change her mood. He sensed she was listening, though determined to feign indifference.

"You know, you're a pretty resourceful gal. That 'parlor game' bit was downright clever." No response. More packing. "I feel bad about rippin' your dress and them seein' you like that. Hell, feel bad I saw you like that. Not that you ain't the prettiest gal in town, but--" He realized he was only getting in deeper. "Admire your spunk. Thought you should know that."

"Spunk? Try stupidity."

"You ain't stupid, Sparkle. You're one of the smartest people I ever met. You can do somethin' even college professors and politicians or educated folks can't. They can't see the future."

She snorted. "Right now I'd say my own future is sketchy, at best. I'm not going back to Topeka, that's for sure."

"What's wrong with Topeka?"

"I used to work in a saloon there. A madam ran it. She wanted a special friendship. I didn't. I like men."

"You ain't got to move on, Sparkle. Don't want you leavin' on my account."

"Then how about you leaving on mine? You said everything this morning. Eloquently. I'm not going to tell you anything about this Mr. Stan Brockman, so there's no--"

"Dan," he corrected softly. "Dan Hoffman."

"Whatever," she snapped, gesturing wildly. "I'm not going to help you hunt people down like wolves, so you can either shoot them or be shot by them. I'm not paying for another stupid bundle of red trash or listening to more of Benton Frazer's insults. And I'm not going to wear this stupid wedding ring, or pretend I give a damn about some stupid gunslinger--" She'd been trying to jerk the ring off her finger, but it didn't want to budge.

She abruptly burst into tears. Rafe thought by rights she should have been crying before now, out in the hall. Having some maniac rip her dress, then threaten to either shoot or rape her.

That maniac wasn't feeling so bold and snarly any more. His stinging pride had quite smarting, until he was actually feeling pretty damned penitent. He also couldn't think of what to say. He'd give five hundred dollars for a line of flowery gibberish, but none came. He settled on a mild observation. "You sure do say 'stupid' a lot when you're riled."

"Oh, Hell's bells."

A sudden thought dawned, something that might appease her. "Darlin', you got ladies countin' on you to tell their fortunes, friends who care about you here. Even Frazer. He

likes you, or he never would've let you stay on. The second my sorry ass disappeared down the street, he'd have tossed you back out again if he didn't like you. It's damned near impossible for a man not to like you."

"You don't. You said we aren't friends," she sniffed. "You said some pretty horrible things to me this morning."

"I'm a horrible person. Just ask anybody. Stands to reason I'd say horrible things, don't it?"

Sparkle gave him a look of reproach. "You're funning me, Rafe Conley."

"Only a little." His eyes held hers. "I do like you. Call you 'darlin', don't I? Don't even call my horse that."

She sighed, unable to suppress a slight smile at his teasing. "The problem is I like you too. And I shouldn't. I don't even want to."

"See, even you think I'm a horrible person." Her fist whacked his wounded upper arm. "Hey, that hurt."

Her eyes were defiant once more. "Then we're even. You hurt my feelings this morning and humiliated me in front of everyone downstairs tonight. Tomorrow every employee in this place will be asking what you did while we played 'outlaw'." She dropped her gaze to the floor.

"Only if you let me stay."

Her gaze came back up. "I should have let Frazer shoot you."

She was damned irresistible when she got going with her tough act. Rafe pulled her onto his lap, wrapping one arm around her waist. "Already been shot once in this town, but if you truly feel I got it comin'..."

"Oh, let me up and stop trying to be funny," she grouched.

A callused hand stroked her hair. "Nope. Hushin' up usually suits me fine, but I want to tell you somethin'...about how I got shot."

"I know how you were shot. By a horsethief brandishing a gun."

He ignored her sarcasm. "I got shot because you weren't around and I needed you."

"What?"

"I needed...this. I needed to talk to you, spend some time with you. I hadn't seen you in so long. I knew I could sleep here in your bed, everybody reckonin' you're my wife. But the other gals looked at me sort of funny, like meat on the hoof." He stopped and swallowed. "I was foolin' downstairs before, Sparkle. I was feelin' ornery. Red-haired gal didn't mean nothin' to me."

"What does that have to do with the shooting?"

"I visited one of the other saloons and...I went upstairs with a gal."

"How nice." She struggled to get off his lap. "I really need to finish packing my things. "

"Will you just shut pan a minute and let me finish?" He dropped his voice. Damn, it was hard getting this part out. "She was fine till my shirt came off. I promised the scar wouldn't rub off on her. She said problem was I'd be rubbin' it all over her." He closed his eyes. "Looked at me like I was some monstrosity. So I left there...and went lookin' for someone to bring in." He opened his eyes again. "Nobody dares to look at me like I'm a freak when I got my peacemaker out."

"Oh Rafe." Sparkle reached for his hand and entwined their fingers.

"Damned fool Nebraskan out to get his head blown off, but a big man, all the same. Not some plug ugly a woman won't let near her."

Sparkle had been ready to leave town that very night. She'd decided to let him speak his peace, then ask him to see her to the depot. Return the wedding band, say her farewells to Ruby Ann and Delia, set off to make a fresh start in yet another cow town. She'd never expected this story, or the tenderness it inspired. She slid her free arm up around his neck and spoke gently. "You don't need to prove you're a man. Deep down, you know you don't have to prove anything, don't you?"

He released her fingers. "Knowin' it and livin' it are two different things."

She said nothing for a long moment, then rested her hand on the front of his shirt, silently willing the scar and everything beneath it to heal.

Rafe instantly both stiffened and relaxed. His muscles went rigid beneath her fingertips, yet he closed his eyes and let a small sigh escape his lips. Sparkle had never seen anyone react in quite that way. Strange. He seemed to both welcome and deplore her intimate gesture. "I'm sorry." She drew her palm away. "Does that distress you?"

Rafe's eyes were still closed. He groped for her hand and put it back against his chest. "Naw, it's just that for a long time now, I thought no gal would ever want to touch me like that. Especially not one who knows." He hadn't opened his eyes. "You are touchin' me right over it, ain't you? Can't always be sure about what I feel there."

"Yes, I am. Can you feel this?" She turned her face and leaned to press her lips to his. They'd kissed several times, but he'd always initiated contact. This time she kissed him, and his response was immediate. Both arms wrapped around her waist and he pulled her back with him onto the mattress. He groaned as his mouth and tongue took total possession of hers.

His hand slid along her ribcage to cup one breast. The nipple puckered under his rough palm. Sparkle had nothing beneath the thin cotton robe. If he undid the buttons, he could have her naked in half a second.

And suddenly she wanted that. She was dying to feel his hands on her bare skin. Hadn't

she wanted it, longed for it, even back in the hall earlier? Hadn't that been the true reason she hadn't covered herself when he'd torn her dress? Hadn't some wicked part of her yearned for his hands to reach out and claim her?

Admit it, Sparkle. You want him. You've always wanted him, in the most unladylike way possible..

She tore her lips from his and stared into his eyes, which were open now and burning into hers. "Would...would you lock the door and take your gun off?"

She didn't have to ask twice. She blew out the lamp and they silently undressed. Sparkle slipped beneath the covers first and waited, her breath catching as Rafe stripped off his jeans and she felt the mattress dip.

His voice was husky with emotion when he spoke in the darkness. "Free mare ain't the same horse once she's saddle broke, darlin'. You're offerin' somethin' only one man can ever take from you. If I take it, nobody can ever give it back. You understand that?"

"Yes."

"Most times the gal wants it to mean somethin'. Reckon this time I want it to mean somethin'. It will to me."

Sparkle swallowed, thrilled yet intimidated by what he'd revealed. "It's my first time, but I understand."

"Do you?" A rough palm reached to caress her cheek. "Ain't never had a steady gal. You're already the closest to that, with folks thinkin' we're married. Things won't ever be the same afterward. Don't be tellin' yourself this will quench my thirst, cause there's a good chance I'll only want you more."

"Is that bad?"

"It might be. Maybe you should think on it. You're a damned pretty gal. There's plenty of men."

"Did you really miss me? Being close together and talking?" He didn't answer, but reached to pull her into his arms. She felt the answer. Even half drugged and in pain, he'd wanted to hold her. Even half angry and unsure what to do next, she wanted to be there in his embrace. Her doubts began to dissolve, the feeling this next step had been inevitable to solidify.

"I think we're already friends...You lied before when you said we weren't. I need my friend tonight, Rafe. You."

He took a deep breath. "Where'd you hide the sheepgut that gal from across the way gave you?"

She hesitated, realizing she'd completely forgotten about this bizarre part of the ritual.

"In my top drawer. But I don't...I mean..."



"What's the matter? You change your mind? If you ain't ready--"

"No, it's...you must! How silly of me," she gushed in relief. "You know what to do with it."

He snorted a soft wheezing laugh and got up to rifle through her drawer. "Yep, I know what to do with it. It's a man thing, won't bother you. I just can't find the damned thing. Wait, here it is."

He was back in the bed a moment later, lean hips pressed to her lower body boldly as he gathered her against him and kissed her deeply. It was incredible, this new sensation. Skin rubbing against bare skin. Rafe's tongue stroking hers, his hands moving over her, awakening her nerves, leaving her tingling and wanting more.

She gasped as his lips left hers and moved down to tease one of her nipples. "Rafe."

His answer came in a reassuring whisper. "Any gal who ain't afraid of my gun pressed against her shouldn't be afraid of my lips, either. I won't hurt you, darlin'. You'll like it. Relax and give me a minute to show you."

His tongue swirled over the bud. Sparkle clenched her thighs together and gripped his shoulders with both hands, relaxing her taut fingers as his mouth melted any last resistance. The feel of lips on her breast was foreign, but exciting. Rafe had been right. She liked the feel of his tongue sliding so wet and hot over her flesh.

She stretched her arms out at her sides and inhaled, lifting her ribcage. "You're right. This is...wonderful. Don't ever let me forget how this part feels."

"Darlin', all the parts feel damn good. But don't worry," he chuckled, "I'm real partial to this myself. You'll have to fight to keep me away from your little beauties."

She tried to sit up. "Oh. They're small, though. The other girls are all so buxom. Mine are--"

"Perfect." He drew first almost an entire globe, then just the stiffened crest between his lips. He latched onto the nipple, tugging slightly as his tongue teased the nub. It stiffened and Sparkle caught her bottom lip between her teeth. "Sensitive and perfect. Don't hold your reactions inside, Sparkle. Show me. Tell me when you like somethin'. There's so much to like."

He kissed and caressed every part of her. He was patient, teaching her delights she hadn't guessed were possible. Then he rolled onto his side and turned her to face away from him. "The way we were sleepin' last night, like two spoons. Lie just like that. Be easier on you this way."

Sparkle remembered only too vividly the feel of his hardness against her bottom. It was there again, but this time the tip of his arousal probed and separated her flesh. Now she knew exactly what Rafe had secretly imagined as he lay beside her the night before. He'd imagined making love to her this way. Imagined this.

The thought made her tremble.

His breath was warm on her shoulder. Coaxing her softly, he began to tease her nipples once more with both hands. She moaned openly and arched her back, unable to stop herself from wantonly offering her backside. Rafe bent one knee and forced his muscular thigh between hers. Cocking his hips, he sent his erect manhood up to stroke her lower region, making her tissues swell and stretch. Her body wanted to close around him, she knew it instinctively, yet the thought frightened her. She knew the first time brought pain....

He teased and toyed with her nipples, commanding her to wrap her leg up over his. His lips branded fiery kisses on her shoulder and neck. She heard the insistent low growling of a mountain lion and discovered the sound came from her own throat. Her hands rose to grip his as they clasped and massaged her breasts, but he pulled free. She felt his hands move down to her hipbones.

"Ease back against me now." He held her pelvis and guided her, pulling back and down as he thrust forward and up. She sobbed as something tore and he abruptly filled her, stretching her, worsening the ache.

"Rafe," she hissed his name in something close to terror.

"It's all right, darlin'. Stay still, I'll help ease it." He didn't move his hips, but used his fingers--God, but they were talented fingers!--to renew her desire. The pain of his bold intrusion dissolved, with lusty need taking its place.

Need for what, she couldn't have said. She only knew she wanted something desperately and only he could give it. "Rafe, I feel so peculiar. Bunched up. It doesn't hurt now, but I want to tear my own skin off. Am I crazy? Is it supposed to be like this?"

"Just hang on, sweetheart." He began to move then. Easily at first, sliding smoothly in and out until Sparkle picked up the rhythm and began to move, too. His languid strokes brought heightened arousal rippling through her body from its very core. Every inch of her tingled. And there, where Rafe was rubbing so sweetly, so hotly...Sparkle gasped as unexpected spirals of pulsations burst from the center of her body.

Rafe pivoted slightly and kissed her deeply. He waited until her climax subsided, then cajoled her onto her back. "You still with me, darlin'? Hurt gone?" He was lying fully on top of her. His arousal hadn't abated, she discovered as his pelvis rocked against hers. He withdrew completely, then filled her again. "Sparkle?"

"The pain's gone. I feel like...kissing you in the dark alone here in my bed all night now," she teased, recalling how she'd forbidden it the first night he spent with her. Her arms slid around his neck and she kissed him, feeling braver, more sure of what was happening now.

Rafe had never tasted a sweeter woman. Hadn't felt this hot and randy since his teens. His strokes were harder and deeper now. She didn't resist, but moaned and clung to him,

arching upward. He'd waited so long, wanted her so long, but she was worth it. Better than his torrid dreams back at the ranch in his bunk. Hotter than he'd dared to imagine.

She slid her hands over his lean flanks and he cursed. He'd lose control soon. He wanted to pleasure her, ensure she wouldn't fear a man's needs. He'd given her a climax, but held his own back. He wasn't sure he could rein in his passions much longer. She was ready for him, meeting his thrusts, clutching at his ass with both hands.

"Go on and take me, " he panted. "All of me...Take me, Sparkle. Deeper. Put your legs around my waist." Her legs encircled him. She clasped him to her, and Rafe had never felt so weak and mortal--or been so glad of it. Her bed would be a fine place to die. From ecstasy.

"Tarnation, but you're an incredible place for a man to lose himself, LaFleur," The first pulsations of his orgasm took him plummeting over the brink of sanity. He gulped for air, shuddering, and gave a final deep thrust.

Sparkle's fingers tensed on his buttocks and she cried out beneath him. He moved to lave a taut nipple, massaging her body with his hands until they both stopped moving.

His voice was rough to his own ears. "You let me put my brand on you. That makes you my woman now. Another fella lays one hand on this beautiful little body of yours, I'll aim for his heart. Catch you pantin' and moanin' like that under anybody else, I'll aim straight for yours."

"You're crazy."

"Yeah, about you. But you're too damned fine to share." He patted her hip and rose from the bed. "Be right back." He unlocked the door and slipped into the hall.

He returned moments later and pulled her back against his side. "You sorry, darlin'?" His hand absently stroked her upper arm and shoulder.

Sparkle heard an edge in his question. He was worried. "No, I'm happy." She rolled slightly and pressed a soft kiss to his bare chest. "Did you feel that?"

"Yeah." There was a pause. "Thanks. Sparkle?"

"Hmm?"

"Means a lot I was your first. Sorry for hurtin' you."

"This morning or just now?"

"Ever." His fingers moved to trace over a nipple. "And those are beautiful, just like the rest of you. Beautiful and mine."

## Chapter 8

Sparkle came up from the depths of slumber with a peculiar dull achiness between her thighs. Then she remembered why, and opened her eyes to find Rafe still asleep beside her. She felt an instant rush of tenderness as she stared at his face in repose. This violent man had taught her about loving. She'd been overwhelmed by the pleasure she experienced at his hands. Her recall of the night before was intensely sensual. She smiled, despite the vague discomfort, and stroked Rafe's bare shoulder with her fingertips. He'd been right about all of it, even consummation being no cure for the desire. She still wanted him.

"Rafe?" He was instantly awake, as might be expected of a man in his profession.

His features softened. "Oh. Mornin'. Sleep all right?"

Her cheeks flushed. He'd never asked that particular question before, and she knew why he asked it now. She nodded, inexplicably shy. After all they'd done and the some of the things they'd said last night, she should no modesty left.

"Wasn't too rough with you, was I? Tried to go easy, but I hurt you, anyhow. Ain't had much experience breakin' gals in. I usually--"

She silenced him with her index finger over his lips. "Isn't this like when someone falls off a horse or something? I've heard the best answer is to get back on and try riding again."

"That why you woke me?" She gave a helpless shrug. Rafe's rumbling chuckle echoed off the walls as he gave one buttock a light squeeze. "Guess I did well enough, if you're already wakin' me for more. Thing is, darlin', I tossed that bit of sheepgut while I was usin' the facilities down the hall last night. We need to get you a pisser."

"A...what are you talking about?"

"A thing gals use. Your friend across the hall would know." He began to dress. "I'll go to the drugstore. Reckon you'd feel funny goin', moreso since that Joe Brooks fella works there. Like I said, you got a real habit of throwin' yourself at me. But I'm gettin' used to it." He closed the last button on his fly and winked at her.

"Oh, you could, eh? Well, I'll admit I did like last night. And I did wake you up, so I guess that makes me a strumpet."

Rafe snorted and drew on his weathered boots. "Likin' what we did doesn't make you a strumpet. Takin' money for it would."

Sparkle sat up. "But liking it must mean something."

He reached over and tweaked the coral nipple peeping out from the covers. "Means you got a passionate nature, which is fine. Unless you take to sharin' it with every fella who rides through. But we both know you ain't about to do that. Cause you do recall what I said about my Colt," he emphasized, buckling his gunbelt. "And I ain't strollin' to the

pharmacy to stretch my legs. I'll show you more to like later on."

Sparkle threw the covers aside and drew on her robe. "Thank you for..." She colored. "For trying to be gentle and for...understanding. I think I'll go take a bath."

A rapping sounded at the door. Sparkle peered out to find Ruby Ann standing in the hallway looking tense. "Some men are here asking for Rafe. One's that tall Indian. Frazer's steamed again."

Rafe gave Sparkle a rueful glance. "Sorry, darlin', wasn't expectin' Sam and his buddy to come for me just yet. Got some matters to discuss. I'll have that item sent over from the drug store and catch up with you this evenin'."

"Rafe, is there some kind of trouble?"

He crossed back to embrace her. "I like hearin' that worry in your voice. Just somethin' I need to look into. Dammit, I'm tempted to rip this off you and have another go. Heard tell the best thing for gettin' thrown from a horse..." He grinned. The gleam in his eyes was soft, not lecherous. "You ain't the only one who liked it." His hands roamed over her curves, proving how easily he could unsettle her.

"I'm not?"

He tilted her chin up to search her eyes. "Last night was about the best night of my whole life. Except tonight. It won't hurt at all next time. I'm buyin' you a pisser, and when I get back here..." He kissed the side of her neck and whispered into her ear.

"Good grief! Rafe Conley." Sparkle knew she didn't truly sound offended, and that he'd seen the glint of suppressed laughter in her eyes.

"You keep sayin' my name like that, I'm liable to put off business and forget you ain't ready for babies yet, Miz Conley." He tipped his hat and went out, once again the casual rover with the lazy grin.

Sparkle closed the door after him and sank back onto the bed, uncertain her legs would carry take down the hall to the bathroom. It was at least twelve feet away. Too far for a woman whose heart was pounding so. Too far when the spot between her legs still ached and the legs themselves were limp as cooked macaroni. But she was certain her legs would find the strength eventually. She had no intention of being anything less than fresh and nicely perfumed when Rafe came back.

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Joe Brooks was straightening bottles of aromatic bitters and rheumatism balms on a shelf behind the counter. Boots thumped into the drugstore. He turned to find a dream come true. Rafe Conley had entered the store with two strangers. Three horses were hitched outside.

"If it isn't my friend Conley," Brooks acclaimed cheerily. "Heard you put some ruffians to rout the other day and got injured. Trust it wasn't serious. You need some dressings or

liniment?"

"Thanks, but it's just a scratch. I came for--" Rafe tossed the others a pointed look and they stepped back out onto the porch. Rafe's voice dropped a notch. "It's for my wife. She's havin' some...you know...troubles."

"Of a feminine nature?"

Rafe nodded and handed Brooks a folded ten-dollar bill. "Can you send a pisser over to the Scarlet Lady? I'd take it to her myself, but I'm headed out on business."

"Certainly. We carry a fine quality pessary from the East. Your change."

"Keep it."

A boy of about twelve skidded in the rear entrance, smoothing his shirt collar. "I'm back, Mr. Brooks" he squeaked.

"Better yet, give him the change for makin' the delivery," Rafe amended. Brooks handed a small package to the boy as Rafe and his associates mounted up. Brooks watched them ride off, smiling to himself.

Sparkle Conley wasn't going to need a pessary for a tryst with her husband. Not tonight, nor ever again.

Rafe Conley was, after all, in such a hazardous profession. Anything could happen in the course of a day's business to a fellow like that. To either of them, Joe supposed wickedly, when one considered Sparkle's equally dubious occupation.

Joe had telegraphed a certain man two days before, advising Conley was holed up with his bride here in Wichita. The wire had set everything in motion. Lovely Sparkle was on the verge of being widowed. So young, too. Fortunately, Brooks knew of several excellent preparations for melancholia--all much more effective when administered with a dose of personal sympathy from a congenial friend. A friend about to come into a nice bonus for having sprung the trap.

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The item from the pharmacy arrived with printed instructions that referred to all manner of strange afflictions and maladies, none of which applied to Sparkle. Mortified, but sensing no alternative, she was forced to consult Ruby Ann about what to do with the pessary. Getting it positioned was a distasteful chore, and it brought Sparkle face to face with what she'd done.

She'd ventured into a whole new arena of sensuality, given Rafe her virginity. She not only felt no lingering regret, but acknowledged that she was fully prepared to experience lovemaking with Rafe again. Even though it meant betraying Jace.

It wasn't truly a betrayal, was it? After all, it wasn't as though Jace had spoken of abiding love for her. He'd never asked her to be faithful. He didn't understand that they were

meant to be together. And she'd already waited, shrouded in loneliness, for years. What if Jace never regained his memory?

He would, though. The cards predicted it. She had to believe one day they'd be together. She'd given her heart to Jace when they were children. She felt the same rush of tender emotion each time she visited and looked into his trusting blue eyes. She had a deep, abiding love for Jace. She didn't love Rafe. He was only...Just what the hell is he, Sparkle?

A temporary diversion. Someone you're close to in a different way. A unique friend, but not a man you could entrust with your heart or your dreams.

It was late, time to stop spinning cobwebs in her attic and get downstairs for the start of her shift. She fussed one last time with the fit of her dress and checked her lip rouge. Not that she wanted to look especially nice tonight for any particular reason. Not that she hoped Rafe's eyes would light up when he came through those batwing doors...Not much.

She was dumbfounded when Michael Malloy appeared as soon as she'd reached the main gaming parlor. Face tight, he crossed to her table with jerky strides. Thinking he'd come to deliver another of his unwanted diatribes about her "witchery," she opened her mouth to shout for Frazer, but snapped it shut at Malloy's startling words.

"My wife's fearsomely distraught, Miz Conley. I was hoping you could come talk some sense to her."

"Elmira? What's the matter?"

"She took sick a few days back. Doc says it's nothing serious, but she's got it in her head she's dying. Nothing I say can shake her feeling of doom. I don't know what more I can do."

"Dying? Oh Lord, she can't really believe that."

"But she does. That's why I thought if you'd bring your cards and come see her--I would have fetched her over here, but she won't leave her bed. And this isn't a fit place for a man to bring a decent woman." The last words came out in a hush.

Sparkle sighed and let the insulting comment go, mentally calculating how long she'd be working tonight. Whenever Rafe arrived, he'd expect her to stop telling fortunes and go upstairs. And she'd want to go, even if the saloon was still bustling. Frazer could go sit on a tack. It was still late afternoon, too early for the evening patrons. If she visited Elmira and came right back, maybe she'd only have to endure a brief skirmish with Frazer when she put her tarot deck away later. Or let Rafe handle him....

"I'll get my shawl and cards and be right with you."

She dashed back upstairs to get her oversized flowered shawl. It covered most of her costume. She knotted it around her shoulders and put her spare tarot deck in her reticule,

then hurried back down.

"Frazer, I have to go out for a little while."

"For Christ's sake, Sparkle. It's past four. I need you here to get the men soaking up the Panther Piss. What's the problem now? Husband shot up again?" The harangue started before she could get a word in. "Always some damned problem! I thought he'd be good for business, but I swear, having you working for me and married to that gun is--"

"He wasn't shot again. This isn't about Rafe. He'll be back later. I'm going to see a sick friend. I'll be back by five, I promise."

Frazer watched her go and blued the air with curses. He scowled at a faro dealer who'd overheard. "Bobby, let that be a lesson to you. Should have left her on her ass in the street, even if I had to lick that gunfighter's boots. She's been a royal pain since I bought this place, and so's he. Those two deserve each other."

That prophetic statement was etched in Benton Frazer's mind two hours later, when Sparkle hadn't returned and a ransom note mysteriously appeared on the bar. After swearing there'd be no more trouble at the Scarlet Lady, Frazer had to hand a note over to the local law advising Sparkle had been kidnapped. He'd thought it rather unusual, that fella coming in to see Sparkle Conley. Gent wasn't a regular customer. But, Frazer hadn't been concerned enough to send one of the dealers to follow them. Didn't even find out which way she'd headed. After promising that lethal husband of hers he'd keep an eye on her.

He shuddered, reflecting on the night Conley had pulled his gun, with Sparkle claiming it was all some weird game. Frazer would bet his establishment on a single roll of the dice that gunslinger didn't play games. His kind was dead serious about what went on between the sheets.

Now his wife was missing! Well, Benton Frazer wasn't answering for it, no sirree. He had a saloon to run. He wasn't Sparkle Conley's private nursemaid. And as her employer, he could only take so much. He left the ransom note with Deputy Thompson, marched back into the saloon, and pulled the tarot deck from Sparkle's table. He was disgusted with Sparkle, her gunslinger old man, cow towns, the saloon business, and life in general.

It made Frazer feel one hundred percent better to dump those weird cards of hers into a brass spittoon and set fire to them.



## Chapter 9

Sparkle was confused as Elmira's husband led her to an unfamiliar part of town. She'd questioned him when they headed west instead of east. He'd mumbled something about new quarters. She barely heard his words before he ducked down a narrow alleyway. "So long, witch."

Then a new voice spoke. "Rafe Conley's little bride. This is indeed an honor. Tobias Bannister." Sparkle turned and met the gaze of a well-dressed stranger. Every instinct said he meant her harm, though she had no idea who he was or why he should put her off.

"Mr. Malloy went to get his wife. They're coming right back," she lied, edging against a building with paint peeling away from rotted wood siding.

"Mr. Malloy will be only too glad to have you out of Wichita," the dandy assured her. "He thinks you're in league with Satan. He doesn't trust your influence on his wife and other local ladies. I'm more interested in your influence on your husband. Any time now, your employer will inform Wichita's lawmen you've been abducted. Conley will be told where to meet me if he wants to see you alive again."

"No." Sparkle started to reach down, but the man clamped a handkerchief over her lower face. She kicked and tried to push his powerful hands away. Then she was in a dark void.

She awoke to find her hands tied behind her back and a gag in her mouth. She lay on a cot in a filthy shack. A tattered blanket provided limited warmth. Weak light flickered from a grimy lantern. Beyond the slatted walls, she picked up the voices of several men.

Where was she, and how long had they kept her in this rotten place? Not more than a day or two, she concluded, for she was still clad in the infamous red trash from the Scarlet Lady and her shawl. The garments weren't torn or all that dirty. She didn't feel famished, just thirsty. It couldn't have been long.

Where in God's name was Rafe? He'd been due back the same evening she'd been kidnapped. He must know by now. Sparkle wasn't about to advise her captors they'd made a mistake about her marital status. Belief she was Rafe's wife was the only thing keeping her alive. If these men knew the truth--that she was no more married to Rafe Conley than to Ulysses S. Grant--they'd probably slit her throat and leave her body to rot in this hellhole.

She had one immediate problem. She needed to relieve her bladder, which seemed as good a reason as any to raise a ruckus. She began kicking and screaming behind the gag until someone came to unlock the door. Tobias Bannister appeared. "Mrs. Conley. I'm going to remove this cloth from your mouth. You're in my camp, a good distance from anywhere. Shout your pretty little head off. No one will hear you." He untied the gag. Sparkle spat in his face.

"Here now. That's hardly the way to begin a new acquaintance," the flaxen-haired Bannister chided. He pulled a fine cotton handkerchief to wipe the spittle from his cheek. He smelled of talcum and pomade. Too much pomade.

"We aren't going to become friends. I need to relieve myself."

"Don't be too anxious to make us enemies, dearie. That man of yours isn't going to be around much longer. A charming young widow needs protection from ruffians and scalawags." He cut the ropes on her wrists.

She rubbed the blood back into her hands. "As the saying goes, it takes one to know one."

"Madam, I may be considered a scalawag by some, but my manners are impeccable. I'd hardly be ranked amongst common ruffians."

She snorted in derision. "You chloroformed a woman and abducted her. No ruffian would do a thing like that, would he? Do you plan to stand around boasting about your manners while I disgrace myself all over your shoes, or take me somewhere to answer nature's call? My manners aren't like yours. I just might do it."

"I begin to comprehend what that ejaculating pistol you married sees in you. Quite the little hellcat." He pulled her roughly to her feet. She tried to ignore the vicious glint in his hazel eyes and the cloying smell of his pomade, but feared wetting them wouldn't be the worst she might do to his shoes. He dragged her outside, where two Mexicans sat on either side of a small fire. Bannister barked at one of them. "Ignacio, take the lady to the outhouse."

A slight man rose and led Sparkle a few yards into the darkness. He stood outside as she stepped into the small wooden structure. Sparkle thought she might pass out from the stench. At least there were no flies at night. She hated to consider what the outhouse would be like in the afternoon. She also hated to think the men were listening and waiting for her to urinate. Their laughter seconds later confirmed her suspicions. When Rafe arrived, she'd be only too happy to watch them pay for their humor at her expense.

She knew now there were at least four men involved. The overstuffed dandy who seemed to be the leader, the two Mexicans, and some other Anglo she'd heard Bannister talking to earlier. There had been something about that fellow's voice. She couldn't place it, but she knew it. Rafe had been right--she'd been too trusting.

The door creaked open. "Señora?"

She stepped past Ignacio and focused her fulminating glare on Bannister. "So, what did Rafe do to make such a lasting impression? Have your brother tossed in jail? Point out to the world your father never married your mother?"

"Ah, a lady with a dry wit." Her captor chuckled without mirth. "He assisted vigilantes in hanging my brother. I was only tried and convicted--lucky me!--of complicity in several robberies. I spent over three years in prison, planning a just reward for Conley

when I got out."

These damn men and their "justice" again.

Sparkle looked askance at his expensive suit and bowler hat. "Did the warden send you to a haberdasher after your release, or did you rob one on your way to kidnap me? It's a gross lack of manners to arrive at a kidnapping in a worn suit."

"Speaking of garments..." He raked his eyes over her saloon dress. "I see your taste runs to European originals."

"Sorry, this is only a saloon costume. The owner makes all the girls at the Scarlet Lady wear them. Signature color."

It was probably one of the most ridiculous debates she'd ever been in--sniping with a convicted criminal over fashion--but it was killing time. Time was her only ally. Sooner or later one of these buffoons would make a mistake or Rafe would show up. Wouldn't he?

"Conley with a scarlet doxy. Tell me, do you clean his pistol for him?"

"Yes, and it's a Colt with a very long barrel." She glanced at his crotch before letting her eyes rest on the shoulder holster beneath his coat. "Quite long, compared to your derringer." She offered a pretty smile. Her host seemed uncertain as to her meaning. Good. Let him wonder if she feared him. "Is there anything besides snake venom around here to drink?"

She was tossed back inside her cell with a plate of bad food and a cup of well water. Her reticule was missing. She patted her right thigh and felt along the garter. They'd taken her bag, but she still wore her knife. The dandy hadn't searched her. His misfortune. He couldn't assume a woman was unarmed simply because she was a woman--not in a cattle town, certainly not when she worked in a house of ill-fame.

Mr. Wonderful was talking again, she realized. Not Spanish, but his flowery English. The other Anglo must have come back. Sparkle closed her eyes and listened closely. Definitely someone she knew from Wichita. Someone who'd been in on this along with Michael Malloy. That vacuous someone had made a mistake, too, for he didn't know how relentless Rafe was when he vowed to mete out justice. These men would all be very, very sorry.

That slender reassurance allowed her to fall into a light sleep.

At the first crack of thin gray light, she began shouting for her handbag. The dandy appeared in his trousers and suspenders and said she couldn't have it.

"There's nothing of any value inside," Sparkle insisted. "At least bring me the deck of tarot cards. I could read them to pass the time."

"Ah, yes. I was told you're a gypsy. I already know what's in my future. I'm going to murder Conley. There," he laughed caustically. "Now you owe me two dollars."

So he knew enough about her to know what she charged for readings, did he? What a revolting thought. "No, I owe you a kick in the crotch."

"My, aren't we the picture of femininity?"

Just then a rider approached amid a swirl of dust. Sparkle saw why she'd recognized the voice. "Joe Brooks, you yellow-bellied skunk!" Sparkle shouted as he alit. "Coming around the Scarlet Lady, pretending you liked Ruby Ann, when all along you just wanted to get at Rafe."

"No, all along I wanted to get at you. I thought that was understood. With your husband deceased, you'll be available. After a decent period of mourning, say a month or so." He snickered before turning to Bannister. "I want my three hundred. The men I saw with Conley when he left town are heading this way."

"You guaranteed she'd bring Conley. I don't deal with lackeys. You get paid when I see Rafe Conley stone cold dead."

Sparkle started to laugh, causing both men to stare at her. If it had been anyone but Joe Brooks, she could have kept quiet, but the irony of that particular idiot being the one involved in this scheme was just too hilarious.

She turned to Tobias Bannister. "You listened to this swaggering mule? He doesn't know what he's talking about. I'm not married to Rafe. I only said I was to get rid of this imbecile. Rafe played along and bought this ring to keep Brooks from making a continual ass of himself." She flashed Brooks a look of pure triumph. "Not that it helped."

"She isn't married to him?" The question was bellowed at Brooks.

"Jesus, Bannister! Her boss and everybody in town thought they were married. Conley said she was his wife just that same morning when he came into the pharmacy."

"A mistress," Bannister spat. "Maybe he'll come, maybe not. I wouldn't walk two blocks to go after that mistress of mine. I'll find out what these riders want. Take her to the shack and keep her quiet."

As Brooks shoved her through the doorway, Sparkle spun and drew her blade, jabbing it against his side. "Come in with me, Joe," she purred. "You're so anxious to spend time together. Shut the door. You make a sound, you'll find yourself showing everyone what you ate yesterday and just how much liquor's in your liver." Sparkle hoped the false bravado hid her fear. If his friends had come, Rafe must be nearby too.

She and Joe stood locked together, listening as a new voice addressed the leader outside. "Heard you're looking for Conley."

"I have something that belongs to him. He'll get her back when he comes to face me."

"He can't come. Had to testify in court."

"Inform him I'll be keeping his little lady friend until he personally rides out here. I'm sure we'll find many interesting ways to pass the time. She's very pretty. Who the hell are you, anyway?"

"Sam Parker, friend to Conley and his woman. This is my partner, Driscoll."

"What the hell's that?" Bannister demanded. Sparkle caught the nervous edge in his voice.

She cracked the door a quarter inch and gave Brooks another warning jab. "Don't get brave now, Joe. You've always been craven. Stay that way and keep breathing."

"A horse," Parker shrugged in answer to Bannister's question as a sorrel headed into the camp. Sparkle recognized the animal instantly and began to smile. Rafe had come for her.

"I know it's a horse," Bannister snapped. "Whose is it? It's saddled." Parker mumbled something. Bannister held his gun on Driscoll. "What's that pinned to his blanket? You and Conley think you can put one over on me?"

Sam calmly went up to the stallion and pulled the scrap of paper from the saddle blanket. "Give me that!" Bannister snatched the paper from Parker's fingers and read it aloud. "Johnnycakes. Johnnycakes? What the hell's th--"

Sam Parker nimbly jumped out of the way as Snatch snorted and reared, hooves flailing. Bannister shouted and went down, firing wildly. Sparkle tried to hold Brooks, but he broke free, flung the door of the shack open, and streaked past the other men. He caught the loose reins of Driscoll's horse. Before he could swing up into the saddle, a bullwhip cracked the reins from his hand.

"Wouldn't push your luck, Brooks," came a familiar drawl.

Sparkle emerged to witness a bizarre spectacle. Rafe had his peacemaker pointed at Brooks, who was playing clay statue. The two Mexicans were on their knees, begging and sobbing in broken Spanish. Parker and Driscoll stood over them with pistols cocked. Bannister lay in the dirt on his back. Snatch stood over him, licking and nibbling at the crotch of his fancy trousers. Sparkle stepped closer and glimpsed yellowish clumps of cornmeal on the suit fabric. Even as she watched, the fabric turned a shade darker. The well-mannered outlaw had just wet himself.

"What's your horse doing?" Sparkle asked Rafe as he pulled her against his left hip. Her arms wrapped around his waist as she tried to stop herself from shaking. "Besides scaring the hell out of Bannister?"

"Eatin' his favorite food. Told you he'll rear and kick to get some. Always give him a few after he takes somebody down. Snatch won't work unless he gets his rewards, same as me."

"I thought you were teasing about him working with you." Sparkle was suddenly a little

lightheaded.

Rafe's arm tightened around her. He glanced down at the small knife in her fist.

"Where'd you get the sticker?"

"It's mine. I always wear it. They forgot to search me."

Rafe's eyes widened. "But I did--that night in the hallway."

As if either of them would ever forget the search in the Scarlet Lady's monkey hall! Sparkle blushed at the reminder. Rafe's eyes roamed over her. "You have it on you then, too?" She nodded. His face went ruddy too, but she suspected his color wasn't due to embarrassment. "Later you'll show me where." She met his intense gaze and shivered. His voice softened. "You all right, darlin'?"

"I'm in one piece," she answered with a calm she didn't feel. Another slight hug, then she pulled back a bit, straightening her shawl. "Where the hell am I?"

"About thirty miles outside of Dodge."

"Dodge?" she choked, reeling. "As in Dodge City?"

"Shit howdy, Dodge City."

"But I can't be."

"Okay, then you ain't," he shrugged. "Pick a town you like and be thirty miles outside of there."

He wrapped his whip back into a neat coil. Snatch ambled over and patiently allowed his master to tie it on the pommel. "Last thing I want to do with you right now is argue." Rafe gave her another lingering appraisal, his eyes stripping away her garments and leaving hot licking little flames wherever they touched and caressed. "The very last thing."

Bannister and the others must have kept her drugged for days to take her this far. She'd lost her bag, been frightened half to death, humiliated...all because of Rafe Conley. Who was now being smooth and reasonable and too darned virile to suit her.

She wanted to kill him.

Rafe glanced at his partners. "Samson, you two take Bannister to the law. Got to figure out what I owe my pal Brooks here."

Joe found his voice, but it had gone decidedly squeaky. "Holy Jesus, Conley! I, I--It was an accident. I didn't know he planned to harm her, or drag her here to West Kansas. I thought he'd only pretend, to flush you into coming after him. Honestly, I never thought it would come to this."

Sparkle liked the way the weasel's Adam's apple bobbed as he lied. Only a dolt would believe the gum he spewed, and Rafe was surely no dolt. He glanced at her. "What was his part in it?"

"It seems he's the one who suggested using me. Dear Joe thought his cohort would eliminate you, leaving me widowed. Bannister wasn't happy when I told him we aren't married. He wasn't sure you'd come."

Brooks tried again. "Conley, I swear I'll make it all up to you! Her, too. If you'll give me another chance, I--"

Rafe stood near Brooks, but still gazed at Sparkle. "Ain't got all day to listen to bullshit." His fist shot out and knocked Brooks cold. Then he turned to Parker and Driscoll. "He goes along with you, accessory to kidnappin'. Shouldn't be any problems. Art Thompson wired every lawman in six states to be on the lookout for Bannister and his men. Any questions, tell Earp I'll be at my usual spot. But he doesn't need to rush to come lookin' for me."

Rafe's dark gaze returned to Sparkle. "Me and my woman got us some catchin' up to do."

She watched the men load up and ride off. The Mexicans began pleading with Rafe in rapid Spanish. He firmly shook his head and mounted Snatch, pulling Sparkle onto his lap. He set his spurs to the sorrel's flanks.

"I'm not going to Dodge City," she asserted stubbornly. "It's the worst trailhead in this whole state. Take me back to Wichita. I lost my reticule, and Frazer's surely cleaned out my room by now, which means my money's gone too. I stink because I haven't had a bath in...I don't even know how long, and none of this ever would have happened if I hadn't met up with you."

"Yes ma'am," he sighed before he bent to kiss her. His lips were too warm and pliable. Sparkle was ashamed to admit how much she enjoyed the kiss. "How much you figure Frazer got?" he asked.

"Around a hundred." At Rafe's low whistle, she tilted her chin up, uncertain whether he was admiring the amount or deriding it.

"Close to a hundred in a couple nights' work? You're damned good at readin' cards and hustlin' drinks." The soft drawl was right beside her ear.

"That better not be Dodge up ahead, Rafe." Since he seemed determined to be so infuriatingly charming, she'd try being unreasonable. If he thought she'd just forget the past few days and go right back to where they'd left off that morning in Wichita...Well, she might, but not so quickly. "I told you, I'm not going there."

"Yeah, I know. That's fine, darlin'. Snatch and I have business in Dodge, but you don't have to come along. I can set you down at the town limits. Sure would miss havin' you with me a hell of a lot, though. And where I'm headed there's a great big bathtub and a clean bed plenty big enough for two."

"Rafe, Frazer's probably stolen me blind and given my room away by now. It's been days. I wasn't supposed to have any more time off until next month. Now I'll have to

wait that much longer to visit my brother, and go home flat broke." She fought a yawn.

"Maybe. Maybe not. Don't look like you got much sleep, darlin'." He adjusted her position so her head rested on his shoulder. "Close your eyes for a spell. It's a ways to the city limits."

She was exhausted. She hadn't noticed until she was wrapped in Rafe's arms, but two days of nerves on edge had a way of wearing down the most stubborn nature, even hers. She wasn't going to let him leave her at the city limits. He'd take her to the depot and put her on a train back to Wichita. He could pay her fare and give her spending money. He owed her that much.

But they'd talk about it later. Her eyelids were too heavy now. She had no strength left to argue. Rafe's arms took the fight right out of her. Made her forget how perturbed she'd been not ten minutes before. Damn, but the man had a strange effect on her. Of course, she thought wickedly, she'd known that back in her bedroom in Wichita.



## Chapter 10

Rafe lowered Sparkle into the arms of a stranger. She opened her eyes at the jostling and discovered they were inside a livery stable, dimly illuminated by a pair of tallow lanterns. Horse sweat and manure assailed her nostrils as Rafe gave precise directions to the ostler on the sorrel's care and feeding. Sparkle jerked free of the stablehand and clutched Rafe's left arm. His right balanced his bedroll, pack and bullwhip on his shoulder.

"Sorry miss," the stranger mumbled when he saw she'd taken offense.

"Missus," Rafe corrected. "She's just anxious to get me up in our hotel room. Ain't been alone with her for nigh on a week. Gets cranky." He gave the man a knowing wink and they both chuckled.

That's it. I'm definitely going to murder him, Sparkle inwardly vowed as Rafe paid three nights' boarding fees in advance.

He walked her past a general store, barber shop, and the huge City Drugs, closed now in the fading twilight. They entered a sprawling saloon called the Bold Adventuress through batwing doors featuring bas relief designs of buxom women. Sparkle stiffened and hesitated, but Rafe caught her elbow in strong fingers and drew her into the gaming hall.

Sparkle had been employed in four saloons during the past several years and visited others. The Scarlet Lady, despite its new owner and tawdry costumes, was actually a nice establishment. The remodeling had improved the atmosphere. Frazer made certain the bar and floors fairly gleamed with fresh wax, the rooms were kept clean. But neither it nor any other saloon she'd visited bore much resemblance to this den of iniquity. The Bold Adventuress, by any standards, was quite simply a glittering palace of amusements.

There wasn't a woman in sight across the entire ground floor. Tables were packed with men of every description. Chandeliers blazed with candles. The air was thick with smoke and curses. The lack of pulchritude was Sparkle's first clue this was no ordinary bawdy house, for paintings of nudes adorned every wall. She knew this meant dalliances were available, at steep prices. Behind the gleaming mahogany and brass bar was a ten-foot mural depicting three naked females in a scandalous pose. Worse than scandalous--truly vile--for there wasn't a man anywhere in the boudoir scene.

She dropped her gaze to the floor as her cheeks flamed.

"What's the matter?" Rafe's voice was low, his eyes searching hers. A corner of the lewd scene leapt into view along with his jawline as she raised her gaze. She gestured toward the mural. Rafe glanced at the scene behind the bar. "Oh. That remind you of the madam in Abilene?"

"Topeka. Why would you bring me to a place like this?"

"Now darlin', the painting don't mean the gals here are any different from the ones at the

Scarlet Lady. Men just like lookin' at that sort of thing. Gals in any situation are--you know. Arousin'. You'll be in a room with me."

Sparkle was frightened yet relieved at the same time. She turned her face into the side of his throat, her words muffled by his rumpled bandanna. "I'm sorry. It's just I left Topeka because it wasn't only the woman herself. She had customers who wanted to pay to watch her do things like that... with me."

Rafe let his gear drop from his shoulder. "Shucks." She found her face cupped in callused hands. "Listen, you're my wife here, same I was your husband in Wichita. Got that? Nobody watchin', nobody around when you're undressed, but me."

His lips sealed the promise. Sparkle clung to him, fighting back tears. It was ridiculous a painting should make her cry when outlaws hadn't.

"You been through a lot, that's all," came Rafe's husky whisper. "But I'll make it up to you."

Her needs and insecurities were just below the surface, nearly overwhelming her, but Rafe was there now. Strong, warm, confident.

Maybe she wouldn't kill him until tomorrow.

"Conley, you sidewinder!" A beefy man with a florid complexion waited for a grin of recognition before clapping a meaty hand on Rafe's shoulder. "Where'd you steal this little dove? Not one of mine, sad to say. Nice get-up, Sweetie." He winked at Sparkle.

"Name's Sparkle, Tolover," Rafe answered. "She's my old lady. Been workin' as a pretty waiter gal in Wichita. Need your special. Want the big copper tub, plenty of hot water, supper tray, and a bottle of your best Kentuck." His grin widened. "No poker tonight." Rafe's hand slid over Sparkle's bustle and pressed her close.

"Reckon you will too," Tolover quipped, chortling at his pun. Sparkle buried her face against Rafe's shirt. "So this is a social visit," Tolover ventured.

Rafe eased from Sparkle's embrace, giving her a look of silent encouragement. You can be brave just a bit longer, darlin'. I know you can. God, now Sparkle could hear his thoughts. This wasn't good.

Rafe turned back to Tolover. "Business. We'll jaw on it later. Special ready?"

The saloonkeeper lifted the first of his chins. "You know it. Help yourself."

"Think there'd be a spare dress lyin' around Sparkle could put on till I can get her over to the store tomorrow?"

"Ask Big Al."

Rafe led Sparkle upstairs into a room and pulled Sparkle tightly into his arms. The door slammed behind them. Sparkle barely heard it. She was lost in a long, hungry kiss. Eventually Rafe released her, and she turned to openly gape at the opulent surroundings.

The bedroom walls were covered with burgundy flocked wallpaper. Candles glowed in brass wall sconces that glittered with cut-glass teardrops around their bases.

Sparkle tested the mattress, gingerly sitting on the edge. She sank into pure luxury.

"Heaven. I didn't know a bed could be this soft." Rafe chuckled at her comment. She turned her gaze toward him and released a startled gasp. Overhead loomed a huge gilt-framed mirror. "Land sakes. You called this Tolover's special? That's putting it mildly. How can we afford even one night here?"

"Did some work for Tolover awhile back. He puts me up free when I pass through this way."

"He lets you stay free whenever you like?"

"Yeah, but usually in one of his ordinary rooms. This here's the panel crib."

Frazer had boarded up the two panel cribs at the Scarlet Lady when he'd taken over. Other than patrons being hustled into buying expensive drinks for themselves and the girls--whose "drinks" were nothing but diluted cold tea--Frazer's patrons got what they paid for at the Scarlet Lady. No more, no less. But she knew many saloons and bordellos had rooms like this one. Strumpets got their customers undressed and otherwise "occupied" while a thief working for the establishment rifled through pants and coat pockets or valises.

The ceiling mirror and pure opulence of this panel crib was so brashly ingenious, Sparkle couldn't help but admire the conceit. Tolover was betting most men couldn't resist the allure of watching themselves and the woman cavorting on that big bed. Intent on the moving naked flesh overhead, they'd pay no heed to the dimmest corner of the bedchamber--which was where the panel was hidden. Sparkle guessed its location before Rafe pointed it out. One corner had a big Victorian chair for a man's clothes and no sconce nearby.

"If he keeps this one rented out, Tolover doesn't need his other rooms filled."

"That's the way of it." Rafe sounded weary. He dropped into the chair and tugged his boots off. He ran his hand along his upper thigh and winced. "Damn, but I'm stiff from the saddle. Nice hot bath's just what I need right now."

Stiff from the saddle, or that mural downstairs and this room? Sparkle wondered. "I hope you enjoy it, but I'd like to borrow some money. I lost my bag, or I wouldn't ask. I'll pay you back as soon as I can, either in person next time I see you in Wichita or I can forward it to your brother's ranch. Which would you prefer?" She looked at him expectantly. "I need to catch a train headed East."

Rafe stood up. His gunbelt and bandanna came off. "That's what you want from me, money and a train ticket?"

I want everything from you, Gunslinger. Everything I shouldn't, and you know it. This can't work. Let me go, Rafe. If I don't get out of this decadent room before anything else

comes off that lean body, I'll never get out that door.

"Yes, yes I--I need to get back." Her words came out faster. "Thank you again for coming to my rescue. Did I thank you before? Well, if I didn't, I meant to." She was rattling on, sounding pathetic, trying not to meet his dark eyes as she commanded her feet to take her to the door. "I still can't believe that idiot Brooks thought I'd want him, whatever happened to you. I should have slit his throat when I had the chance."

Rafe caught her by the shoulders. "Hold on. You sayin' he tried to--" Something ice cold glinted in his usually warm brown eyes. "The only reason any of those fellas are still breathin' is it didn't look like you had a scratch on you. I asked if you were all right. You tell me that bastard Brooks put even a finger on you, I'll see him decoratin' a cottonwood."

She shook her head in dismay. "Rafe Conley's justice again. No, they didn't hurt me."

She could feel the heat radiating from his body. Some of it anger. Most of it a different emotion. One she was feeling herself.

"You got a problem tellin' when I'm funnin' and when I ain't. I don't fun about killin' people. If I say I'll see a man lynched, I will." His grip tightened. "And you ain't leavin'. What the hell's the matter with you? Think I only fetched you out of obligation?"

"No. I think--"

"What?" he demanded.

"I was afraid you wouldn't come, but--"

"How could you be afraid of that? You knew I meant for us to spend more time together. I told you if you gave yourself to me, it'd mean somethin', Sparkle. Why is it every time we get close, you take to jawin' about goin' our separate ways?"

"Rafe, come on," she cajoled as he released her arms. "I need to go back. You know I have to work."

"You got no job to go back to. Frazer told Art Thompson he wasn't takin' you back again, no matter what." His tone was offhand, but he turned and raked his fingers through his hair where his hat brim had flattened it. "Look, I can't put you on a train. Like it or not, you got to stay on with me for a few days here. I'll get you some money and a ticket out after I get paid."

Sparkle saw hurt in his eyes then. Deep, familiar. He thought she was rejecting him. Her palms lifted to his shoulders. "Can't you come with me back to Wichita? You can talk to Frazer."

He untucked his shirt and shook his head. "Sorry. I'll get you flush in a couple days. I'm workin' on somethin' big, the business Sam came to see me about."

"But I don't have a dime. I--"

"You don't need money just now. I hired on to do a job here. Ain't lettin' you out of my sight or puttin' you on some train by your lonesome. Forget tryin' to wheedle your way in this. I ain't listenin', Sparkle. Every time I turn my back, you're in some other fix and needin' my help."

"You're the cause of the last one."

"Maybe so, but my point is, I can't take chances now. Got work to do. Can't do my job and keep an eye on you unless you're here."

"Wonderful. So you've taken me prisoner now?"

"Dammit, but you're a pig-headed woman. There's nothin' you need in Wichita. Got a hot bath, supper, a fine big bed, and a man to warm it right here. If you want him. If you don't--" His breath escaped in a harsh puff. "Reckon I've managed to share a bed without touchin' you before. Least this one's a lot wider."

"Rafe." He made her sound more mercenary than he was. "You know things are different now." Her fingers curled into the dark mane at his nape. "We couldn't sleep like that again. Either of us."

Rafe moved to answer the rap at the door, admitting a troupe of visitors: two men bearing a large hammered copper tub, others carrying steaming buckets, and a woman with a tray of cold food and a liquor bottle. When the Adventuress employees left, Rafe turned back to Sparkle. "You were sayin'?"

"I think I'll stay."

His grin was back. "So...you hungry, or want that hot bath before we eat?"

She got no chance to answer. The door abruptly flew open, nearly torn from its hinges. A massive woman stood in the hall, faded chestnut braids pinned into a coil around her head and fastened with a feather plume. She waddled into the room beneath layers of shiny blue satin. "Raford Conley, you weasel! Heard you were back. How the hell are ya?"

She buried him in spongy flesh and body powder. The gaudy outfit, so much bare flesh, the feather, too much rouge...Sparkle realized with astonishment that the beaming human mountain was a working doxy. She had to be well over three hundred pounds. Sparkle was amazed Rafe still had his spine intact after the all-consuming hug, but he calmly brushed excess talcum off his dark brown shirt. "I'm fine, Al. How you been?"

"Not bad. Gettin' fatter." She noticed they weren't alone. "Tolover didn't tell me we had us a new bedbug."

Sparkle crossed her arms over her breasts.

"She don't work here," Rafe advised. "She's my wife. Sparkle, this is Alice, more commonly known as Big Al."

The whore's eyes widened as she spied the gold on Sparkle's hand. "Well I'll be jo-fired. Up and got yourself hitched? Rafor!" A thick arm clamped around Sparkle's shoulders and drew her toward the hallway. "My room's over here, honey. Got something for you. She'll be back in a minute, Rafe, so keep your iron in the fire." She beamed at Sparkle. "What's your name, sugar?"

"Sparkle. And I'm --"

"Oh I know, I know." The fat woman's voice dropped as they stepped through the doorway into an overcrowded bedroom. Knickknacks and faded pink lace abounded. Her pudgy forefinger waved at the room's interior, then lifted to poke at Alice's scalp. She peered at a jumbled shelf of jars and bottles high on one wall. "You're reckonin' me and that husband of yours done tore up the mattress a time or two. Long time back, when he wasn't but a spindly drag rider wet behind the ears."

Sparkle glanced back to see Rafe's bare buttocks sink into the steaming copper tub. Stiff from the saddle, after all. "He never mentioned he'd ridden herds."

"Didn't last long at it. Wasn't much of a cowpoke. Here's what I wanted you to have." Alice held out a jar of pale green ooze. Sparkle's nose wrinkled. "What's that glop?"

"Cactus juice. Always thought Rafe should rub some into that scar. It softens the skin. He wouldn't set still for me to do it, but seein' as you're his wife, you might give it a try."

Sparkle didn't know how to explain that she wasn't Rafe's wife, but his mistress. As this woman must have been--or still was. She obviously had genuine affection for him. Why would she hoard a jar of medicine for him--aside from the fact she plainly hoarded everything, from the looks of this room--unless Rafe still visited her regularly? He'd said Tolover put him in one of the other rooms at no cost. This one? Sparkle told herself she should feel resentment and animosity toward the big aging whore, but she couldn't. She instinctively liked Alice, and accepted the jar.

"Thanks. I'll try, but Rafe's chest is a sensitive point, even with me. Mr. Tolover mentioned you might know where I could find some spare clothing. I've been wearing this since Wichita. I'm...I used to be a pretty waiter girl in a saloon there."

The woman flashed a grin of pearly, well-worn teeth. "Sure, honey. Rafe's lookin' grim. He take somebody in today? His face says there was trouble. How many bad 'uns this time?"

"Two. Well, four actually, but he left the Mexicans to walk."

Big Al chortled and went purple. "How many did Snatch get for him?"

"God, that horse is incredible, isn't he?" Sparkle laughed too now, at the image of Bannister helpless on the ground. "And has the worst name I've ever heard for an animal."

"Rafe needs you," Alice declared, sobering. "Spare clothes are in the trunk yonder. Help

yourself to whatever you like, then get on back to your husband."

"We're not really married, Alice."

Alice shrugged. "And I'm not really fat. Deep inside I'm a slim-hipped wonder with nice, high little teats like yours. But folks don't see inside. They go by what they see on the outside."

Sparkle began rummaging through the musty trunk. "I see the future sometimes. I'm a fortune teller. I see trouble if you don't stay away from those rich cream pies you love so much. What do you see, Alice?"

"You and Rafe tearin' up a dozen mattresses. Worse things could happen to a woman than havin' him crazy to pieces over her." Alice reached for a box of chocolates from a low table beside the bed.

"Alice, it's not good to keep stuffing yourself," Sparkle chided lightly.

"Miz Conley--" The fat woman sighed, rolling a chocolate cream into the inside of her cheek as she spoke. "And don't bother arguin' whether you is or ain't Miz Conley. I don't got me a Raford, honey. Got no little ones or a home of my own or any damned thing a woman can hold close to her heart. So I love my customers. Every blasted one of 'em. Plan on givin' every man who comes to see me plenty to grab hold of and suck on until the good Lord sees fit to take that skinny gal inside to a better place."

Sparkle pulled out a blue gingham cotton dress, calico skirt, and a faded blouse that looked like it might fit. She also found a chemise and some pantalets. She turned back to Alice, but the woman had her head stuck through an open window. She was shouting to a man in the street to come up.

"Thanks, Al," Sparkle called from the doorway. Rafe was dozing with his head against the rim when she went back into the panel crib. She tossed the clothes on the bed and brought the jar with her beside the tub. He did look tired, bone tired. "Need any help, cowboy?"

"Yeah." He straightened and opened his eyes, tugging at her shawl. "Take off your duds and get in. You can scrub my back. Or my front. Ain't choosy."

Sparkle unfastened the red dress and drop-kicked it across the room. "That's for you, Benton Frazer."

Rafe's laughter came as a rich sound that pleased her immensely. How was she going to keep her distance from him when he seemed so warm and approachable?

"Probably should have let you do that when we first met." He continued to watch her undress. "What the hell's that mess?" he demanded as she at last stepped into the warm water holding the jar.

"Cactus juice Al's been saving for you. She thinks it will help soften your scar tissue." Sparkle's eyes drilled his as she sat down across from him. "I ought to be jealous."

"Of Al? Hell, that was a long time ago."

"Not that long, surely. She was waiting for you. Do you stay with her when you come here to Dodge?"

Rafe snorted. "She'd crush me these days. We're just friends now. She was about a hundred-fifty pounds lighter when we met. Ain't funnin', neither. Jesus, last couple years she got bigger than most of what's herded into boxcars. She worked at the Tinderbox down the street. It wasn't nothin', Sparkle. She was just my town whore hereabouts."

"Like me in Wichita."

He shook his head and handed her the soap and washcloth. "Nope. You were never a whore and I wasn't your customer."

"But I shared my bed and gave you a ride upstairs. I'm...Bannister called me your mistress. How's it any different?"

"I never loved Alice."

The statement rolled so naturally off his tongue, Sparkle almost missed its significance. Almost. Her mind numb, she made the only reply she could think of at that moment.

"Oh."

"Hurry up," he grouched, rising to step from the bath. "Tired of waitin' on you, woman. And you can take that mess in the jar right back to Big Al. You ain't smearin' none of it on me. I ain't no Nancy-boy."

Sparkle watched him wrap a towel around his lean hips and stalk across the room. He flopped onto the Victorian chair and tore into the meat and bread on the tray, washing them down with liberal swallows of whiskey. His skin was still glistening, the bottom of his hair wet and curling where it touched his bare shoulders. She stared at the edge of the white towel against his tanned belly. He'd just admitted he loved her.

The tingling sensation in her breasts might have nothing to do with the tub of hot water and everything to do with the sight before her eyes. Sparkle had to admit she had a strong desire for Rafe. Maybe not genuine love, but a powerful attraction she didn't have the strength to deny. She lathered her hair and body, gratefully erasing all traces of the dirty shack and her confinement.

She rinsed and stepped out, wrapping her body in a thick towel. She took up the jar of salve and slowly approached the armchair. "I think Al's right and this might help your scar. My mother used something like it when I got too much sun. It won't hurt."

He scowled in response, slowly shaking his head. She purposely softened her eyes and vocal tone. "Not that I object to looking at it or touching it. Your chest or...any of the rest of you. You're very--"

Rafe squinted at her. "Very what? Handsome? Manly?" A fingertip reached out to peel back the towel. He drew a damp circle around her navel. "A stark naked woman's



drippin' water and sweet talk all over me, knowin' full well I want her body, not some mess in a jar. Wouldn't be tryin' to blackmail me, now would you, darlin'?"

"No, I'm suggesting you endure one thing you don't want to get the other, which presumably you do."

He snorted in disgust. "Surprised you didn't bargain your own way out with Bannister. This ain't always goin' to work," he muttered as he sat back and closed his eyes. He gripped the arms of the chair, knuckles taut and face set as Sparkle massaged the runny paste into his scar. His misery was so obvious, so palpable, she almost laughed out loud. What would Bannister and Brooks think if they could see Rafe being tortured by a woman with cactus juice?

"Sparkle--" His eyes smoldered with desire. His voice was slightly hoarse. "You ever get that delivery from the pharmacy?"

"Yes, that same morning."

Rafe abruptly caught her in his arms, rose and carried her to the bed. "Then it's time to pay up."

He kissed and caressed every inch of her body, stroking and nibbling with sensual lips until she was certain he'd set the bedsheets on fire. He'd turned the bed down while she was across the hall. "Oh Rafe," she breathed, twining her arms around his neck.

She burned everywhere and the only thing that seemed to help was saying his name over and over. When he finally loomed above her, his thighs between hers, she raised her hips to meet his deep thrust. He entered her smoothly and moaned her name in turn. "God, I been wantin' you," he whispered, tightening his embrace.

But his strokes were slow and deliberate. Sparkle had expected a frantic pummeling. "Rafe, it's so sweet. I thought...thought you'd hurry."

"No way," he mumbled, his lips at her temple. "I want to enjoy this, want to make it better for you than before. Better for both of us. Wrap your legs around me and don't let go." She gripped his muscular frame and let him guide her.

They made love three times, each more intense and delicious than the one before.

By the time Sparkle lay sated and still in his arms, she was too dreamy to care that she was once again in bed with Rafe Conley in a saloon. She closed her eyes, telling herself the ornate panel crib was actually a fancy hotel room in Paris. She ignored the gunfire, wagons, and ribald shouts below on Front Street and sighed against Rafe's shoulder. He slid a hand to her hip and released his own deep sound of contentment. "Feels so damned good to hold you. Get some rest, darlin'. About to make a right hefty chunk of cash these next few days. You'll be flush again, I promise."

Her arm slid over his torso, stirring Rafe differently than her touch had before. This wasn't sexual, but he wanted it even more than he'd wanted her wanton passion. "I'm so

glad you came after me," she mumbled. "Glad...we belong together."

Rafe shifted and discovered her eyes had closed. Her breath rose and fell softly. She was exhausted, he thought with a satisfied smile. Truth to tell, he was tuckered out too. But instead of closing his eyes, he peered straight up. It took a moment for his eyes to make out their shapes against the white sheets through the darkness. He'd blown the candles out, but strained to look in the mirror. He couldn't trust the messages from his damaged nerves. He saw their reflections, saw Sparkle.

For once he didn't question or deny, just accepted.

The woman he loved was wrapped around him, fast asleep with her fingers over his heart.

## Chapter 11

"Let me see if I understand." Sparkle's calm voice belied her anxiety. Dressed in the blue gingham dress she'd taken from Al's trunk, she was seated in a chair in the rear of the Dodge City Emporium watching Rafe try on boots. "You want me to tell fortunes at the Bold Adventuress, and my doing that would help you entice a certain man into town."

"Yep."

Rafe shook his head and reached past the nervous young clerk. "Too tight." Another pair of mule-ears came down from the display shelf.

"This man likes unusual women," Sparkle persisted. As the clerk ducked into a curtained alcove, she said what she'd avoided before. "And I'm supposed to be extraordinary--fortune telling being the mildest of my 'talents'?"

"The more unusual and talented, the better," Rafe confirmed.

"You mentioned a new outfit. What did you have in mind, some gaudy charm bracelet and my floral shawl? I don't see anything particularly exotic or unusual here." The store stocked few ready-made garments, but had a large supply of yard goods. Sparkle couldn't spot anything among the calicos and finished skirts anyone might consider provocative. It seemed the "good" women of Dodge made a point of dowdiness, probably to differentiate themselves from the larger population of "fallen" women in town.

Rafe settled on a pair of square-toes and paid the clerk. "I know just where to find what we need." He steered her through the Emporium's front door.

"Just a minute," she asserted, refusing to take another step along the boardwalk. "This role you want me to play...Does it have anything to do with the fact you specifically requested the panel crib? Not for our comfort, as I first thought, was it? Because of your job. And buying me some exotic dress, insisting we couldn't leave until your business here was finished...I have the oddest sensation I'm not going to like what's behind this. What have you dragged me into, Rafe?"

He didn't flinch. "You said you wouldn't help with Hoffman, and I know you don't like what I do. But this time's different. You need money, and I need you as my partner."

"You have partners. Sam Parker and that fellow Driscoll."

"Yeah and they'll be workin' along with us on the set up. But the man I'm lookin' for has got a real penchant for whores. You lure him up to our room, and--"

"You'll be waiting behind the panel," she finished, growing angrier by the minute.

"Which is supposed to make me feel perfectly secure, despite the fact I'm the one who'll be having her clothes ripped off by some outlaw. No, absolutely not. I'm not helping you, Rafe! I want no part of what you do. I've had a taste of outlaw hospitality, remember? I didn't like it. Get some real whore to play fortune teller. Tolover must have

a harem."

"There's a thousand in it."

"For one night's work?" She gaped at him, horrified. "After last night, us together like that... you'd actually want me to let some stranger climb in bed with me? How could you?"

"Like hell," he growled, gripping her arm fiercely. "Pay attention. I said lure him into the room. He ain't gettin' in bed and neither are you. Just get him into the panel crib and make him take off his gunbelt. You disarm him, I take him out. Done. You're a thousand dollars richer."

Sparkle hesitated while he awaited her decision. Blackmail wasn't so amusing when on the receiving end of the proposition, she discovered. At length she sighed and nodded. He led her to a dressmaker's shop on a side street. The racks were filled with satin, taffeta, velvet, and organza gowns. Brass hooks on the wall displayed frilly bonnets, feather boas, and all manner of gaudy necklaces and trinkets.

It was the last place a gunslinger would frequent.

"You're a source of constant surprises today, Rafor." The use of his full given name should have been clue enough, but she made certain her mouth and eyes evinced her displeasure. "I suppose you'll get me a costume free here, like the room at the saloon. Just what did you do for this business owner, nab a bootlegger pilfering corsets from the back room?"

He looked perplexed. "My sister...Bought her a--I forget what you call it. Some thing, like a shirt with buttons." He gestured on himself and managed to look like a circus baboon.

"A Basque?" Sparkle offered, softening. She relished his embarrassed flush.

His shoulders jerked. "Might be. And some hair ribbons for Christmas, before I headed back to the ranch last winter. Ain't got credit here. I'll buy you whatever you like."

The proprietress arrived in time to overhear the operative words. Her smile was instantly brilliant. All for show, like her merchandise. "Well, in that case, madam will want to look at--" She took in Sparkle's faded blue gingham and torn stockings and seemed to grapple with herself to refrain from saying everything. "My newest evening gowns and corsets," she finished lamely.

Rafe followed the dressmaker to a long rack of gowns. "We need somethin' real flashy. Got one to match her eyes? I'm partial to the color of my wife's eyes."

"I don't wonder," the woman answered, patting her spill of plump ebony sausage curls. "Yes, I know just the dress." She disappeared into the back and re-emerged displaying a dress of pale cream silk. The hemline shimmered with several inches of intricate beadwork, iridescent pearls of various sizes, all in shades of turquoise. The dress was

fabulous. Sparkle hated it on sight.

"We'll take it," Rafe announced.

"Darling, I haven't tried it on yet," Sparkle countered.

The dressmaker gathered up underthings, silk stockings, and a turquoise silk shawl.

"Come right back here."

Sparkle appeared a few moments later to pirouette for Rafe. She looked like a first-rate trollop. "We'll take what she has on and these too," he announced, handing the shop owner a pair of dangling rhinestone earbobs. The woman was only too pleased to wrap everything up when Rafe produced a wad of folded bills.

Samson Parker was waiting at the bar when they returned to the saloon. Rafe brought him up to the panel crib and discussed the plan in detail. Parker and Driscoll had tracked their quarry from Colorado into Kansas. He was holed up somewhere on the outskirts of town, and had been for at least three weeks. Knowing his penchant for saloons and whores, it stood to reason he'd be making an appearance on Front Street sooner or later. Sooner, once word got out about Sparkle LaFleur's debut.

"There's one problem," she thought aloud. "I don't have a tarot deck. I left my good deck back in my table at the Scarlet Lady, and those idiots lost or stole my bag with the spare when they drugged me."

Rafe nodded and left the room. Sam looked at Sparkle, his warm, almost-black eyes kind. "My friend Conley's heart is glad to have you with him. This is good for my spirit, too. You belong at his side, Conley's woman."

Sparkle knew her cheeks were beet red. It was hard not to think of herself beneath Rafe rather than beside him. "Thank you, Samson. It's nice to see you again. Are--"

Rafe was back already. "Hey, Tolover's gettin' us a tarot deck."

"He can get tarot cards just like that?" Sparkle snapped her fingers.

Rafe grinned. "Everett G. Tolover can get nearly anything just like that. He knows some old spinster who has a deck of tarot cards."

It was good shuffling them again, Sparkle reflected as she perched atop a stool in the gaming parlor dressed in her finery. Rafe was playing poker; Sam was at a faro table near the swinging doors. Tolover's attitude toward Indians was liberal, unlike Frazer's. There were at least two other men in the Bold Adventuress at that moment who might have been half-breeds, and Sparkle noticed an Indian dressed in buckskins had been at a poker table the whole day. She'd seen him when she returned from her shopping trip.

She had another customer. She'd already given a dozen readings, and it wasn't yet ten o'clock. A barker on the porch made certain the menfolk along Front Street heard about the saloon's new addition. Sparkle wasn't only a novelty as a fortune teller, she was also the only female on public display. Tolover's customers weren't missing a chance to ogle

a fancy woman for free.

Rafe caught her eye as she was laughing with a customer and purposely gave her a disagreeable frown. Sparkle suppressed the urge to poke her tongue out in response. Rafe told her to pretend he was just another drifter. She wasn't to call him by name or acknowledge him. He wasn't supposed to know her. But he watched her constantly during the long evening.

The outlaw never showed.

When Sparkle reached the panel crib at two in the morning, Rafe was fully dressed and standing at the windows. Sparkle cleared her throat. "Mr. Tolover thinks it may take another night or two for word about me to draw your man."

Rafe turned, barely looking at her. "Reckon I should check on how Snatch is gettin' by, maybe have a few words with Sam and a drink with Tolover. No need to wait up."

Sparkle began the arduous and irksome process of stripping off her finery, layer by irritating layer. He could at least have offered to help before rushing off, she thought with dismay. His manner struck her as peculiar, but she'd never been around him while he was working. Maybe he was always so intense and undemonstrative while he tracked someone. All the more reason to dislike his profession. At the Scarlet Lady he'd been eager to be alone with her. Just now, he'd left without even kissing her.

"Fine, " she said aloud. "Let him go kiss his damned horse."

She crawled into the big bed, too aware she was alone in this rotten hellhole of a town. Where else would a whore who weighed almost four hundred pounds have a steady stream of visitors? Where else would the bardog stand proudly before such a lurid mural? Dodge City was one step shy of the Barbary Coast, which in turn was one small foothold shy of Hell itself. A woman working saloons in Dodge City was definitely on the decline.

Sparkle wasn't about to linger here for days on end, not even for a thousand dollars. She'd give Rafe two more days. She had to get home. Majesta knew to write Sparkle care of the Scarlet Lady if there was ever a problem with Jace, but what would Majesta think if the letter came back? If no one knew what had become of Sparkle LaFleur after her disappearance that day?

Rafe didn't seem to understand about her situation. She'd tried to tell him her brother depended on her. And poor Jace. She'd given another man the gift she'd saved so long for him. Would he understand and forgive her that? Possibly. He was the most generous, patient soul Sparkle had ever known. He might understand she'd become trapped in her own lie and succumbed to Rafe's charisma. But he'd never forgive this: posing as a doxy, deliberately luring an outlaw into a trap.

She tossed and turned, fuming to discover she had such difficulty falling asleep without Rafe beside her. How long did it take to have a drink and check on a horse? How long

had it taken her to become this pathetic, wanton woman? Mooning over a scarred gun for hire, who obviously preferred drinking with his chums or patting his horse's rump to patting hers. To hell with the outlaw and the money...Tomorrow she'd either kill him or head for the train depot.

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She opened her eyes and struggled to sit up. The sheets were tangled around her lower legs. Daylight streamed through a crack in the curtains. Morning. Beside her was a big empty space and an abandoned pillow.

"Damn that man. I'll kill him," she reaffirmed, gnashing her teeth as she worked her toes through the tangled bedclothes to the floor. "Leaving me here alone all night. Probably found himself a skinnier Alice."

"Like hell."

She gasped and spun to her right. Her heart caught in her throat. Rafe was seated in the chair, wearing a crisp white shirt, fresh pair of denims, and his new boots. He'd obviously just visited a barber. "You cut your hair," she noted vacantly.

"You talk to yourself." A booted ankle crossed over to rest atop his opposite knee. "How were you figurin' on murderin' me?" he asked in a conversational tone. "With your little pig sticker, or you got a notion to try firin' my peacemaker? It's on the bedside table there."

She felt her cheeks go deep pink. "I--I'm sorry. I didn't hear you come back last night. If it was last night."

His grin nearly split his face in half. "It was. Locomotive could've pulled through here and you wouldn't have heard it. Wasn't gone but a couple hours. Came back and you were dead asleep. By the way--you snore, darlin'."

"I do not!"

He chuckled and rubbed his stomach. She crossed to the washstand, determined to ignore him. She rubbed soap into her left eye and scrunched her features, groping blindly for a towel. Intent on the burning pain in her eye, she was oblivious to the water trickling from her arms or that a droplet coursed down her breast.

"Here, let me get that," came a husky whisper directly in front of her. So close, she started at the sound. She hadn't heard his boots on the flooring. She wasn't sure she liked the idea of Rafe sneaking up on her that way, or as he had last night.

She opened both eyes to find him kneeling, the tip of his tongue almost touching a droplet poised to fall from her stiffening right nipple. As they both watched, the nipple stood out, brazenly begging for his tongue. Rafe's hands cupped her buttocks and pulled her closer. She thought she'd faint when his tongue finally swirled over the hot point of her breast, heavy and aching now with need. Her head dropped back and she whispered his name.

"Damn, you're so pert and tasty, Sparkle," he whispered, tongue laving from the nipple all along the underside of her breast down to her ribcage. "Just got to kiss you. Sorry I didn't wake you up last night. Thought about it. Drank half a bottle of bourbon when I came up here, lyin' beside you. Couldn't get to sleep for an hour thinkin' about kissin' you and these beauties."

She moaned as his fingers gouged into her buttocks--lifting, encouraging her to open herself as he pulled her pelvis closer. His tongue probed into her navel and trailed lower. She whimpered and tried to back away as he neared her feminine curls. "Rafe, this is unseemly. Please don't--"

He wouldn't release her. "Natural, darlin'. Don't fight it."

She opened her eyes and watched him drawing her forward, closer and closer to his smooth, freshly-shaven jaw and chin. She gasped at the contact when his tongue finally brushed her most intimate place. His lips followed, beginning a slow suction. Sparkle's breasts instantly went on the warpath, jealous creatures that they were. She grabbed the empty towel bar on the washstand as a fiery battle heated up between her upper and lower hemispheres. All of her wanted Rafe. Now.

Rafe buried his face and attacked her like a ripe watermelon. He mumbled words of encouragement as she ground her hips against his chin. He lapped and slowly sucked at the gush of feminine moisture, driving her into a frenzy. Her breasts ached, screamed for his soft, masterful mouth and those callused fingers. Ached, needing him, but there was only so much of Rafe to go around. Just then he was busy elsewhere....

"Rafe, please. Stop this. I can't stand it."

He rose and drew her with him to the bed. "Sorry, but I'm just startin', honey. You don't know what you taste like. Heaven, I swear." His hands moved at last to cup her swollen breasts as he bent to kiss her. She tasted an unfamiliar saltiness on his tongue. Herself? Truly, she'd gone straight to Hell.

His clean clothes were soon lying in a forgotten heap on the floor. Rafe stretched out on his side. Sparkle lay beside him, savoring the smell of the barber's soap on his skin. She started to wrap her arms around Rafe's neck, but he stopped her.

"Want a go at somethin' else first. Other way round." He twirled his index finger in mid-air.

Sparkle blinked. He repeated the gesture. "There's still plenty left to teach you, darlin'. Reckon you'll want all the love lessons before you kill me. I would. Lie back this way."

"Rafe, I promise I won't try to murder. Just kiss me and--"

"Promise you'll thank me later. Come on." He pressed her shoulders back, twisting her around so her head was near his hips on the mattress. "Dawnin' on you how it works?"

Something was beginning to, Sparkle realized with utter dismay. She must have had a



prurient mind all along, for Rafe wasn't having much trouble getting her imagination going. Still, she was certain he couldn't mean what he seemed to imply. He couldn't be suggesting that. She glanced at his face with an unspoken question in her eyes. He nodded and licked his lips. Both their mouths pleasuring at the same time?

"Rafe, what you want must be a sin to Moses," she gasped.

"Moses can have any sins he wants, mine or anybody else's," Rafe scoffed good naturedly. "Learned a long time ago never to argue with whores about what feels good." He bent to kiss the button of pink flesh peeping through her dark curls, letting his tongue flick over the stiff nub. Sparkle nearly came off the mattress. "And it does feel good, huh?"

"So good it's probably illegal."

He laughed heartily and arranged her thighs on either side of his neck. "I like wearin' a thigh collar every once in awhile. You can watch, but I'd be happier if you found another way to keep yourself entertained while I'm kissin' you down here."

"Don't say things like that." Sparkle clamped her thighs together, desperate to shut him up. Big mistake. Seconds later she was gasping and cursing, so wet and out of control she forgot everything but the wave of pleasure he sent spilling over her.

Rafe paused, wringing a sobbing cry from her. "Tarnation, but you're lazy," he admonished. "Remember the cactus juice? You kiss me, I'll kiss you."

Good God.

She closed her fingers around him and brought the head of his shaft to her lips. She kissed and licked. Rafe reciprocated. She tried again. Cause and effect established, she took him fully into her mouth and suckled. Rafe suckled too. Lord, but it would be something to go at it this exercise with real determination.

The pure ecstasy...The man had debauched her, ignored her, sneaked up on her, debased her further by teaching her this absolutely fabulous and thoroughly impure act. Forget his Colt or her knife, he'd given her the ultimate weapon. She'd love him to death. Kill him with kindness.

Determined to ignore the havoc he created from within his "thigh collar," she attacked his engorged manhood with a vengeance. Before she was finished, he'd be praying for his own death. She'd show him he wasn't the only one who could use pleasure.

"I can't believe I lived through that," she murmured some two hours later. "I'm sure women aren't meant to crest so many times."

"Yes they are. You got us fellas beat about ten to one. Make you feel powerful?"

Powerful? Try limp. Exhausted. Mentally considering a pilgrimage in search of eternal salvation.

There wasn't one inch of her body that didn't tingle still. Correction. There were precisely two square inches--her nipples. They'd finally gone numb. She slowly sat up and pulled loose from the tangled sheets. Rafe reclined against the pillows with his arms folded behind his head, not a shred of bedclothes covering his nude magnificence. His expression was solemn, thoughtful. A reprieve. Then she saw the corners of his mouth lift ever so slightly. She crushed her eyelids shut. Too late. She'd seen that damned grin of his.

She was learning too quickly and too well. Her training had taught her that when she glimpsed Rafe's slow grin, his lazy drawl was coming next. When Rafe chewed out words in that measured way, she could too easily imagine those sensual lips and his tongue chewing on her body in that same slow, meandering way. Her breasts tightened then, and she got damp in a most unladylike fashion.

"Don't start up again," she warned. "Don't lie there grinning at me, thinking what you're obviously thinking. It must be past noon, and I haven't left this bed--well, n-not really," she stammered, the washstand episode too vivid.

"So? We got all day to spend in bed," Rafe's smile was decidedly evil. "You got somethin' better to do?" His arms unfolded and he shot up, reaching to capture her in a blur of movement. Sparkle found herself sprawled against his chest. His lips and tongue thoroughly ravished her mouth as his hands massaged her bare buttocks and ground her pelvis against his. She couldn't believe she detected stirrings of life in his manhood. "I got nothin' more important to do for the next couple hours."

"Really?" Sparkle grabbed for her cloak of haughtiness in near desperation. "Don't you have a horse to check on, or something you need to discuss with Driscoll and Parker?"

His hands went still. "Now I'm tryin' to decide if you're funnin' me. You want me out of here? Can't still be mad about last night. If you are, there must be an itch someplace I forgot to scratch. That's tough to figure. Pretty sure I scratched everywhere."

"Well, I was pretty itchy all over last night," she informed him. "But you didn't even bother to kiss me before you skedaddled."

"So you figured I didn't want to."

"Of course not. If you want to do something, you just do it, Rafe. You pulled me back into bed just now, didn't you?"

"Yeah." His expression changed and he cocked his head, his gaze changing from warm and teasing to something she couldn't label.

"You're wrong, Sparkle. I wanted to kiss you, but I also wanted to break your neck." His tone suggested he wasn't teasing in the slightest now. "Felt sick, watchin' you smile at every goddamned pair of blue jeans in town. Didn't appreciate bein' tied up in knots, feelin' sick in my gut."

"Rafe, I did just what you told me. You can't mean you--"

He pushed her away. "No? Been readin' my cards again, so you can tell me what I mean? Left last night because I reckoned I'd only get upset if I stayed, like I'm gettin' now." She gaped at him as he sat up and continued to rant. "Don't see no friggin' cards. Guess I'll have to say it for you, then."

"What? What's come over you?"

"I didn't want to make a horse's ass of myself by tellin' you I hate watchin' you work in saloons. I always hated it. Hate you readin' those damned cards too, even mine. I was sorry I got your damned job back for you in Wichita, because you're too fine for saloons and men like Frazer or madams with perverted notions. I'm glad you ain't got your job in Wichita now. If I had my way, I'd never let you out of this bed. I'd just keep you here with me and never have to feel so damned pissed again." He stood up and stepped into his jeans, jerking them up over his hips.

"You sure say 'damned' a lot when you get mad," Sparkle teased. He ignored her. Not a good sign. She knew then he was genuinely upset. "Using me as bait here was your idea."

"Yeah, brilliant too, ain't it?" he all but shouted. "Just cause I thought of it doesn't mean I'm proud of the notion. Doesn't keep it from stickin' in my craw seein' it carried out." He had his fly half buttoned. He paused to glare at her, and Sparkle was absurdly elated. His eyes burned with a greenish fire that could mean only one thing. He was jealous. Insanely, wonderfully jealous.

"Tolover seems to think your idea will work, though. And I'm downstairs as your partner, remember? It's part of our--"

Rafe swore a stream of colorful expletives. "If I hadn't already taken money up front, I'd pull out, Sparkle. Ain't never done that before. Ain't never felt like doin' it. But ain't never been so mixed up, or pissed off and boxed in before, either. Never in my whole life."

"I'm not boxing you in," she replied gently. "If that's how you feel, why won't you take me to the depot? This town's full of whores. I don't need money badly enough to ruin our--to disrupt everything for you."

"Sparkle," he croaked. "You know how I feel about that." He dropped back onto the mattress and drew her into his arms. "I hate havin' you here, but I'd hate not havin' you even worse. That's exactly what I mean. Whichever way I go at this, it makes me ornery."

"You are that," she smiled, planting a kiss on his cheek.

His tone softened. "It's always been just my own hide. I never stopped to consider someone might go after you. Should have, but I didn't. Won't take the risk again. Keepin' you close is the only way I can be sure you're safe. If I let you board a train, I wouldn't be able to keep my mind on what I'm doin'. That's likely to get me killed."

She hugged him tightly. "I'd miss you, too. And I certainly don't want you taking needless risks. We just had Dr. Stone patch you up. So I guess I'll stay, and you'll have to get over feeling jealous. You are, you know."

His eyebrows shot up. "Always laughed at other fellas for actin' like jackasses. Now I'm as big a jackass as any of them. It's loco, I know it, when everybody thinks you're my wife. But you're so pretty, while I'm--" He stopped and reached for the center of his chest.

"Stop that," she gently chided. "There's no reason for you to be upset. You're being absolutely unreasonable about this." She brightened, hearing that assessment. "Why, yes you are! Thank you."

"You're thankin' me for goin' loco?"

"I thought I was the only one unreasonable enough to want to shoot a man for checking on his horse." Rafe searched her eyes, then released a slow chuckle and hugged her back.

"I'm partial to my sorrel, but it ain't nearly the same. Bein' jealous of me spending time with my horse is the craziest thing I ever heard."

She got up and began donning her clothes, today the blouse and skirt Alice loaned her. "Who are we trying to entice here, anyway? Reclusive Dan?"

"Elusive Dan," he corrected. Sparkle smirked behind his back as he tucked his shirttail in. She doubted he'd noticed her deliberate mistake.

"I'll get back to him later. One I'm after now's a rustler who stole over a hundred head of prime beef stock. Rancher's put up a big reward to make sure it won't happen again. Took part of my pay up front, guaranteed success. Easier to get the outlaw to come to me than chasin' him all over Hell and gone."

"You guaranteed success?" she frowned. "Why would a rancher hire you to catch a rustler? Isn't that what sheriffs and marshals are for?" Rafe handed her a hairbrush he'd dug out of his pack.

"Law ain't helped. Cattlemen hire freelancers all the time. Their hands won't generally shoot a rustler. Figure they get paid to herd cows, not risk their lives defendin' them. The boss can always replace a few steers, to their way of thinkin'. Shootin' at wolves or coyotes is one thing. They don't shoot back."

"I never thought about it, but I guess it makes a certain sense. I wouldn't risk my life if someone tried to rob Frazer. I would've helped the crook fill his sack."

"Rustlers generally don't stop at a few head. They come back, again and again. The law ain't caught up to this particular fella, and it wouldn't matter anyhow. Wouldn't be witnesses comin' forward to make him dance at the end of a rope."

The full implication struck as they left the room and started down the staircase. "Rafe,

you hired out to commit a murder."

Her words were a horrified whisper as one hand rose to her throat. The open stairwell swam in front of her eyes as she fought a wave of nausea. She'd almost convinced herself Rafe wasn't really as dangerous as the menfolk thought. Wasn't really a killer.

He froze. The drawl was absent from his speech. "I hired out to put an end to a problem. With this particular fella, wouldn't matter whether I was out to shoot him or ask him to the Saturday night dance. Outcome would be the same, even if I tried to have him arrested. He'd never let it happen. It's him or me."

She abruptly sat down on the top step. She shouldn't ask, but she had a right to know. She was already involved, to her increasing terror. "Just who are we talking about?"

Rafe folded his legs to sit beside her. "Ned Slocumb."

Sparkle's blood ran cold. Frazer had been warned about Slocumb. Art Thompson had shown the whole saloon staff the Wanted poster. Ned Slocumb had done more than rustle cattle. He'd killed three ranch hands and a lawman who went after him, then shot a buyer at the cattle auction who wouldn't agree to Slocumb's asking price. That poor soul survived, but was blinded in one eye.

Rafe was going up against Ned Slocumb--using her as bait.

They walked to a small cafe several blocks down Front Street. Sparkle numbly eased into the chair he pulled out for her, but sullenly stared at the tablecloth while he ordered ham and eggs. She refused to order anything. Rafe told the waitress to bring coffee for both of them, potatoes and toast for Sparkle. "Got another long night ahead," he sighed as the girl hurried off. "Need to keep your strength up."

"What for?" she hissed. "Slocumb's going to get me upstairs and beat it out of me before you ever get that panel open." Her fingers shook so badly when the food arrived, she couldn't keep the jelly on her toast, let alone get the gooey plank to her mouth. She gave up and dropped it on the plate.

"Sparkle." Rafe's hand reached across the table to steady hers. "Slocumb's a ladies man. Saloon gals are his weakness, same as mine, I guess. I'd damned sure rather have this fight on friendly turf. Tolover and his men will be there to back us up. I'll be upstairs behind the panel. Sam will follow you up the main stairs, Driscoll will take the back set along the monkey hall. You'll never be alone with Slocumb. He'll think you are, for all of about two minutes. And trust me, in those two minutes he ain't about to kill you."

"How can you be sure?" Sparkle's voice was a terrified whisper. "He's a murderer, Rafe! He kills anyone who gets in his way. I'm not even a real whore. I don't know how to act. I'll never convince him I'm an expert in--you know."

"Sparkle La-Goddamned-Fleur." He got her undivided attention then. "You're so good at it, I can't tell you. Explainin' would make me crazy for another go. Why do you think I get jealous over you smilin' at other men? Don't you know why I kept you in that brass

bed half the day?"

"I thought that was more you than me," she answered quietly without meeting his gaze.

"Listen, Slocumb likes his gals alive and kickin'. He's never murdered a woman. But there's somethin' else you ain't considered."

"The wood for my coffin or what I'd like carved on my tombstone? Should I write it down for you?"

"Put your claws back in. How come the rancher figures I can take Slocumb when nobody else has? There's no shortage of cattle detectives. The rancher's a big man, he can afford any gun for hire. So why me? Ask yourself that. He's payin' five thousand dollars, Sparkle. That kind of money says I must be good, but I'm better than good when I want to be. I'm one of the best."

She studied his face. Rafe had touched briefly on his own reputation before, but never boasted to her. It wasn't his way, and she knew from his eyes he wasn't bragging now. He was stating fact.

"That's how you can offer me a thousand and still pay Parker and Driscoll," she concluded. "Five thousand dollars." Something like awe crept into her voice.

"You're takin' a chance. Won't lie about that. Slocumb's a nasty polecat. But I won't let him hurt you." He took a swig of coffee, then scanned the street. Sparkle had almost stopped noticing how he constantly checked his surroundings, but it was important now.

"A thousand's a lot more than you lost in Wichita," he pointed out. "The fancy evenin' dress and earbobs won't fit Snatch, and I don't wear silk, so I reckon you best keep the duds as part of the deal."

He was teasing her again. She took her first healthy bite of toast, followed by a forkful of potatoes. "I'm hungrier than I thought. Must have been all the activity earlier. Seems I worked up one appetite while appeasing the other." Her eyes flicked down to his silver belt buckle.

"More potatoes for the lady," Rafe called, motioning to the waitress. When the slim blonde approached, he spoke with mock sobriety. "Better toss a slice of ham on her plate while you're at it. My wife gets powerful hungry stayin' in a hotel. Not that her own cookin' ain't the finest. She cooks like nobody's business."

"I'm sure," the girl shrugged before removing his empty plate and heading for the kitchen.

Rafe's eyes raked over Sparkle's bosom, then locked on her face. His lazy grin came back full force. "Yep, cooks like nobody's business--especially when she ain't nowhere near a stove."

## Chapter 12

After two more evenings in the cream silk, Sparkle convinced Rafe to take her back to the dressmaker's shop. This time she selected a deep purple velvet gown with a dipping heart-shaped bodice and gathers below the bustle, spilling down the back. She could tell Rafe wasn't pleased by her choice, but the dress wasn't for him. It would attract Ned Slocumb. Sparkle wanted to conclude the awful business.

Rafe had explained Slocumb's tastes. He'd learned about them from old whores like Big Al and a man he'd met, reputedly one of Slocumb's associates. During a poker game, the fellow talked of his partner's strange sexual proclivities. Slocumb couldn't wait to get his hands on one bit of quim, the fellow claimed, because Slocumb had heard she'd come from a Mexican cantina where the girls appeared on stage with a donkey. Slocumb was known in bordellos from Santa Fe to New Orleans, St. Joe to Laredo. The more exotic or brazen the doxy, the faster he'd pony up to get into bed with her.

Sparkle was now the talk of Dodge. Said to be the illegitimate daughter of a French peasant girl and a Hungarian prince, she'd been credited with giving oral sex to an American politician under the table during a state dinner attended by the crowned heads of Europe. Gossip reported she told fortunes in the gaming hall and did unspeakable things in her private salon upstairs--the finest and largest pleasure chamber in all of Dodge--but the price for passion with her was so exorbitant, few men could boast of the experience.

The woman herself found the exaggerations more than appalling, yet she had to admit part of the tale was true. She powdered the tops of her breasts, put kohl on her eyes, and rouged her lips and cheeks nightly, knowing her price was beyond high--it was utterly unattainable for anyone save Ned Slocumb. Rafe had gone to visit the reportedly ferocious lawman in town, a man Rafe knew personally. They'd reached an agreement. The law would look the other way if Rafe confined his activities to the Bold Adventuress and the specific task he'd been hired to perform. He left his gunbelt behind when outside the saloon. Left it in the ornate room where Sparkle LaFleur did indeed do "unspeakable" things.

Things that had been unthinkable before she'd met Rafe Conley.

He barely spoke to her in the evenings, choosing to clamp the lid on his jealousy by ignoring her. When at last they'd give up their vigil for the night and settle into the big bed, Rafe would roll away from her. Sparkle would wait until he'd fallen asleep, then snuggle close to his broad back. With her gunfighter's deep breathing and warmth beside her, Dodge City wasn't so horrible and Slocumb wasn't a threat. She could blot out reality and sleep.

But in the mornings, when the saloon was quiet...when all across Kansas farmers paused to wipe sweat from their brows while their wives churned butter or hung out the wash, Rafe would reach for her. He'd awaken her and overwhelm her. One kiss or a light pinch

to a rosy nipple and Sparkle went willingly into his arms. It was useless to resist, for he'd conquer her even if she tried to remain indifferent.

She'd be wet and whimpering in less than two minutes when he touched her; panting and gasping, begging for mercy in as little as ten. Craving the foreplay that fired her blood as much as the final release from the torment.

Rafe had taken her in the tub, on the table, in the chair, even against the wall. And that very morning...Sparkle flushed crimson and secretly ached, remembering what he'd done that morning.

He'd pulled on his jeans and slipped downstairs before dawn. She'd felt him rouse. She'd watched him disappear, returning a short time later with a tray of oysters and a jar of apple butter. She'd remarked that it seemed an obnoxious combination to her. He'd laughed, a throaty low chuckle, and informed her oysters were said to enhance a man's virility.

"With apple butter on them?" she'd grimaced, thanking her lucky stars women weren't forced to eat putrid foods to prove themselves alluring. Boned corsets and rouge were torture enough.

"Aw now, darlin'," he'd drawled as he caught her left wrist and lashed it to the bed frame with his blue bandanna. "You eat what you like and I'll do the same."

"Have you gone crazy? What--Raford Conley!" Shouting, kicking and bucking had proved useless. Rafe caught her right wrist and tied it to the bed with his red bandanna, then stood grinning. Sparkle cursed and made unflattering comparisons between him and members of the ape, canine, and equine families. Rafe chuckled at her epithets, then stripped off his jeans and made her watch as he perched on the edge of the mattress and slowly ate every last oyster.

Even before he wiped his mouth with the back of a tanned forearm--even before his eyes lingered on her heaving breasts or his sensual lips parted--she'd guessed...feared?--what he'd inevitably say. "The apple butter ain't for the oysters, anyway, darlin'. The apple butter goes on you."

She gasped, seeing the jar in his hand. She rued the night she'd met Alice and let herself be talked into rubbing cactus juice on his chest. She apologized for the incident, pleaded for mercy. But he hadn't forgotten and intended she never would. She couldn't forget Rafe licking the smeary mess off her...or the violent orgasms, soft suckling, the gleam of triumph lighting his dark eyes. That memory was seared into her for life.

The rogue from her thoughts appeared behind her, startling her again. He scowled at the reflection that met his eyes in the dresser mirror. Sparkle continued primping silently, hoping he wouldn't notice her high color or ask what she'd been mulling over as he came in. Perhaps he knew. She'd had difficulty meeting his gaze all day. She was too vulnerable now.



Rafe was thinking she looked every inch the high-toned strumpet. Slocumb would take one look and go stiff as a fence post. As stiff and randy as Rafe was, even after a day in bed beyond compare. He still saw her in his mind's eye. Her wrists tied to the frame, writhing and gasping as he'd traced apple butter over her nipples with his index finger. Saw her thighs clamped around his hips, eyes and puffy lips pleading for release--and not from her bonds--as he'd run his tongue across her stomach, lapping at the sticky goo.

Jesus. Every man who walked into the Bold Adventuress that night would look at Sparkle and fantasize about doing similar things. Now Rafe questioned the wisdom of teaching her all he had. He'd told himself she had to make a convincing whore. How could she play the part of an exotic fallen angel if she'd done no more than spread her thighs for a man?

Slocumb was a goatish lout. Rafe had to be certain she wouldn't blush too easily or stumble when the outlaw behaved like a known libertine. She had to be smooth and seasoned as a length of hickory. She was Rafe's partner. Her safety depended on how convincingly she could execute her role.

And it wasn't as though Rafe hadn't enjoyed every minute of her training. He had, too much. Now it hurt. She wasn't the gal he'd met in Wichita any longer. That gal, though furious enough to rip her dress off and throw it at her boss, had paled at the mere suggestion of going upstairs. That gal had been innocent, pretending to be worldly and tough. The person primping before the mirror now was a woman in every sense of the word--no longer an innocent, worldly in truth.

The sultry looks she flashed Rafe from her card table were enough to make him seize up and fight for breath. The damned velvet evening gown clung to every curve and had Rafe straining against his jeans. The dress and the black stuff painted on her eyes worried him. She didn't need to go that far to play the strumpet, and he'd told her so. His comment had sparked a feminine giggle and a literal slap on the back of his wrist.

Rafe's scowl deepened, darkening with his mood.

There were grown men who'd sooner bunk with a rattler than touch Rafe's right arm. Their throats went dry if he moved that arm an inch during a poker game without visible cause. If Rafe didn't extend his right hand first, nobody who knew his name and reputation ever reached for it. You didn't take liberties with a mercenary's gun hand--unless you happened to be his woman and were out to show how far you could push him.

Rafe could swear Sparkle was torturing him on purpose. She didn't really want to help catch Slocumb. She'd been emphatic about not helping with Rafe's business. It wasn't really the money, either. She could have turned whore for Hard Case if it all came down to money. Rafe had begun to suspect she liked dressing the part. Liked leading customers on, because it drove Rafe insane. She knew he watched her, knew how jealous he felt. She smiled at the menfolk and lowered her lashes just to drive Rafe loco.

Down one pissing short trail.

He was halfway to deranged now, and Sparkle hadn't even left the panel crib yet. He stood between her and the door. "Let's make sure we're straight on what to do."

"We've gone over this every night. I know what to do."

"You square on what not to do?"

She rattled off the litany. "I don't let him undress me and find my garter knife. I don't let him get too close to the sliding panel or the windows. I've got it."

She reached for the doorknob. He wouldn't step aside. "You don't let Slocumb do more than you absolutely have to until his guns come off. No foolin'. I can get that panel open without makin' a sound. I catch you playin' --"

"Are you implying I'd want a murderer pawing me?" she demanded, eyes wide. "Are you drunk, Rafe?"

His lips thinned into a hard line. "Nope, but I'm recollectin' how much you liked our romp this mornin'. How steamed up you get with a man's hands on you." His fingers clamped over her wrist. "Likin' it with him would be a real serious mistake. Maybe even your last."

"You know, you were right," she hissed, jerking free. "You do say horrible things because you're a horrible person. You just threatened me."

"I say horrible things when folks make me think 'em." His eyes narrowed as they riveted on hers. "I told you I loved you, but you ain't said anything like that back to me. I think and say horrible things when I'm played for a sucker. When it seems my woman don't give a crap. Like if it wasn't for a thousand dollars and a train ticket, she'd have left me by now."

"I don't like it here. You know that. I never wanted to come to Dodge. If we were in Wichita, --"

"You'd tell me you love me if we were standin' in Wichita? What kind of horseshit is that? Either you love me or you don't."

Sparkle pushed a pin deeper into her hair. "We really shouldn't have this conversation now. Both of us are on edge. I'm nervous every night and you're jealous for no reason. You know I care about you, Rafe."

"I do, huh? Damned amazin' how you're so sure of that. But hell, I forgot. You're the fortune teller. Why don't you point out the big clue, cause I missed it."

Sarcasm laced his words, and Sparkle faltered, sensing this anger was somehow different from his aggravation on previous nights. "It's not necessarily any one thing. I --"

"You thanked me for savin' you from kidnappers. Was that a sign? Did that mean you

love me?" came his harsh demand. "You pant and shout my name--of course, so does every other female around here, if she can remember the payin' customer's name. Is that it? Or should I assume you must love me, account of me bein' the one who took your maidenhead? You were savin' yourself all those years, just waitin' for me to come along. Is that right?"

Sparkle closed her eyes. She wouldn't lie, not after all they'd shared. She refused to lie to him, even though he was on a rampage and the truth wouldn't be pleasant for either of them.

"No, I wasn't. There's...someone else, a man I've known for years. I was saving myself for him, but he doesn't see me the way you or the men downstairs do."

"What?"

"I liked you from the first. I like the way you kiss, the feel of your arms around me. The tarot said you were someone special. I hated the hurt and loneliness inside you. We could talk and...trust each other. To a point, anyway. I let things progress beyond talking. Maybe that was wrong, or my reasons were. I'm sorry. You know I don't have much experience. I didn't know any better."

"You're sorry?"

She swallowed and dropped her gaze. "Only because you're not happy. I thought--I mean, I was fairly certain you'd realize you're important and that I do care, but...I have to go downstairs."

She slipped past him and out of the room. Once in the gaming parlor, she tried not to let the confrontation destroy her spirits. She needed to appear vivacious. But tears burned behind her eyelids. She forced a smile when a stranger asked for a tarot reading. Her fingers took over shuffling and laying out the cards. Her lips formed the standard words of explanation. But her mind was still upstairs, in turmoil.

She saw Rafe glaring at her, his face contorted with jealousy. She heard him fuming, informing her he detested seeing her in saloons. She pictured them together on the wide mattress, her fingers gripping the brass frame, Rafe's hips grinding. She heard her pleas for him to sate her burgeoning lust as he laved apple butter off her taut, exigent nipples. Saw Rafe's wicked grin as he'd savored the oysters. Imagined them climaxing together as she watched in the overhead mirror, imagined Rafe kneeling to catch that water droplet....

Before, during, afterward that same lazy grin.

She choked back a sob. How would she ever get him out of her life or her blood, now that she'd let him in?

An hour later the saloon's main floor was still half empty. Tolover advised the weather had turned foul. A stiff wind kicked up, bringing rain their way, which might ruin their chances of luring Slocumb into town. Men out in the open would seek what shelter they

could or head for high ground. Sometimes rain filled up trailheads, sometimes it left them standing empty.

By the time slashing drops splattered the overhanging balcony, the saloon's poker tables had thinned out. Only a handful of gamblers remained. A few lone drinkers lounged at the long bar, looking forlorn. Then a group of rowdies came stomping through the doors, soaked to the skin. Laughing crudely at the wall mural, they shouted for tall rations of Old Touse. Sparkle looked up and missed her shuffle. Cards exploded across her tabletop and onto the floor.

Sam Parker had given her the nod.

She didn't have to wonder which of the newcomers he'd recognized. As she slid off her stool to retrieve the scattered cards, she rose and found the most sadistic-looking stranger of the group directly in front of her. A lecherous grin split his face. His dark eyes glittered. He ran a hand over his damp, stubbly cheek.

"This must be the new painted cat who tells fortunes. Fellas have yourselves a few drinks. I'm gonna get me a nice French kiss." He hummed a ribald drinking tune as he bent forward to run his tongue over the exposed tops of her breasts, up the column of her throat to her lips. Sparkle stood rooted to the spot, too stunned to react.

"Nice powder," he announced. "Guess you don't kiss with any feelin' till we get upstairs." He licked his lips and reached into a pocket of his sodden coat. "Heard tell there's high times to be had, if a fella can ante up. How much to see your room, French doll?"

Sparkle recovered enough to find her voice. It was surprisingly smooth and clear. Years in saloons had some value, after all. That poise might just save her life. "I was born in Paris, but have been in this country some years now. I do not have so much the accent any longer. Visits with me must be arranged." She pointed to Tolover, relieved to glimpse the implacable set to his features.

Tolover, Rafe, Parker and Driscoll...you'll be well guarded, never really alone with him. Never in true danger.

"If you like my powder," she remarked with false assurance, "there are other places from which to sample it. Places few men have tasted as you will, sir."

"Hot damn! You read tea leaves, the wrinkles on a man's balls, or what?"

"Tarot cards," she replied in a sultry hiss as she held up THE LOVERS.

"Ho, got some other tricks too, I hear. Want some more of your powder, French pastry. Now. Tell the boss I got a pocketful of gold eagles."

Sparkle offered a winning smile and sashayed across the saloon to the bar, where Tolover stood with his burly bardog. "Send the men upstairs to fill the tub. I'll wait in the panel crib while you hash out price."

"The tub?" Tolover frowned. "But I just had Denny Ray and Marcus pull it out not two hours ago, on Rafe's orders."

"We need to get the mud off our guest," Sparkle whispered, winking. "Never met a man who wore his gunbelt in the bathtub."

"Good point." Tolover ambled over to Slocumb. Sparkle hurried to the kitchen to request the tub and hot water. She passed Driscoll waiting on the employee stairwell, as promised. She announced their quarry had arrived, then continued up to the panel crib.

She nearly ripped the door off its hinges. "Rafe, he's here. Tolover's sending the tub back up. I'm going to suggest a bath. Slocumb's covered in trail mud, and he'll have to take his guns off."

Rafe never answered. When the bedroom door opened, Sparkle was seated on the edge of the brass bed, loosening her hair and removing her earbobs. Saloon help carried in the copper bathtub and steaming buckets. Her "customer" stood watching beside Tolover.

"Boss says you give some fantastic baths. Damn well better, for what I paid."

"She's worth it," Tolover reassured him. "Last man she had up here said he'd never had better, and he's visited saloons from here to the Pecos. Dozens."

Sparkle fought to retain her fragile composure. Had Rafe heard that? "You'll be more than pleased," she told Slocumb, drawing him inside. "We're to be good friends. I am Sparkle LaFleur. What do your friends call you?"

"Ned." The door closed and they were alone. Sparkle prayed the erratic pulse in her throat wasn't visible. She gave her chin a haughty tilt and unfastened the purple velvet gown.

"Sparkle, huh?" Slocumb prowled the chamber. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry when he checked everywhere, even under the bed. Rafe's pack was hidden with him in the space behind the panel. Slocumb glanced at the big tub. "Them sweet tits are gonna be real nice, wet and bobbin' under my hands." At last he seemed satisfied they had their privacy. He began struggling out of his coat.

"Oh dear, but your things are so very wet." She was pleased by the petulance in her tone. "They will soil my big bed. Allow me to take them," she purred, stepping out of her gown and petticoats. Clad only in her corset and chemise, she took his coat over to the dark corner.

"This chair is for my visitor. Your weapons and boots, Mr. Ned?" She reached out, palms up expectantly. "I'll fold your things neatly. Ah, but you'll be a changed man when you leave tonight, Mr. Ned."

Considering Rafe's mood, you just might be a dead one. Don't make a stand, please. Let us all live through this, Slocumb.

He unbuttoned his shirt, but seemed leery of parting with his gunbelt. "Want a good taste

of them titties first. Without all the powder this time. Just sweet skin."

Sparkle thought she heard a muffled curse, but Slocumb didn't react. He stood waiting with a distinctive bulge at his fly. Sparkle reached back and untied her corset, then sidled over beside the copper tub. She made a show of removing her stockings, but didn't let him see her slip her garter knife into the stack of fluffy towels.

"There's no reason you can't enjoy my charms while you wash, Friend Ned. We will both enjoy ourselves much more after your hot soak. Please get in."

Slocumb hesitated. Sparkle bent from the waist, offering her bosom through her filmy chemise over the tub's rolled copper rim. The gunbelt dropped to the floor with his filthy work pants and underdrawers. Slocumb stumbled over the pile of dirty garments, sloshing into the bathwater. Sparkle fought her rising fear, telling herself in a few more seconds, Rafe could come out.

Slocumb yanked the fabric of her chemise down with grubby fingers, splashing water over her breasts with his free hand. "Oh yeah, you look mighty nice," he growled as her nipples hardened. "Want the talcum off. There." He leaned to fasten puckered lips over a dusky crest and Sparkle jumped. She barely noted his guttural growl, ignored the discomfort as his teeth raked her hard little nub. Her mind churned. Time for Rafe's signal. She had to mention oysters.

"I'll ask Mr. Tolover to bring us some wine and oysters," she announced in a clear voice. "You'll need oysters tonight."

She tried to rise, but Slocumb had her chemise in his fist. "I've never needed oysters in my life, honey."

Rafe slid the panel open and emerged with his peacemaker trained on the man in the bathtub. "Conley. Goddammit, you set me up! French whore in a fuckin' panel crib. Hope you plan on drillin' the slut, too. Bullet's too good for the tease," he snarled as his fingers tangled in Sparkle's hair. "I'll drown her, save you the lead."

He jerked her face toward the waterline. She screamed and flailed with her right arm, frantically grasping for the towels.

The hall door banged open. Sam Parker entered, his shotgun pointed at Slocumb's head. Rafe's voice was calm and reasonable. "Stop, Slocumb. You're done. Got more men downstairs. By now they've got your gang. Let her go. Paid the slut to play along."

Slocumb froze. Sparkle's heart thumped harder as she realized Slocumb was holding his breath. Inches from his face and chest, she should have felt his breath, seen his nostrils flare. He'd loosened his grip on her tresses, but wasn't breathing. He ignored Sam, kept his eyes glued on Rafe. She knew what that meant.

She'd been trained by the previous owner of the Scarlet Lady how to deal with dangerous men. Forget where they looked. They deliberately chose a focal point to throw opponents off. Stay calm, take a deep breath yourself. Use your head and live. Her

fingers found the stack of towels, wrapped around the handle of her knife.

Slocumb finally inhaled and uncoiled his muscles, launching himself forward. He lunged at Sam, never once tearing his gaze from Rafe's weapon, unaware Sparkle had pivoted and raised her arm. Ned threw himself--right onto Sparkle's three-inch blade.

"Murderin' whore."

He seized for her throat with one hand. The other clapped over his gut. There was a loud roar and Ned jerked, releasing her. The base of his skull whacked against the tub's rolled rim. A thin maroon trickle formed below the hole in his forehead. He slumped back, unmoving, unseeing. The bathwater had already gone crimson from the gash Sparkle put in his belly.

She was too shocked to realize Ned Slocumb wasn't the only one bleeding.

Rafe holstered his Colt and caught her to him.

"We got him, Rafe." Her voice sounded strange, distant. The candles must have blown out. The room seemed dark and too cold. She began to shudder.

Rafe saw the blood and rushed her over to the bed. "Sonofabitch. Sam, get a doc up here! She's hit."

Tolover sent for the law. Rafe didn't say more than two words to Earp, walked the length of the room as Slocumb's body was dragged out. He continued to pace while the doctor stitched Sparkle, stepped over the employees sent to remove the tub and Slocumb's clothing. Paused only to open the window when the doctor said Sparkle needed fresh air, then resumed his pacing. He was still prowling after Parker and Driscoll paid the doctor and saw him out.

Tolover spoke from the doorway. "Your wife's all right, Conley. Just a couple stitches in her scalp. Doc says it was probably the murder itself sent her into shock, not the flesh wound. He sedated her because she needs rest."

The gunslinger paced without looking up. Tolover had known Rafe a long time, but had never seen this odd reaction before.

"Dammit stop, Conley! You'll put a track in my floors I'll never get back out. Come downstairs and have a drink. She'll sleep for a spell. I'll send one of my gals to stay with her."

Rafe crossed the room and doubled back. He never acknowledged Tolover's presence or indicated he'd heard the words meant to console him. Just kept moving, staring at the floor in front of his boots. He never so much as glanced over at the woman on the bed. And it was this strange aversion that sent Tolover across the hall.

## Chapter 13

"Stop that pacin' and set a spell."

Rafe ignored the husky voice. It came again, this time a harsh warning. "Set yourself on that bed and start usin' your jaw instead of your feet. You don't stop wearin' the wax off the floors, I'll take you down. You know I can do it. Set your bony ass down."

Rafe had heard Alice raise her voice to him exactly once before.

He stopped and sank to the edge of the mattress. He scanned the huddled form behind him, then stared down at the bare floor. "Al, I'm busy right now...contemplatin'."

Alice pulled the Victorian chair directly in front of Rafe and set her hands on her knees as she lowered her bulk into it. "I can see that. Ain't never seen you 'contemplate' quite like this. Tolover, neither. Got him plum spooked, Rafor, and that ain't easy. Heard a bullet strayed and clipped your gal." Alice inclined her head toward the woman in the bed. "It happens. Can't tell me you never had one stray before."

"It ain't the scratch. Whole thing never should've happened. Should've known she'd try somethin' with that knife. She didn't listen to me. All she had to do was get the guns away from him and give me the signal." He rubbed his palms together, still staring at the toes of his boots. "She shouldn't have been here at all. My fault she was."

"I thought the idea was to use her to bring him down."

"Bad idea. Broke my own rule. Never work with an amateur. Got stuck bringin' her into town with me, and I thought--naw, I ain't been thinkin'. Should have reckoned what could go wrong, taken better precautions. Might have, if I'd been usin' my brain as much as my pecker lately."

"She wanted to work with you?"

"Naw, she hated the idea. But I didn't leave her much choice, cause before we rode in, she'd--" He stopped, glancing up at Al for the first time. "It's complicated."

"The best stories always are. Got a customer sleepin' off a three-day drunk. He won't be raisin' his flagpole anytime soon, unless rigor mortis sets in," she snorted. "I got time to listen. You got somethin' better to do?"

Rafe heard himself asking Sparkle that same question before making love to her again on a long sultry morning. He'd forgotten where he'd learned the phrase.

"Met her outside a saloon in Wichita. She was a waiter gal, told fortunes. Pretty good income, but the owner wanted her on her back in his monkey hall. She wouldn't do it. He booted her out, but I got him to take her back. She read my fortune. I tipped her big, gave her a nice juicy kiss... Purposely tweakin' the fool runnin' the place, you know?"

"So far it's simple enough."

"Well, I liked her too. Naturally. While later, I was in Wichita again on business. She



came runnin' up to me on the street. Some fella had been pesterin' her and she wanted me to play husband, get rid of him."

"So that's how the tale started, hmm? And the ring?"

"One thing led to another. I bought her the ring to make things easier for her, so her boss wouldn't push at her. She was scared, hadn't never been with a man." Alice's eyes narrowed, and he rushed on. "Know it sounds like hogwash, her bein' so pretty and workin' in bagnios. But she was tellin' the truth. I proved it."

"Well, well."

He released a heavy sigh. "She told me earlier tonight she'd been savin' herself all that time for some other fella. She's still got feelin's for him."

Al drew a deep breath. "Well Rafe, you got two separate wrinkles need ironin' out. Let's take one at a time. You're lower than a snake's belly over the shootin' tonight. Makes sense, but part of your guilt's cause you had her first, and you ought to understand that."

"Come on, Al. I'd feel like shit if anybody got hurt."

"Naturally, but this ain't anybody, it's Sparkle. And it's worse cause you opened up the world for her. Ain't all that different than if you save somebody's life. Feel responsible for what happens to them afterward."

"Is that why you're in here now?"

"Damned straight it is."

Rafe glanced at Sparkle, then back to Alice. "How much did you tell her?"

Al shrugged. "That you'd been a cowpuncher, pretty raw when we had our times. Didn't tell her just how raw, how your uncle brung you to me at twelve for breakin' in. And Lord Almighty, but I sure did, didn't I?"

Rafe got to his feet again. "Already signed on to take out Slocumb when I got word some fool had kidnapped her from the saloon in Wichita. Thought she was my wife. It was a joke. I played along like I was her husband, figurin' sooner we might end up...like this." He met Alice's searching gaze squarely. "I just wanted her in my bed, worse than any woman I've ever met. I couldn't buy her."

"This way turned out a lot harder, huh?"

"Christ, it's like I bought into a round of poker way too rich for my blood. Been anted and raised about five times, and I'm only holdin' a pair of threes. Can't win this unless I get real lucky on a bluff. Look at her," he hissed. "Should I feel lucky?"

"Outlaw's dead. You're alive; so's she."

"Because I understand how wanted men think. Know what I'm up against. Ain't like that with her."

Al didn't respond right away. "You and that little gal grind hipbones like I ain't heard go on in years. You're not walkin' the floor just cause of a guilty conscience. That other fella's got to you. But I can't help wonderin'...if Sparkle's sweet on him, how come he wasn't her first? What's she doin' under you?"

"Hell if I know. Says she's known him a long spell, that she was waitin' for him to come around--" He stopped, frustrated and confused.

"What's a gal mean when she says a fella doesn't see her like the men in a saloon do? He some Nancy-boy? Older and married? How could any man not see Sparkle as a pretty gal?"

"Could be married, I reckon," Alice answered thoughtfully. "You ask her?"

"We weren't exactly havin' a peaceable chat when the subject came up," he admitted.

"Then all hell broke loose." He wiped a rough palm over his eyes. "Hell, I don't know what to do. Probably best for both of us if I just step out of her life. She wouldn't have that new part in her hair or been kidnapped if she spent nights with anybody but me."

"Thought maybe you loved this gal."

His voice was tight. "No maybe about it. I do, Al. She'll do anything I want, anytime I want, any way I want. And I always want, no matter how much I have of her. Can't let her out of my sight. What the hell else could it mean?" Now his voice was tinged with sarcasm. "Yep, she'll do anything I want, except say she loves me."

Al lumbered to her feet. "Ever ponder she might, only not know it yet?"

He shook his head. "Has it in her mind she loves the other man. Saw her eyes when she told me about him."

Alice snorted again. "You ever known a woman to keep her love in her mind, Rafe? Along with about a thousand men, I've known my share of gals in my years on the rack. Never met one who didn't hold her love in her heart. If Sparkle ain't in love, she's in some powerful lust. I'd use that, make her see it's you she wants, not the married fella. I've known whores to go soft over some man they couldn't have. Maybe that's what this is with her. You're an honest, hard-lovin' man. She might want that somebody else, but she needs you."

"You know the situation, though. Can't give her forever."

"Can't...or won't? You don't offer that, some other man will," Al pointed out quietly.

"Ain't none of my funeral, and I ain't fond of tattle-asses, but a fella came up to the landin' a couple nights back while you were over at the livery. I heard them talkin'. He offered Sparkle an opportunity on the Barbary Coast. Said he owned a gaming parlor, offered her a partnership if she'd read cards out there." Rafe's eyebrows shot up, evincing his surprise. "Figured you didn't know. Point is," Al muttered, "Know how many gals pray some man will make them an offer like that? Sparkle turned him down."

"Not cause of me, cause her brother's a cripple and she wouldn't move so far away from him."

"Maybe, but you ain't never run from a fight. Tracked Hoffman for years. If you're fixin' to give up so easy, then you deserve to lose her...Even though she won't find what she has with you again. You won't find another like her, neither." Alice shambled toward the door.

Rafe moved quickly, slapping his palm against the wood barrier before she could open it. "Al, I know you're right. I won't find another like her. She doesn't care about my scar or that she's too pretty for me. But--"

The whore's massive arm slipped around his midsection. "Make her see she loves you, Rafe. But remember, her kind needs forever. Forever's your challenge, not Hoffman. Someday you got to face it down. It's huntin' you, sugar, gettin' closer all the time."

"Al." Rafe's voice was hoarse.

The big arm withdrew. "Go on back to pacin' if it eases your mind. Take care of Sparkle and yourself. Get her on her feet, and don't come back here again, Rafe."

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Sparkle jerked awake and sat up, heart pounding. She'd just escaped from something unpleasant in a dream. Though clearly daylight, it was pouring rain outside. Water streamed down the dingy windowpanes. She was alone in the brass bed, alone in the room.

"Rafe?"

No answer. The saloon was still as a tomb. Had he left town? Collected his reward and stranded her? He'd been so angry the other night... When was that? Sparkle found she couldn't quite recall. She fumbled into the blue gingham dress, not bothering with undergarments. She raced out the door to the landing. "Rafe." She peered down through the gloom, calling through cupped hands. "Rafe."

He was downstairs with Tolover and Parker when he heard the screams. He bounded up the staircase as Sparkle came tearing down. They collided and he nearly knocked her off her feet. "Jesus. I'm sorry, Sparkle. I didn't know you were awake."

She burst into tears, covering her eyes with both hands. Rafe couldn't have been more startled had she flung a bucket of ice water at him. Doors opened here and there. Curious women peered at them along with a scowling male. Unhappy customer. Sparkle wailed as though Rafe had just announced he'd shot her pet hound dog. "Come here, darlin'." He dragged her back into their room and closed the door.

He wondered how one small filly could hold so much water. She was leaking from everywhere--but what was seeping onto her skirts was bright red. Something was wrong. He bolted across the hall to Al's room.

"Get off, cowboy! We got an emergency." Rafe grabbed the naked man stretched full length atop the strumpet's immense white belly and flung him off the sagging bed. Then he grabbed a thick wrist and yanked, jerking Alice to her feet. "Sparkle's dyin'. Something's wrong, she's bleedin'!"

Al waddled over to study the girl, barefoot and quietly sobbing in a huddle on the floor. Alice saw the dark stain on the cotton skirts and began to jiggle with suppressed laughter. "You mean this?" she pointed with a chubby index finger.

"Yeah. Do somethin', Al. I'll go for the doc. Wait--which way from here?"

Al lost control and let loose a booming laugh. "She's just havin' her courses, Rafe. She ain't dyin', for Christ's sake. You just ain't knocked her up yet, despite all that...tryin'." Alice literally slapped her thighs and wiped tears from the corners of her eyes.

Rafe's face went slack, then red, followed by livid purple. Sparkle stopped hiccuping and looked at the other two with a mixture of horror and mortification.

"Sorry Alice," Rafe ground out. "I'm goin' back down and have a nice stiff belt of bourbon. You two gals can sort this out." He threw Sparkle a murderous glare and banged out the door.

"My, oh my...Don't I feel silly?" came Sparkle's rhetorical question. Waking up from a bad dream, imagining the worst--that she'd been abandoned in the Gomorra of the West--totally unaware it was "that time" again, she was genuinely embarrassed to the soles of her feet. God, and they were bare, too. She'd acted like a ninny. Another female had been summoned to make the diagnosis about the blood, and Sparkle suspected she looked like an overgrown child.

But then again, it was hard to feel too ridiculous. Rafe thought she'd been bleeding to death. Heaven only knew why, since the man clearly knew women's bodies almost better than his own.

And why be so mortified, when she sat looking up at a stark naked woman the size of a young hippopotamus? "I apologize for all this. I woke up and Rafe wasn't here. I was afraid he--he might have left town. I've got a headache and cramps, it's raining, Rafe's furious--otherwise, everything's peachy. Got anything for the monthlies, Alice?"

"Yeah, be right back. Got a customer too, so you'll have to get straightened out and patch things up with that fool husband of yours."

"Alice, you know Rafe's not--" Alice was gone. But a moment later she returned, wrapped in an embroidered tablecloth. Sparkle looked twice. Yes, it was a tablecloth. Al thrust a bundle of faded cloths and a pair of pantalets at Sparkle.

"Rafe doesn't need a drink," Alice pronounced. "You got hurt the other night. You've been sleeping off the morphine the doc gave you for two days. Rafe ain't finished a plate of food in all that time, but downed plenty of bourbon. Had to threaten to sit on him before he'd take nourishment at all. He don't need liquor, honey, he needs your arms."

Clean yourself up, then take him to Marybel Wing's eatery. Tell Marybel to boil you up some chamomile tea and charge the vittles for you and Rafe to my account." A haughty tilt to her head, the elephantine woman in the tablecloth disappeared.

Sparkle changed and found Rafe at the Adventuress' long bar, studying his whiskey glass as though he expected it to spin and dance on the polished wood. His features were taut. Chagrined was an endearing expression on his rugged face, Sparkle decided, masking the upturned corners of her mouth with a small cough. Proper decorum around a gunslinger required awe, not amusement, but damned if he didn't look like a small boy caught filching from the cookie jar.

"Al says Marybel Wing has some special tea at her restaurant that will make me feel better. Maybe some food would help you." She reached for his arm.

"It's rainin'," he scowled, talking to his whiskey tumbler. "Too wet for a walk."

"Afraid of a little water, Rafe? We won't drown."

Rafe closed his eyes, struggling to blot out the memory of Slocumb threatening to drown Sparkle as he watched. The bartender produced an umbrella and gave Rafe a wink.

Rafe led Sparkle outside and opened the umbrella. "Sorry I was--my sister's a few years ahead of me. Our ma's been gone awhile, and whores don't work when...you know. You were hollerin' and wailin', then I saw that blood. I sort of panicked." He laid an arm across her shoulders.

"I was crying because I thought you'd left me here."

Rafe frowned. Left her? "Darlin', you should know better." Then he considered their argument the night of Slocumb's killing. He'd accused her of planning to dump him. Maybe she didn't know better.

"I swear that would never happen. I'd never leave you." He pressed a soft kiss to her cheek. "Never."

"Guess I panicked, too." She stared up into his eyes, and it came rushing back. Her unflagging desire for this man, the need to be close to him. Still.

"Al said I'd been hurt. Is that why I have this awful headache?" She gingerly reached up to her hairline.

He began walking along the sidewalk, shortening his strides to keep her next to him and under the shelter of the umbrella. "Your man ain't too bright sometimes," he sighed, slowly reiterating the events of two nights before.

A half-hour later he was sipping strong black coffee and studying her face in the empty restaurant. He'd explained only what he had to. Sparkle drank her special tea and seemed to ponder the tale. "When are we leaving town?" she asked.

"Reckon I'll get the balance of my fee tomorrow. Soon as this weather lets up, we can

head out."

Sparkle's gaze raked his face. "You don't have to work another case right away, do you? You made enough that you should be able to take some time off. Please tell me you're not going after Hoffman next."

Rafe set down his mug. "Hoffman ain't about money. It's personal, you've known that from the day we met. But I ain't fixin' to go after him just yet."

"What did he do? Oh yes, you said something about him killing a member of your family."

Rafe glanced out the window, watching the rivulets stream down the dirty glass. "My uncle. Hoffman was sheriff in a small town until the election, when my uncle took over his job. Hoffman got ticked, claimed the vote was rigged. Uncle Tom actually took a shot at Hoffman in the street about a week after the votes were recounted, tried to make him back off and quit carpin'. Couple days later, Hoffman backshot my uncle in front of witnesses. They arrested him for murder. The whole damned town knew he'd been in trouble before, but somehow he was acquitted."

He toyed with his coffee cup. "My pa and older brother died in the War Between the States. I was too young to go, but Uncle Tom came back wounded. Then he got killed after tryin' to straighten out his life. His murderer got away with it. Ma faded away after that, died a short time later. Her husband and first-born son killed in the war, brother murdered senselessly. It broke her spirit."

"I'm sorry. My mother's been gone a long time, but I still miss her. I know how sad you must feel." Sparkle's fingers reached to brush his, but he pulled away.

"Quit the gang I was ridin' with then. Hired my gun out. Ma and my sis never liked my ways, figured Travis would follow in my footsteps and turn outlaw too."

"You were an outlaw?"

"Of sorts. Seventeen and mostly big talk is what I was. But damned fast with a pistol. Always, from the first time my pa put one in my hand. Took the notion to hunt Hoffman down and see justice done. Collected a reward or two along the way. Natural talent, I guess you'd say. Never was much use workin' cows. Hated raisin' corn on our farm in Nebraska. Born with a wild streak, a lot like my uncle."

"Seventeen and an outlaw," Sparkle mused aloud. "I was fifteen and a saloon girl."

"My uncle had been a lawbreaker before the war. Even when he came back, for a short time. Don't reckon folks realized they'd voted in the same Tom Wilmont that had ridden with Micah Slade down in Texas."

"Micah Slade?" The missing piece of the puzzle clicked into place in Sparkle's mind. Violence in their pasts, families torn asunder. Parallel destinies.

Micah Slade. Both of our lives forever altered, tainted by a man neither of us ever knew.

She mentally shook herself. "I'm not sure I'll be up to traveling tomorrow. Since it's not costing anything for the room, could we stay another day or so?"

Rafe stood up, flexing his right knee. "You made a big point of tellin' me how you hate this town."

"I know, but--I'm not ready to face my brother. I can wire money to his nurse, but I have to figure out some reason to give Jace as to why I left Wichita. I certainly can't say I lost my job because I was abducted."

"Wire the nurse that you're comin' home. We'll stay until you're well enough to make the train trip. I'll send Snatch with Sam out to Big Bow. Ain't never set foot on a stage, ain't sure a train's much better. Notion of bein' cooped up for hours in any movin' contraption doesn't appeal to me, but you ain't goin' alone. And you ain't goin' back to saloons, so don't bother ponderin' the notion."

Something had changed. For everything Rafe said, there was something left unsaid. A vague unease had been building during their meal. "Rafe, are you upset with me for some reason? If it's that silly business of that card parlor in San Francisco, I --"

"Heard about that."

He sounds jealous again. The night Slocumb was killed, Rafe had been jealous. They'd argued, she now recalled. "It was nothing, Rafe."

He noticed the rain stopped and closed the umbrella. "It's all nothin', ain't it?"

"What? Will you wait a minute?" He didn't. He purposely strode away, leaving her gaping at him. "Rafe?"

He stopped on the saloon's broad porch and spun back to face her. "I said it's all nothin'. Here with me, Frisco with some stranger who owns a card parlor, or San Antone with somebody else. Wouldn't make any difference. You're pretty. You'll always get offers from fellas lookin' to take care of you. Won't let me take care of you, will you? You should stay home with your brother."

She caught up, fighting to catch her breath. "I don't understand. If you're asking will I let you keep me--" He shrugged and her spirits sank. "I can't let you pay for my brother's care and our expenses. The answer's no, Rafe. The man going to the Barbary Coast wasn't talking about that kind of relationship."

"I'll just bet," Rafe drawled.

"Nevermind. I'll talk to Frazer and make him--"

"He told the law you're not allowed back, no matter what. Wants nothin' more to do with either of us. Reckon if I pass through Wichita again, I'll do my drinkin' over at Sadie's or another tavern."

"How often do you 'pass through' Kansas City?" She planted her fists on her hips.

"Been there once or twice."

"So why go now? Are you looking to clear your conscience? See me home, cough up some cash, pat yourself on the back, and boast you reformed me. Make a noble gesture, then continue hunting criminals and Hoffman as if nothing happened. Pretend my kidnapping and this horror with Slocumb never took place."

"Pretend?" he repeated, glaring at her. "While I'm at it, I guess I'll pretend I never made love to a goddamned virgin nine ways to Sunday--only to have her confess she's in love with someone else! I'll pretend that didn't hurt my feelin's none. What the hell? I been pretendin' I'm married to the woman for months. I'm gettin' so good at all this pretendin', don't know myself what's real anymore."

"Rafe--"

Tolover burst through the batwing doors with another man behind him. Both were armed with shotguns. "Praises be, you're back. Earp came by. Trouble down at the Staghorn. Boys from two rival outfits been drinkin' heavily and it's turned nasty. He asked for back up. Figures you owe him."

Sparkle's heart caught in her throat. "Rafe, no."

Rafe plowed through the swinging doors, ignoring her huffing up the staircase behind him. She entered the panel crib to find him fastening his gunbelt around his hips. "Rafe, don't do this."

"Stay here," he ordered. "I'll be back quick as I can. We ain't settled our hash yet."

"Rafe." She practically threw herself in front of him, blocking the doorway.

His hard expression softened as her arms slid around his waist. "Darlin', I'm just goin' for threat value, like the mornin' I got Frazer to take you back. This will likely blow over without a shot. But I got to--"

"Damn you, you do not. Don't you come back with another chunk missing someplace, Rafe Conley," she warned, her eyes filling as she moved aside. "I'm not going to cry over you or nurse you this time. I'll go home alone to Kansas City. I don't need you. I'm not going to cry over you again, do you hear me?" she sobbed brokenly.

"Yeah, but I got to go anyhow." He pulled off his bandanna and pressed it into her fingers. Then, with a chaste peck to her forehead, he was gone.

She was still awake when he appeared hours later. "Hey," he nodded as he entered the panel crib. Candles glowed in the wall sconces. She was seated cross-legged on the big mattress wearing one of his shirts over a pair of pantalets. Tarot cards formed a cross in front of her. She dropped her gaze back to the painted surfaces.

"Your own future? Thought you didn't do that."

"Once in a while I do." She offered a casual shrug. "It helps pass the time while I'm



waiting to hear if someone I care about has been hurt or killed."

"Who?"

She put away the cards. Rafe undressed and blew out the candles. It was pitch dark and he was suddenly beside her--naked, reaching for the buttons on his shirt to peel it away from her torso. He reverently kissed the tip of one breast. "I asked who you care about."

"You, you stubborn blockhead."

"Do those cards tell you how much I love you?" The words were whispered in the darkness. "I do, Sparkle."

"And you prove it by making me sick with worry?" There was a sharp edge to her voice, but she couldn't help it. He'd left her to imagine the worst. Tonight her imagination had been entirely too fertile.

His soft chuckle melted her insides. "You might've been worried, but you ain't sick. You feel fine," he noted, pulling her bare torso against his own. "So fine I can't help wantin' you. Though I know I shouldn't, it bein' your time and all. Sparkle ..." His lips met hers in a tender kiss that took her breath away. He held her tightly, kissing her gently.

"Mmm?" came her answering languid sigh when she finally got her mouth free.

"I had a turn frettin' over you too, " he reminded. "Twice. Bloodshed's never affected me, even when a fair amount of it's my own. But both times I saw you bleedin', the sight turned my bones to jelly. Sooner shoot myself than see anything happen to you."

She pressed her lips to his throat, feeling the strong pulse, drinking in his musky scent.

"Now you know how I felt when you went out. Why is everything between us wrong suddenly, Rafe? I've never been involved with anyone. Is this disquiet part of it?"

He stiffened. "Between us there's somebody else, remember? At least that's what you said." His voice was raw with pain. "Just tell me whoever the fella is, he ain't married. It tears me up inside, thinkin' of you wastin' your life over some married fella. You need to be a wife and mother some day."

"He's not married. I don't want to talk about him. Please, let's--"

"Thought about this ever since the other night. May regret it, but I got to try."

"Rafe--"

"I want you to become my wife, for real. Don't know if he's married or not, but I ain't. I think we should get married." There was a frozen silence. "You hear that, LaFleur?"

"Yes. I'm just not certain I believe it."

"You don't think I mean it? Is that why you're cryin'?" His fingers brushed her damp cheek.

She shook her head. Sideways, then up and down. "I don't know. We've only been

together a short time, and too much has happened. I'm not sure either of us can think straight."

Rafe's voice was husky, seductive. "Don't see it as a matter of thinkin'. Comes down to what you feel. One of us two fellas ought to be your husband. You want me or him?"

"Oh, I didn't expect you to ask this. I don't--" Her voice broke over a sob. "I can't answer that. I need time to think, to assess my fe-feelings. I know you're not very...patient--Well, maybe with Hoffman, but not with me. I'm terrified I'll lose you."

"Are you?" His arms wrapped her in warmth. "That says somethin', right there."

He held her until her sobs quieted. She lay in the circle of his arms and the Dodge City darkness, oddly comforted by the very town she'd feared. It had become a dark haven, a place where she had no "proper" expectations to meet, no demanding boss, no women like Majesta judging her for lying half naked beside a man who loved her at her worst.

Rafe did, Sparkle realized. Crying, shouting, nervous, even having her monthlies...But he was still everything she shouldn't want. Tonight had been a vivid reminder. He still took chances, still went in search of that horrible final bullet.

"You know what I can offer," he murmured against her hair. "I'll allow it don't seem like much. That city fella back home's probably a thousand things I can't measure up to. Hundred things I'll never be, even if you gave me a dozen years to work on 'em. I don't talk fancy, don't own a suit."

"Go to sleep," she hushed. "I'm tired. I don't want to talk about this now."

"Not yet," he insisted. "All I got are calluses on my thumb, my horse, some money in the bank, and the Continental Divide across my chest here. But whatever he can give you, it can't be more respect than I got for you. And no man alive could have more love. Used to say anything's possible, but not that, Sparkle."

## Chapter 14

Snatch was tied behind Samson's palomino. Rafe handed Sam a wad of bills, then shook hands with him and Driscoll as they mounted up. Sparkle watched the men ride off, her heart a knot in her chest.

She'd decided against wiring Majesta. There was no point, when she'd arrive in Kansas City in a day or so. She'd pay Majesta and tell Jace she'd lost her teaching position. Majesta wouldn't have written to her at the Scarlet Lady so soon, anyway, Sparkle had rationalized late the night before. She'd lain awake long after Rafe had fallen asleep, reflecting on her options.

That's when she realized Majesta and Jace likely knew nothing of her disappearance or that anything unusual had taken place. After all, she'd just returned from a visit home when Rafe had been shot outside the livery stable. It seemed a lifetime ago...their terse walk back to the saloon, the fight in the monkey hall, sitting on Rafe's lap and listening to him explain how and why he'd been shot. Letting him make love to her the first time. The kidnapping, coming to Dodge.

In actuality, less than a month had passed since she boarded the train in Kansas City to return to Wichita. Less than a month...but in that time, Sparkle's whole world had changed.

Rafe was right; she'd have to choose. This time it wasn't just a matter of packing up and wandering to the next cattle town. She had to decide where her future lay, which man would share her life. It might have been simple, had Jace been whole or had his memory come back. It might have been simple if Sparkle hadn't come to love both men. That was another dark revelation from the wee hours of the morning.

She loved Jace; she loved Rafe. Equally. Unexpectedly. Confoundingly.

With Jace her love was sweet, solid. Reliably deep and abiding. Warm and reassuring. Unwavering as his dependence upon her.

With Rafe it went even deeper. It was dark, mysteriously powerful. Throbbing, pulsating with promise. Forbidden. Mindlessly pleasurable. Unwavering as her need for him.

She felt complete only when he was near, when she could reach out and touch him. Fill up with his scent, taste him.

She had resolved only to weigh her decision later. To take the journey one leg at a time.

I may never know a passion this strong again. I may never be this woman who can give herself so freely ever again.. It may be only here, in this godforsaken, wicked place. It may be this time, or this man. It may be destiny. But whatever it is, I can't let go yet...I can't stop loving Rafe yet.

She'd used a portion of her thousand dollars to buy a satchel and some proper garments. She'd wanted to leave the garish evening dresses behind for the next female who

happened into the Bold Adventuress, but Rafe had insisted she pack the cream silk with the turquoise beads matching her eyes. "I'm real partial to that dress," he'd announced. "Want you to marry me wearin' it."

They stood on the platform, ready to board the Santa Fe for Kansas City. The train was running behind. Rafe cursed when he was informed they'd be aboard all night. "Give me and the wife one of them lower berths in the sleepin' car, then. Can't expect a lady to sit up all night long." He glowered at Sparkle and carried their bags up the narrow steps.

"It'll be all right, Rafe," she soothed, knowing his agitation stemmed from his intense dislike for being confined. He sat ramrod straight, looking ill at ease as they left the station and headed into the Kansas heartland. He reluctantly uncoiled when she snuggled against his shoulder.

He stared out at the scenery in silence most of the day and managed to endure the crowded dining car, though she noticed he didn't eat much. But when the railroad staff announced it was time to retire, he balked. "I'm fine in this seat. You take the berth."

"You'll get a crick in your neck sitting up all night. Besides, I don't want to sleep alone in there. It's not very gallant of you to suggest it. Who knows what ungentlemanly louts are aboard this train?"

He dropped his voice to a whisper. "Can't make myself crawl into some dark hole, Sparkle. Can't be put in a box. You'll have more room to stretch out without me hogging the space, anyhow. If there's a problem, them fellas workin' for the railroad will come runnin'."

"It's not a casket," she emphasized. "And I don't want a man from the railroad. I want to be alone with you. It's been several nights since we..."

His face drew into a scowl. "Still gettin' your way by hangin' that over my head, aren't you? Hell, go get on your nightdress. I'll be along directly. Just need to get some fresh air first."

Sparkle changed into the cotton batiste nightgown she'd bought for the trip and waited in the berth. She'd begun to worry he'd jumped off the train when he finally crawled inside. She took one look and giggled uncontrollably.

Rafe was wearing long underwear.

"Hush up," came his fierce whisper. "Dammit, knew it'd be like a tomb in here!"

She reached to pull him into her arms. "Don't think about it. Kiss me."

"Mmm, that's better," he sighed, hands stroking her curves over the delicate fabric of her nightgown. "I can tell myself we're still in that brass bed." His lips nibbled at her throat. "Bet you don't hate Dodge the way you did. Had us some fine times, didn't we?"

Fine times, Sparkle repeated silently. More like incredible...heart-stopping, unforgettable times.

"Yes, but when I get home, I'll have to take off the wedding band. You'll be staying on the couch in Jace's study or on the parlor settee. My room's upstairs."

"So we've only got tonight?"

She nodded, moving his hands to her breasts. "Real sweet nightgown," he whispered. Before she could stop him, he'd untied it to expose her breasts.

His fingertips teased a nipple into a taut pebble. She gasped as the pebble met with the edge of his teeth. His tongue circled the firm nub, traced over to its partner. He bunched the gown's hem up around her hips, reaching for the curls between her thighs.

She was already moist. He fondled her in the darkness, using the heel of his palm and two long fingers to make her writhe and squirm.

"You're my woman," he asserted firmly, cupping her pubic mound fully in his hand.

"Mine. Before this train pulls into Kansas City, you'll tell me you love me. I think you do, and I'm prepared to drive you plum crazy until I hear you admit it."

"Rafe," she panted. "Take me...love me now."

"Nope. Not until you say how you feel about me."

She tried to unbutton his underwear, to pleasure him, but he wouldn't allow it. She attempted to cover herself. He threatened to shred the new nightgown. She tried negotiating favors. He wouldn't listen.

She endured it all until she was ready to scream with frustration, raw with unquenched desire. It might have been minutes; it felt like agonizing hours. Rafe questioned her, taunted her, cajoled her, telling her over and over her need would be well satisfied as soon as she confessed her secret feelings.

Finally she managed to free his swollen sex from the clinging underwear. He groaned as she brought him to straining, twitching life, stroking his length with both hands.

"Dammit, you're still gettin' your way," he growled. He drew her thigh up over his hip and plunged deep, sending his satin heat to vanquish her. He took her savagely, matching the rhythm of the locomotive's steam engine, pumping, grinding.

They climaxed together, yet he didn't stop touching or kissing her, didn't withdraw. He was on a quest, determined to obtain his greatest reward yet--the bounty on a human soul.

Sparkle was powerless against the onslaught. Nothing he did of a sexual nature surprised her. He'd already done so many things in so many ways, she knew he was capable of anything. Everything. Rafe Conley was pure animal lust and aggression, a ravisher. The embodiment of every bawdy town like Abilene or Dodge City, raw need driven to own and tame.

She accepted it, reveled in it. From the first, she'd understood he was a rowdy, dangerous

man.

But the tenderness... Why tonight had his mood and manner changed to one of such astonishing tenderness? His kisses and caresses were whisper soft as a gentle breeze on her skin, yet they seared deeper than ever.

Abruptly she found herself caught in his net, twisting violently, resisting with every ounce of strength she had, yet unable to free herself. She couldn't move away. The space was too small. She couldn't ignore the feelings he incited.

His lips teased a stiff nipple. "You told me our first time I shouldn't let you forget how much you liked this. Do you want me to stop? You've always liked it before. What's wrong?"

She turned her face into the hollow of his neck. "I've never exposed myself so completely to anyone. And sometimes I begin to think...it's almost like I actually do belong to you."

"I want to say the same. Would it be such an awful thing to belong to each other?"

He caught her face between his hands. "Stop hidin', Sparkle. You'll lie there naked in my arms, but you won't show your insides. You've seen my scar. You know I don't like showin' that to a woman. You know I been hurt, been left to feel like I'm not a man because of it. But Christ, you're beautiful. You ain't got any reason to hide yourself. Why won't you let me see what's in your heart?"

"You scare me.

"Had my loaded gun against your chin, you never flinched. But you're shakin' now. Doesn't make sense."

"It's not that kind of scared. It's easy for me when you tease and talk like a hired gun. But when you're serious and gentle like this--"

"Like this?" His tongue laved the underside of her right breast and ignited a flame. Something more awe-inspiring than carnal need rose in her. Something she didn't want to face, prayed she wouldn't have to name.

"Yes. You know what that does to me."

"When I kiss you like that, it's a special gift. Like your virginity was to me. See, darlin', I can't share this side of me with anyone else. A mercenary ain't supposed to be have tender feelin's."

Her arms curled around his neck. "I know."

"I'd rather be dead than be alone in feelin' this powerful love, Sparkle," he whispered harshly. "Never figured I'd fall in love. Knowin' you don't feel the way I do cuts worse than the Bowie."

God. Why'd he have to say that? Why that? "You're not alone, Rafe. I never should've let

you touch me, but I did. It's too late. Now I need you so much."

"Say it, goddamn you," he hissed. "Once. Say it."

"I...Lord forgive me, I think I do love you."

They melded then. Bodies, souls, mouths, genitals, hearts, minds. The passion swept over them, scorched their minds and bodies, leaving Sparkle limp.

At last Rafe withdrew and tucked the blanket up over their lower bodies. The sleeping car was quiet but for the steady clack of the wheels along the steel rails. Rafe left her sleeping gown untied at the neck. She knew why, and made no move to stop him as he fastened his lips on her flesh, gently suckling as he drifted off to sleep.

His world was so hard, his choices so bitter. Rafe softness. Her understanding and forgiveness. His lips went slack moments later, signaling his drift into deep slumber. She eased him from her body and retied her nightgown. She was exhausted, fully sated, but unable to surrender to oblivion herself. She had too much on her mind.

Rafe honestly wanted to marry her. Could she allow their game to become reality?

Ruby Ann's words about raising fatherless children came back to haunt Sparkle, as did Frazer's boasts of Rafe's exploits. Ned Slocumb sightlessly staring, blood trickling down his face. Rafe's pronouncement he'd been hired to expunge a problem. Human life reduced to mere nuisance....

She'd take Rafe home to meet Jace. That act might prove her salvation. No one could look upon Jace's withered limbs or heavy cane wheelchair and remain unmoved by the sight. Would a man who craved freedom and open space willingly chain himself to a house-bound invalid? Had Rafe ever considered that's what Jace was? Sparkle doubted it. She was almost positive Rafe would change his mind about marriage after meeting Jace--which was probably best for all concerned. Jace didn't need another man's pity. Rafe didn't need entanglements.

And Sparkle didn't need reminders of her past or the loss of her mother. A permanent relationship with Rafe would be like Sparkle's early years with Eliza all over again--only this time Sparkle was no a naive child, the person she loved no innocent laundress. Rafe's livelihood was destructive at its very core. Sparkle couldn't overlook that. She'd be painfully aware, every minute of every night and day, they were living on borrowed time. No. Impossible.

She couldn't, wouldn't go through that pain again.

## Chapter 15

Sparkle pulled the wedding band off and dropped it into her handbag. "Oh dear, there's an obvious mark on my finger."

"Doubt your brother will notice," Rafe replied. "He'll be too busy inspectin' me from head to toe. Remember how I felt the first time Miranda brought Zach home. Hearin' we met in a Wichita saloon ain't apt to warm him up to me, either. "

"You can't say we met there. We didn't. We met on the street."

"Darlin', I wasn't plannin' to boast you wiped my boots with your bustle. Figured I'd say you told my fortune. You did."

"It can't be anything to do with a saloon. Jace thinks I teach school."

They'd been walking to the LaFleur house from the depot. Rafe set down their bags and burst into uproarious laughter. He wrapped both arms around his middle and collapsed onto the sidewalk, cackling so hard tears began to trickle from his eyes.

"I don't see what's so funny." Sparkle glared down at him, tapping her foot.

"A schoolmarm? Hell, why didn't you make yourself head of the Women's Temperance League, or the Reverend Mother of St. Lucinda's while you were spinnin' yarns?"

Sparkle gave him a good swift kick in the rump. "Get up, you jackass! I wasn't even sixteen when I hired his nurse and went to work. I said I was a teacher's assistant in Topeka. When I got to the Scarlet Lady, I claimed I'd become a full teacher and taken a post in Wichita. The nurse knows better, but Jace doesn't. That's how my brother put up with me working in saloons--I never told him."

Rafe's backside smarted where she'd kicked him and he was smothering with his shirt collar buttoned. It was almost summer and too damned warm for stiff collars or a corduroy jacket, but he wanted to make a good impression on Sparkle's only kin. "How's he figure you make so much money teachin' school?"

"I tell him I also tutor privately on the side. Helped cover why I couldn't visit more often."

"Okay, so I saw you walkin' down the street and tipped my hat. Or helped you out of a mudhole, or whatever. How long have I been sweet on you?"

"I don't know. " She looked thoughtful, maybe spinning a new yarn.

Rafe caught her hand. "Stop right there. It's been a year we've known each other, Sparkle. Collected my bounty on Slim Jenson early last summer. Course, bein' a travelin' salesman, I only get to Wichita upon occasion." He snorted with fresh laughter. "Is that what we're claimin' about me? Or do schoolmarms take up with former outlaws to teach morality lessons?"

"Ha, ha," She mimicked with angry sarcasm. "I don't see why we have to get into any of



that. You're just a gentleman friend. Jace will be surprised enough I've brought a guest home. We don't--"

"I ain't just some friend! You call me that one more time, I'll horsewhip you."

"How? Snatch took your bullwhip to Colorado," she reminded haughtily.

"Dammit. I'm not funnin' now, Sparkle. I'm askin' for your brother's blessing. You ain't got a pa, so it's up to Jace. He'll want to know all there is about me before he agrees to a marriage. That's how brothers are."

"I haven't said I'd marry you," she tersely reminded, mounting the front steps of a modest home. The front door opened before she could knock or pull out a key. A blonde woman in a starched white apron arched a pale eyebrow at them.

"Majesta, I've decided to surprise Jace with a visit." Sparkle's voice sounded artificially cheery to Rafe's ears. "I'd like you to meet Mr. Conley. He's a gentleman acquaintance from Wichita. How's Jace?" Sparkle breezed past the woman into the house.

Rafe studied this Majesta. Sparkle said there was a nurse, but this woman didn't look like anyone to alleviate suffering--she was more the type who inflicted it. All buxom and stiff, cornflower eyes downright wary. Those eyes said Rafe was allowed inside, but that didn't mean he was welcome.

"Please come in." She pivoted as she closed the door behind him. Then he promptly ceased to exist as she turned her attention to her employer.

"Your brother's resting. He seems more tired than usual. I thought I'd let him sleep until the meal's ready. You'll join us for supper, won't you?" She shot a glance at Rafe. He nodded and cleared his throat, but had no chance to speak up before she said icily, "Sparkle didn't wire she was bringing a guest. I would have prepared something special. I'm afraid you'll have to take pot luck."

"Whatever you're fixin's fine, ma'am."

Majesta disappeared through a doorway into what Rafe assumed was the kitchen. Sparkle frowned. "Ma'am? You never called me Miss or Ma'am from the very first instant I met you."

"Just tryin' to be sociable, " he parried. "She ain't happy you brought me along. Maybe I should find a room somewhere, call on you tomorrow. Seems she's not feelin' hospitable just now."

"She never feels hospitable, but it doesn't matter. I'll bring home anyone I see fit." She pulled him down beside her on the parlor sofa, sighing. "I'm sorry, I don't like sounding mean. Majesta takes some getting used to. She can be condescending at times, but she's wonderful with Jace. She's just used to running the house her way. I'm not home very often, so I let her. Looking down her nose is what she does best. She even does it to me. You should see the poor drummers who come peddling their wares. They never get

beyond the porch."

"Friendly as a scorpion on a hot rock. That schoolmarm tale probably encourages her to look down on you."

"She's an employee," Sparkle huffed. "Who can be replaced."

They lapsed into silence. Rafe fought to ignore the walls closing in, though a bead of sweat ran down his back. Sparkle was primly sitting beside him, hands folded in her lap. A convincing schoolmarm. But he'd much rather watch her read tarot or climb into bed next to him, as his convincing loving wife. Damned peculiar, since he'd never wanted one before. Never pictured himself as anyone's husband. But he'd adjusted to the scenario during their pretense, and now having Sparkle as his mate was something he wanted badly. Deep down, no funning. But first he had to impress her ailing brother, and that posed a dilemma.

He wasn't about to say he was a traveling salesman--not after Sparkle's remark about how the nurse hated drummers. Jace might have the same dislike. Maybe the nurse was so unfriendly because Jace wanted it that way. But hired gun would be just plain dumb. Nope, he couldn't admit that. Partner in Crockhead Rest seemed a reasonable alternative. It was close to the truth. Travis nagged him every winter about going in on the spread. Rafe had sunk some of his own money in horseflesh and cattle over the past couple years.

That was the best way to handle that question, he decided. If he seemed awkward at the supper table, these city folks would excuse his manners. Cattle ranchers weren't expected to fuss over the right fork or soup spoons. Sparkle's brother wouldn't know the first thing about the beef business.

Majesta swept past them to head up the staircase. "You folks wash up," she commanded. "Seat your Mr. Conley across from Jace's customary place at the head of the table. We'll be down in a moment."

Your Mr. Conley? Rafe suspected the nurse would have preferred to seat him in the next county. Jesus, but she was the unfriendliest excuse for a female he'd run across in a good long time. Had a fine figure, but who'd give a damn? Rafe would just bet she did more than bark. She likely had a damn good bite, if anyone pushed hard enough to find out. He didn't much care how she treated him, but he didn't cotton to her being snippy to Sparkle.

"You know," he commented as they took their places in the dining room, "that woman doesn't treat you with proper respect. Acts like this is her house, not yours. If she doesn't get her bustle on straight, there'll be hell to pay. Won't stand for anybody showin' you any disrespect once you're my wife."

"What's this?" a deep voice demanded. Majesta wheeled a slender man with intense blue eyes into the room. "Wife? I couldn't have heard correctly. It seems Sparkle's neglected

to tell me something important."

Rafe opened his mouth to explain, but the devilish look Jace tossed at his sister said he was teasing in mock anger. Rafe recognized that way between kinfolk. He'd teased Miranda all their lives. She was such a royal pain, it was easy to get her dander up. The more he taunted or ignored her, the more wound up she became until he got her exasperated. Rafe supposed he wasn't the only brother to need recognition from a sister. Even the exasperated kind.

Sparkle had found her voice and that chin-up manner that always warmed Rafe to watch. "Jace, this is Rafe Conley, a gentleman friend." She gave Rafe a speaking look, silently warning him not to contest the last word. "Rafe, this is my brother, Jace LaFleur."

Rafe came around the table and reached down without hesitation to shake hands. He noticed the keen intelligence in Jace's light eyes. The grasp of the man's fingers was surprisingly strong too. Though awkward, since he used his left hand. Rafe amended the image of the "helpless cripple" he'd carried in his mind. There was something in the man to be reckoned with, wheelchair or not. Jace was sharp as a tack.

"This is indeed an honor, Mr. Conley," Jace grinned, glancing at Sparkle. "My sister's never brought a gentleman caller home before. From what I caught as we came in just now, I gather there's a good reason why she's brought you to meet me."

"The food's getting cold, Jace," Majesta admonished. "We'll discuss family business later. Our guest must be hungry. Let me bring the roast out." She adjusted his chair and drew a napkin over his lap.

Damn, but that blonde woman was quick to order folks around. The meal was excellent, but Rafe noticed with mounting irritation the nurse continued to speak in uppity tones and hovered over her patient. He didn't know how Jace bore up under the fussing. A woman seeing to a crippled man's needs was one thing. This gal cut Jace's meat for him, served him more peas before he'd finished the scoop on his plate, even answered Rafe's questions before Jace could speak up. Talk about running the house.

Sparkle also seemed to note the fawning attention, how Majesta's hand lingered on Jace's shoulder or brushed his wheat curls off his brow. She shot the nurse a dark frown that went largely ignored. The nurse woman had seen it, Rafe knew she had. But instead of backing down, she continued in the very same way. There was an undercurrent between the two females Rafe couldn't fathom. Tough enough figuring the workings of one woman's mind. Rafe wasn't going to even try to sort out two.

They adjourned to the parlor. "I'm pleased you surprised us like this, Sparkle," Jace remarked. "I'd asked Majesta to write next week to inquire if you could come for a few days."

Sparkle edged away from Rafe. He was itching to hold her close or entwine their fingers, but knew it was too soon. Jace had only just met him. Fighting his strong desire

for physical closeness with his woman, Rafe kept a safe distance, didn't even brush Sparkle's hand. He'd find a way to be alone with her later.

"Write me?" Sparkle repeated, glancing from her brother to Majesta and back. "Has something happened with your health? Has your memory come back?"

About what? Rafe wondered, sensing a subtle increase in the tension in the room. The women...it emanated from them.

"His health is adequate, " Majesta replied.

"Actually, I've never felt better," Jace agreed. He turned to pin Rafe with his gaze. "I assume you've been calling on my sister for some time, Mr. Conley."

"It's Rafe. And I've been sweet on her nigh onto a year. I came to ask for her hand."

"Well, it seems wedding fever's in the air," Jace beamed.

Rafe suddenly understood why the blonde behaved as if she owned the place. She did.

"Majesta and I were married last week," Jace announced. "I'd hoped to have Sparkle here for the ceremony, but our minister had prior commitments--"

"Married?" The color drained from Sparkle's face. She shot off the couch as if she'd just noticed it was a cactus.

"Yes. We're together constantly, as you know. One day I realized I couldn't imagine life without Majesta, and not just because of my physical limitations. I'd miss her inner strength, her understanding ear. And while I'm not certain she's made the best choice of husbands, I was thrilled when she graciously consented to become my wife."

Sparkle inexplicably went livid at those words. "I pay you to cook the meals and look after this house, not crawl into his bed!"

Rafe winced. He'd seen Sparkle upset before--or thought he had, up until this moment--but she looked ready to swallow a horned toad backwards.

"Darlin', ain't you happy for Jace?"

"Happy for him?" She sounded incredulous at that perfectly natural suggestion.

"Yeah. I know you weren't expectin' to find them hitched, but your brother seems real pleased, and--"

"Oh shut up, Rafe. This has nothing to do with you." She glared at Jace. "You'll have to get an annulment or find some way to--"

"Don't be ridiculous." Jace laughed in protest.

"But this is all wrong," Sparkle insisted. "I want to see you in the other room, Majesta. Now."

Majesta stalked off to the kitchen with Sparkle right on her heels. The door closed behind them and Rafe offered his host a wry shrug. "Can't imagine what's come over

your sis. Maybe because the news took her by surprise. She doesn't always cotton to surprises. She'll boil over, then simmer back down."

Unfortunate choice of words, Rafe. He inwardly groaned at the image of Sparkle naked and panting beneath him. He saw her very clearly at the boiling point, gasping. Clutching at him, coral-tipped mounds and creamy thighs aquiver as he thrust deep a final time, spilling himself into her. Sparkle at her boiling point...those eyes of hers turning smoky teal just before they closed in ecstasy. Think of something else, Rafe warned himself. Anything else.

"We met in Wichita," he blurted, apropos to nothing. Jace hadn't asked.

"Ah," Jace nodded, appearing grateful for the change of subject. "Wichita. Do you have a business there?"

"Nope. I'm partners with my brother. Got a spread over in Pueblo. I travel, buyin' stock and supplies. Met Sparkle on the street one mornin'. She's got the prettiest eyes I ever saw. Ain't been the same since I first looked into them."

Rafe forced a smile he hoped looked congenial and tried to ignore the angry voices carrying from the kitchen.

"She's also got a stubborn streak a mile wide," Jace remarked, coloring as he too caught the disturbance through the closed door.

"Sparkle hasn't actually agreed to marry me yet," Rafe admitted. "Guess she wants time to decide between me and the fella she's known so long. I'm real partial to your sister. You seem like a decent fella, wouldn't hand me no gum. Reckon this local dandy's the right man for her?"

Jace looked baffled. Rafe couldn't detect any mendacity in his voice as he answered. "I don't have the slightest idea. This is the first I've heard of her seeing anyone. If she has a beau here in town, I can't imagine where she's been meeting him. Two suitors?" he muttered. "And to think I worried she'd end up a spinster."

Rafe frowned. Clandestine meetings? The other fella had to be married. Jace's comments all but proved Sparkle had been lying when she denied it. "So you don't know this man, know if he's serious about her?"

Jace soberly shook his head. There was no green tint to his eyes, Rafe noticed. They were pure sky blue. Rafe wouldn't have fallen so hard if Sparkle's had been that same ordinary shade. Jace's hair was much lighter than hers too, and he didn't have her turned-up nose. Funny how there wasn't much resemblance in some families.

"Who does Sparkle favor," Rafe inquired, "your ma or your pa?"

"She doesn't look anything like Mother. I've got her coloring. Sparkle must take after our father, but I can't be sure. I don't remember what he looked like. He died years ago, the night I was wounded. I can't recall much from before the injury."

"What happened? I mean, if you don't mind me askin'."

"I was shot. The bullet's still lodged in my brain. That's what the doctors believe keeps me in this chair."

Rafe jerked as if he'd been shot himself at Jace's revelation. No wonder Sparkle got so upset over firearms. He took a deep breath and forced his thoughts away from weapons and gunshot wounds.

"Got an older sister and younger brother. The three of us are spittin' images on the outside, but we wrangle over what's in our noggins all the time. They got their notions, I got mine. Just the way it goes in families. Maybe Sparkle didn't think you'd cotton to her local beau. I wasn't sure you'd take to me."

"Well, we aren't meeting under the best of circumstances, " Jace coughed, "but you seem a decent sort. Straightforward. You're fond of my sister. I can see that for myself."

"True, but I don't know what I'm up against. Sparkle won't say much about her other fella. Don't know what he looks like or does for a livin'. Could be just some figment of a female imagination--you know, designed to make me jealous."

"Is it working?" The teasing glint was back in the cornflower blues.

"Too damned well. Does that gleam in your eye mean I got your blessin'?"

Before Jace could answer, the women stalked back into the room. "It's too late to catch a train now," Sparkle announced coldly, "but Mr. Conley and I will be leaving first thing tomorrow. If you'd permit him to stay overnight in the study, Jace,--"

"Sparkle, this is still your home," Jace reproached. "You don't need my permission to invite a guest, and what's this nonsense about leaving? You just got here. Majesta, what did you say to her?"

"Several things. None of which I'd care to repeat in mixed company. I'll wait for you upstairs. Your sister can help you up."

"Majesta LaFleur, you will not go up without me," Jace corrected. "I'm not having this house divided. And Sparkle, I'm sorry you had to discover--"

"Discover what? That you and your nurse have been playing house behind my back for months? Or is it years? How big a fool was I? Just when did her tender ministrations come to include massages in bed?"

"Now just a minute," Jace exclaimed, flushing deep red. "Nothing like that ever went on. Majesta's a proper lady. I never laid a hand on her until we'd taken our vows, just as I'm sure you'd never allow a man to take liberties outside the sanctity of marriage."

Rafe rolled his eyes. So much for highfalutin' manners and city folk. This was turning as ugly as any saloon brawl he'd ever seen.

"Sparkle, I should find a hotel room," he reiterated. "You folks need to sort things out."

I'm just underfoot. I shouldn't be intrudin'."

"There's no call for that," Jace disagreed. "There's a settee in my study." He used his good arm to maneuver his chair to the bottom of the staircase. "Majesta, we're retiring to our room. Our guests must be weary from their travels. Everyone will have a better outlook after a rest. Help me up."

Rafe saw Majesta bend to take Jace's arm over on her shoulders as he struggled to stand. The buxom woman seemed sturdy enough, and Rafe knew she must help Jace up those same stairs daily. Still, Rafe couldn't just sit and watch. "I'll take him. Which room?"

"To the right at the top of the stairs," Majesta replied, dragging the wheelchair up behind the two men. Rafe waited until she'd joined him on the landing and had Jace's weight on her shoulders before he stepped aside.

"Thanks," Jace said softly, offering his left hand again. His blue eyes met Rafe's brown and held them. "You and Sparkle take a walk. Have some lemonade. Talk. Ask her again, and advise that I think you'd make a fine husband." He glanced down beyond Rafe's shoulder. "We'll talk later, Sparkle."

There was no response. Rafe turned. She stood at the base of the stairs, her face an ugly mask. Her eyes glittered as Majesta and Jace disappeared and their bedroom door closed. Rafe had seen hurt and anger in her eyes--during the heated exchange earlier--now he saw something else. Incomprehensible, but all too familiar.

He'd felt it himself recently, watching her flirt with saloon patrons. He'd seen it in Sparkle's aquamarine eyes before, the night she'd pulled the doxy off his lap.

Sexual jealousy.

Lord God Almighty, it couldn't be....

'It's the first I've heard of her seeing anyone...'

'We've known each other for years. He doesn't see me the way you or the men downstairs do.'

'How big a fool was I?'

Rafe flew down the stairs. "Goddamn you, tell me I'm wrong about what I see in your eyes, Sparkle," he hissed. "Why are you upset they're hitched? Sore because Majesta has what you yen for? Wish it was you in that bedroom upstairs with him, don't you?"

He shook her roughly. Her eyes left the empty stairwell and rested on his face, but Rafe doubted she saw him. "No wonder my scar never bothered you," he spat in disgust. "You were in love with a freak all along. Christ, that freak's your own brother! He ain't supposed to see you like other men do. I won't be able to after this, either, never again. You're nobody's woman now."

His valise was still by the front door, the Colt inside it. For one horrible moment, his

revulsion was nearly overpowering. He thought of the smooth grip in his hand, pictured his thumb on the hammer. One flick, and Sparkle wouldn't be around to poison Jace and Majesta's life with her sick desires. One flick. Rafe would never encounter her again, never have to look into those damned eyes....

He didn't open the valise. He opened the door.

And struck out for the depot, recalling a watering hole on the way. He purchased a bottle and took it to the darkest spot, farthest from the doorway. Needing a dark hole now, he proceeded to get roaring drunk, so drunk he could barely stagger the rest of the way to the train station and buy a ticket. He tripped over the steps outside the depot. He spat, thinking how he detested bustling cities. Miserable overcrowded places, where folks lived on top of each other. He never should have come to one.

He hated Kansas City and the uncomfortable jacket and boiled shirt he'd donned trying to impress Jace LaFleur. Hated that hellish warning voice that had whispered to him every night in Dodge that having a beauty like Sparkle was too good to be true. He sunk to a nearby bench, belching and muttering curses, sick of life. Resigned to half-dead whores in tawdry saloons, sandwiched between long nights on the trail alone.

His words to Big Al came back. Nope, he'd never find another gal like the fortune teller. Sparkle was unique. That reassurance was precious little consolation. How many barrels of bourbon or huge reward payments would it take to wipe her out of his heart? A hundred, ten thousand?

Something had to sponge her away. Rafe had to forget the panel crib, Wichita, tarot card predictions...everything remotely connected to Sparkle LaFleur.

If he didn't, remembrance of how the clear mountain stream had become a rotten cesspool would find him. Engulf him when he was alone and unaware some dark prairie night. Then he'd stare into his campfire and remember other things: her voice, her hair, the scent of lavender water, her fingers on his scar. He couldn't think about that. He'd go insane if he did. He had to forget it.

If he didn't, Sparkle would still be able to destroy him. Suck his soul straight down into Hell.



## Chapter 16

Sparkle hadn't slept a wink all night. She gave up at last, sensing dawn rapidly approaching. The dresser mirror revealed purple semicircles beneath her eyes. Her reflection was grim, and Sparkle thought her face had never looked so old and worn. So bitter.

The only face she'd seen look worse was Rafe's when he walked out on her.

She'd made no attempt to go after him. She'd been too frightened to even try. His warm brown eyes, reliably so soft as they held hers--even in his glee over her "schoolteacher tale," they'd shown no malice--had become the unblinking pits of a cobra. More black than brown, with no forbearance, only a brittle hatred. For the first time, Sparkle had actually been in terror of him. Terror for her life.

For one fleeting instant, Rafe Conley had appeared exactly like what she now knew he was: a cold-blooded killer.

She'd fled upstairs and barricaded herself in her room, hiding from Jace and Majesta. How had things gone so horribly wrong? she numbly asked herself. Her job at the saloon was gone. She'd helped kill a man. Jace had taken another woman as his wife. Solid ground was now quicksand. She'd never intended for any of it to turn out this way. She'd worked hard, scrimped and saved. For what? Her dreams had blown apart, her morals collapsed. She'd met Rafe and he'd changed everything. Then she'd lost him.

She had nothing left. Nothing.

Except a duty to find both an explanation Jace would accept about Rafe's abrupt departure, and a graceful way to resolve matters with the newlywed LaFleurs.

Sparkle swallowed back tears at the memory of the awful things she'd said the day before in the kitchen. She'd never liked Majesta; always been aware of the nurse's disdain. But Sparkle was still honest enough--honesty being perhaps the lone virtue she still retained--to admit she'd trusted Majesta implicitly. She owed the woman a grudging respect and loyalty, for Majesta had done more than tend Jace's withered body. She'd looked after his spirit and pride, as well. Allowed him to grow to love the woman he depended upon, exactly as Sparkle had intended.

Except she was to have been that woman.

But she hadn't been here with Jace, night and day for the past several years. Hadn't helped him mature from a gangly, withdrawn youth into the decisive man he was now. That much Sparkle understood, despite her jealousy and wounded pride. Jace was the man of the house. No spoiled tyrant, but sure of himself. He didn't apologize for his deficiencies. How much of his inner confidence was due to Majesta's influence? Sparkle needed to find out.

She went into the kitchen, poured a cup of tea, and asked to see Jace alone. She wheeled him into his study and took a long, revitalizing sip of hot liquid.

"Jace, I'm ashamed of the way I acted yesterday. My behavior was uncalled for, unconscionable. I'm truly sorry for it. I don't expect you to forgive me. But knowing you, you probably will."

"I already have," he answered simply. "I should have told you last time you came home that I was considering marriage. I knew my feelings for Majesta long ago, but it took some months for me to work up my nerve to propose. I admire Conley for being forthright in stating his feelings. He says you haven't accepted. I don't understand why. By the way, where is he this morning?" he frowned, noticing for the first time the study was empty.

"I-I wouldn't look for a wedding any time soon. Rafe and I spoke after you went upstairs, and...I'm afraid he's gone."

"To a hotel, after I told him there was no reason to stay elsewhere?" Sparkle silently sipped at her tea, shaking her head. Jace's expression darkened. "You don't mean gone, as in not coming back to call on you?"

Sparkle averted her face, fighting back tears. She'd thought--hoped--she hadn't any left, after crying most of the night. "I wasn't very ladylike, as I said. He's had a change of heart. We broke it off."

"I'm so sorry, Sparkle." His voice held genuine sadness. "He impressed me as the salt of the earth. Is there no chance you two might still work things out? That upset yesterday was just an altercation between siblings. He realizes that. He told me so at the time. I don't understand this turn of events at all."

Sparkle quickly wiped at her cheek. "It's not important. Perhaps it's for the best. Anyway, I just wanted to apologize and tell you I've lost my job. If you'll give me a few days to find a room somewhere, I--"

"Don't be ridiculous. This is your home. My marriage has no bearing on that. You don't need to seek a new post right away. Take a good long rest, regroup."

Sparkle set down her tea, slowly shaking her head. "That's not possible. I've been paying Majesta all these years out of my earnings. Unless you're planning to send her out to work, I have to find something fairly soon. I have some money put aside, but it can't last forever. Your trust fund won't support us all."

"Neither will you," Jace said firmly. "Go find another stint of drudgery, working long hours? Become a dried up spinster with no prospects? I can't abide the thought of that, Sparkle. Don't you think I took our circumstances into consideration when I asked Majesta to marry me?"

"No, I honestly didn't think you had. She didn't have any suggestions. She assumes I'll work, as I always have."

"Well, it's not right to have my sister supporting this household alone. We must reassess matters, have a long talk, the three of us."

"Jace, please don't take on. I'd prefer to work. There are other sal--schools." Her spirits dampened all the more as she realized what she'd almost said. And that she'd be back reading cards in one before a month was out.

"I didn't sleep very well," she mumbled. "I think I'll spend the day in my room."

"Please, have something to eat and get some rest," Jace replied slowly. "Conley seemed an understanding enough man, particularly with regards to family. If you think it would help, I'll contact him at his ranch."

"No. Please just leave it alone."

She dashed out of the study, straight up the stairs. Majesta appeared in the doorway and met Jace's troubled gaze. "Conley left yesterday," he informed her. "Seems he withdrew his proposal after our little family debacle yesterday. She's lost her job, too."

"She told me."

"I reassured her she's welcome to stay and gather her wits before making any decisions. She's rather confused at the moment, which is understandable. Already talking about finding another position somewhere. I don't want her pressured about money. Life is difficult enough for her, having just lost her teaching job and her suitor."

"You mean her lover. Your sister and that stranger were much more than friendly acquaintances."

"Oh, pshaw. You know Mother raised us with strict rules. Sparkle would never let a man take advantage. Besides, Conley never so much as held her hand."

Majesta crossed her arms over her full breasts. "You watched them, did you?"

"Of course I did."

"But not closely enough," Majesta replied with confidence. "When two people can't keep their eyes off each other, yet never lay a finger on one another, it's generally because they can't trust themselves to leave it at a finger." She arched a brow at him.

"Didn't it strike you as odd, her showing up with him out of nowhere? He claimed he'd been courting her for a year. Why hadn't she mentioned him before? She was just here a month or so ago. She could have told you someone was calling on her. Why hide their relationship, if it was proper and platonic?"

Jace had been ready to dismiss his wife's suspicions completely until she asked that. The question plagued him for the next hour. Could she be right about Sparkle and the rancher? If she was, Conley's decision to break things off made even less sense. Sparkle had been upset with the LaFleurs, after all, not Conley. Though she did bark at him to shut up.

Ludicrous, he told himself. If they'd been lovers for any time, the fellow surely would have weathered a fit of temper. He'd mentioned something about her boiling over...And looked darned uncomfortable, now that Jace reflected back on it. Maybe there was

something to Majesta's mistrust.

Jace didn't like to think of Sparkle being misused and cast aside. But if Majesta was wrong, why indeed had Sparkle kept the relationship secret? Because of this mysterious 'other man'?

Someone Conley intimated she knew here in the city. The problem with that line of reasoning was that Jace didn't believe it was true. There would have been signs...personal notes, flowers, a rosy glow in Sparkle's cheeks when she came through the front door. Something. So what the hell was going on?

If Sparkle and Conley had a sexual liaison, she should have jumped at his proposal. Jace sensed it was genuine on the cattleman's part. Sparkle should have gladly accepted, not manufactured some tale about a non-existent rival suitor. Unless it wasn't a tale. But it had to be, didn't it? Unless she'd foolishly become involved with some other woman's husband.

They would have a serious talk, Jace decided--and soon. He wouldn't let her put him off this time. She had a way of evading questions and turning conversations away from herself. Not now, by God. If she'd been misused by Conley or some married local gent, Jace would do whatever necessary to put things right. Even if that meant threatening to reveal an ongoing affair to some poor matron, in order to keep her errant husband home with his trousers buttoned.

Three days later, Jace saw his opportunity. Majesta had gone out shopping. Sparkle had taken her laundry to the basement. They were alone in the house. He'd never get a better chance to speak to her candidly about her social life. He inched his chair near the open basement doorway and called down to his sister.

"Sparkle, I want to talk to you. I know you're not comfortable discussing things in front of Majesta. She's not here now. I'm your brother and I have a right to know what's going on."

She scowled up at him. "Nothing's going on. I'm unemployed."

"That's not what I mean, and you know it. You're clearly more distraught than you admit over the falling out with Conley. I heard you crying last night in your room. I want to know who the other man is and what he means to you. Just when and where have you been meeting him? Is there some reason you've told him not to call for you here?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I haven't met anyone." She picked up a wicker basket and dumped its contents into the waiting washtub. Jace glared as she turned away and began scrubbing garments.

There she goes again. I don't know what's going on, and she's not about to tell me. Thinks by pretending I haven't just asked several urgent questions, by playing ignorant, she'll get me to drop the subject.

"Your suitor here in Kansas City. Is he married, Sparkle? Conley told me you had

another beau."

She glanced up, wringing out an undergarment. "There's no man. Rafe was mistaken, Jace. About a few points."

"Why would he believe there was someone else, unless you gave him that idea?"

"I don't know, and I don't need you watching me rinse out my underthings," she admonished, frowning over her shoulder. "I'll be up in a minute."

"And you'll change the subject or breeze right past me and trot upstairs. I know you think this is none of my funeral, but--"

"No, I know it isn't. I'm sorry I brought Rafe here. Forget about him. I mean to."

His anger got the better of him. "I would," he ground out, "but Majesta seems to think you've been sleeping with him. If that's true, he'll do right by you. I may be restricted by this chair, but by God, there are lawyers and social codes and expectations when a man ruins a virgin. He'll do the honorable thing."

Sparkle turned then. "Force Rafe to marry me because Majesta thinks we were lovers? My word. For a new bride, she certainly focuses her energy on other people's sexual activities, instead of her own. But then, she probably hasn't got anything to focus on. What can you do for her, Jace? Do you take her in the bathtub or up against the wall, the way Rafe took me? Is that what you wanted to hear me say?"

"Good God, you can't be telling me you let--"

Her fury abruptly turned to horror. "Jace, the stairs!"

Even as she shrieked in warning, Jace rolled too close to the edge. His chair pitched forward. He plunged down the basement steps headfirst, tumbling like a rag doll. The chair bounced after him. Sparkle threw herself over him as he hit bottom, letting the chair strike her back and shoulders, sparing him further injury. But when she saw his pallor and inertia, she feared it might be too late to matter.

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"You may as well go home," the doctor advised Sparkle hours later. "His wife's staying tonight. We'll do everything we can. You're exhausted. I'll be admitting you next, if you don't get some rest."

"I don't think I can close my eyes. Every time I do, I see that chair tumbling again. God, if Jace isn't all right, I don't know what I'll do."

"It's primarily a few cracked ribs and contusions," the young medico advised for the third time.

"Then why doesn't he wake up?"

"Let's talk about that." He took her hand and settled on the bench beside her, squeezing her fingers. "Mrs. LaFleur says your brother's been incapacitated since he was a child,

due to some accident. His right side has atrophied. He can't use that arm or leg normally, is that correct?"

Sparkle nodded, her tone grave. "Jace was shot in the head years ago. He was...I was nine, so Jace was twelve. Thirteen? I'm not sure. I'm sorry," she rattled. "I'm not thinking clearly."

The doctor's gray eyes were kind. "Miss LaFleur, it was an accident. People argue. You didn't push your brother down the stairs. If you hadn't kept the chair from falling on top of him, he might be at the undertaker's now, instead of this hospital. You'll have some nasty bruises yourself." He gently probed between her shoulder blades. "Would you like me to look at your back?"

"No, it's all right. Anyway, when Jace was shot, the doctors said it was safer to leave the bullet where it was, rather than try to remove it. The wound never festered, and eventually Jace recovered. Well, for the most part."

"How extraordinary. The bullet's still lodged in his brain?"

"Yes. That's why he can only move his right leg sometimes. His nurse--well, now she's his wife--tries to work with him to make him stronger. He doesn't remember anything before we moved here. We lived in Texas when he was injured."

The doctor looked pensive for a moment. "It's possible this fall may have dislodged the slug. I want to call in a colleague with more surgical experience. Perhaps we'll be able to get the foreign object out of your brother's head at long last."

"The bullet's why he's unconscious?"

"It may be, or he may have suffered a concussion. But don't worry, I'm in charge of his case, and I've never lost a patient yet." He winked and gave her a gentle smile.

"I'd like to see Majesta before I go."

"Certainly. Right through those doors," he pointed, releasing her fingers.

Sparkle slunk into the hospital room. Majesta was in a chair pulled close beside the bed. She barely acknowledged Sparkle's presence. "Majesta, I'm so sorry," Sparkle whispered. "I know it's not enough, but I have to say it. I'm sorry I quarreled with Jace and he fell. I'm sorry for the things I said to you. I'm sorry I ever came home. I'm going now to pack. I'll find another job somewhere and send money when I can."

"Jace needs more than money," Majesta responded dully. "He needs your happiness. You've never given him that. It would mean more than you know."

Sparkle's eyebrows shot up. "But--I'm not all that unhappy," she lied. "Just unsettled at the moment."

"Still telling stories, Sparkle?" Majesta searched her face now. "You love that man and God help him, he loves you. You two couldn't stop looking at one another, caressing

each other with your eyes. Jace doesn't understand that. I'm nearly thirty, Sparkle, and your brother isn't the first man I've loved."

Sparkle nearly choked. Majesta saw the startled reaction, but continued unfazed.

"Whatever happened between you, you still need Mr. Conley. Do you think old maid schoolteacher is any great improvement over saloon girl? Jace wouldn't. Don't let him believe you hate us for having what you've deny yourself."

"I don't hate either of you." Sparkle realized it was the bald truth. "You've done exactly what I paid you to do, and more. You've loved Jace and understood him. As I love and understand Rafe." She dropped her gaze. "Deeply, as you guessed. But he's rough and wild, not the kind of man a woman marries. Not safe and predictable. Not constant and true, like Jace."

Majesta seemed to reflect on that. "But you're not trapped in social convention, like me. You can't judge what's right for you by what other wives choose in their husbands. We each need different things, you see. Our men need different things from us. Mr. Conley appears to need your spirit. You're a courageous person, Sparkle."

Sparkle stared at her, thunderstruck.

Majesta was worldly, actually quite wise. Sparkle had never noticed. Why hadn't she ever talked to Majesta before?

"Dr. Barlow says they may be able to remove the bullet. I don't know if brain surgery's the right thing. What do you think? You're trained in medicine, not me."

"I trust the doctor's professional judgment, but I won't consent to surgery without you here. If we're going to risk losing him, I think both the women who love Jace need to make that choice together. Be strong together. Please don't leave town. Stay until Jace can say farewell. Don't go now."

'Please' had never been in Majesta's vocabulary. Not where Sparkle was concerned. "All right. I'll be at the house if there's any change. I'll come back just after dawn, then you can go home to get some proper rest. We'll take turns keeping the vigil."

"Sparkle."

She paused at the door and turned back to meet Majesta's concerned blue eyes again. Concerned, but not fearful. Majesta wasn't afraid, Sparkle saw, and it gave her hope.

"I've never had a sister," Majesta said softly.

"Me either."

"I'd like one."

Sparkle swallowed and nodded. "Yes. See you in the morning."

Sparkle had never truly had a brother, either. But she'd had Jace, her oldest and dearest friend. A friend who needed her now. And was married to a strong, intelligent,

determined woman who could also become a friend in her own right--if Sparkle only gave her the chance. It didn't feel awful confronting their marriage when Sparkle looked at it that way. She didn't have to be at odds with Majesta. She'd chosen to be.

This was a second chance for all of them. Acceptance could dissolve away the bitterness. Not only because Sparkle honestly believed in forgiveness--not revenge and grudges--but because she knew with sudden clarity that Jace and Majesta had always belonged together.

She'd chosen Majesta from a pool of nursing candidates. Selected her, somehow knowing exactly who and what she was really choosing. Sparkle simply hadn't wanted to admit it before. But hadn't she always told herself, Rafe too, that day in the parlor, she'd overlooked Majesta's haughty manner because the nurse was wonderful dealing with Jace?

Sparkle knew things intuitively at times. Now she acknowledged that some dim part of her mind had known this would come to pass. It stunned her at first, but didn't truly come as a surprise.

After all, Sparkle reminded herself, she was a fortune teller.



## Chapter 17

"You know, Miss LaFleur," Dr. Barlow remarked in a mellow tone, "if it weren't for your brother's fortuitous accident, we wouldn't be together this evening."

"You're certain it was fortuitous? Jace will come around soon then, you think?"

"You know I can't promise that, but I believe he will. He was stable when I left the hospital earlier. But I wasn't speaking of your brother's medical status. I meant his accident is what allowed us to meet."

"Oh yes, I should have sensed--but I was hoping you implied Jace was lucky, in that his fall precipitated the surgery to remove the bullet, and he'd finally be able to walk again someday."

"That's a distinct possibility. One we all fervently hope for."

"Indeed, doctor." Sparkle pulled her hand away and moved to study the next oil painting at the art exhibition. Two nights before, they'd shared a meal at a fashionable supper club. Another time they'd had lunch in a local restaurant. Last week the doctor had taken her for a long carriage ride in the open countryside.

Dr. Barlow had begun formally calling on Sparkle LaFleur.

She'd allowed the relationship to develop out of concern for Jace's well-being and her own lingering guilt over his injuries. Though comatose now, following the difficult surgery he'd undergone--the doctors claimed this was to be expected--she couldn't escape the knowledge that he never would have been hospitalized if she hadn't caused his fall. Jace had always been cautious and sensible. He never would have been so foolish as to allow his chair so close to the stairwell if they hadn't been arguing.

They'd had disagreements before, but those had been mild rifts. Sparkle had never spoken to Jace so cruelly, deliberately taunting him about his disability. She'd wanted to hurt him at that moment.

Everyone around her, Majesta included, could deny Sparkle's culpability. But she knew better. Knew how deeply it had stung when she'd learned Jace had wed. Knew how painful the entire topic of Rafe Conley was, how she'd lashed out, trying to silence Jace before he said anything more on the raw subject.

So she'd turned to Jace's doctor for solace. Kent Barlow was calm and objective. He did his best to assuage her guilt. She'd allowed him to become a close friend in a matter of weeks, well aware the doctor hoped to be viewed as something more.

Tall and energetic, with flowing sandy hair and lively gray eyes, Kent soaked up his surroundings. He chewed up details and spit them out, then pushed forward in search of more. He was ever inquisitive, keenly intelligent, if admittedly a bit driven for Sparkle's tastes. He evinced a true passion for his work. A passion she found almost fascinatingly foreign. During her years in drinking houses, that element was conspicuously absent

amongst employees. Bardogs, whores, faro dealers, piano players, cleaning women: they performed necessary chores in order to survive, none of them particularly enjoying themselves while they were at it, most of them talking endlessly about better times to come in the future.

Unemployed now, with little to occupy her thoughts or time but constant worry over Jace, Sparkle had been grateful for the doctor's flattering attentions and detailed explanations. He was extremely thorough in presenting information on Jace's status and prognosis. When discussions of Jace became discussions of other patients, then local events, the larger world in general, Sparkle had continued to soak up his personal insights.

They helped her ignore the well of sadness that had enveloped her when Rafe walked out of her life. Primping for the young doctor's social calls at the house and being escorted around Kansas City kept her thoughts on the present, instead of the past. Kept her mind from drifting back to saloons and cowboys.

Except when Kent kissed her, as he was doing now. They'd left the art exhibit and gone back to the LaFleur parlor. She'd been lost in her musings and couldn't recall most of whatever he'd said since they arrived back at the house. She must have automatically made the appropriate nods and mutters in the right places. Old habits died hard.

Her mind had wandered many miles away. Back to a dark Kansas plain, to images of a gunslinger riding a star sorrel or playing poker in a smoky gaming hall. Somewhere a lifetime from her present moment, raucous piano music and laughter spilled out of batwing doors onto a dusty street bathed in the light of a Midwestern moon. Somewhere a pair of spurs and creased leather boots thumped along a plank sidewalk.

Sparkle sighed. Kent interpreted it as encouragement and deepened their kiss. She closed her eyes and he became Rafe. It was Rafe's lips and tongue melting over hers, Rafe's hand moving slowly up her ribcage. He would bare her breast. Not here, in Jace and Majesta's parlor. "No, we can't do this h--"

Abruptly her eyes opened and her fantasy shredded. The eyes searching hers were gray, not warm chocolate brown.

"Forgive me. I'm being too forward," Kent murmured. "I don't mean to press you." He pulled back, straightening his rumpled jacket. "I had a very enjoyable evening, Miss LaFleur." He got up and crossed to the front door. "Will I see you tomorrow at the hospital?"

She offered a wistful smile. "You know I'm there every day, rain or shine."

"Well, good night." He nodded politely and went out.

"Is the doctor gone, Sparkle?" Majesta's voice came from the top of the stairs.

"Yes." Sparkle bolted the door and blew out the candle on a shelf near the entry. "I thought you'd be at the hospital. Is everything all right?"

Majesta floated down the stairwell, robe rustling softly. She perched on the ottoman before Jace's favorite chair. "He likes you very much, our young Dr. Barlow." Sparkle shrugged. "I get so weary of that hospital room and waiting for Jace to come out of the coma," Majesta sighed. "Do you think we made the right decision?"

The question was fraught with exhaustion and uncertainty. Sparkle couldn't let either of them give up hope. The doctors had explained there were roughly equal odds that Jace might make a full recovery, only a partial recovery, or exhibit no change at all. But the tarot presaged a rosy future ahead for Jace. Sparkle had chosen to put her faith in the cards.

"It's not as though we had much choice. It was his best chance--his only chance at a normal life. Kent and the other doctors made that clear. He reassured me Jace is doing as well as could be expected. When he's stronger, he'll wake up. My cards predict that. Any day now. You'll see."

"I don't know how much more I can endure." Sparkle heard the defeat creeping into Majesta's words and tone. "If he doesn't come around...I'd already given him my life and accepted him as he was. I could have borne up under the demands of caring for an invalid. At least he was here, I could look in on him. Now...It's very hard to stay and wait, alone upstairs."

Sparkle drew Majesta back upstairs to the room and bed she shared with Jace. "Any night now he'll be home." She moved his pillow alongside Majesta's body and placed her arm over it. "Until then, hold onto this and tell yourself it's Jace. He'll come back to you, better than ever. Don't stop believing."

Sparkle left Majesta weeping softly into her pillow, hugging its mate. Sparkle tiptoed across the hall to her own room. She undressed and climbed into bed, mimicking the ritual she'd just taught Majesta. At least Majesta could hold more than a pillow. However fragile, Majesta could cling to hope.

Sparkle's tears wet her pillowslip as she admitted her own longings were futile. Her desires would never come true. Her cheek would never again be pressed against a rough, scarred torso. Rafe had walked away for the last time. This time he wouldn't come back. And he'd been right in predicting she could no longer work in saloons. She'd discovered she couldn't bring herself to consider another trailhead. Any cow town would be torture. No matter where the saloon was, no matter how remote the chances of it happening, she'd wait and watch the swinging doors. Hoping uselessly--pathetically--Rafe would walk through them.

She needed to stop thinking about him and concentrate on Kent Barlow. Maybe once Jace came home and she didn't see Kent in a clinical environment...but she'd been with him in other settings: the park, restaurants, open countryside, the art museum. He was pleasant company, but he hadn't prickled her senses or aroused the latent sensuality in the hollow of her belly. There simply were no sparks between them.

Part of the problem was, Kent smelled of disinfecting agents. He was too sanitary. Ever crisp, well heeled, his trousers impeccably creased, his fingernails buffed. She'd never encountered anyone so compulsive about scrubbing himself. She'd watched the ritual repeated endless times at the hospital. Not that she didn't believe cleanliness was next to Godliness, but Kent washed his hands so often, she'd bet he actually arrived home cleaner than when he left it.

He'd didn't need a woman to share a tub of steaming bathwater or lick trail dust off his skin. He didn't own a pair of leather boots. She'd asked when they'd taken a carriage ride to the farmlands. He laughed and told her he'd never been on a horse or worn denim jeans.

Maybe she'd grown too accustomed to Western ways: gritty men, cattle drives, honky tonks and saloons. Kent Barlow was pure Easterner. Cultured, urbane, handsome, ever proper. He also had an illustrious career going--whereas she had absolutely nothing going. Maybe that was the problem.

No, it wasn't. The truth was, Sparkle didn't like Kent Barlow. He didn't wear spurs.

She chuckled aloud, then heard her laughter dissolve into something closer to a sob. She buried her face closer against the white cotton bedlinens. The real problem was Kent didn't own a saddle horse with the world's crudest moniker. He didn't wear a charcoal gray cowboy hat. He caused scars with his scalpels, but he didn't have one. He didn't drawl.

He wasn't Rafe.

She opened her eyes hours later. Fingers of gray light poked between the shutters. She'd favored sleeping until noon before Dodge City, when she'd shared a brass bed with an amorous gunfighter. Now she often woke at dawn to find she'd been dreaming about the panel crib again.

"Leave me alone, Rafe," she whispered, "God knows I shouldn't have, but I did love you." She rose and opened the shutters. She gazed out the window at nothing in particular. "And it's a curse on both of us, because no matter how hard I try to stop, it seems hopeless. Damn my soul, I still do."

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Sparkle chatted nonstop, emulating Joe Brooks on the stagecoach, though she doubted Jace could hear her. He lay motionless except for his shallow breathing, beyond comprehension, but it made her feel better to sit beside him each day. To ruffle his tawny curls, hold his limp fingers. To watch and hope.

Jace was still like a brother to her. Today she needed to tell him what was on her mind.

"You've got a fine doctor. You don't know it, but he's been calling on me. Majesta said you'd fretted I'd never take a husband. That's silly. Of course I will, someday. Maybe in the next year or two, if Dr. Barlow keeps courting me. I'd have to consider it, wouldn't I?"

Settling down with him has definite merit. I'd be living right here in town. Wouldn't that be wonderful?

"You and Majesta would have your privacy, but we'd see more of each other than we have in recent years. I can't as yet claim to care for him. But I don't have much sense when it comes to matters of the heart. I seem to love all the wrong--"

She stopped, pausing to wipe her cheek and blow her nose before she asked the next question. "Do you think it's appropriate for me to consider the doctor? People wed for lots of reasons, like stability. Maybe I could learn to love Dr. Barlow. Do you think so? I wish you'd answer me, Jace. You don't know how silly I feel, sitting here talking to myself."

"Then why don't you shut pan, Sparkle Cummings? If you didn't rattle on, maybe a body could get a word in."

"Jace?" Her head shot up. Her hanky fluttered to the floor unnoticed. "Jace, did you say something? What did you call me?"

Blue eyes cracked open. The voice came again, weak but lucid. "Sparkle Cummings. That's who you are, aren't you? You're the only gal I know with those funny-colored eyes."

"That's who I was, a long time ago," she answered carefully. "When we lived in Texas. You remember Texas? The name of our town?"

"Fire Thorn. What's wrong with you? You act like--Lord, you look weird. Kind of bumpy in spots. You were always skinny as a fence rail."

"Yes," she laughed, tears of elation filling her eyes. "I'm bumpy in a few places now. I need to go tell someone you're awake. Don't worry. You're in a Kansas City hospital, but you're all right. I'll be back."

She dashed into the hall, shouting for Dr. Barlow. A nurse pointed in the direction of the intersecting corridor just as he headed toward Jace's room. "Looking for me, sweetheart?"

She didn't even notice the endearment. "He's awake. And he remembers. Texas and my name, but he sounds a little confused. He recognized me, but I'm not sure he realizes we've both grown up."

Kent took her by the elbow and smiled. "It's not unheard of, for there to be gaps in a patient's memory. We'll ease him into the present and give him whatever time he needs to adjust." He escorted her into the room and grinned at his alert patient. "Ah, good afternoon, Mr. LaFleur. Your sister says you're feeling much better."

"My sister?" Jace snorted, frowning. "I don't have any sister, and my name's Jace Flowers. She's Sparkle Cummings, my best friend. But you got to watch her, she likes to pull pranks. This time she's come up with a real frolic. My sister."

Sparkle ignored the ominous expression on the doctor's face and spoke to the man in the bed. "Oh Jace, I knew you'd come around! I prayed and prayed someday you'd remember Fire Thorn and our past. The tarot cards said to have patience, that eventually you would."

"Oh yes. Tarot. Eliza Cummings and her funny cards. How is she, and where's Mother?" His face clouded. "Father's...gone, isn't he?"

She glanced uncertainly at Kent. He gave her a small nod of encouragement. She reached for Jace's hand. "I'm afraid so. He's been gone for years. That night in the Fire Thorn cemetery was a decade ago. We've both grown up. Our parents are gone, but you have a wife. I need to go get her. She'll be thrilled."

"A wife? Ten years?" Jace sounded incredulous. "Sparkle, my God. That would make me--"

"Going on twenty-three in a couple months, and still my very dearest friend," Sparkle replied as she bent to kiss his cheek. "Dr. Barlow will tell you whatever else you need to know. I'm going to get Majesta."

Jace grabbed her hand tighter. "Majesta? What kind of name is that?"

"I don't know," Sparkle shrugged. "Majestic?" She couldn't resist a teasing smile. "It fits her."

"Oh heavens. What's she like?"

"Fairly tall with straw-colored hair. She's bright and proper, and ..." she hesitated, still finding it hard to admit it, "perfect for you. But your mother changed your family name after your father died. Your last name's LaFleur now. It's French for--"

"Flower," he supplied, giving Sparkle a look of trepidation. "Majesta sounds too fancy to be married to a plain old Flower. Guess I ought to leave the fancy surname."

"You and Majesta can decide. I love you, Jace."

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"You might have warned me he wasn't actually your brother," Kent chided. They sat in the parlor before a low fire. "You can't imagine what an unpleasant surprise it was, to have my patient vehemently denying his own name and relationship to a significant person. For a second, I was afraid we'd cut out his sensibilities along with the bullet. That would have been some tragedy. We'd already disposed of the slug. It wasn't as though we could put it back."

"Oh Kent," Sparkle laughed. "You're incorrigible."

"As are you, young lady. You might have confided in me. I thought we were closer than that."

Sparkle took a deep breath. "I swore an oath to Jace's mother never to tell. I was

orphaned, Kent. She could have delivered me to a foundling home, or left me to make my own way, just another guttersnipe. She didn't, she took me in. Calling me Jace's sister was her idea. She claimed me as her own in exchange for my silence. I never broke my oath, even after her death. She--we wanted Jace to recall on his own."

"Perhaps you'll make me a promise too, though not such a solemn one as that. When Jace is back at home and things settle down, will you promise to spend all your free time in my company, Miss LaFleur--or should I say Cummings?"

"Either one is fine. But actually, I've taken too much time off lately," Sparkle demurred. "I should find a position somewhere. Jace has a modest trust fund, but the only way the household managed before was with me gainfully employed."

Kent nodded. "Majesta mentioned you were a teacher. I have a friend on the local school board. I could--"

"No. I mean, I... I don't think I want to be surrounded by children any longer."

"I understand," he smiled, patting her hand. "It makes you long for your own. That's why I don't work the children's ward, if I can avoid it. I've got a soft spot for them. Plan to have a dozen or so of my own someday."

A dozen or so? Sparkle blinked. His wife would have to spend...nine years of her life pregnant. Nine years bloated and waddling? Not her. She'd have to temper his views on that straight-away.

"But Kent, you're such a busy man, with a demanding schedule. A large family is--well, a man would have to summon a great deal of fortitude and ..." She colored, trying to think of how to put it delicately.

"Income?"

"Inspiration...to father twelve children. Not to mention tremendous patience and energy to rear them all properly."

"I'd find the time and forbearance." He raised her fingers to his lips. "With a woman like you, inspiration and energy pose no difficulty. Remembering I'm a gentleman is much harder than finding myself...inspired."

She yawned and came to her feet. "I'm sorry, Kent. This has been quite a day. I'm exhausted, elated, grateful for your medical skills. However, I also need to get some sleep. There will be new challenges tomorrow."

He drew her into his arms and kissed her. "Most inspirational," he mumbled, smiling as he stepped out into the cool evening air.

Sparkle knew what it was to be inspired. White-hot, searingly inspired. To overflow with desires you could barely suppress just from laying eyes on your lover. Because seeing him made you want to rip your clothes off. His too. Made you want his hands taking control of your body, his tongue intimately stroking yours. Made you long to kiss and

caress every inch of his flesh--especially the inches capable of appreciating a woman's ardor most.

Such very wicked thoughts.

Proof that Rafe had ruined her. Not in the sense society meant, for there was no child from their union. But Sparkle was ruined, just the same. Knowing what genuine inspiration was, the memory of lying nude in Rafe's arms, she wanted nothing less and no one else.

She wasn't sure she could compromise and devote her life to Kent. Many women would consider him ideal, yet, as Majesta noted, each woman needed certain things from her mate. Intelligence, stability, a sense of humor were all important to Sparkle.

So was having her bedsheets on fire.

And the man who could set them ablaze was gone. The man Sparkle wanted inspired, wanted to cherish with her heart and body, the man she secretly dreamed of kissing in Kent's place would never look at her as a source of inspiration again.

She wasn't his woman now.

He hated her.



## Chapter 18

Travis wondered whose tail was on fire. Someone was kicking up dust along the rutted path from Crockhead's main gate. He'd put up supplies for the winter, brought back two loads of hay the day before yesterday, didn't owe any merchants on his accounts. He couldn't imagine why anyone would be in such a hurry to see him. Nor did he recognize the fella bearing down on the ranchhouse full chisel. But behind the stranger, through the haze of billowing dust, came a familiar star sorrel. The horse's rider was slung crosswise over the saddle.

Rafe.

Travis' rifle somehow appeared in his hands. He had no awareness of having crossed the broad porch to get it. But whoever the bastard was who'd shot Rafe Conley, if he had balls enough to show up here to dump the body, he was someone to be reckoned with. Travis wasn't sure he'd let the man live long enough to turn his horse back around. Or maybe he'd let the sonofabitch think he was in the clear, then drop him just as he reached the main gate. Shoot him in the back, the way he'd probably shot Rafe. The way Travis and Miranda always feared he'd be killed.

Ignominiously. Stupidly.

"Ain't a goner," the stranger shouted. "Just passed out. Got hit a couple days ago. Bullet passed clean through. Bleeding stopped, but he needs a doctor."

By now three ranch hands had ridden toward the house, alerted by riders approaching. Travis turned to two of them. "Put Rafe in the back bedroom." He barely glanced at the third man. "Randy, fetch the doc."

Travis turned to the stranger. "You, come inside." It wasn't an invitation of welcome. Travis kept his rifle pointed at the man's chest.

Moments later, Travis sat drinking strong coffee at his kitchen table with the fella, listening to his tale. The man said his name was Driscoll. Said he and Rafe and another man--the half-breed friend of Rafe's Travis knew, Sam Parker--had been ambushed outside Big Bow. There was a pregnant silence when Driscoll finished his story, until boots entering the parlor brought Travis to his feet.

"You move from that chair, Driscoll, you'll regret it." Travis accompanied the doctor to look at Rafe.

Driscoll was permitted to leave an hour later. He rode away wondering if he'd ever lay eyes on Rafe Conley again. The man had a real talent with weapons. And a daunting reputation Driscoll fully believed the gunslinger had justifiably earned. But the past few months, it seemed he'd lost his edge. Hard to imagine. The man had taken out Ned Slocumb. Rafe hadn't only fulfilled his guarantee to the cattle baron who'd hired them, but done it with his lady card-reader half naked in the outlaw's arms.

Now Rafe had taken a bullet himself and lost his back-up man. Driscoll was no slouch

with a six-gun, but he lacked Conley's lightning speed and Sam Parker's instincts. Driscoll had thrown in with Parker two years ago, ended up riding with Conley a lot of the time. Which was fine by him. The three of them had fit like pegs in grooves.

Hell, just a week before, they'd been drinking at a rickety plank bar listening to Sam Parker tell his bad Injun jokes. They'd slept under the stars, shared a campfire, each trusting the other two with his life. Tight. Companionable.

Now everything had gone to shit.

The doctor said Conley's wound was badly festered. He'd lanced it, drained the putrescence, smeared some ointment over it. But Driscoll knew as well as the doctor did--though neither said a word to Conley's brother--sometimes the poison was already in a man's blood and draining the wound couldn't save him.

Driscoll rode out of Colorado alone. Worn out, busted, headed for Texas. Leaving one riding partner behind dying; the other, already dead.

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Travis stood beside the bed, staring down at his unconscious older brother. Wiping a palm over his stubbled cheek, Travis grimly realized he hadn't used a razor in two days. Or slept. Since late Tuesday when the stranger rode in, all he'd done was change his clothes, slurp bitter coffee, and prowl this small room while either the doctor or the foreman's wife fussed over Rafe.

Well, he'd done one other thing. Sent a wire summoning Miranda. He'd hated scaring her so badly, especially with her being in the family way. And he'd questioned the wisdom and necessity of his actions, even as he ordered the telegram sent. If Rafe woke up tomorrow, he'd cuss a blue streak at learning Travis had gotten Miranda involved. But if he didn't wake up ....

Travis couldn't think about that. Rafe would come around. He was too damned ornery to die. Saying was, only the good passed on young. Rafe had barely made the quarter-century mark. He was far from sweet and pure. He gambled, whored and shot people. He wouldn't die.

He hadn't when some outlaw tried to carve him up like a side of roast beef. He'd laughed over the shot he'd taken in his arm last year. Rafe had been nicked by more bullets than a practice tin can, yet he'd always come through. If a ten-inch Bowie hadn't sent him to meet his Maker, how could a simple little rifle slug that didn't even stay inside him possibly do it?

"You die on me, Rafe," Travis warned aloud, stalking the perimeter of the silent bed, "I swear I'll never forgive you. You die on me, I'll curse your soul to eternal hellfire every day for the rest of my natural life. Don't forget--I'm younger than you, Little Brother...And you are the little brother. Look at you. Puny, all pasty. Look like some Nancy-boy or a goddamned plucked chicken."

No response.

"I'd get up and punch my brother right in the face for a crack like that if I was layin' there. You gonna let me get away with that? No argument? What happened, rifle bullet knock all the piss out of you?"

No reply, just uneven breathing.

"You die on me before Miranda gets here to see you one last time, I'll go out and shoot that damned horse of yours. I'll come after you when I die. Find your miserable, bony ass down in Hades and drag it to barn dances every night. I swear I will. You die on me, I'll tell every man on this spread how you and Rannie had tea parties and you sipped lemonade like a girl. You give up and die, I'm never forgivin' anythin' you ever did...including breakin' Ma's heart. You worthless, ignorant mule. Never listen to no one, never bothered that we love you. You ought to die and end the damned suspense. Go on, see if I care!"

Rafe never moved.

A choking sob echoed in the small bedroom. "Please Lord, oh please, don't let him die. Don't let my big brother die."

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Rafe heard her slip into the room and come to the bed. He'd been lying still, burning with heat, wanting her worse than he could remember since the very first time. She didn't say anything. Didn't reach for him or say his name in that certain way she had that made his gut clench, his manhood stiffen. He was already so hot, he had to be hard as an oak limb. Damn, what was she waiting for? Didn't she know how he wanted her? He tried to move his lips.

"Rafe."

Was she crying? Maybe she had a cold in her turned-up nose. She was sniffing. Was that why she hadn't curled against him? Even when he rolled away, she'd snuggle up close when she thought he was sleeping. It was one of the things he loved about her. The way she always knew he didn't mean to shun her. It was just hard for him not to show too much sometimes.

Especially when he looked into her eyes.

The color had struck him that first morning, along with the crackling life in them. But now that he really knew her, her eyes affected him for a whole different reason.

She watched while they made love. Watched him move on top of her, watched him lick and suckle. Most gals closed their eyes when a fella took them. Sparkle did too--but not until just seconds before she came.

It was like a dare. Let's see if you're man enough, Rafe. Make me close my eyes.

He always could, but he had to get her right to the very edge. So close to climaxing himself, he could hardly hold back. Then those aquamarine pools would go dark, the lids would squeeze closed. She'd begin to quiver and gasp his name. Seeing her, hearing her...knowing he'd given her such intense pleasure, he'd lose control. Gratefully. Explode deep inside her, where she was hottest. Unbelievably tight and burning hot. Like his skin now.

"Too hot," he mumbled. A cool wetness engulfed his brow. He felt her fingers. "Darlin'?" He willed his leaden eyelids to raise a notch. Through slits he saw it wasn't Sparkle, but Rannie. Weeping.

He groped with his right arm, found her hand near his side. She jumped at his touch. She'd been wiping her nose, not looking at him. She did now and happiness flooded her puffy features.

"Here," she coaxed, holding a cup to his lips. "Wet your lips and tongue. Don't drink too much." Rafe did as she instructed. The cool water broke the seal on his mouth. He tipped the cup and took another tiny sip.

Miranda glanced at her husband, who stood near the door. "Find Travis. Tell him Rafe's awake."

Zach left before Rafe could say anything. Miranda faced Rafe again, and he saw her dark eyes appeared almost haunted. She hadn't looked so dreadful since the day they buried Ma. "Travis sent for me," she informed him in a voice entirely too grim.

Christ, had somebody else died? Rafe fleetingly wondered. But nobody else was left.

"He didn't think you were going to live, Rafe. Until a few hours ago, I wasn't certain myself. You were shot again. This time the wound got infected. You've been feverish." Her palm pressed against his bare shoulder, then tested his cheek. "You're still too warm, but if we keep bathing you with damp cloths and get some fluid in you, I think we can get your temperature back to normal."

"Sorry to be a pain in the ass." He didn't know why that phrase had come out. Rannie didn't like crude language.

"You've been a good deal more than that," she snapped. "Travis has been absolutely beside himself. I've never seen him so distraught. Don't you understand you're all that stands between us and death? Our parents and Simon are gone. I was thankful you were too young to go off to the war. So what do you do? Grow up to wage your own private one."

"Rannie--"

"If you die, who's next? We are. Travis and me. It's so incredibly selfish of you not to see that. Leaving poor Travis feeling responsible for your welfare."

"Ain't tryin' to burden Travis. Don't even know how I got here."

"Your friend--or should I say cohort in crime?--Driscoll brought you, tied over your horse. He told Travis you were ambushed. Not that you don't use the same technique yourself, or that I feel particularly sorry for you. You probably had it coming."

"Yeah, like you have this comin'." He pulled her down and gave her a smacking buss on her cheek with cracked lips. His gaze dropped to her midsection. "See you're fixin' to give Zach another mouth to feed. Where's Kayla?"

"With Mrs. Abbott. I don't want her seeing you like this, Rafe. You'd only frighten her to death. Please tell me you're finished with this business for good now."

"Don't start with that, Miranda," he grouched. "I'm powerful hungry. Just woke up after a bad night. Need somethin' in my stomach. We can talk--"

"Is that how long you think it's been?" she scoffed. "You've been here almost a week. Oh, here's Travis. Now you be decent to him, or I won't bring you any of the nice hot soup Mrs. Abbott made."

The two brothers visited quietly until Miranda came back with a tray. "Travis, did you talk sense into him?"

"Ain't sure."

"What good are you?" she demanded in exasperation. "Either do something to help now, or get out of my way."

Travis rose and moved aside. "Yes'm. Whatever you say, Mrs. Donaldson. You're in charge of the prisoner. Did you bring some of that moldy bread I'd been savin' for him?"

"No, just soup. You can get the leeches and moldy bread later. When he's strong enough to be taught a good lesson." Miranda narrowed her eyes at Rafe, then set the tray down and tied a kitchen towel around his bare throat.

"Whoo-ee," Travis cackled. "If them gals from the town socials could see you now, Rafe. Naked but for a dishtowel. If you ain't a sight."

"You don't get your ass back to work," Rafe growled, "I'll blacken both your eyes so's you won't have to worry what a sight I am." He winced as he sat up.

Travis ducked out. Miranda sat on the edge of the bed and began spooning hot liquid into Rafe's mouth. The soup was actually good. He let her feed him most of the bowl. But she had to upset the apple cart.

"Travis wrote me some months back about your peculiar 'situation'."

"What situation's that?" Rafe frowned.

"He says there's a woman who goes around claiming to be your wife. That you gave her permission to."

"Travis blows hot air."

She shook her head. "Not this time. He wrote me a two-page letter. He was deeply concerned. Apparently this is some saloon harlot. Seemed more than a passing fancy."

"She wasn't a harlot. Just a pretty waiter gal."

Miranda's hair, a shade lighter than Rafe's, was caught in a bun at the base of her neck. Golden highlights glinted in a shaft of afternoon light as she tilted her head, deep in thought. "Her name was something like that, wasn't it? Fancy or Glitter...Something unusual."

Jesus, don't say it. She doesn't need to know. Don't you dare open your mouth, Rafe. Promised yourself you'd never say that name again--ever.

"Sparkle."

His sister's brown eyes pinned him. "Where is this Sparkle?" He shrugged. "When do we get to meet her?" Rafe shrugged again and made an exaggerated production of stretching his legs and wiggling his toes.

"I understand you lied to protect her," Miranda went on. "Still, considering your reluctance to even consider taking one, I find this 'wife' pretext a rather startling development."

She hadn't asked a question, but Rafe was locked into the shrugging bit. His shoulders jerked again.

Miranda pulled the dishtowel away and stood up. She bustled out with the tray, but Rafe's reprieve was too brief. She came right back. "I want to see Kayla," Rafe tried again. "Why don't you bring her in here? I don't look that bad. " He ran his fingers up to his face. "Take that back. Couldn't Travis at least shave me?"

Miranda closed the door. "No, he couldn't. You were dying, Rafe. A week's growth of beard was the least of his concerns."

Rafe cleared his throat. He had no idea how a man replied to the news he'd been at death's door. He only knew he wasn't about to look Miranda in the eye just then. She'd turned into Ma Number Two, which meant another of her fire and brimstone diatribes was due, complete with biblical quotations, verse by agonizing verse. Another sermon on the evil life of Rafe Conley.

"Do you love the woman?"

He'd never know why he told the truth--except Rannie had fooled him into dropping his guard, and maybe a dying man didn't have far to drop it, anyway. "So much it's killin' me. I should've smelled that ambush."

Miranda didn't blink, just moved to stand beside the bed. "Travis was angry. He thought she was after your money. But I was pleased to learn you might be in love. And oddly enough, I liked what he wrote about her. A fortune teller with special cards. Travis thinks it's weird, but I think it's charming."

Rafe groaned audibly. He wasn't charmed. Bedeviled, tormented. Not charmed.

"Why aren't you seeing her any more?" Miranda searched his face.

"You know what? Need to piss somethin' fierce, Rannie. Could you get Zach or one of the men to help me down the hall?"

"Not until you answer my question. Is she why you were shot? You're right, you should have sensed an ambush. Maybe your friend lied about what happened. Could it be a jealous boyfriend didn't appreciate her new 'husband' hanging around the saloon?"

"Nope. Come on, Miranda, you fed me that broth. Now I need to go."

She crossed to the dresser and brought down an empty cooking pot. "There you are."

Rafe glared at her. "You're determined to make me suffer. If I was strong enough to drink the stuff off the spoon, I'm strong enough to make it to the bathroom and let it back out."

"You've made us suffer. I'd like to send for Sparkle. Certainly she'd come, if she knew you'd been badly hurt."

"Don't want her to. It's over, Rannie. She's got herself another man. I don't want to talk about her. Just got to where I could make it through a whole day without thinkin' of her."

Miranda didn't repeat the conversation to Zach. When Travis confronted her later, she told him the gist of the story. But she left out the point she found most intriguing. Rafe had said he could get through a day without thinking about the girl. He never said anything about his nights.

Three weeks after the Donaldsons went home to Nebraska, Rafe announced plans to move out to his cabin. Mrs. Abbott argued with him vehemently and sent for her husband. Joshua argued some more. Then he went to the boss--which Joshua disliked doing, because as foreman on this spread he was expected to know how to run it. But despite years of dealing with cantankerous cowboys, idiot cattle, lazy horseflesh, broken axles, wobbly wagon wheels, and stubborn mules, Joshua had never met up with difficult like Rafe Conley.

Travis paid Joshua Abbott and his wife pretty well, but there wasn't enough money in the world to get the ranch foreman to go up against a trained killer like Travis' older brother. If his years in the west had taught Joshua anything, it was that sooner or later a gunfighter resorted to pulling his weapon to enforce his point of view.

Travis stormed into the front room, snowflakes clinging to his hat and the shoulders of his sheepskin coat. "Got better things to do than listen to my foreman run at the mouth over my pig-headed kinfolk. You're not stayin' in the cabin this winter, so just settle yourself back and hush up."

Rafe stalked across the room, hunching over and whispering. "Makes me too nervous, Travis. Can't abide it no more."

"Who? Abide what?"

"That Miz Abbott. All the time flutterin' around here, movin' things. Tellin' me pick my feet up, she's got to sweep. I pick 'em up, she says put 'em back down, cause I got a smear on the table and she just waxed it. Always foldin' laundry or scrubbin' somethin'. I'm tempted to pull my Colt and shoot the dad-blamed female just to watch the dust settle."

Travis sighed in exasperation. "She's a housekeeper, Rafe. That's what they do."

"And I aim to let her do it. Just don't want her fussin' around me. Besides, need some peace and quiet. I got contemplatin' to do."

Travis trudged down the hall toward the back bedroom, wondering when he was ever going to win a round with Rafe. "I'll help take your gear out."

The cabin door creaked as it swung open. Travis grimaced, averting his face. "Jesus, smells worse than the barn! You skin somethin' out here before you left?"

"It's always musty until I get it aired out," Rafe drawled. "Throw my duds on the bunk. I'll manage here on my lonesome. I'll come inside when that fool woman rings the supper bell."

Travis dropped Rafe's saddlebags on the bunk. Rafe's was double the width of the wood frames in the bunkhouse. Like the log structure itself and its other sparse furnishings, Rafe had made the bunk himself. It was nailed against one wall beneath a high window. Rafe slept with the high casement open, even in January. Travis stepped up on the bunk now and unlatched it, welcoming the fresh air.

"That's better. Musty, my ass! I can't believe you put up with this stench every time you come back. Don't you dare leave it reekin' like this when you head out next spring."

Rafe sat in his rocking chair and gave Travis a silent appraisal. "Won't be any next time. This is my last winter here. Need to take stock of my life, decide where to head next. Lost my back-up man. Been reconsiderin' things lately. Visits here at Crockhead are one of 'em."

"Rafe, we talked about this...how you'd go in partners with me and stay on. Help me build the spread up."

Rafe shook his head. "You talked about it, Trav. I mostly sat there listenin' to your notions. Didn't say I agreed."

"You're not ridin' back out and hunt down whoever ambushed you." Travis planted his feet apart and set his fists on his hips. It was the stance he took right before he started swinging his fists.

"Didn't say I was plannin' on that," Rafe pointed out.

"Christ. Parker's dead. Sad, but a blessin' in disguise, if you ask me. With no back-up



man, maybe you'll finally give up the nonsense. Already got more money than anybody could need, Rafe. Zach told me you're set."

"My money's none of your funeral."

Travis was building up steam. "You're finally away from the painted cats and the damned saloons. Won't be gettin' the French pox or robbed blind by some flirtin' doxy. Your health's comin' back. No reason you can't stay on."

"Except I don't want to. Makes me itchy, sittin' in one spot too long. I like the trail. You know that."

"Well, hell no, my ranchhouse can't hold a candle to that bagnio in Wichita, with your slut mistress livin' upstairs, I'll give you that," Travis fumed. "You can play poker with the men any night of the week. Get liquor and gals in town. Not the kind you're used to. Decent folk." Travis' eyes went hard. "Only thing we ain't got here is trouble. Least, we didn't until you showed up, slung over Snatch's back. You bring trouble."

"Knew you'd see the light," Rafe nodded, rocking.

"Don't make me sorry I patched you up."

"Little Brother, you'll be sorry, whether I make you or not. Don't expect me to change my whole way of thinkin' over one bushwhackin'. I miss Sam Parker every day. He was the best friend I ever had--next to you--but you're kin and nosy as hell, so it ain't the same. Reckon I'll find myself lookin' over my shoulder a dozen times before I get it straight that Sam won't be back there no more."

Travis grunted in reply.

"Before the ambush, I got a tip Hoffman's gone to Salt Lake City. Been thinkin' I'd ride out that way once the snow's over. Maybe I'll find him, maybe not. Could settle in Oregon or Californy."

"Californy?" Travis spat. "You mean as in the Barbary Coast? Rowdy as any Kansas cow town, plus you got fellas gettin' shanghaied. Anyplace wicked, where fools go sellin' their souls to the devil, my brother wants to jump into the thick of it! Hoffman again," he snorted. "He's dead, or gone down to Mexico, Rafe!"

Rafe answered in a weary voice. "Could be. Listen, I'm not goin' anywhere for couple months. Save your best shots, Trav. I'm plum tuckered out just now."

"What about the other subject? Tried to step right over it, like you didn't hear me bring up that strumpet who was claimin' to be married to you. Rannie says the gal threw you over. Didn't I tell you saloon cats were trouble? Knew somethin' bad would happen. Why can't you--"

"You know everything, don't you? Except I don't recall you knowin' Belinda Johnson was out to do the same to you. Want to ponder what's become of her? Maybe she's fat as a stuffed goose by now. Maybe her old man's got warts on his knees and likes to eat

peach pie on Sundays. Want to set a spell, and both of us ruminat on what we're missin'?"

Rafe saw the answer in his brother's glower. "Tell you what. I won't jaw about your mistakes, if you don't dwell on mine. Don't want to hear the name Sparkle or nothin' about her again. If you forget that, I got a couple sets of knuckles to remind you." Rafe closed his eyes. "See you at supper, Little Brother."

## Chapter 19

Majesta was waiting for Sparkle and Jace when their train pulled into the depot. She came forward to greet her husband, smiling warmly, ignoring the stares of curious onlookers as Jace moved stiffly across the platform, cane thudding.

"Dr. Barlow's been asking after you, Jace," Majesta said brightly. "He was surprised you'd make a trip so soon. I assured him Sparkle was along to look after you. I gathered from your wire things went well?"

Jace set down his valise. His features went taut. "You defied me, didn't you? Do you expect me to believe he stopped by the house? You've been to the hospital."

"He did come to the house," she replied, winking at Sparkle. "He didn't know his lady friend was out of town until he came calling."

Jace ignored her explanation. "You took the job at the hospital, after I specifically told you not to."

Sparkle reached for her satchel. "It's clear you two need to talk. I'll go on home."

"Sparkle, you understand someone has to put food on the table," Majesta announced. She gave Sparkle a beseeching look, then faced her husband. "Besides, what was I to do while you two were off gallivanting? I was bored, and they truly need my help at the hospital. When I saw Dr. Barlow this morning, I invited him to supper tonight."

Sparkle inwardly grimaced. Part of the reason she'd accompanied Jace to Texas was to put some distance between herself and her ardent new suitor. Kent had pressed her into becoming his almost constant companion. Jace and Majesta genuinely liked him, as Sparkle herself did. But she'd reached the conclusion friendship was all she felt. Majesta's matchmaking would only muddy the waters.

"Excellent," Jace grumbled as they started along the sidewalk. "When he's eaten his fill at our dining table, you can explain you're forced to resign. He'll take the news better after some of your chocolate layer cake."

"Be reasonable, Jace. I--"

"Things have changed, my dear. We'll discuss it at home."

Now there was a classic understatement, Sparkle silently noted. Things had changed for all of them. She had less reason than ever to consider marriage to a man she didn't love, all the more to revive her dreams of Paris. Unless, of course, one would help bring about the other. Wouldn't the dashing and urbane Dr. Kent Barlow, with his artistic and cultural bent, be the perfect escort to tour France with her? She might be able to forget her previous romantic entanglement and view Kent in a different light over coffee in a Parisian cafe.

Yet somehow she doubted it.

That evening, Sparkle donned the cream silk gown and her glittery jewelry. She tucked her hair up with a mother-of-pearl comb and lightly rouged her lips. Kent greeted her with an appreciative smile. She knew he was surprised by the finery, a marked contrast to her usual cotton day dresses. She smiled. There would be fewer cotton dresses in her future. Less scrimping, more enjoyment of life. Tonight she had reason to celebrate.

The trip to Fire Thorn had been a resounding success. Things had changed, all right.

"I'm pleased to see you looking so fit, Jace," Kent remarked as they took their places at the table. Sparkle found herself inwardly chafing. Kent was sitting in Rafe's chair.

Rafe's chair? Do you hear yourself? He was here once, for a few hours. He doesn't own that damned chair.

He certainly didn't. But it wasn't the first time she'd noticed how he seemed to leave his stamp. Everything he touched seemed to wear his brand afterward...including her. And because she still wore it, Kent Barlow seemed to be trespassing.

"And doesn't Sparkle look festive?" Jace flashed her a brilliant smile. Neither had divulged beforehand the reason for their return to Texas. Neither had expected the substantial sum they'd found in the rusted strongbox. They were both beaming as their eyes met.

"Thank you. This was one of my saloon gowns," Sparkle tossed out casually. Jace and Majesta instantly looked stricken. A deep flush began spreading up from Majesta's throat. Sparkle smiled at Kent, awaiting his reaction.

"Saloon gown?" He sounded as though one of the bones from the roast chicken had become lodged in his throat. "I don't understand. You don't mean to say a schoolteacher would visit a drinking establishment. Ladies don't frequent such places."

"This one has, and worked in a few, too. You couldn't expect me to admit that when we first met, but since we're keeping steady company, it's time you knew the truth."

"Kent, what she means is--" Jace clarified, "temporarily between terms, just to help make ends meet and pay for my medical care, she told fortunes in saloons. A passing amusement for customers." Jace glared at Sparkle now. First Majesta had openly defied him, now Sparkle had. She'd confessed the truth about her past employment during their trip. Jace had been adamant she not divulge the information to her beau.

"A drinking establishment ..." Kent cleared his throat roughly. "Or a place like Madame Beaumont's across town?"

"Having never set foot there myself," Jace responded defensively, "I can't say. I've heard of the place you mentioned. I overheard some discussion amongst your colleagues at the hospital."

"Perhaps we should clear up any misunderstanding," Kent directed tightly. Sparkle was pleased at the unease between the men. It wasn't what she'd intended, but it would serve

her purpose--to make this Dr. Barlow's last visit to the LaFleur house.

"I personally have never gone to a gentlemen's club," Kent stated. "Not that I believe this is appropriate conversation in the presence of ladies."

Sparkle detected the all-too-familiar scent of "Eau de Hypocrite" on Kent Barlow. He'd never been to a gentlemen's club? Then why was he so self-righteously angry? She'd wager the girls of Madame Beaumont's would sing a different tune.

"Perhaps you should visit one sometime," she offered, buttering a dinner roll with studied indifference. She noticed Majesta looked ready to throw her napkin to the floor for an excuse to crawl beneath the table. Good, maybe she'd learn not to meddle.

"Though I don't suppose here in the city gentlemen's clubs offer precisely the same diversions as trailhead saloons," Sparkle continued. "The last place I worked was called The Scarlet Lady. We had gambling: faro, poker, monte, the occasional cockfight out back. Then too, of course, there were rooms upstairs in what they call the monkey hall. That aspect's probably similar to Madame What's-Her-Name's. Though I doubt a man has to worry about ending up in a panel crib there."

"I'm almost afraid to ask what in God's name you're ranting about, " Kent said with a sharp edge to his tone.

She feigned a look of surprise. Two could play ignorant. "Why, a room with a hidden panel in the walls. Sort of a profit maximizer for the house. Customers are robbed as well as entertained."

Jace coughed into his napkin. Majesta went bright crimson. Kent stared at Sparkle. "Sometimes the panel cribs are actually lovely rooms." Sparkle was dismayed by the wistful tone in her remarks. She was supposed to be acting cavalier, not going maudlin.

Kent suddenly threw back his head and laughed. "You had me going for a moment there, Miss LaFleur. Panel cribs! What did you do, read about such lurid things in one of those dime novels about Hickok? How delightfully wicked and amusing you can be."

Sparkle only smiled. You can't begin to imagine, Doctor.

Majesta jumped up, muttering about a lemon cake in the kitchen. She all but threw four slices of dessert onto plates, more spilled than poured the accompanying coffee. Halfway through her own dessert, she developed a mysterious headache. Jace suggested Sparkle take his wife upstairs.

"It's probably nothing serious," Kent remarked. "But if you like, I could examine her."

"That's not necessary," Jace ground out, stabbing Sparkle with a warning glare.

"It's probably the pressure from working so hard," she obliged. "I think Majesta's under a strain."

"Oh?"

"Yes, well we can discuss that and a few other matters after the ladies have retired," Jace pointedly announced, still pinning Sparkle with his angry blue gaze.

"I'm not tired yet."

Kent looked pleased at that and moved to pull out her chair. "Good. I've had a bit of pleasant news."

Sparkle let him lead her into the parlor. "My father has to make a business excursion to Chicago. On their way from Baltimore, my parents have decided to stop here for a few days. I've put in for some time off at the hospital and was thinking of taking them to the opera house one evening. That gown you're wearing would be lovely. Care to join us?"

"She'd love to," Jace replied tightly. "You're bearing up admirably, Sparkle, but I know you're weary after our trip. I need to discuss a point or two about my personal health with our physician friend. I'll see him out later. You go get a good night's rest."

Jace had dismissed her.

So the hellion from Fire Thorn was back, she thought. She knew what was coming next. Jace would tell Kent the entire saloon discussion had been another prank. She'd explained her sentiments and doubts during their travels. He was paying her back for embarrassing Majesta.

She allowed Kent to press a kiss to the back of her hand, then bade the men good night.

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The next morning Sparkle was up early. She dressed quickly and found her reticule, intent on visiting the banker who handled Jace's trust fund. She met up with Kent on the sidewalk in front of her house. "Kent, aren't you due at the hospital or your partner's surgery?"

"I confess I was anxious to speak with you. I couldn't plunge into my day without knowing whether you'd spoken with your br--" He flushed and offered a wry smile.

"Sorry, I still tend to think of Jace as your brother."

"He might as well be. But he's still in bed, perhaps overtired from our trip to Texas."

Then a frightening thought struck and she gripped Kent's forearm. "Is something wrong? I know you two talked last night about his health."

"No, no. It's nothing like that. This is rather embarrassing, here on the common walk."

He propelled her back to the covered porch, with its two empty chairs facing the street.

"He's doing very well physically. I wondered if you'd spoken him with regard to... Well, I was frank with Jace last night about my feelings for you. We came to an understanding, and--"

"Please, Kent, I think we--"

"Hear me out. I told Jace of my desire that we be married soon. We agree next month,

while my parents are in town, seemed a sensible time."

"What?" She'd murder Jace. How could he agree to that, knowing she'd been meaning to discourage this man?

"Sparkle, my father's business schedule would make it difficult, if not impossible, for my parents to make another trip in the coming months. I don't want to wait until next spring or summer. There's no point in a delay." He caught her hand between his. "I'm certain this is what I want, sweetheart."

"Well, I'd surmised you might bring this subject up one day. But not so soon, and not to Jace before we'd talked. I'm sorry you spoke to him about this."

"Considering the circumstances, I could hardly do less. You're living in the man's home as his ward. I was obligated to make him aware of my intentions before I spoke to you."

"His ward?" After years of paying for Jace's nurse and expenses, she was being described as some nuisance underfoot, as a mere child. "I'm not his ward, Kent."

He arched a brow. "There's no genuine kinship between you. In essence, as I understand it, you were his mother's ward. She was your guardian. Following her death, guardianship passed to Jace."

Sparkle opened her mouth to contest that, but Kent plunged on before she could. "It's a moot point, since Jace has agreed, and next month you'll become my wife. We'll have a small ceremony here," he gestured back at the house, "with only immediate family. I won't have but a few days free, so we'll have to postpone a wedding tour. But after the ceremony, we'll have a nice supper and go to the opera with my parents. We'll make a gala evening of it."

A gala evening? Sitting beside middle-aged strangers, listening to some woman on a stage shriek as though someone's standing on her foot? How romantic, Kent! I'd dreamt of a wedding tour to Paris--but what's a month in France compared to an evening at the opera with your parents?

"Kent, I--"

He impulsively kissed her, cutting her off. "I know, Sparkle. It's sudden, but wonderful, isn't it?"

That wasn't the adjective she would have used. "But Kent, there are arrangements to be made. I don't have a gown or veil, and there's--"

"We're not talking a society nuptial with four hundred guests, Sparkle." His tone sounded for all the world like he was chastising a wayward child.

Sparkle was beginning to realize he truly saw her as one.

"Jace explained you were only partly teasing about the saloons. While I don't hold it against you, realizing you resorted to it out of economic necessity, I--"

"Hold it against me? If I hadn't gone to work after his mother died, Jace would have lost this house. Jace's aunt left the house to her family, but Widow Flowers had been married to a common blacksmith from a small Texas town. She didn't have any money to speak of. The trust fund she left isn't sufficient to meet ongoing expenses. What was I supposed to do, Kent? You seem to hatch brilliant schemes in a heartbeat. What would you have done?"

"Ah, perhaps I didn't phrase that as well as I might have."

"Perhaps not."

"I understand why you went out to work. Still, your sketchy employment history precludes me apprising my colleagues of our plans and making a grand affair of the wedding. We'll have a simple private ceremony, then you'll move into my home and we'll quietly take up life together."

Sparkle was at loss for words. She'd never had anyone both flatter and insult her at the same time. Usually it was Texas rabble doing that. She truly wasn't sure how to react.

Kent placed an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. "But I must secretly confess you looked quite...what's that word you used? Inspirational last night in that saloon get-up. The image of you garbed and painted up, telling my fortune in the privacy of our bedroom has a delightfully lurid appeal."

Cross out flattered, Sparkle told herself. Now he's just plain insulting.

"Keep your saloon dresses and tarot cards for the nights when I desire a wanton gypsy."

She was about to suggest where he might go find one when the front door opened. Jace flashed them a boyish grin. "I see you're having that little talk. Majesta was thrilled with the news, as I knew she would be."

Sparkle tried to keep her voice level. "Jace, I need to speak to you."

"Surely. But we mustn't keep the doctor from his patients. We'll see you again tomorrow evening, Kent. Come back inside, Sparkle. We'll chat while I have my breakfast. Majesta just put the coffee on."

Kent doffed his hat and disappeared along the lane, whistling, his stride positively jaunty. For Sparkle, it was the icing on the cake. He was so pleased with himself, it made her instantly furious. Had she worried she'd never love him? She'd never be able to stomach him, now that she knew what he really thought of her.

Majesta had gone out to tend her vegetable garden. Sparkle watched her weeding and pruning from the kitchen window, then turned back to accept the steaming cup of coffee Jace held out.

"You and Majesta are thrilled. Did it occur to you that I wouldn't be? You know I don't want to marry him, Jace. I distinctly recall telling you I had mixed feelings about Kent. I told him about the saloons to stop him from calling on me. I'm not certain I'd ever agree



to marriage, but I'm certainly not going to rashly jump into it next month. You're insane if you thought I would."

"Sparkle--"

"I mean it, Jace. When he comes back tomorrow evening, I'll talk sense into him. He'll wait until I'm ready, if indeed the time ever comes. But knowing he thinks I'm--"

Jace's demeanor went from smiling to forbidding. "You'd better listen closely, because I mean what I'm about to say, too. Majesta and I had a long talk yesterday afternoon. About the Texas money and other things. She reminded me about something that had slipped my mind. She has suspicions about your past relationship with that fellow Conley you brought home. A particular conversation you and I had some weeks ago crystallized in my thoughts."

"Oh, for pity's sake."

"Don't try to deny you and Conley were lovers. You admitted it to me, in very graphic terms."

"I know, Jace, but--"

"That was months ago. Plainly the man has no intention of doing the honorable thing. Therefore, I see nothing wrong--indeed, I can see only every conceivable advantage--in allowing the young doctor to wed you, instead."

"Except for the fact I don't love him, and it's unfair to both of us if I pretend I do."

"You're still like a sister to me, and you always will be. Mother raised us together, took us to Sunday services, read us the scriptures. You know what you allowed to happen was sinful. You may have been swayed in later years by the tainted environment of the cow towns, but you're finished now. It's time to take your place in decent society."

"Are you finished lecturing me, Brother Dear?" Her voice was heavy with sarcasm.

"No, I'm not. Kent Barlow can offer you security and a respectable life. He's a professional man. He doesn't know you've been compromised." He colored slightly. "I'll leave it to you to decide how you'll handle the situation, come the wedding night."

"Why leave anything to me? You've made all the other decisions."

"Stop this, Sparkle. Any woman would be proud to have Dr. Barlow for a husband. I want you to have a solid future. I owe you that, after all your years of sacrifice. Don't you think I still feel beholden? Dividing the Fire Thorn profits sixty-forty still doesn't balance us out, and you know it."

Sparkle said the first heartfelt, completely honest words she'd uttered to Jace in a long time. "I did it because I loved you, Jace. I'm not sure you ever understood quite how much. I knew you weren't my brother, but I loved you all the same." She fought to control her voice. "Don't repay that by forcing me into--"

"Neither of us could hope to find a better match. I'd willingly throw myself down the steps all over again to regain my memory and give you this chance for happiness. We've finally put our past where it belongs, behind us. You'll be better off with the doctor than some uncouth cattleman."

At her involuntary gasp, he added, "Don't misunderstand. I liked Conley. But even you must see Kent Barlow is by far the better man."

"I see where you would think so."

"Anyone with a lick of sense would." Jace's voice rose. "I'd forgotten how ridiculously pig-headed you can be. Comparisons between the two are beside the point. You need a husband and--"

"No, I do not need a husband," Sparkle snapped. "I'm perfectly capable of looking after myself. I'm not pregnant. I don't need Dr. Barlow's income. I'm sorry if my past embarrasses you. If I'm inconveniencing you and Majesta, I can find a room in a boardinghouse."

"Pregnant or not, you've been compromised. I will not stand by and watch you throw away this opportunity. The man can give you everything. He's assured me he will. Majesta's taking you to a dressmaker tomorrow to begin fittings. Despite your qualms, I believe one day you'll thank me."

"I'll thank you now. You've helped clarify my thoughts and feelings. I know what I have to do."

Relief flooded his features. "Very wise," he nodded, giving her an affectionate squeeze around her shoulders before he moved stiffly to the back door. "If you'll excuse me, I think I'll see what's keeping my dear wife."

Sparkle waited until he'd gone out, then went upstairs to pack.

## Chapter 20

The weathered sign suspended over the rutted drive announced Sparkle had reached her destination. Crockhead Rest. Rafe said he spent winters on his brother's ranch. She sensed his presence the moment her carriage left the main road and started up the fork toward the ranchhouse. He was here, all right. She took a deep breath to calm her nerves. She'd be face to face with him in a matter of moments.

Coming here to see him hadn't seemed insane when she'd made her decision back in Kansas. On the verge of being pushed into a marriage she didn't want, this made perfect sense. She should try to clear the air, find out if she and Rafe still had a chance together. It made perfect sense in Kansas.

Now that she'd actually arrived in Colorado, she wasn't feeling nearly so confident. What would Rafe say? Would he listen and understand why she'd felt she had to see him? To settle the lingering unanswered questions once and for all? Even if they had no future, she needed to be certain of that, so she wouldn't always wonder what might have been. Rafe would understand. A man still trying to right a wrong from years past would understand.

Jace and Majesta hadn't. There'd been another heated row with Jace. Forced to go slinking off like a thief in the night, Sparkle had left a sealed letter behind for Kent. It explained that upon introspection, she concluded she wasn't of his social status. She'd written a very apologetic missive for the most part, allowing herself a small victory. With a devilish smile, she'd penned the closing line. She hoped his parents wouldn't be too disappointed attending the opera without her.

The rented wagon dipped again, jolting her back to the present. The driver pulled to a halt beside a broad covered porch. The wide ranch house sat on a gentle bluff overlooking the drive.

"I'm a friend of Mr. Conley's," she announced, as a wizened hand approached from around the side of the house.

"Ma'am, beg pardon, but I been foreman here since Travis first started this ranch. Ain't never seen you around these parts, not even at the town socials."

"I'm from Kansas, and I don't mean Travis," she clarified. "I've come to see Rafe Conley. He's staying here for the winter, isn't he?"

The foreman tilted his hat back and scratched at a receding hairline. "Yes'm. Been here for a spell. But he ain't around just now. Went yonder two spreads north of here with some of the men, gatherin' strays got loose through a section of busted fence. Should be back by nightfall." The man eyed her trunk. "You fixin' to stay awhile?"

"Yes. Might I wait inside? It's a bit chilly out here."

He shrugged and spat a glob of chaw. "Suit yourself. Front door ain't never locked." He turned and disappeared the way he'd come.

"Gushin' host you got there," her driver commented dryly as he carried her trunk inside and accepted her fare. "Good luck, ma'am."

Sparkle closed the door against the frosty air and removed her bonnet and gloves. She sank onto the dark russet sofa, curling gratefully against its back. The sofa had been covered with a brightly colored crocheted throw in an attempt to hide several threadbare sections of upholstery. Sparkle smiled. A man's house ...

The parlor was warm and cheery as its color scheme, a jumbled mass of hues and shapes. None of the furniture matched, with the exception that each piece might have been chosen for comfort--by someone much taller than Sparkle. She thrust her legs straight out and found she couldn't get her heels to catch the edge of the coffee table. The sofa's cushions sagged into deep hollows. Its arms and those of the chairs were broad and well worn.

Crackling flames warmed the room from a massive stone fireplace. An oak clock ticked softly on an adjoining wall. Much of the large room's cheer came from the knotty pine paneled walls. This wasn't a house where people sat in stiff-backed chairs or ate in assigned places at a formal dining table. Cowboys propped booted feet up with their spurs still in place--the gouges on the coffee table attested to that. A row of pegs beside the front door waited for brimmed felt hats--one a broad charcoal belonging to a certain lean gunslinger.

Sparkle could easily see Rafe here.

Sprawled in a chair near the fire in a work shirt and jeans, dozing, evincing the false lazy demeanor that hid his predatory natural wariness so well. No wonder the parlor felt like home. The foreman had mentioned a cabin, but she'd bet Rafe had been in this room recently. She could almost smell his musky scent, picture his square-toed boots crossed at the ankles propped up on the coffee table.

A heel struck the puncheon floor behind her. Sparkle came off the couch and whirled around. Her heart leaped, then faltered. The man standing there wasn't Rafe, but someone who looked a great deal like him. They both spoke at once.

"I'll be damned. You must be Sparkle."

"Travis?"

They each responded with a silent nod and went on taking inventory. Travis appeared taller and slightly thinner than his brother, but the wavy sable hair and deep brown eyes were Rafe's all over again. Travis had more sharply-defined features, not Rafe's rawboned look. He also wasn't wearing a gunbelt. Sparkle noted that he did have on a pair of silvery spurs. Her smile widened at the sound they made as he went to warm his hands before the fire. God, how she'd missed spurs.

Travis had been struck immediately by the woman's distinctive eyes. Not that any other woman was likely to have turned up here asking after Rafe, but Travis could have

pegged this particular filly in a whole herd of females. He shot her a sideways glance. Rafe had said she'd probably been named for her eyes, that she was a pretty little thing. She was more than that. Outright stunning was closer to it. A gal as fetchin' as this one could have her pick of men in any saloon. Hell, in any town.

"I see your foreman wasted no time advising you had a visitor," Sparkle offered, hoping they could both stop assessing each other and get on with the amenities.

Travis coughed and unbuttoned his coat. "Well, only woman ever visits is our sister. And you lookin' for Rafe comes as a surprise, since he said you'd passed him over for another fella. Can't say I'd blame you."

Sparkle let her inward surprise register in the lift of her eyebrows. "You wouldn't? That doesn't seem very charitable. He's your brother. He happens to be mistaken," she added, "but you should still be naturally skeptical about me."

Travis slung his coat over the back of a chair and studied her openly now. Damned straight he should be, but how many gals would've said so? Feisty, all right. What else had Rafe said? That talk in the barn was so long ago, Travis couldn't quite recall.

"How about some coffee?" he asked. "There's usually a pot on the stove. Maybe you should take off whatever that is, if it's supposed to come off, and visit my kitchen." His lips curved up into a smile.

Sparkle beamed back at him. "You look and sound a lot like your brother."

"Only when I get nervous."

"Do I make you nervous?" She took off her cloak to reveal a serge traveling suit. Travis had seen the same thing on gals in town, but hadn't seen another gal fill one out any better. "You're younger than Rafe?"

"Yep, by a couple years." He gestured for her to precede him through the doorway into the kitchen. When she did, he saw she was indeed petite. The top of her head only cleared his elbows by a few inches. Nothing he saw fit the image of a fallen angel. She looked and carried herself like a lady. A lady who'd come looking for his testy, mule-headed big brother. Wonders never ceased.

In the time it took to set out the sugarbowl and get them both into chairs at the trestle table, Travis had reached his decision. Without hearing her version of whatever had taken place over in Kansas, he was sure Rafe had fallen in love for all the right reasons.

Travis had never idolized his brother, but always had a healthy respect for Rafe. Deserving of his hard reputation, just plain old impossible as the man could be, Rafe was a force all his own. Looking over the rim of his coffee mug into prismatic blue-green eyes, Travis experienced a new emotion: envy. He envied Rafe this woman with her bewitching eyes and trim little figure.

"You hinted it wasn't you left Rafe," he said softly. "Hard to believe he'd be dumb

enough to walk away from someone like you." He expected she'd thank him for the compliment. She didn't.

"Not with what he thought was adequate provocation."

He said nothing for a few moments, let her get some warm liquid into her innards. Then he sighed. "I've got to tell you the truth. He's not doin' too well."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Travis purposely pulled his features into a grim mask. "He was ambushed a few months ago and took a bullet through his side. Friend rode him back here, but the gunshot wound had festered. Doc said another day's delay and it would've been too late to save him."

It brought precisely the reaction he hoped for. Pain and fear clouded her eyes. "Oh, my God. But he's all right?"

"Depends on what you consider all right. He's up and walkin', ridin' again. But also sayin' this is his last winter here. Still talkin' trash about goin' after Hoffman. You know about him?" She nodded. "And...I don't reckon he'll be happy you've come. Whatever happened, he's awful bitter and he ain't forgotten."

"Thank you for being honest with me." Her lower lip trembled. "But it's not the first time he's been hurt and walked away from me."

"He's a damned fool, if that's so."

Sparkle's chin came up. "You're very hard on your brother. Remember, he doesn't like feeling boxed in. He's not comfortable with anyone being too close to him, physically or emotionally. But we've had time apart. Maybe that will make a difference."

"Philosophical about it, ain't you?"

Sparkle took another sip from her cup. "I haven't come to cause him any more grief. I'm hoping to spare him some, at least where Hoffman's concerned. All I want is a chance to talk business."

Travis banged his mug down. "You came lookin' to hire him? Thought this was personal."

"It is. That's why I'd rather not go into details with you." A hint of a smile played over her lips. "But I like seeing the heat in your eyes and hearing you get defensive, so I'll tell you this much. If Rafe wants me, I'll stay with him. If he doesn't, I'll move on. Everything I own is in that big trunk in your parlor. I've had it with Kansas and trailheads. A gentleman offered me a partnership in his card palace in San Francisco. I could go there and make a fresh start."

Jonah and the whale, what a pair! Travis inwardly cursed a foul string of oaths. Both his brother and now this gal talkin' about the Barbary Coast. He wondered if Rafe knew

there'd be no escape from this filly. Even if he took off to Californ, he'd only run into her again.

"Either you honestly love my brother, or he left you carryin'." Travis gave her a frankly penetrating look.

"Only a torch, Travis."

He stared down at his hands, wrapped around his empty mug. "I shouldn't say this, but I know he loves you. It's tearin' him up. I can understand. You're the finest gal he's ever had. Might be he's scared, you know? On account of you bein' so fetchin'. He's got that big scar fr--"

"I know. It's one of the things I missed." Her hands gently closed around his. Both of them cradled the mug as if it were a frightened bird.

"I want to tell you something, Travis, because I want us to be friends. I left Kansas to avoid a mistake I would have regretted the rest of my life. A doctor in Kansas City wanted to marry me. Everyone thought he was perfect. He could offer me a pampered life, what every girl's supposed to want. I almost let myself be pressured into marriage, even though I didn't love him."

"You came out here instead?" Truly, wonders would never cease.

"Perfect and pampered isn't me. When things are too orderly, there's no room for spontaneity, no adventure. Your brother's not perfect. He's scarred and stubborn, unpredictable, adventurous, sometimes charming, always irreverent."

Travis had to admit, she hadn't sold herself any pig in a poke. She had Rafe down to the bone. "That just about sums him up," he agreed.

"But times with him were never dull."

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Rafe came stomping through the back door, shaking muddy slush from his boots. Travis waited at the kitchen table, breaking into a grin as Mrs. Abbott bustled past Rafe, carrying a steaming platter of food.

"You'll eat tonight, Rafe," she muttered. "I fixed roast beef with mashed potatoes and gravy." Rafe dropped into the chair to Travis' right.

"Guess you're tryin' to tell me I been hangin' around too much," Rafe chuckled. "First day I leave the spread, I ride back to find my favorite for supper and my little brother in his Sunday best. Another social tonight? Thought you just went to one couple nights ago."

"I did. There's no dance tonight."

"Well, shit howdy, if I don't feel downright honored! Duded yourself up just to share a meal with me."

Travis saw Sparkle step into the kitchen doorway. She'd brushed her hair and changed into a rose-colored dress with lace edging the sleeves. Rafe was shoveling forkfuls of potato into his mouth and hadn't looked up. "Not exactly," Travis replied, his eyes on their guest. Another subtle scent wafted into the kitchen, competing with the aroma of roast beef.

Rafe glanced over his shoulder, addressing the woman at the stove. "Taken to wearin' toilet water, have you, Miz Abbott? Smells real nice."

"No." She spied the younger woman across the room. "I-ah, need to check on the bunkhouse," she stammered. "I'll be back." Seizing her shawl from a hook by the back door, she hurried into the winter darkness.

"Remind me never to pay her no more compliments," Rafe muttered. "Lit out of here like back of her skirt was on fire. If she ain't wearin' the perfume around here, you better change your shavin' soap."

"We have a dinner guest." Travis inclined his head toward the parlor.

Rafe followed his brother's gaze and froze. He stared at the girl in the flowing rose skirts. She stared back. The taut silence was finally broken by Rafe's snarl.

"You have her, Travis. Lost my appetite." He bolted out of his chair, jerked the back door open and disappeared in the housekeeper's wake. The door banged shut so hard behind him it nearly splintered off its hinges.

Sparkle took the chair Travis pulled out for her, waited until he'd righted the one Rafe had vacated, then offered a weak smile. "That went well, don't you think?"

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Travis spent the evening with his guest, and rarely had he enjoyed himself so much. They sat in the parlor after supper. Sparkle told his fortune with her tarot cards, he told of starting the ranch. They talked about Miranda and her family in Omaha. Sparkle asked intelligent questions and wasn't intimidated by verbal sparring. She turned taunts right back. Travis noticed, though, her eyes misted over when Rafe's name came up. Finally he escorted her to her room, squared his shoulders, and went out to face his brother's wrath.

"You left this by the back door," he announced, tossing Rafe's heavy coat over the foot of the bunk. Rafe was seated on the edge of the mattress, swilling whiskey.

"How could you do that to me, Travis? Sending for her, after I told Rannie not to. After I told you I wanted to plum forget I ever met the gal."

"Whoa, hold on there! Rannie never told me anything about sendin' for Sparkle. I didn't invite her. Seems you did."

"Like hell." Rafe tunneled his fingers through his hair. Travis thought the disheveled mop was symbolic of Rafe's general state nowadays. Ever one to see a barber with



regularity, Rafe had abandoned the habit since he'd been wounded. He'd let his hair grow into a mangy tangle--the perfect frame for his saturnine features and bloodshot eyes. The man was one hell of a miserable wretch.

Travis plowed his hands down into his jeans pockets. "You're the one who gave her my name, bragged how you stay here every winter. She showed up this afternoon in a carriage from the depot. What was I supposed to do, tell her to get off my land? I couldn't be sure you wouldn't want to see her."

"Well, now you are," Rafe grumbled sourly. "Ain't talkin' to her. Said all I need to, and she damn well knows it. Whatever excuse she used for comin' --"

"Says she has business to discuss." There was no reaction, so Travis unloaded his big piece of news. "Told me she left some fella at the altar in Kansas City. Maybe you were wrong about her preferrin' somebody else. She's even prettier than you described. I'll admit I was wrong about saloon gals in her case."

Rafe snorted. "You weren't wrong, and neither was I. Entire time I've known that woman, she never had but three or four dresses. Shows up here with a whole overflowin' damned trunk. Now, what's she got in there, furniture? Never trust a goddamned female. Especially not that one. There's no way I'm talkin' to her, about business or anything else. Man can't just talk to Sparkle LaFleur. Might start out jawin', but before long he's wantin' to do more."

"I spent a fair amount of time talkin' to her. Don't know if I should agree with you or not."

Rafe's scowl deepened at that remark. "Poison. The gal's worse than a gila monster. You see her tomorrow mornin', you tell her to get her little ass right back on the next train."

"If that's the way you want it, Rafe."

Travis headed back to the house, thinking he'd found two things mighty curious during his visit to the cabin. Sparkle's trunk had been taken to the back bedroom before Rafe returned that afternoon. So how did his brother know she'd brought a large trunk along, unless he'd been talking to some of the hands or snooping in the guestroom window? If he had no interest in the gal, why bother?

That intrigued him. So did the fact that despite forbidding Travis to ever mention the woman's name, Rafe had done it. Her name had tripped right off Rafe's tongue, natural as could be. He hadn't choked on it or hesitated, hadn't even noticed he'd said it--which meant, of course, the name was on his mind.

Natural to him as breathing, because it was in his thoughts.

Travis grinned as he stretched out in his double bed beneath a pile of warm blankets. He wanted to be well rested for tomorrow's showdown. He had no intention of asking his beautiful guest to leave. If Rafe wanted Sparkle off the ranch, he'd have to tell her himself. And if his angry prediction was accurate, telling Sparkle anything was liable to

lead to an entirely different interaction between them.

Travis laced his fingers behind his head. Ranch life could be monotonous, especially during the long winter months. But here was a situation to make every man on the spread sit up and take notice...not to mention put up part of his pay. Sparkle would get Rafe to change his mind.

She wasn't fooling Travis. She hadn't come to talk business.

She'd come to hunt down the man who made a living hunting down other men. Travis chuckled aloud at the irony of that. After all those years of nailing men's hides to the wall, Rafe's hide was the one in danger of being stretched now.

He'd stood up to the Bowie that scarred him for life. Faced guns, bullwhips, rope, broken bottles, and just about any other weapon a man could turn against him. Battered, scarred, even barely breathing like the last time, Rafe emerged victorious.

But he was no match for Sparkle LaFleur...and he knew it.

The coward was holed up in that cabin, afraid to get within arm's distance of her. Scared of a little bitty gal--who didn't need any weapons beyond her clear eyes and soft voice to bring the awesome Rafe Conley to his knees.

It was damned comical. Rafe had always been rawhide tough. No one had ever seen him shed a tear. Pa, then Simon, eventually Ma were all laid to rest. Rafe had stood beside their graves in silence, features stoic as a headstone. Even as kids, Pa's leather strap in the shed never made Rafe cry. Simon once or twice, according to Ma. Travis had been too young to remember. He himself had bawled and carried on something fierce after a whipping. Kept crying until Rannie or Ma put honey in his oatmeal or held him and soothed him, made him feel better. Not Rafe. He'd rather starve to death than show weakness. Wouldn't break down.

Travis was sorry Pa and Simon hadn't lived to see tough old Rafe now. Hiding in a hovel, drinking...terrified of a pretty gal with a special deck of cards. Of course, having seen the determination in those sparkling aquamarine eyes, Travis wasn't sure Rafe had overestimated his opponent. The gal was tough, too.

Come daylight, they were in for one hell of a show.

## Chapter 21

Sparkle nodded as Travis explained his brother refused to see her. She waited until they'd finished breakfast and Travis headed out to start his chores. Mrs. Abbott was baking bread. There was no one to stop Sparkle when she grabbed a kitchen chair and dragged it outside. She huffed across the frigid crust blanketing the ground and set the chair twenty feet from the cabin's porch.

She'd seen Travis slip out the night before with Rafe's coat in his arms. She'd watched from her window and made note of where he'd gone. The cabin's door was closed, the curtains of the big glazed window beside the door tightly drawn. Sparkle knew that wouldn't stop Rafe from detecting her presence. He had a habit of peeking through window curtains. She walked around the side of the log structure and discovered another smaller window, up high. It was slightly ajar.

"Rafe," she called loudly beneath it, "I'm not leaving until you talk to me. It's about Hoffman and it's important." He gave no indication he'd heard. "I'll be waiting outside your door." She plunked herself down on the wood seat and started her vigil.

Rafe could have incredible patience. She recalled waiting for Slocumb night after night in Dodge. But she'd learned to wait too, sitting for hours at the bedside of a comatose Jace. And she had another advantage. Rafe hated feeling trapped. He wouldn't be able to stay inside that small cabin long. She could outlast him.

Or so she thought. But she was still sitting there, bottom numb and feet frozen, at noon. She retreated to the main house for some coffee and a sandwich, then returned to her post. The curtains were still closed. She walked up and lightly pushed the door. She was surprised when it moved, but the instant it began to swing inward, she pulled her fingers back.

Rafe's voice came low and menacing from the other side. "Push that damned door another inch, I'll blow your fool head off."

She went back to her chair. A cowhand squatted down beside her, offering a hopeful smile and a pat on the shoulder. "Probably thought it was one of us. He wouldn't shoot a lady."

"I'm not so certain about that," Sparkle answered grimly, recalling the peacemaker against her chin in the Scarlet Lady's hallway.

"Nobody's allowed in there," the stranger explained. "Even the foreman has to knock and wait for Rafe to open up. It's one of the first rules you learn when you hire on. Even after he goes in the spring, none of us set foot inside. Believe me, the way those other fellas snore, many's the night I been tempted to break the rule and take Rafe's bunk when he's away. Want me to try talkin' to him?"

Sparkle shook her head. "And tell the others to stay away, please. This is between the two of us. He can't stay inside forever."

She wasn't so confident hours later, as she and Travis ate alone in silence. Travis hadn't said a word about her failed mission. Sparkle wondered if he thought she was a madwoman, or just bent on proving she could be more obstinate than his brother. It didn't really matter, as long as Travis didn't sabotage her efforts.

"I'm going to bed now," she announced, clearing her plate and utensils from the table. "Thank you for allowing me to stay. I know I'm imposing, but I don't want anyone to bring food or coffee out to the cabin. I honestly need to speak to Rafe. I need him to get cabin fever bad enough to face me."

"Miz Abbott's already smuggled some vittles out to him," Travis coughed. "But if you want to know my position...as long as you don't disrupt work on this spread, you're welcome to stay until Doomsday."

Sparkle lay awake for a long time before the solution came to her.

The next morning she ate breakfast alone. Travis had already gone to ride the range. Sparkle asked Mrs. Abbott to help her mix up a batch of johnnycakes. The housekeeper greased a big skillet and showed Sparkle how to fry up the cornmeal cakes. Sparkle dusted off her hands and returned the spare apron. Then she startled the older woman by asking if Travis would meet her in the barn.

Mrs. Abbott frowned as Sparkle filled a wooden platter with her creations. "Travis and the hands don't eat in the barn, Miss. You'll have to take those to the bunkhouse."

"These aren't for the men. Please have Travis meet me in the barn. I want to buy a horse."

He came stalking through the barn door an hour later. "Sparkle, I don't know what this is about, but I got no spare horses to sell. You'd need two. One just for the trunk you're haulin' all over creation."

"I'm only interested in the horse you're boarding. Snatch."

"Have you lost your mind? If I tried to sell that sorrel, Rafe would--"

"Come storming out of that cabin to stop you?"

Brown eyes widened. A playful smile curved Travis' lips. "You know, Miss LaFleur, that's one hell of a notion. Just sneaky enough to work. How much you offerin'? Keep in mind now, I'm only negotiatin' on behalf of his owner--who'd set a mighty high price. The horse is trained special."

"I know, but he won't be showing off his trick today. I've already fed him a whole batch of you-know-what's." Travis guffawed.

"I've got a bank draft made out to Rafe for three thousand dollars," Sparkle went on. "I'll take this platter back to the kitchen and get it. You take Snatch out in clear view of the cabin. I'll meet you back there and we'll light your brother's fuse."

They examined Snatch from every angle. Travis raised his voice a notch and boasted he'd had his farrier put a new set of shoes on the sorrel only weeks before. Sparkle handed over the folded paper and they shook hands, then she reached for the reins.

At that very second, the cabin door opened and Rafe barreled out, Colt in his hand. "Just what in tarnation you doin' with my horse?"

"Ain't yours now," Travis corrected. "I sold him. Sorrel ain't done a thing but turn hay into manure for months. Finally made a profit on him."

"Snatch is mine, and he ain't for sale!" Rafe glared at Sparkle, then spoke to the animal. "Snatch, johnnycakes."

Snatch shifted his weight, but both forelegs remained on the ground. "I said johnnycakes, you broomtail."

The stallion offered Sparkle his warm nose. "You're welcome," she said softly before meeting Rafe's murderous gaze. "I fed him a whole batch, Rafe. He doesn't have to kick for them."

Rafe turned his fury on his brother. "Ain't sellin' him to anybody. Least of all her."

Travis crossed his arms over his chest. "Miss LaFleur's offered top dollar. You weren't cheated."

"The price ain't the point," Rafe snarled, raising the muzzle of his pistol. "He's my horse. Just like this here's my gun and that's my cabin. You don't want him eatin' up your fodder, fine. I'll ride out. Don't need| no--"

"Good," Travis interrupted. "Because I been thinkin' I'd knock down the cabin, since you're so positive you won't be back. Get rid of the foul smell."

Rafe looked momentarily stymied. He glanced at Sparkle for a brief second, then seemed to address the ground. "Give Snatch back. Don't want your money."

Travis' tone was all business. "Too late. She bought and paid for him. You'll have to buy him back. And while we're settling ownership..." His rifle barrel appeared out of nowhere. Sparkle hadn't even noticed he'd been carrying the long gun. "This here's my gun, Rafe, and it's loaded." He pointed it squarely at his brother's forehead. "Step away from Snatch and let Miss LaFleur go on her way. She's got a train to catch."

"Don't be a jackass. You ain't about to shoot your own brother."

"Seems we need a clear understandin' of who runs this spread," Travis replied. "You give me money for stock and such now and again, but it hardly makes up for what it costs me to feed you and that sorrel for months. You're snarlin' at me for sellin' a horse for five times what he's worth. Might take orders or advice from a partner, but you made it real clear you're not my partner. Told me over and over I'm the owner of this spread. Which way is it?"

"You're tearin' the scab off that, just cause she showed up?"

"Sparkle bein' here makes me realize it's time to get it straight. You want her gone, but you won't tell her. She wanted to do business, but you wouldn't talk to her. I did, made a sound business deal for you, and you're carpin' about that. My welcome mat's wearin' thin."

"Fine. You want me out, or what, Mr. Boss Man?"

Travis jerked the reins so abruptly both Rafe and Sparkle let go. "Nope. I want Snatch back in my barn, where he belongs. I want your ornery butt beside Sparkle's on the parlor sofa." He handed Rafe the bank draft and motioned with his gun barrel again.

"Want my ranchhands back to work, with no more excuses to gawk at this pretty gal. And I want you to find your damned common sense, Rafe. Now git!"

## Chapter 22

Rafe defied Travis by standing against the far wall, as far as possible from where Sparkle sat. He told himself he wasn't going to look at her. He didn't dare. Not only because she was still so dang pretty. But her expression outside had been all crumpled, like any minute she was fixing to break down and cry. He wanted no part of that. No way. He had to think about something else.

Money. That was safe, always a smart thing to ponder. He studied the paper Travis had shoved into his hand.

Bank drafts in Rafe's name, even for mind-boggling amounts, weren't all that rare. But this one made him curious, the prickly sort of curious that demanded investigation. How the hell had Sparkle laid her hands on so much, and why offer it to him? That second question burned in his mind. He'd walked out on her....

"There's three thousand dollars here," he said after a long, awkward silence. "Must want that horse awful bad."

He hadn't actually spoken to the woman in the parlor. He'd just been thinking out loud, remarking to the furniture. But a soft feminine voice responded.

"I don't want your horse at all. I just had to make you come out. That's a bounty. It was buried in Texas near the town I lived in as a child."

Rafe held the paper out to her. "Naw, you earned your share of the Slocumb reward. The hard way. Ain't got to pay for the clothes or jewelry, if that's--"

"I told you, this has to do with Hoffman."

"What, did he take you to dig up this money?" He knew he sounded sarcastic. It was deliberate, cause if she thought she could use Hoffman to--

"No," she answered, too reasonably for Rafe's tastes. "I can explain how I got it, but it's complicated. There's a critical point at the beginning of the story I'd have to relate first."

Rafe muttered an expletive beneath his breath. "Spit it out and let's get this done."

"Remember how I swore I'd never lied to you...about being a virgin and everything?"

He groaned and closed his eyes. "Stick to the money."

"I lied about one thing, Rafe. The thing you got so distressed about."

He stared at her. He knew it was tantamount to lifting rocks and hunting for rattlesnakes, but he lowered himself into an overstuffed chair. "You didn't lie about it," he amended.

"You took your sweet time tellin' me, but you were straight enough in sayin' there was another fella. Just didn't say who. The who made all the difference."

"You were partly right. Jace was the man I had feelings for. But he's not my brother. We're not related."

"There's no blood between you?" She shook her head. "Then why'd you put on like he--"

"My mother and I were boarders in the Flowers family home down in Texas. When I was nine, Jace was shot, along with his father late one night. A week later, my mother was murdered. Jace's mother was the only adult left. She was certain the men would come back to kill everyone in the house--especially if they learned Jace had survived. His father helped an outlaw friend of his hide stolen loot."

"Big trouble."

"Yes," she nodded. "She smuggled us out of Texas to her aunt's in Kansas City and changed her name to LaFleur. It was her idea to claim I was her daughter. Jace was barely alive at that point. He didn't remember anything. She didn't want him to. She made me promise I wouldn't tell him who I really was or what had happened. I agreed to wait to see if he'd remember on his own."

Rafe said nothing for a long moment. "Thinkin' you two were kin... You can understand that I just couldn't stomach what I thought was goin' on." She swallowed and bobbed her head, avoiding his gaze. Rafe thought back, thought hard.

"Recall you askin' about his memory. Told me himself about bein' shot, and that he couldn't remember what his pa looked like. I'd asked him which parent you favored. Noticed you didn't look much alike, for brother and sister. But it doesn't change the fact you were in love with him."

"I felt close to Jace, responsible for him. Bound to him. He was the only person left alive who knew where the stolen money was hidden. I'd always had this silly notion that he'd remember and we'd dig it up and be rich. I'd tell him I wasn't really his sister. We'd get married and go to France. I'd finally see Paris."

"All neat and tidy." Rafe heard the sarcasm in his own words. This time it didn't have the same appeal.

She sighed. "I'd kept that fantasy alive for so many years, I don't even remember when it began. You have to recall how young and naive I was when I started working in saloons. Jace didn't know I had that silly dream. When I found out he'd married Majesta, I was shocked and hurt. He destroyed everything I'd worked for."

Rafe offered a noncommittal grunt.

She rose to stare down into the glowing embers on the hearth. "I wasn't ever in love with him. I'd kept that foolish dream alive to endure the saloons. I had no idea what love was between a man and woman. I didn't know how it felt to love a man." She turned and gave him a tremulous smile. "Until I met you."

Now Rafe swallowed hard. It would be so easy to get sucked into what she was spinning. The pain in her voice and eyes seemed genuine. Nothing she'd said was hard for him to imagine; most of it, entirely too easy. Nobody understood better than Rafe about people hanging onto fables or fantasies to get through what had to be done.



He cleared his throat. "You discovered makin' love with me. You were lonely. So was I. Been that way most of my life. You never minded my scar, and I couldn't help bein' drawn to you because of that. The acceptance meant a hell of a lot. God's truth. And there's no denyin' you're damned good in bed, but--"

"You expect me to believe that's all it was?" she demanded. "You said you loved me. You said it meant something, that I was your woman. We're not talking about lust. It was more than that, more than loneliness. And I can prove it."

She pushed the coffee table closer to his chair and quickly dealt tarot cards into a formation. She'd pulled a deck from the pocket of her skirt. "Do you remember when I told your fortune? Can you remember some of the cards? Tell me what they were."

Rafe was about to refuse, but she abruptly dropped to her knees across from him and closed her eyes.

He was instantly transported back to Dodge. To one night when she'd knelt before him and taken him in her mouth. The image of her nude and smiling impishly filled his mind. Her nipples taut from his attentions, triangle of dark curls damp, her hand reaching down to cup him....

He was stiff and ready, holding his breath to keep from--

"What?" He jerked back to the present. His fingers had actually moved to the buttons of his fly. Thank God, her eyes were still closed.

"I asked again about the cards."

"Oh. Don't recollect."

"There was a snake on one, remember?" she coached. "Look down. You'll recognize others. I did several readings for you. You must remember some of the cards."

"Yeah, this one, DEATH." He studied the pasteboard images. "And STRENGTH, with the gal and the lion. We argued about that one."

Sparkle nodded. Rafe gazed at her and felt his mouth go dry. Damn, but he wanted her, despite everything. Her hair was longer and even shinier than he remembered. He'd kill to bury his face in it, to hold her close.

"And the Five of Swords is near THE LOVERS," she whispered. "Do you see those two cards?"

"So what? Those lovers supposed to be us?" he snorted in derision. "Is that why you're readin' my fortune again, to prove--"

"This isn't yours. It's mine. The times you spotted me reading my own fortune, like in the panel crib that night--you never saw the cards, did you? I never let you see them."

"Nope." Rafe couldn't say why all this made his skin crawl, but suddenly every nerve in his body was taut.

"The central card is the Queen of Swords. A woman. Me. I don't need to look to tell you what's there. The cards have come up the same for a long time. I know them by rote." She clicked off the names and positions. If he hadn't watched her shuffle and deal....

A gunfighter listened to his instincts.

He'd been watching as she laid out the cards. She hadn't rigged this. Couldn't have, any more than she could have put that rattler on the trail in front of Snatch.

"Sparkle, I'm not mad any more. Look at me," he urged. "What does it mean, us havin' the same cards?"

Her eyes slowly opened and met his. "You know. I've told you, we're meant to be together. The hidden money belonged to a man named Roy McAllister, who rode with Micah Slade. Just like your uncle did, before he went to Dodge. The draft is part of Slade's money. I hoped you'd look at it as your uncle's share."

She was still kneeling, but leaning closer. Her eyes glowed with a smoky green inner light. "Please let Hoffman go. I know you need closure. I can't bring your uncle back, but you have something of his, a kind of justice. Let it end, please."

"Never heard he'd left any loot in Texas." His voice sounded too raw to his own ears. Could she hear the pain and desire in it?

"I doubt he knew," she answered easily. "McAllister arrived alone, but someone had followed him. Jace and I suspect the third partner, Frank Jackson, killed McAllister for his share. He never found it. Bludgeoned my mother to death, but she couldn't reveal what she didn't know. She hadn't been in the cemetery that night.

The money was in one of the graves, but Jackson would have had to dig up the whole place to find which one. If he'd followed McAllister, he knew your uncle wasn't involved. I wonder if he wouldn't have killed your uncle, as well--if he hadn't taken that job as a lawman. Jackson couldn't risk going after a man with a badge."

Rafe nodded thoughtfully. "Might be. But I don't--"

"We've always been connected, Rafe. To this money, to outlaws. Slade and his violence changed both our lives. We were just children, and neither of us even knew him, but look what his criminal activity cost us. Let Hoffman be. Travis says you're still thinking about pursuing him. Don't."

"Jesus! You come here with this tale about outlaws, say the fella you introduced as your brother's only some old friend. Tarot cards and Micah Slade, our fates bein' tied up together. It's damned eerie. You're makin' it sound like I have to take up with you again, or I'll have a curse on my head or somethin'."

She gathered up the cards without looking at him. "Your nature's the curse. Either you have feelings for me, or you don't. Someone confronted me with that same sticking point once." Now she met his gaze. "I can't put emotions in your heart that aren't there.

Forgiveness...love...anything."

"Sparkle--"

"I should have told you before how much you meant to me. Your lazy drawl and that damned sorrel with the awful name, the sound of your spurs on a wood floor."

Tears trickled down her cheeks now. Rafe wanted to reach out to her, but he couldn't make himself do it. "You've never understood. I knew the first time I laid out your cards who you were, Rafe. The vagabond who'd finally found me. But because you were also a hired gun, I was frightened. I was afraid of the danger and the violence. But I never thought of myself as too good for you." She squared her shoulders and wiped her face. "A part of me is just like you. It's probably why I love you. Why I always will."

She got to her feet. So did he. He stood arm's distance from her and let the feelings flow--fierce, merciless, lashing at them both.

"I should have gone after you," she choked out between sobs. "But I was hurt and being selfish...too busy thinking how Jace had shattered my life. I'd lost so much. My job, half my clothes...my innocence...my dreams. Then I lost you."

His hands came to rest lightly on her shoulders. "You don't belong with me because some tarot cards or my uncle's past make you think you're supposed to. That doesn't make sense, Sparkle. You're nuts if you left some city fella who could give you a decent life to come after me."

His voice broke. "You know I got no future. Told you that the day we met, and I never needed no painted cards to figure it out. We can't tangle ourselves up again. It was one thing playin' in Wichita or Dodge, but this ain't a trailhead. And we got no one left to fool but ourselves."

"I'm not fooling myself. I've had months to assess how I feel, Rafe. I love your grin and the way you can be so reasonable you make me want to murder you. The way you kiss me, the way you make love. But I'm here because you'd never take me to the opera with your parents on our wedding night."

"What?"

"The doctor in Kansas City had just enough time in his schedule for a brief ceremony. We couldn't have a big wedding, because he didn't want to invite his doctor friends and risk them finding out I'd worked in saloons. We'd just have a private ceremony, then go to the opera with his parents. I hate opera," she announced with conviction.

"I hate art shows and men who can't admit they've ever been to a bagnio. He called it a gentleman's club. Told me to keep my beaded gown and tarot cards, so I could play gypsy for him alone in our bedroom. He said the image of me in a saloon dress had a wicked allure. Can you believe he insulted me, practically admitted he was ashamed of me, then had the temerity to think I'd marry him?"

Actually, Rafe could. Them stuck up city fellas were like that. Damned if she hadn't found a way to make him chuckle inside, at the very last thing he should find amusing--the notion of some other man wanting to marry Sparkle.

She was his woman. Rafe's. Just ask Travis, or any of the dozen or so men on this ranch. "Sounds like a Nancy. Even if my folks were still alive, I sure as hell wouldn't ask you to go anywhere with them on our weddin' night."

There was an awkward pause as they both realized what he'd said. She cleared her throat. "I heard you were seriously wounded and a friend brought you here. How is Samson?"

Rafe let his gaze drop along with his hands. "Driscoll and I buried him. Bushwhackers attacked us. Sam was gut-shot. Nothin' I could do."

"Nothing you could do?" she repeated numbly. Then he saw the horrible realization dawn. "Oh Rafe, no! Bushwackers murdered Sam?" She tentatively touched his sleeve. "I'm so sorry. I know what he meant to you. He was... You're--you're not going after the men who did it?"

He jerked his arm away. He couldn't take her sympathy now. "Naw. Heard Hoffman might be in Salt Lake. Plan on headin' over to Utah after the spring thaw. Got ambushed by too many men; there was too much crossfire to sort out faces. Be a waste of time tryin' to find the ones who killed Sam. He knew the chance he took ridin' with me. It's part of the risk."

"Sam's life was just part of the risk? Losing your best friend was ..." she seemed to grope for the right words. "Just a cost of doing business? Is that what you're saying?"

He stared out the front window at nothing in the distance. "Reckon so."

She left the room so quietly he never heard her go.

## Chapter 23

A low sound intruded, nudging Sparkle to consciousness. She opened her eyes. The ranch bedroom was pitch black, but she was certain she'd heard something. A low thud, then a sort of jangle. She recognized the sounds then: boots and spurs striking a wood floor. She sat up and was fumbling for her dressing robe when a match flared. Rafe lit the bedside lamp.

"You tried every way you could to make me feel guilty," he announced, flexing his fingers, then closing them into fists. "Sat outside my cabin all day. Got Miz Abbott givin' me dirty looks, her husband avoidin' me, cowpokes gapin' at me like I was a two-headed calf. You even used my own horse and my little brother against me. But usin' Sam Parker is goin' too damned far."

"Don't you dare throw Sam's death up to me," she gasped. "I didn't get him killed. I had nothing to do with it. I liked him...very much. I nearly got killed myself protecting him that night at the Bold Adventuress. He was in danger from Slocumb, not you."

"All of us were," Rafe argued. "I felt like shit when I realized my bullet had grazed your scalp and sent you into shock. You followin' me?" His features went taut. "I shot you, Sparkle. Do you think it's been easy livin' with that? You were between me and a man I'd been hired to kill--a place you never should've been. A place I never should have allowed you to be. My fault. And Sam was killed because he backed me up. My fault again."

"So you feel guilty?" She didn't ask with kindness, any more than she'd asked him to come here in the middle of the night to finish their debate. If he'd come looking for the bitter truth, by God, she'd give it to him. Cold and stark, with nothing to help wash it down.

"Of course I do, woman."

"Good! Maybe if guilt eats at you day and night, you'll stop your insane way of life before you get yourself killed. But I doubt it. I'm not sure there's enough guilt west of the Mississippi to make any difference. You're wasting your time searching for Hoffman. But if you can't find him, there's always someone on a Wanted poster. Go look for trouble. Sooner or later it's bound to find you again.

"Just don't stand there pretending you don't have any choice or you're misunderstood. I understand. We both know all you have to do is walk away. Stop. Take off your peacemaker--in honor of your best friend, if you need a reason. Do it in Sam's honor."

"Sam didn't think he was my best friend."

She glared at him. "He was right. Snatch is. You wouldn't come out of that cabin for anyone else."

"Wish my best friend would go in it with me."

"I hope you and your sorrel have a nice life together."

He pulled a bandanna from his chest pocket and held it out to her. Sparkle ignored it and wiped her face with her sleeve. "Get out of here. Just leave me alone, Rafe. It hurts seeing you and talking to you."

"Same here. Been tryin' to ignore you, but I can't sleep. We got to settle this." He abruptly gathered her, quilts and all, into his arms.

"Put me down!" Her yelp was partially muffled by the bedcovers. She punched and kicked to no avail. He proceeded down the hall and through the empty kitchen.

"Hush up, before you wake Travis and the Abbotts," Rafe hissed.

"If you don't put me down this instant, I'll scream until I wake the dead." He tossed her over his shoulder. Now she was totally buried in the bedding.

The thump of his spurs and boots on wood gave way to a crunching sound. She would have jumped at the chance to be alone with him in the cabin when she first arrived. Now she meant to claw his eyes out as soon as he got her inside.

She landed with a little puff.

She shoved aside the quilts to find herself sitting in the middle of a crude bunk. A log snapped in the rock fireplace, a rifle stood propped in a dark corner. Rafe's gunbelt and hat lay on a side table--a table hewn from the same timber comprising the cabin's walls.

"I'm not interested in anything you have to say," she asserted, crossing her arms in front of her breasts. She realized she was barefoot and clad only in a flannel nightgown. Hardly the best attire for rational discussions with a former lover. "Take me back to my room. We said everything this afternoon."

"Stop snivelin' and you just might learn somethin'," he replied, taking his rocking chair beside the fire. "Sam Parker's dyin' words were about you."

"Me?"

"Weirdest damned thing I've seen in years. You two hardly knew each other. Yet layin' there, bleedin' to death in my arms, he talked about you. Said you were my best friend. Swore you were still my woman, no matter what had passed between us."

Rafe's fingers plucked at the creases of his jeans at one bent knee. "And he's right." He glanced up at her now. "I ain't touched another since I met you. Can't stop thinkin' about you. I reckon, whether I like it or not, Sam's last words are true."

Sparkle sat immobile and kept her features impassive, afraid to let him see his admission had affected her.

"Got enough blame on my soul over Sam, and walkin' away back in Kansas City without givin' you a chance to explain. I couldn't just sit out here and let you leave on the next train without workin' through this."

"I've basically said all I can," she informed him softly, "except for one thing. You're headed for something terrible, Rafe. I saw it in your cards before I came here. When Travis told me how badly you'd been injured, I was relieved, thinking that must have been the calamity I'd foreseen." She eased her feet to the floor and stood, taking a step closer to his chair. "But I consulted the tarot again this afternoon after our talk. A disaster's still there, yet to come. You have to stop carrying that gun." Her eyes flicked to the peacemaker in its holster. "Before it's too late."

"What if I said I don't want to?"

There was no anger in his question. He sounded almost mystified, bemused. Startled by that, she drew a sharp breath and pinned him with her gaze.

"You said you understood me, but you don't," he sighed. "Everybody reckons I'm just like that Colt, ready to go off. Nobody ever considers I might know exactly what I'm doin'. That I understand the cost."

He stopped, swallowed, then went on in a smoother tone. "You and my family see what I do and say I need to change, because it's not your way. You all tell me it's dangerous, like that's the big dark secret I just haven't cottoned onto yet. Livin's dangerous, Sparkle. We're all dyin', a little more each day."

"Rafe--"

"I'm a freelance gun because it's what I'm best at. It's what I got a natural talent for." He pinned her with his dark, forthright gaze. "I believe it's what I was put on this earth for." At her raised eyebrows, he chuckled. A harsh, unhappy sound. "See? I knew you didn't understand."

"No, and I'm not sure anyone would. I've known card cheats and whores. None of them believed they were destined to do those things."

"I'm like a wolf or cougar, an avalanche. We keep the balance out yonder." He jerked a thumb toward the door. "You talk a lot about what's meant to be. I was meant to be a gunfighter. Can't be a farmer or some dandy in a suit. I tried sittin' in Jace's parlor in a starched collar so I could--" He pounded a fist on his knee. "Dammit! This talkin' don't cut it. It's just gettin' me riled again. It's no use. You'll leave here tomorrow, still not understandin' that I love you, but--"

Her voice was soft. "Don't get upset. I'm listening and trying to hear what's inside of you. Go on and say what you feel."

"I feel riled. Tired and confused. Pissed off. And ..."

"And?" She crept closer, almost close enough to touch his shoulder.

"Hurt, Goddammit! I've had nothin' but time to lick my wounds, and reckon on how the whole world's gone sour, and most of that's my own fault. You ain't the only one who's lost a lot these past months."

"I know." He did indeed look hurt. Too thin. Plagued by worries. Bereft of the unflagging sense of humor that had always seen him through before. "I didn't mean to sound callous before about what happened. Your injury. Travis said you nearly died. He's still worried about you, and you do look much too thin."

He jerked his shoulders. "I'll be all right."

She cocked her head, studying him. "Need a haircut, too. You shouldn't have carried me out here, you know. You might have reinjured yourself."

"Were you goin' to get out of that bed and come talk to me if I'd asked?"

She flushed. "Maybe not."

"There you go. See, it's things just like that. Folks don't want to deal with a problem. When I do it for 'em, they tell me I'm wrong."

"I didn't say you--" She started to argue, then realized he was correct. She had just implied that. Much as Kent had inferred she'd been morally wrong for doing what she'd had to in order to survive.

She knelt in front of the rocking chair and gingerly laid her head on Rafe's knee. "I've been as hard on you as everyone else. I'm sorry for that. As much as I've missed you these past months, I'm glad I didn't know--" Now her head came up. "No, I'm not. I was about to say I was glad I didn't know you were so terribly hurt, but I'm not glad. You might have died, Rafe. Died never knowing you'd been mistaken about Jace, or that I love you so much. When I think--"

But his lips on hers wouldn't let her think. Neither would his arms pulling her against his hard length. Dragging her back across the small space to the bunk and enveloping her.

She finally drew a breath of air and found herself stretched out on the bunk beside him, her head on his shoulder.

"Know what's worse than thinkin' someone you love might die?" he whispered.

"No."

"Lyin' alone night after night, feelin' a hand on your chest. Thinkin' the one you love is there, strokin' your skin, even though it's scarred. Thinkin' there's someone special to live for. Tellin' yourself you've got a reason to keep on. Then wakin' up to find it's just the nerves in your chest lyin' again."

"Oh, Rafe." She unbuttoned his shirt and ran her palm over his bare skin. "Do you feel this now?"

"Yeah, but I know you're here. Saw you reach into my shirt. Doesn't count."

"Doesn't it? I could have wired you that money and sent a letter explaining about McAllister and Slade. I think my being here in person should count for quite a lot."

He kissed her tenderly. "Sparkle, you're a fool crazy woman, givin' up a city doctor to



chase after me."

"All right, I'm a crazy woman. Just promise you won't leave me again, Rafe. Please. You told me back in Dodge it would never happen and I shouldn't worry about it. But it did. Promise never again. Swear it."

She saw his eyes were damp in the low firelight. "Sparkle, I--God Almighty, but I'm so sorry. You know it was a mistake. I love you, darlin'." He gently stroked her cheek with one long finger. "Don't stop trustin' me. I didn't do it to hurt you."

"I know that. But I need your promise before we can make love."

"Hey, you blackmailin' me again?" Sparkle had to grin at the hopeful note in his voice.

"I think so. Are you paying up?"

"Shit, yeah. I promise I won't walk away from you again so long as I live." He undid the neckline of her nightgown. She let him take the gown off, then pulled his shirt free of his pants. He climbed off the bunk and removed his clothes. He reached to take Sparkle into his arms, then stopped when he saw she was crying. "What now? You said you wanted to--"

Sparkle drew in a sharp breath. "Your side and your back."

He grunted. "Not gettin' any prettier, am I?" When he saw his attempt at humor failed, he spoke gently, gathering her close. "I'm still alive, honey. Stop cryin'. You'd been cryin' earlier, too. I could tell when I lit the lamp in your room. You cried when I wouldn't touch you. Don't cry now."

With little foreplay--only a lingering kiss and his hands lightly cupping both breasts--he entered her. It didn't matter, for she didn't need teasing foreplay tonight. She only needed him. With her. All around her. Inside her.

She released a soft moan and clutched him feverishly, returning his passionate kiss full measure. At length he pulled his lips from hers and rested on his elbows. "Sorry, darlin'. Don't have the...wind...I used to back yet. Give me...a minute."

"Stay like that, take a few deep breaths," she whispered, then tucked her head down, wriggling to press her lips to the hardened ridge of his long Bowie scar. Her legs trapped his. She kissed and licked his chest, loving him with her tongue. God, but she'd longed to do this--love him, taste him. Right there.

"Sparkle...God, woman." His words became incoherent moans as she licked and nipped with her teeth, then fastened her mouth over one flat brown nipple. She began to stimulate him, massaging his lean buttocks with her fingers, pulling his hips down against hers, gyrating her pelvis to arouse them both.

Rafe pumped his hips. Sparkle licked and sucked at his scar while simultaneously raising her pelvis to meet his thrust.

Gasping, fighting for each breath, Rafe was on fire--from the tip of his erection to the last follicle of his scalp. Burning with a fever hotter than his infection had caused. His woman had done more than come back to him. She'd listened, battled, and blackmailed him. Now she was loving the worst, ugliest part of him. Kissing the disfigurement. Telling him with more than words just how much she loved him. Loved it. Jesus H. Christ.

He'd wondered if he'd be able to detect a sensual caress on his chest during lovemaking. Since meeting Sparkle and finding his nerve endings somewhat improved, he'd wondered all the more. But he never would have asked her to caress him so boldly, to kiss him there as he took her.

Hell, he'd paid women to satisfy him and been too ashamed to ask them.

Sparkle's lips and tongue laving his scar was his darkest secret fantasy. The one thing he'd craved, but never expected to experience. Without a word from him, she'd known. She was granting his most powerful wish: that she'd not only prove she accepted who and what he was, ugly as that was, but also show him she could embrace all of it.

He lifted his torso and locked his elbows, arms trembling with the effort to stay rigid above her. Sparkle was short; her lips met his flesh at the perfect spot. He endured the eroticism of their position as long as he could--the pleasure along with the pain--but felt his strength ebbing too soon. "Can't," he panted. "Side's bothering me."

She immediately pushed at him, forcing him to lie flat on his back with her straddling him. She took up the slow, seductive rhythm he'd established. He watched in the firelight as she undulated, bending to kiss and caress his torso with her lips all the while. Her aquamarine eyes were open. Her unspoken dare enflamed him, as always.

But this time it came as a different taunt.

Prove you're still my man, Rafe. Take me loving you like this. Prove you can endure it as I sear your soul.

It was heaven. It was hell. Beyond his darkest imaginings. Beyond his most magnificent dreams.

For once, he wasn't taking a woman. His woman--the person he loved more than he'd ever believed possible--was giving herself completely to him. Giving him intense carnal pleasure. Proving he hadn't surrendered his heart in vain.

There was one thing he still wanted. One last thing he needed from her.

"Close your eyes, darlin'."

"I love you, Rafe." Her blue-green pools went smoky teal, then slid closed as she ended with his name. He jerked and convulsed, beyond all rational thought and restraint. His firebrand erupted in wrenching spasms. He arched, lifting them both off the bunk. It seemed his climax went on and on. Sparkle still rode him, bucking and whimpering until

she collapsed in a limp sprawl.

That supreme moment was followed by an uncharacteristic hour of silence. They lay wrapped in a warm mutual embrace, listening to the tick of his shelf clock and the low snaps from the hearth. Rafe supposed this was what happened when two people connected on the very deepest level. When they were destined to be together, as Sparkle insisted. Folks that close didn't need words.

But there was something he had to say.

"I'm not sure I'm up to sufferin' the pure hell I been in these past months again. I gave my word I won't leave you. Need to know you'll stick with me."

"Mmm," she sighed, curling closer and pressing her lips to his throat. "Like glue."

"Swear I won't ask you to the opera. Promise we'll spend our weddin' night in bed. I'll lick wine or the icin' from the cake off your body. Give you a dozen peaks and long, sweet valleys in between. Make love to you so long, you won't leave the bed for a week."

"You certainly take me for a lusty wanton," she giggled. "I can't imagine where you'd get that idea."

"I take you for the passionate woman I want to be my wife. I asked you before, but maybe you didn't think I meant it. I'll do my best to make you happy, even though I'll probably never manage to get it quite right. Don't reckon I could make anybody as deep-down content as you make me."

Sparkle meant to laugh--both at his reference to the opera and his overly somber tone. She had no idea how tears managed to slip out instead, but they were there, dampening her face. "You really want to, don't you? You want to see me happy. The last several sentences were all about me."

"Reckon I'm learnin' how to blackmail from one of the best. I was sweetenin' the deal. So, how about this? I promise to love you with all my heart until the day I die."

She hiccuped, choking on a sob.

"Sparkle, if we're meant to be together, you got to marry me. Don't you see that?"

She gave him a tearful smile. "Yes. Oh, yes."

"Yes, you see it, or yes you will?"

"I said yes twice, Rafe."

"Goddamn. You did!"

## Chapter 24

The cabin door creaked slightly. "Rafe, you awake?" Travis stepped inside. Miranda was right behind him. She let out a gasp of pure shock. There was a sudden blur of motion as Rafe shot from the bunk to seize his Colt from its holster. An astonished high-pitched shriek came from the bunk, and something squirmed under jumbled quilts and covers.

"Sorry," Travis coughed. "Didn't mean to intrude."

Rafe scowled and lowered his pistol. "Sneakin' up on a man like me can prove lethal, Travis. Ought to know better. Rannie," he mumbled, giving a half-nod of greeting. He retrieved his jeans from the floor and stepped into them. "If I'd known my big sister was comin' to pay me an early mornin' call, I would've made sure I at least had on a clean pair of socks."

Miranda blushed. "We were concerned. Travis' houseguest mysteriously disappeared sometime during the night. He said she was distressed last evening. I worried something might have happened to her. He thought we should ask you if you'd seen her."

"Yep, she's here, safe and sound," Rafe responded coolly.

"Well," Miranda huffed.

"Little privacy might be nice. Meet you in the kitchen for breakfast in a half- hour or so."

Miranda pursed her lips. "You're positively depraved, Rafe Conley." She glared at him, then at their brother. "And you're not far behind him. Allowing his crude debauchery on your land."

"Half an hour, Rannie," Rafe interjected sternly. "Polish up your pulpit and save your sermon till then."

Miranda was still mumbling about evil taking root when Rafe banged the cabin door shut. He crossed to the bunk and peeled back the quilts. Sparkle had blushed to a bright pink hue. "Mornin', darlin'. Damn, but you're a fine sight first thing in my day."

"They're gone?" It was a squeak.

"Yep. Come here, you." He gathered her in his arms, releasing a hearty laugh. "We sure got Miranda's tail in a knot this time. Catchin' us naked in bed together! Serves her right. She's always been a busybody."

"Why don't you put a bolt on that door?"

"Never needed one. Only man on this spread who'd dare come through it is Travis. I'll deal with him. But just now I'm feelin' randy, even though we spent most of the night--"

"Your family's waiting for us," she reminded, slipping out of his arms.

"Let 'em wait," he growled, lunging to catch her as she darted past him to grab her nightgown and tug it over her head. "I can rip that right back off, you know."

"You could, but unless you plan to bring me back to the main house buck naked in front of any wranglers who happen to be around at the time, you'd better leave it alone. In case you'd forgotten, this was all I had on when you abducted me from my room last night."

"I never did," he protested, grinning. "You came out here and threw yourself at me, just like old times. Begged me to make love to you. Four times."

"Behave yourself when we go face your family, and maybe I'll do that tonight."

He'd slipped up behind her and caught her around the waist. "I'll behave, if you pay me an installment now. One taste. Any part, you pick. One taste to hold me over."

"Don't be ridiculous. There's no lock on your door, your sister's furious already, and it's broad daylight." She gestured toward the curtains over the large window. "I'm not about to let--"

"Darlin', we're gettin' married," he chuckled, scooping her up and tossing her back on the bunk. There he quickly pulled her nightgown to her waist and held her pinned to the mattress. "Thought you knew from Dodge I like daytime even better than nighttime. I like mornin's. Can see what I'm enjoyin'." He parted her thighs and buried his face, reducing Sparkle's protests to mere whimpers.

A short time later, he stepped through the back door into the kitchen with her in his arms. Barefoot in her flannel sleeping gown, she hit the floor running and sprinted through the kitchen.

"She thinks she ought to dress for breakfast," Rafe drawled, cocking a dark brow at Miranda.

"Well, imagine that. She has some decorum, after all."

"Rannie, I love that gal. Don't you talk her down, or I'll toss your butt into a wagon and drive you back to the depot myself."

"I'm sure you're to blame, anyway," Miranda rejoined. "I trust you have an explanation for your deplorable behavior. Fornicating in that disgusting cabin of yours."

Rafe poured himself a mug of coffee and took the empty chair beside Travis. "You plannin' to hand me some gum, how Sis here conveniently showed up? Know damned well you wired her again."

"You haven't been yourself, Rafe. You kept insistin' you wouldn't see the gal, even though she'd come clear from Kansas."

"Didn't mean I wanted everybody else seein' her."

"From what I understand, " Miranda interjected, "first you deliberately shunned the poor young woman. Then you spoke so unkindly to her, you reduced her to tears. She came to discuss business matters. You obviously lured her into, well...compromising her virtue."

You should be ashamed of yourself, Raford--though I seriously doubt you understand what shame is."

"I didn't compromise nothin'. She used business as an excuse, but it was personal between us all along. I knew I'd upset her yesterday afternoon. Came to the house last night to talk things out. Then I took her out to the cabin. Ain't ashamed of her sharin' my bunk. Maybe feelin' a mite foolish it took me two days to get her there." He winked at his brother.

Miranda gasped in outrage. Travis chuckled and tipped his coffee mug against Rafe's in a gesture of salute.

"Relations between unmarried persons is a sin before the Almighty."

"Most of what I've done or refused to do my whole life's some sin or 'nother, the way you tell it, Miranda. What's one more sin, if I've already got the best seat in Hell? Make me out to be the next thing to Old Scratch himself, but--"

"Is this woman your fortune teller?" Miranda interrupted. "The same girl you were so positive didn't have genuine feelings for you?"

"Yes, but he was mistaken," came a female voice from the doorway. Sparkle entered the kitchen in her dressing robe. "I love your brother."

Rafe rose and went over to wrap an arm around her waist. "You look fine, darlin'. Pretty as a picture." He pulled out the empty chair beside his. "Pardon my manners," he drawled, gesturing for her to take a seat. "Sparkle, you already know Travis. The know-it-all woman with the sharp tongue over there's my sister, Miranda Donaldson. Miranda, this is Sparkle LaFleur, my fiancee."

"Well glory be!" Travis crowed. "Raford's gettin' hitched at last. When?"

"As soon as I can bring the local preacher out," Rafe announced, giving Miranda a triumphant glare.

Sparkle shook her head. "No, that's not quite accurate." She inhaled and looked at Travis and Miranda. "We'll be married as soon as Rafe hangs up his peacemaker and finds a new way to make a living."

"What?" Rafe thundered, his jaw literally dropping.

"It was nice meeting you, Mrs. Donaldson. Travis, forgive me, but I'm not very hungry this morning. I think I'd like to take a bath." Sparkle got up and left.

Rafe started after her, bumping his chair with his hip and sending it crashing to the floor again.

"Dammit, Sparkle! You never said nothin' like that last night. You can't expect me to--"

Travis caught Rafe's upper arm to halt his flight. "Let her go, Raford. You just got back together. Don't start trouble again. You don't calm down, I won't have any kitchen chairs

left to sit on. Give her some time. She's probably a little put out cause we embarrassed you two this mornin'. Let her calm down before you go hollerin' at her."

Miranda used her most authoritative tone. "Both of you sit yourselves back down. I'll speak to the girl." She called to Mrs. Abbott, requesting water be put on to boil.

Rafe glowered at his brother, waiting until their sister left the kitchen. "Thanks for bringin' her out to the cabin," he snapped in a caustic tone. "Couldn't you figure Sparkle might have been with me before you went nosin' around?"

Travis flashed him a broad grin. "Of course I knew she was with you. Heard you drag her out last night. I also knew if Miranda got an eyeful of you two bunkin' together, she'd insist you marry the gal. Sparkle told me she loved you. Saw a chance to give things a shove in the right direction."

"You sneaky little sonofabitch."

Travis broke into glee. "Wish you could've seen your face when you thought I was sellin' Snatch to Sparkle! Boy, if --"

"Sparkle told you she loved me? When?"

"Five minutes after she got here. I came out and asked if she was carryin'. Figured maybe that's why she'd come."

"Travis," came Rafe's low growl.

"She answered, 'Only a torch.' Just like that. Told me she left town instead of marryin' some other fella everyone said was perfect. Told me she loves you, even with your scar, cause you're adventurous and..." He paused a moment. "Irreverent."

They both laughed. "Irreverent?" Travis repeated. "More like downright lecherous. You know, before the door creaked and gave us away, I caught a glimpse of you two, and--"

Rafe grabbed a fistful of Travis's shirt and jerked him out of his seat. "Just forget whatever you saw, Travis."

"Can't. Saw one of the prettiest, nicest gals I've ever met in my life with her arms around my brother. Saw him lookin' truly peaceful for the first time in weeks. Saw you got a damned good reason to listen to what everybody's been tellin' you for years, Rafe. It's time you settled down. And I hope right now I'm seein' a man with sense enough to appreciate what he's got and hang onto her."

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Sparkle opened the guestroom door at the soft knock. Miranda entered and closed the door behind her. "I've had Mrs. Abbott put some hot water on. You'll catch your death in a cold bath." She eased onto the edge of the bed, wincing slightly with the effort. "Now, would you mind explaining what's been going on here? If I ask Rafe and Travis, I'll get two completely different pictures. I'm more interested in your version than either of

theirs."

"You don't even know me," Sparkle replied warily.

"But I'd like to. I'd heard you were pretty and had unusual eyes. Travis wrote to me last winter, concerned because Rafe seemed serious about you. Knowing he met you in a saloon in one of those lawless cow towns, Travis suspected you were more interested in his money than Rafe himself."

Sparkle had to laugh. "I've never asked him for money. He'll tell you that. Rafe's spent some on me, but it was always his own idea, not mine. Did Travis also tell you I brought a bank draft in Rafe's name for several thousand dollars?"

That revelation brought a look of surprise to Miranda's features and softened them noticeably. "I'm not destitute. Rafe and I haven't discussed his financial situation. He mentioned he had savings, but I never asked for specifics."

"He's quite well off. My husband's a bank manager in Omaha. He looks after Rafe's investments. He has quite an impressive portfolio. Suffice it to say Rafe doesn't need any additional outlaw bounties."

Sparkle took a deep breath and played with the sash of her robe. "Mrs. Donaldson, I honestly don't know what you want me to say. I love your brother for the same reasons I assume you love your husband."

"And those would be?" Miranda prompted.

"He's strong and independent. He has an amazing sense of humor. He can be stubborn and impossible, or perfectly reasonable and sweet as a lamb. Either way, sometimes I just want to kill him," Sparkle admitted with a tiny smile. "And I'm happiest when I'm with him, wrapped in his arms. That's why I came here."

"Those are some of the same reasons I love Zach," Miranda agreed. "Yet I've never thought of my husband as being anything like Rafe. Why did Rafe think your relationship was over? He told me you'd found someone else when I was nursing him back from his gunshot wound."

"Rafe and I were very close. I didn't really have another suitor. We had a misunderstanding. I came to explain and see if he'd give us a second chance. Have you never had an argument with your husband?"

"Oh, a good many of them." Miranda's laugh was musical. She pressed a hand to her rotund abdomen. "The last big set-to we had was... about seven months ago. It's heavenly making up, isn't it?"

Whatever doubts Sparkle harbored about this woman's acceptance were gone. Miranda didn't dislike her. Miranda was frank and amusing; and, like Travis, bore a striking resemblance to Rafe. So strong it was impossible to look at her without seeing something of the man Sparkle loved.



"I know you and your mother never approved of Rafe's work."

Now Rafe's sister gave Sparkle a hard look. "I don't approve of what he does for money, but neither do I consider it to be 'work'. A workman builds or repairs things. Rafe does just the opposite. He destroys people and lives. Rafe weakens our social system and risks his own life doing it.

"Travis was beside himself when Driscoll brought Rafe back more dead than alive. We nearly lost him, and he knows that, yet I don't think he appreciates how rough it is for us living with the constant fear he might be killed. I applaud your stand, Miss LaFleur. I'll support you any way I can. Rafe has to put up his gun if he means to take a wife."

"Thank you," was all Sparkle managed to get out after that speech.

"You won't thank me for also reminding you a liaison with my brother is wrong. Immoral. We can't pick and choose which of the Lord's commandments to obey, Miss LaFleur. A good Christian obeys all of them. I'll stay here with you. This bed's big enough for both of us. Rafe won't be permitted to abscond with you to that cabin again. Not that I condemn you for the passions you feel. Lord knows, Rafe needs a strong woman passionately committed to him."

Sparkle tried to hide her smile. "He does?"

"Indeed. Travis would be content with a girl to simply hold his hand and gaze into his eyes, but not Rafe. He delights in excess. His appetite for excitement is what sends him roaming with a gun strapped to his hip. But the need for your affection is stronger than that appetite. It could force him to give up his wild ways, Miss LaFleur."

"That sounds so oddly formal. Please call me Sparkle."

"Only if you'll call me Miranda, or Rannie. I hate that, but when Rafe was young, he couldn't pronounce my name. The nickname stuck."

"Well, Miranda, I hope you're right. I pray Rafe will agree to change his way of life, but I'd rather have him just as he is than risk losing him again."

"Oh, I'm right." Miranda handed Sparkle clean towels from a dresser drawer. "I can't claim to know him better, but I've known Rafe longer than you have. He's needed you his whole life. He's a wastrel and a murderer, who's probably already damned for eternity." She sighed, dropping her gaze. "But he's also my brother. I want him to be happy, to father children and have a full life. He'll come around to our way of thinking, you'll see."

## Chapter 25

Rafe spent much of the day checking fences for Travis, trying to concentrate on his task. He didn't have much luck, nagged by the way things had been left dangling between him and Sparkle. Maybe it was best to give Sparkle some time, but he didn't think she'd change her mind about his peacemaker.

She'd urged him to change his ways since the first time she told his fortune, and she hadn't even known him then. He'd been a stranger to her. When they became friends, she'd scoffed at him for risking his life to buy a saloon. Always gotten testy over his prediction that he had a short future, hated to hear about the bullet fated to claim him one day. Been mad as a hissin' cat over the stupid flesh wound Bowlegs Barker had given him.

He abruptly wheeled Snatch around and set his spurs to the sorrel's flanks. She'd been furious over that... .

Christ! Why hadn't he seen it before?

He tied Snatch to the porch rail and marched into the parlor. Sparkle was on the sofa with a little girl in her lap. They were looking at Sparkle's cards. "Well now, look at who's come to visit," he called, winking as the moppet glanced up.

"Uncle Rafe!"

Kayla bounded from Sparkle's lap and raced to him, giggling when she was swept up into his arms.

"Now, wait a second. If you're callin' me Uncle Rafe, you must be... Whoa, that can't be right. You can't be Kayla," he taunted, grinning. "Kayla's no bigger than a minute, while you're a half-grown lady. Darned pretty one, too. Almost as pretty as the one over there." He nodded toward Sparkle. "You like the lady with the fancy picture cards? She's mine, you know."

"You brought her here?"

Rafe's gaze met Sparkle's. "Nope, she came on her own. But I'm real happy she did. She's my best friend in this whole world, and I've been thinking she should stay with me for good."

Kayla's arms tightened around his neck. "Can she, Uncle Rafe? She has lots of pictures and funny stories. She says you saved her from some bad, mean men and Snatch helped you."

"Time for your nap, young lady," Miranda announced, reaching for the toddler.

Rafe refused to relinquish his hold. "You're too far along to be totin' her now, Rannie. I'll take her. Where do you want her?"

"In Travis' bed." He nodded and followed his sister down the hall.

He was surprised to find Sparkle fighting tears when he returned to sit beside her on the sofa. He held out his red bandanna. This time she accepted it and wiped her eyes. "I came to talk about this mornin'," he said gently.

She reached for his hand and squeezed it, sobbing.

"Somebody put another slug in me? You're upset like outside the doc's in Wichita, when those idiots tried to steal Snatch."

"I'm not upset, I'm touched."

He openly perused her. "Where, in the head?"

"I never imagined you'd be so wonderful with children. You're the man who calmly explained about hiring out to kill Slocumb. You see, you don't have to hunt desperadoes, Rafe!"

"I see we're still stuck on that same point." He sighed. "Maybe you should've taken that city doctor fella up on his proposal. Then you could be proud of your man for savin' lives, instead of ashamed of him for takin' them."

"I'm not ..." She paused and met his dark gaze. "I'm not ashamed of you. I'm just not strong enough to live with the fear. I hate the thought of you hurt."

"That's part of what I wanted to talk about, because to be honest, I'm plumb bamboozled. You were mad at me last night for bein' thinner and havin' been shot. You got all ticked when I got shot in the arm by horsethieves. I recollect I asked then if it would've been okay if I'd just had them arrested without gettin' a scratch. It was the flesh wound you were mad about, wasn't it?"

"Of course! I was frightened half to death. When Frazer said you'd been shot, I dropped my bag and literally ran to the doctor's surgery, terrified of what I'd find when I got there. I'm terrified whenever you go into a dangerous situation. I love you."

"So you get mad when I'm hurt because you love me? That's why?"

"No, I get mad because all the men I've hired still haven't manage to kill you," she snapped back. "Of course it's because I love you! Why else would it upset me?"

"So you were already in love with me in Wichita that day? You were so boilin' mad, you wouldn't hardly talk. When I asked if I was in the way, you only yelled louder and insisted you were mad I was hurt."

"Oh, so what? What difference does it make when--"

"A whole world of difference to me, darlin'." He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close, a warm smile lighting his face. "Al was wrong. It was never about likin' me in bed. You just admitted you loved me before I ever took you the first time. When I'd only kissed you and held you in my arms one night. That's why you wanted me to be your first, ain't it? Why you chose me out of all the men in that trailhead. You were sweet on

me even then."

Her cheeks stained darker than they had being caught naked in the cabin. "Sparkle, I ain't never seen you turn this red. I'm right, ain't I? You were in love with me a long time ago."

"I suppose I must have been. Maybe Joe Brooks just gave me a convenient excuse to throw myself at you, as you always suspected."

"Lord, but I'm glad you did, darlin'." He kissed her deeply, then sobered. "I think I knew I'd never get free of you the second I looked into your eyes that first time outside the Scarlet Lady. But I stormed off and left you in Kansas City. I was so frustrated. Truth is, I never believed you really cared about me. Never really believed you could. I feel rotten that I made you come crawlin' back. It should've been me crawlin' on my hands and knees to you."

"You didn't understand the situation, Rafe."

"Neither do you. Remember what I told you last night about bein' a hired gun?" She nodded, her features wary. "It's been a long while I've been ridin' the trails and earnin' bounties. All that time, I never set much store by true love or the Good Book--or anything else but gunpowder and reward money. But God gave you to me...dropped you right off that porch onto my feet. Maybe we were meant to be together, like you say. But I like to think you're livin' proof He ain't turned His back on me."

"You say the sweetest things sometimes."

"I'm a sweet person. Just ask anybody."

That brought a deep chuckle from behind them. They turned to find Travis listening from the kitchen doorway. "Come on, Sweet Big Brother," Travis taunted. "Want to show you somethin' out in the barn."

When they were alone, Rafe discussed his plans and paused to grip his brother's shoulder. "Listen, I said a few things I didn't mean before. You stood by me during a rough time. Sorry for bein' so ornery."

"Like when you told me to kick her off the ranch," Travis grinned. "I knew you didn't want me to. We're even. I'd never sell Snatch. In fact, I'd buy him from you. Damned sorrel's turned out to be a decent stud animal. Three of my mares are in foal since we let him out in the pasture. Horse works faster than you do."

Rafe laughed, but sobered as he met his brother's eyes. "I owe you one, Travis. For Sparkle. Thanks, Little Brother."

Travis had supper with the family, but immediately afterward got cleaned up and rounded up the hands to attend a local barn dance. Rafe and Sparkle settled in the parlor for a quiet evening alone, but their intimacy was short lived.

A pair of cowhands burst through the front door, congratulating Rafe on his upcoming

marriage. Travis had made the announcement in the bunkhouse. The boisterous voices drew Miranda from the hall. Within minutes, Kayla was awakened and crawled into Rafe's lap. He was drawn into the kitchen as the cowboys straggled out the back door. He'd just taken his place at the trestle table when several more men came through the house, laughing and joking.

"Well, this fixes my flint but good," Rafe grumbled, surrounded by his fiancée, his pregnant sister, and his young niece. "Won't be a chance of anyone hirin' me once the men hit the waterin' holes with this tale. Worked years to build a mean reputation, only to have you gals turn me into a dad-blamed Nancy in the blink of an eye. I can hear the talk now. Rafe Conley gave up poker and whiskey. Saw him sippin' hot chocolate with womenfolk. Havin' a dad-blamed tea party." He flashed his darkest glower at Miranda. "I'll have to walk around with my fly open to prove I still got a set of balls."

"Raford," Miranda hissed, glancing at Kayla.

"Sorry." He downed his chocolate and reached for Sparkle's hand. "Well, good night all. We best turn in, darlin'."

She didn't budge. "She's sleeping in the back bedroom with me," Miranda informed him. "There'll be no more visits to that cabin until she's your lawful wife."

"Miranda, I'm leavin' day after tomorrow. Won't see her for a spell and--"

"You won't be seeing her again the way you saw her this morning until you bring the preacher out here."

Rafe swore beneath his breath and released Sparkle's fingers. "Rannie, when Ma died, did she nominate you the family pain in the ass?"

Sparkle tried unsuccessfully to smother a giggle. Miranda sent Kayla back to bed with Mrs. Abbott before turning to confront her glowering brother.

"As a matter of fact, she did. She said because I was five years older and unquestionably wiser than you--and since you were always the troublemaker of the household--I should ride herd over you. It's a job I never wanted and don't particularly enjoy. You're willful, argumentative, bull-headed, and just plain dumb sometimes. I'll gladly relinquish the chore to Sparkle. Thankfully, she's up to it."

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Two days later, Rafe rode out of Pueblo.

## Chapter 26

The front door opened. The unfriendly blonde Rafe recalled only too well stood in the doorway, no hint of a smile on her face. "Afternoon, ma'am. I don't know if you remember me, but I'm--"

"Mr. Conley." She glanced past him, frowning at the empty porch. "Isn't Sparkle with you?"

Rafe flushed. This was damned thick humble pie, no matter how he sliced it. "No, Miz LaFleur. She doesn't know I've come. She's at the ranch. I'd like to have a word with Jace, if I might. And apologize to both of you for leaving the way I did."

"He should be home soon. Please come in."

Rafe perched on the sofa, vividly aware of his other disastrous visit to this parlor. "Sparkle told me Jace got fixed up at the hospital. Says he's walkin' now. That's great. You must be real pleased."

"Yes. He's doing so well, he works a few hours each afternoon at the library. Would you like a cup of tea while you wait?"

Hell no. Got any rotgut? "That would be fine, ma'am." They moved to the dining room. Rafe politely sat drinking tea while Majesta struggled to make small talk. Jace came through the door a short time later. He walked without the aid of a crutch or cane, Rafe saw, but not smoothly.

"Good seeing you again, Jace," Rafe said as he entered the parlor.

Jace slowly raised his right arm and opened his fingers, but looked uncertain. "You remember Mr. Conley, Jace," Majesta encouraged. "Sparkle brought him to visit us once before. He'd been courting her, before your accident. They met in Wichita."

"You're the one who decided against marrying my sister."

"Is she?" Rafe inquired. "She told me you're not actually kin. Said your ma just took her in years back."

"Forgive me. We're not blood, true, but I think of Sparkle as an adopted sister." Jace lowered himself into a nearby chair, blue eyes riveted on Rafe. "I must say, I'm surprised to see you."

"I know. I'm sorry for my rudeness. Never said good-bye. You folks were right kind, but Sparkle and I--"

"She said you'd had a falling out. She was quite distressed, and she's not here any longer. She left town and we've no idea where she's gone. She promised to write, but we haven't heard from her."

Rafe ran a hand over his freshly-barbered hair. He was uncomfortable in this parlor, both with the close scrutiny and the shorn feel of his hair. He toyed with his hat brim in his

hands.

"She's been staying with me in Colorado. The housekeeper and ranch foreman are playin' chaperone. She came to look me up when she left here."

At the stilted silence, he went on. "The long and short of it are: I mistook her feelin's, she mistook somethin' I said, and we had to settle down and have a long talk." His color deepened. "You know how things can be between folks."

"I know it's not easy to get to the heart of the matter with Sparkle," Jace commented.

"We're getting married."

"I thought as much," the wife nodded with a smug expression.

"That's why I'm here. I want things straight between us too, Jace," Rafe announced firmly, "since we'll be like in-laws or some such. Got me a brother-in-law and we get on just fine. I reckon it won't be quite the same, but I'd like for us to get along. Don't reckon we can, unless I'm straight with you."

Jace sighed. "I think I know what you intend to say, and there's no need. Sparkle's a grown woman, and if--"

"She didn't want you to know the truth." Rafe looked Jace squarely in the eye without flinching. "I told you I was partners in my brother's ranch, but that ain't so. The fact is, I've been hirin' out as a freelance gun. Met Sparkle in a saloon. She wasn't ever a schoolmarm."

"Majesta and I discovered that," Jace answered dryly with a meaningful look at his wife. Rafe could see he clearly didn't appreciate folks keepin' things from him, and Rafe couldn't blame him one bit.

"She wants me to hang up my gun. Before I do, I'd like some answers from you. You were involved in the money from Texas."

"What do you need to know?"

"Where exactly she got thousands in stolen cash, and whether she put herself in danger to get it. I've followed too many outlaw trails myself to accept that one bein' stone cold, no matter how long the money was buried. Anyone likely to come lookin' for my bride soon as the preacher leaves?"

Jace vehemently shook his head in denial. "It was in the cemetery outside a small town. No one around there knows there's any connection between Mr. J. LaFleur and a boy named Jace Flowers, believed to have died a decade ago. The money was stashed by an outlaw named McAllister. He died the night he hid it. I don't know what happened to his partners, but since the box was still there untouched, I assume they've either died or been sent to prison. No one will look for Sparkle."

"Wilmont's dead. He was my uncle; rode with Slade for a time," Rafe said. "Frank

Jackson's the last member of the gang unaccounted for. Authorities say he went up to Canada." At Jace's look of surprise, Rafe explained, "In my line of work and with Wilmont bein' kin, I keep up on things. I know all about Slade's men."

"How odd," Jace remarked. "Tom Wilmont's nephew taking up with our Sparkle."

"Yeah. Small world."

"I felt she was owed the bulk of the money. She worked in hellholes to support me. She was corrupted by--" Jace paused and swallowed. "It's hard to accept she became little better than a harlot. I'm glad you're making an honest woman of her."

Rafe scowled. "That's another thing needs clearin' up. Sparkle was untouched when I met her. No fella ever bought her--not even me. I'm the only one to lay a hand on her. And I'm incorrigible, my big sister says, so it's my fault if Sparkle's virtue's a bit tarnished. Ain't no call to think badly of her."

Majesta spoke up. "I told you she loved him, Jace."

"Sparkle's the first gal ever treated me with genuine kindness." Rafe couldn't believe he was volunteering this next bit of information, but it was pertinent. "I've got a big, gruesome scar on my chest. She understood I was touchy about it. A lot of women didn't take to me 'cause of that scar. Sparkle's the first who ever saw me as a man--not a scar. Not a Colt and holster."

Jace and Majesta exchanged looks so open and powerful, Rafe was embarrassed to have witnessed the flow of emotions between them.

"I can appreciate your feelings," Jace said thoughtfully.

Suddenly Rafe was overcome by a wash of powerful feelings, too. "I love Sparkle. She's everything to me. You got a problem with me marrying her, knowin' the full truth, I'll understand. But I'd be much obliged if you'd consider her side in this. I came to make peace, hopin' you'd agree to give her away. She'd be real excited if you two came for our weddin'. I want to surprise her." He laid two train tickets on the coffee table in front of him. "And I'd like you to meet my family and spend a couple days at the ranch."

There was a moment of silence, then Jace awkwardly got to his feet. "How could I have a problem with any man who'd do this for Sparkle? It took courage to come here." For the first time, he didn't look at Majesta as he answered for both of them. "We'd be honored, and I'll most certainly give Sparkle away during the ceremony. Good luck, Conley."

"Rafe," came his drawl. "I'll send a wire with the details. Like I said, I'm in your debt." He paused by the front door. "By the way, what was your surgeon's name again? Sparkle mentioned it. Maybe he can do somethin' about my scar."

"Kent Barlow. He works at the hospital just a few blocks from here."

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The man who strode into the examining room was immaculate from head to toe, about thirty, of pallid complexion, and all crisp business. "Good day, sir. You were referred by Jace LaFleur? Is he--Ah yes, Jace Flowers. How's he doing?"

"Visited the house yesterday," Rafe answered in what he hoped sounded friendly and calm. "He's gettin' around fine, even works a few hours a week at the library. Last time I was in town, he was in a wheelchair. You did wonders for him, Doc. Maybe you can help me. Got this big scar. So plug ugly, womenfolk can't abide me with my shirt off. Makes courtin' tough."

"I see." The doctor focused on his patient's upper body, studying the scar tissue with both eyes and fingertips. "That's quite a nasty keloid. Must have been a very serious injury. Life threatening. A horrific accident of some kind?"

"Yep. I accidentally walked into a knife about yea long." Rafe held his palms in mid-air almost a foot apart.

Dr. Barlow frowned and probed the raised weal again. "Does it give you pain? Any tenderness or itch?"

"Sometimes I can't feel anythin' at all. Other times it's real sensitive. Like now." Rafe winced at the continued prodding. "Been like this nigh on six years." Ignoring a transitory pang of guilt for his deception, Rafe let the words flow off his tongue. "I never thought anythin' could be done about it, but Jace's sister Sparkle reckoned maybe you could help, since you're such a good cutter."

Rafe took perverse delight in the instantaneous reaction and hooded misery in the doctor's eyes. There weren't many women named Sparkle--certainly no bumper crop all living in the state of Kansas. He and Dr. Barlow were in love with the same gal. Rafe recognized the anguished look; his own face had worn it for months.

"I'm afraid she's overconfident in my ability," Dr. Barlow concluded. "There's no reason to tamper with this. A surgical repair would be costly, require you to recuperate all over again, and may not result in any significant improvement. Your skin tends to build thick, almost excessive scar tissue."

Now the doctor probed at Rafe's new scars. "Some people have this problem. I realize they're unattractive, but I'm afraid I can't help."

Rafe sighed loudly. "Well, you know best. Appreciate your time, Doc." He paid the physician, who turned back at the doorway. "Did you happen to also see Sparkle when you visited yesterday?"

"Nope. She doesn't live in Kansas City now. She's set to marry a fella out in Colorado on my brother's ranch. Lucky man, ain't he? She's one pretty little gal."

"Yes, she was."

Rafe's heart soared. Was! The doctor's reaction proved it. Sparkle had jilted this city

dandy--and not a bad lookin' one at that--in favor of Rafe Conley, who now dressed and returned to his hotel room.

He sat and thought about the implications of what she'd done. She'd chosen him, even after he'd abandoned her. A girl who could have her pick of suitors, who'd left the crude rowdiness of Wichita and been living a decent life in the city. He thought of how he'd defended her to Jace, and mentally acknowledged every word had been the truth. Sparkle had always been a good friend; believed in Rafe even when he didn't deserve it. She truly loved him.

And what had he ever done to warrant that kind of blind devotion?

He tried to recall a single redeeming incident, but the scales were woefully tipped in the opposite direction.

He could think of many unkind, cold things: Sam's death, Sparkle losing her job through her association with Rafe, Slocumb and Nestor and others going to early graves--sometimes without Rafe even learning their names. He'd sent men to rot in prison, used women like Big Al. Helped put that dead look in their eyes. Helped make the Benton Frazer's of the world the well-heeled little assholes they were.

What stood up to all of that?

Sheltering Sparkle from the first, trying to soften the world around her. Keeping his word not to lay a hand on her until she'd wanted it. Going easy her first time, making sure she had prevention. Making peace with Jace. Being a gentleman on a few occasions wasn't enough to change the balance.

He and Snatch were both due a rest by the time they made Wichita. Rafe greeted the stableboy he recognized from the incident with Bowlegs. The kid told Rafe he was more wary of strangers now, and boasted he'd been saving up to buy his own peacemaker. Rafe winced at the words and handed over a twenty-dollar gold piece. "Forget the gun, Bub. Get a better job."

Nothing in the trailhead had improved during his absence, Rafe noted. Sadie's, Bodacious Jones' and the Lightning Strike were still dumps. Number eight and the Rusty Nail had men lined up along their battered oak bars clear out the front doors. Fallen angels lounged around half naked in broad daylight.

Rafe shouldered his way through the batwing doors into the Scarlet Lady. Twenty minutes later, he crossed the street and entered the marshal's office. The grizzled marshal was at his desk. His deputy was tacking up fresh Wanted posters. Rafe slapped Art Thompson on one wide shoulder.

"Howdy, Art. Frazer's on his way over to swear out a complaint."

The marshal glanced up from his newspaper, features drawn into a disagreeable frown. Art's smile of greeting faded too. "What now?"

"He doesn't like the beautifyin' I did to his nose."

Thompson fought to disguise a smirk, but kept his voice official when Benton Frazer stormed in. "Got to learn to be careful around those swinging doors, Benton. Hear they pack a wallop."

"He bwoke my fwiggin' nose." Frazer jabbed an accusing finger toward Rafe. "Goddamned hired pishtol! Told you he'd come after me."

The marshal frowned. "Conley, Mr. Frazer's one of our most renowned local citizens. Did you break his nose?"

Rafe answered in his usual drawl. "He owes my woman three hundred dollars. Been out to cheat Sparkle since the first time I met her, which you might recall." Art nodded. "Let her be abducted. He was supposed to watch her for me. Instead, he cleaned out her room, sold off her belongin's, and pocketed her back pay. Want the money for her personal effects, plus the hundred she had comin'. Cheatin' Sparkle is the same as cheatin' me."

"Don't owe no fwee hundwed." Frazer protested. It was tough to understand him with a bloodied handkerchief pressed to his face. "Two, maybe."

Rafe shrugged. "Fine. I'll take that, and you can keep the rest of your face the way it is. But if I find out you're lyin', I'll be back to do some more rearrangin'."

Frazer went back across the street, returning to count out the two hundred before glowering at the lawmen. "You imbeciles! Sitting on your butts while he exshorts money from me. You can be repwaced. If you're not going to do anything but--"

"Frazer," the marshal intoned, "your saloon can be replaced, too. Those temperance wives would love to see it converted to a prayer meeting hall. Best have the doc look at that nose."

Frazer was still spouting foul words as the marshal escorted him out. Rafe flopped into an empty wooden chair and tipped his hat back.

"Need a favor, Art."

"Didn't you just use up a few?"

Rafe peeled off a twenty-dollar bill from the stack Frazer had given him and laid it on Art's desk. "Looks like you could use a shave and haircut, nice hot bath, maybe a good meal."

There was a moment of silence before Art picked up the money. "Want you to wire Sparkle, care of the Conley ranch outside Pueblo. I'll go to the bank and have this money sent to her. Send a message sayin' I collected it from Frazer and I'll be back in a couple of weeks."

Art grunted in assent. Rafe squinted up at a Wanted bulletin on the wall. "Heard from

Driscoll or Bregon lately?"

"Nope. Been pretty quiet. I was hoping you'd be sticking around, but not if you got a ranch in Colorado. Settled in Pueblo, huh?"

"My brother's spread. Sparkle's stayin' there temporarily. Been thinkin' about Denver. Little gal wants me to hang up my Colt."

Art nodded. "I'd listen. That fortune teller always was a sharp young thing. She read my cards, and we had us a couple nice evenings." Rafe's eyebrows shot up. The reaction made Art grin. "You're a damned lucky fella. Saw it coming that day in the street. She looked at you like your boots were made of pure gold."

Rafe stared, wondering how he'd missed it--if there'd been a clue pointing to something between Art Thompson and Sparkle. Then he recalled that Art had enjoyed an eyeful of her naked breasts in the monkey hall. Why was it everywhere Rafe went, he ran into another man with a yen for his woman?

Rafe got to his feet. "You run across Driscoll or any freelancers, have them wire me care of Zach Donaldson at the First Bank of Omaha. I'm in touch with him from time to time. Think I'll send a wire to Bregon's pa back East. Got a business proposition for a couple of guns interested in steady work."

"Turning over your hunting grounds? Shit. You'll be missed. Much as I hate paying you two compliments in one day, damned few men have your talent with a peacemaker.

"Good luck," Art said with a lecherous wink. "And say hello to Sparkle for me."

"Like hell I will."

## Chapter 27

Travis ran a hand over his slicked-down hair, then set his hat at a jaunty angle. He consulted the mirror above his dresser and readjusted the hat brim. A cough from the doorway made him glance back at the woman soon to become his sister-in-law.

"Caught me fussin'."

"Yes, and it surprises me. You'll have the eye of every girl in the place, and you know it."

"Want the eyes of a certain one tonight. Pearl Sweeney. Be obliged if you'd bring your tarot deck to the Anderson's and tell her fortune. She'll believe it if you say her destiny's tall, dark and handsome."

"As in one Travis Conley?" Sparkle teased. "I'm not comfortable making up the future as I go along, Travis. But I could say a romance is on the way."

"Consider it fair trade. You owe me a big favor. Rafe would skin me alive, if he knew I'd taught you to use a rifle."

"Why? It's common sense. I should know how to defend myself."

"Wouldn't need to know if you were set to wed anybody but Raford. Kidnappin's and such." He grimaced. "Still, he won't like it."

Sparkle leaned forward to smooth his collar and peck his cheek. "You were very gallant, and he doesn't have to know. It eased my mind to learn."

"Well, just tell Rafe how I eased your mind when he reaches for his bullwhip. He'd flay my hide for lettin' you anywhere near a gun."

"He wouldn't take his whip to you."

"Ha." Travis snorted. "You don't know Rafe."

"Yes I do, and he wouldn't hurt you."

"Come to the dance tonight and do me the favor with Miss Pearl."

Sparkle saw it was a losing battle, so she spent her evening smiling at townspeople she barely knew, telling fortunes at the Anderson's barn dance. Travis spent the evening with the girl he'd introduced as Pearl. She was attractive, every inch like the gem she was named for--pale, with light eyes and lustrous blonde hair. But wrong for Travis. Sparkle saw a dark, unusual woman in Travis' future, not this ethereal blonde. She knew better than to tell him, though. He was taken with his gem.

Someone tapped Sparkle on the shoulder. "Miz Abbott knew where I'd find you. Howdy, darlin'."

"Rafe?" She practically threw herself into his arms. Rafe turned to his brother.

"I'm takin' her into town. I'll bring her back to the house later." He led her out to where

he'd tethered Snatch. "Get the money I sent from Frazer and the message I was headed back?"

"Yes, but--"

"What the hell are you doing here? You should have stayed on Travis' land."

Sparkle decided to ignore his surly manner. He pulled her up onto his lap. She was too pleased to have him back to argue, even though he seemed unaccountably glum. "Why are we going into town?"

"Need to see you alone. I took a hotel room." An ominous chill ran up her spine. She hadn't seen Rafe's grim hunting side, the aspect he wore while danger prowled, since those nights back in Dodge. She'd fervently prayed never to see that side of Rafe again, yet here it was. Why?

She wrapped her arms around his waist, pressing close. "I missed you so much," she whispered. He grunted in reply and spurred the stallion forward. She was confounded by his indifference. What had come over him?

She waited until they stood in Rafe's hotel room. She inquired why he'd taken it, when his cabin sat empty. "Miranda and her family are on the way. They should arrive tomorrow or the next day, with their new baby. Travis might have to shuffle the Abbotts, might need the cabin."

"Something's wrong, Rafe. Are you going to tell me, or do I have to read your cards and tell you?"

He didn't look at her. He moved the curtains aside and peered out at the night. "Wonder if you can."

God, he was checking the windows! Why should he be nervous? She grabbed for her reliable haughtiness to cover her mounting fear.

"I can," Sparkle assured him. "You know that."

"Always wondered how much you could see." His voice was harsh. "You never wanted me to know, on account of Hoffman. Gave my word I wouldn't pursue him. Show off your talents. Tell me what went wrong."

She sat on the bed and dealt the tarot. She had the last card in place before she glanced up at his face. "DEATH isn't here now. You've made a major change. You can't go back on your decision."

"What else?"

"THE TOWER. The catastrophe I'd foreseen...There was a stranger, a man who was weakened or helpless in some way...No, not a man. A woman?" Her breath caught. Her eyes filled with unshed tears. "Is there some other woman?" He didn't answer. She said the words for him. "You don't want to marry me now."

His eyes were twin black coals as he took her hand. "That's not right. I still want to marry you, but I don't think you should take vows with me."

"Why, Rafe?"

"There won't be an end to the violence. I always told you there's a bullet with my name on it someplace. The fella with it loaded into his gun is bound to turn up, even if I'm not lookin' for him anymore. Stay here tonight and take the train out tomorrow. I'll send your things wherever you want. Maybe to that card palace in Californy."

"So you can claim I left you at the altar? Travis will never believe it. I'm not sure Miranda would, either."

Rafe stared down at the cards, reached for one with trembling fingers, then withdrew his hand and met her eyes again. "Nobody would blame you for doin' what's smart. I love you, darlin'. I truly do. God forgive me, too much to let you be hurt."

"I can tell you rehearsed this speech. There's only one problem, my noble love. What you're describing isn't what will happen. You're destined to marry." She pointed to the same card she'd indicated in his first reading. "And father children. I suppose you could do that with someone else, after you're rid of me."

"Don't talk like that. Can't you see this is killin' me?"

"Perhaps we should look at my cards." She quickly reshuffled and fanned the tarot into a new reading. "There's the rest of my life. Did I tell you this was my mother's best deck? I left the other deck with Tolover. Wasn't mine, anyhow. Did I explain about these?"

He mutely shook his head. "My mother told Roy McAllister's fortune."

She had Rafe's attention now. He stared at her intently, almost as though the name meant something. But that was preposterous. She'd mentioned McAllister before, but the name shouldn't cause this odd reaction.

"McAllister was an outlaw on the run. His horse had thrown a shoe. Jace's father was a blacksmith and an old friend, so McAllister came to the Flowers' farmhouse. They let him stay."

"You and your ma were livin' there."

Sparkle nodded. "Tarot readers usually withhold negative aspects: fatal illness, financial ruin, events a person wouldn't wish to know. The one time I ever recall my mother telling someone about his own death was when she read the cards for that outlaw. She predicted he'd be dead in less than four days. The next night he was shot and killed."

"Coincidence," Rafe snorted.

"That's always a possibility, but what I find fascinating is that was also the last reading my mother ever gave. This was her European deck, her favorite. Jace burned her other set in his father's forge. He was a hellion as a boy." A wistful sadness stole into Sparkle's

heart. She turned her thoughts back to Rafe.

"To spite her for making such a dire prediction, Roy McAllister took my mother's cards and put them with his stolen money in the strongbox. He swore he'd laugh in her face when he went back for his money and dug her cards up with it."

"None of this has anything--"

"I know why she told him, Rafe," Sparkle broke in. "I knew the second I held this deck in my hands. She knew she was doomed, too. She'd given her final reading. She was murdered a week later."

Rafe backed away. "You're talkin' crazy, Sparkle. Ain't natural for a person to know things like that."

"I know when I'll die, too," Sparkle replied softly. "Shall I tell you about it, where and how? I've known for a long time."

Rafe shook his head. "Put away those heathen things. They're just painted pictures on paper. I don't want to know when you'll die or how. Why do you think I'm scared to marry you? I don't want nothin' to do with it."

Sparkle's voice was barely above a whisper. "You won't have anything to do with it. You'll be gone yourself by then. I'll be sickly and frail, over seventy years old. Ready, because I will have been widowed awhile by then, and I'll want badly to be with you."

Rafe blinked. His voice was hoarse. "Widowed late in your life? Past seventy? Damn, that's crochety, Sparkle. Then how'd I go? Was I--"

"I'm sorry, this isn't your reading. Shall I shuffle again and look? It was natural causes of some kind, but--"

"You're lyin', dammit! Ain't no way I can live to be some wrinkled coot, die from apoplexy or a bout of consumption. I can't make it that long, not with strangers gunnin' for me."

"Think back to what I said the first time I read your cards. I only see the future, I don't determine it. Whatever takes you, our children will be grown and have children of their own by then. I'll be living in a big house on a hill. The children and grandchildren bring me back there after we lay you to rest...in a cemetery with a big tree in the middle. I can actually see the graveyard from the house, and--"

Something she couldn't name flickered in Rafe's eyes. "Don't say anything else," he croaked.

Sparkle put her cards away, fighting to maintain her composure. "Who was the woman and what happened?"

"Wasn't a woman," he answered slowly. "It was a boy. A goddamned boy. Barely fourteen. Bragged how he'd waited for his fourteenth birthday to make his move. Waited



two years to come after me."

Sparkle paced the length of the room, watching his shoulders hunch. Pain and wounded pride. She'd seen them before in her gunfighter. He needed her now, but he couldn't admit it.

"You mean like Bannister, looking for revenge?" she asked gently.

He turned and lashed out. "How the hell did he reckon he could go up against me and live to tell about it? He was a kid. Wasn't there anybody with a lick of sense to tell him it was suicide? Played it over a hundred ways in my head. There's nothin' I could've done any different. Gave him a chance to walk away, but he just stood there, puffin' his chest out like some bantam rooster, damned Remington pointed at my head."

His fists clenched and pounded against his thighs. "Was I supposed to just stand there and let him kill me?"

"That would have been easier for you."

He reached a hand to her, his voice rough with misery. "Dammit woman, you always goin' to understand?"

"I'll always try."

She pulled him into her arms. She inhaled and spoke slowly. "My mother was beaten to death on her way back from town. The Flowers lived outside Fire Thorn a few miles down a dirt road. She'd finished her laundering and been paid by her customers that week. I started whining because I wanted a dress made from some calico I'd seen at the mercantile--white background with flowers that matched my eyes. She couldn't take the pouting. She went back into town late that day, thinking she'd surprise me."

She paused, her chest loosening as his arms came around her waist. "For a long time, I believed I'd killed her. With my selfishness. I've never liked my eye color or my name since she died. I haven't worn anything turquoise or aqua...until you bought me the beaded dress in Dodge."

Rafe pulled back and lifted her chin. "You could've had a different dress. There were plenty in that shop."

"But you liked that one."

"Aw, Sparkle. You--"

"It's like your scar."

"You don't like to talk about it, you mean?"

"No. From the first time I saw your bare chest, I thought you let yourself be too concerned about it. I always thought you had a fine body. The scar's only part of it."

"A fine body?" He sounded surprised. "Thanks."

"But it dawned on me I'd spent most of my life being the same way over Mother's death. Refusing to wear blue or hating my eyes can't bring her back. Being so defensive and obsessive was only hurting me, just as feeling rejection from the scar hurts you."

She pulled free of his arms. "I know you're trying to force me to walk away and why, but I won't do it. I want a life with you, Raford. A family. You've had that, but I haven't. Not really."

"It would kill me to let you go." Was that relief she heard in his voice?

"Time and distance won't change our feelings," Sparkle assured him. "The months apart should have taught you that. I know this was a terrible blow, but you can get past it. This doesn't have to leave another scar."

A sheepish look crept over his face. "Had Doc Barlow look at my scar while I was in Kansas City."

"Dr. Kent Barlow? You went to see him, knowing..." It had never occurred to her Rafe might do such a thing.

"Yeah." He inhaled and squared his shoulders. "I had to know if you'd told the truth about having a shot at marryin' him."

"Rafe. You actually asked him?" She was mortified.

"Nope, and I didn't ask how well he knew you. Just said you'd referred me for medical advice. But I could tell he's stuck on you. When a man flinches at the mention of a gal's name, he's got it bad. I should know--I wouldn't let Travis say your name when I thought we'd busted apart for good. Reckon you can forgive me?"

"For doubting my word? Well, it is a little insulting after...everything." She thought of how she'd proven her love with her tongue on his chest and felt her cheeks stain.

"Not only that. For tryin' to run you off." He swallowed and stared into her eyes. "I'm scared out of my wits, honey."

"Why? I won't regret marrying you. I knew it was what I wanted when I took the train here to see you."

He averted his face. "Spark--" He seemed to choke on nothing. "Can't stop picturin' some sonofabitch comin' after me, but hurtin' you instead. Thinkin' I'd have to watch you die, like I did Samson. I couldn't face puttin' you in the ground. I swear...I've never cared about anybody this much."

"But I told you that won't happen," she reminded firmly, yet gently. "No one's going to murder me." She realized then he wasn't wearing his gunbelt. "Where's your Colt?"

"Left it in Denver with a buddy. Only carry a parlor gun now."

"Denver?"

He nodded, tucking her head under his chin as he stepped in close and set his hands

lightly on her waist. "Tell me again what you saw. I just need to hear it one more time. Kept thinkin' all the way back how a fella will purposely go after kin. How outlaws tricked you, grabbed you in Wichita... how a man with any sense can figure killin' you would be better revenge and a sight easier than murderin' me. Understand how you felt about your ma. I can't live with that kind of guilt. Please, darlin', promise...swear to me I won't have to."

"You'll live to be old and gray. So will I. We'll have wedding anniversaries and children together. You like children, I saw that with Kayla. I only hope you don't have your heart set on a brood of ten or twelve."

"Naw, three or four would be plenty." He sighed and bent to kiss her. "Christ, but we're a pair. Me thinkin' I'm ugly cause of my scar, reckonin' I don't deserve a beauty with your incredible eyes. You hatin' the fact you got 'em. Probably wish you were plain and ordinary."

She'd remained stoic up to that point, but at the veracity of his observation, she was suddenly in tears.

Rafe ran the pad of his thumb across her cheek. "Sparkle, you listen now. Don't you ever apologize for bein' so pretty. Fact you are makes you all the more precious to me."

"Could you take me home now?"

"Yeah, darlin'. But come Thursday, home is wherever I happen to be standin' at the moment. You understand?"

"Thursday?"

"Our weddin' day. I'll fetch the preacher out to Crockhead Rest at eleven. It was chasin' the rewards you fretted over, right? You ain't figurin' on me never usin' a gun again? I can't walk around unarmed. The boy was proof of that. I'm tryin' my damndest, but I can't promise I'll never pull a weapon. I found somethin' not so dangerous to do. Consultin' work."

"Fine, as long as you're not constantly risking your life." Sparkle flashed him what she hoped was her most brilliant smile. "I need to do some shopping before Thursday, so I'll have to come back into town without you."

"Tell Travis to send Randy or Josh Abbott along. And keep your money. Have the merchants put whatever you need on the Conley account. I'll settle up later."

"No you won't, because what I want to buy is a present for you."

"Oh. I thought maybe you wanted a different weddin' dress. I asked you to wear that fancy gown from Dodge, but I didn't know how you felt about clothes matchin' your eyes. You can pick out a new dress. I'll pay for it."

"That one doesn't remind me of my mother. Just you...and the panel crib."

He led her down the hotel stairs. "If I don't ride you out to the ranch right now, I'll get too riled to wait for my weddin' night. You had to mention that panel crib," he grumbled. "Like I ain't thought about our reflections in the ceiling mirror about a thousand times since then. Like I didn't think about you and miss your body every damned night I was away."

"Thought about yours, too," she replied, eagerly meeting his lips for a deep soul kiss.

A short time later she stood on Travis' porch, watching Rafe disappear into the night. She'd almost lost him so many times. To a horrible misunderstanding, to an assassin's bullet during an ambush, to his own bitter recriminations tonight. Yet she knew Rafe loved her, without question. She'd always been able to feel that love, see it in his eyes, even when he tried to be cold and distant.

And she loved him just as intensely.

Majesta was right, Sparkle reflected. Every woman needed certain qualities in her mate. Sparkle needed Rafe. Sanctimonious or profane, he was in her blood. She needed his solidity, his warmth and humor, his amazingly intense passion. Along with that perfectly calm reasonableness he exuded when she felt like flying apart. Rafe was hers, and she wouldn't lose him. Not now, not ever.

She'd lie, steal, cheat...even kill to keep him safe and part of her life. She'd do whatever she had to. Just ask Ned Slocumb.

## Chapter 28

Tuesday afternoon the Donaldsons burst into the ranchhouse, filling the parlor with excited chatter. Sparkle had just returned from town, where she'd purchased Rafe's wedding present. Kayla trotted over and wrapped chubby arms around Sparkle's thighs, lifting a cherubic smiling face. "Mama says I should call you Auntie now, cause you're marryin' my Uncle Rafe."

"That's right, sweetie. The day after tomorrow. Then you'll be my niece, too. I'm so happy you're here."

"Sparkle," Miranda called out, beckoning to her, "You've never met my husband, Zachary. Zach, this is Sparkle LaFleur, the young woman who's finally turned my profligate brother's life around."

"I can see why," Zach remarked with a wink. "I must say, you've caused quite a stir in this family, Miss LaFleur. Rafe's an uncommonly fortunate fellow."

"Your daughter looks just like you," Sparkle noted, glancing back down at Kayla, who still hadn't relinquished her hold. "Kayla, who's that Uncle Travis has over there? A new baby boy. Why, you're a big sister now, aren't you? How nice." Kayla glanced at the bundle of blue in Travis' arms and sent her head up, then sharply back down in the emphatic nod of a three-year-old.

"Skylar's a miniature of Travis, isn't he?" Miranda asked. "I remember Ma saying he and Rafe both looked like our grandfather. I don't remember Grandpa, but there's both Wilmont and Conley blood in Sky. I see our mother around his eyes. I'm not sure what Zach threw into the mix."

"A sizable endowment, madam," Zach replied with a straight face. "All us Donaldson men have large endowments."

Miranda rolled her eyes. "And modesty. If only my son grows up with better manners than the uncouth menfolk around here...Speaking of which, where's Rafe?"

"Staying at a hotel in town." Everyone looked at Sparkle as if she'd just announced a new War Between the States. She found herself blushing and fought back a giggle. It was the first time she'd ever gone pink after doing absolutely nothing with Rafe.

Travis cleared his throat. "As the uncouth man who owns this spread, I think we better get you folks situated. Zach, you and Miranda can take the Abbotts' room--unless you'd rather put her in a horse stall." He shot his sister a mock glare.

"I don't want to displace your foreman, Travis," Zach argued mildly. "Don't mind if Rannie displaces a mare, though." He waggled blonde eyebrows at his spouse.

"You and Rannie take the Abbotts bed. They'll use Rafe's cabin temporarily. Now that Miz Abbott spent two days scrubbin' the place, it's habitable. Expect you'll bunk Sky with you. Sparkle's stayin' in the guest bedroom. Maybe Kayla can sleep with her..." His

voice trailed off as Zach carried the luggage down the hall behind his wife and brother-in-law.

Sparkle told Kayla an elaborate bedtime story, then settled down for the night early herself. She was the first one dressed and into the kitchen the next morning. She rolled up her sleeves and borrowed Mrs. Abbott's apron from its peg, smiling as she set to firing up the stove and making coffee.

She'd learned a good deal about cooking and running a home in the weeks Rafe had been away, but this was the first time she attempted preparation of an entire meal alone. She usually baked biscuits or helped with some of the dishes, but felt she was up to tackling a full breakfast.

When Travis came in the back door--Sparkle suspected he'd already awakened and gone out to check his spread--she had the fresh pot of coffee waiting. A tower of hotcakes with syrup and platter of fried bacon already graced the table. Mrs. Abbott had taken trays of food out to the bunkhouse for the men. Travis looked pleasantly surprised.

"Mornin', Sparkle. You're turnin' into some cook. You sure you don't want to stay on here? Maybe marry me instead?"

"Coveting thy brother's wife already, Travis?" Miranda asked as she wandered in, her hair in disarray. She gave the air a sniff. "Bacon. Bacon I didn't have to cook? Marvelous." Sparkle gave her a sympathetic smile, noticing the milky stain on Miranda's shoulder. It seemed Skylar had just returned part of his breakfast.

"You look like a wreck, Rannie," Travis observed.

"That's because there's no such thing as Mother Nature, Travis. If a female being ruled the natural world, she would have put teats on the male of the species and let you fellas get up during the night."

"Boy, havin' babies sure makes a gal grumpy," Travis informed Sparkle. "She could take a joke before."

Kayla bounced in just ahead of her father, and soon the table was cluttered with forks and plates. The juice pitcher shuttled back and forth between compliments to the cook. A loud thumping sounded at the front door. Travis got to his feet, frowning. "Wonder who the hell that could be. Everybody around these parts knows I don't bolt my door. The locals just barge right in."

He went to the door and Sparkle waited, but the conversation was too hushed to carry into the kitchen. She peeked into the parlor and let out a squeal. "Jace! Majesta. I didn't know you were coming."

Travis stepped aside, or Sparkle would have plowed into him in her rush to embrace the couple crossing the threshold. "More kinfolk. Looks like I'm movin' to the bunkhouse," he muttered.

"Or the barn with your mares," Miranda chided.

"You're just in time for breakfast," Travis nodded, ignoring his sister's taunt. "Sparkle's showin' off her new kitchen skills."

Sparkle took Jace's arm, leading him into the kitchen. "Let me make introductions. You met Travis. This is Zachary Donaldson and his wife, Miranda. She's Rafe's older sister. That's their little girl, Kayla. They have a new baby too, but he's asleep. Everyone, this is..." She colored and whispered in Jace's ear. "I don't know what to say you are."

He squared his shoulders. "My name's Jace LaFleur. Sparkle's my adopted sister. She's the only relative of sorts I've got. I couldn't be more proud of her, or love her any more, if we were truly blood kin. And I'll prove it, by risking her cooking."

"Jace," Majesta squawked.

"Oh, and this fine woman--who's reminding me I've just managed to embarrass her in our first five minutes here--is my wife, Majesta."

Everyone laughed and adjusted positions as two more chairs were crowded in around the table. For Sparkle, the breakfast feast was an amazing thing to behold. She hardly ate herself, too preoccupied with watching the camaraderie develop before her eyes. The immediacy of the bonding was something she hadn't expected. The Donaldsons and LaFleurs hit it off at once.

Zach's expression became sober as he turned to address Jace. "I'd been hoping to get a chance to speak with Rafe about you. He sent me a letter recommending you for a new post I have open in your neck of the woods. You're on the Kansas side, but he seemed to think you'd be amenable to working across the river in Missouri. Have some more bacon."

Jace shook his head, looking bemused. Sparkle certainly was. Rafe sent Zach a letter about Jace going to work for him?

"Perhaps we can go out in the parlor and discuss things." Zach motioned for Jace to follow him, then inquired, "What kind of salary would you demand, Mr. Vice President?"

"V-Vice President?" Majesta stammered. She'd risen to follow them.

"Yes," Zach grinned at his stunned audience. "Rafe said he knew the perfect candidate to manage a new bank in Kansas City. First Bank of Omaha's expanding its holdings. Rafe assured me your husband here is intelligent, honest, and looking for a career opportunity. If there's one thing Rafe's an excellent judge of, it's a man's character."

"But surely you must have other candidates more qualified." Jace flushed and cleared his throat awkwardly. "I don't know if he explained my background, but I don't have any previous experience in banking."

"He did explain, but no, I haven't any other candidates I wish to consider. The job is

yours, if you want it."

Majesta gasped and turned to Sparkle, who'd also edged into the parlor. "You're marrying a most extraordinary man. Jace and I both liked Doctor Barlow, but I have to say I've never met anyone quite like Rafe. Or the others in this wonderful family. We owe him a debt of gratitude. I believe you're owed much the same, Sparkle."

"Me? What have I done?"

"Been strong enough to remain true to yourself," Majesta answered, embracing her.

"That's never easy. Had you not done it, things would have turned out differently for all of us."

Something in Majesta's eyes then told Sparkle that Majesta had been aware of her secret longing for Jace. She'd known all along, yet she wasn't criticizing. Quite the opposite. She was genuine in her praise. Sparkle found she craved some fresh air. Too much was happening too fast.

She skirted the men, deep in conversation now, and went out onto the wide front porch. She'd been idly musing on the porch swing when she spotted a sorrel and rider coming up the gentle rise from the main gate.

"Rafe." She barely let him dismount before flinging her arms around his neck. "Oh, I love you, you incredible man. You're too sweet, you know that?"

Rafe reached down to retrieve his fallen hat from the dust at his feet. "Mornin' to you, too. Be nice if you'd let a fella tip his own hat to his intended."

"Jace and Majesta are here. You invited them, didn't you? And you made Zach give Jace a job with his bank. I can't thank you enough."

"So that's what's got you fired up. I thought maybe you slept on things last night and woke up starved for my affections. I could use some of yours." He caught her buttocks in both hands and pulled her against him, giving her a randy kiss.

"I know you did all this for me."

He shrugged. "For you and for Jace, too. Ain't as though I ordered Zach at the end of my pistol, or nothin'. Made a suggestion. Jace is a right smart fella, even after takin' a bullet to the head. Hell, maybe that's what made him so smart. Might've done the same for me, if anyone had pumped one into my noggin, 'stead of every other damned place."

"I can think of one they missed."

He gave her a mock frown of disapproval. "You keep talkin' like that, folks inside are liable to find us doin' the dirty deed here on the swing."

"Me?" she huffed. "What about you, grabbing me and kissing me like that, talking with your drawl? As if you don't put that on deliberately to get me all riled. I can't help that it works."



"Does, huh? You mean from the first, I could've just talked you into bed with me?"

"As if you didn't."

He released a throaty chuckle and started to lead her into the house, but she caught his forearm. "Wait a minute. Jace told me you asked him to give me away. You'd asked once about my father. I never had one."

"Sort of figured that."

"Part of the reason I wanted to see Paris was because Mother had come from a wealthy family. Her parents took her to Europe. That's where she learned to read tarot. I loved her stories about Paris. She was never bitter about the past, or the fact that after having a glorious upbringing, she got pregnant with me out of wedlock. Her parents cut her off without a cent. She ended up dirt poor."

Rafe sighed, waiting.

"I wanted the calico because I was sick of handed-down rags from the families who employed her. We lived in one small room in Jace's house. She couldn't afford decent clothes for either of us."

"You don't have to tell me all this."

"I want you to understand. My whole life, I've lived in one room somewhere, even when you met me at the Scarlet Lady. I never thought I'd be part of a big family." She threaded her fingers through his. "Thank you for marrying me, Rafe. Your name and your family mean more than you know. Even more than seeing Paris one day."

He muttered a low expletive. She glanced up sharply, searching his eyes. "Can't just stand here and say nothin', can I?" he grumbled. "Got to find some flowery words for you."

"You think so?" she sniffed, waiting.

He looked down at their joined hands and squeezed gently. "I'm not good at this. But here goes. I'll share my family, hang up my peacemaker, empty my bank account, or sell my soul to the devil to make sure you never end up poor or rearin' a child alone, like your ma." He straightened to his full height. "You have me now, and however long I've got to live and draw breath, I'll take care of you."

The next afternoon Jace walked Sparkle out behind the main house and placed her hand on Rafe's arm. The ranch hands and families assembled in the sunshine to watch the preacher unite Sparkle LaFleur and Rafe Conley in marriage. Rafe slid a gold band set with diamonds on her finger, and sealed their pledges with a kiss. Sparkle looked into his dark eyes and inwardly thanked the Lord. At long last she did indeed have Rafe--until death did them part.

Now she sat on the edge of the bed in his hotel room, smiling as Rafe removed his coat and string tie. She'd worn the beaded silk. Rafe had arrived in polished black boots, a

black gambler-striped suit and a new black hat. There'd been a barbecue and dance at the ranch after the ceremony, then Rafe had brought her here.

"You didn't have to give me a weddin' present," he said kindly. "Becomin' Miz Conley in truth is all I really wanted." His dark eyes were warm as they met hers.

"I know. Open it, anyway."

He did, and stared in silence a long moment. "Spark--"

He was choked up again, she realized. Only half of her name got out, and he glanced over at her helplessly. She rose and went into his arms. "Rafe, I have to tell you that I'm not sure I can truly predict when or how someone's going to die. I was very upset the other night...I couldn't bear to lose you again." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Please forgive me."

"You sayin' you lied to me? Thought you swore you'd never do that again."

"I have a strong feeling I'm right, but I can't guarantee my predictions will come true. Please don't be angry with me. Not tonight." She glanced down at the new ring glittering on her left hand.

"Got a confession of my own to make," Rafe asserted. "Made some bold promises about our weddin' night, boasted about goin' wild and drinkin' wine off your skin. I don't figure on keepin' my word about that."

Crestfallen, Sparkle wondered if she should have waited to tell him about the limits to her prescience.

But he leaned down to kiss her tenderly, and his voice was a husky murmur. "There's a time for foolin' in bed, but not tonight. I'm about to do something really important for the first time. I've never made love to a wife. We waited a long time for this. I'm fixin' to love you long and slow, Miz Rafe Conley, till you fall asleep in my arms."

"You say the most heavenly things," she sighed against him.

His hands moved to cup her breasts possessively. "I'm goin' to brand you for good tonight, so there's no mistakin' you're mine--clear to the bone. Or that I'm yours, just as deep."

He slowly began to kiss and undress her. She stood naked before him, experiencing neither trepidation or embarrassment as he knelt and worshipped her with his mouth as he had by the washstand in Dodge. She gave in to her desires willingly, letting him evoke her primal urges. Panting beside him, beneath him, above him. Surrendering completely with him, both of them giving their bodies and hearts over to the feeling that consumed them as they forged their vows.

Sparkle had no doubt they absolutely belonged to each other any longer. She recalled his hushed whisper on the train when he'd asked if it would be such an awful thing to mutually own one another, body and soul. What a fool she'd been to be afraid. With

every lick of his tongue on her flesh, with every whispered word of love, with every thrust and groan, Rafe had fused their lifetime bond. She would always be his woman.

For though he didn't tease or jest with her, though he didn't lick icing from her navel, Rafe did give her the unforgettable wedding night she'd dreamed of. She was numb, but aware dawn was far away. There would be hours of afterplay. Rafe shifted slightly, adjusting her more comfortably in the circle of his arms. Her lips formed a sleepy smile.

Yes indeed, Rafe kept his promises.

## Chapter 29

"Sparkle Conley, you're bein' stubborn now." Rafe held a thigh in each hand, parting them wider as he let his lips and tongue hover an inch from her swollen nub. "I want sausage and fried taters. You're one hell of a cook, and your husband's starvin'. You makin' sausage for my breakfast like I asked--even if it is the fourth day in a row--or not?"

"Rafe, I'm not sure there's...any sausage left," she panted, reaching for him, trying to pull him against her quivering body. Her taut nipples ached, her lower belly was in a fiery knot, and he wouldn't appease her. "How about bacon?"

"How about you're just bein' contrary? Two can play this game, you know." He dropped her thighs and sat back on his haunches. "Don't reckon I feel like doin' this. We did it those other mornin's this week."

"Rafe, you started it. You can't just leave me like this!"

"Hmm, you have a point. Cause knowin' you, the next time you start pleasin' me, you'll stop halfway to get me back. Reckon I better ponder on this a few minutes..."

"Rafe."

He flashed her a thoroughly wicked grin. "Blackmail, darlin'. Learned it from you."

"All right," she nearly screamed. "Whatever you want for breakfast. I don't care if you eat sausage every day for the next two years, just help me!"

"My pleasure, ma'am."

She was still thrumming with the shattering climax he'd finally given her when he bent to place lingering kisses on each breast in turn and whispered he'd be back. He rose and pulled on his jeans, going out behind the cabin to relieve himself as he did every morning.

Married for over a month, they still resided in his cabin while they waited for their new residence in Denver to be refurbished. Rafe refused to tell Sparkle anything about the house or his new business venture in Denver, insisting both were her wedding presents.

Other than communicating by telegraph with the man in charge of the renovations on their new home, Rafe had no pressing demands on his time. He'd ride into Pueblo every few days to check his mail or send a wire, then come right back. He was gone the entire day only twice since their wedding day. His wife couldn't have been happier that he'd chosen to take some time off.

They needed this glorious time together. Just as Rafe needed to fully recuperate from his near-fatal injury. He was eating like a horse and getting stronger by the day--taking better care of himself than he had before their marriage.

She sat up and donned her nightgown. She was certain no one would dare walk in on

them now, but she'd never forgotten the episode with Miranda and Travis. She refused to sleep in the nude, resolutely pulling a sleeping gown over her head nightly before sleep overcame her. Rafe simply chuckled and gave odds on how long she'd be allowed to wear it. Damn the fates, he was a good gambler, too.

What's keeping him?

He never took this long to come back inside. He'd remarked about being famished. Perhaps he'd gone to the kitchen. No, recalling he'd left in only his jeans, that seemed unlikely. He wouldn't give Mrs. Abbott a look at his bare chest. Then Sparkle caught the rise and fall of voices outside. He must have met up with Travis. She padded barefoot to the cabin door and inched it open, planning to scold her wayward husband. But he wasn't talking with Travis.

"You killed my boy, you bastard! You sent my eldest to jail for six years. He won't be out for least 'nother one, mebbe two. Then I gotta break the news his little brother's gone, cause you put a bullet in him. You'll only tear up some other family."

Sparkle edged the door open wider, cautious of its tell-tale squeak. Rafe had his hands in the air on either side of his head. He stood in ankle-deep mud before a grizzled stranger. The man held a shotgun pointed squarely at Rafe's chest. Rafe apologized slowly, his drawl absent as he related the tale of the boy who'd drawn on him and refused to back down. The shotgun barrel wavered only briefly as Travis rode up.

Sparkle listened, frozen in fear. Travis trained his rifle on the intruder and asserted he wanted no bloodshed on his land. The Conley brothers tried to reason with the older man. At last it seemed he'd relent. He lowered his weapon.

Rafe's hands came down to relax at his sides, signaling a fragile truce. But then she saw his right hand inch toward the pocket of his denims while Travis and the stranger talked. Rafe's fingers moved almost imperceptibly over the fabric, then went still.

Two thoughts collided in Sparkle's mind: Rafe wasn't carrying his derringer, and he didn't trust the visitor. His gunfighter's instincts were on alert.

That was enough to send her for the cabin's rifle. She checked to be sure it was loaded and brought it to her shoulder, recounting Travis' instructions again. Stepping onto the porch behind the men's line of vision as they faced the main house, she watched Travis swing down out of his saddle. Rafe started toward him, nodding. Travis slid his rifle back into its sheath.

Now both her husband and brother-in-law were unarmed, but the stranger still gripped his shotgun.

Travis mentioned coffee inside and turned to wrap his reins around the hitching post. In that instant, with Travis' attention diverted and Rafe walking ahead of him, the stranger's expression changed into a vicious snarl. The shotgun barrel moved up level with Rafe's spine.

Sparkle held her breath and squeezed her rifle trigger. She was thrown backwards, flying off her feet to crash against the cabin's front wall.

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"She gonna be all right, Doc?" Rafe stood beside the cabin's stone hearth, thinking his log enclosure had never felt so tiny nor the world beyond it so bleak. He'd vehemently prayed every night since returning to that hotel room in Pueblo never to taste the despair racking him now. Sparkle couldn't die. She'd give him her sworn promise they'd grow old together. She couldn't break her word.

"She'll be herself in a few days," the doctor replied, closing his medical bag. "She's got some nasty contusions. I'm mainly concerned about the bump on her head. She may have a slight concussion. Bed rest is what she needs. I'll come back to look at her in a few days."

Rafe grimaced as Travis came through the door. "You weren't supposed to show her how to use a gun, Travis, you were supposed to keep men posted to prevent somethin' like this. Dammit, you--"

"Excuse me," the doctor interrupted. "If you've got any liquor, Travis, I recommend you pour some down your brother's throat. Otherwise, I may have to sedate him. I'm not anxious to patch any more bullet holes in Rafe Conley." The doctor scowled at Rafe. "He's one of my worst patients."

"Rafe?" At the faint croak from the bunk, Rafe spun to gaze at his wife. Her eyelids fluttered open and small fingers crept to the edge of the blanket. Rafe dropped to one knee beside her.

"I'm here, darlin'. You just got banged up a bit. You'll be all right."

She tried to squeeze his bare arm. "Stay with me." Her hand moved to the empty space beside her and gave the blanket a weak pat.

Rafe glanced up at the physician. "Okay if I lie next to her?"

"Probably the best medicine for you both." The doctor and Travis quietly left, closing the door behind them. Rafe pulled off his jeans and climbed into the bunk. He eased Sparkle into his arms. "You need to sleep. Don't worry about anything, Sparkle. I'll be right here."

"Tired...don't think I can make s-sausage. Tomorrow."

Rafe bit his lower lip so hard he tasted blood. For the first time, he regretted his inability to cry. He'd never wanted to so badly before--but his wife had never been his back-up man and saved his life before.

"No sausage, sweetheart. I ain't hungry, anyway. Go to sleep, Sparkle," he soothed. "I will, too. Be right here for you."

And he was, when she awakened in the dead of night to release a long anguished howl. His arms and warmth enveloped her, his drawl lulled her back into murky, blissfully ignorant sleep. Rafe brought her the chamberpot, held cups and spoons to her lips, brushed her hair, massaged the ache from her shoulders, comforted her.

Then the day came when she was strong enough to talk about what had transpired. Rafe had taken them out on a picnic, saying they both had cabin fever. An early summer breeze caressed Sparkle's face as they ate lunch on a blanket.

"I murdered a man, Rafe," she stated without preamble.

He sat with one arm propped on a bent knee, staring off into the distance. He didn't move a muscle, though she could tell he'd heard her. "He would have shot you," she went on. "I had to do it. I couldn't let him..." Her voice shook. "When does it stop being the only thing you can think about?"

Now his head swiveled. His eyes were somber, penetrating, a little frightening. She hadn't asked her husband. She asked the gunslinger, and that's who answered. "It stops here and now. You took a vow to obey me. After this talk, you don't think on it again. The blot ain't on your soul, Sparkle. It's on mine. Whether it was you, or Travis, or one of the hands I barely know--whoever shot that fella would've done it on account of me. The man came lookin' for me."

She wiped at her cheek, lowering her head with a tiny nod. She couldn't dispute that. "So you're not thinkin' on it any more," he commanded sternly. "You ain't relivin' it, or havin' nightmares about it. If there's any soul searchin' to be done, I'll do it. You understand me, Miz Conley?"

Rafe never spoke to her that way. They both knew why he'd done it now...and Sparkle had never been so grateful to anyone before. Or loved her gruff vagabond more intensely. "Oh Rafe." She launched herself at him, knocking him onto his back.

He held her against his chest, hands stroking her hair until her sobs waned and she pulled back to look into his face. Then he sighed. "I need to tell you something, Sparkle. I wanted to before we got married, but I never got the chance."

"What is it?"

"It wasn't rustlers or common lawbreakers who ambushed me and Sam. Bringin' in outlaws was always just part of what I did, the smaller part. Mostly I hire out to important men for special investigations: tracking people down, advice on security risks, personal escort service, things like that. It pays damned well, but it also makes enemies. Enemies powerful and rich enough to arrange to eliminate me."

"What?" She couldn't believe she'd heard him correctly. Had he just calmly told her someone else had hired out to kill him?

His soft voice and the explanation continued. She closed her eyes, shut out the blue sky above and the fragrant meadow around her as the world began to spin.

## Chapter 30

The world was still spinning a month later. Rafe and Sparkle had taken the train to Denver; Snatch went along in a livestock car. Now Sparkle and Rafe rode the big sorrel up a knoll on the outskirts of town. They stopped before an imposing home at the top of a narrow street. Rafe slung the stallion's reins over the porch rail and dismounted, reaching for Sparkle.

She slid down in front of him. "Whose house is this?" she inquired, suspecting she was about to meet one of his wealthy employers.

"Ours." She'd never seen a broader grin on his face. Theirs? Was he teasing her again?

Double oak entry doors swung open. A mild man in a gray suit and spectacles beamed at Rafe. "You're here, sir." The fellow bustled forward, right hand extended. "Excellent. The furniture was delivered yesterday. I presume your luggage is on its way also?"

Rafe nodded, one arm around Sparkle's waist. "Howdy, Dan. Station master said he'd send some men out later. This fine gal's your mistress, Sparkle Conley. Darlin', this fella here's Dan Pearson. He's our houseman, like a butler. Dan answers the door, takes in mail and deliveries, helps out around the place." Her face went beet red as he added, "Except for the cookin'. I'm partial to the way you cook taters and sausage."

The old familiar desire to murder Rafe was coming back.

He'd turned back to Dan. "This bein' the first time I'm bringin' her into our new home, best do it right. If you'd just open up those doors a bit wider...Thanks."

She was bodily lifted into Rafe's arms and carried across the threshold as the amused houseman looked on.

Sparkle gaped at the opulent interior. Rafe had to be teasing. This had to be some elaborate prank, or maybe she was dreaming. This couldn't be their new home.

But the fiercely proud expression in her husband's eyes said indeed it was. Entire layers of Rafe's persona peeled away in that moment. The musty log cabin at the ranch, acting lucky to save the cost of a hotel room by sharing her bed at the Scarlet Lady...The man was a complete charlatan! A drawling, denim-clad, spur jangling, irresistible charlatan.

Dan cleared his throat. "Mr. Bregon's waiting in your study, sir. Is there anything I might get for you, Mistress Sparkle?"

Now she was certain she was dozing on the train and this was a dream. Mistress Sparkle? She shook her head, blushing and giggling as Rafe stalked down the marble hallway with her still in his arms.

"Darlin'," Rafe admonished as he set her on her feet, "my new partner might take offense if you walk in snickerin'. He was a hired gun, like me. He's not one to laugh much. I'm the clown of the outfit. He's the looks."



"Raford," she warned in a low voice, "I won't have you insulting my husband. I happen to think he's a very attractive man."

"Might change your mind after you see Will. He has gals lined up for a mile behind him, though he never seems to take any notice."

They entered the study to find a man dressed in tan work pants and dark brown boots. He wore a black cowboy hat tilted back on his head and a dazzling smile. He was whipcord lean and taller than Rafe. He was also more than comely. The right word was breathtaking.

Though she'd found everything about Rafe striking from the first--from the thump of his boots and spurs to the cadence of his speech--she knew most people wouldn't notice those details. Others saw Rafe as a typical frontier drifter. He had a rugged, yet forgettable appearance, a major contributing factor to his success. He could sneak up on someone easily. He blended in.

But there was nothing forgettable about his partner. Will Bregon couldn't blend in if he tried. Not with his olive complexion and moss green eyes, set off by sun-streaked tawny hair. He looked out of place in this room. He belonged on a medieval battlefield or seated on a throne with a broadsword in his hand. Modern garb and spurs simply didn't do him justice.

Watching as her husband poured a bourbon for Will at a massive maple sideboard, Sparkle's heart swelled. Clown of the outfit? Hardly. Even when compared to the chiseled features of his taller, admittedly gorgeous partner, Rafe had an aura of power. His was the stronger presence. He was far more than the clown of the outfit. He was also the father of Sparkle's child, but she hadn't told him yet.

Her eyes flicked to the wall behind Rafe's desk. His peacemaker literally hung suspended a few feet from the ceiling. Holster slung from a brass hook, the gun was displayed above a carved plaque. Sparkle began to laugh. Tears trickled from her eyes. Will mumbled an excuse to leave and closed the study door behind him as he went out.

Rafe curled an arm around her shoulders. "See you spotted my joke. Happy now, Miz Conley?"

The sign below the holster read:

**WARNING--DON'T TEMPT ME TO PULL THIS. MY WIFE AIN'T FOND OF GUNPLAY, AND SHE RUNS THE PLACE.**

"I can't tell you how happy I am. Your office is very impressive. It's a clever sign."

"This ain't my office. Will and I got a place downtown. I'll take you to see it some time. Driscoll's comin' back to work with me, and Will knows a couple good men. I won't be out in the field much. Will's not hitched, so he doesn't mind travelin'. He figures to take most of the risky cases. I'll just meet with the bigwigs and charm the pants off 'em so they'll hire us."

"If you have an office, what's this?"

"My study. City fella's got to have one. Jace does," he reminded. "Anyhow, some of the men will prefer meetin' me in private. They can come for a drink here--seein' as how my wife frowns on me strollin' into saloons these days."

"You know," she began indignantly, "I wouldn't have been so upset before the wedding if you'd told me the truth before. You let me think--"

"What I needed you to think. What I still need everybody else to think." His eyes were deadly serious as he held her gaze. "Senators and owners of big lumber outfits don't want outsiders knowin' their business. Let's go check out our digs. Been real anxious for you to see the place."

He led her into the hall. "That's the parlor, of course," he gestured. "Beyond it there's another sittin' room, and a closet or somethin'."

Sparkle fingered the heavy brocade curtains tied with braid ropes at the entrance to the parlor. "How'd you afford this big house, all the furnishings, and an office in town? I never asked about your money, but--"

"Senator's pa. Took care of a problem for him three years ago. He basically said to name my fee." Now Rafe looked slightly embarrassed. "Remember when we talked about you growin' up in rags, and I promised you better? Here it is, darlin'."

Sparkle's eyes brimmed with unshed tears. "Aw, now don't start leakin' all over the new rugs," he taunted. "Anyhow, when I decided to buy this place, I wired him I needed furniture. He knew somebody and arranged the decoratin'. But if there's anything you don't like, we can send it back. You just say so. You do like it, don't you? The house?"

"How could I help but like it? I'm just afraid to ask what sort of favor could possibly have warranted all this." Her voice had gone a bit shaky towards the end.

Rafe frowned as she sank onto a nearby bench. She was feeling lightheaded suddenly. Dizzy mother- to-be lightheaded, she secretly smiled.

"Don't assume the worst," he growled. "Nobody got killed."

"Honestly? You earned a houseful of expensive furniture by--doing what?"

"Can't say precisely, but I'll give you some examples." He sat down beside her.

"Sometimes I check the background of every man on somebody's payroll. Or I visit a bank to point out weak spots, help the banker avoid bein' robbed. Find out who's makin' threats against a politician or sleepin' with his wife." His eyes blazed as he caught her chin in the web of his hand. "Which, by the way, I'm particularly good at. So don't take to hankerin' after somebody else."

"There isn't an ounce of hanker left anywhere in my body that isn't already aimed at you, Rafe," she purred.

He leaned closer and kissed her parted lips. Her arms slid around his neck and he deepened the kiss, then pulled away. "You're gettin' me sidetracked, Miz Conley."

He rose and slid open a pair of pocket doors. The doorway revealed an octagon-shaped room with a bank of arched windows. Dark mahogany and curved into a horseshoe shape, the desk had a large floral upholstered chair behind it and side chairs around the outside of its arch. A matching floral settee and potted palm were the only other items in the strange room. "What do you think?" Rafe asked.

"I'm not sure. What's it supposed to be?"

"Your card parlor. Ain't the Barbary Coast, but you don't have to split your profits. Got you a new tarot deck, too."

Sparkle stepped forward to examine the gilt-edged cards. "Turn 'em over," came the soft drawl behind her. The backs had a glittering aquamarine finish with one stylized word printed in blazing gold across them. Her first name.

"You want me to continue telling fortunes for money?" She looked at Rafe in mild surprise.

He shrugged. "Not if you don't want to. I pondered on how you slipped off to see the women behind the general store and told fortunes for free. You can do that here, only now they'll come to you."

"You have influential men hiring you and an elegant home. You wouldn't be embarrassed for me to read tarot cards? Rafe, you're richer than Dr. Barlow, and he wouldn't have allowed it."

"He didn't understand, did he? If I recollect, that's why you're Miz Conley instead of Miz Barlow."

"I'm not funnin' you, Raford," she hissed.

"All right." He straightened and looked her in the eye. "Your havin' the sight's sort of like my scar. I'm not sure how I feel about it sometimes. Damned tough to overlook, but I've learned to live with it. And this ain't my elegant home," he corrected. "It's ours."

She smiled and took his hand as they started up the staircase.

"Almost like havin' a saloon and livin' above it, though," he taunted, chuckling. "Fancy as the Bold Adventuress, but no murals." He winked, then sobered as they started along the upstairs hall.

Sparkle discovered two modest bedrooms, then went stock still when they entered a nursery, complete with a child's low bureau and lacy bassinet. Four chairs gathered around a low table in one corner beside a dormer window. In the center of the tabletop was a miniature silver tea service.

"You knew? But--"

"That you'd want kids right away? You asked how many I wanted, and you're not wearin' a pisser. Odds are, it won't be long." He rubbed the tip of her nose with his index finger. "Want our first to be a pretty filly like her ma, with a cute little turned-up nose and aquamarine eyes. Can you work on that?"

She was too choked up to reply.

He drew her down the hall to a large raised-panel door. "Ready to see our room?" She nodded. When he ushered her inside, the breath left her body in a gasp. Their room was immense, decorated with flocked wallpaper and crystal sconces. In the center stood a gleaming brass bed.

"It's just like the panel crib, Rafe!" Happy tears trickled down her cheeks.

He lifted her in his arms and deposited her in the center of the bed. "Yep, except there's no mirror or hidden panel. And we got our own bathroom, complete with a footed tub."

"The whole house is beautiful, Rafe."

"So are you, darlin'." She reached for the buttons on his shirt as their lips met and melded.

"There's somethin' else I need to show you," he whispered in a husky voice. "I been wonderin' if I should do it now, or wait till after we break in this new bed. I'm mighty riled up." He drew her hand to his crotch to prove it. "What do you think?" he asked, nuzzling her throat.

"We should definitely christen this bed first," she murmured, feeling her nipples stiffening. "Then I have something to share with you, too."

An hour and several orgasms later--she lost count--Rafe was stretched out on his side beside her, still teasing her breasts with his lips and tongue. Afterplay, foreplay, it was always fantastic. Except when he used the edge of his teeth, as he was doing now. Her breasts were too sensitive these days for that.

"You're going to have to be gentler from now on," she whispered. "For the next several months, at least." His mouth froze. "And I won't be able to indulge all your fantasies when my time gets closer."

He loomed up on one elbow, peering into her eyes. "That's why you looked so peaked downstairs. You're expectin'?"

"Yes, it seems you're going to be a father before next winter's over. We'll be using the nursery sooner than you thought. I hope you don't mind I waited to tell you. I wanted to share the news after we made love the first time in our new home."

"A father?" he repeated, dark eyes widening. "You're havin' my baby?"

"That's the usual result from your favorite activities," she reminded, beaming. He pulled her close and began nuzzling her throat. "It's really comin' true, all of it," he mumbled.

"Damn."

"What?" His lips had been half buried. She wasn't sure she'd understood him. But it didn't matter, as he slid his arms underneath her torso and smoothly impaled himself in a single deep thrust. "Sparkle, I just got to make love to you again. I love you so much. Please, darlin'."

He closed his eyes and began thrusting as she wrapped her legs around his waist. "I love you too, Rafe. And it's not like I'll ever have something better to do. There is nothing better."

He waited until their pulses had slowed again, then helped her dress. Pulling on his jeans and buttoning the fly, he announced, "I want you to see the view from our balcony." She thought his voice sounded oddly strained. Maybe he was more shocked than she'd realized about the baby.

He opened the French doors and moved to the wood railing. She tiptoed out behind him, coming to stand at his side. "Rafe, you are happy about the child, aren't you?"

He reached to pull her close against his side. "Yeah, darlin'. I was just contemplatin' things. Life. Findin' out I'll be a father soon..." He looked down into her eyes, and she saw the love shining in the dark depths of his. "I'm better than happy." He kissed her forehead. "It's almost time for supper. Can't let you skip meals or get overtired."

Her fingertips caressed his cheek. "You're going to drive me crazy for the next few months, I can see that. I'm perfectly fine, Rafe. The doctor came out to see me while you were gone one afternoon last week. And I hope you're planning to put the rest of your clothes back on before we go downstairs," she chided. "What will our butler think?"

"Dan's more than a butler. He's also a the best back-up man I've ever known besides Sam Parker."

"That kindly-looking little man?"

"Thought by now you knew how looks are deceivin'. The outside's got nothin' to do with who a man is inside."

She blinked. "I do believe that's the first time you've ever acknowledged that. You're not upset over your scar anymore."

He jerked his shoulders. "Doesn't seem worth focusin' on. Not compared to what's in your belly or to that," he pointed at the vista of the Rockies. "They're why I don't mind livin' in this city. I don't feel so penned in with mountains so close, I can almost smell the pines. Hell of a view, ain't it?"

Sparkle smiled and followed his gaze.

"Rafe." She clutched his arm to keep her knees from collapsing.

He moved closer and braced her back with his palm. He'd known all along, she realized numbly. Since the night in his hotel room before their marriage...these past weeks...on the train, all day...While she thought she was being clever, saving her surprise about the

baby, he'd known about this.

"You never said anything," she choked out. "You let me apologize, thinking I'd gone too far. You knew."

"You had to see for yourself. Did sort of influence my thinkin' on that card parlor for you, though."

Sparkle noticed a pair of rocking chairs a few feet away. "You always insisted you'd never grow old and gray, or sit on a porch in one of those."

"This ain't a porch. It's a balcony." He turned to face her, his dark eyes reading hers. "You saw. This. Tomorrow. Years to come."

Sparkle gulped. "My mother could do it. I'd seen her..." Her words trailed off as she gazed into the distance and took in the headstones, sprinkled randomly around a grove of cottonwoods in the otherwise open expanse of green foothill a few miles away. An ebony carriage draped with stark white bowers waited next to a small knot of black-clad mourners and a clergyman. As Sparkle and Rafe watched, they disbanded and left the cemetery. The cemetery within view of where the couple stood--on the balcony of their big house on a hill.

Rafe reached into his jeans and withdrew his pocket watch. He flicked open the gold case. A watch and chain was something many a bride gave her groom on their wedding day, but Rafe knew his was different.

His wedding present from her was more than a simple gold watch as a token of her love. It was a tangible promise, Sparkle's personal guarantee.

He held the object with reverence and considered the gift she'd bestowed when she became his wife, the day she saved his soul. The precious gift and a way to measure it. A watch with its golden case symbolically engraved with the word that mattered most: TIME.

THE END