

Shrouded Hearts

Cass Andre

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~ * ~

For Bette.

Your stories brought me Veiled Hearts, then Shrouded Hearts.
Without you neither book would have been possible.

Special thanks to Cheryl Ludwigs for opening
the door to the world of romance writers.
And to Pam Crooks and Chery Griffin who've
held my virtual hand too many times to count.

And thank you, thank you, thank you,
Denise Agnew for the use of "Deli"

~ * ~

Chapter One

Arizona Territory, April 1878

"Don't make any sudden moves," Deli ordered. "She's real nervous."

"I ain't..."

Pacing her shallow breaths, Deli swept away the hair tickling the side of her neck. "Move real gentle like. The same way you would on your sweetheart when you wanna sneak a kiss." She lifted her gaze and grinned at her younger brother. "Not that you'd know of such things, right, Travis?"

"At's right," he said with a tone just as quiet and a smile just as wide. "But this'll make for good practice."

Deli bit her lip. If she laughed, she'd startle the hog between them. It grunted up at her but aimed its rear at Travis.

"Take a slow step," she murmured. Still quiet, yet a scant firmer, she added, "Had you fixed your part of the fencing like I told you, we wouldn't be in this mess."

The hog grunted in agreement.

Deli darted her gaze to the pen on the left, then to the empty space to the right. Thinking ahead, she lifted her heel off the ground, ready to leap at the sow when it darted toward the open area. With every muscle in her body ready to pounce, she dug her boots into the dry earth. If she missed, the beast would head straight for Gold Mountain an acre away.

Ignoring the itch on her bare leg, Deli licked her lips and glanced at her brother. Wouldn't do either one of them any good to argue over whose fault this was. Although the blame pointed to Travis, she wouldn't say another word about it. She narrowed her glare on him. At least, not right away.

Hot air breezed through Deli's hair, cooling her sweat-dampened cheeks and neck. She released a shaky sigh. What would Momma do if she were here?

Travis took a careful step forward. His arms stretched out at his sides like the fellow they'd seen doing that balancing act at the fair two summer's ago.

"I think I can get her," he said, excitement edging his words.

"Not yet," Deli warned.

"I think I can."

"Not yet..."

The hog pushed its fat snout into the ground and let out a grunt that blew a handful of dry dust into its own face. Seeming to like that, it did it again.

Deli held her breath. They couldn't afford to lose another hog. Shoot...These days they couldn't afford to lose a single egg, let alone an entire litter which meant a sale or two.

She closed her eyes and tried not to think of the consequences.

Steady yourself like Momma would.

Gentle and steady.

Focusing on the hog, she exhaled through pursed lips.

"Steady..." she whispered aloud.

"Almost there." Inching closer, Travis extended his arms. "Almost—"

His leap severed his words. The hog's squeal cut off his "umph" as he landed face first in the dirt, missing their prey by a hand.

Deli lurched forward.

Travis groaned.

The hog, wild with fear, scraped past her calf.

Whirling in a circle, Deli darted after the shrieking beast. "Shitfire, Travis! What the hell were you thinking?"

He scrambled to his feet. "I was thinking I had her!"

Following the hog's lead, Deli bounded over the thicket and further away from the pen. She pumped her arms in time with her legs, ignoring the scrapes and cuts that burned her thighs from the sharp thorn bushes and hiding cacti.

"Stupid, stupid animal," she puffed.

"Jus' let her go," she heard Travis groan.

Jus' let her go?

Rage sliced through Deli. She'd give Travis hell when they were done.

No wonder they were losing everything. Travis didn't give a hoot if they lived, died, or lost the whole damn farm and stayed in the saloon's back alley. That's what was wrong with Travis. He was too much like Pa.

In the distance, rustling bushes betrayed the hog's present course. Deli quickened her pace and charged in that direction.

Suddenly, the movement stilled.

Stopping too abruptly, Deli teetered forward, but caught herself from falling over. Breathless, she bent and braced her hands on her knees. Sweat trickled into her eye, but she was too tired to brush it away. Instead, she squinted at the last place she'd seen their target.

"Don't move," she ground out. "I know where she's at."

"There's jumpin' cactus over there," Travis rasped, claspings his chest. "I ain't movin' no where 'cept back to the house."

"Stay right where you are."

"You're nuts," he said. "It's only one hog, Deli. Please..."

What he needed was a blunt whack on the back of the head.

"And she carrying a whole litter, dim-wit. Think about it." Wheezing, Deli held her hand up. "Never mind. Don't think about it. We all know what happened last time you thought."

The amusement fell from Travis's young face. All of eighteen years old and he still couldn't take a lick of criticism, even if it was in jest.

He turned on his heel. "That's it. I'm going back."

"Oh, no you're not."

"Look at us, Deli. You're all torn to shreds. And I'm aching all over. We ain't *never* gonna catch her." He swiped his sun-darkened forehead with the back of his callused hand. "Leave her be. She'll come back when she's—"

"No wonder Pa left this all up to me." Deli straightened and rubbed her scraped palms together. She ignored the sharp sting and glared at her brother. "If it were your way, we'd be eatin' chicken feed three times a day and callin' it manna from heaven."

"But I'm whipped."

"Well ain't that just nice for you," Deli clucked. "Travis Gold is tired so he gets to go home." She took a step in the direction she'd last seen the hog and added, "It's a good thing the Lord didn't say that after the first verse in Genesis. No, sir, he went on and made the whole damn earth." She jerked her thumb at her brother. "Travis here, he's whipped after a little hog chasin'."

Knowing Travis had stopped listening the moment she turned away, Deli didn't bother to wait for his reaction. Cautiously, she moved forward and avoided the half-dead brush camouflaging an ugly barrel cactus.

Bending, she scooped up a handful of pebbles. One at a time, she tossed them into the hog's direction. She waited a moment, then pelted the area with the remaining rocks. It didn't move. Damn pig...

Painfully swallowing the dry knot in her throat, Deli dropped her arms in defeat. Somehow, while she'd wasted time arguing with her dull-witted brother, the hog had wandered away.

Deli shielded her eyes from the blazing sun. It was too damn hot to be spring. And too damn hot to hunt for a pregnant sow. Annoyed, she scanned the distant shrubbery. It could've made its way to the denser undergrowth at the end of the cactus patch by now, and they never would've even notice.

"Shitfire."

Now what were they going to do?

Reaching down, she scratched the top of her knee and groaned. With the cactus pricks working their lethal magic under her tender skin, her legs itched more than ever.

Slowly, Deli spun to where Travis last stood.

Remaining true to his word, he'd given up and walked a good distance ahead of her. Starting after him, Deli bit her tongue. She'd have plenty to say at supper time.

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Reed Becker scratched the back of his head and stood on the edge of a sharp plateau overlooking Gold Farm. The sun bore down on his shoulders and heated his already sore muscles and back. Tipping his hat further down to shade his tired eyes, he looked his land over.

Just like Matthew had said, it wasn't much. A few acres, maybe twenty. 'Course, twenty was better than one, and a hell of a lot better than nothing at all. He'd been wise to take the old man's word for it.

Reed couldn't spot the ornate house Matthew had bragged about, but a small shanty instantly captured his attention. The quaint piece of land surrounding it would be a good place to put up his feet and do as he pleased with no one to bother him.

Reed rolled his head to the side. His neck cracked an objection. He hoped there'd be some kind of bed in the shack he saw below. Maybe a soft bed with thick cushioning and cool, clean sheets. Chuckling at his own absurdity, he backed away from the edge of the plateau. He must be beat if all he could think of was life's luxuries.

Climbing back into his rig, he glanced over his shoulder at the long casket in the rear of the wagon. Satisfied that it hadn't been disturbed during their travel, he clicked the horses around. He hated to think of what its contents looked like, but from the outside, no one would be any wiser. Unless they got too close, and then that God awful stench would get them.

Keeping his eyes on the spread of untouched desert, he followed the vague tracks that had brought him to the ledge in the first place. He'd seen the farm. It was there, down in a valley, just like the old man had said. Now Reed needed to find the easiest path to it.

Yawning, he steered his team of horses toward the white streak of land in the distance. If he wasn't mistaken, that road would take him into the valley. He'd hoped to save daylight by cheating the road and taking a shorter route, but now it'd be dark by time he reached the place. He'd be twice as hungry too.

Clicking the horses into a quicker pace, Reed thought on the land that now belonged solely to him. It'd been a long while since he'd done nothing at all. And he needed this place. It didn't belong to his brother. It didn't belong to his mother. It was his, and only his.

Lifting a canteen to his lips, he took a swig. Life was good.

Dumping a stream of water over his head, he glanced back over his shoulder and wondered exactly what he'd find down there.

~ * ~

"Travis! Travis Gold! Get in here!"

Deli scowled at the muddy boots by the door. Just how many times did she have to tell him?

Travis poked his head out of his room and glared at her. "I'm busy, Deli. What is it?"

"Well, I think they're called boots." She pointed. "And what they're on is called a clean floor."

"Aw, come on," he moaned. "I'm just gonna put 'em back on in the morning."

"Not if you can't find them, you won't."

"And I'm just gonna clean the floor again tomorrow," he added. "So what's it matter?"

Deli touched her lip thoughtfully and cinched her brows together. "Hmm, let's see..." She grabbed her free falling hair in her hands and examined the ends of it. "Is my hair near black? No," she answered herself. "It's red. And my eyes" —she bit her lip and scrunched her face in concentration— "do they look brown? No, my eyes are blue. Least they were last I checked. So, let's see. If my hair isn't black like Momma's, and my eyes aren't brown like hers were, then why in the heck do you keep mistaken me for her?" She dropped the sweet display and glared at her brother. "I'm not your momma, Travis, so get out here and do it yourself."

"That's right," he said retreating into his room, "you're not. So leave me be."

He slammed the door, cutting Deli off.

She huffed and glared at his filthy boots. Shitfire!

"What do I gotta do to make you listen?" she muttered.

"I can hear you talkin' to yourself," Travis taunted from his bedroom.

"That's cuz you're driving me to insanity," she chirped back. Darn him!

Pursing her lips, she crossed to the boots and bent to pick them up. She'd show him real good. And maybe next time he'd listen and keep his damn boots outside or at least clean them up before bringing them in.

Taking a deep breath, she opened the door. A chorus of screeching crickets welcomed her. Deli hesitated. If there was anything she hated worse than filthy boots, it was insects that thought they owned the earth.

It'll be worth it, she told herself. Tomorrow when Travis was hunting down his boots, she'd be sittin' pretty and watching a fine show. She smiled. It'd be well worth it indeed.

Pulling her hair over one shoulder, she stepped onto the porch. An unexpected giggle escaped her lips. Walking across the dirt, she headed for the cactus patch. She'd make it real easy for him to find his boots. *Getting* them would be something entirely different.

Clutching the boots to her stomach, she skipped into a trot.

A soft light snatched her attention to the barn. Deli sucked in a breath and stilled. Panic seized her as she searched in all directions, wishing there were a place to hide.

Dropping to her haunches, she eyed the light that spread a dim brightness on the ground outside the barn. Travis was irresponsible, sure, but he wouldn't leave the lantern burning in the barn. At least, not this late.

Forgetting the boots, she let them slip to the ground. She moved onto her hands and knees and crawled toward the barn. She didn't need to guess who was in there. Chance Evens and his bunch of half-wits.

"Shitfire..."

Chance was here to follow through with his threat and burn her out...again.

Utterly helpless, Deli flattened her body against the dirt and scanned the illuminated ground for a weapon. A large, dead tree branch beckoned to her from the left. Satisfied with its size, she slithered toward it.

Keeping her eye on the wide barn door, she grabbed the branch and scrambled, as light-footed as possible, to the barn. She'd barely moved, but her breaths came quick and shallow. Deli closed her eyes and forced quiet breaths through her mouth. She'd give ol' Chance Evens a welcoming he'd never forget.

Straining to hear their conversation, Deli positioned the branch over her shoulder and flattened herself against the wall. Now, she only needed to wait. Eventually, one of them would come out.

A soft voice drifted from the barn. Deli smiled to herself. She was right. He wasn't alone.

Footsteps crunched the dry hay and came louder and closer in her direction. Tightening her grip on the branch, Deli held her breath.

His shadow emerged first, torturously slow. Before the rest of him could follow, she took a good guess at where his head would be and swung.

Right on target, the branch echoed a sickening crunch against his face. His grunt mixed with hers. Chance flew back but he hadn't covered his head in time. She had him!

Blindly, he lunged toward her.

Without hesitation, Deli swung again, this time making solid contact with the side of his neck.

He hunched over.

Deli drew back. She glanced at the door.

The others will be out soon!

Before he could straighten, she landed a kick square in his chest. The satisfying sound of his breath leaving his lungs filled the air. With the last of her energy, Deli brought the tree branch straight down and broke the dry wood over his back.

Chance Evens collapsed.

Breathless, Deli took two steps back. "Y...You low-life, filthy rat..."

He lifted his chest off the ground.

"Stay down," she ordered. "Stay down or I'll beat you dead. I swear it."

He shook his head and cupped his hand over his face.

"What the hell are you doing?" he ground out, rising to his feet.

Deli lifted the broken branch over her shoulder. "Don't you move."

"I almost can't."

"Good."

Bracing his hands on his knees, he took several deep gulps of air. Deli smiled at that. This outta keep him off her land for a while. If she'd swung a little harder, she might've kept him off for good.

"I told you, I'm not leaving," she said, eyeing his every move, waiting for his reaction. "Gold Farm *and* its mountain belong to me."

Slowly, he lifted his head.

Deli gasped. Pointing to the stranger who now had blood running from his crooked nose, she dropped her splintered weapon.

"Y... You're not... Chance Evens," she stammered.

"I *know* that," he growled. "It's nice to see that it matters."

Deli lowered her gaze to the branch she'd dropped and wished she hadn't been so clumsy. "Are you a friend of Chance's?"

The stranger looked at her as if she'd asked him to marry her. "You think I'd answer yes to a question like that?"

Only two feet away, she inched closer to the branch. "Who are you?"

"Lady, you take one more step toward that stick and I'll—"

"You'll what, Mister?"

"You caught me off guard the first time. It's not about to happen again."

"What're you doing here?"

He reached up and wiped his nose. "Hell, lady..." He jerked his hand away from his face. "I think you broke my nose."

"You can tell Chance there's more where that came from too."

"I'm not telling Chance anything," he snapped. "What the hell is wrong with you? What're you doing here?"

Deli eyed him suspiciously. She didn't trust him one bit. What kind of man wandered around another person's barn at night? Especially a stranger.

"You a thief?" she asked.

"Not much in there to steal."

"Are you alone?"

"Got a handkerchief?"

"*Are* you alone?"

The stranger glared at her for a brief moment, in what seemed to be a sweeping calculation of her character. His eyes stopped at her legs.

Deli swallowed and glanced down. Cuts, bruises, and slashes decorated her thighs and knees. She'd always felt comfortable wearing Momma's old skirts, cut several inches above the knees and sewn between her thighs, but this man gawked at her as if she wore nothing at all.

"Scuse me, rude person, but would you *please* stop staring at me?"

He blinked up at her, an expression of bewilderment and concern pasted to his face. "Do you live here?"

Deli narrowed her eyes. She wouldn't answer any of his questions. He'd be back on his horse, lickety-split, to ramble off to Chance if she did.

"Do you live alone?" he asked.

Alone? Brightening, Deli smiled. "No. My husband is back at the house. All I need to do is scream and he'll be out here." She cocked her head to the side. "I'll warn you, he's an excellent shot."

He touched the swollen bridge of his nose. "Not half as good as his wife, I'll bet."

Deli contemplated diving for the tree branch. She didn't feel half as safe with it lying on the ground. And if she did scream, Travis certainly wouldn't run to her rescue. She hoped the stranger didn't recognize her lie.

"Besides, what the hell would you be screaming for?" he asked. "I'm the one being attacked."

"You were trespassing." She nodded to the interior of the barn. "Who else is in there? Who were you talking to?"

Cupping his hand over his nose, the stranger glared at her. "I was having tea." He walked a wide circle around her and headed for the house. "With my horse."

"Where do you think you're going?"

"To get myself cleaned up." He didn't bother to look back at her. "Then we'll figure out what the hell you're doing here and how soon you'll be leaving."

Deli could barely make out his broad shoulders and tall form in the vague moonlight. If he turned around, she'd never see his face, and she'd never know what he meant by that.

"I told Chance, and now I'm telling you, I'm not going anywhere," she called after him.

"Sorry, lady," he tossed over his shoulder, "but you're wrong."

Before she could stop herself, Deli swept her trusty branch up and slowly started after him.

Closing her eyes, she took aim. It'd be best to wait until he turned around.

Approaching his back, she spoke in her softest voice, "Um, Mister?"

He paused, then turned to face her.

Deli hoisted the branch over her shoulder and steered it toward his head...too late.

A powerful grip snatched her hand. His thumb dug into her tender inner wrist. The branch disappeared as she lost feeling in her fingers. The stranger, no longer playing the part of a wounded dog, pinned her arm to her back.

"Shitfire," she grunted.

Somehow his free hand had landed itself at the back of her neck, holding her in place. His tightening fingers didn't seem so coincidental.

"Look, Lady, I don't know who stuck a fly in your honey, but I already warned you about coming at me again."

Hot and close, his breath stroked her cheek. Deli shook back the hair that had fallen around her face. She wiggled her fingers to make sure they were still there.

"Let me go."

Despite his disfigured nose and bloody shirt, he looked ready to laugh aloud. "I don't know if you're stupid or just plain mean."

"Well, I'm not stupid."

"I wonder..." His hand loosened on the wrist he had strapped behind her back. "We're going into that shack of yours. I'm going to take care of this nose and get myself something to eat. I've been traveling for too long to argue with some woman over who's coming and going on a piece of dirt." He lowered his grip on the back of her neck, but his eyes warned her to stay put. "After I talk to your husband, we'll get this straightened out. Because, you see, this is my land, and *you* are the one who's trespassing."

"I must have hit you too hard," Deli said sweetly. "Or not hard enough."

The stranger let out a sigh that told her he was more than just physically tired. "Are you going to cooperate?"

"What do you think?"

Deli moved away, but he quickly grabbed hold of her upper arm and yanked her next to himself. Grumbling under his breath, he guided her toward the cabin.

"The name's Reed Becker," he said, leading her across the porch.

Deli shrugged. She didn't care if he was St. Nick or President Hayes.

"I've come to claim what's rightfully mine," Reed Becker continued, "and to bury a friend according to his wishes."

"And what does that have to do with me...us?"

"He owned this place." Reed reached for the door. "He wanted a proper burial near his wife."

Deli hadn't moved since she'd heard his first word. "Owned this place?"

"That's right," Reed said. "Matthew Gold was his name."

Weak, Deli braced herself against the wall beside the door and stared into Reed Becker's determined eyes. It'd been eight years since she'd felt this sick. And only one man's name could do it to her.

Reed frowned. "You know him?"

"Yes, I know him," she whispered. "And you can't bury him here."

"Why the hell not?"

Regaining her strength, Deli straightened. "Because, Mr. Becker, I said so. Matthew Gold is my father..."

Chapter Two

Reed couldn't ignore the pulsing in his nose. It had already spread to his head and was playing tug-o-war with his eyes and neck. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so badly thrashed.

"Have a seat," he told the woman when they entered her cabin.

He gave the shack a quick inspection. A short sofa, two chests and a wall of shelves filled the parlor. In the connected kitchen, a small haphazard structure he assumed to be a table beckoned him.

"Don't think of moving 'til I say," he said.

"Just give me the chance."

Reed glanced away in disgust. He'd never be able to figure out how he got into these predicaments. He'd come to bury his friend. It seemed like a simple enough task. Leave it to a woman, a woman with a good aim, to turn it into an all out brawl.

Hell, his nose hurt.

Scowling at her, he moved to the wash basin and carefully filled it with water. He didn't dare take his eyes off her. A woman like that, the dangerous kind, needed to be watched every minute of the day. Especially now, since it looked like her anger had doubled when he mentioned Matthew Gold.

Searching for something he could use to clean the blood off of his face, Reed turned in a slow circle. He spotted a cupboard, as tall as his hip, full of dishtowels and different colored cloths.

"Don't touch those," she said the second he stepped toward them.

"And what do you suggest I use?"

She lifted her shoulder in half a shrug. "Figure it out for yourself."

Deliberately, Reed whipped the whitest cloth out of the stack and dropped it into the basin.

She leapt to her feet, but made no attempt to retrieve the cloth. Reed gave her a sweeping once over. She claimed to be Matthew's daughter, but that couldn't be. Not that thing, that woman with wild red hair, a filthy sleeveless shirt hanging down one shoulder, and those pants—or was it a skirt, with two skinny, butchered legs sticking out the bottom and a scruffed pair of men's boots at the end. Reed shook his head. There was no way she could be a relation of his friend.

Reed frowned at her lower half. What the hell was she wearing anyhow? It could've been a skirt...in another lifetime. More like she'd cut it to mid-thigh and had sewn it together to make some sort of misshapen, baggy trousers. Convenient, sure, but the ugliest damn thing he'd ever seen.

"Wanna tell me what you're staring at?" she snapped.

"Staring?" Reed repeated. "I'm trying to focus. I think you near blinded me."

"Serves you right."

He grunted and wrung the cloth out. Folding it in quarters, he laid it gently over the bridge of his nose. "Looks like you can use some cleaning up too."

"You told me not to move."

Reed rinsed the cloth out, tainting the water to a pearly pink, and placed it over his face again. "Now I'm giving you permission."

Her crystal blue eyes stood out amongst a filthy face and pinned him with threat. Rolling them skyward, she moved carefully to the linen cupboard and withdrew a stained cloth for herself.

She glanced at the pink water in the wash basin and tossed Reed her disgust. "We'll need more water."

"I'm not letting you out of my sight. This water will do."

"For an animal, yes."

She switched her gaze to the half full pitcher of clean water and didn't hesitate in dipping her cloth in. After wringing it out, she carried the pitcher to the table and sat.

Purposely grabbing another white dishtowel, Reed followed her lead.

"So, tell me, Mr. Becker," she said, "what makes you think I'll allow my father to be buried here?"

Straight to the point, Reed thought. At least she had one redeeming quality. "What makes you think you have a choice?"

She hiked one foot up onto the table and gently spread the cloth over her shin. "This *is* my place, after all."

Reed chuckled, but his pulsing nose wouldn't allow him a smile. He could argue himself crazy, show his documents, and she'd still insist he had no rights.

Shaking his head, he lowered his gaze. In the V of her legs, high up on her thigh, dull white cotton peeked out of her shortened trousers. Reed wrinkled his nose, then wished he hadn't as pain pulsed to his watering eyes.

"Just what is it you're wearing?" he asked.

She followed the direction of his eyes and tugged on the tight white undergarment peaking out.

"Underclothes. And you?"

"What *kind* of underclothes?"

"Deli!" a voice hollered from one of the adjacent rooms.

She stiffened. Her leg plopped to the floor.

"Is that your husband?" Reed asked.

"Y... Yes. Of course." She paled and licked her lips. "Yes, dear," she chirped back. "What is it?"

A long pause hung after her words.

"You sick or somethin'?" the voice answered,

"Why, of course, not, sweetheart..."

"Then what's wrong with your voice?"

She frowned at the closed door.

Reed smiled and spread a fresh cloth over his nose.

The door opened as a lengthy man sauntered out. His eyes fell on Reed, and he stopped.

Reed returned the frown. This *boy* was her husband?

"Who's that?" the kid pointed.

Terror draped the woman's features. "Well, my dear *husband*, this is Reed Becker. He claims that we've trespassed on his land. When in fact" —she glared at Reed— "it's the other way around."

The man looked more like a boy with every passing second. He blinked his young, puzzled eyes between the woman and Reed.

"Speaking of names," Reed said, "you never mentioned yours. What was it your husband called you? Deli?"

She shot him a hateful glare.

"What happened to you?" the kid asked Reed.

"I was attacked," he answered, "by a vicious beast, just outside your barn."

"A what?"

"I thought he was Chance Evens," Deli defended.

The kid grimaced. "You didn't bother to look first?"

Reed peeled the cloth from his nose and rinsed it out. "Does it look like she did?"

"Geez, Mister," the boy said, "I think it's broken."

"I *know* it is."

"It's gonna have to be set," he continued. "Ain't nothin' worse than the crunch of a nose poppin' back into place."

Deli scowled at him, an expression that Reed thought rested comfortably on her features, as if she didn't know how to do anything else. Keeping an eye on her, he swiped her pitcher and used the fresh water to pat his nose clean. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so much pain.

"Ain't no getting' around it," the kid said. "You gotta get it back into place." He shuttered. "Sure glad it ain't me."

"That's enough, Travis," Deli said. "You need to get to bed."

Frowning, the kid whose name was obviously Travis backed toward the room he had come from. "Ain't fair."

Reed lifted his brows and tried not to smile. "You let your wife talk to you like that?"

"My wife?" Travis repeated. "Oh, yeah, my wife." He switched his attention to Deli. "Say, that's right. I ain't gotta listen to you." He put his hands on his hips and immediately inherited squared shoulders and a cocky saunter. "Woman, I think it's you that needs to—"

"Give it a rest, will you, Travis?" Deli threw her damp cloth at Reed, hitting him in the chest. "He's not my husband anymore than you're Chance Evens. He's my brother."

Reed chuckled. Least she was honest. So, that meant that Matthew had two unmentioned children. It just didn't figure.

"What'd you expect?" she went on. "I had to say something to protect myself from the likes of you."

"What kind is he?" her brother asked.

Her features returned to their accustomed frown. "Pa's kind. And wait until you hear what he's doing here."

Suddenly pale, Travis pulled the chair out beside Deli and sat in it. For being their father, Matthew Gold sure had a strange affect on these two.

Travis didn't look like the same "kid" that had come out of that room. His young eyes had darkened and his nostrils flared.

Reed cleared his throat and moved uncomfortably in the hard chair. What the hell could Matthew have done?

"So, what are you here for?" Travis asked.

"I'm burying a friend."

"He's burying Pa," Deli clarified.

Reed wouldn't have thought it possible, but the last drops of color faded from the boy's cheeks. "Why?"

"Because he's dead," she snapped. "Why do you think?"

"Matthew was a friend of mine," Reed said. He didn't much like the thought of being cornered by these two. Especially since he couldn't figure out why. "Deli says he was her father. That would make you his son?"

"Yes, it would," Travis said through clenched teeth. "You figure that out all by yourself?"

Slowly, Reed pulled the cool cloth from his nose and dropped it into the wash basin. "As a matter of fact I did." He switched his gaze between the two sets of eyes drilling into him, not at all liking what they had to say. "Tell you what, why don't we all just lay our cards on the table, so to speak, and see what the other's got. Figure out—"

"There's nothing to figure out," Deli snapped. "Nothing at all."

Reed chuckled. "I beg to differ."

"Beg, plead, and insist all you want," she said, "but that doesn't change a thing. You've already seen what I do to trespassers. You don't want to know what happens to thieves."

"Thieves?"

"That's right," she nodded. "Didn't you say you were here to steal my land?"

Reed clenched his teeth. "No, lady, I didn't say that. I said I was here to *claim* my land."

"Then what are you doing on Gold Farm?"

Reed shook his head. She was too much. "First of all, Matthew never said a thing about kin he might have around these parts. Except his wife, and she passed away some—"

"Eight years ago," Deli interrupted him.

"That's right."

She folded her arms primly over her full bosom, a relaxed action that didn't fit her firm scowl. "And did he sugar coat that pack of whoppers for you too?"

Reed shrugged. "I don't get your meaning."

"She means he's about the biggest liar you'll ever cross paths with," Travis filled in. He looked upon Reed with spite equal to his sister's.

Reed didn't know what to make of them. He liked to think that he knew Matthew. You didn't spend three years with a fellow and not know him front and back, up and down.

Matthew had talked about a lot of things. Why would he leave out his children? He'd told Reed about how his father, Dylan Gold, had struck the biggest vein of gold in a hill beside his house. He'd told him how Dylan bought every squared parcel for miles around, and how he lavished his wife with jewels that she'd never have an occasion to wear.

Matthew could babble on for hours about how his father, the same man who rolled in riches and owned contraptions that folks never heard of, slowly drank and gambled the fortune away. He never learned a trade, never lifted a finger to actually farming the land, and when the hill stopped giving, Dylan Gold had nothing.

Nothing but the twenty acres that was still here now, with the house, the barn, the barren land, and the damn hill, Gold Mountain, he called it, that started it all.

Reed willed his headache away and leaned forward on the table. Two determined glares continued to drill into him.

"Look, honey," he told Deli, "I can't say I know who you are, but I do know Matthew lost this land to me more times than I can count."

Her lips parted long enough to suck in a quick breath of air.

"And every time," Reed continued, "I refused." He leaned back in his chair and braced his fingers on each side of his nose. "But when Matt passed on, he left it to me and made me promise to bring him back here." Gently, he felt out the knot on the side of his nose. "And I have. I told him I'd keep after the place and everything on it." Reed clenched his teeth against the oncoming pain. "I didn't know that included children."

Without another thought, he snapped his broken nose into place.

Deli flinched.

Travis grimaced.

Reed bit back a curse. He squeezed his eyes shut and took a deep breath.

"I'm not a child," he heard her say.

The pressure in his head had subsided, but a new pain coursed through his face. What the heck had he done to deserve this? Reed opened his eyes. He should've turned away after seeing Gold Farm from a distance.

"So, he never told you about us?" Travis asked.

"Who? Your father?"

"Who do you think?"

"We are *not* children," Deli said again.

Reed gave her a brief glance, then returned to her brother and shook his head. "Not a word."

"That outta tell you something," Travis said.

"It tells me something," Reed answered. "I'm just not sure what."

"Look, Mister," Deli said, coming to her feet, "just because my pa said you can have my land, doesn't make it so."

"It's got my name on it," he said. "I think that makes it—"

"I don't believe you."

"You know what, little lady? I don't care in the least what you believe." Reed licked his dry lips and searched for a fresh pitcher of water. "I've never worried about proving myself before, I'm not about to start."

"Maybe this time you'll have to..." As if she could read his mind, Deli disappeared into her brother's room. She returned with a porcelain-white pitcher and poured herself a glass of water.

Reed swallowed again. "Mind if I have a sip of that?"

Taken back, Deli blinked dumbly at him.

"Of your water," he clarified.

Deli gave him a smile he didn't trust and strolled to the front door. Opening it, she gazed at the black sky freckled with specks of silver.

"You can have anything you like," she told Reed over her shoulder.

He stood and crossed to where she stood in the doorjamb. "Thanks."

Swinging her arm back, she tossed the fresh water out the front door. "As long as you've brought it yourself."

With the light at his back, shadows drenched Reed Becker's stern, filthy features.

Deli licked her lips and leveled her jaw. He didn't scare her one bit. He wasn't nearly as large as Chance Evens, and he certainly didn't have Chance's bark.

"Looks like I should take things up with the man of the house," Reed said, in a low irritated tone.

"I *am* the man of the house," Deli answered. Deed or not, he wouldn't stay one night on Gold Farm. She'd talk to Sheriff Sault first thing in the morning. Surely, there was something he could do.

"I meant," Reed said, backing toward the table, "Travis."

Like a loyal dog, Travis leapt to his feet at the sound of his name. "Y...Yes, sir?"

Deli gulped at the annoyance she'd sparked in Reed Becker's eyes.

"I've been traveling for some time," he told Travis, but his eyes remained fixed on Deli. "I'm sure your momma raised you with some kind of manners. Why don't you fetch me a pitcher of water?"

"You leave my momma out of this," Deli said. She took a threatening step closer to him, but had no idea what she'd do if he didn't mind her.

Travis slipped the pitcher out of her hand and started out the front door.

"Don't you do it," she told her brother. "You don't have to do anything for him, Travis."

"Shoot, Deli," he whined. "Why do you gotta make war with everybody? You broke the fella's nose. Least you could do is let him have a little water."

"It's the least you could do," Reed echoed.

Deli switched her glare to her brother.

"Well, it's true," he said with a shrug.

All right, Deli, what're you gonna do now?

"Fine," she sighed, "but you might as well fill the other while you're at it."

"Maybe you do have your pa's good sense," Reed said, sitting at the table again.

Travis rushed between them and swiped up the second pitcher. "Don't you two go killing each other while I'm gone," he mumbled, disappearing out the doorway. "I don't want to miss the good stuff."

"As long as Mr. Becker doesn't tempt me, you have nothing to worry about," Deli answered.

Biting her lower lip, she stared at Reed. What the hell was she supposed to do with him?

She looked thoughtfully around the room, not caring to fill the silence between them. She had nothing to say to this man except "get out." But she couldn't even do that much if what he said was true.

Her stomach twitched. Did Pa really give him the farm?

"I'm not about to just toss you out, if that's what you're worried about," Reed said.

"Worried?" Deli answered. "Why would I be worried? This is my land, Becker. You'll find that out first thing in the morning."

Lord willing...

"I'm only trying to assure you," he said, shaking his head.

"Even if there was a possibility that you *might* be the rightful owner, do you think I'd stay one night here?"

"I'm sure we'll work something out."

"I have *plenty* of places to go." The idea of leaving tied her stomach in knots. She didn't want to have to think about it. "Me and Travis can always stay in my room at *Chestnut's Place*."

Reed reached down and whipped off one of his boots. "Chestnut's place?"

"The saloon," she clarified. "It's where I work. It may not be the most dignified way to earn money, but I'm good at it. Chestnut's always made sure I have a way to put food on the table."

If it weren't for his bulging, red nose and bruise-blackened eyes, Reed's face would've been stark white. Was it so hard to believe that she actually earned a living?

She'd cleaned up after more men and made enough beds to last her a lifetime. Her room there had come in handy on more than one night when cleaning and scrubbing had taken her into the morning hours due to a bar fight or a skinny patron that couldn't handle his booze. She was a hard worker, always had been. And Chestnut was more than generous with her pay.

"I wouldn't have taken you as the type," Reed said, letting his second boot drop on the floor.

"Well, what do you think I do? Sit around here all day?"

Deli glanced out the door in time to see Travis coming across the porch. Water splashed on the floor as he ambled into the house.

"Where's my boots?" he demanded.

She struggled to not smile. She'd nearly forgotten about the evening's lesson. "Half way to the barn."

He set the pitchers on the table and scowled. "I don't expect they got there by themselves."

"You're lucky," she said, dipping a fresh cloth into one of the pitchers and wiping off her face. "They were headed for the cactus patch 'til I caught the land thief tinkering around in the barn."

Reed sighed.

Deli smiled. She hoped he felt miserably guilty. Stealing her land...

Shoot! If he did own this land, she'd have to figure out some way to outsmart him. As if fighting off Chance Evens wasn't enough.

Reed emptied a glass of water in a loud gulp, then refilled it. "Your sister was telling me about what she does at Chestnut's place." He didn't appear too happy. "You approve of this, Travis?"

Deli frowned at him. What business was it of his if she worked? Most women did.

Travis only shrugged. "Don't matter how she makes money, so long as she does."

"That's a pretty selfish way of thinking."

Travis's eyes widened. "W...Well, she's been there for so long, I don't think it matters."

"And it keeps me busy," Deli added.

Reed paled even more than before.

Now what could be wrong with him?

Deli's mouth fell open as the answer occurred to her. He hadn't bothered to ask her *what* she did at *Chestnut's Place*. He'd assumed.

He thought she was a whore!

She bit her lip to keep from laughing.

How could one man be so fool headed?

"If your father had only known..." Reed said, slowly shaking his head.

"Known?" Travis said. "Well, of course he knew. He got Deli work there in the first place. Remember that, Deli?" He spun in his chair to face her. "You were practically kicking and screamin' when he told you."

Deli nodded, but could say nothing. She'd explode from laughter if she did. Reed Becker's face had shifted to tree green.

"Pa said," Travis continued, "that it was about time Deli made herself useful. Working over at Chestnut's seemed to be the only thing she was good at."

"And after a day or two," Deli couldn't help herself, "I started to like it. You meet the most interesting people..."

"I'm sure you do." Reed gave her a once over that forced her eyes to leave his face. "And they don't mind you looking like...that?"

Deli didn't need to glance down to understand his reference. She wasn't about to explain that she'd spent all morning mending fence and all after noon chasing the pig from hell.

"Would you mind her looking like that?" Travis inserted. "I mean, Deli cleans up pretty good with a little soap and water, but most men don't care what she looks like." He shrugged and scooted away from the table. "Ain't like they're there to look at her face."

Deli choked on her next breath of air. Lordy, was Travis gonna kick himself when he found out what Reed *thought* they were talking about.

"And you think this is funny?" Reed asked her.

"What I think," Deli snipped, "is none of your business." She pulled her hair over her shoulder and sashayed around him. "What my brother and I do, and why, is none of your business either."

Mr. Becker had an odd manner about him, Deli decided, glancing at him out of the corner of her eye. If he wasn't here to steal her land, she might've tolerated him. If he wasn't here to bury her father, she might've liked him.

Sighing, she moved to the door and leaned in its jamb. She didn't need this right now. There were more important matters to tend to without Reed Becker getting in her way. Course, if he *did* own Gold Farm, her problems would become his. She smiled. She'd like to see what Chance Evens might do against the likes of Reed Becker.

Raking her fingers through her tangled hair, Deli bit softly on the inside of her cheek. What a shame he was her enemy. She could certainly use an ally.

What the blast would he want with her farm anyhow? Besides, a farm, this farm, always homed family. Not strange men. If he was such a good friend to Pa, it couldn't be Gold Mountain he was drawn to. He would know that the mine went barren years ago. Then again, Pa never mentioned he had children. Who knew what else he might've lied about?

"Do you have money, Mr. Becker?" Deli blurted.

Reed chuckled. The warm sound rolled from deep within and made her smile. So, he wasn't wealthy. Maybe he hoped Gold Mountain would change that.

"I guess one would consider my family to be well off," he answered.

Damn...Bad call.

"New money?" she asked, keeping her attention on the clear sky.

"Geez, Deli," Travis exclaimed. "Could you be any ruder?"

"I'm sure she could," Reed said. "Old," he answered her question.

Deli nodded. It just didn't fit. "Are you the proverbial black sheep?"

"No."

"Then why" —she turned suddenly on him— "do you want my land? You have money and you aren't an outcast. So why, pray tell, are you bullying me?"

His grin widened. "I haven't bullied anyone."

"Not yet."

"I'm here to bury a friend."

"And that's another thing." She moved away from the door and pointed toward the barn. "That man is not welcomed here."

"But he owns the place."

"*Owned*," she said. "He stopped owning when he left us."

Reed pursed his lips, but gave no retort.

Good, Deli thought. That's right where she wanted him. Speechless.

She reached down and scratched her ankle, but never took her eyes off of him. This farm would not be the same without her. Sure, they hadn't brought in so much as a crop of dust since before Momma fell ill, but it was still her land, her home. She and Travis had been born here...Well, they'd been born in the big house that stood behind the cabin until Chance burned it down, but it was the same thing.

Why the hell would Reed want it?

Shitfire, she hated being stumped.

Reed's nose had stopped bleeding, but the rims of his eyes had brightened to a beautiful, sun-set red, his eyelids a contrasting lavender. Deli turned away before he could see her smile. And here she thought she hadn't hit him hard enough.

"What do you say we take this up in the morning," Reed said, coming to his feet.

He loomed a good head taller than she and yawned. Deli gulped her surprise.

She hadn't noticed his size before...

Shitfire...She stepped back. She'd nearly beat down a man twice her size.

"Oh, I...I plan to," she stammered. "I won't take your word for anything, Mr. Becker."

"You never should."

"So, as far as I'm concerned," she continued, "this is still my place."

Reed released a heavy sigh. He could predict her next words before she had to say them. "I suppose you want me to sleep in the barn."

"Why not? Pa always did." She stole his seat and took up cleaning off her arms and legs. "I don't care where you sleep, as long as you understand it's only temporary."

So much for a soft bed with clean sheets...

"All right, Deli. I'll play along for tonight."

Intent on scrubbing her elbow, she hadn't bothered to look up. "Travis, get a blanket for him." Obviously irritated, she plopped the cloth into the filthy water. "This'll never work."

"Well, I have to sleep somewhere, Deli."

"I wasn't talking about *you*," she stomped toward her room.

Cantankerous. That description fit her like a new dress. Cantankerous and mean.

Travis followed behind her, but emerged first from the room with Deli right behind him

"Not that one," she said, yanking a blanket from her brother's arms. "This is mine, you dimwit."

"You don't need two blankets," he said, taking it back. "It's the middle of summer."

"Any blanket will do," Reed inserted.

"But it's still mine."

Reed folded his arms over his chest. He and his brother, Luke, hadn't bickered like this since they were schoolboys.

"I need one to cover me and one to cuddle with," she ground out.

Reed snapped his gaze up. "To cuddle with?"

Deli stole the blanket back. "That's right." She threw it back into her room and stomped toward the front door. "Find him something else."

"Where are you going?" Travis asked.

"To take a bath, if you don't mind."

"Is it Tuesday already?"

"Ha-ha, Travis," she said disappearing off the porch. "Very funny."

Reed chuckled. He'd pay good money to watch these two spat for kicks.

"She ain't mad," Travis told Reed as he closed the front door. "Not at me anyways."

"I already told her that I'm not throwing you two out."

"It's not the same thing," Travis said. "See, Deli does things her way. Has always had to. She's used to it being that way."

Reed gave the small sofa beneath the window a glance. He wouldn't feel sorry for her. If he was willing to work something out, what was the problem?

Travis pulled a folded blanket out of the trunk in the far corner of the room. He flapped it open and spread it out on the sofa.

"Deli ain't always mean," Travis said. "But it ain't like you come with the best news. This is our home, you know?"

Reed resolved to sitting on the couch. His face hurt like the devil from the attack. His back had grown stiff from endless steering. And his stomach wouldn't stop begging for fill.

Travis started for his room, but stopped mid way and pointed to Reed's boots by the table. "If I were you, I wouldn't leave those there. You'll be digging through jumpin' cactus for them by morning."

"She wouldn't think of it," Reed said stretching out on the sofa.

"You don't know my sister too well," Travis laughed. "She's *always* thinkin'." He entered his room and closed the door. "You better sleep light, Mr. Becker."

"Thanks for the warning," Reed muttered.

Physically exhausted, but not mentally ready to rest, he sat up on the sofa. Deli Gold had a lot of spit and gumption for a kid of twenty—He frowned. How old *was* she? Twenty-four? Twenty-five? And already she was wasting away in a hole in the wall whore house. He'd have to talk to this Chestnut person in the morning. He owed that much to Matthew.

Sighing, Reed pulled the thinning curtain away from the window and looked out.

His mouth fell open.

He'd have take back what he'd said. Deli Gold was no child. At least not according the naked body she sported right smack in the front yard!

As if she might hear him, Reed held his breath and squinted at her shadowed form. She'd pulled a wash tub right up under the water pump in the front yard. He couldn't be sure, but it looked like her make-shift clothes had been discarded beside the tub. One thing was for certain: She didn't have a thread of cloth on.

Even if he wanted to, Reed couldn't let the curtain fall back in to place.

She paused before getting into the tub, tilted her head back and stared at the sky. Reed drew his eyes down the arch of her neck and traced the generous swell of her breasts. Swallowing, he darted his eyes toward the barn, then to the sloping hill on the other side.

What if someone saw her?

Slowly, he exhaled.

Someone already had.

Narrowing his eyes, he rested his chin on the back of the sofa and lowered his gaze to her thin waist and flat stomach. Without hesitating, he dropped his attention to the vague shadow of dark hair between her thighs.

"She's crazy," he said simply, but the uncomfortable swell in his denims had come to a difference conclusion.

Sweeping, his inspection upward, he stopped at her face. If she'd noticed, which he doubted, she seemed unaffected by his stare. He could barely make out her features, but he'd seen enough of her to remember exactly what she looked like. Soft, clear skin with a brush of dirt along her chin. Blue eyes. Thick lashes.

And a big mouth with the meanness to back it up.

Reed swallowed the hard knot in his throat.

Plunging one long leg into the tub, followed by the other, Deli sat completely in the water.

Reed let the curtain fall across the window. He'd done enough peeping for one night. More than enough.

Adjusting his pants around his waist and loosening them just enough around his groin, he fell back on the sofa.

Well? What did he expect?

"Peace," he answered himself.

For once, he'd expected peace and quiet.

Closing his eyes, he searched for sleep. It didn't come easily. Something told him that this woman would cause him more trouble than twenty acres was worth.

Chapter Three

Deli leaned over her mother's gaunt form and listened for her breaths. A distracting fly buzzed noisily around the shadowed room. Finally, it settled on the headboard and quieted.

Deli stilled and listened for her mother's strained inhales and shallow exhales.

"Well, Momma," she sighed, just to hear her own voice in the dark room "what shall we do today?"

As usual, no reply came.

Straightening, Deli crept to the window and brushed aside the heavy, tattered curtain. Another world existed out there, a world bright and clean, free from the thick stench of sickness and looming death.

The sweet scent of honeysuckle seeped through the cracked window pane and taunted her. Deli blinked and focused on the distance. Little Travis ran amuck through all the places their mother wasn't there to tell him not to go.

The cactus patch, the vegetable garden, the mud.

"Shoot, Travis," Deli whispered, "Git outta that mud, ya fool. Jus' like a ten year old boy, right, Momma?"

Deli bit her lip. Did she really expect an answer?

Lifting her eyes, she searched for her father. He'd been hiding out in the barn for two days now, mumbling about "the old times" and drinking himself to oblivion.

It was better this way. The last thing she needed was another body to take care of. At least in the barn, Pa stayed clear of her. 'Course, he stayed clear of his responsibilities too.

Deli tightened her jaw and shifted her gaze to Gold Mountain guarding the far corner of their land. Thinking about her worthless father would only make her angry.

Sighing, she pulled away from the window. How could it be so dark and dismal inside, yet so beautiful only a few feet away?

A hollow groan closed Deli's eyes. Every time the sound grated her nerves, it reminded her of Momma's pain. Every time...

Squeezing her fists together, she dug her nails into her sweat-dampened palms. Finally, the sound ended with a raspy cough that she knew, without looking, wracked her mother's frail body.

Her mother choked then gagged. Her deep moan rumbled like an overhead storm, threatening never to cease.

Powerless, Deli struggled to keep from watching, but her heart gave in. "Jus' hold on a minute, Momma," she murmured. "I'm coming."

Refilling the wash basin, she sat beside her mother's bed. As always, Deli held her breath. Her intuition, and the glaze in her mother's eyes, told her it would be over soon.

Dipping a tattered cloth into the basin, she sponged down the bone-thin arms that had lovingly cradled her as an infant.

"Travis don't have a lick of sense," she said, forcing cheer into her monotone voice. "I know exactly what you mean about young boys. Busy as bees and thick as good steaks. Did I tell you what he did yesterday?"

Her mother grunted.

Deli soaked the cloth in water, wrung it out, then swiped it over her mother's graying cheeks. "He brought about two dozen of them nasty little bugs into the house." She shivered at the memory and kept her hands busy by folding strips of cotton. "One of those big black beetles with the shiny, fat bodies, and a regular ol' gray spider that looked full of babies. Plus, a few ants, and two of those horrible brown and whites with the fangs shootin' straight out the front." Grimacing, Deli wet a second piece of cloth. "And do you know what that fool did? He dropped them all on the kitchen table, Momma, all of them. 'Course, they'd already gone wild after each other, scrambling all over each other's bodies, then shootin' off in different directions the second he let 'em free. I tell you, Momma, I near choked on my spit."

Her mother gasped.

Deli cringed, then quickly added, "But don't you worry none. I got 'em all."

She patted her mother's hand and put a fresh cloth over her eyes. Leaning forward, Deli listened to her mother's shallow breaths. The steady sound allowed her to relax in her chair.

"Dara Mitchell is having her sweet sixteen party, Momma." She paused as the words sank in. She hadn't meant to say them out loud. Even if her mother couldn't hear or understand, Deli didn't like the accusing tone in her own voice. "That's right," she nodded, "sixteen years old..." She hardened her jaw. "Fool-headed thing to just up and throw a party, don't-cha think? I mean, who cares a lick if a gal turns sixteen or sixty?"

Stop thinking about it, she scolded herself. Ain't worth wasting thoughts on.

Pa had warned her months in advance that her own sixteenth birthday would be just another day. He'd said they needed to be strong and understand that there wasn't money for such frivolous things. Now it seemed like parties and such were popping up all over the county.

Gulping down the dry knot in her throat, Deli suddenly remembered her mother still waited for the rest of her story.

"So, anyhow," she continued, smoothing the sheets on the bed, "about Travis. We about screamed our heads off for the rest of the night, laughing and being crazy while we searched for those bugs. You woulda liked it," she sighed. "Lots of laughing...Laughing and smiles."

She lowered her gaze to her mother's face. Sadness crept up on her in the quiet way it tended to when she wasn't paying attention. Deli fought to keep the drop from her tone. "Y...You always had a beautiful smile, Momma. Pa always said it was what he liked best about you. A beautiful smile and a solid upbringing..."

She swallowed and quickly looked away. Usually she could keep her tears at bay, but today they seemed to have a mind of their own.

"Shitfire," she whimpered, pinching the bridge of her nose.

Don't you dare! Momma's the one hurtin', and here you are getting ready to bawl like a baby!

The anger of her thoughts hardened her jaw. Clearing her throat, Deli took a deep breath.

Atta girl, she told herself. Be brave, just like Momma.

Slowly, she exhaled. Taking the cloth from her mother's eyes, she stood and placed the large bowl on top of the bureau.

Her stomach grumbled. Giving her mother a final glance over her shoulder, Deli opened the door.

A sickly hiss slapped her soul like a double coat of white wash on dry fencing.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood at attention. Her body stiffened. Her heart stopped.

"Deli..." a distorted version of her mother's once honey-sweat tone grated down her spine. "Come..."

Deli bolted upright in bed. Breathless, she darted her gaze around the room. She'd heard her mother's voice. She would swear on it.

Yanking the tangled blanket from around her legs, she wiped the sweat from her brow and cheeks. Though vague and retreating, she recalled the memory that relived itself in her dreams.

Sighing, Deli pulled her legs up to her chest and rested her chin on her knees. She'd thought she had erased the details of that day, the day Momma passed on. Apparently Pa had brought the memories back with him.

Refusing to dwell on the past, Deli fanned herself with her hand and guessed at the time. Regardless, she wouldn't be going back to sleep. Not with dreams like that haunting her.

She took a deep breath and frowned.

The scents of breakfast eluded her, which meant Travis wasn't awake yet. Deli grimaced. Being first out of bed meant being first to face Reed Becker and his intrusive questions. And she was too tired to argue with him today. At least, not yet.

Sighing, Deli swung her legs out of bed. She couldn't wait any longer, and there was no sense avoiding the inevitable.

Careful not to make a sound, she flipped open the cloth trunk at the foot of her bed, one of the few things they'd rescued from the fire. Luckily, Momma's possessions had been in the downstairs bedroom when Chance lit the place up.

Deli peered into the trunk and frowned. "Shitfire..."

Had she worn all of her customized trousers already?

Turning, she eyed the ever-growing pile of dirty clothes in the far corner of her room. Looked like Travis was falling behind on his chores again.

"Oh, well," she murmured, pulling another of her mother's skirts out of the trunk.

She eyed the off-white cotton with misgivings.

Maybe not this one, she thought, putting it back. The off-white one had been one of Momma's favorites.

Deli dug deeper within the trunk and found an older dress. Her mother never had the chance to patch the fist-sized hole above the sky blue hem.

Shaking it out, Deli grabbed her rusted pair of sheers and stood. She shut the trunk lid with her foot and wiggled out of her worn nightgown.

There were too many things to do today without worrying about Reed getting in her way. Just because he'd come at an inopportune time, with the most inconvenient agenda, and his utterly absurd ideas, didn't mean she had to concede. Reed Becker or not, she and Travis had work to do.

Struggling with the sheers' chipped blades, Deli butchered the lower half of the dress above the knee, then started on the sleeves. Bending over, she squinted out the window at the rising sun. It'd be hotter than hell on one of it's best days today, she decided, cutting the first sleeve up to the shoulder.

Satisfied with her handy work, she plucked a needle and thread from the small, three-legged table beside her bed. Dropping to her knees, she sewed the center of the skirt together, creating two lopsided leg holes.

Tossing the thread and its mate back on the table, she smiled at the frumpy, faded blue dress.

"Not bad for someone who never learned to sew." Smiling, she stepped into the dress and pulled it over her shoulders. "Not bad at all."

Forgoing her corset, which she could only assume lay somewhere beneath the dirty laundry pile, she buttoned up the front of her dress.

"Boots," she murmured. "Where the hell are my boots?"

Spotting the scuffed toe of one peeking out from under her bed, Deli dropped to her knees. She tossed aside an old meal sack and finally spotted its mate.

Quickly, she yanked on both boots and jumped to her feet.

Forgetting something she couldn't name, she did a slow inspection of her room. She wrinkled her nose at the mess. She'd have to tell Travis it needed cleaning.

Locating her hairbrush, she smiled and raked it through her hair. She methodically rolled it into a sagging knot and stuck in the only two hairpins she could find.

"That's it," she said, crossing to her door.

She'd never figure out why it took some women an hour to dress.

Deli opened the door and frowned at the empty parlor. Maybe Reed had thought better of it and left in the middle of the night?

Not likely, her good sense told her.

Her brother's room, its door wide open, was empty as well.

"How peculiar..."

Shrugging, she went to the kitchen. According to the clean table, Travis had done at least *something* this morning, even if he hadn't made breakfast. But what the hell could so important that he'd forgo their schedule?

Deli narrowed her eyes on the sofa. It'd be something involving Reed Becker, no doubt. Already that man was inconveniencing them.

No coffee.

No breakfast.

And no Travis Gold.

Clenching her jaw, Deli headed for outside. Where the hell could they be?

She stepped off of the porch and scanned past the barn, the outhouse, and Gold Mountain. Her gaze stopped at the entrance to the mine. It didn't look like the boards closing it off had been disturbed.

Still...

Clenching her fists, Deli headed for the mountain. If Travis had taken Reed anywhere near her mountain, he wouldn't have the teeth to eat the cake at his nineteenth birthday. She'd make sure of it.

In the distance, voices stopped her rampage.

Turning, Deli searched the land behind the house. Almost an acre away, near the wooden cross Deli had mounted herself, Reed and Travis busied themselves with intentions she couldn't make out from this distance.

Reed swiped the back of his neck and leaned casually against an unfamiliar wagon. Travis's laugh burned Deli's ears. He nodded and replied to whatever Reed had said. Then bending down, Travis touched the cross...the cross that marked their mother's grave.

"You traitor..." Deli lost her breath.

Grasping for sane thoughts, she ran toward them. Her hairpins lost hold and her hair cascaded down her back, but she didn't care. She didn't need to be told what they were doing there. They *thought* they were going to bury her father.

And they'd thought very, very wrong.

Still smiling, Travis turned when Reed pointed at Deli. The shine in Travis's eyes disappeared and the color vanished from his cheeks.

That's right, she thought. You'd best be terrified.

Reed nudged Travis to the side and stood in his place.

Deli slowed.

This was a family matter, and no place for Reed Becker.

Just short of bumping into him, she stopped. Breathless and furious, she glared at Travis over Reed's squared shoulder. How dare Travis agree to bury their father! And to make matters worse, he'd helped dig the hole.

Deli lowered her gaze to the massive pit in the ground. Grinding her teeth together, she slowly lifted her gaze.

"Move out of my way," she told Reed.

"Just calm down, Deli."

"It's only right," Travis said, a hint of fear in his voice.

"Right?" she shrieked.

"Calm down," Reed said, setting his hand in her shoulder. "Just calm down."

Turning her head, Deli glared at his hand. "Don't you touch me..."

Reed frowned and pulled back. "No one wants to hurt you, Deli, but I talked—"

"This is between me and my brother."

"And Reed," Travis said with a gulp.

Deli lunged at him.

Reed's strong arm swept across her chest and held her back. Determined to reach her brother, she struggled against him.

Travis leapt back and walked a wide circle around her. He backed slowly toward the house, his features frozen with fear.

"P...Pa has every right to be buried beside Momma," he said softly.

"He lost those rights!" Deli yelled, still fighting against the arm strapped across her chest.

Travis lifted his sorrowful eyes to Reed. "She's mad right now," he said, "but she'll calm down."

"No I won't," Deli countered. "Mark me, Travis Gold, I'll remember this for the rest of your life. Which," she added, "won't be very long."

"Head on back to the house," Reed said calmly. "Let me talk to your sister."

Deli stopped fighting. "I have nothing to say to you."

"No, you're going to listen."

"I wouldn't bet on it," she told him. "Judas!" she screamed at Travis.

He stopped walking long enough to look over his shoulder and acknowledge that he'd heard her.

"I'm going to let you go now," Reed told her. "Are you going to stay put?"

"Just let me go," Deli said. "I'm not making deals with you."

Despite her reluctance, his arm fell away from her chest. "Your brother and I have been up half the night digging this—"

"Then that's your own stupidity," she said, glaring at the wide, deep hole in the ground.

The musky scent of earth and broken roots tickled her nose and reminded her of her mother. She'd been so afraid to bury her that day, afraid that she wasn't really dead.

It was silly, really. If not impossible. Even if the gun hadn't killed Momma, chances were she wouldn't have awoken again anyhow, not in her condition. And all that blood...

Slowly, Deli exhaled.

She walked deliberately around Reed, feeling his eyes pinning her every move, ready to pounce if she started after Travis again. Glaring at him, she dropped to her knees beside the fresh hill of dug up soil. Digging her hands into the damp earth, she shoved the top layer back into the hole.

Above her, Reed sighed. "You'll fight to the end, won't you?"

Clenching her teeth, Deli shoved another layer in.

"Your brother understands," he said.

"That's because he's a dimwit."

"Or because he listened."

Tipping her head back, Deli glared at Reed. His nose looked worse now than it had the night before. Narrowing her eyes, she tried to imagine what he'd look like without the swelled disfigurement and blackened rings under his eyes. Matching his bruises, his soft, dark hair fell at will over his forehead and curled naturally around his ears. Still, it'd be a good week or two before she'd recognize his features and know what he really looked like.

"What?" Reed said.

Deli blinked dumbly at him. "What?"

He touched the tip of his nose. "Admiring your handy work?"

She frowned at him then dropped her gaze to the mound of dirt. "Actually, yes, I was." She dug her hands into the soil and stood, preparing to shove more dirt into the grave. "And I was thinking what a shame it is that I don't have a better aim."

Shoveling the dirt forward, she smiled. She's was about to add, "or a stronger swing", but the ground disappeared.

Dried roots scraped up her arms as she toppled forward and the sky spun in a circle. Something whipped her in the face. A rock slammed her in the head as the air whooshed from her lungs.

Flat on her back, Deli gasped.

Blinking away an oncoming daze, she tried to get up. Fresh dirt assaulted her. Dampness crept up on her.

"Are you all right?" someone asked.

Groaning and fighting to breathe, Deli looked up. Above her, Reed's silhouette blocked out the morning sun. Travis's head appeared instantly beside him.

"W...What happened, Deli?"

"She fell in," Reed said, reaching for her.

Deli shrank away from his hand. "Fell in?"

She widened her eyes and struggled to sit up. Surrounded by darkness and steep, flat walls, she winced.

Her father's grave...

She was in her father's grave!

Panic seized her good sense. "Get me outta here!"

"I told you to go back to the house," Reed calmly told Travis.

"But, Deli—"

"Don't worry about Deli. I'll take care of her."

Taking a breath that pained her chest, Deli leapt to her feet. "Don't you leave me here, Travis Gold! Don't you dare leave me here!"

"Go on," Reed told him. "I got her."

Deli spun in a circle, trapped within the walls of her worst nightmare. "Travis!"

Flat on his stomach, Reed leaned his forearms on the edge of the hole. "He's gone, Deli, so you might as well stop."

"G...Get me out of here!"

"I am. I will."

Leaping up, she gripped the rim of the grave, clung for a moment, then fell back to the bottom.

Calmly, slowly, Reed's outstretched hand came toward her. "Will you let me help you?"

"Just full of stupid questions, aren't you?" she snapped.

His hand disappeared.

Too late, she leapt for it.

"There's something wrong with a woman that can't keep her mouth shut long enough to accept help," Reed said.

Deli darted her eyes around the grave. What was that sound? She hugged herself and rubbed her hands up and down her arms. Snakes, that's what it was. Snakes, spiders, and crickets...coming to get her.

"Oh, Lord," she groaned.

Worms. Worms were burrowing toward her. They had to be. She could hear them.

"You just can't let that fire go down, can you?" Reed asked.

"What do you mean?"

Something touched her knee. Deli leapt back and scanned the soil.

"You," Reed said, not making another attempt to reach for her. "You're about the meanest creature I've ever come across."

"That's a nice thing to say."

"You've earned it."

Play him like a fiddle, she could hear Dancin' Debra say.

Forcing herself not to panic, Deli gave Reed her most humbled smile. "You're right, I have been mean. I'm very, very sorry, Mr. Becker." She raised her dirtied hand toward him. "Now, *please*, Mr. Becker, help me out of here."

His dark eyebrows lifted and his smiled widened. "You're so full of horse manure, it's not funny."

Deli dropped her hand and glared at him. "What do you mean?"

"Never mind," he chuckled.

Deli frowned. How the hell did Dancin' Debra managed to get so much outta men?

"Come on." Reed offered his hand. "Out you go."

Biting her tongue, Deli grabbed onto his warm hand. She shivered at the thought of being left in the grave another moment. Swinging one leg onto the side, she climbed out and scooted away from his hold.

Reed sat on top of the fresh dirt and shook his head. "You are one angry woman, Deli Gold."

Deli lowered her glare. What did he mean, she was angry? Angry with him, yes. Angry in general? Not usually.

She shook her head and dusted her hands on her bare knees.

"I aim to bury your father here," Reed said. "I'm not asking permission. I won't have you fighting me every step of the way. Whether you like it or not, I do have rights to this land."

Deli flinched at the finality in his voice. "We've yet to discover that."

"I'm telling you, Deli, that's just the way it is."

"No, it's not."

"Sorry, but it is."

"You're not sorry. So, why do you say sorry? What do you want with this place, anyhow? The mountain is all dried up, there ain't no cattle, no crops, nothing."

His eyes darkened on her as if he might actually be considering her argument. Deli bit her lip. Maybe Travis was right. If she could just explain to Reed why this farm mattered, he might understand. But would it be enough to make him go away?

"Maybe I want a place to call home," he finally said.

"By taking ours?"

He let out a loud, heavy sigh. "It's not an easy situation we're in, Deli, but—"

"It is for you."

Shoot! Why couldn't she keep the bite out of her tone?

"No, it's not easy for me," he said. "Matthew was a good friend. I don't fancy the idea of tossing his children out with nothing."

"At least you have a conscience."

"One of us should."

Deli ignored the remark. Reed Becker had no idea what he was talking about.

She squinted at the cabin she and Travis had built after Chance destroyed the house. Leaving had never occurred to her before. It didn't matter what Chance did. He had no legal claim to her land and she wouldn't be scared away. She'd never had to consider actually leaving.

Swallowing the swell in her throat, Deli shifted her attention to Gold Mountain. That mound of dirt had caused the Golds more trouble than the riches it once gave them.

If what Reed said was true, she had no rights...not anymore. And whether he let them stay or not didn't matter. It wouldn't be the same. It'd be his.

"Shitfire," she hissed. "That man damned me in his dying breath. Wasn't bad enough that he did it while he was still here."

"Your father?" Reed asked.

"Yes, my father. Who do you think?"

Frustrated, Deli shook her head. How could this man claim to know her father so well, and yet know so little about him?

"Just what is it he did?" Reed asked softly. "If we're going to figure this out, I want to know. I think I'm entitled."

Deli sought comfort in Reed's large, brown eyes. She wanted to sit beside him and explain why her heart had hardened.

She shook her head. He'd think she'd lost her mind if she did that. Still, if she expected a drop of sympathy from him, maybe he did need to know.

Reed hadn't said another word, but his eyes reassured that he had her trust.

Deli picked a twig up off the ground and snapped it in half. She'd have to go back, back to the day Momma past on. The day that decisions were made to change all of their lives...

"Help..." her mother wheezed.

Struggling to calm her nerves and her pounding heart, Deli took a deep breath. She focused on her mother's foggy eyes to keep from looking at her extended stomach and the swollen veins that netted her flesh.

"You just hush," Deli soothed. "We're gonna get a couple drops of water on your tongue, Momma, maybe a taste of broth and maybe—"

"No..."

"Stubborn as a...as a..." she paused unable to think of a respectful comparison. "Well, stubborn as always."

"Under..." her mother struggled. "I...It's under the mattress."

"What, Momma?"

Glass fragile, her mother's sunken eyes wandered aimlessly on their own. Occasionally, her swollen, coated tongue rolled out to dampen her pasty lips, but it made no difference.

"The mattress..." her mother managed.

Deli gulped at the eerie strength that lay beneath the words. Pressing her hand beneath the mattress, she touched the hard unmistakable steel of her father's revolver.

Narrowing her eyes on her mother, Deli gulped down her anger. She didn't want to think of why she'd been directed here.

"Bring," her mother said.

Deli's fingers tingled as she wrapped them around the gun's barrel. She hated guns. Ever since she'd watched Pa put that mule down two winters back.

"I expect," she said in a forced, chipper tone, "that it ain't been too comfortable with this digging into your back." Keeping it pointed away from herself, Deli withdrew the gun. "You want to tell me how it got there?"

"Your...pa..."

"And why would he do such a fool headed thing?" Deli set the gun on the floor and forced herself to continue smiling. "I suppose he thought he might lose it. Is that it?"

"F...For me..." her mother breathed.

Deli bit her tongue. Her hands shook at her sides as if a gust of wind had whirled through the still room and captured her limbs.

"Sometimes," her mother said through shallow gasps, "I can't...endure. I told your...pa to bring...his gun..." Her head rolled to one side and her eyes shook in their sockets. "I can...can end it all now."

Deli caught the next breath in her throat. She'd kill Pa for this. "Now, Momma," she said in a shaky voice, "what're you doin'?"

Like a clock's pendulum, her mother's eyes swung in her direction and stopped.

"You're gonna be fine." Deli wiped her palms on her tattered skirt. "Don't you do that, Momma. Don't you ever do that."

A puzzled expression flitted across her mother's unfocused eyes.

"I mean give up," Deli added. "Don't you do it."

"It's time..." her mother hissed.

"How about a sip of water?"

"Please..."

"Just stop!" Deli flinched at her screech that shattered the peace between them and screamed of injustice and pity and unfairness. "I don't want to hear another word."

Groaning, her mother straightened and stared at the ceiling. "I can't do it..."

"No, you certainly can't. Not while I have it."

"I'm too...weak."

"That's right."

"But you can..."

Deli's stomach lurched.

She wasn't sure just how long she'd stared into her mother's eyes. For the first time in months she saw determination and persistence. She saw a glimmer of life in there, too. Slowly, Deli inhaled. At the same time, she saw death.

It wasn't until her mother's transparent eyelids closed that Deli finally looked away. Fidgeting with her fingers, she blinked back her tears. How could her mother ask her to pull the trigger?

"I won't do it," she whispered. "Makes me sick just thinking that you'd ask." Her voice trembled, a perfect match for her hands. "Makes me sick that you'd think I'd do such a thing."

Her mother's eyes never opened and her lips hardly moved when she said, "Fetch your pa. And Travis."

The gun on the floor captured Deli's attention. Bending, she picked it up between her thumb and forefinger. "I'll get them, Momma."

She'd get them, but her mother's words wouldn't let the nerves in her stomach rest. Her fingers, damp with sweat, almost dropped the heavy weapon. With her free hand, Deli steadied her grip. She stepped quietly through the doorway and crossed to the large oak table at the furthest corner of the parlor where she ridded herself of the damn thing.

"Yee-haw!" she heard Travis whoop from outside.

Moving faster than her mind, Deli scurried out the front door. The bright sun-rays blinded her as she stepped to the porch and started for the barn.

"Momma's awake!" she called to Travis.

Travis paused in the middle of catching a beetle. His eyes brightened and his mouth fell open. Deli couldn't help her own smile. Except when he'd been mischievous, his smiles were rare these days. It took a heart's beat of time for the words to reach him before he ran in the direction his sister had come.

Deli steadied her weak knees as she headed for the barn. Getting pa to react wouldn't be as easy.

Just inside the barn doorway, Deli narrowed her gaze and adjusted to the darkness.

Leaning against the wall with a long necked bottle clamped between his lips, her father, a man she hardly recognized, stared back. His eyes, red-rimmed and shadowed by two bushy eyebrows, crossed slightly before focusing on her.

"Momma's awake," Deli said, groping for the courage.

"I'm not going," he grumbled, "so you might as well forget it."

"Y...yes you are."

"I been thinking," he said.

"You mean drinking."

"No." His eyes steadied on her. "Thinking."

"And were you injured while taking the road less traveled?"

"I'm still your pa," he snapped. "For a sixteen year old child, you sure gotta lot of mouth on you. He waved her away as if she were a pesky fly and caressed the neck of his liquor bottle. "I already paid my respects."

"Maybe we outta just jump ahead and start digging the hole while we're at it." Deli skewered him with disgust. "She ain't dead, yet. Maybe you'd see that if you step foot in the house once in a while. She's callin' for you, Pa, and you're gonna come, liquored up or not." She yanked the bottle out of his weak grip and threw it across the barn. "She ain't opened her eyes in near six days. She—"

"I know how long it's been," he stopped her. "You'll hear me out."

Shitfire, he had a lot of nerve.

"I might," Deli said. "And I might not."

"We need money, Deli."

"You only just figured this out? What do you think I've been doing over at Chestnut's Place? Playin' poker?"

"I know I ain't done my part," he said, sullenly.

"We all know that."

He jerked his head up and nodded at Licorice, Deli's black Morgan in the corner. "I got plans."

Deli glared at the saddled horse, its sides bulging with supplies. "Just what's that for?"

"I need to take a trip," he said after a long pause.

She folded her arms boldly across her chest. "And will this trip bring you back here?"

He bent and picked up his half-empty bottle. Taking a deep gulp that dribbled down his chin, he glared at her.

She would never understand why Momma wanted him near. He wasn't the same man he used to be.

"Well?" She tapped her foot.

"I'm goin' to look for work, that's all."

"Which you wouldn't have to do," she pointed out, "if you hadn't let this place go to hell."

"You act as if we were rich."

Appalled, Deli gave him a slow once over. "We were rich, Pa. Just not the way you think."

Dragging his feet, he crossed to Licorice and took up the reins.

The air squeezed from Deli's chest. Her eyes blurred but she refused to believe there were tears. Not for him. Anger and frustration stabbed at her heart.

"I'm coming back," her father said.

"I don't believe you," her voice dropped a notch. "Next time Momma sleeps, she may not wake up at all. What am I supposed to tell her?"

Her father lowered his gaze and shifted from one foot to the other. His eyes wandered anywhere that wasn't Deli's face. He could promise and swear all he liked, but the unease in his dull eyes told her he wouldn't be coming back.

"Stop looking at me like that," he snapped.

"You're a coward," she said. "She ain't never asked nothin' of you, and you can't—"

"It ain't about her!" he exploded.

"Not to you it ain't. To you, it's always you."

Licorice nudged Deli's cheek, but she shoved the horse's nose away.

"You're going in there," she said, gripping her father's upper arm. "If your sorry face is what she wants, you better believe I'm gonna deliver you wrapped in a red bow, or kickin' and screamin' the whole way."

Suddenly, her father raised to his full height and towered over her.

Deli loosened her grip on his arm, but he clamped his hand on hers before she could step to safety.

"Do you really wanna try, Deli?" he asked in a low, empty tone.

Deli watched the tips of her fingers brighten from pink to purple. She clenched her teeth to keep from crying out. With all her might, she ripped her hand from his grip.

"That's what I thought." Tossing the bottle aside, he swung onto Licorice and glared down at her. "That's always the way it is with you, ain't it, Deli? Lots o' mouth an' nothin' to back it up with..."

Deli stepped back as the massive horse stomped its heavy foot. Refusing to acknowledge him, she lowered her eyes. She'd wash her hands of him. Obviously, he'd chosen to do the same of them.

She lifted her tearing eyes as her father steered Licorice out the barn door. Switching her gaze to the house, Deli took a deep breath.

What would she tell Travis?

What would she tell Momma...?

Swallowing her anger, she resisted the urge to give her father's retreating form another glance. He'd put this fool idea about death into Momma's head and now he was running away. He was leaving them with nothing, not even hope.

Resolutely, Deli started for the house.

She didn't have much of a choice. She had to do what she had to do. That was the only way they could survive...

Reed Becker's expression hadn't changed. He stared thoughtfully at her, his eyes still soft and encouraging.

Deli shifted under the pity she saw there.

"Doesn't sound like the Matthew Gold I know," he finally said.

"You don't believe me?"

"I didn't say that."

He didn't have to say it. He didn't want to believe her because it was easier to believe her father. A man as strong as Reed would never admit that he'd been fooled.

"How long after did your mother pass away?" he asked.

Deli gulped back her answer. Was this the real reason he was here? She stared at him, completely speechless, absolutely terrified.

"That day," she said, but her voice had escaped, leaving her with a weak whisper. "She passed away a few moments after Pa left."

Reed's beautiful eyes took on a new mask. They narrowed to unreadable slits and pinned her in place. "How...?"

"Why, I...I told you, Reed, she was very ill." Deli shifted her gaze, unable to look directly at him. "She must've known, and I think that's why she wanted to see my...my father."

"I mean," Reed said, "did she die of natural causes?"

Tears swelled in Deli's eyes. She didn't want to think about this.

Clenching her jaw to keep her lower lip from shaking, she met his forceful stare. "You didn't see her condition in the end, Mr. Becker. There was nothing natural about the way my momma suffered." She blinked and damned the betraying tear that rolled down her cheek. "There was nothing natural about the way she died."

"I mean," he said, his voice growing tighter, "did you—"

"Did I shoot her like she asked? Is that what you want to know?" Roughly, she swiped her tear away. "Absolutely not."

Her mother's death was none of this man's business. And neither were the details.

Relief softened Reed's features.

Deli took a deep breath. "So, you see, Mr. Becker, this land is more than just a home to us. Far more. I can't imagine what you'd want it for."

Turning, Reed surveyed the acres behind him.

Grateful to have lost the past subject, Deli followed his gaze. "Momma always loved this place. She said it fit a family like a glove. While you may be honoring my father's wishes, I have to honor hers. I can't let it go. Not to you. Not to anyone."

His eyes came slowly back to her. "Who's to say there won't be a family here?"

Deli tilted her head to the side. "You getting married any time soon, Mr. Becker?"

"Not any time soon," he chuckled. "But some day, I expect. And just like any man, I'll want to have something to pass on."

A shiver ran up Deli's spine. That hadn't occurred to her. When he died, Gold Farm would go to his wife. When she passed on, it'd go to their children...

Deli would never have the chance to get it back.

"And just who do you think would marry you?" she asked, kicking a clump of dirt.

Reed smiled. "It'd have to be someone who can tolerate me."

"Well, then, I'm perfectly safe."

He wrinkled his brow. "Safe?"

"Sure," she nodded. "Ain't nobody gonna tolerate you, Reed Becker. Plus, you're a good ten years older than me, which means you'll probably pass on first. With you gone, I could probably get Gold Farm back again. See?" She smiled brightly at him. "Even if I am a withered old hag, it would be mine."

Disbelief fell across his face. "You are a wicked thing, aren't you? Planning my death all ready. You're not plotting it as well, are you?"

Deli lifted her eyebrows. He didn't want to give her any ideas.

"Well, then," Reed said, standing, "I'll just have to find me a wife sooner."

"Good luck on that one."

There wasn't a woman for miles around that would tolerate him.

Deli stood with her hands on her hips and stared into the deep hole they'd planned to put her father in. If Gold Farm was hers, she'd have the final say about this burial.

Lifting her gaze, she watched Reed casually make his way back to the house. Pa must've had at least one redeeming quality for Reed to like him.

But Deli didn't want to believe her father had changed. That would mean forgiveness, something she wasn't ready for.

Sighing, she started after Reed. They needed to talk to Sheriff Sault. They'd know by nightfall who rightfully owned Gold Farm. And if it was Reed...

She tried to shake the thought away, but she couldn't ignore the possibility forever. She believed Reed when he said he wouldn't throw them out. But how long could they stay? She could tolerate living with him, but—

Deli stopped mid-step.

She *could* tolerate him, couldn't she...

Why, she'd done a fine job of it thus far. Sure, he'd been presumptuous and stubborn, but she *had* tolerated him.

"Shitfire, I'm thick," she said. "Why didn't I think of it before?"

She glanced at Reed before he disappeared around the corner. If she became his wife, which would take some doing, Gold Farm would be hers. He looked good and ready for a wife if she ever saw a man that was.

She couldn't cook. She'd never been very tidy. But that's what Travis was for. They'd just keep him on.

Biting her lip, Deli peered down at her legs, covered in cuts and scrapes. She grimaced and dusted off her filthy skirt.

Why did it feel like she'd already lost?

Chapter Four

"I'm done apologizing," Reed said. He looked at Deli out of the corner of his eye and resisted saying sorry again. He *was* sorry. Then again...he wasn't.

She'd turned as red as one of his mother's roses when Sheriff Sault declared that Gold Farm legally belonged to Reed.

Deli hadn't said a single word. She just pursed her lips, stomped out of the sheriff's office, and hopped into the wagon.

The last thing Sheriff Sault had said was, "Did she really think she could hold onto it forever?"

Reed had apologized when he sat beside her in the wagon, but she hadn't acknowledged him. She stared solemnly at the horse's rear, her eyes glossed over, her chin set.

He thought she might cry, but should've known better. Deli Gold wouldn't know how to cry. She'd certainly lost every other emotion most women held tightly to. Except anger. She had plenty of anger.

Reed tightened the reins around his hand and glanced at her again. "You're welcome to stay until—"

Loudly, she cleared her throat and stopped him. Stomping her foot, she straightened and folded her arms across her chest.

"You're upset, Deli, I can see that, but—"

"Upset? Why, Mr. Becker, how did you ever become so observant?" He felt her glare instantly upon his cheek. "What more of your wisdom would you like to share with me? Perhaps you'd like to inform me that the sky is blue? Or that a rock is hard? Oh, you wise, wise man..."

Reed narrowed his eyes on the strip of road ahead of them. He wouldn't say another damn thing to her. When she left, and he hoped it be soon, he'd never give her another thought.

He clicked the horses into a faster pace and ground his teeth. Why didn't Matthew mention Deli and Travis? Why the mystery?

Beside him, she sighed and mumbled something he couldn't hear.

"What was that?" he asked.

She shook her head as if dismissing her words, then said, "It's just something Momma used to tell me."

Her voice had softened and she moved her glare from the horse's rump to the distant mountains. Half the sun already hid itself behind dark blue mountains, transforming the sky to a pallet of deep red and transparent pink.

"She said the Lord would never have me carry more than I could handle." She scratched the back of her head, and when her hand reappeared it held two rusted hairpins. "I think she was wrong..."

Her rose-red hair toppled down her shoulders. Reed quickly glanced away. It reminded him too much of what he'd seen last night when nothing but her hair covered her.

Pulling gently on the leather reins, he brought the wagon to a slow glide. "Sounds like she was a wise woman."

"She was," Deli answered, inspecting the ends of her hair. "Wise about some things. Not so wise about others."

"That just about sums us all up."

"Almost." She dropped the ruby tresses and squinted up at him. "And what is it you're wise about, Mr. Becker?"

"Women," he said without thinking. It'd been the one thing he and his brother could always boast and jest about.

"Ha!" Deli chortled. "No wonder you liked Matthew. What'd the two of you do? Sit around the campfire entertaining each other with whoppers?"

Reed smiled. He missed those nights with his old friend. While they didn't exactly sit and swap tall tales, there were a great number of nights, between shootings, killings, and captures, that they'd become each other's confidants.

"So, how did you know my father?" Deli asked.

"We were partners."

"Bank robbers?"

He frowned at her.

"Or hustlers?"

He shook his head.

"Or sweethearts?"

Reed yanked hard on the reins. His lead horse whinnied and stomped to a stop.

Deli's somber expression remained fixed on him, but her eyes told a different story. They shined with a mischief he hadn't seen since his sister-in-law had won his brother over.

Reed frowned at that. Deli Gold was nothing like his kind-hearted sister-in-law. Why, they didn't even run in the same circles.

"It seems I've guessed uncomfortably close to the truth," Deli said. She pursed her lips as if she couldn't fight hard enough to keep her grin in.

"You guessed wrong," Reed said, shaking his head. "On all accounts."

"I wonder..."

Reed touched her gently beneath the chin, but she didn't flinch. He tipped her head upward and gazed into her sky-blue eyes. Her sleek eyebrows rose slowly and she smiled.

"Well?" she asked. "What was it?"

She pierced him with the eyes he couldn't see from such a far distance last night. Her image, naked and gullible, flashed before his eyes.

"Women trackers," he said, dropping his fingers from her chin.

Deli tipped her head to the side. "Now who's full of horse manure?"

Reed eased the horses into a trot. He'd spent too much time with Deli...alone. Three years celibate had done something to his brain. It'd made him eager to settle...for just about anything.

"And what, might I ask, did you do to these women when they were captured?" she asked.

"When you become a woman," Reed said, "I'll tell you."

She opened her mouth for what, he guessed, would be another teasing question, but closed it quickly. Instantly, she recovered her pouting posture, her arms tightly over her chest, her nostrils flared.

"You expecting company?" Reed asked.

Rehashing his comment, Deli didn't bother to look up. "No, but it seems to be the season for all kinds of dimwits to just pop in as they see fit."

Catching her attention, Reed's outstretched arm lifted and he pointed further up the road. "Someone's heading this way from the farm."

Frowning, Deli glanced up. She leapt to her feet at the single rider heading their way. The carriage's momentum tossed her back into the seat.

"Just hold on," Reed said.

Deli shook her head. She tugged on his arm and pointed at the tall man on the large palomino. Where was her voice?

At an increasingly faster speed, the rider charged toward them.

"Do you know who it is?" Reed asked, calmly.

"S...Stop the wagon," she blurted.

The rider rushed past them.

"Chance Evens!" she found her voice. "Turn the wagon around, Reed! Get him!"

Reed's frown sent Deli into a panic. She grabbed and yanked on the reins. He fought to get them from her hands.

"He's getting away!" she screamed. "Turn it around!"

Startled, the lead horse screeched and lifted its front hooves high in the air. The wagon jostled Deli into Reed's lap. Bracing her hand on his face, she leapt to her feet.

He cursed and covered his nose.

"What are you waiting for?" she demanded.

Reed's arms came instantly around her waist and pulled her into his lap. "Just calm down, Deli."

She lurched against his chest and spun to catch a dull kick-up of Chance's dust in the distance. Reed lifted one leg and strapped it firmly over both of hers, strapping her between his thighs.

"Just stop," he commanded. "He's gone."

Deli gasped for air. Her arms fell limply at her sides. Pursing her lips, she glared at the lead horse that managed to calm as she did.

"You let him go," she whispered. "Why'd you let him go?"

"Who?"

"Evens. Chance Evens."

"All right, Deli, just calm down," he soothed. "Breathe."

Deli nodded and took a deep breath. How could she calm down when the man trying to kill her had been an arm's length away? And Reed had done nothing.

He eased her off of his lap and set her on the hard, wooden seat. "Now, in plain English, why don't you explain what the hell is going on here?"

"Chance Evens," she said, pointing behind them. "You just let him go."

"I didn't let anyone go."

"Well, you certainly didn't stop him."

Deli glared at her feet and clenched her hands into fists. She should've leapt out of the wagon and chased him down herself.

Lifting her gaze, she eyed Reed. Whatever made her think that *he* could help her.

"Chance Evens," Reed said, gesturing his nose. "The Chance Evens you thought I was?"

Deli nodded.

"But you never explained why," he added.

Corralling her emotions, Deli picked up the reins between them and handed them to Reed. "Do you want the whole story or just his reputation?"

"How about we start with why you'd risk your life to kill him?"

Obviously, he hadn't been phased by her frenzy. Calm as ever, he clicked the reins. Deli braced herself on the seat and glanced over her shoulder. If they'd returned home a few minutes earlier, she might have been able to catch him.

"I have to kill Chance Evens," she said, "before he kills me."

Intense and frowning, Reed kept his eyes on the road. "What makes you think he wants to kill you? And why?"

"Because he wants Gold Mountain," she said simply, "and because he said so."

"He said he wants to kill you."

Deli stared at him with disbelief. The least he could do was pretend he believed her.

"Yes, he said it. He's said it more than once. And he's tried it more than once." Pulling the sticky strands of damp hair away from her sweaty neck, she looked up at Reed. "Did my pa ever tell you about Gold House?"

"The big house?" Reed asked, steering the horses around the bend to Gold Farm.

"Yes, the big house. Well what do you think happened to that?" she asked.

"Chance Evens?"

"Yep. He burned it right to the ground."

His eyes narrowed. "What does Sheriff Sault have to say about all this?"

Deli scowled at the name. She should've known he wouldn't help her keep Gold Farm. He certainly hadn't helped with anything else. Not her mother's death, the big house burning, or Chance Evens.

"He said there's no proof," Deli sighed. "He's scared of Chance. He says Chance had an alibi for the night my place was destroyed."

Reed's features softened. "Maybe he did."

She was losing him. "He *says* he did. Sault never checked. He just took his word for it."

"I see." Reed nodded. "So everyone's against little Deli Gold."

Deli whipped her gaze up at him. The mocking tone of his voice sent chills up her spine. He was no different than the rest of them.

"What exactly did Chance do to make you think he's after you and your land?" Reed asked. "What makes you so sure it was him?"

"It's not what he did, but what he said."

"And what was that?"

Deli glared at Reed. What had ever given her the impression that she could tolerate him? Just because he had beautiful brown eyes, and *sometimes* a soft voice?

"Well?" Reed asked. "What'd he say?"

"He said, 'Deli, Gold, I'm gonna torch Gold House in a flame you'll tell your grandchildren about. That is, if you get out in time...'" Deli folded her hands primly over her knees. "That's what he said."

"Oh," Reed's tone dropped to a humble low.

Deli piled her hair on top of her head and fanned herself with her hand. "Two nights later, the house was in flames."

Reed's eyes had darkened as they approached the shack. "And Sheriff Sault didn't pursue it?"

"He's a dimwit," Deli said, growing impatient. "He just gave you my land, didn't he? That shows you *exactly* what kind of sheriff he is."

Deli noticed Reed's lips part for response, but she leapt out of the slowing wagon before he could speak. She'd had enough controversy for one day. And enough conversation.

"Deli!" he called after her.

She stepped onto the porch and glanced back at him.

Reed pulled the wagon to a stop and stepped down. "If Chance Evens is after you, what was he doing here today?"

"He was probably—" Her hands turned ice cold.

Lordy! Today she was thicker than ever.

Deli darted her eyes around the farm. Shitfire! She'd been so busy chatting with Reed that she hadn't been thinking straight.

One step ahead of her, Reed called out, "Travis!"

Fear rippled nausea throughout Deli's stomach. She didn't want to know. Chance wouldn't just stop in for a friendly "how-do", and Travis's big mouth would only get him into trouble.

Something bad had happened...to Travis. She could feel it.

Throwing the door open, she rushed inside the shack, searching for her brother. "Travis!"

"Travis!" Reed echoed outside.

Deli pivoted and headed toward the barn. Images of her brother's lifeless body, covered in blood, perhaps mangled beyond recognition flashed in her mind.

"I swear," Deli murmured, "I'll never set foot in the saloon again if You let him be all right."

"Travis!" Reed bellowed from somewhere near Gold Mountain.

"Travis!" Deli screamed in the barn.

"What the hell do you want?" a voice answered.

Deli thought she'd collapse on the spot. Turning on her heel, she braced herself in the barn's doorjamb.

With a scowl on his face, Travis, alive and well, sauntered away from the outhouse. Reed swiped the back of his hand against his forehead and came toward them from the other direction.

"What're you bellowing about?" her brother asked.

Deli closed her eyes. Her knees still felt like they might buckle.

He was all right...

She snapped her eyes open and glared at him. "You trying to kill me?"

"What're you talkin' about?"

"Where were you?"

He jerked his thumb toward the outhouse. "Where do you think?"

Deli narrowed her eyes. "Don't you ever do that to me again. Do you hear me Travis Gold?"

"What am I supposed to do? Hold it in?"

"Don't get smart. What the hell were you doing?"

Travis's gray eyes widened. "Well, first I was knitting you a scarf for Christmas and then—"

"Never mind."

No wonder she was half losing her mind. Travis didn't give a hoot who he hurt with his stupidity. Shitfire, didn't he think of anyone else?

"Are you all right?" Reed asked, coming up behind him.

Travis switched his gaze between them. "What's wrong with you two?"

"Maybe you were wrong," Reed told Deli. "Maybe it wasn't Chance."

"Chance Evens?" Travis said. "What wasn't him?"

"Riding away from here." Deli glared at Reed. He still didn't believe her. "He passed us on the road."

"*Maybe*," Reed inserted.

"It *was* him," she said.

And this dimwit thought he could handle a farm?

Travis shrugged. "Coulda been him. Wouldn't be the first time."

"Try telling that to him." She pointed to Reed. "He seems to think I'm crazy."

Travis nodded at the outhouse. "Maybe he came while I was occupied."

Deli put her hands on her hips. "Well, just how long were you in there for?"

"As long as it takes."

"Wonderful!" She threw her arms in the air. "Just dandy."

Reed gave his back to Deli and turned to Travis. "Do you think this Chance Evens person is someone we need to worry about?"

"Excuse me," Deli chirped.

"Absolutely," Travis said. "He ain't no pretty boy, Reed. And he certainly wouldn't come out here for a neighborly visit."

Reed scratched his chin and nodded slowly. "What do you think he was here for?"

"I already *told* you," Deli said.

Reed gave her an irritated glance, then returned his attention to Travis. "How long has this been going on for?"

"About a year," Travis said. "Ever since—"

"Hello," Deli cut him off. "That's what I've been trying to—"

Reed stopped her with a scowl. "Please, I'm trying to find out what's going on."

Deli's mouth fell open. Who the hell did he think he was? Travis didn't know what the hell was happening. He was a child.

Why wouldn't Reed listen to her?

"And six months ago," Travis continued, "he lit up the house."

I already said that!

"You sure it was him?" Reed asked.

Travis nodded. "Positive."

Reed sighed and started toward the shack. "All right. Let's get something to eat, then I'll head back to town."

"What?" Deli shrieked.

He didn't bother to stop.

"Do you mean to tell me" —she ran up behind him— "that you'll take Travis's word for it, and not mine?"

His long strides quickened. "I'm not taking anyone's word."

"Like hell you're not."

Reed suddenly stopped. "Look, Deli, why don't you make yourself useful? We can't exactly get to the bottom of this with a woman underfoot." He pointed to the house. "You can start by getting us something to eat before we leave."

Travis grabbed his gut and laughed out loud.

Deli flattened her hand on Reed's chest and kept him in place. What did she look like? A hired hand? She would've guessed by his age that Reed Becker would know a thing or two about women. Obviously, he'd spent too much time with her father.

"What's wrong?" He switched his confusion to Travis. "What the matter?"

"You're about to get another broken nose, that's what," Travis chuckled.

Deli felt her brother's eyes on her. If she wasn't so busy thinking of the best way to put Reed in his place, she'd knock that grin right off Travis's face.

"I know there's a word for it," Deli said, struggling to remain calm enough to be heard, "though for the life of me I can't remember what it is."

Reed pushed her hand off his chest. "What?"

"You're one of those men that think a woman's brain is the size of pebble. You think that just because I have long hair and breasts that I outta be spending my time cooking over a hot fire."

Irritation furrowed his brow. "Oh, hell, Deli, I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to say it," she said, losing control of the pitch of her voice. "But you haven't listened to a damn thing I've said since you got here. Shitfire! You'll take Travis's word over whatever I say, even when we're saying the same damn thing." Shadowing him, she stomped across the porch. "And then you want me to cook for you. Hell, I don't even like you, Reed Becker, why the hell would I cook for you?" She followed him into the kitchen. "And you know what else? I think if I was a man, you'd let me keep Gold Farm. But since I'm not, you're taking it."

Reed sat at the table, stretched out his long legs and folded his arms over his chest.

"You would, wouldn't you?" Deli demanded. She yanked Travis to her side by his sleeve. "If Travis was the eldest, you woulda come here, looked the place over, and said farewell. And you know why?" Roughly, she shoved her brother away. "Cuz' you'd think the farm was in good hands because a *man* was in charge. Well, guess what Mr. Chauvinist—" she stopped mid-sentence. "Yes, that's the word I was looking for. Chauvinist. Ain't that what Momma used to call Pa?"

Dumbstruck, Travis shrugged. "Yeah, but only in jest."

Resolutely, Deli nodded at Reed. "Well that's what I think we have here. A genuine chauvinist."

She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. That outta show him she was no woman to be pushed around. What'd he have to say to that?

Reed tipped his head back and fought the creeping smile from showing on his face. Boy, this woman had a loud whistle for something so small. Slowly, he unfolded his legs.

"So, Deli, when do we eat?" he asked.

Her mouth popped open. If he thought she had the guts, he would've shielded his nose from an oncoming blow. But something told Reed that her actions couldn't quite keep up with her mouth.

Travis's eyes widened. With quiet, careful steps, he moved away from the table and his sister.

"What's the matter?" Reed asked him. "Think she might explode?"

"I don't think," Travis said, shifting his gaze to Deli. "I know."

Reed shook his head. He'd had more headaches since yesterday than he'd experienced in a year.

"All right, Deli," he said, standing, "just calm down."

"If you tell me to calm down one more time—"

"I wouldn't have to if you'd stop working yourself into a frenzy. Hell, woman, I've never seen someone with so much bottled up energy." He pointed at her. "Your problem is, you're using it for all the wrong things."

"And what would you expect I use it for?" she snapped.

Reed opened his mouth, but shut it just as quickly. Why the hell had he said that? He shook his head and focused on the point he was trying to make.

"I have every right to be angry, Reed. You don't know anything about us. You don't know what we've been through."

Not about to veer onto another subject, Reed stepped closer to her. She didn't step away as he hoped. Instead, she tipped her head back and glared at him at close range.

"First of all," he said, "I listen to what Travis is saying because I can hear him. He doesn't have obscenities jumping in and around every other word. And secondly, he's not going off like a mad dog. You've got so much emotion swimming within events that they sound more like fiction than fact."

She lowered her eyes.

"You about lost your head back at that road when you thought you saw Chance," he pointed out. "I couldn't understand a thing you were saying. Not to mention that you nearly broke my nose again."

He waited for her mouth to start screeching again, but she said nothing. Reed looked hopefully at Travis. He only shrugged.

Reed returned his attention to the top of Deli's head again and willed her to look up at him. She didn't budge. She looked about half her size when her mouth wasn't flapping.

Reed gulped as a thought occurred to him. Had he made her cry?

"It has nothing to do with your being a girl—a woman," he quickly added. "And as far as giving Gold Farm to Travis if he was in charge of it, you're wrong. The only difference is, Travis wouldn't be throwing a fit over it. He'd acknowledge that this place is rightfully mine and be a man about it."

Slowly, she nodded, but still, she kept her blue eyes hidden. "You think that's what I'm doing?" She lifted her chin and stared up at him, her voice quieter than Reed thought possible. "I guess someone like you, would think that." Stepping away from him, she walked through the open doorway. "I have to go to work. You want to take this up with Travis? You do that." She turned to her brother. "And you want to give up Gold Farm without a fight, you go right ahead. But don't you come crying to me twenty years from now when you're looking back and thinking on what you should've done." Reaching behind her head, she tied her hair into a knot at the nape of her neck. "I'm tired of fighting," she said, softly. "And I'm tired of fighting alone."

Stunned, Reed listened to her feet scrape against the porch wood with the same gentle tone as her words. Now, she'd stumped him. A screaming woman, he could deal with. But not a beaten one.

Travis mirrored Reed's bewilderment. He gulped and stared out the door.

"What'd I say?" Reed asked.

Travis lifted his arms from his side and shrugged. "I dunno." He crossed to the door and peered out of it. "I ain't never heard her so quiet in all my life." He turned back to Reed. "Sh...She sounded just like Momma."

Reed frowned, then shook off his unease. He'd be damned if he'd ever seen a woman behave so peculiar. One minute she's ranting and raving as if she could conquer the world. And in the very next second, she drew her tail between her legs. She might as well have rolled over and died.

"Look," he said, "I don't know what I'm supposed to do. She's making it sound like I'm robbing you blind."

"Well, you are," Travis said. "You're just doing it honestly."

Reed scowled. "Not you to."

"No, not me." Travis shook his head. "You got every right to this land. Still don't mean it's...uh, morally right. Know what I mean, Reed?"

Reed knew exactly what he meant. Course the way Travis said it made Reed out to be a crook...which he wasn't. Besides, who were they to talk about morally right? She worked flat on her back at this Chestnut person's whore house.

Hell, he'd meant to talk to Chestnut about that today, too.

"—been through worse," Travis was saying.

Reed blinked dumbly at him. "Worse?"

"Yeah. Worse than losin' land." Travis shut the front door and roamed into the kitchen. Puzzled, he inspected the room, then brightened and reached for the faded apron slung over the back of a chair. "I know you don't think too much of my sister, Reed, but she's the strongest person I know. Lot's of girls woulda hitched up with some fellow to save themselves from the hell we've been through. But not Deli." With practiced ease, Travis tied the apron straps around his waist. "No, not Deli. She made a plan and survived. That ain't an easy thing to do 'round these parts. Specially with all the talk that was goin' on back then."

Reed wrinkled his brow as Travis pulled numerous ingredients from the pantry and set them on the table. This house was as confused as a deaf bat. *She* was out working while *he* tended house?

"It's hard enough for a woman as it is," Travis continued, measuring flour in a dented tin cup. "The gossip didn't make it no easier." He leveled the flour with his index finger before looking up. "Working at Chestnut's didn't help either."

If Reed ever had any questions, Travis seemed to knock them off with one answer after another before they could be asked. Lowering himself onto one of the kitchen chairs, Reed resolved to silence. If he listened long enough, Travis would fill in all the blanks.

"Course they didn't care that she was busying herself scrubbing filthy underclothes," Travis said. He scratched his cheek and left a powdery beige streak behind. "You'd a thought Chestnut had her whorin' or something..."

Reed lifted his brows at that and came to attention.

You mean she isn't? he wanted to ask.

"Some of them people were just plain mean," Travis finished. He set the mixing bowl aside and dusted off his hands before sitting across from Reed. "My sister is one of them amazin' people you hear talk of. I know you can't tell right off, but she is. And she might be mean," he chuckled, "but she ain't always like that."

Reed hardly heard a word the boy said. So, Deli Gold wasn't a painted lady after all. She sure enjoyed making him believe she was, although she didn't quite come out and say it.

He smiled at her sauciness. Brazen and sly, he thought to himself. Not a very good mix for a woman, but a perfect description for Deli Gold.

"What're you grinning over?" Travis asked.

Reed lifted his gaze. "I'm thinking of paying your sister a visit."

"Oh, she ain't gonna like that," Travis said, shaking his head. "I don't think you'd better."

"There's going to be some new rules around here," Reed said standing. "Rule number one, we aren't going to worry about what Deli likes."

Clucking his tongue, Travis pulled the mixing bowl up to his chest. "She ain't gonna like that either."

"I figured as much." Reed winked. "So we'll break it to her slowly."

Travis hesitated before dipping his hands into the bowl. "You're up to something, ain't you?"

"Absolutely."

Reed smiled to himself. He was up to a lot of things, starting with catching Deli in her lie. Swiping his hat off the crooked peg in the wall, Reed opened the door.

He paused within the jamb and narrowed his eyes on Gold Mountain shadowed in the distance.

What else had she lied about?

Chapter Five

"I already tried that," Deli said, dipping a tattered shirt into a wooden tub full of steaming water. "I tried being as sweet as honey when I fell in that grave and he still hates me."

Debra leaned casually against the washroom door. She left a crooked cigarette dangling from her ruby-red lips, stretched out her leg, and bent at the waist to run her hands along her thigh in a sensual inspection.

"Maybe you coulda been nicer," she said.

"There's no such thing with Reed Becker," Deli answered. "I'm telling you, the man has no heart to speak of."

Straightening a dingy garter around her thigh, Debra glanced slyly at Deli. "All men have hearts, sweetheart. You just gotta dig a little to find them. And you gotta dig in the right place." She took a deep drag of her cigarette and wrinkled one eye as she exhaled. "I find it hard to believe that you were as kind as you could be and this Becker fellow wouldn't budge."

Deli bit her lip and frowned into the graying water. She hated lying to Debra, but it'd been hard enough to admit to herself that she hadn't tried to cross the barrier with Reed. She wanted his help, but couldn't find it within herself to ask.

And he'd made her so damn angry.

Her head had been spinning with rage since he'd arrived. And Travis certainly hadn't helped.

Sighing, she looked gloomily around the full laundry room. She'd be here all night again. Swiping the sweat out of her eye with her shoulder sleeve, she wrung out a stiff sock. Shitfire, but it was hot tonight. Usually with the back door open, she could catch a breeze, but not tonight.

"Think high," Chestnut would tell her.

"Think high," she murmured.

Rubbing the sock on the washboard, she grimaced. There weren't too many high points to think on these days.

"Well, then find one," he'd say.

"I'm thinking," she whispered. "I'm thinking."

"What's that, darlin'?" Debra asked.

Deli shook her head. "Nothing."

If she was lucky, there'd be left-over stew from the eatery tonight, although she'd never get it to Travis in time for supper. She hoped he wasn't waiting for her.

"Am I paying you to stand around yapping all night?"

Deli flinched at the husky voice and caught Chestnut standing behind Debra.

"Hiya, Chestnut," she said.

Shine replaced Chestnut's scowl as he looked down at her. "Evenin', sweetheart, how's things been?"

"Not so good," Deli answered. "But we're not dead," she added with a wink.

"Atta girl, Deli. Think high." Chestnut turned to his old eyes on Debra. "Now what the hell are you doing? Is this what I pay you for?"

"As a matter of fact," Debra said, flipping her shoulder length, brown curls to the side, "you don't pay me at all. My fellas do."

"Get upstairs." He nodded toward the bar in the front. "There's plenty of things you can do with that mouth of yours, and chattin' with Deli ain't one of them."

"Yeah, I'm going," Debra grumbled.

Chestnut gave her a stern nod and stepped away from the door. "You're goin'?"

"I said I was, didn't I?" She dropped her cigarette on the ground and snuffed it out with the toe of her boot.

Chestnut tightened his gray ponytail and walked away shaking his head.

Debra laughed. "With all the money I make for—" she stopped suddenly and nodded to the back door. "You got company, sweetheart."

"Shitfire," Deli hissed. "Already?"

Without turning around, she reached beside her chair and withdrew a wrinkled brown sack. She placed it in her lap and attempted to smooth down her hair.

Debra's grin widened.

Slowly, Deli stood and raised her arms high above her head, sack in hand. She forced a loud yawn.

"Well," she said, "I think I better get to bed. Lot's to do tomorrow."

Giggles erupted from the doorway behind her.

"Yep," she said, ignoring them. "Lots and lots to do. What about you, Debra?"

"Yep," Debra answered loudly. "I'd say it's about time to hit the ol' sack."

Deli nodded and slowly turned toward the door. She leapt back in mock surprise and covered her heart. Three sets of young, anxious eyes stared up at her. Deli stared down at the youngest two crammed in the doorjamb and took pride on the smiles they'd brought with them. She'd created those smiles...

"Well, my goodness," she said, "what do we have here?"

"Why, I think it's mice," Debra chirped. "Think of that! Mice at *Chestnut's Place*."

Louise, the smallest of the three, held her smirched hand out, palm up. "We ain't mices," she lisped through the gap in her upper row of teeth. "It's us, Deli. Louise, Jacob, and Haylee."

Deli forbade a smile. She tapped her chin thoughtfully. "And just what is it you're holding your hand out for, Miss Louise?"

"For taffy!"

Jacob wiped his nose on the back of his hand and nudged his little sister with his free arm. "Don't be so rude, Louise."

Deli grinned. She couldn't help it. Jacob reminded her so much of Travis when he was ten, before the shooting and the chaos and the desertion. She lifted her eyes to the eldest Johnson child, Haylee.

Sixteen-year-old Haylee fidgeted with the end of her braid. "Evening, Ms. Gold."

"How're you doing, Haylee?"

"All right, I guess. My ma is sleepin' so I thought we'd come early tonight."

"Plus, I got a hankerin' for some taffy," Jacob added with a serious nod.

"Me, too," Louise said, looking admiringly up at her older brother. "I got a hankerin', too."

~ * ~

Respectfully, Reed tipped his hat at a passing woman with a flattened blue feather stuck in her blonde hair. She gave him a sly smile and nodded toward the stairs that led to the second floor.

He didn't remember the saloon, otherwise known as *Chestnut's Place*, being this loud the last time he'd visited. Course that had been four years back. The town had grown some since then.

"What can I get ya?" a small voice asked when Reed reached the sticky bar.

He avoided touching the faded countertop and frowned at the boy, who couldn't have been older than fourteen, standing tall behind the bar with a white towel in one hand and an empty glass in the other.

"I'm looking for Deli," Reed said, above the ruckus of booze-blind patrons and a clanging piano. "Deli Gold." He waved smoke and unsettled dust away from his face. "Any idea where I can find her?"

"What do you want her for?" the kid asked.

"You looking for Deli?" a second voice piped up.

Reed glanced at the slick, tidy man at his side. "That's right."

"Follow me."

Reed nodded at the young bartender and followed the second man through a group of laughing women and groping men. He wrinkled his nose against the thick cloud of warm whiskey breath and sweet toddies. A cool breeze blew softly over his face as they took the long way behind the bar.

"She's right through there," the man pointed out with a clean, tapered finger.

"I'm obliged," Reed said, stepping past him.

"If you don't mind me asking, I'd like to know what your interest is in Ms. Gold." The man had a distinguished, precise tone and rolled each word with gentlemanly perfection. Reed gave him a skeptical once over. Had he met this fellow before?

"I intend no offense," the gentleman said, "but I consider myself a rather close friend to Ms. Gold."

Not able to place his face, Reed nodded. "I just need to speak to her. It's personal business."

The man narrowed his eyes and lifted his chin. "I don't recollect seeing you around here before. With the nonsense over at Gold Farm and that dastardly Chance Evens, you can't blame a—"

"You know Chance Evens?"

"How could one not know him?"

Reed switched his attention to the room he'd been directed to, but couldn't see Deli. She could wait. This man had his full attention with Chance Evens as the topic.

"What exactly is the feud between Deli and this Evens person?" he asked.

"You really aren't from around here, are you?"

Reed shook his head. "Is it true what I've heard? That he tried to burn her out? That he's after her farm?"

"Well, sir," the man answered, glancing about the bar as if he might be heard, "that depends on who you speak to. Half the town says yes, the other half says no. Of course, you *must* take into consideration that most of these good people can't find it in their hearts to forgive Ms. Gold for that nonsense with her mother." He leaned closer to Reed and whispered, "Personally, I think she's a saint."

Confused, Reed nodded then shook his head. He couldn't make top or bottom out of this fellow's gibberish.

"So, I suggested that she mine Gold Mountain again," he continued. "It certainly couldn't hurt. Why, Ms. Gold might discover the solution to her present circumstances, being without means and what have you."

"Fortunately, that's no longer the case," Reed said. "Where can I find Chance Evens?"

"Oh, out and about I suppose. He frequents this establishment on a regular basis, though Mr. Chestnut is extremely acrimonious when he does."

Contemplating, Reed examined the saloon and its congregation. "You pass the word along to Chance Evens that if he has business to settle with Deli, he can take it up with me."

"W...With you, sir?" the man stammered. "Why, whatever do you mean?"

"I mean," Reed said, swinging his attention back to him, "I own Gold Mountain now. Pass that on to Chance."

"Y...you?" The man paled. "But that belongs to Ms. Gold. I don't understand." Suddenly, his eyes widened. "Sir, I must ask this as a gentleman, and I shall ask only once. Have you placed Ms. Gold in an unfortunate predicament?"

Reed wrinkled his brow.

"What I mean to say is," the man lowered his voice, "she's not obliged in any way to you, is she?"

"Frankly," Reed answered, enjoying the shock on the man's stark white face, "I don't think my affairs with Deli Gold are any of your business. If you're asking if she's in the family way, you're a few cards shy of a deck."

The man straightened. "I implied no such thing."

"You implied plenty," Reed chuckled. "Though it's nice to see that someone is looking after her."

"I'm a friend. No less. No more. And a businessman in these parts." His eyes hardened in a manner that didn't comply with his soft features. "I make it my business to keep after the Golds from time to time. You aren't a person of which I can imagine Ms. Gold would take the company of, which is why I asked." He gestured to Reed's swollen, bruised nose. "Compliments of a bar fight, I presume?"

"No." Reed shook his head. "Compliments of Deli Gold."

The man blinked back at him, his brow furrowed.

"Oh, Eric..." The blonde woman Reed had seen earlier, stepped closely behind the man. "You haven't forgotten our appointment, have you?"

The willowy man, Eric, took her hand with a grace Reed hadn't seen since his sister-in-law's flamboyant fiancé had turned tail and run off. "Of course not, my dear. If you'll excuse me," he told Reed, "I have business of another nature to tend to."

Reed nodded and kept an eye on Eric and his lady friend as they walked, hand in hand, up the steep staircase. He'd be damned if he couldn't put his finger on where he'd seen Eric before. He certainly had an interest in Deli. Reed could only wonder from where that interest stemmed.

Sighing, he turned toward the room Eric said Deli would be in. He could see the doorway clearly now, and the long-legged beauty that stood inside of it. She held a cigarette between her fingers and laughed at something that had been said inside the room.

Reed shook his head. It was a damn shame when a woman's potential had been stolen and her lot in life became turning a buck flat on her back.

Quietly, he approached the door.

Over the woman's shoulder, he recognized Deli's back by her ugly, hand-tailored outfit. It was the same one she wore when she left the shack earlier that evening. Mud stains from where she'd sat on the dirt beside her father's grave still decorated the rear of her dress and speckled the backs of her legs.

The woman in the door turned and gasped.

Reed held his finger against his mouth to quiet her.

She licked her heavily reddened lips and a slow smile took shape.

Not seeing them, Deli crouched down and at the back door opposite of them. She handed something to two small children standing outside, then glanced up at the young woman standing beside them.

"I suppose you want another, Miss Louise?" Deli said softly.

"Yes'm." The smallest child, maybe six years old, nodded. "I got a real big hankerin' for taffy tonight."

"And did you already eat supper?" Deli asked.

"Yes'm."

Deli tipped her head back and addressed the young woman, the older sister, Reed assumed. "I'll bring by some stew in the morning if I can," she said. "And you make sure you keep giving your momma sips of that elixir."

"I am," the girl answered. "Seems to ease the pain, Deli, but it's almost gone."

Deli handed the brown sack to the boy and stood. "Then I'll just have to get some more, Haylee."

"But how, Deli? I know you don't have the money to keep bringing it. Pa said to tell you to stop. He said it's not right to—"

"You tell your pa to swallow his pride," hardness edged Deli's tone. "I'll find a way to get some more."

"But how?" Haylee asked.

"I just will." Sighing, Deli returned to the smaller children. "All right, so what'll it be tomorrow?" her voice reached a pitch that told Reed she had a wide smile on her face. He wondered what it might look like there.

"Licorice!" the younger children yelled.

"Licorice it is. You get on back home now, you hear?"

"Yes'm."

Deli took Haylee's hand before she walked away. "Don't look so down, Haylee. Don't take so much on those shoulders."

"I'm not."

"Don't tell me you're not because I know different."

Haylee dropped her gaze to her feet. "Pa stays by her side every single day, Deli. Every day."

"Good," Deli answered. "That's right where he should be. Now get after them young'uns before they get into mischief."

Haylee brightened. "Yes'm."

"And why don't you come 'round and see Travis sometime?" Deli added. "I know he'd like a visit."

The girl's cheeks instantly took on a sunset red hue. "Yes'm."

Reed gave Deli's back a sweeping once over. She looked like the same woman, but she'd become a different person when Gold Farm wasn't under her feet.

She stood in the doorway for a moment before turning around. "Them kids..." her voice faded when her gaze landed on Reed. Her stone features matched her hardened eyes. "Shitfire. What the hell are you doing here?"

The woman that stood in the doorway between them, cleared her throat. Innocently, she twirled a curl between her fingertips and smiled seductively up at Reed.

"Is this him?" she asked.

"Yeah, that's him," Deli said, kicking a pile of laundry and not bothering to look up again. "Reed Becker, meet Dancin' Debra. Debra, Reed. Now that we have the proper introductions out of the way, you can leave."

"All right," Debra said, backing out of the doorjamb.

Deli straightened. "Not you. *Him*."

Knowing a kinder spirit lay beneath, Reed ignored the spite in her tone. "So, this is what you do here."

She paused, her head still down. "Well, of course." Slowly, she lifted her chin and stared at him with shining, bright eyes. "Whatever did you think I did here?"

Tipping his hat to Debra, Reed eased his way into the confined room. "You know what I thought."

"Don't let her rattle fool you," Debra said, backing toward the hall. "She don't really bite."

Deli scowled at her and Reed smiled. What a relief to see he wasn't the only one getting that frown.

"Thought I'd come by and see how you're doing," Reed said.

Standing, Deli crossed her arms over her chest. "Why? Didn't we see enough of each other already today?"

How easy it was to put her shield back into place. And to think, just a moment ago she'd been down on her haunches and smiling from ear to ear. What a shame he wasn't ten years old again.

Debra roughly cleared her throat. Reed glanced at her but her eyes remained fixed on Deli.

"Women have a way of doing that," his brother, Luke, had once said. "They pass secret messages back and forth with their eyes and we'll never know what the hell they're saying."

Reed had a feeling he was the topic of one of those messages at this very moment.

Debra's painted eyes softened. Deli's were reluctant to follow.

"Well," Debra chirped so loud Reed flinched, "it's off to work I go. Be seeing you, Deli-girl. Nice to meet you, Mr.?"

"Becker," Deli filled in.

"Reed..." Debra gave him a smile. "Nice to meet you, Reed."

"Don't work too hard," he returned.

"Honey," she said, turning toward the bar, "there's no such thing."

"With her," Deli mumbled, "there never is."

Reed waited until he was sure Debra had disappeared before planting himself beside Deli. She plunged her hands into a tub of water and fiddled around with something at the bottom. Her hair had been pulled back and

fastened in the center of her back, but chin length pieces swung forward and tickled her jaw as she scrubbed. Reed watched as every few seconds, she rubbed her face against her upper sleeve.

So this was what she did. Farm business and errands during the day, scrubbing mountains of reeking laundry at night. Then bed. And another day of the same. It was no wonder she had the temper from hell. She'd forgotten what it was like to be a person.

Reed stared a moment longer, but quickly looked away when he realized he'd been gawking.

"What are you really doing here?" she finally asked.

Getting comfortable, Reed scooted back against the laundry along the wall and stretched his legs out. He thought it'd been an act at first, but was beginning to believe she really didn't trust him. If it was because he rode with her father, that was understandable, but nothing he could change.

"Just thought I'd let you know that I'd caught on," he said casually.

"That I'm not a whore? You're not so smart after all, are you, Reed?" She pulled a sopping blue shirt out of the water, examined it, then dipped it back in. "Of course, I'm sure you didn't figure it out all by yourself."

"Travis let on."

She nodded and rubbed the back of her neck with her hand. Water droplets flung and landed on Reed's cheek.

Deli grated Mr. Sampson's shirt against the washboard, sure it'd be torn to shreds before she was finished with it. She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth and concentrated on the task. A chill ran up her spine and she swiped the back of her neck again. Why did it feel like *his* eyes were burning into her?

"We really haven't had a chance to speak since Sheriff Sault made his decision today," Reed said. "I thought maybe we could settle a few things now."

Deli lowered her attention to the thickening water and pretended not to hear him. She'd thought so much about Gold Farm that her head ached. She'd talked to Debra and Chestnut and Eric, and they all agreed. It'd be in her best interest to come up with a way to make Reed let her stay. She'd told them about her idea of marriage. Eric and Debra thought it was just what Reed deserved. Chestnut said he never heard of a more fool-headed, *woman* plan.

"It'll be for the rest of your lives," he'd told Deli. "You really think Gold Farm is worth it?"

Sighing, Deli scrubbed harder on Mr. Sampson's shirt. Shitfire, it wasn't like her heart belonged to someone else or like she'd ever cared either way about being hitched. A man she could handle. Reed Becker would be just like all the others she'd run across.

She wrinkled her nose. But was her entire life *really* worth Gold Farm?

"Always thinking," Reed murmured. "Travis was right."

"That'd be a first," she answered, pushing thoughts of plot and marriage out of her mind.

"You can't give that boy a break, can you?"

Deli paused before withdrawing her hands. She wiped them on her waist and faced Reed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

She and Travis got along like ham and eggs. At least, he'd never complained.

"You know, all the while you're gone," Reed said, "he doesn't dare say a word against you."

"He's my brother." She shrugged. "He shouldn't."

"But you can't let a breath out without belittling him."

Her? Belittle Travis?

"You have no idea what you're talking about," she said.

Who did Reed think he was, telling her how to treat her brother? Why, Travis was all she had, all she cared about.

"Keep an eye on yourself," Reed said, straining to sit up. "You'll see what I mean."

Deli shook her head. She'd never heard such nonsense. "I don't know what you're talking about."

A dozen rude remarks danced on the tip of her tongue, but Deli bit them back. Recalling Debra's last word on the matter, she pursed her lips. Debra was right. She'd never get Reed to marry her if she couldn't say "how-do" without biting off his head.

Out of the corner of her eye, Deli glanced at Reed. There had to be *something* kind she could say to him. *Anything*. She examined his severely disfigured nose and the dark circles under his brown eyes.

"How does your nose feel?" the words came so fast, she barely heard them.

What a stupid question!

Straightening, she forced her most civil, compassionate smile and faced him.

Reed appeared just as surprised. "About the same as it was this morning."

Deli took a deep breath. She could do this. Slowly, she lifted her hand and touched him under the chin. Small, uncut hairs tickled her fingertips.

He tensed and narrowed his eyes.

She didn't blame him. Convincing him that she'd had a complete change of heart would be impossible...if not a miracle.

With his eyes on her, she wiggled uncomfortably and struggled to focus on his nose. She blinked suddenly when her eyes crossed from trying to focus too quickly.

"I suppose you want to put your signature on it," he said softly. "It's quite a piece of work."

Deli lifted her gaze and inspected his. Swallowing her principles, she slid her hand up his cheek.

"I just want to make sure it'll heal well," she murmured.

"All right, Deli. Sure."

"This is partially your fault, you know. If you'd announced yourself, I never would've attacked you."

"I find that hard to believe," his breath stroked across her inner wrist.

"Does this hurt?" she asked, touching his nose.

He leapt back and snatched her wrist away. "Yes, that hurts."

Deli cringed.

Shitfire, she'd done that on purpose.

She half wanted to kick herself and half wanted to laugh out loud. She pulled her hand into a fist and tugged away from him, but he held tight to her wrist.

"Just what is it you're up to, Deli Gold?"

She swallowed and forced herself to meet his querying gaze. "Up to?"

He yanked her closer. "What're you doing?"

Her heart beat faster. She could feel it pounding strangely, wildly, in her chest. Surely, he could feel it too.

"I...I'm not up to anything, Reed. I—"

"You what?"

"I feel guilty about—"

"*You* feel guilty? That's about the biggest—"

"And now you're making me regret feeling even that," she snapped and jerked her hand out of his. "Never mind."

Shitfire! This would be harder than she thought. But she couldn't back down every time he confronted her or she'd never get anywhere, especially not to the alter.

"You aren't making this easy," she mumbled. Taking a deep breath, she reconciled with his eyes, determined to remain steadfast. "I'm trying to say I'm sorry, Reed, and I am."

"And this has nothing to do with Gold Farm?"

"Why would your nose have anything to do with that?"

"Your attitude has everything to do with it."

Deli doubted that even Dancin' Debra could manipulate this man. He was too strong willed, and certainly not ignorant.

"There's something wrong with a man when he can't accept an honest apology," she said with a nod.

"Fine," he said. "I accept."

But the skepticism in his voice countered his words. Deli shrugged. At least it was a start.

She flicked water droplets off her hands, then got comfortable on the clothes pile. "Think I'll take a break."

He leveled her with a glare. "Why?"

"For the same reason you came here, to get this settled."

He didn't move to relax or stand to get up. His eyes remained fixed on her the way they might've been if he'd encountered a sidewinder.

"You know, Reed, I don't think you've given me half a chance. You caught me off guard yesterday." She swallowed and forced herself to say the next sentence. "You came out of no where with the terrible news of my father's death. And on top of that, you've taken—I mean, you've been given the only home we've ever known." When he still didn't move, Deli continued. "Now that I've had a chance to calm down, to think it over, I'm sure we can come to some kind of agreement."

Reed latched onto the word "think", and narrowed his eyes on the woman sitting beside him. She lay against the clothes and laced her fingers behind her head. He didn't doubt she'd been thinking, but he knew it wasn't the way she said.

He hadn't been born this morning, and she wasn't the first woman to ever try to get her way with him. Women thought they had a "skill" and never quite understood that it had to be mastered before used. Deli Gold, here, appeared to be an amateur.

She crossed one leg over her other's bare knee and stared thoughtfully at the ceiling. He'd never seen a woman look so confused and absurd all at the same time.

"So, now we're friends?" he asked, testing the waters before jumping in.

"Might as well be." She smiled. "We're going to be living together, aren't we?" When he didn't answer, she propped herself up on her elbows and frowned. "You're sticking to your word and not throwing us out, right?"

"Oh, absolutely," Reed answered, solemnly. "I wouldn't think of it."

Easing beside her, he laid on his back. "Of course Gold Farm is rightfully mine."

"Yes."

"And I've been raised in such a way that I have to insist that certain rules be followed in *my* household."

Her nostrils flared and she looked about to give an unwanted opinion, but instead her jaw clenched and she smiled. "But of course, Reed."

Testing her further, he slid his arm around her back. "As long as we're agreed."

"We are. Absolutely agreed."

"You sure?"

"You want it in blood?" she said under her breath.

Reed smirked and gave her frail shoulder a squeeze.

"I said it sounds fine," she quickly added.

"Good."

"Good."

Sighing, Reed sat up. He caught her bare knees in his sites again and wondered just how many "rules" she would abide by. Especially if he forbade her from wearing those god-awful clothes.

Standing, he crossed to the open door and avoided tipping a hill of filthy laundry. He felt her eyes singe his back, but when he turned around, she continued to force an imitation grin.

"I'm glad we've settled this," he said.

"Absolutely," she replied through her teeth.

Reed turned away before he could laugh. Bound and determined, she was. Just a like a woman.

"I hope," he said, striving to push her over the edge, "that you realize what a sacrifice I'm making."

"Sacrifice," she repeated. "Oh, absolutely. I'm forever grateful."

Reed pursed his lips and strode casually from the room. He'd have to determine just how far her gratefulness would stretch.

Chapter Six

Deli crumpled up the instruction list from Reed and kicked the table's leg. Pain shot through her toe and up her foot.

She'd had enough!

Scowling at the ball of paper, she clenched her fist and shoved it into her skirt pocket. He'd done exactly as she'd predicted. He'd bullied her. Not outright, but slowly. So slow that she'd been able to smile and comply thus far. But each of his lists got worse as the days went by, and after fourteen days, she was ready to stuff the paper up his nose.

Shitfire, he had a lot of nerve. Just like Pa.

Deli had quelled her anger when he listed simple chores, things she would have done anyhow, but then dear old Mr. Becker got personal.

No cursing? Setting a bedtime for her? Mending?

Had he lost his mind? Or perhaps he didn't have one to begin with!

What irked her the most was that he did it intentionally. She could tell by the shine in those dark eyes that revealed themselves when the bruising went away. Fine lines around the corners of his eyes would crease, and she knew he wanted to smile.

Thinking of Reed's eyes burning into her as she read prior lists, Deli crossed her arms over her chest and glared at the table. It'd taken everything in her not to make him eat those sheets of paper.

And just when she thought she'd scream, he'd ask in that soft, honey-sweet tone, "Is anything the matter, Deli?"

"Of course not," she'd force herself to reply, all the while wanting to give him a hard flick on the forehead, right on the faint scar above his left eyebrow.

Today's list, the one she found on the table would keep her just as busy as the others, but this time a postscript caught her attention.

I've taken the liberty of checking your size, and will bring home the clothes you so obviously need.

If she'd eaten breakfast, she would have lost it on the spot. Unfortunately, Travis hadn't been keeping up his end of the work. And that meant Deli would go hungry 'til noon again.

"New clothes," she scoffed, tugging on her collar. "I don't take charity."

She slumped on the sofa and crossed her ankles. When Reed got home, she'd tell him exactly what he could do with the clothing he'd bought.

"You're so close," she remembered Debra saying two days earlier. "In a week or two, you'll have Reed Becker eating out of the palm of your hand."

The thought of his lips passing over her palm tickled the center of her hand. Deli scratched it away and sighed.

Was

she close to having him accept that she'd changed for the better? There were times even she believed that her kindness was genuine.

Deli shook her head. Reed had been toying with her and nothing more. Almost as if he needed to test her.

Shitfire! How many tests did she have to pass before he'd move onto trusting her, then marrying her?

How hard could it be? And just how blasted long would it take?

Frowning, she pulled her knees up to her chest. It made sense that he wanted her in a *real* dress. Didn't every man want to see his wife tidy?

Damn, she hated those things. Hated them with a passion. Those blasted skirts always tangled around her legs and she hadn't worn a corset in so long, she wouldn't be able to breathe if she tried one on now.

"It won't kill me," she murmured.

Reluctantly, she pulled his hand written note out of her pocket. She flattened it out on her knees and straightened its crumpled edges. Leaning back on the sofa, she examined the postscript and found herself wondering what color he might choose.

Lord, she'd take anything but yellow. *Anything*.

Reed had decent taste as far as other things went. She could only hope it extended to his choice of clothing and anything else he might want her to do.

Folding the list into equal squares, Deli tipped her head against the back of the couch and closed her eyes. Shitfire, what more could this man possibly want?

~ * ~

Keeping his eyes on the belt of road ahead of him, Reed patted the long brown package under his arm. He wished like hell that he could have seen Deli's face when she read the ending in the note he'd left this morning. He and Travis had been up half the night predicting her expression and betting on whether or not she'd comply.

The wagon rocked to a stop inside the Gold barn, but Reed still hadn't seen her. He didn't know her well enough to decide if that was a good or a bad sign.

He knew one thing, though. Travis was right. Deli may answer his requests with a sweet smile and cordial compliance, but she was always thinking. Of that much, he could be certain.

Reed tucked the large paper package under his arm and strolled toward the shack, adding a eager step to his stride in case she was looking out the window. She'd be inside and waiting for him, her mind already decided on whether or not she'd keep up with this game and take the dress with a smile.

Reed hopped up the step and swung the door open. He half wondered if he shouldn't crawl in and prepare to duck for cover, but there she was, sitting at the kitchen table calm, silent, and serene.

Casually, she glided a tarnished brush through her long hair and pretended she didn't see him, but Reed had already noticed her eyes tilt briefly upward when he entered. Without a word, he gripped the thin twine around the package and swung it onto the table. It landed in front of Deli with a thump.

"You dropped something," she said, not looking up.

"It's for you."

"The dress I so obviously need?"

"What else?"

With a frown, she concentrated on the silken ends of her hair. Pulling it all over one shoulder, she set the brush down and touched the top of the package. Reed didn't need to see her eyes to know she was up to something.

"I don't suppose," she said softly, "that you'd care for me to amend *your* wardrobe."

Reed glanced down at his blue button up shirt tucked into denims that were just as dark. He shrugged and frowned at her.

"Your wardrobe is just as convenient for you as mine is for me." She swiped up the package and hoisted it over her shoulder. "But I'm curious to see what you've come up with."

She turned, and Reed followed her to her room. "Does that mean you'll wear it?"

"If that's what you want, Reed."

He stopped outside her door, but she hadn't bothered to turn around. Her voice had dropped to a tone that unnerved him and left him wondering if she did it on purpose. She nudged the door closed with his foot and shut him out.

Reed stepped back before she could damage his nose again. He touched the tip of it softly, and stared intently at the door.

He must've imagined the scant trace of seduction in her voice when she said his name just then. If she'd been looking at him, he would've sworn she'd been possessed by a spirit that wasn't her own. That voice didn't belong to the likes of Deli Gold. Something else hid beneath it.

Reed backed away and felt his way to a chair where he sat. He picked up her hair brush and drew a long red strand from its thick bristles. Wrapping the hair around his index finger, he cast his gaze over her door. She'd be in the same state as when he'd watched her bathe. Only this time, her curves and features wouldn't be hidden by shadows and blurred by distance.

Swallowing the knot in his throat, Reed snapped the strand of hair off his finger and brushed it onto the floor. Funny how the Lord had decided to bless a woman like that, a woman with such a nasty disposition and bad taste in clothing, with such a fine body. When she stopped talking long enough for him to think about it, he could almost see her image before him, not caring how much he saw, and desperately praying he'd not look away.

Of course, then she'd open that mouth of hers and wash the mirage away.

Reed shook off thoughts of Deli and focused on the dress he'd purchased. Nothing seemed to "fit" her. He had so much to do that getting the dress took last on his list. After sending word to his brother and sister-in-law, Reed wandered from store to saloon to eatery, hoping to catch a bit on Chance Evens.

Both Deli and Travis said Chance had never gone this long without one antic or another, but Reed wasn't surprised. It put a knot in Chance's rope when he heard that Gold Farm no longer belonged to Deli, so it didn't bother Reed that the man hadn't pursued his threats and intimidations. Either he was rethinking his strategy or had given up all together.

Reed hoped it'd be the latter.

No one seemed to agree on Chance Evens's character. Of course, they hadn't agreed on Deli's either. Depending on whom he spoke with, Deli was either the Devil or a saint. The same went for this Evens person.

By the time Reed had reached the dress shop, the portly woman who didn't look able to move out from behind the counter, much less reach for a ceiling-high measure of dress material, gawked at him like he might try the dress on right in her shop. She might've swooned if he hadn't made it clear that his buying the dress for Deli was purely out of kindness.

"I hope you ain't got no hidden intentions for that girl," the shop-woman had said. "She ain't the kinda lady you wanna cross paths with, if ya know what I mean."

Reed had shrugged her off. No, he didn't know what she meant.

Besides, what went on here at Gold Farm was no one's business but his own. The words remained with him, however. Those words and a few others that had been spoken.

The patrons at Chestnut's opposing saloon jested about Deli's character. Reed had pretended that he understood every vague reference made, but he couldn't put two and two together, and the mystery behind little Miss Deli intrigued him more than the bizarre clothes she wore.

"You'll do just fine," one man at the bar said, "so long as you don't come ill."

The saloon fell silent at that, as if he'd spoken on a taboo subject and stepped over some unspoken law. Reed had pushed the nonsense out of his mind, promising himself that he'd pursue her secrets once the Gold Farm chaos subsided.

He'd been right to think that Deli and Travis were more than just an average set of abandoned children. He should've understood that much from the first night he met her.

He tapped his foot and glanced at her closed door again. How long could it take for her to get dressed?

Unless...Unless, she couldn't figure it out.

He adjusted himself in the chair and scratched his ear. Surely, she knew how to put on a dress.

Or maybe she didn't like it?

Didn't all women like yellow?

"What an idiotic idea," Reed mumbled to himself. "And all out of spite too."

"You know," Deli's voice chirped from the other side of the door, "Travis says it's a bad sign when a person talks to himself."

Reed jerked his head up.

"Thin walls," she added. "I can't hear what you're saying, but you're saying something."

"I'm just thinking," he called to her.

"Never think with your mouth open."

Reed frowned at the door.

"And stop frowning at me like that," she quickly added.

"Frowning?"

"Yes, frowning."

Reed scratched the back of his head and refolded his arms over his chest with a smile.

"I expect," she said, a grunt cutting off her words, "that now you're sitting there with your arms crossed."

Quickly, Reed uncrossed them.

"And your ankles too."

He grimaced at his outstretched legs, one crossed over the other.

"And you're thinking," she continued, "how smart you must be for getting me in this hellish dress."

"Not even close," he said too soon.

"Unfortunately, Reed, for all you know, I can be in here taking my sheers to your precious idea."

Reed bounded to his feet.

"Sit back down," she said with a voice that told him her grin had spread to her eyes. "I ain't cut it."

Slowly, Reed sat.

"Yet..."

Silence idled between them. Reed feared moving. It sent a chill up his spine when she predicted his every move, and she seemed to be doing that a lot lately.

"I'm just adjusting it a little," she said.

Reed scowled at the door. He knew exactly what she meant by that. He'd bet Gold Farm that she couldn't leave the room with the dress all in one piece.

He cleared his throat and tried to relax. He should've searched her room and seized every pair of sheers he could find before sending her in there alone.

"I was in town today," he attempted to fill in the silence.

"Oh, good," she answered. "I was afraid you'd picked this dress up on the side of the road."

"You always have something to say, don't you, Deli?"

"Usually."

He waited for her unavoidable quip, but her room fell quiet. "As I was saying, I was in town today, asking around about Chance. I thought I should get a few outside opinions on the man. I talked to—"

Her door flew open. Standing half naked in the jamb, Deli gaped at him. "What're you meddlin' in my affairs for?"

Reed didn't know what threw him off the most. Her sudden burst of anger or the amount of skin she displayed...

A bed sheet draped casually over her shoulder, swung around her midsection and barely hanging low enough to cover the top of her thighs, gave his eyes no comfortable place to settle.

"Chance Evens is my problem, Reed. Not yours," she said.

"But Gold Farm belongs to me."

"Gold Farm belongs to me," she parroted. "What's that got to do with it?"

She threw her arms in the air and half lost her grip on the sheet. Reed dropped his gaze, hoping she might lose it. Instead, she gathered up the drooping cotton and jerked it tighter around her breasts.

"Chance hasn't done a thing to you," she said. "Besides, you had the opportunity to get him that day he passed us and you didn't. So, I won't make the mistake of asking you to try again." She stomped over to the table and dropped into the chair beside him. "You'll only cause more trouble anyhow. I already have friends looking after me. Shitfire, if you keep asking questions about Chance, he's bound to get lit again and come back. Why can't you leave well enough alone?"

"Because Travis said he thinks Chance's disappearance should have us worried."

Deli grimaced at him. Travis said? When did her brother develop thought and an opinion?

Sliding down her shoulder, the sheet tickled her flesh. Aggravated, Deli yanked it back into place, but not before she caught Reed's eyes drawn to it.

She hesitated and inspected his subtle reaction. With half a shrug, she let the sheet fall slightly down again. Reed didn't flinch.

Deli licked her lips and smiled. So, that's what Debra meant about having a power.

She could probably curse Reed to the devil and he wouldn't care as long as her shoulder kept showing.

"Don't you think?" she said out of no where.

Reed blinked up at her. Blank and puzzled, his eyes widened. "Think about what?"

"Nothing," she whispered.

Gliding her elbow up to the table, she drew her fingers through her hair. "So what did you hear about Chance?"

"Chance?"

"Chance Evens...?" she reminded him.

Lordy! It worked!

Deliberately, Deli lifted her leg and crossed it over the other. The sheet slithered away and cool air caressed her thigh.

Reed's eyes narrowed and lowered. "I learned a number of things."

Deli lifted her gaze to meet his and ran her fingers through her hair again. A thick knot blocked her path. She frowned and tried to appear casual as she tugged on it.

The serenity disappeared from Reed's features. "What's the matter?"

Deli tugged on the knot again, losing her hold on the sheet around her breasts. "Nothing."

As if reality had awakened his senses, he reached up and took the knot between his fingers, then reached for the sheet with his other hand. Deli yelped and caught the covering from falling away.

"Let go," she commanded.

Hastily, Reed withdrew his hands. He scratched the back of his head and stared at her with skepticism and disbelief.

Shitfire, she'd tried to show her more feminine side and had made a blundering mess of it all. No wonder he looked at her as if she'd bit and mangled his hand.

"I heard," Reed started, but Deli held up her hand before he could continue.

"I'm lying," she said. "I don't care what you heard about Chance."

Standing, she pursed her lips. She needed practice. And she already knew everything she needed to know about Chance. She knew he was gone, and that was enough.

"Um, Deli?" Reed stammered.

She looked crossly down at him. "What?"

"Your...er...breast..." he pointed at her chest.

Deli glanced down and gasped at the breast that had managed to release itself. She covered it with her hand and gave Reed her back.

"You could at least turn away," she snapped.

Her cheeks warmed as she adjusted her breasts into place and closed her eyes. Now she'd really made a fool of herself.

"It's not the end of the world," he answered.

"No, it's my breast."

"I know," his voice flushed her more than before.

"Yes, well—"

"And it's not the first time."

Deli opened her eyes and swirled around. "I *know*, Reed. I'm sure you've seen more than your fair share."

He cleared his throat and his jaw came up a notch. His eyes darkened, and for once, he didn't look anywhere near teasing. At this moment, although she wanted to more than ever, she couldn't read him as well as she had been during these past weeks. His expression, his very demeanor, lingered mysteriously, as if he wasn't sure of his own words.

"I mean of you," he finally managed.

Weakened, Deli clenched the sheet harder to her chest. Her breath deserted her. Desperately, she wanted to ask what he meant or accuse him of lying, but her voice had eluded her.

"When you bathe," he added, still pinning her in place.

Slowly, Deli glanced at the window that faced the front yard. She gulped at the truth he told and forced herself to look at him again. "Y...You've been spying on me?"

"I wouldn't call it spying."

"If you're interested in such things, visit *Chestnut's Place*, not my front yard."

Deli felt her cheeks go from warm to hot. How dare he? Was nothing sacred to this man?

"How...How—"

He adjusted his stance and scratched the back of his head again. "Spit it out, Deli."

"Just how many times have you seen me?"

The corner of his mouth twitched slightly. "How many times have you bathed?"

Speechless, she sucked in her next breath. Tears of embarrassment stung her eyes, but something more powerful thumped her heart.

He'd seen her...more than once...and of his own free will.

Her lower lip throbbed and she realized she'd been biting it. Taking a breath, she wrapped the sheet tighter around her, then realized she'd already near cut her circulation off.

"I don't know what to say," she murmured. "I think you're very rude, Mr. Becker. And I don't appreciate you taking advantage of me."

"Then perhaps you should consider taking your clothes off where you can't be seen."

"I have *always* bathed under the pump." Funny how her bathing never ended up on his lists of things she'd been forbidden. "I thought you'd have better manners."

"And you wonder why Chance Evens comes around."

"I know why he comes around," Deli snapped. "And it's not to see me, you dimwit." She stepped closer to him and looked down her nose at him. "Shitfire, if I was man—"

"If you were a man, I wouldn't be looking."

Deli gasped and put a step of space between them. She didn't know what to make of Reed Becker's drawn eyes and satisfied smirk. If he expected her to erupt in a fit of anger, she wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

She clenched her fists together. How could he look so...so normal, so unaffected, so unembarrassed?

"They were right about you," Deli said. "I should've listened."

His annoying smirk spread to a full smile. "Who's they?"

"*Everyone*. Debra, Chestnut, Eric. They were right."

"Eric?" Reed chuckled. "Is he your sweetheart? He sure had his eye on you when I spoke to him."

"No," she mimicked, "he's not my sweetheart. Eric Archer is my friend, and I should've believed he was looking after me. If you think..." her voice drifted off.

Now what the hell was wrong to turn him so instantly pale?

Reed's eyes had narrowed, but not in the same seductive way they had when he groped her with his stare a moment ago. They were different now, teetering on terrifying, blackened like Pa's when two bottles of whiskey filled his gut.

Deli swallowed her lecture and instinctively moved further away from Reed.

Deliberately, he unfolded and stood to his full height. If the look on his face was anything to go by, Deli thought she might lose her life.

"What did I say?" she breathed. "You're the one who was—"

"Archer," dangerously low, the name rumbled from Reed's lips. "Ames Archer."

"No." She stepped away until her back was flat against the wall. "His name is Eric. Eric Archer."

He moved closer to her. "I knew I recognized him."

"Recognized him?"

Reed touched the base of his neck and momentarily appeared weak. Immediately, his eyes flashed dark again. "What's he want with you?"

"Nothing. He's a friend." Cornered, Deli lost her breath. "What's wrong?"

Reed lifted her chin with his warm fingers and peered into her eyes. "How well do you know him?"

"Well enough." She brushed his hand away. "What's wrong with you?"

In all the time she'd really known Reed, she never truly thought he would harm her, but now she felt fear. Heat radiated from his body and suffocated her. Anger hardened his jaw. She'd never been so afraid of anyone in her life. Even Pa, in a drunken rage, couldn't terrify her. But Reed's eyes did. He looked at her for a moment longer before stepping away. Her breath returned.

Mr. Becker was as backward as they came. He didn't mind Chance Evens threatening and near killing her, yet he feared Eric Archer?

She shook her head and moved out from under Reed's scrutiny. "You leave Eric alone."

Ignoring her, he swept his hat off the table. "I don't think so."

"Where're you going?"

"To talk with your *friend*."

"Why?" Impatience rose within her. "Will you stop and tell me what the hell is wrong?" She rushed up behind him and turned him around by his shoulder. "You've seen Eric. He's harmless."

"No Archer is harmless."

"So, you know his family," she concluded. Shrugging, she added, "What's that matter? Eric wouldn't harm a tree. Mostly because he wouldn't want to dirty his hands. You've met him, Reed. You know what I mean."

Reed glanced at her hand then peered into her eyes. "We'll see."

"Well—I—" Flustered, she lowered her touch. "You ain't—aren't making a lick of sense. Just where do you think you're going?"

"I'll be back," he avoided her question. "If I'm not here by sunset, I'll be at Sheriff Sault's."

Confused, Deli gaped at him. "What for?"

Reed slipped his hat on and stepped to the porch. "More than likely, for murder..."

Chapter Seven

Reed wished he could have stayed and taunted Deli a bit longer, but hate and revenge shrouded his thoughts. His stomach tightened every time he thought of any member of the Archer family. They were the same bunch who tried to kill his sister-in-law, Mariah, the same clan that swore to destroy the Beckers, and the same gang that nearly ended his own life.

Reed forbade himself from touching the ugly scar at the base of his throat. He *knew* he recognized that Eric fellow. He was kin to Ames and Sierra Archer.

How could he be so blind?

Hell! How had Deli Gold kept him so occupied as to not notice? And more than that, had she done it on purpose?

Reed shook his head. He couldn't put two thoughts together, at least not two *sane* thoughts. He didn't need verification that Eric Archer had a role in getting rid of Deli. That was the Archer's way, always at the bottom of something.

Who did Eric think he fooled with his sashaying walk and refined vocabulary? Looking after Deli, he'd said.

Reed clenched his jaw. He'd find out *exactly* what Eric wanted from her before sun down. He had more than enough time.

Steering Matthew's old mare into the wide barren road through the center of town, Reed switched his gaze to the left then to the right. Now aware of Eric's presence kept the hairs on the back on his neck raised. Surely, he'd be ambushed at any moment.

Narrowing his eyes, Reed stopped in front of *Chestnut's Place*. He scanned the bright red sign that appeared to be the only upkeep Chestnut did for the two-story building. Dull voices buzzed to his ears from within the foul establishment.

Coming to his senses, Reed dismounted and slapped the mare's reins over the hitching post across the front of the walkway. He lifted his jaw a notch and ignored the tinge of guilt Deli had laid upon him before he'd left.

She had been right about one thing. Eric did not appear capable of dirtying his hands to so much as slap a fly away from his face. Although knowing what he knew about Eric's brother and sister, Reed found it hard to believe that completely true.

He pushed through the saloon doors and stood just out of their way as they slapped into place and came to a stand still. The kid behind the bar didn't bother to look up. No one did.

Shrugging his way through two men in a heated debate, Reed reached the bar. "Hey, kid."

The young bartender lifted his hand, waving Reed to wait.

Impatient, Reed tapped his fingers. If the kid had been a day past boyhood, he would've given him a word or two, and it wouldn't have been kind.

"What'll it be," the kid finally said.

"I'm looking for Eric Archer," Reed answered, his composure withering.

"That's mighty nice to know."

"How about telling me where I can find him?"

"You didn't say that," the kid said too smartly.

"Is he here?"

"Archer? Here?" He shook his head and swiped his nose on the back of his hand. "Why the hell would he be here in the middle of the day?"

Reed leaned forward so as to get a better look at the boy whose chest scarcely reached the bar. "How about telling me where I can find him?"

Giving Reed his back, the kid emptied a shot glass, swiped it with a filthy cloth, then slid it back under the bar. "I expect he's at his place of business."

"And that would be...?"

"Across the way."

Reed glanced over his shoulder and stared passed the top of the half doors. Vaguely, he could make out a line of shops.

He turned back to the kid who had resumed cleaning glasses with the dirty towel. Reed narrowed his eyes and inspected the boy's stringy brown hair and close-set eyes. He looked more intent than most the criminals Reed and Matthew tracked, but not nearly as dangerous.

"What're ya lookin' at," the kid said, not looking up.

"Shouldn't you be in school?"

"We all should be doing something," the kid said. He jabbed his thumb into his chest and added, "Darrell Martin's place is right smack behind the bar. I'm the youngest 'tender for miles around, an' people respect me."

Not buying the tough demeanor, Reed slowly nodded. "How old are you kid?"

"Twelve. Going on thirteen. And I ain't no kid."

"Oh, I can tell," Reed said in the same voice he would use on a three year old, a voice that earned him a scowl from Darrell. "So, you say Ames...I mean Eric is across the street?"

"That's what I said."

Reed stepped away from the bar and gave Darrell a wide smile. "Thanks, kid."

He pushed his way through the same two arguing men he'd encountered on his way in, though they appeared to be the best of friends now. One of them went as far as patting Reed on the back as if they were long lost comrades.

Reed shrugged off the touch and took a long step to escape the stench of whiskey-burnt tongues and unwashed teeth. How could Deli stand it?

Stepping into the street, he scanned the opposing buildings and crossed the dirt road. Archer's "establishment" stood out as crisp and clean as he did over at *Chestnut's Place*. Reed paused in front of it. This could evolve into a mistake that might ruin a good man's reputation or end his life.

The calmness he now felt disappointed Reed. He wanted Archer. Any of them. They needed to pay for what they'd done. But his initial rage had dissipated.

He never should've stopped to talk to Darrell. He'd given himself too much time calm.

Reed paused and eyed the clear glass door that read: *Eric Archer, Entrepreneur*.

Entrepreneur? Of what?

Reed shook his head and opened the door. A tinkling bell, sounding more like the arrival of a lovely fairy, rang above his ears. Suspicious, he glanced around the room. The solid wood floors shone like morning dew and spread to the walls and ceiling.

Reed spun in a slow circle, not quite sure of what to make of the place, and not particularly caring for the feeling of being boxed in.

He took a back step toward the door then paused.

Pitiful. He'd have to get a hold of this aggravating fear.

Scoffing himself, Reed smiled and walked to the single desk in the corner of the quaint room. As if they had been prepared as a display not to be touched, a stack of books, their edges entirely lined, set on the corner of the dark wood desk. A sheet of paper, completely blank, had been centered in the middle. Reed knew he could've measured it and found it set perfectly in the center. Behind the desk and just off to the side, a rectangle doorway led to a second room.

Reed leaned forward and peaked into it from afar.

He dropped his attention to the stack of books and resisted the temptation of opening one.

"If you'd give me just a moment..." Eric's clear voice said from the back room. The clickety-clack of his shoes echoed throughout the entire place.

"What the hell am I doing here?" Reed murmured.

Just because this man shared Ames Archer's name, didn't mean they shared the same blood, or the same heart.

"Why, Mr. Becker," Eric chirped, coming through the doorway with his hand extended. "What a pleasure it is to have you visiting my place of business." He took Reed's hand and gave it a soft, gentlemanly shake.

"Please, why don't you join me? Although, I am positive it's safe to assume you happened upon my establishment by chance." He paused and glanced hopefully up at Reed. "Or perhaps, you're interested in doing business?"

Caught off guard, Reed nodded and followed Eric's lead. He couldn't be sure if they'd actually left the first room since this one appeared identical, with the exception of a tall grandfather clock along the far wall and a lift of stairs beside it.

Reed craned his neck to look upstairs, but only saw the corner of a closed door. "Just what is your business?"

He straightened and gave Eric a once over. The similarities between he and his brother, Ames, sent a chill up his spine, but he refused to succumb to it. Subconsciously, he touched the rugged scar on his throat.

"I've got some questions for you," he heard himself say, but his voice sounded distant and less demanding than he'd hoped.

Eric waved toward the chair behind the desk. "Won't you be seated?"

"I'd rather stand."

Momentarily tipsy, as if he'd never been so insulted and didn't yet know what to say, Eric shook his head and sobered. "Just what can I do for you, Mr. Becker?"

Reed dug his heels into the hard wood floor. It'd do him no good to let his anger get the best of him. He'd handled himself around the Archers before. He'd do it now, even if it tore him apart.

"Why don't you start by telling me about yourself," Reed said solemnly.

"About me?" Eric gestured his chest as a wide, almost mocking smile, pulled at his lips. "Why would you be interested in me?"

"To be specific, I meant your family. Particularly, your brother and sister."

Reed hadn't prepared himself for the cloud-white drape that paled Eric's pristine features. His eyes glazed over and his lips, instantly dry, parted.

Scurrying back into the lobby, Eric's wispy puffs of breath startled Reed. The gulp of air he finally took echoed between both rooms. The front door opened. The bell rang. It clicked closed again, followed by the tap-tap-tap of his nemesis's shined shoes scuttling back across the floor.

Eric appeared again, still pale, but now weak and shaken. Closing the second door behind himself, he trapped Reed within the blank, shrinking walls.

Reed nonchalantly touched the barrel of his gun braced against his back. Narrowing his eyes, he gave the pristine man a sweeping inspection. This wasn't the reaction he'd expected.

Whipping a white cloth from inside his taupe vest, Eric patted his gleaming brow and lowered himself into the chair he'd offered Reed. If it hadn't been for the chair, Reed thought the man would fall completely to the floor.

Maybe Deli knew Eric well enough after all.

Relaxing his guard, Reed lowered his arms to his side. He waited patiently, more curious than before, for Eric's response.

"How much do you want?" Eric finally wheezed. "I haven't much, Mr. Becker, understand that. I am, in no sense, a man of exuberant means. Though that's not to say I'm penniless either." He patted his brow again, his hand still trembling. "How much do you want?"

How much did he want? Reed wrinkled his brow. "I don't understand."

Eric clenched his jaw and raised it a notch. The brazen movement did nothing to camouflage the absolute fear in his eyes.

"You aren't the first man I've dealt with in regards to Ames and Sierra," he said.

"They made a fair share of enemies," Reed countered, still not catching his meaning.

"While this is true," Eric answered, "I am near my end, paying for their mistakes."

"Paying?" Reed straightened. It all made sense now. "I don't want your money, Archer."

"Then what do you want?" Eric leapt to his feet, the tips of his ears shining red. "My head, perhaps? What is it my brother did this time? Robbery? Rape? Murder? You needn't spare my feelings, Mr. Becker, as I have heard the stories many times before." He swiped his upper lip and lowered his gaze as well as his tone. "I sleep with those stories on my conscience and their blood on my hands, simply because I share a name with persons I've never had the displeasure of meeting." Slowly, he lifted his eyes. "So, tell me, Mr. Becker, how were you wronged? And how, precisely, will I be paying for it?"

Speechless, Reed blinked dumbly at Eric.

"Well?" he prompted him. "Where's the fire and gumption you came in with? Let's have it."

Reed cleared his throat and suddenly wished he'd taken the seat he'd been offered. "Are you trying to tell me that you have no connection with—"

"Do I look like I would?" Eric gasped. "My, God, man, I can't count the days I've thanked the good Lord for making me a sickly child."

"I don't understand."

"Had I been well, my father would've separated me from my mother as he did my siblings, and who knows what path my existence might have taken."

Reed found it hard to believe. How could a person know so little about his brother? His blood of all things?

"You see," Eric went on, "my father, a dastardly fellow, weak in character and not at all what you'd consider wholesome, took it upon himself to carry on in a great number of affairs. While adultery may be among the most common of sins committed, my mother had never been one to approve." He frowned and lost the tremble in his voice. "Had she looked the other way, my father might have stayed, and perhaps we wouldn't be having this confrontation now. You see, Mr. Becker, my mother had a been a strong woman, not prone to fits of tears and not easily swept into the daze of depression as most women would in such a tender predicament." Tucking his kerchief away, Eric's eyes took on a proud shine. "Perhaps that's why I've allowed Deli Gold to become such a close friend. She reminds me so much of my mother." His voice had drifted to nothing. He blinked up at Reed and smiled. "You can't imagine my father's surprise when upon the return of one of his many escapades, he found the house guarded and locked tight. My mother, she would not have him."

Reed nodded, allowing the picture to sink in. He'd never had the displeasure of meeting the Archer patriarch, but his children had spoken for him.

"He was also a man of spirits," Eric said with the wave of his hand. "And in a drunken rage, he disposed of my grandmother and took my brothers and sister with him. We never saw him again. As I said, it was a stroke of luck that'd I'd been born sickly. Two children and a toddler, he could manage, but not an unwell infant."

Searching for a thread of mis-information, Reed picked Eric's story to pieces. There had to be some lie within the words, some evidence that this frail, calm man needed to meet his doom.

Disappointed by the find, Reed lowered his gaze.

Ames Archer had earned his death three years ago, but it wasn't enough. Not for Reed.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you," Eric read his thoughts. "I'm near petrified to ask how you were wronged, though I'm sure you'll tell me."

Reed eased slowly toward the closed door. He didn't want to see this man's apologetic eyes. It was too hard to hate him face to face, knowing Ames and Sierra destroyed them both in completely different aspects, but just as thoroughly.

He couldn't have so much in common with an Archer.

Reed glared unobtrusively at Eric. How much of this tale told the truth?

"You keep clear of Deli," he ground out in a voice he scarcely recognized. He hadn't heard it in so long, it was hard to believe it belonged to him. It certainly didn't belong here, under these bizarre circumstances.

"Whatever do you mean, sir?" Eric asked.

"I mean" —Reed shot him a glare that matched his voice like a mirror image— "I don't trust you or your claim to innocence, Archer."

Eric blinked at him. Confusion squinted his eyes. "Your trust is of no consequence. Ms. Gold and I—"

"Are friends," Reed finished. "Yes, I know. She told me. Repeatedly."

He couldn't fight the rising bite in his tone or the anger that surged through him despite Eric's claim.

"And what will you do for me in return?" Eric said.

Reed swung the door open. "I won't kill you."

Unaffected, Eric sighed. "For heaven's sake. I simply meant that I must ask a favor in return."

"That's not what you said."

"I must ask that you keep my family, that is, their darker side, to yourself."

Reed closed the door and looked the elegant man over. It seemed a simple enough request, one that made sense in light of Eric's story.

"You see," he continued, "I have made a name for myself here. These people see me as a businessman, a consultant. I won't have you destroy all that I have strove to accomplish. Putting it bluntly, Mr. Becker, you keep yourself and your accusations away from me, and I shall bow out as Ms. Gold's friend. But I warn you, that shan't be an easy task, as she and I have grown quite close over the years. If she comes to me, be it as a friend or a person in need, I refuse to turn away. Beyond that, I'll pursue her no longer. It's become painfully obvious that you've set your sites on Ms. Gold."

"I did what?"

"Spare me denial, Mr. Becker. A fool, I am not."

Reed's anger dissolved, replaced by an uncontrollable urge to laugh at the pitiful man's observation. Why, Eric had never seen he and Deli interact. Obviously, he'd assumed.

"I see it in your eyes," Eric said, his calm demeanor returned. "I heard it in your threat."

"I never threatened you." Reed disliked this man more with every passing minute. While he may have been innocent of his brother's crimes, he had a disposition of arrogance that twisted Reed's stomach.

"It was the bite in your tone that threatened," Eric said. "Not your words."

A door slammed before Reed could comment on his observation of lunacy in the Archer genes. Then the door beside him flew open. Breathless and red, Deli glared at him. Her gaze switched to Eric.

"Y...You're all right," she breathed. Clutching her heart, she stumbled over to Eric and took his hand. "He...He didn't harm you, did he?" Before Eric could answer, Deli turned on Reed. "You, sir, are a madman!"

Undeterred, Reed smiled at her. "You amaze me, Deli. I had no idea the word was in your vocabulary."

She blinked dumbly at him. "Madman?"

"No. *Sir*."

She straightened. "It *is* in my vocabulary. Forgive me for misusing it."

Eric chuckled.

"This isn't funny. I sat half-naked at the table for quite a while, Reed, before it occurred to me that you might actually kill Eric."

A hollow squeak replaced Eric's laugh.

"I got here as soon as I could," she finished.

"Now why would Mr. Becker intend to kill me?" Eric asked coolly.

"That's what I'd like to know." She wrapped her arm around his shoulders and guided him out the door. "Stay close to me. You'll be safer."

Amused, Reed watched her tug Eric out of the building like an untrained pup. With sorrowful eyes, Eric glanced back at him and gave a meager shrug as if to say, "What do you think about that?"

Reed thought plenty about it. Starting with the fact that Eric had broken their deal. He'd promised to stay away from her.

"Watch out for yourself, Deli," Reed called out to her. "You have no idea what kind of man you're in the company of."

The comment stopped Eric in his tracks.

"Don't listen to him," Reed heard her whisper.

"Archers may be sweet talkers," he went on, "but—"

"Enough!" Eric swiveled on his heel. Just as red faced as when Reed first brought up Ames and Sierra, he huffed, "My, God, man! Have you no decency?"

Reed shrugged. It gave him an odd kind of pleasure to torment this man. Whether it stemmed from Eric's kin or from the comments he'd made about his relationship to Deli, Reed didn't know. Nevertheless, needling Eric gave him an undesirable satisfaction, the same way catching a puny fish might. It'd do him little good to keep on with it. Then again, Reed had never been one to throw back a puny fish.

"If you insist on provoking me, I'll tell her myself," Eric said.

Deli pulled her protective arm away from his shoulders. "Tell me what?"

Furrowing his smooth brown, Eric cleared his throat and faced her. "You see, my dear, I have kept hidden a secret that if exposed could completely ruin me." He nodded at Reed. "Your dear Mr. Becker has discovered this discrepancy and finds me unfit to accompany you as a friend or otherwise."

Deli hadn't moved her head, but she pinned Reed with a glare and her lips parted.

"My siblings are not, how can I put it, not as refined as myself." Eric appeared just as humiliated and torn as when he first told his story. "Apparently, Mr. Becker had a quarrel with my brother, and for this he despises me."

"I'd say it was more than a quarrel," Reed said, not at all liking the criticism in Eric's voice.

"Regardless," he continued, "he's decided to hold me accountable. Therefore, he's requested that I keep my distance from you."

Reed had only glanced away for a moment, but when he looked at Deli again, her features had stilled to stone, her cheeks a hot red.

"You did what?" she said in a threateningly low tone.

"Y...You needn't be angry," Eric stammered. "You will never understand the way of a man's mind."

Reed moved uncomfortably under Deli's intense scowl. Archer made it sound a dozen times worse than it actually was.

"How dare you?" she ground out. "You may own Gold Farm, Reed, but you do not own me. Who do you—"

Cutting her off, Eric grabbed her by the elbow. He took her two steps away from Reed and mouthed words that couldn't be heard. Reed leaned forward and strained to hear, but Eric kept his tone deliberately low.

"What are you saying?" he demanded.

Deli pursed her lips and appeared reluctant to agree to whatever it was Eric had said. Finally she gave a single nod, but still she refused to look up.

Reed narrowed his eyes on them. What the hell was this all about?

Eric nudged Deli forward and she nearly tripped over her own feet. Clearing her throat, she lifted her gaze.

Reed had seen men headed for the gallows with happier eyes. Deli swiped her mouth with the back of her hand and frowned at Eric. Without a word, he nudged her again.

She swatted his hand away. "I'm going."

More intrigued than impatient, Reed tried to read her expression before she could actually speak.

Finally, her mouth opened but nothing came out.

"Will someone please tell me what the hell is going on here?" Reed demanded, his tone more forceful and much louder than he'd intended.

Deli flinched. "I..."

"Appreciate," Eric prompted.

"Appreciate," she squeaked.

"Your concern."

"Your concern," she repeated. Sighing, she glanced somewhere above Reed. "I appreciate your concern. And...while I think you're an idiot—"

Eric elbowed her.

"I mean overprotective," she quickly corrected, "I can understand your...your—"

"Apprehension," Eric inserted.

"Yes," Deli sighed, "your apprehension."

Reed kept his eyes on her full lips as she spoke words they both knew she didn't believe and probably didn't understand. When she appeared to be done, Reed shifted his attention to Eric.

"Is there anything else she'd like to say?" Reed asked.

"How, pray tell, would I know?" Eric shrugged. "Deli Gold speaks for herself."

"I can see that."

"But I do have to add," she held up one finger, her tone returning with its hostile bite, "I do not appreciate you deciding who I will associate with. Though I must admit," she lowered her voice, "it is flattering."

Reed didn't believe the comment deserved a reply and he didn't give one. Instead, he held her with his gaze, hoping she'd recognized the skepticism there.

Deli Gold must've considered him a fool.

She stepped away from him and re-linked her arm with Eric's. They stood arm in arm with matching, contented smirks.

"Now," Deli said, a little too pleasantly, "if you'll excuse us."

Oh, absolutely, Reed thought.

Clenching his jaw, he held his ground as they sauntered away. Something more than Deli's antics were amiss.

Just how stupid did they think he was?

Reed narrowed his suspicion on Eric. He didn't need to think twice about trusting this Archer now, and it had nothing to do with Sierra and Ames. Eric had a corrupt agenda all of his own. And if Reed didn't keep his eyes open, he had a feeling he'd find himself the target...again.

Chapter Eight

Deli walked quietly through the house, more confused than ever by her actions. Eric had been right about one thing. If she planned to marry Reed, she'd have to control her temper. So what if he'd become defensive and tried to designate her acquaintances? He'd done it because...Well, Eric insisted Reed had done it because he cared, but Deli found that more than hard to believe. After all, hadn't Reed taken every past opportunity to insult and demean her?

"Asking you to wear a dress isn't demeaning," she murmured.

Lord, when had she lost control?

She was *supposed* to be manipulating Reed, not the other way around. And now this had come up, something about Reed and Eric having a connection in the past. A quarrel Eric had said. He'd mentioned Reed nearly died from a gunshot wound, but he refused to elaborate.

"Shitfire, what do I care?"

Sighing, Deli took her time moving to the kitchen area. She wanted to forget Reed's expression when it'd become painfully obvious that he knew she'd been trying to manipulate him. But that didn't mean she would stop. It was like Debra said, "Anything worth achieving is worth fighting for."

And Reed was well worth fighting for—

Deli paused. It wasn't Reed she was fighting for. It was Gold Farm.

Wonderful! Now she had herself confused.

Pulling a chair away from the table, Deli sat with her feet beneath her. She leaned her elbows on the table and covered her face with her hands. She'd never fought so hard for something, and she'd never been so confused. Even when Momma died, as painful as it was, she understood why.

But, now, with Reed Becker looming around her every action, Deli couldn't figure herself out. And if she couldn't figure herself out, she'd never figure out Reed.

Turning her head, she rested her ear in the crook of her arm. Through her doorway, she saw Reed's ugly yellow dress still draped across her bed. It looked like something the Reverend's mother would wear. Tight, constricting...clean.

Deli glanced at the front door as she stood. If she knew Reed as well as she thought, he wouldn't be home anytime soon. Travis had been staying late at the Johnson's house and that meant she'd have more than enough time to herself. To try on that dress...if she wanted to...just to see what it looked like.

Licking her lips, she moved toward her room as if she'd have to corner the dress before it escaped. It would look absolutely ridiculous on her, of course. Most of them feminine clothes did.

"Shitfire," Deli murmured. "It don't bite."

Praying that neither Reed nor Travis would come home, Deli gave the door a final glance before disappearing into her room. She swept the dress up and pressed it against her chest. What woman, in her right mind, would be caught wearing such a ridiculous thing?

Deli tossed the dress aside and unbuttoned her tattered blouse. Tripping over her own feet, she struggled to remove her shoes while pulling the new dress on. Cool and clean, the soft cotton caressed her skin as she wiggled it up her arms and fumbled with the tiny pearl buttons. Her dirtied fingers tarnished them, but Deli didn't care. It wasn't as if anyone would see.

~ * ~

Reed had actually started to think something of Deli Gold, until she turned out to be a manipulating wench in cahoots with an Archer. Hell, he nearly had himself believing that she could become a decent woman with finer clothes and a little help from himself. He'd almost gone as far as believing that her change in demeanor might actually be legitimate.

When the hell had he become so damn ignorant?

Irritated, he stomped across the porch. "Shitfire—"

He froze.

Shitfire?

Looked like she was rubbing off on him instead of the other way around.

"Shitfire," he chuckled again, liking the sound of her favorite profanity as it whispered over his lips. "Deli Gold..."

Pushing his hat higher on his forehead, Reed opened the door. A faint gasp betrayed Deli's presence, but he didn't bother to pay her attention. She'd left him too boiling mad in town. Right now, he didn't even want to

look at her.

Her squeak reminded him of two branches rubbing together during a windstorm, but he refused to look up. Whatever she was up to, he didn't want to know.

Intentionally, Reed turned away from her. He took his time hitching his hat on the peg protruding beside the door. The smooth sounds of Deli's footsteps scraped loudly against the floor, informing Reed that she'd started toward her room.

He ignored her.

He didn't care if she hid out in her room all night. It'd give him more time to think.

Her shadow fell into his side view. Reed flinched, and almost looked away, but a blur of bright yellow brought his gaze to attention.

She'd almost escaped, but now he knew why.

Her dress, the dress he'd bought for her, defined all of her sleek, womanly curves, her full breasts and narrow waist, traits he'd seen unclothed from a distance.

Reed gulped down his surprise, but his eyes refused to neglect her again.

"I..." Her blue eyes, enhanced by the embarrassed blush of her cheeks, darted around the room. She pointed to her bedroom. "I...I was just trying it on."

Reed thought of a dozen things he might say, but none found a path to his lips. Shitfire came to mind, but even that he couldn't say aloud.

"I didn't hurt it," she said. Then glancing down, she added, "I smirched a button. Well, two of them really, but I didn't hurt it at all."

Finally able to move, Reed nodded, but he hadn't heard a word she'd said.

Hell, until this exact moment, he must've been blind. Surely, this wasn't the same Deli Gold that sported soil and manure on a daily basis.

"And I spilled chilly right here," she said, pointing to the front of the skirt. "A...And when I tried to clean up the buttons, I think I made an even bigger mess of it."

Reed blinked up at her, damning himself for being so gullible. Her voice, hesitant and soft, warned him against the trust he suddenly wanted to feel for her. Maybe he'd underestimated her after all.

Hell, yes, he'd seen her bathe. And he'd even seen her bare breast. But this, her looking more like a woman than he'd ever thought possible, this was different. He'd stolen those bathing moments, and her breast had been an accident, but this dress was Deli's choice. She'd shown him a different side of herself, a feminine side he thought for sure no one else had seen. And she'd done it intentionally, for him.

For him?

"Why the hell would I think that?" he muttered.

Her eyes narrowed sharply on him. "What'd you say?"

Startled by a tone he recognized, Reed straightened. "What?"

"What'd you say?"

"When?"

"Just now."

He shook his head. "I didn't say anything."

"Oh, yes you did," she snapped. "I heard something. And you don't have to say it again. I know what you're thinking, Reed Becker."

Reed felt his cheeks warm up. She couldn't be experienced enough to know what he'd been thinking.

"You're thinking what a frumpy dimwit I am." Angrily, she threw her hands in the air. "Well, now you know why I don't wear these blasted things!"

Reed knew he'd been mistaken when he thought he heard her voice waver on "blasted." And her eyes, suddenly glossed over, must've been from rage because they certainly couldn't be tears. Not from Deli Gold.

"So, stop gawkin' at me already," she said, stomping into her room.

Reed shut his mouth. He'd never *gawked* in his life!

"Just hold on a minute," he said, following her. "What are you getting all worked up about?"

"You!" She pointed accusingly at him. When he didn't answer, she started unbuttoning the dress at the collar. "I know what you were thinking."

"Somehow I doubt that."

"Then what were you thinking?"

A smile tugged at the corner of Reed's mouth, but he'd be damned if he'd let her see it. "You don't want to know."

"I'm sure I've heard worst," she said, tugging at one of the small, stubborn buttons. "So, say it."

Reed gave Deli's slender body a slow once over that only tortured him further. What were the chances that she'd actually dressed for him?

"All right," he agreed. "If you'll stop disrobing long enough to hear it, I'll tell you."

Her fingers stopped moving. She dropped her hands to her sides and lifted her chin. "What...?"

Reed cleared his throat and glanced at the long, cracked mirror on the wall beside his bed. It looked like it'd been dropped, broken, and put back together again more times than a whore bent her knees, but it'd work nonetheless.

"Let me show you," he said, nodding at the mirror.

If she narrowed her eyes anymore, she'd see black, but somehow Deli managed it and crossed to him without tripping. "What do you want?"

Reed examined the step of space that separated them. Stubborn to the end, she was. Reaching out, he took her hand and pulled her in front of himself then turned her to face the looking-glass. When she shrugged her shoulders, her back moved evenly against his chest.

Reed considered her reflection and the blank expression in her eyes. The woman in the mirror glared back then dropped her scowl to his hand as it made its way up her shoulder.

"Look in the mirror, Deli."

"What're you doin'?"

He touched her chin with his free hand and turned her face toward their reflection. "Just look."

Her frown tightened. She wrinkled her nose and scratched it with the back of her hand.

Reed pulled her hand down. "Stop that."

"Stop what?"

"Look in the mirror..."

"I am! I look in it every day! Shitfire..."

Reed smiled at her frustration. "Try looking in it without talking."

Deli obeyed him and crossed her arms over her chest.

Reed put them back at her sides.

She lifted her chin and stared at the top of the mirror.

He redirected her attention to their images again.

When it appeared that she wouldn't move, Reed slowly lowered his head to hers, gently gliding the side of his face against her cool cheek.

Immediately, her breathing stilled.

"Now tell me, Deli Gold," he said softly, "what do you see?"

"Two dimwits."

"Really?"

"Well, I'm standing here like one, so I must be, and you... You seem to have forgotten who I am or..."

"Or what?" Reed asked, his warm breath bouncing from her cheek back to his lips.

"Or you wouldn't be standing to close...to me."

Reed examined her lowered lashes in the mirror, wishing she'd widen her eyes and allow him to look into them. "Does it bother you when I'm this close, Deli?"

"No," she said, but her voice had melted to a whisper.

"How about looking at yourself?"

Instantly, her head came up. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," Reed said, his voice growing softer, more tender, "you haven't looked in the mirror since I brought you over here."

Slowly, she turned her head. Their noses brushed, until she tilted her face slightly upward.

"I know what I look like," she said. "I look into this mirror every day."

Reed searched her azure eyes, confused by the strength and weakness struggling within them. She hadn't brushed off his touch. She hadn't moved away. But her eyes, they seemed to beg him to go.

"I want you to see what I see," he said.

He fought against the urge that suddenly overtook him, the urge to feel her lips with his. Had she been anyone else, any other woman, that kiss would have ended this soft conversation and started a forbidden discussion of bodies and sweat and satisfaction. But something kept him from Deli.

"So, tell me," she said.

Just as quite, Reed asked, "Tell you what?"

"What you see." She returned to the mirror. "What you see in me."

Reed blinked up at the looking-glass and back into the reality of her naiveté. Knowing she watched his eyes in their reflection, he deliberately lowered his gaze to her feet then moved it back up to her eyes.

She didn't look away.

"I see a woman," he said.

Her eyebrows lifted, and she looked ready to laugh aloud.

"With spirit," he added.

"You mean with a big mouth."

Reed smiled. "That too."

Her back that had been stiff and unyielding, softened against his chest.

"You mean there's a difference?"

Reed nodded.

"What else?" she asked, her voice barely audible.

What else?

Hoping she wouldn't notice, Reed slid his hands down waist and clasped them at her stomach.

"Look at me, Deli."

She started to face him.

"In the mirror," he said.

She nodded, uncharacteristically compliant.

"Now look at yourself," he said.

Her eyes shifted to her image.

"And then me."

Again, her eyes moved to his reflection beside hers.

"And back again." When she did, he pressed his cheek against hers. "Now, tell me Deli Gold, what do *you* think I was thinking about?"

Moving his hands upward, Reed swept her hair over the shoulder opposite of him. Instinctively, she tilted her head to the side. Her neck, bare and beckoning, displayed a curved path to her soft jaw line and delicate ear. In the mirror, her eyes widened, as if she'd surprised herself with the natural reaction.

Immediately, almost scared, she straightened.

"I was thinking," Reed said, "that you don't look so bad in that dress, Deli. And maybe you know that. And maybe that scares you."

"I don't look so bad? What do you mean I don't look so bad?"

"And I was thinking," Reed said, ignoring the rise her tone, "that this might be my only chance to take advantage of—"

"Take advantage of...?"

"Don't look surprised, Deli. You said you've heard worse."

Her back stiffened against him again, making Reed wish he hadn't been so honest.

"So, you were thinking of kissing me," she said accusingly.

Reed searched her eyes and decided to let her answer the question herself.

"And...And why didn't you?" she demanded. "Just what's so wrong with me?"

"There's nothing wrong with you," Reed chuckled. "I just didn't think you'd take to kindly to it."

Grimacing, she moved away from him and crossed her arms over her chest. "Well, I wouldn't."

"Now you're making me wonder if maybe I should've."

Her eyes snapped up at that as if she wondered the same thing.

"Well, it's a good thing you didn't," she said. "Cuz that woulda been a sad mistake, Mr. Becker, a real sad mistake."

Reed smiled at the spunk she forced into her tone. He turned her toward him and gazed into her narrowed, forcibly angry eyes.

"What?" she said.

"I was wondering, that's all."

A heavy, irritated sigh escaped her lips and brushed against his. Taking him off guard, Deli boosted herself onto her toes and pressed their mouths together. Just as quick, she pulled back.

"Now you can stop wondering," she said smartly.

She went to move away but Reed caught her wrist before she could step back. She didn't object when he pulled her closer to him, and the look in her eyes said she knew he wasn't amused.

Holding her wrist against his chest, Reed slipped his free arm around her back and locked their bodies together. Her eyes widened, but she didn't struggle.

Reed lowered his head and hesitated before sealing their lips. He'd been aching for this woman in more ways than he wanted to admit. If she didn't object now, he'd quell the curiosity he knew they both had.

"Well?" she whispered. "What're you waiting for?"

Reed asked himself the same question. He'd been waiting for something she wasn't going to give. Resistance.

Lowering his mouth to hers, he gently kissed her lips. She relaxed, but not nearly as much as he'd hoped. He moved her hand up to his neck and let it go. The shirt around his shoulder tightened and she drew it between her fingertips. Her other hand slithered up his forearm and tightened around his shoulder.

Slowly, Reed exhaled.

Deli imitated the action.

A warmth he vaguely recognized returned from years passed, reminding him that it'd been too long since he'd held any kind of woman in his arms.

Opening his mouth, he tasted the sweat flavor of Deli's lips. She gasped. Pacing his eager intentions, Reed moved his tongue between her parted lips.

Pain instantly stabbed the tip of his tongue.

"Shitfire!" she shoved him away. Immediately, she covered her mouth with her hand. "What the hell are you doing?"

Reed touched his tender tongue. Thin traces of blood colored the tip of his finger.

He stared at her in disbelief.

"Are you mad?" she screeched, but Reed could barely understand her through the hand over her mouth. "What are you doing?"

Was he mad?

He rubbed his tongue along the inside of his teeth. "You bit me..."

"What do you think I am?"

Torn between frustration and confusion, Reed blinked dumbly at her.

"Just because I work at Chestnut's, doesn't mean I'm a whore."

"What?"

"You stuck your tongue in my mouth!"

"Not quite," Reed said, regaining his senses. "You didn't let me get that far."

Deli shoved him hard against the chest. "I'm no whore, Reed Becker, so you might as well forget it."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Swiping her lips with the back of her hand, she avoided looking at Reed. All her hard work, just so he could think she was a whore.

"Go around sticking your tongue in people's mouths..." she muttered. "You're lucky you have one left, you know that?"

"Deli, I think you're—"

"I *already* know what you think, Reed."

She licked her lips and could swear she still tasted him there. The thought made her gulp again. The moment his tongue brushed against the inside of her mouth, she'd lost her breath.

Deli glanced sharply at him. She refused to acknowledge that what made her most angry was that for an inkling of a moment, she'd liked that feeling.

Reed's eyes narrowed on her. "Don't look at me like that, Deli."

She lowered her gaze. She'd look at him any damn way she wanted. Shitfire...She could do anything she wanted. She always had.

"You're over-reacting, Deli."

She bit her lip. *Now* he was telling her how to act?

"I don't think so," she said slowly.

She'd seen the way Debra and the other woman at *Chestnut's Place* were kissed by men they entertained. Some of them looked like they might just lick Debra's face off.

Deli shivered at the repulsive thought. She'd be damned if any man would attack her that way. Even if it was Reed Becker. And even if, just for a moment, he'd almost had her interested...

Chapter Nine

Debra gasped. "He did what?"

Fervently, Deli nodded her head. Debra hadn't moved out of the doorway where she usually stood until Chestnut ordered her back to work.

"Exactly what I said. He stuck his tongue in my mouth."

Debra's smirk hadn't moved either. She'd been completely enthralled and more than entertained by Deli's story, but now it looked like she wanted to laugh out loud.

"I don't see what's so funny," Deli said.

"I guess I just don't see what you're so upset about," Debra chuckled. "You did it. Aren't you happy?"

"Happy? Are you thick? He doesn't think I'm any better than a whore."

Debra's eyes snapped to slits. "Well, are you?"

Instantly, Deli wished she could take the comment back. "You know what I mean."

Wonderful! Now Debra was angry with her too.

"No," Debra said, "what do you mean?"

"He stuck his tongue in my mouth!" Deli said for the tenth time that day. "What does that tell you?"

"That he wanted to kiss you?"

"*That* is not a kiss, Debra."

Deli grated Mr. Sanderson's underwear against the washboard. It'd taken the bulk of her anger for the last half hour, but Deli didn't care if she shredded it to nothing.

Debra crouched in the doorway and came into Deli's eye level. "Let me see if I understand. You think that because he was going to kiss you like that, it means he thinks you're a—"

"Well doesn't it?"

"No."

"But—"

"You've been at Chestnut's for too long," Debra said, standing.

Deli lowered her gaze to the thick water in her wash basin. Debra didn't know what she was talking about. She didn't see the things Deli saw as an outsider. No woman, no respectable woman, would let a man kiss her like that. It just wasn't decent.

"Deli," Debra caught her attention with a whisper. "You think your momma didn't kiss your pa like that?"

Deli's mouth fell open before she could stop it. "Absolutely not. Never. Absolutely never."

"Are you honest for real, Deli Gold? Not once?"

Deli scowled at the thin collar of Sanderson's long underwear. "Well, it ain't like I was there all the time, now was it?"

"Apparently not."

"But I know my ma and I'm telling you, she would never—"

"You know your momma as a ma," Debra said, still giggling. "But I'm telling you, she wasn't a ma all the time."

Defensively, Deli threw the underwear into the basin. "My ma was the best ma this town ever saw."

"Don't get in a huff, Deli," Debra said, coming all the way into the room. "What I'm saying is, she wasn't *always* a ma. Sometimes, she was other things. We all are." She glanced out the door before sitting on the pile of laundry beside Deli. "You know how Frisk Miller takes me to the Sunday picnic every week?"

"Yeah."

"Do you think I'm a whore at those times? Hell, no. Them are the times I get to be a lady. I get to be me."

"And what's that got to do with my ma?"

"She's the same way. Sometimes she tended you and Travis. Sometimes she mended your pa's socks as his wife. There were times I heard her sing in the Sunday choir and she wasn't at all herself. And there were times, Deli, I don't care what you say, that she was...was a lover too."

Deli's cheeks heated up, more from anger than anything else. How dare Debra insinuate such a thing?

"Reed Becker's not your pa," Debra continued. "What'd you think he was gonna do, kiss you on the forehead and pat you on your way?"

Deli shrugged.

"There's nothing wrong with the way he kissed you, Deli, unless you didn't want him to kiss you at all." Debra stood from the dirty pile and crossed back to her post at the door. "Did you want him to?"

"Of course not!" Deli said without thinking.

She could hardly answer the question with thoughts of her mother kissing her father the way Reed had tried to kiss her floating through her mind. If what Debra said was true, no wonder Reed looked at her as if she'd misplaced her senses.

"Now he'll never marry me," she muttered.

"How bad was it?" Debra asked.

Deli sighed and forced herself to reconcile with the memory. She'd spent so much time trying to wipe it away, she surprised herself when it presented itself upon command. There she was, completely surrounded by Reed, his strong arms locked against her, his warm breath drifting against her lips.

"It wasn't bad at all." Slowly, she lifted her gaze. "It was...was nothing like I expected. Course, I don't have anything to compare it with. At first, I thought what an idiot I must be, you know? And somehow, he took that away. I didn't care about looking like an idiot, or the stupid dress. It was probably the first time in years that I stopped thinking about Gold Farm or worrying about Travis."

Deli paused when Debra's eyes widened.

"What?" Deli asked. "What's the matter?"

A wide grin captured Debra's face and spread to her charcoal-painted eyes. "I wasn't talking about the kiss," she said. "I was talking about your bite. How bad was it?"

Deli slapped her hand over her eyes and hid her face.

"But it sounds like it was more good than bad," Debra laughed.

Deli smiled and shook her head. Already, Reed was making her crazy. Before she knew it, she'd be talking about rainbows and verse!

"And you had to go and bite him," Debra added.

"Well how was I supposed to know?"

"Now you know."

"Hell of a lot of good that does me," Deli said. She licked her lips and found herself wondering if Reed might try to kiss her again. More than likely he wouldn't. Even if he wanted to, he probably valued his body parts

too much.

"Next time," Debra said, folding her arms over her chest, "next time, you'll be ready."

Deli dismissed the idea and resumed scrubbing Sanderson's filthy underwear. "There won't be a next time."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that. It's up to you, Deli."

What did she mean it was up to her? What was she supposed to do? Go up to Reed and tell him that she'd made a mistake and that he was more than welcome to stick his tongue in her mouth again?

"No," she whispered.

"Yes, it is," Debra said.

"You don't know him like I do."

"You don't know him at all. You know he used to ride with your pa and he owns Gold Farm. Which you want. Which you say you'll do anything to get. And I'm afraid, Deli girl, that includes getting him to kiss you again."

"You mean by humiliating yourself."

"Or being honest."

"They're the same thing." Deli drenched herself wringing out the ragged underwear. She tossed them into a second basin and dried her hands on her skirt. "What do you suggest? Should I send him an invitation?"

"Not a formal one."

"And I should just tell him that I had no idea what was happening?"

"I'm sure he already knows that." Debra glanced over her shoulder. "Chestnut's coming," she said. Turning back to Deli, she added. "Because you don't understand, you have the upper hand. Men love that."

"They love stupid woman? Why would I want to love a man that wants a stupid woman?"

"Who said anything about love?"

"What am I payin' you for?" Chestnut growled, coming up behind Debra.

Deli brightened. Like most men, he never said what he meant. Chestnut's nasty snarl and "what am I payin' you for" usually meant, "please, honey, can you get back to work?" He just never knew how to say it.

"Hiya, Deli girl," he said, a smile instantly appearing.

"Evenin', Chestnut."

"What we're talking about is your land," Debra continued as if Chestnut wasn't there. "We're talking about everything you've worked for."

"What's that?" Chestnut asked solemnly. "We talkin' about Reed Becker again?"

"We?" Debra echoed.

"Cuz he's out front," Chestnut said. "Been holdin' five for twenty minutes at least."

Frowning, Deli stood and pushed past Debra and Chestnut to glance out the door. Just like Chestnut said, Reed was playing poker. And sitting next to Eric, no less.

"Shitfire, I shoulda known..." she whispered.

"Come on," Debra said softly, "just because he's tossing back a few and sitting at the table doesn't mean anything."

"It means everything."

"'Cept he ain't touched a drop of liquor," Chestnut said, staring at Reed.

"That doesn't change anything," Deli said tightly. "A gambler is a gambler."

"But that doesn't mean he's like your pa," Debra said.

Like hell it didn't.

And why not? Deli clenched her jaw. He did everything else the way pa did.

~ * ~

Reed focused on the pair of queens smiling at him and ignored Deli's stare burning into the back of his neck.

"What's she doing?" he muttered to Archer.

"Standing there, same as she was a few minutes ago," Eric said. "Are you in or out?"

As if he'd only just been dealt them, Reed blinked at his cards. "Out. I mean, in."

"Well, which is it?" the burly man to his left growled. "We ain't got time to watch you play long distance grab ass with Deli. Are you playin' or not?"

Reed glared at the man out of the corner of his eye. What the hell was this booze-blind fool babbling on about? He was doing *what* with Deli?

"I'm in," Reed repeated, tossing a chip into the center of the table.

"You can't raise!" the man said. He tossed his cards, face down on the table. "This game has gone to hell."

"Mr. Sanderson's absolutely correct," Eric said with an aggravated sigh. "We're attempting a hand of cards here, Mr. Becker. Could you kindly stay in turn?"

Reed shifted his attention between both men, each the exact opposite of the other, but both adamantly in agreement. Was his interest in Deli that obvious?

Straightening, Reed swiveled in his chair to get a look of her for himself. Immediately, her eyes widened like a child caught fibbing. She'd pushed Chestnut and Debra aside and had started in his direction.

"Oh, hell, now you done it," Sanderson said. "Grab your edges, boys."

On command, Eric and the other three men gripped the rounded edges of the table, their knuckles instantly white from the pressure. Reed faced forward, needling them with a curious stare.

"Ms. Gold doesn't care for cards," Eric explained.

"Care for 'em?" Sanderson snorted. "She hates 'em."

"Seventeen games last year," a smaller man squeaked. "All ruined."

"Ruined?"

"It's Deli," Eric said, his voice drifting softer as she approached. "She got quite intoxicated on a number of occasions and—"

"Tipped the table," Sanderson finished.

"I'll never forget the night I had a straight flush," the smaller man pouted.

"You had no such thing, Tyler, and everyone knows it," Deli's voice surfaced behind Reed, but she hadn't touched his vision. "And I haven't a drop of whiskey in me tonight, so you all can let go of that poor table."

No one moved.

Reed snapped his cards together and tipped his head back. He could almost make out the curve of her chin.

"Good evening, Mr. Becker," she said without looking down.

"Evening, Ms. Gold."

"I can see that I was right."

"About what?"

"Who," she corrected.

"All right, Deli." Reed shrugged. "About who?"

"You, of course. Did my father teach you how to lose money with cards? Or did you figure it all by yourself?"

"All by myself, actually," Reed said smugly. "Why don't you join us?"

"I wouldn't be caught dead."

The man Deli had called Tyler, snickered.

"What's so funny?" Deli demanded.

Instantly, he sobered. "Nothin'."

"Oh, come on!" Sanderson growled. "Are we gonna play cards or chit-chat all night? I gotta get home before my wife hunts me down." He nodded at Reed. "Take her home, will ya? We'd like to lose our money to Archer in peace."

"I'm not going home," Deli said before Reed could answer. "I have fifteen pairs of trousers to scrub and twice that many socks."

"Go ahead and let off early," Chestnut said out of no where.

Reed turned to find that he'd sneaked up behind Deli, surprising them all. He had a fatherly quality about him, Reed decided, something you didn't see much of in the way of cat houses.

Deli turned on her heel and faced Chestnut, nose to nose. "I'm not—"

He cut her off with a look Reed couldn't read. It was the same look that went with the nudge Eric had given her that afternoon. Apparently, Chestnut had his hand in it too, what ever *it* may be.

"Who'll take care of my wash?" Deli asked.

"Debra will do it," Chestnut coolly answered.

"And what about the leftover stew?"

"I'll see that you get it."

Slowly, Deli's gaze lowered to Reed. After their encounter this afternoon, it was no wonder she looked irritated and apprehensive.

"Are you headed home?" she asked him.

Reed glanced at Eric and Sanderson. Both gave him a nod that said they wouldn't be playing with Deli poised over their shoulders. Reed wondered just how many of them were in on whatever it was she had up her sleeve.

"Looks like I *am* going home," Reed said, unfolding from the uncomfortable chair. He stretched his arms, which triggered an unexpected yawn.

He hadn't expected Deli to become this friendly so soon. Smiling, Reed stretched his arm out with an exaggerated flourish. "Shall we, Ms. Gold?"

Tyler snickered.

Deli scowled.

She took hold of Reed's arm, almost ripping it from the socket and yanked him away from the table.

"I don't see why everything has to be a tease with you," she muttered.

Linking his arm into hers, Reed led her out the saloon doors. "And everything is so serious with you."

"Life *is* serious," she said.

The moment they stepped onto the walkway, she let go of his arm and stopped walking. Reed pretended not to notice as he started for his horse at the hitching post.

"I guess I'm riding with you," she said, not sounding at all pleased with the idea. "My brother dropped me off and was supposed to take me back."

Reed guided Matthew's old mare toward Deli and extended his hand. "You think you can survive it?"

Just a hint of amusement shined in her eyes as she sighed. "I suppose."

"I don't want to force you into—"

"You couldn't force me to do anything, Reed."

"That's right," he said, taking her smaller hand into his. "You are, after all, *the* Deli Gold."

"And I have a mind of my own."

"So, I've heard."

Her brows rose slightly. "Heard?"

"And have seen," Reed added. He touched the tip of his tongue. "And have experienced. Or was that your temper?"

Reed wouldn't have believed it possible if he hadn't seen it for himself, but Deli Gold's cheeks, despite her brazen independence, turned a warm shade of red. The unusual color made her sapphire eyes appear brighter and larger on her face.

"It was neither," she finally said.

If Reed hadn't been straining to hear, he never would've made out the words.

"Then, what was it?" he asked.

She wiggled her hand out of his and anxiously approached the horse. "A mistake, that's all."

This mysterious side of Deli Gold had showed its face before. Those were the times when Reed found himself drawn to her the most. Not that he minded her strong will and stubbornness. But her anger, he could do without. Even now, while the same woman stood before him, her back to him, her shoulders slightly hunched, the anger had disappeared.

"A mistake?" Reed repeated. "As in an accident?"

He hadn't meant to sound so mocking and disbelieving, but his gut wouldn't allow him anything else. It was hard to believe that she was trying to escape with such a pitiful excuse, especially since they both knew she didn't bite him on accident.

"No," she said, mockingly. "Not an accident. A mistake."

"You *mistakenly* bit me?"

"No, I bit you on purpose, but only because I—"

"Stop fiddling with that horse, Deli, and look at me."

Her arms fell to her sides at the command. Her shoulders straightened and her head moved a notch higher, making Reed wonder if he hadn't provoked her temper again.

Sighing, she did a slow turn to face him. "When I said I made a mistake, I meant...I was...wrong."

Wrong?

Reed had spent years looking over his shoulder and keeping an eye out for himself, but he'd never expected to be ambushed like this. Face to face, and by a woman whose simple words caught him off guard and without a weapon.

"How was I to know that people go sticking their tongues into each others mouths?" she said. "If I'd known that, I would've..." her voice trailed off.

Reed found himself wishing she'd complete the thought. You would've what? he wanted to scream.

How the hell was he supposed to know that she didn't have *some* kind of knowledge on the subject of men and women?

"Well, people don't just go around kissing *anyone*, Deli," Reed heard himself say with a nervous chuckle he didn't recognize.

"I *know* that. Shitfire, what do you think I am? Thick?"

Reed shook off his bewilderment and moved closer to her. Making sure they were alone, he glanced at the saloon doors over his shoulder.

"So, what you mean to say, in your beat around the bush kind of way, is that you wish you'd known better. And if given the chance, you'd might take me up on it."

Her gaze moved from his lips to his eyes then back again. She gave him an abrupt nod, but nothing more.

Not for the first time, Reed found himself wishing they were alone. She'd stumped him again, but he wouldn't waste his time trying to figure out why. Not now.

"You know something, Deli? You truly mystify me."

Her features hardened to a scowl. "What'd I do this time?"

"Absolutely nothing."

"So...Are you?"

"Am I what?"

"Going to kiss me again," she said, her expression dancing between simplicity, embarrassment, and absolute seriousness. "I figure I might as well know. A girl, I mean a woman, should probably know ahead of time. Though, I guess most would," she said, nervously scratching the side of her head. "Although I don't expect it's something you can plan. It just sorta happens, right? Like a rainstorm or a drought. Yeah, probably more like a drought. It's almost near impossible to tell that there's gonna be one until it's right on top of you." She stopped rambling long enough to nod at Chestnut's place behind Reed. "Maybe I should practice first."

Reed took Deli's hands and silenced her with a shake of his head.

Just who did she plan on practicing with?

Still holding her hands, he gently nudged her chin upward. "We *don't* need to discuss it. You *will* know when it's going to happen. And you *don't* need to go practicing." No longer concerned with spying eyes, he lowered his face to hers. "With anyone."

"I'll know when it's about to happen?" she softly repeated.

Reed nodded. A sudden urge to completely protect her, maybe to even keep her for himself, surged through him. He'd never given a thought to whether or not she planned on or ever had been with another. It never mattered before, not the way it somehow mattered now.

"I think I know when," she whispered.

"You think so?"

"Mm-hmm..." he barely heard her murmur.

"And when's that?"

"Right now?" she said hopefully.

"You're a fast learner."

"Deli..." he heard her name, but it hadn't come from him.

Reed ignored the weak voice that threatened to steal what he'd unknowingly hunted and had finally caught.

She closed her eyes and took a long gentle breath. Her full, pure lips parted as she exhaled against him.

"Deli..." the voice squeaked again.

She answered it with a soft moan that vibrated Reed's mouth. He slithered his arms around the small of her back and pulled their bodies together.

"Pleeeth," the voice groaned, sounding further into the distance than before. "Evens...Ch...Chance Evens..."

"Chance Evens," she breathed.

Reed paused over her. Her brow crinkled and her eyes fluttered open.

"Chance Evens?" she said again, this time separating their bodies as much as Reed's arms would allow. "What'd you say?"

Reed blinked at her. "Chance Evens?"

"Deli...pleeeth..."

At the indecipherable groan, they both turned toward the sound.

"Chance," Deli said, suddenly aware.

Reed gripped her wrist and held her beside himself. "I heard it too."

"Deli..." the ghostly sound haunted her.

"Let go!" She yanked out of his hold.

Reed reached for her, but she'd already bounded out of his reach, headed toward the direction of the voice. Instinctively, Reed reached for his gun. Too late, he realized he'd never retrieved it from Chestnut. Damn saloon and the "no firearms" policy.

"Wait," Reed called after Deli, but she'd already rounded the corner into the alleyway beside the saloon.

Reed followed her lead into the shadowed alley. He rounded the corner and stopped in his tracks. On the ground, two feet ahead of him, Deli had fallen to her knees. She hunched over an unrecognizable form that murmured words Reed couldn't understand.

"It's Travis," she said before he could ask.

Reed felt the pain in her words, though he knew immediately that he wouldn't see it on her face when she looked up. Her anger had returned. Reed sensed it immediately. Deli had been ripped to shred by her brother's near dead condition, but it'd never bring her to tears.

"Don't move," he heard her say.

Unsure if she meant the order for him or for Travis, Reed paused.

"You're gonna be all right," she said, in the same dead tone as before.

Reed knelt beside her for a closer look at Travis's injuries. The boy's once handsome, defined features had been transformed into something that resembled a mountain lion's dinner. His lips and eyes had dried shut with an amount of blood Reed had never seen a man live through. Travis's left cheek had swelled like a thunder cloud ready to burst, while his right one sagged, crushed and disfigured. Fresh blood continued to flow freely from an indistinct wound on his head.

Reed couldn't have blocked out the muted grunts if he wanted to.

"Don't speak," he heard himself say. His stomach churned, a reaction he never would've expected.

He'd witnessed wounds equal to and far worse than this, and went for supper afterward, but this was different. He knew this kid. He liked this kid. Travis didn't deserve this.

"Now do you believe me?" Deli's voice sliced through him with animosity that pointed blame.

Travis's desperate groans had withered to relieved whimpers. In his sister's hands, he knew he would live.

But Reed wasn't so sure. He hadn't pointed it out, but below them, just beside his foot, a puddle of blood had grown. Carefully, he plucked back Travis's shirt. Already bruised and swollen, his frail chest heaved in and out. Below his breast, a gaping black hole stared back at them. Reed blinked twice, but there was no mistaking the broken blade still inside.

Chapter Ten

Deli scraped a sliver of Travis's dried blood out of her thumbnail and stared lifelessly at the center of the kitchen table. "I don't blame you."

"Of course you don't," Reed answered. "You blame yourself."

Deli lifted her gaze at the comment that sounded more along the lines of a well-planted insult.

"Just like you blame yourself for everything else," he added.

"I won't even ask what you're talking about," she said, getting to her feet. "It's probably another argument that I don't want anything to do with."

"I'm only saying, Deli, that it seems that you take the blame for a number of things that can't be controlled."

Deli took a moment to examine his features. Reed didn't appear mocking or all-knowing. In fact, she'd hardly been able to face him since they'd taken Travis to Dr. Young because Reed's eyes had been so full of a pain, a reaction Deli hadn't been prepared for.

"This could've been controlled," she finally said. "I should've known Chance wasn't done with us."

"You sure it was Chance?"

Deli shook her head with disbelief. "You're still questioning us..."

"I talked to the sheriff and—"

"And he says that Chance has an alibi, right?"

Reed nodded.

"Well, of course, he had one." Deli grunted. "He's a bastard, not an idiot."

"I'm not questioning your brother or you," Reed said. His features had hardened and his gaze had shifted steadily to the door as if he expected company at any time. "I only want to know what we're up against."

"We?"

"Gold Farm does belong to me," he said, looking at her again.

"You don't need to remind me."

"So this is more of my fight than it is yours."

"Is that why your brother was attacked?" she asked smartly. "No, Chance isn't after you. It's personal. He hates me. It's beyond Gold Farm."

Deli had figured that out the moment she saw Travis's limp body in the alley.

"So, this has nothing to do with the farm," Reed said, shaking his head.

"I'm sure the farm's a bonus."

"I doubt that..."

Deli scooted over to the widow and peered out. Shadows danced in the front yard and climbed up the side of the barn and the distant trees. Reed said it wasn't her fault, and she knew it wasn't. But somehow she still took blame. Had she bowed out and gave way to Chance, Travis would never have suffered a moment near death. She pressed her forehead against the glass. So many things she should have done differently. So many things...

"I shouldn't be here," she murmured. "I should be with Travis. Shitfire...Pa always said my pride would get me killed. Looks like he was right."

Unease rose within her. She'd come to a conclusion, but had been too afraid to say it out loud. Saying it would make it so.

Hell, it just wasn't fair!

She pressed her forehead harder against the warm glass and flattened her palms against the window. Dr. Young said Travis's condition didn't look good at all. That's when Deli told him he was an uneducated idiot with cow patties for brains, and that if Travis didn't come through this clean as snow, she'd kill him.

Deli glanced over her shoulder and caught Reed staring at her.

He'd dragged her out of Young's place like a stubborn yelping pup. She didn't remember much except that Reed had said that she was making things worse for Travis.

Sighing, she moved away from the window. She'd have stayed if Chestnut hadn't promised to keep an eye out for Travis and if she'd been strong enough to fight Reed off. But she wasn't. She couldn't fight Reed or Chance or Pa. She'd tried for so many years. Maybe Ma was wrong. Trying didn't make a damn difference.

"We can go see him in the morning," Reed said suddenly.

Deli shook her head. Wearily, she glanced around the cabin, that sick feeling returning to her inner gut.

"I...um..." her voice disappeared as she gestured to one of the walls. "I've been thinking about—"

"About what?"

She cleared her throat and the knot that swelled within it. "About all of this...About the farm. I'm...uh...leaving."

"Don't go harassing Young," Reed said, solemnly. "He needs to concentrate on your brother right now."

"No, I don't think you understand. I mean...I'm leaving."

The very sound of her voice, weak and defeated, made her want to vomit. Her news should've made Reed jump for joy, but instead, lines of concern etched his forehead as he stood.

"What do you mean leaving?"

"I mean I'm done," she nearly shouted. "I'm leaving."

Saying it didn't put a damper on the ball of fire burning its way up her throat. Stomping to her room, Deli kicked open the chest at the end of her bed and stared dumbly into it. Reed's footsteps stopped behind her.

"Chestnut has been offering me a room for years," she said. "I should've gone before now. I should've stopped being so stupid and stubborn and selfish. I should've listened to everyone." Bending over, she gathered her tattered clothes into her arms. "Gold Farm is yours anyhow. I don't even know what I'm doing here."

"You're here because it's your home."

"Was."

Reed took the clothes from her arms and dropped them into the trunk. "It still is."

Unable to register her announcement to suddenly up and leave, Reed stared blankly at the determination hardened on Deli's features. She'd bent to pick up the clothes he'd discarded, but paused and glanced up at him.

"What's wrong with you?" she asked.

He had a dozen things to say, but she'd stumped him again. He knew she could be pushed over the edge. He just didn't know it would be so absolute and so devastating.

"You're just giving up," he voiced his conclusion aloud.

"I think I've fought well, Reed. Sometimes you just gotta let the dog die, my ma would say." She grouped her clothing into her arms and straightened. "I thought you'd be happy about this, glad that I'm finally out of your way."

"I'm not. That's not what I wanted."

"Isn't it?"

Somehow, she didn't seem like a child anymore.

"Put your clothes down," Reed said. "No one is going any where."

She paused and seemed to consider his words for a moment. She blinked down at the clothes in her arms, then back up to him.

"Should I stay until they kill Travis?" she asked softly. "Or me? Or...Or you?"

Taking advantage of the temporary weakness he saw in her eyes, Reed took the clothes out of her arms. "No one's going to die."

The truth in his voice scared him. It told him the one thing he hadn't wanted to face before. No one would lay a hand on Deli...least not while she was here...with him. He wouldn't allow it. Travis's pain had been enough of a warning. And Deli was right. Whoever had done this meant to do more. But Reed knew one thing. Running wasn't the answer.

Dropping her clothes into the trunk, he took her by the hand and led her from her room. "If the sheriff is in with Chance—"

"He's not. He's just a dim wit. He's scared of Chance Evens. Everyone is."

"But *if*," Reed said, directing her back into her chair at the table. "It's a possibility that we have to consider. First things first, though. Who do you think Chance is working for?"

"Working for?"

Reed sat beside her and let her hand drop softly in her lap. "You hadn't considered that he might be the go-for for someone higher?"

"Uh—uh."

"But—"

"But it's possible," she breathed. Realization washed a spark of hope over her softened features. "Chance is almost too thick to—"

"All right," Reed stopped her. "Let's not just stop with that. What else could it be? Maybe Chance is answering to the Sheriff?"

"Maybe."

Knowing he'd side-tracked her, Reed relaxed. He'd never actually considered she might leave. The thought made him unexpectedly hollow and sick.

"All right," she said, the life returning to her eyes, "but why Sheriff Sault? What does he want Gold Farm for?"

"The mountain."

"Right." She pushed her hair behind her ear and slumped in her chair. "That damn...I mean dang mountain has been cursing this family for years."

"Who else wants it?" Reed asked.

"Just about everyone."

"Such as?"

"Well, almost everyone. Most folks think I'm lettin' it rot by not minin' it. Most think the mountain has more to give."

"But who, Deli? Name them."

"*Everybody*." She shrugged. "Even Chestnut thinks I'm lettin' it waste to nothing. That's why Sault won't pin nothing on Chance. He says it can be anyone."

"But you're sure it's Chance Evens."

"I've *seen* him Reed. Plain as I'm looking at you right now."

Reed leaned one arm on the table and wrinkled his brow. It made no common sense whatsoever. What kind of sheriff had that much to go on and didn't do anything about it?

"I mean it's not like he's the first," she said off handedly. "If he jailed everybody that threatened me, there'd be two people left in town. Me and Travis." Her eyes widened as soon as the words left her mouth. "I mean...it...it ain't...I mean hasn't...been easy."

Reed narrowed his eyes on her. She hadn't told him everything.

"You don't have too many friends around here, do you, Deli?"

Her eyes shifted away from his. "Nope, and I don't want none either."

"And why's that?"

"Because I have no use for them."

"No." Reed shook his head. "What I mean is, why don't they befriend you?" It didn't take much for him to know it had something to do with what had been said in the saloon when he first came here. "Is it because of your mother?"

She swallowed and licked her lips, looking no where near trusting him. Reed wondered what truth hid beneath her dull blue eyes, but knew he wouldn't get it even if he asked.

"All right..." she said in an ominously low tone. "I'm gonna say this one time, and one time only. Then I'm not saying it again. I won't answer your questions. I won't tell you more than I want to. And I won't be left to feel like a leper, when I'm done. You hear me?"

Reed didn't know what to say to that. If he hadn't seen her lips moving, he never would've have guessed such a dead, disgusted voice could come from the pit of Deli Gold.

"Them folks," she said, "most of them think I killed my momma. They'd have hung me right off if Chestnut hadn't stopped them. They'd have taken Travis and killed me." Slowly her gaze met his, but they were eyes Reed didn't recognize. "I *did not* kill my momma. I *did not* shoot her. I *did not* ask anyone to shoot her for me. And I did not do anything else they say I did. I took care of my momma straight up to the day she took her last

breath. And then it was done. That, Mr. Becker, is why there ain't too many around here that care what Chance does. And I ain't gonna...won't say another word about it."

She continued to stare boldly at him, awaiting the verdict of his words. Reed searched her eyes to find the truth he'd hoped would be there. While her eyes spoke in volumes, he couldn't discount the missing pieces in her story. There were parts she'd blatantly told him and parts she deliberately left out.

Determined not to push her further away, Reed took a deep breath before speaking. The less he said, the more likely she'd be to trust him to the whole truth of her secrets, secrets that he assumed had made her into the stone woman she'd become.

"Is this why Sault won't help you?" he calmly asked.

"I can only guess."

She relaxed the moment he spoke. Her eyes appeared a shade lighter and her chin had lowered, though not much.

"That's why I didn't want to leave Travis in town," she said. "I don't trust them."

"Travis is in good hands. I talked to the Doc myself."

"And that's suppose to change his entire idea of me?" She shook her head and smirked at him the way one would a child who'd asks about babies. "This town sticks together."

"What's Dr. Young done to you?"

Deli's brow wrinkled. "Nothing, but—"

"But you assume—"

"I keep my shield up, Reed. Don't you know anything about fighting in a war?"

"In war? No. But I know a hell of a lot about personal battles."

Reed wondered if she understood a word of what he said. By the look on her face, she didn't.

"Take a look around, Deli. No one is fighting against you, but you."

She straightened and gawked at him as if he'd grown bull's horns. Reed wished he didn't have to put that look on her face. Lingering between realization and offense, her eyes tightened on his face.

"You mean to tell me that I imagined Travis's wounds?" she said. "Why, Mr. Becker, that's wonderful."

Reed narrowed his gaze on her. He should've guessed she'd attack him. How quick she was to turn the subject away from her own pain.

"I never said your hurt isn't real, Deli." More frustrated than irate, he glared at her. "I thought you knew me better than that by now. I also think there are more people in this town that support you than you're willing to give credit."

"You have no idea what you're talking about."

"Maybe I don't," Reed said. "But I do know that you'd rather shut everyone out than risk letting them in. I know more about you than you think."

"No, you don't."

"No?"

Her eyes dwelled on him for the stroke of a second before she grew uncomfortable and looked away. Reed wished she could understand what he meant. He'd seen so many aspects of Deli, so many different sides, sides she more that likely hadn't shared with others.

He'd witnessed her anger, her frustration, her fright, and her smiles. And of course, her passion, though she'd simplified that to a scant kiss they'd never finished.

So much more hid beneath Deli. So much even she didn't know was there.

"You don't think I know you well enough to realize what you're doing to yourself?" he asked. "What you do to others?"

She blinked lamely at him as if seconds parted each of his words and she hadn't heard all of what he'd said. Swallowing, she wound a strand of hair around her finger and gave him half a shrug. She appeared intrigued by his words, but Reed could only hope.

"Stop fiddling, Deli."

Taken off guard, she glanced at the hair she'd frazzled before pushing it behind her ear. "What do you mean what I do to others?"

"When you push them away."

"I don't push everyone away. Only you."

"I know."

She was trying to push him away right now. Her features tightened when he grinned. Try as he may, Reed couldn't stop it.

"Apparently," she said, "I haven't been very successful at that either."

"It's the only way I know to get to the real you, Deli."

Reed narrowed his gaze on her when the words left his lips. He'd thought about it before, about the way she weakened in his arms, but he never thought he'd actually find himself saying it aloud. Talking about such things with Deli would more than likely send her running in the other direction.

"Wh...What?" she stammered. "What's the only way?"

"By getting physically close," he answered.

He hadn't been prepared for his heart's double beat. It only made him reconcile with what he hadn't wanted to believe. Somehow this kid, this woman, with so little experience and yet so much life behind her, had managed to weasel her way into his heart the way so many women had tried and failed to in the past.

The idea almost had Reed in hysterics. His brother, Luke, once asked him what kind of woman he thought he might marry. The concept had been laughable at first. Reed didn't want marriage. Unlike his brother, he had no cause. And he wouldn't be forced.

Looking at Deli now, Reed understood the question. At the time, he'd told Luke that the woman he'd have for wife would be pure, of course. Humorous. Beautiful. Kind. Everything Deli Gold wasn't.

Shifting his attention to her wide, anxious eyes, Reed wished he could withdraw his last thought. There was a beauty about Deli, a charm he hadn't recognized the first night he met her and something no one could see from a distance.

Shifting uncomfortably, she resumed twisting the tip of her hair. Even that, that habit, that small repeated gesture, appealed to him.

And as for kindness and humor, he'd seen that part of her too, though not often.

Reed cleared his throat and wished he could remember where their conversation had left off. Her gaze had drifted downward in the humble way it sometimes did when he stared at her for too long.

"So what you mean," she finally said, "is that the only times you like me is when I'm...I mean, we're...close." She gestured their chests. "And when we're not—"

"You've missed my point entirely," Reed said. He hated to think of what she'd do if she knew how much he actually thought about her. "What I'm saying is that the shield you said you wear for this 'war' lowers at those times, Deli. You aren't thinking about how much you hate. You're only thinking about one thing."

Her eyes lifted suddenly. "And what do you think that is?"

"Me."

Her lips parted, but nothing came out.

Stunned, Deli took a slow breath, but she couldn't be sure if the air actually reached her lungs. She knew the exact times Reed spoke of, and he spoke so honestly about them. He knew her, just like he said. When his breath fanned her cheek and his arms warmed her back and neck, she couldn't think of anything but him...and herself.

Lowering her attention to the table, she embraced the guilt that came with realization. She'd only been so compliant because she needed him to marry her, right? He hadn't really affected her so deeply. He hadn't really softened her shield.

The swelling guilt made her hands shake. She'd made him believe exactly what she'd wanted. How could she do such a thing? How could she manipulate Reed so thoroughly that she actually believed the act herself?

And it had been an act, hadn't it?

Deli folded her hands together and lowered them in her lap. It was only natural to dwell on those moments, even if she hadn't meant them. Of course, she'd thought about him constantly. He was the key to Gold Farm. She couldn't help but want to progress past a single kiss. That was all part of the plan.

Refusing to look at him, Deli took a shaky breath. Her explanations seemed to make sense, but they also slipped away as quickly as she thought of them. She wanted more from Reed Becker. And it had nothing to do with tricking him into marriage.

"Do you want to tell me I'm wrong?" his voice caressed her. "You don't think about me at those times."

Slowly, Deli nodded. There wasn't much else she *could* do without a voice.

"And maybe," he continued, "it's not just at those times."

Refusing the accusation, she shook her head.

"You see, Deli, I have a theory about our kind."

"Our kind?" she repeated.

Reed nodded. "We who want nothing more than simplicity and ease. We don't have the room or the time for things that everyone else gets carried away with. Things like family and marriage and love." His eyes pinned her in place and stole her objections. "But I think we also have a problem here, Deli, whether you recognize it or not."

"And what problem is that?"

Sitting across from her, Reed leaned forward and balanced his forearms on the table. She continued to stare intently at him, her eyes never moving, never blinking.

"Somehow," he said, "when we weren't looking, one of the things we've both tried for so long to avoid, sneaked up on us. And since it's pretty clear that it wasn't family and marriage, it must've been—"

"You're wrong," she said before he could finish.

Dear Lord, when had her palms started sweating?

Pulling her hair over one shoulder, Deli busied herself with twisting the thick main into a tight twine that resembled a barber pole. "You have no idea how wrong."

Reed pulled her hands away from her hair. "Stop fidgeting."

"I'm not."

He lifted one brow in question.

"All right, so maybe I am fidgeting," she conceded. "But what am I suppose to do when you start babbling on about ridiculously stupid things like..." Deli closed her eyes, unable to bring herself to say the words. "Like what you were just talking about, things that have nothing to do with us. Do you have any idea how ridiculous you sound? You're so wrong."

"You already said that."

Deli caught Reed's hands moving gently over her fingertips, but couldn't pull them away. She'd tricked him better than she thought.

"You can't deny it," he said.

"Yes, I can."

"But do you want to?"

Deli froze at the challenge in his tone. Did she want to deny him and herself all the things that transpired between them, all the things that the future might hold if she pursued this conversation?

Immediately, she pulled her hands away and fumbled with her hair. "Stop staring at me."

"I'm trying to talk to you, Deli. I'm trying to tell you something."

Why was he doing this to her?

Was it so easy for him to fool with a person in such a way?

Aggravated, Deli crossed her arms over her chest and finally reconciled with his eyes. Never before had they been so clear and intent.

"You talk about love, Reed, but you can hardly stand me," she said.

He shook his head. "That's not true."

"And I can hardly stand you."

"Now I *know* that's not true."

"Oh, really," she said. "How do you think I feel about you, since you appear to know everything else."

Reed licked his lips and leaned back in his chair. This part was easy. He knew exactly how she felt, even if she wouldn't admit it.

"You're madly in love with me, Deli Gold, and that scares you more than anything you've ever faced before."

She laughed, and Reed widened his eyes. He'd expected a lot of things, but not laughter. It was the laugh, however, that verified his suspicions. Though a smile matched her unrestrained giggle, it didn't match her eyes. Within those pools of blue, surrounded by thick dark lashes, the truth stared back at him. He'd slammed the ax down and had landed square on his mark.

She did love him.

Her smile disappeared almost as instantly as it had come. "You should know that the only reason I would ever marry you, Reed, is to get Gold Farm."

Reed nodded at what she probably thought insulting. She could say what she wanted, but he already had his answer. "So, now we're talking about marriage?"

"No, I'm just saying—"

"I know what you're saying, Deli. And we both know you're lying. The sooner you realize that, the sooner we can move onto—"

"Shitfire, you got a lot of nerve."

Reed frowned at the scowl pinching her eyebrows together. This time her anger seemed genuine.

"You think I don't see where this is going?" she asked. "You want me to marry you because then we can, or actually, *you* can fornicate all over the place."

"You make it sound like we're rabbits."

"That's what this is about," she said, straightening. "That's what you're all about. I work in a whorehouse, Reed. I see it all the time, on the faces of every drunk that comes through there."

She waved her hand in the air. Reed caught it in his own.

"But you're forgetting," he said, "this isn't a whorehouse. And I'm not drunk. Secondly, Deli, I don't need to marry you to make love to you."

Her cheeks turned a bright red, but Reed didn't regret his words.

"If I wanted to," he said, "if I really wanted to, we could make love right now, and you wouldn't say a word against it because I can see it in your eyes, you want to just as badly."

"Why, you ignorant, pr—"

Reed pressed his fingertips against her lips and instantly quieted her.

"But," he added gently, "you deserve better."

Her eyes softened. For a moment, Reed thought, hoped, that he'd made her understand. Slowly, she lifted her hand and moved his fingers away from her mouth. Her tongue appeared to wet her lips then disappeared again.

"So, you want to marry me..." she breathed.

Reed shrugged, but he didn't feel as near as casual as the gesture he gave. "I figure it's inevitable."

"I don't believe you," she whispered. "And I don't trust you."

Reed didn't know what to say to that. Here he'd put his heart on the table, something he swore he'd never do and she refused to acknowledge it. But could he blame her? Just because he'd experience some kind of epiphany, he couldn't expect her to comply. Why the hell did she have to be so stubborn?

Somehow, it didn't matter though. Even if she didn't recognize it now, she would...

Even if she only married him for the damn farm, he didn't care...

"Let me see if I understand you," she said, a glimmer of suspicion glaring from her eyes. "You want to...to marry me. And why was this?"

"Because I love you?" he suggested. Isn't that what he'd been saying?

"I see." She nodded. "You love me. And remind me, when did this happen?"

"I have no idea."

"And it doesn't matter that I don't love you?"

"Oh, but you do," he said matter-of-factly.

"How could I forget. This is the part I don't know about."

"That's right."

She examined the table for a moment, swiped a speck of dust Reed couldn't see, then looked at him again. "And it doesn't matter that I'm only interested in Gold Farm?"

"Not in the least. Because you're not."

"Amazing," she breathed. "You've got this all figured out, don't you?"

"Except for the part about our children."

Reed thought she might smile. Instead, a frown captured her face. "And it doesn't matter to you that you know nothing about me?"

"I'll learn," he said simply.

She nodded, but it appeared to be a part of her mockery. "And—"

"More questions?"

"One more." She held up her finger. "When exactly did you lose your mind?"

Reed froze.

"You see, Reed, I don't believe a word of what you say. There's nothing about me that you could possibly love." Her eyes dulled but her chin remained firm. "You know I only want Gold Farm. I told you how I feel about you, but you keep on with this. That makes me not trust you."

Reed took a deep breath, reminding himself that she still held that shield in place. Straightening, he reached across the table and cupped her chin in his hand. Surprisingly, she didn't pull away.

"Just like that," she said, "you're willing to risk a marriage that would never work."

Giving her eyes a final inspection, Reed nodded. "I'm willing to bet on it."

Slowly, her chin moved in his palm as she nodded. "Fine," she said. "I'll marry you. Either way I win."

Her eyes, cold and withholding, needled him with resentment. Reed wouldn't allow himself to be put off by the gesture. He'd said a lot tonight. She needed time to get used to the idea. They both did.

"I'll tell you what, Deli. If you're so sure I can't be trusted, I'll give you the one thing you want. Gold Farm. It's yours. You can have it. I'll go see Sault in the morning."

Her expression didn't change, but Reed could see her thinking.

"When will we marry?" she asked as if they were putting the final amendments on a contract.

"When do you want to?"

"The sooner the better. I told you, I'm only interested in the farm. The sooner we get this marriage part over, the closer I'll be to having it."

"I already said I'm giving it to you, Deli."

"And I already said I don't trust you."

Fine, Reed thought. If that's what she needed to allow herself this step closer to happiness.

He couldn't be sure how he knew she needed him. She just did. The thought sent warmth and contentment throughout Reed. It'd been a long time since anyone needed him.

She needed him for the parts of herself she hadn't yet discovered. But when she did, he'd be there...waiting.

Taken by how swift their arrangement had come about, Reed took a deep breath. The end to this charade eluded him. He'd marry her...and he'd wait. The only problem was, he didn't know how long he could hold out. He wasn't sure how long he could wait for Deli Gold.

Chapter Eleven

Deli cupped her hands against her face and refused to look into Debra's mocking eyes. What exactly had she done?

"You know what I think?" Debra said. "I think someone's been tricked, and it's not Reed Becker. You wanted to marry him, but this isn't exactly how you planned it."

"It's not how I planned it at all," Deli mumbled into her palms.

"But Gold Farm will be yours, Deli. I don't see the problem."

Deli released a heavy sigh, but it did nothing to take away her unease. Reed had left her alone at the table last night. It'd been better that way. A myriad of thoughts confused her and blurred all common sense. She had a feeling that's exactly what he wanted to happen.

On occasion, though not often enough for it to matter, she allowed herself to wonder if he might really *want* to marry her. Though she couldn't figure out why. Debra said men were like that. She said when it came to being in love, Reed was right on the money since men had a way of knowing these things first.

That scared Deli more than anything because that meant Reed was right. Before he'd brought it up, she'd never given a thought to love. She'd thought plenty about marriage. That had been her goal. But love? What did her marriage to Reed Becker have to do with love?

"That tells you something," Debra said, "if he's willing to just give you Gold Farm."

Deli nodded and dropped her hands from her face. "It tells me he's up to more than I can figure."

"Why does he have to up to anything?"

Deli looked Debra over. Funny how her legs never got tired, even when she stood in that doorway for hours on end. Suddenly, Debra didn't seem as wise as she once did. Her question, one whose answer was so obvious and painful, repeated itself in Deli's mind.

"Look at me," she told Debra. "What exactly is it that Reed is in love with?" Her voice felt weak and dissipating, but Deli refused to let it go. Her lack of beauty had never been a secret. "I'm dirty more often than I'm clean. I don't know how to cook or tend to house or be all the things my momma was. I can't recall ever saying a kind thing to Reed or making him feel welcomed. But he still insists that...that..." She shook her head. "Just look at me."

Debra let out half a laugh, a laugh that burned Deli's ears with mockery. She moved inside the small washroom and closed the door behind herself. Uncomfortable, Deli shifted her gaze to the mounds of laundry around them. She pretended not to notice when Debra sat beside her.

"Let me tell you something," Debra said in a tone so soft Deli almost didn't hear her. "I'm going to tell you something you were too young to notice and something your poor momma never had a chance to say."

Deli swallowed the implications of her mother's death. She hated to be reminded of it, especially when it seemed to come up so often these days.

"Our qualities," Debra said, "aren't the things we show, they aren't the things that everyone so obviously notices. The people who love us, love us for something so much deeper, Deli. Since you don't think much of yourself, I don't know if get my meaning."

Deli shrugged. Why did it seem that she'd been getting nothing but lectures these days?

"Reed loves you beyond your meanness, Deli. He's seen what's beneath that. It's the same way you love me despite my being a whore. You love Chestnut although he's a verbal dimwit. You love Travis despite his sometimes being pea-brained and immature. You love all of us for what you know about us that others don't." Debra took a deep breath, but her voice whispered. "That's the depth of love, Deli, that goes beyond the single word. Love isn't an action. It's not a hug or a kiss. It's so much more that I can't begin to tell you. If you think Reed isn't capable of reaching beyond what you show, you're about fifty cards short of a deck. And if he said it, Deli, if he went so far as to saying those words to you, than you have no right to deny him. You don't have to love him back, but you can't change what he feels."

Deli fiddled with her thumbnail and drew her lower lip between her teeth. How Debra had learned so much, just by being a whore, she'd never know.

To believe that Reed loved her, that he really and truly loved her, was as laughable as Travis becoming president.

"And I don't know what else to tell you about it," Debra said standing. "But I do know this, if you didn't feel something for that man, for the one person who has chosen to look past all your bitterness and contempt, than you wouldn't be set on marrying in the next few minutes."

"I want Gold Farm," Deli said.

"Sure you do," Debra said, opening the door. "You want Gold Farm *and* Reed Becker."

How absolutely ridiculous.

Standing, Deli dusted her hands against each other and pushed passed Debra in the doorway. She couldn't bring herself to look her in the eye.

"I have to go," she said. "I have to go get married."

"You sure you don't want us there with you?" Debra called after her.

Not bothering to answer, Deli kept on toward the saloon doors. She didn't want any of them there to witness her deceit. Especially if Travis wouldn't be attending.

Deli struggled to put thoughts of her brother out of her mind, but his reaction to the wedding announcement stuck with her more than anything anyone else had said. Travis had smiled. Though he couldn't speak, and could barely breath, he'd somehow managed to push a grin onto his face when Deli said she and Reed were getting married. Deli didn't know what to make of that grin. But for the first time in her life, Travis didn't look like a child anymore.

That bothered Deli more than his reaction. Things were changing too quickly.

Crossing the street, she avoided the stares she felt at her back. She envisioned a dozen heads pressed into the small doorjamb of the saloon as everyone watched her climb the steps to Sheriff Sault's office. As far as she was concerned, they all needed a good hard whack on the back of the head.

The meddling, nosey fools...

Taking a deep breath, Deli opened the door and stepped into Sault's dark quarters. She squinted into the shadows to see he and Reed bent over a small desk in the corner. Both looked up when she entered.

Reed smiled, as genuine as he'd been the night before. Quickly, Deli looked away. She scratched the side of her head and approached them.

"All right," she said, "where do we start?"

"I'm going to have you sign right here," Sault said holding a quill out to her.

Deli took the pen without hesitation. "And that's it?"

Reed frowned.

"Not exactly," Sault said.

Deli hunched over the desk and signed her name beneath Reed's. She couldn't bring herself to read the document. Denial still tugged at her heart and kept her eyes away from the words.

"There you go," she said, dropping the quill. "Now what?"

Sault scratched his dark bushy mustache and blinked at her. "You sure this is something you want to do, Deli?"

"What's it matter to you? When did you suddenly care?"

Reed lifted his hands between them. "Let's not turn this into another fight. Deli knows what she's doing." He looked at her. "Right?"

She glanced down at their signatures and crossed her arms over her chest. "What do we do next?"

Reed dropped his hands to his sides. He hadn't expected her to wake up with a different attitude. She'd needed more than one night's time.

"Now we have a brief ceremony," Sault said.

"Is that necessary?" she asked.

Reed nodded. "Yes."

Sault shook his head. "Not really."

"Then I don't want one," Deli said.

Sault scratched the back of his head and shifted his gaze between Reed and Deli. "It ain't exactly that simple."

For a moment Reed wondered if he wasn't about to make the biggest mistake of his life. She didn't want him. She'd said so. Her actions verified it. Why was he pushing her?

"I have to ask," Sault said, "if you, Deli Gold, are taking this man of your own free will."

"Yes," she quickly answered.

"And do you, Reed Becker, take this woman as your wife—"

"Yes, he does," Deli said. Reaching forward, she swept the paper they'd signed from the desk and held it over their heads. Folding it, she turned and headed toward the door while stuffing the document down the front of her dress.

"Then...Then I now pronounce you man...and wife," Sault said to no one in particular.

Deli disappeared out the door and left it wide open.

Reed swallowed the growing knot in his throat and glanced down at his side where his new bride should be. This was not the wrong choice, he reassured himself.

But the look on Sault's face made him wonder.

"Holy shitfire!" Deli's voice screeched from outside.

Reed exchanged a puzzled expression with Sheriff Sault.

"You low down bastard, I...I should kill you right now," she said.

Reed frowned at the tremble in her voice.

"What's the matter, sweetheart?" a second, unfamiliar, voice cooed.

"I don't have a gun, that's what's the matter."

"Why, honey," the deep reply said, "you ain't thinking of doing me like you did your momma, are you?"

Reed spun on his heel and bolted out the door, nearly pummeling into Deli and a man twice the size of them both. Deli lunged toward the beastly stranger, her hands clenched into fists and aimed at his head.

Reacting, Reed grabbed her by the waist and yanked her to himself. "What's the matter?"

"That's him," she screamed, pointing an accusing finger at the filthy man who graced them both with a wide, toothless grin. "That's Chance Evens."

Reed's blood went cold at the name. He considered letting Deli at him again, but the mockery on Chance's face said it wouldn't do any good.

"Oh, hell," Sault's voice came up behind them. "I told you to stay clear of here, didn't I, Evens?"

"That you did," Chance laughed. "But I heard a little something that had me interested. Some idiot took Deli Gold as a wife, is that it?" He narrowed a suddenly threatening glare on Reed. "You must be that idiot."

"Yes, he is," Deli snapped.

"Thanks," Reed muttered. Turning, he handed Deli's wiggling body over to Sault. "Take her inside."

"Lemme go!" she screamed.

Reed ignored her retreating objections as she and Sault disappeared back inside.

With a deep breath, Reed nodded at the man standing mockingly before him. He'd have to stay calm. His past witnessed his lost temper, and this would not be another testimonial of it.

"Walk with me," Reed told Chance.

Chance appeared apprehensive, but grudgingly started up the walk after Reed. Keeping him cornered against the buildings, Reed strolled on the outside of the boarded walkway.

"Apparently," Reed said calmly, "you have a problem with Deli Gold, which in turn means you have a problem with me."

"A problem with Deli?" Chance laughed. "Is that what she says."

"She and everyone else."

Chance stopped walking. His eyes darkened. "Who's everyone else?"

Reed squared his shoulders and folded his arms over his chest. Chance stood a good head taller and at least a foot wider than himself.

"It doesn't matter," Reed said coolly.

Narrowing his eyes, he summed Chance up. He'd arrested a number of criminals in the past that could've been Chance himself. Men with muscle and very little of anything else.

"Let's get this out of the way right now," Reed said in a threatening low voice, a voice he hadn't had to use in years. "Gold Farm belongs to me. And so does everything on it. That includes the mountain *and* Deli Gold."

Reed waited a beat for Chance's reaction, but wasn't prepared for the slow grin that stretched his lips.

"I wouldn't mind having a little of both," he said.

Reed saw black.

He snapped his hand around the burly man's fat neck and pinned him to the wall. He moved so quickly, he lost his breath. Nose to nose with the person responsible for Travis's injuries, Reed squeezed his grip and flinched at the quickened pulse he felt.

How did he get himself into these situations?

Chance didn't move. A blink of pleasure flashed in his eyes when Reed increased the pressure on his throat. Reed clenched his jaw against the ridicule he saw there and his own ignorance. This man, twice his size could easily break him in two with his bare hands.

"I was right," Chance gagged. "You are an idiot."

"I should kill you right now," Reed seethed, resisting the urge to grab his gun. "Stay clear of Deli Gold. Stay clear of Travis. And stay clear of me."

Shoving himself away, Reed let go of the fleshy neck. It took everything in him not to stoop to what he once was. He wasn't a murder, not anymore. In this town, with the sheriff behind him, Chance held all the cards.

The enormous man rubbed his throat and chuckled. "You tell little Travis I send my condolences."

Reed clenched his hands into fists and refused to knock Chance's grin off with one solid swing. He'd have to put an end to this or Deli would never feel safe.

"I surely hope nothing more happens to that boy," Chance laughed. "That'd be a damn shame. You and I both know you can't be every where at once."

Reed held his breath as Chance walked away with a cocky stagger in his step. If only he could get Sault to turn a blind eye for the beat of second...

Glancing over his shoulder, Reed exhaled. He knew almost immediately Chance wasn't alone in his pursuit of the farm. This was a game to him. Someone else had motive. Someone with serious plans hid behind Chance's bulky form.

Turning on his heel, Reed headed back to Sault's office. He'd have to find out exactly who this person was. For the sake of sanity and his wife's struggle it was time to end this game.

Chapter Twelve

Deli felt Reed's eyes upon her before he spoke, but she hadn't bothered to turn around to face him. She focussed on Travis's serene features, but could imagine Reed's expression. Every where she went, she heard he'd been looking for her.

She'd lived in hell for the last week, avoiding him at all costs, sleeping at Chestnut's Place, claiming work as an excuse. Even now, she wished she could escape out the window.

She'd deprived Reed of what belonged to him as a husband. She'd deprived him of her. The thought of paying for Gold Farm with her body made her ill.

Most days, when Chestnut demanded she go home, Deli stayed with Travis. Doctor Young had stuck to his word and had given Travis the best of care. His wife, Kyla-Daye catered to Travis when he woke, which was rare. Their kindness heightened Deli's guilt. Travis might have had a normal life if she hadn't shrouded him from the world she thought was so full of hatred and pain. They could've had so much more if she had let down her guard...just like Reed had said.

Blinking down at her hands, Deli concentrated on Travis's smooth easy breaths. She took comfort in that sound. Doctor Young said it was the best sign yet. Chance had left his blade in Travis's lung, but the stab had been a lucky miss. Nothing was easy when it came to vital organs, the doc had said. But Travis's wounds could've been much worse.

Patting down her shortened skirt, Deli peeked up at her brother. From behind her, Reed's shadow fell across Travis's face, but he didn't speak.

Pretending she didn't sense him, Deli touched Travis's still hand.

"It's nice to see he's got his color back," Reed's voice bellowed in the quiet room and made Deli flinch.

Nodding, she pulled the covers over her brother's hand. "Doc Young said he's gonna pull through, Reed. He said he's young enough and strong enough."

"And he shares your blood."

Deli crooked her head to the side. She expected to see Reed mocking her, but sincerity showed clearly on his face.

"Yes, he does have that," she agreed. "From our mother."

Silence hung between them. It swayed slowly at first, until Deli felt a sudden desperateness to fill it up.

"Come with me, Deli," Reed startled her. "We need to talk."

She'd avoided this moment for so long that she'd let her guard down and he'd managed to corner her. Easing a headache away, she closed her eyes.

"Travis will be fine," he said. "Come walk with me."

Deli licked her lips and carefully stood. She wanted so badly to look into his eyes, to read what he had in mind, but she didn't need to. It had become painfully clear. He'd changed his mind.

Deli took her time straightening out Travis's blanket and filling the glass beside his bed with water. When there was nothing more she could do, she reluctantly followed Reed.

"This way," he said, leading her out of Young's office.

Deli blinked at the bright sun. Tormented in her own world, it seemed an eternity since she'd seen it. Shading her eyes with her hand, she followed Reed onto the street.

"I guess it's pretty obvious that I've been avoiding you," she said.

Reed barely glanced over his shoulder. "I hadn't noticed."

"Oh..."

"Besides," Reed said, hopping up the steps to Eric's place, "I figure we'll get around to that when you put your pride aside."

"So, it doesn't bother you at all?"

Reed swung the door open and waved her in. "I didn't say that."

Deli paused outside the door. Didn't he care? She contemplated asking another question, but Reed didn't seem to be waiting for more from her.

Stepping into Eric's small establishment, Deli blinked at the group of familiar faces staring back at her. They stood, crowded in the center of the room as if one couldn't move in either direction without the others.

She swallowed uncomfortably. She'd avoided them all this week. "What's going on here?"

"Reed's called a meeting," Eric said. "How have you been, my dear?"

"Fine." Deli nodded. "I've been fine. What kind of meeting?"

Chestnut broke away from the group first and put his arm around her shoulders. "About Chance."

"What about him?"

Debra tightened the end of her braid and leaned casually against the furthest wall. "Reed figures we all know a little something about him. If we all put our heads together, so to speak, maybe we can figure out who's hired

him."

Numb, Deli nodded at them all. They'd all showed up to help her? To help them?

Humbled, she glanced up at Reed.

"Good idea?" he said.

"Yes," Deli said. "It's a very good idea."

"I've had Chance upstairs with me a couple times," Debra said. "He's always mumbling about one thing or another, but nothing that I could make sense of."

"Maybe we can," Eric said. "I've played a card game or two with the fellow. A gentleman of his kind tends to drink more than his fill and talk more than he should."

"And I've chatted with him on more than one occasion," a voice said.

Deli narrowed her eyes on the voice she recognized as Sheriff Sault. What was he doing here?

Sault pushed his way to the front of the group and nodded quaintly at Deli. "Chance never mentioned that he'd been hired, but—"

"As far as you're concerned he's never done anything wrong to begin with," Deli stopped him. "What's your sudden interest?"

"I'm just a sheriff," he said quietly.

"You're *the* sheriff, Sault. It's your job to protect me."

"I never had any proof that Chance was—"

"How about my brother's limp body across the street? Is that proof enough?"

Sault's cheeks reddened.

"This is pointless if we're arguing amongst ourselves." Reed guided Deli away from Sault. "We all have a common goal. Let's start with that."

"I'm not so sure," Deli said, glaring over her shoulder at the sheriff.

He scowled at her, then glanced wistfully out the window. "This is ridiculous. I'm right about one thing, we can't prove that Chance has done anything."

"And I bet you just love that, don't you?"

Reed hushed her. "Sheriff Sault came here of his own free will, Deli. Now, in my experience—"

"What experience is that?" Chestnut said. "Come to think of it, we don't know that much about you Mr. Becker."

Reed scowled. He appeared ready to say something cross, but cleared his throat instead. "Hunting down men like Chance Evens was my business before I retired and came here. I *do* know what I'm doing. Although this time, it's become personal."

Deli widened her eyes. Is that how he and her father met? Is that what they did together?

Trying not to laugh, she gulped down the idea. Her father was a pitiful drunk. How exactly did he hunt down wanted men when his hands were occupied with a bottle?

"That's what you did with my father?"

"With Matthew Gold?" someone laughed.

"Yes," Reed said, still completely serious. "With Matthew Gold." He narrowed his attention on Deli. "So I do have quite a bit of experience with men like Chance."

"So, that's where you've been," Eric murmured.

"Can't you just kill him?" Debra asked.

"No." Sheriff Sault leapt forward. "Absolutely not. Chance may not be our most upstanding citizen, but he's a citizen nonetheless and has the same rights as the rest of you."

"But the rest of us aren't trying to burn out and kill Deli Becker," Debra pointed out.

Deli lingered on her words. It was the first time anyone had referred to her in her married name. Deli Becker. She'd said to herself on a number of occasions, but it sounded so real when it came from someone else.

"We don't have proof of that," Sault said. "You can't just take the law into your own hands. There's only one way to put an end to this, Deli, and I told you what that was."

"To give him the farm?" she shrieked. "Are you thick? Hell, no, you good for nothing excuse for a lawman. If you were doing your job, I wouldn't have to worry at all." She stepped threateningly close to him. "If you were doing your job, my brother wouldn't be near dead."

Reed tugged gently on her arm. She shrugged him off.

"It's your fault Travis got attacked," Sault said, his voice rising in defense. "If you weren't so stubborn, he never would've been hurt." The red in his cheeks spread to his pointed ears. "I told you it would get worse, Deli. Didn't I tell you that?"

"You told me to give up!"

"Any normal woman woulda known her place and left, but no, not you. Not Deli Gold."

"Gold Farm *is* my place," Deli said, fighting the urge to beat this stupid sheriff senseless. "And my name is Becker. Deli Becker."

"And even that's a farce," he bit out. "Everyone knows why you married this Reed fellow."

"This isn't the point of this meeting," Reed said calmly.

"Cuz you're whorin' yourself," Sault said. Drops of spittle clung to the corners of his wide mouth. "He ain't payin' you in money. He's payin' you in dirt. Gold Farm dirt."

"That's not true..."

"If your mamma knew what you were doing, she'd thank the angels she was dead. She'd—"

Deli reared back. Pain shot through her hand and her knuckles popped. It wasn't until Reed's arms came around her that she realized what happened. Sheriff Sault toppled backward and clutched his hand over his eye.

Deli shook the sting out of her fingers. It'd been so long since she'd actually struck someone, she amazed herself by landing right on target. "If you ever mention my mother again, I'll kill you!"

Reed whispered in her ear, but they were words she couldn't understand.

"You mean the way you killed your mamma?" Sault countered.

Reed's arms tightened against her body at the accusation. Instantly, Deli stopped struggling.

"I didn't kill my mother," she said in a low, dead tone.

Reed took a deep breath. If he wasn't so worried about her hurting herself, he would've let her go.

"You forget," Sault said. "I was there. I saw the blood. I saw the bullet hole. And I saw you." He came slowly upon her, towering threateningly above her. "You had the gun in your hand, Deli, and everyone knows it."

"You weren't there," Chestnut came to her defense. "You didn't see what Mrs. Gold went through. She wanted to be put down. Deli did what she had to."

"She did what any of us would've done," Debra added.

Slowly Reed let Deli go. He felt her eyes upon him, but couldn't bring himself to look into them. Hadn't she sworn that she didn't shoot her mother?

"Not me," Sault said slowly. "I wouldn't have done it, because I'm not a murderer." He backed toward the door and opened it. "As far as I'm concerned, Deli, you're getting exactly what you deserve. Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord. And for what you did, Deli Gold, you're getting exactly what you deserve."

Sault stepped out and turned abruptly on his heel. Wishing she had hit him harder, Deli glared at his back. Though many were on her side, she felt questions and accusations burning into her from the eyes around the room.

"Well," Eric huffed, "that gentleman leaves me to wonder."

Deli didn't concern herself with the eyes around her. Only one set. Reed's. She felt his presence more than anyone's, though she knew he had abruptly moved away.

"I don't think this meeting is getting us anywhere," she said softly. "I appreciate your support, everyone, but if any of us had an inkling of what Chance was up to, something would've been said a long time ago."

"That's not precisely true," Eric said. "Sometimes we don't hear everything. If we work together—"

"No," Deli said. "It's no good. He'll come again, and when he does, I'll be waiting."

"Hell, Deli, when will you stop?" Debra pushed away from the wall. "Haven't you been doing this alone for long enough?"

But I'm not alone, Deli wanted to say. Reed's with me.

But somehow that didn't seem true anymore. She could feel his abrupt coldness lingering behind her, chilling her spine.

"What will you do?" Eric asked.

"Are you staying with us tonight?" Chestnut echoed.

"You can stay with Travis," Doc Young volunteered.

Deli moved away from their incoming, looming forms and the questions she couldn't answer. "I don't know."

"Well, where are you going?"

"I don't know." With Reed's eyes still burning into her back, Deli slinked toward the door and the escape she desperately needed. "I don't know. All right? Did that ever occur to any of you? I don't know where I'm going. I don't know what I'm doing. I have *no* idea."

Stomping out the door, she pinched the bridge of her nose. All the answers to those stupid inconsequential questions haunted her. None of them mattered.

Reed would have plenty of questions for her, questions that she'd have to answer if he would ever truly love her. For all that he'd given her, he deserved her honesty.

Deli glanced at Doc Young's office and pushed thoughts of Travis aside. They'd take care of him, she knew that now. Grateful, Deli started toward the long road that would eventually lead her home.

She needed to think. If she wasn't sure Reed was still at Eric's place, Deli would've sworn he still stood behind her, hating her for the lie he thought she'd told. How much should she say?

She'd made a promise so many years ago. A promise that she'd stuck so firmly to, she believed it herself.

Closing her eyes, Deli took a deep breath. Within that breath, she knew the route she had to take. Travis might not forgive her, but Reed had to know the truth about their mother.

Chapter Thirteen

Reed lifted a spoon to his mouth and pretended not to notice Deli deliberately ignoring him. He knew she had much on her mind. Chance Evens. Sheriff Sault. Travis. Her mother's death...

After Deli had stormed off, no one had said much. Reed had questions, but he could see there would be no answers from her friends. Besides, he wanted them from her lips. He wanted her to trust him enough to open her heart up to him.

"Travis is looking good," Reed said, not actually expecting a response.

"Yes, he is," she murmured.

"Young said his recovery is almost amazing."

"I know."

"But Travis still hadn't spoken a word."

Deli nodded.

She'd been going on this way since he found her here at sun set. Her answers remained brief and to the point, her face remained fixed on anything that wasn't him.

Even when Reed warmed up the stew Chestnut had sent over, she only nodded her thanks.

"You going to see him tomorrow?" Reed asked.

Her eyes continued intently on her bowl as she separated chunks of beef from the vegetables with little effort.

"Deli."

She blinked lamely at him.

"I asked if you're visiting Travis tomorrow."

There was no mistaking it. She definitely had something on her mind. If she were anything like the other women he knew, she wouldn't come right out and say it. He'd have to dig a little.

"Oh." She cleared her throat. "Yes, of course, I'm visiting him."

Reed examined her saddened eyes but she averted her gaze before he could translate what she was thinking. He stared at the top of her head for a moment longer. When it appeared that she had nothing more to say, he started eating again.

Tonight, Chestnut's stew had no flavor. Reed felt it in his mouth. He could decipher between the pieces as he chewed, but they had no spark.

"This is pretty decent," he said, groping for conversation.

Deli slammed her spoon down, causing the table to shake. "Will you stop?"

"Stop eating?"

"You know what I mean."

Baffled, Reed shrugged.

"Stop needling me," she said.

"Needling you?"

"And stop staring at me like that."

Slowly, Reed nodded.

"If you have something to say," she said, "then say it."

Reed shrugged. "All right."

She pursed her lips and lifted her brows. Tapping her fingers on the table, she pressed her lips into a finer line and leveled Reed with a glare.

"Well?" she finally said.

"Well..." Reed cleared his throat. "I was thinking this stew is surprisingly decent, and so I said so."

"That's *not* what I'm talking about."

"Then what are you talking about?"

Reed pushed his wooden bowl away from himself and settled back in his chair. This was the battle he'd expected. He'd seen that intent expression on her face enough times to know it was coming.

"You're having all kinds of regrets," she said matter-of-factly.

"I am?"

"About our marriage."

"Is that what this is supposed to be?"

"Exactly." She pointed at him. "That's what I'm talking about."

Reed folded his arms over his chest and peeled back her words to find their true meaning.

She took a large bite of stew then wrinkled her nose as if it rotted on her tongue. "I know what you're thinking," she said with her mouth full. "You're wishing you hadn't let me trick you into marrying me."

"On the contrary," Reed said. "I knew what I was getting into."

"And you found out you were mistaken about me."

Wrong.

"Actually, everything is going as I planned," Reed said.

Her increased coldness in regard to him during this past week had been a prediction he could've bet on. He knew she would fight harder against him once they were married. He knew it would take time.

"And you haven't changed your mind?" she asked.

Reed smiled. He couldn't mistake the weakness that eased into her voice.

"I don't think that's possible," he said. "As far as you're concerned, my mind is set."

Her bright blue eyes darkened to gray. "Does...Does that mean you don't care about...about what they said back there? About my mother?"

Slowly, Reed nodded.

So, that's what this was about. He'd thought quite a bit about it ever since Sault's big mouth had brought it up. He'd been stunned at first. Stunned and speechless.

If he chose to believe the accusations, his wife was a liar. Deli Gold-Becker was a lot of things, some of them not too pretty, but she was no liar. Not about this.

Reed had dismissed the comments almost as quickly as he'd heard them. No, not all of it made sense, but she held the key to that secret and obviously wasn't prepared to open that particular lock.

"I knew it," she said quietly. "You do believe them."

"Nope," Reed said. "It just so happens that I don't."

"You don't," she breathed.

Relieved to hear the bite fading from her tone, Reed uncrossed his arms. "If you say you didn't harm your mother, Deli, that's enough for me."

"Even though Debra and Chestnut, my own friends, implied that I did?"

"I figure," Reed said, "that they don't know you as well as I do."

A hint of color warmed her cheeks. Even with very little light, that from a single lantern, Reed could read her eyes. Although, she still didn't look at him often.

"What's wrong, Deli?"

She shrugged. Complete bafflement wrinkled her sleek features. "I...I had been ready to...to defend myself. I thought—"

"You don't have to defend yourself against me, Deli. *Ever.*"

Deli lifted her gaze to find Reed peering intently upon her. He'd astonished her again.

Debra had been so right. He knew so much more about what was happening between them.

How could he have so much blind faith in her?

"Are you wondering?" she asked softly. "Aren't you curious about what they meant?"

"I wouldn't be human if I wasn't," he said with an impish grin. Shrugging, he added, "I figure you'll either let me in on it or put it behind yourself."

Guilt-ridden, she lowered her gaze. She couldn't put this behind her. Not when she had to face Travis every day.

"See, it's something no one else knows," she said.

She fidgeted with the tip of her hair, even though she knew Reed would tell her to stop. Just as soon as she touched the silken end, he carefully moved her hand away.

Intent on speaking her mind, she boldly lifted her attention to him. "It was like Sault said. Part of it. The part about...about the bullet in her head and...and the gun." Balancing her elbows on the table, she rubbed her eyes. "Shitfire, when I think of how it coulda gone. When I think of how she suffered, and I try to make myself believe her death was for the best..."

Deli took comfort in the fact the Reed hadn't distanced himself. He sat just as still as before, hanging on to her every word. She wanted so desperately for him to understand. She wanted him to believe in her innocence because it was fact, and not just because she said so.

"Travis was just a baby," she said, showing his height with her hand. "Maybe he wasn't a baby, but he was up here." She tapped her temple. "Momma wanted him to stay so young, to not be affected by her pain. And I tried, Reed, I tried so hard to keep him that way."

Taking a deep breath, she inched her fingers across the table toward his hand. Desperately, she wanted the strength of his touch to hold her up. As of her thought had spoken aloud, he took her hand in his.

Steadying her nerves, she concentrated on the past she'd tried so hard to forget.

"See, that was the day pa left," she said. "I'd been fightin' with him out in the barn since he wouldn't go see Momma. Remember I told you that?"

Reed nodded. "I remember."

"We went back and forth for a while, but Pa made himself clear. He was leavin' and there wasn't anything I could do to change that. Part of me was happy to see him go though. He'd stopped caring, Reed. He'd grown weak and detestable, living in the past through bottles of booze we couldn't afford."

"It's not a pretty sight to see someone you love withering away, Deli."

"But *I* had to," she said. "I had to sit through every minute of it. I didn't get to up and run away." Deli clenched her jaw against the waiver in her voice. "He did."

Reed nodded, though it didn't look as if he understood. His fingers tightened warmly around hers.

"So, I watched him ride away," she said. "I...I didn't know what to do. My momma had just begged me to murder her. My pa was leaving us for what I knew was forever. I had no money. And I had Travis, a kid who still came home and asked for taffy money every day. And more than anything, I wanted...I wished...I..." Deli lost her voice. She couldn't say what she wished. It was so cowardly and weak.

"What, Deli. What did you want?"

"I wanted to run after him," she breathed. "I wanted to beg him to take me with him. I kept thinking we could just ride on forever and never have to look back."

"But you didn't," he said quietly. "You didn't run away."

"I came very close," she whispered. "I turned around to him. And I remember I raised my hand to call out to him, but"—she shook her head—"but nothing came out. Never in my life had I wanted something so badly, Reed."

"But you didn't do it," he said again.

"But I wanted to. I walked after him. Even though I couldn't speak, I'd hoped he would turn around and see me, and take me with him, but he didn't. And then...then I heard it."

"Heard what?"

"The gun..."

A harsh silence fell after her words.

Reed flinched as if the truth had fallen right smack on top of him. "Travis..."

Deli nodded. "Like an idiot, I'd left it on the table, almost like I wanted him to use it. If I hadn't—"

"No, you didn't want him to."

"But I left it right there," she insisted. "If I had half a brain, if I'd been thinking, I woulda taken the gun out with me."

"But you didn't and there's nothing that can change that."

Fervently, she shook her head. "My pa, he heard it too. I saw him straighten like poker in Licorice's saddle, but he never turned around. He just...kept going..."

"Doesn't sound like the Matthew Gold I know," Reed said.

"Well it's the same man." Feeling better by the moment, Deli took a deep breath. "When I went inside, Travis could barely hold pa's pistol up. He still had it aimed at her, but he shook so bad I thought it'd go off again. There was no mistaking it, she was gone...almost instantly. He..Travis...just kept saying how much she hurt and now it was all over. Over and over again, til he dropped to his knees and cried. I...I really hated her for that Reed..."

"And that's how Sheriff Sault found you?"

She shook her head. "I know pa said something on his way out because Sault showed up before I had time to do anything. I'd ladled half a jug of rot-gut down Travis's throat to get him to sleep and calm down. There was no waking him by time Sault got there. Sault was stupider then than he is now, if you can believe it. He didn't know what to do with me. If it'd been a more experienced man, I woulda hanged."

Relief swept through Deli. Letting out a heavy breath, she steadied her elbow on the table and leaned her head on her hand. How long she had wanted to tell her story. And Reed Becker of all people was the one she felt compelled to tell it to. As if she knew he'd hold her in the same regard as before.

Deli wiggled her fingers in her hand and stared hopefully up at him. "So, now you know."

Reed spread her hand and splayed her fingers. "You never told this to anyone before now?"

"Oh, I couldn't," she said. "Absolutely not."

"But you've told me..."

"Ain't that a kick in the rear," she said with half a laugh. "You of all people."

Deli heard Licorice whinny out in the barn, laughing at her for being such a fool. She shifted her attention to the front door and shook her head. Stupid horse...

"I guess it's safe to assume that maybe you're starting to trust me more than you thought," Reed said.

Licorice whinnied again.

Deli nodded.

Now what was wrong with the beast?

Reed followed her eyes to where she stared at the door. "She's been temperamental today."

Again, Deli nodded. It sounded like Licorice was more disturbed than temperamental.

A muffled, throaty scream followed the horse's plea.

Reed leapt to his feet.

His chair slid back and tipped over.

Deli winced.

"Something's out there," he said.

Deli nodded. "Yes, a horse." Noting the worry on Reed's face, she added, "It's not Chance. He would come back here so soon, not after today."

"Think I'll take a look," he said, crossing to the door.

The thought of him facing Chance churned her stomach. "Now you understand why I panicked that first night you were here."

Reed nodded. For a moment, he looked ready to smile, but another unfamiliar sound wrinkled his brow.

"Stay here," he said.

Deli grimaced at him. Was he serious? Why, she'd been dealing with the likes of Chance years longer than Reed could imagine.

"I'm serious, Deli, I want you to stay here."

Full of disbelief, she scowled at him.

"Deli," he warned her.

"Oh, all right, Reed, I'm staying right here," she sighed.

Just because they were married didn't mean he had to act like her husband.

"*Stay here*," he repeated.

Deli crossed her fingers in her lap. "I will."

Who could tell what the future would hold? She certainly wasn't about to make a promise on something she couldn't predict.

A dull cry snatched Reed's attention to the door.

"It's probably just a coyote, Reed. That's what it sounds like."

Shaking his head, he placed his flattened hand on the door and shifted his gaze toward her. "I don't want you to get hurt, Deli."

"*All right*." Growing impatient, she waved him away. "Go see what it is."

To her relief he cracked the door open and peered out. "I'll be right back," he said, slipping outside and closing the door behind himself.

Immediately, Deli leapt for the sofa. She landed hard on her knees and threw the drape open. Familiar darkness greeted her. Deli smiled at Reed's shadowy form crossing the farm. Now he knew what it felt like to get the beeezus scared outta him, even when it was nothing.

Peering at the barn, she froze. A dim light emanated from the wide doorway.

Holy shitfire!

Taking a deep breath, she pressed her forehead against the window. Why hadn't her gut warned her? She'd sincerely thought that Licorice was just misbehaving. Reed had been right. There was someone out there.

Scampering off the couch, Deli quietly opened the front door.

Thank goodness for crossed fingers...

She paused in the doorway and searched the elusive darkness that had swallowed Reed up. If Chance was in there, he'd show no mercy.

Swallowing, Deli spun on her heel and searched the parlor for some kind of weapon. Due to their first meeting, Reed had unfortunately cleared the front lot of wood and branches she might use. Deli silently cursed him, and crossed to rifle above the mantle. Just looking at it gave her a chill of memories she didn't want.

"Oh, hell, Deli," she muttered, "you're shooting it, not the other way around."

Standing on her toes, she lifted the rifle off of Travis's hand-carved shelf. It weighed heavily in her arms. Solid and smooth. Cool and intimidating.

Quickly, Deli cocked the weapon and made sure it was empty. Then wrapping her hands around the long steel barrel, she swung in over her shoulder. It was no tree branch, but it would work.

Rushing out the door, she ran across the farm on her tip-toes. She steadied her rampant breathing. Trying to calm herself, she closed her eyes. The sounds within the barn, mixed with solid tones and chilling laughter, rang in her ears. She tried to decipher the voices, but the indistinct words eluded her.

Pressing her back against the side of the barn door, she steadied the rifle over her shoulder. More than likely, Chance would send Reed out first.

Be patient, Deli told herself. Don't swing until you *know* it's him.

"Move out that way," someone said.

"Keep it down," another answered.

Deli bit her lip to keep from crying out. He had Reed!

Their voices drifted closer.

A large shadow emerged first.

Deli gasped when she saw Reed's profile.

Accounting for Chance's height, she lifted the rifle slightly higher. A breath behind Reed, Chance emerged.

Deli swung.

Reed ducked and swore.

The rifle smacked hard against Chance's forehead. He slumped to the ground.

A woman screamed.

A baby cried.

"I got him," Deli hollered.

She glanced excitedly up at Reed...then froze. The man, who certainly wasn't her husband, stared at her with his jaw dropped. A woman cradling a bundle in her arms leapt over the body on the ground and stood behind the first stranger.

Deli blinked lamely at the man. She'd been sure he was Reed. He looked so much like him.

"Oh, no," she groaned.

The man reached forward and yanked the rifle out of her hands. "What're you doing?"

"I...I thought you were Reed."

"I guess that's lucky for me," he said, leveling her with a glare.

Slowly, reluctantly, Deli lowered her gaze to the man on the ground, the man she thought had been Chance. She cringed at Reed's face, his eyes closed, his head lolled to the side, an ugly, noticeably large lump on his forehead.

Deli covered her mouth and dropped to her knees beside him. "Oh, not again..."

"Again?" the woman above her repeated.

Ignoring them, Deli touched Reed's warm cheeks.

"Who the hell are you?" the man asked.

Deli tipped her head back. "Who the hell are you?"

Dumbstruck, the man and woman stared at her.

"Luke Becker," the man said. "Reed's brother."

Deli cringed. She'd done it this time!

"And you are...?" the woman asked softly.

"Deli Gold-Becker. I'm his..." She gestured lamely at Reed. "I'm his wife."

Luke blinked as if he'd misheard. "The hell you say..." Lowering to his haunches, he gave his brother's head a sweeping inspection. "I'd hate to see what you do when he's been out all night."

Caught off guard, Deli flinched at the teasing grin on his face. "He's gonna kill me for this..."

"Naw," Luke said, "he's been through worse."

"You don't understand. The first time—"

"The first time?" he stopped her. "You mean this isn't the first time?"

Embarrassed, Deli shook her head. Hoping he'd wake up, she patted Reed's cheek.

"Oh, this should be real interesting," Luke said, sitting his brother's limp body upright. "Let's get him inside, and you can tell us all about it."

Deli couldn't miss the teasing in his tone. He might think this was funny, but Deli knew Reed wouldn't be laughing.

Chapter Fourteen

At the kitchen table, Reed held the cool cloth against his forehead and glared at Deli. She kneeled before him, her hands balanced on his knees, her eyes peering tenderly into his.

"I'm so sorry," she said again.

"Do you always try to catch men this way?" Luke chuckled behind her.

"I don't need to catch him," Deli said, glaring over her shoulder. "I've already caught him."

Reed lifted his brows at her. She appeared just as surprised by the remark.

"You know what I mean," she whispered. "What are they doing here?"

"Reed sent for us," Luke said.

For Reed's sake, Deli withheld a frown. Couldn't he let Reed speak for himself?

"And it's a good thing we came, too," Luke added. "It looks like you're in pretty deep this time."

Reed pulled the cloth away from his head, examined it, then put it back. "I've got it under control."

"And what happened to your nose?" Luke asked.

"My nose?"

"It's off. Not by much, but enough for me to notice."

"I noticed too," the woman said, laying the sleeping baby into a small, wooden cradle on the floor.

Luke had introduced her as his wife, Mariah. And the baby, Shyla, was only six months old. Both the baby and the woman made Deli nervous. She'd never been very experienced dealing with either kind.

"Let me see that," Deli said, pulling the cloth from Reed's head and replacing it with another. "It's not too bad."

"You knocked me out, Deli."

"But I didn't mean to."

"What were you meaning to do?" Luke asked.

"It's Chance Evens," Reed said when he saw the frustration on Deli's face. "He's trying to run us off the farm."

The jest fell from Luke's features and his eyes darkened. Deli swallowed at that. He'd look so much like Reed. Older, maybe, but their expressions were a match that could spook a horse.

"How bad is it?" he asked.

"Her brother," Reed said, settling his hand over Deli's, "he almost didn't make it. The town doctor has him over at his place. Half his face was smashed in. Chance left his blade inside the kid."

Reed lowered his gaze to Deli and lingered on the unique softness around her eyes. She licked her lips as if she could already feel his mouth there.

Gliding his arm around her waist, Reed lifted her onto his lap. She didn't object. She didn't even speak. Her eyes remained intently fixed on his face.

Glancing at his brother, Reed added, "Chance practically admitted he did it, and the sheriff won't do a damn thing about it. If Deli had stayed in the house like I told her" —he squeezed her hip then gestured his forehead— "this never would've happened."

She blinked at the implication and frowned. "I said I was sorry."

"I know you are."

"How about coffee?" Mariah asked.

Deli flinched. "Oh. Of course."

She leapt off of Reed's lap and rounded to the jars on the shelf above the wash basin. Reed adjusted his chair inward and leaned on the table. The pain in his head wasn't nearly as bad as the damage she'd done to his nose, but it pulsed nonetheless.

"Coffee..." Deli mumbled, turning in a lost circle.

"On the shelf," Reed nodded.

His brother and Mariah exchanged frowns.

Deli opened the first canister and wrinkled her nose.

"The other one," Reed prompted.

She lifted the second lid and smiled. "Found it."

"You're sure she's your wife?" Luke muttered.

Reed scowled at him. "Need I remind you that Mariah wasn't exactly self-sufficient when you met her?"

Mariah laughed. "You put up with this, Deli? Men seem to know everything unless it's something useful, right?"

Speechless, Deli replaced the lid on the canister and pulled it from the shelf. Her new sister-in-law had a kind, all-knowing smile that lit up the room and emanated a bright light from her being. Silky white skin and

almond shaped eyes matched her honey-blond hair and went beautifully with her soft voice and crisp clean clothes.

She wore a beige button up shirt tucked tightly into a dark pair of men's denim trousers. Boots, a smaller version of her husband's, peeked out of the bottom of her pants. Never in her life had Deli seen a woman wear such a thing. Tiny duplicates of men's clothing.

Quickly, Deli shifted her gaze to her own attire. She tried not to make the self-inspection obvious, but the frown on her face was a sure give away. Her own clothes, though clean, stared back at her with stains and bulk from the bad sewing job she'd done on them. Self-consciously, she pushed her hair behind her ear.

"What's the matter?" Mariah asked.

"Nothing." Deli shook the thought away. "I'm looking for the coffee pot."

"I've got it," Mariah said, lifting it from the stove. "The water pump is out front, right?"

Deli nodded. "I'll go with you."

"Better yet, let me get it," Reed said, getting up. "Until we figure out what Chance is up to, it's best if you two stay inside at night."

Deli gave him half a shrug. She moved inconspicuously to a far corner and watched as Reed stepped outside and Luke and Mariah leaned over to check on their baby. Quietly, she set the coffee canister down and folded her arms over her chest. These people were different than she and Travis. They were refined and wealthy.

Love radiated between Luke and Mariah, leaving Deli to feel as if she'd intruded on a moment only the couple should share. Licking her lips, she sneaked behind them and headed for the door.

Luke glanced up when she opened it. His gaze remained fixed on her for a moment. Something registered in his eyes before he turned his attention back on his daughter.

Before he could stop her, if that were his attention, Deli slipped outside. She focused on Reed at the pump and started toward him.

"I told you to stay inside," he said, without looking up.

"I don't want to," Deli said softly. "It feels different in there, like I don't belong."

Reed stopped pumping and stood upright. "They're good people, Deli. You don't need to be afraid of them."

"I'm not."

He tipped his head to the side, paused, and extended his hand. "Come on."

Deli slipped her hand into his. She didn't care where he took her as long as it wasn't back to the house. At least for now.

Reed led her to the left, in the direction of Gold Mountain. Her hand remained snugly bound in his, leaving her safe and without fear.

"Don't you want to know where we're going?" he asked when they'd distanced themselves from the light of the house.

Deli shrugged.

She thought she saw his eyes glimmer with triumph, but he only pulled her closer to his side and continued walking. His arm warmed hers and made her feel lulled and tired...relaxed.

Taking a deep breath, she rested her head against his upper arm and yawned.

"Tired?"

"No. I just can't remember the last time I really didn't care to worry about anything." She squinted into the darkness and focused on her steps as they rounded the foot of Gold Mountain. "Why? Are you tired?"

"Nope."

The way she felt now...It reminded her so much of how she felt at night with her "cuddling blanket." Safe, comfortable, at ease. She imagined him replacing the ol' blanket, draped beside her in bed, her leg coiled around his stomach, her arms wound around his neck. She gulped and tried to push the thought away, but it refused to be moved.

"What's wrong?" Reed asked.

"Nothing," she squeaked. "Nothing's wrong."

"You sure?" He lifted her hand and spread her fingers open. "Your palm is sweating."

And what if they happened to be completely naked while he lay beside her in bed, her limbs wrapped tightly around his body...

Her heart quickened.

Reed's shadowed face swooped instantly closer to her. "What's the matter?"

She'd have answered him if she had a voice. Holding her breath, she glanced nonchalantly over his shoulder.

Reed cupped her chin and forced her to reconcile with him.

Embarrassed, Deli lowered her gaze.

If only she knew how to get him into that position without making a fumbling mess of it all. She'd learned the hard way that seduction was not her high card.

"I can see you thinking," Reed teased.

His hand moved upward and curled her hair behind her ear.

He could see her thinking?

Deli closed her eyes and *prayed* he couldn't see the actual thoughts.

An urge, deep and unyielding, tangled her insides in knots. It weighed heavily in her lower stomach and crept knowingly between her thighs.

She gulped at the new sensation. Part of her knew she needed to move away from Reed, and part of her wanted to pull him closer.

He'd moved their hands together and linked their fingers. Maybe he did know her thoughts after all.

"Reed," she found her voice.

"What?"

"Remember how you said I'd know when you're going to kiss me?"

He nodded.

Easing her nervousness away, she inched closer to him. "Well, being as...experienced as you are, wouldn't you know the same thing?"

A spark of shine lit his eyes. "Do I know when I'm going to kiss you?"

"Please, Reed," she whispered. "Don't tease."

Reed narrowed his eyes on her and tightened their linked fingers. He'd waited so long for this moment that it killed him not to rush ahead. Was she saying what he'd waited so long to hear?

"Because I'm going to," she said quietly, her eyes no longer on him. "And I don't want to talk about it or get a lesson on how to do it. I just want to do it."

Reed stared at the top of her head, wishing like mad that he could see her beautiful eyes. He moved his hands out of hers and drew them up her arms. Her free hands moved instantly to his hips. They lingered for a moment before she linked her fingers into the waist of his pants.

Reed took a quick breath.

She'd been so forthright about everything else, he should've known that when the time finally came, she'd be just as straightforward about this. He graced her cheeks with the palms of his hands and tipped her head upward. Her eyes widened and searched his. A message, though quiet and unspoken, screamed loudly in his ears.

"What are you waiting for?" he said.

Torturing him with innocent hesitation, she lingered long enough to wet her lips. Slowly, Reed lowered his head. Meeting him halfway, she exhaled a cool inviting breath over his lips.

She licked her lips again, scantily touching his in the action. Reed closed his eyes and slid his hands behind her neck. She'd hardly touched him, but his heart began to race.

Her mouth pressed harder upon his, a clear demand for more. Her heavy breaths whispered in the air around him, tantalizing him with unspoken promises.

Reed ached. His hands. His chest. His legs. They ached with necessity and neglect.

How long had he waited for her to come to him?

And now, shamelessly and completely, she leapt over all that had held her back in the past. Now, when he least expected it.

She murmured words Reed didn't care to waste time figuring out. He drove his hands through the mass of hair at her back, molding their bodies together, feeling the rampant beat of everything that pulsed and flowed within her.

Her grip tightened unabashedly at his waist. Her tongue moved carefully at first, then became more demanding with each of her shallow breaths.

"You have no idea of what I've been thinking about," her low voice vibrated his lips.

Reed smiled against her mouth. "I have a pretty good idea." He turned her toward the mountain and bent his knees to lay her down. Suddenly, he stopped. "Damn..."

Almost bent backward, she held onto his shoulders. "W...What's the matter?"

"We can't do this here."

"Yes, we can!"

Reed pressed his fingers over her well-kissed lips. "Shh..."

"We can," she insisted. "It's fine. This is fine."

"No, it's not."

He swept her into his arms and started toward the house. She nestled her mouth against his neck and spread a warmth over his flesh with her soft persistent lips. It traveled up to his earlobe and pressed dangerously hard against the pulse in his throat. Reed tightened his hold on her.

"Stop that," he whispered, stepping into the light from the house.

She stiffened in his arms. "Am I doing it wrong?"

He smiled at her innocence. "No, I'm just afraid I might drop you."

Her eyes glowed in such a way Reed never thought possible. He stepped onto the porch. Already, her mouth fell on his again, hypnotizing him and making him selfish for her touch.

"Oh, hell," he groaned

Scowling, she peered into his eyes. "Now what...?"

"My brother's in there."

"Oh, hell," she murmured. Brightening, she nodded toward the front of the house. "The barn. We can go to the barn."

"Good thinking," Reed said, stomping back across the porch.

Hell, why tonight, of all nights, did his brother have to show up?

It hadn't been as long as his body claimed, but it felt like he'd waited an eternity for Deli Gold. She'd lingered for so long between the rules of her life and the lust in body. He feared she might change her mind. Finally, she'd come to him, with no idea of what would happen between them and---

He stopped mid-step.

She *didn't* know what was about to happen between them. She had no idea. Well, maybe *some* idea. She did, after all work in a whore house, but---

"Now what?" Deli demanded.

Reed leaned his head against hers. Slowly, reluctantly, he looked her in the eyes and lowered her to the ground.

"What's the matter?" Her eyes widened as if she feared his answer. "Why aren't we going to the barn?"

"Because we can't."

Internally, Reed argued with the hard pressure in the fork of his pants. He wanted Deli more than he'd wanted anyone or anything in his entire life, but he couldn't lay her down in a barn. Not for the first time.

"What do you mean we can't?" she said, her voice raising a desperate notch. "I thought this was the whole reason we got married. So when I finally came to my senses, we could get right to it." She grabbed his hand and yanked him toward the barn. "Well, I've come to my senses, Reed. What are we waiting for?"

"We need to talk about--"

"Oh, no you don't. I don't want to talk about anything. You know something, Reed? You talk more than any man I know." With her hands on her lips, she glanced longingly at the barn. "Most men wouldn't be standing here wanting to map out a plan of attack. Most men would--"

"I'm not most men," he said with a smile.

He never would've guessed she'd be so persistent. The passion and desire smoldering in her eyes begged him not to argue.

"All right, Reed, here it is," she said, pointing to the barn. "I'm going in there. If you want to join me, and it's probably necessary that you do, you know where I'll be."

She spun on her heel and stomped away.

It was lucky that she turned away when she did. Otherwise, she'd have seen the amused grin he couldn't keep from his face.

Reed took two steps toward her. Briefly, he looked over his shoulder at the house. How were they supposed to pull this off with Luke and Mariah visiting? He faced Deli and immediately started after her.

Halfway to the barn, he caught hold of her arm and turned her to face him. Her features stayed fixed into an intense scowl.

"What's so funny?" she demanded.

Reed wiped the smile from his face. "You'll thank me later."

"If we're not doing anything, what am I thanking you for?"

"For waiting." He took her by the hand and led her back to the house. "Trust me, Deli, you'll be glad we did."

She wound her free hand around his bicep and rested her head there. "All right, but *what* are we waiting for?"

Reed wasn't sure if any of his explanations would be fitting. She might not understand.

"We're waiting for something more appropriate than the side of a mountain or a barn, Deli."

"We can go to my room at Chestnut's place," she said hopefully.

"We are *not* going to a whore house."

She stopped walking and lowered her gaze to the ground.

"It's not too fun having to wait is it," he said, a hint of tease lining his words.

"Is that what this is? Revenge?"

"No," Reed chuckled. "Not revenge."

Forcing her to tip her head back to look at him, he drew his arms around her. Her eyes had lost the determination from the moment before, but desire still lingered there.

Reed brushed lips over hers. He wiped the kiss away with his thumb and tipped his forehead against hers.

"It won't be much longer," he whispered. "I promise."

"Reed," Luke called from the house.

His brother never was one to have good timing.

"What?" Reed said, not moving to look at him.

"Mariah's ready for bed," Luke said. "Where should we put up our feet?"

"They can have Travis's room," Deli murmured.

Keeping his hand around her back, he guided her toward the house. He wasn't looking forward to another uncomfortable night on that damn couch.

"Little Shyla's waking up," Luke said when they came into the parlor.

Reed nodded and quietly shut the door. Deli moved away from his side, leaving him cold and longing.

"Go ahead and take that room," Reed said, nodding at Travis's bedroom. "Travis will be at Young's place for a while longer."

Luke lifted the baby and her cradle and stepped carefully into Travis's room. Reed opened the trunk in the parlor and pulled his blanket out. He tossed it on the sofa, and turned to find Mariah staring strangely at him.

"I won't even ask what you're doing," she said.

Reed smiled.

"Neither will I," Deli said, coming beside her. "Reed, honey, you know Travis isn't here, so why are you making him a bed?"

Stunned, Reed blinked at her. She may have been inexperienced, but she was a very quick learner.

"I..." Now she had him at a loss for words.

Mariah shifted her gaze between them, then lifted one of her eyebrows in question. "I won't even ask," she said again. Crossing to Reed, she stood on her toes and pecked him lightly on the cheek. "Behave yourself."

It's not me you have to worry about, Reed wanted to say, but he still couldn't find his voice.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Deli," Mariah said. "We'll have more of chance to talk in the morning."

Deli flinched at her voice. "In the morning?"

Mariah nodded. "I'm interested in knowing how you managed to catch the one that always got away."

"Go to bed, Mariah," Reed warned.

Mariah giggled and backed toward Travis's room. "I'm sure it's a very interesting story."

"You should talk about stories."

"Mariah," Luke's voice rose above theirs. "Stop picking on Reed."

Mariah stepped inside the room and graced them with another all-knowing grin before she closed the door.

Reed shook his head. One would think his sister-in-law had learned her lesson about match making.

"I think I'll go take a bath," Deli whispered. "Wanna come?"

Reed tensed. "No. No bath."

What kind of trouble was she trying to get them in?

She pulled her hair over one shoulder and disappeared inside her bedroom. "You coming?"

Reed hesitated outside her door. He tried to keep in mind that a single wall separated her and Travis's rooms. Deli sat on the edge of the bed and unbuttoned her dress. Reed watched her hands with eager interest.

"This isn't a good idea," he said.

She unhooked the last button at her waist and tipped her head up to see him. "I think it is."

Reed's gaze lingered on the flash of bare flesh peeking out from under her dress. He took a deep breath. His body demanded that he step forward and take Deli in his arms again, but his legs refused to move.

"The walls are very thin," he said.

"Very thin," Luke echoed from the next room.

Deli's cheeks brightened. Her hands blurred up the front of her dress as she linked the buttons back together. Her eyes had widened and her throat bulged for a moment as she swallowed with obvious difficulty.

"Geez, I'm thick," she said, slapping her hand over her eyes.

Stepping forward, Reed pulled her hand away from her face and held a single finger up to his own lips. "Shh..."

"I get it now," she whispered, her cheekbones still tainted with an embarrassed pink. "We'll wait."

Reed nodded and carefully crawled onto the bed. "Come here."

She moved up to the top of the bed and lay beside him. Reed agonized over her body being so close to his. Somehow, he'd make it through the night.

"Hey, Reed," Luke called out.

"Christ, Luke, *what* now?"

Silence answered him.

After a beat, Luke quietly added, "Never mind."

Reed slipped his arm under Deli's head. She peered up at him with innocence and a love she hadn't yet voiced.

"Maybe we can put them up at *Chestnut's Place*," he whispered.

Deli smiled. She yawned again and wiggled closer to him. She nestled her head under his jaw. A quiet sigh tickled his chest.

Reed tightened his arms around her and prayed that sleep wouldn't elude him. He could only hope that she wouldn't change her mind by morning.

Chapter Fifteen

Deli stretched her arms over her head and yawned. She rolled onto her side and pulled her blanket into her arms. Last night, Reed had her thinking about a thousand things that she never thought possible.

The remembrance of him sent a familiar buzzing through the pit of her stomach. All night, he'd slept beside her. The feel of him blanketed her in peaceful dreams. But she hadn't wanted to sleep. She'd wanted to watch him, to remember what he looked and felt like beside her.

The aroma of mouthwatering ham and greasy eggs opened her eyes. Uncertain, she blinked at Reed's side of the bed. He had slept beside her, hadn't he?

Sitting up, Deli frowned at the empty room. Voices in the parlor cleared her mind, reminding her that they were no longer alone in the house. Leaping out of bed, she straightened her lippy dress, the same things she'd worn the night before. Sure that no one would notice, she patted down her hair and rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

Laughter erupted from the parlor. Deli stilled at the sound. She glanced at her bed, wishing she could cover out and go back to sleep.

With a deep breath, she swung her bedroom door open and joined Luke, Mariah, and Reed in the kitchen.

As pristine as she'd been the night before, Mariah brightened. "Good morning, Deli."

"Morning, Deli," Reed and Luke echoed.

A baby's giggle startled her more than their chorus of voices. Sitting at the table, Reed held Shyla long-ways across his lap. He bounced his knees and cradled her tiny head in his large hands.

Shyla laughed and batted at the air above her face.

"I don't know how you do it," Mariah said, stirring something at the stove. "She never sits still like that."

"This is why I need a house full of children," Reed said, bringing his face down the baby's.

Uncomfortable, Deli cleared her throat. He looked odd pampering such a small creature, but he did it with ease, as if he'd been doing it all his life.

"Here," Reed said, standing. "Want to hold her?"

Deli's stomach tightened. "For what?"

"Just to hold her."

"Why?"

"Because." He pushed the baby closer. "Here."

All eyes burning into her, Deli extended her arms. Bright blue eyes blinked up at her. Though full of innocence, they were the wisest she'd ever gazed into. Reluctantly, she slipped her hands around the tiny, chubby torso and held Shyla at arm's length.

Reed stepped away and folded his arms over his chest. "Isn't she adorable?"

Little Shyla kicked and laughed. Fluffy blonde curls poked out all over her head. They waved back and forth when Deli exhaled.

Deli flinched and tightened her grip. She examined the baby with wonder. Shyla was certainly heavier than she'd expected, but not nearly as much as a sack of potatoes.

Reed placed his hand against the baby's back and eased her closer to Deli's chest. "She won't bite."

Deli gave him a frustrated glare. Why did she feel so clumsy?

"Luke did the very same thing when he first held her," Mariah said with a laugh.

"I did not."

"Oh, yes you did."

Afraid to wrap her arms around the child, Deli kept her hands firmly under the baby's arms. "I just don't want to hurt her." She moved closer to Reed. "I'm done. Can you take her now?"

Shyla wrapped her chubby fist around Deli's uncombed hair and gave it a tug.

"All right, I'm done," Deli said, more firmly than before.

Shyla bounced her fist against Deli's eye and laughed again. No one had warned her that babies could be so violent.

"Reed," she pleaded.

Smiling, he slipped his arms around the baby and brought her immediately toward his chest. With bouncing steps, he walked around the room, whispering something none of them could hear.

"It's a whole lot different when you have your own," Mariah said, but Deli could only release a light laugh.

What made them think she was having children?

Shyla hiccuped into a squawk-like cry.

Deli grimaced at the offensive sound.

Throwing a fit over a hiccup, for goodness sake.

Reed hushed her and sped up his bouncing. Deli pursed her lips against the smile that eased to her face at his discomfort. Apparently, he wasn't Shyla's sweet prince after all.

"Let's take her outside," Luke said, opening the door.

Continuously bouncing, Reed passed over the threshold and disappeared with Luke at his ankles.

"Men," Mariah scoffed with a shake of her head. "They get weak at the knees when a baby's around."

Uncomfortable, Mariah examined a small crack in the floor. She didn't have knowledge on either subject. Men or babies.

"You have no idea how happy I am that Reed is finally settling down," Mariah said, serving breakfast onto platters Deli had forgotten she owned.

"Was it that hard to find someone that would marry him?" she asked.

"To marry Reed?" Mariah laughed. "More like the other way around. It's been hard finding someone *he'd* marry."

Deli lifted her gaze.

"That makes us think you must be someone pretty special," Mariah continued.

"Just convenient," Deli murmured, but for the life of her she couldn't think of any way that'd she'd ever been convenient to Reed.

"That's what I mean," Mariah said. "As far as Reed has ever been concerned women are nothing but *inconvenient*. So, tell me, how'd the two of you come to meet?"

Deli licked her lips at the scent of fried ham and sat at the table. "It's a long story."

"The good ones usually are," Mariah said, sitting across from her. "Have you lived in these parts for long?"

"All my life."

Still smiling, Mariah nodded. "What I wouldn't give to have been able to see his face when he realized he'd been licked by a woman." She pulled her long blond hair over her shoulder. "Reed swore he'd never give any woman that chance. Don't get me wrong. He wasn't against women. Just set in his ways."

"Don't I know it..."

She wanted so badly to like this woman. Mariah had been the first Deli ever recalled talking to, who didn't needle her nose into business that didn't belong to her. Hesitance stood in Deli's way. She knew the moment she turned her back, people changed. Maybe Mariah wouldn't turn out to be so kind after all.

"He's a good man," Mariah said with a nod. "It's nice to see him happy."

Deli widened her eyes. *Was* Reed happy?

Mariah seemed to think so, and she appeared to know him better than anyone.

"You think he is?" she heard herself ask.

"Happy?" Mariah frowned. "Don't you?"

Deli shrugged. "Depends on how you look at it. I mean, it *was* his idea that we get married, but I'm not exactly wife material."

"Who is?"

"You seem to be making a good job of it."

"Me?" Mariah's blue eyes shone as she glanced at the door their husband's had exited from. "There aren't too many who think so."

Deli shifted uncomfortably and stared in disbelief. How could anyone think she wasn't the perfect woman who played house for fun, served home-cooked meals on time, and popped a baby out every year?

Mariah sobered but her eyes still glowed with an inner beauty Deli envied. "It's not so much whether or not anyone else thinks you're the perfect woman. It's what Reed thinks." She extended her denim-clad legs and crossed one over the other. "Take me, for instance. How many men do you know would be interested in me? I'm not a walking beauty. I dress like a man. And I have ideals that most run from. But it's me." She shrugged. "Just like you're you."

Deli's mouth fell open. Was she serious? Not a walking beauty?

Why, it looked like this woman had everything. Money, nice clothes, a perfect family...money.

Disgusted, Deli shook her head. Someone like Mariah would never understand she and Reed's arrangement.

"I believe," Mariah said in a sugary tone that made Deli's stomach churn, "that we all have someone. Take my former fiancé, for instance. He wanted to marry me for everything I wasn't. But Luke wanted me for everything he knew I was and would be."

"Rich people certainly have strange habits."

"Excuse me?"

"Just how many times were you engaged?"

What a stupid question! Mariah probably had men leaving rings on her doorstep!

"Only once. Luckily, my sister was happy to marry him instead," Mariah said. Her voice had lowered and her eyes dimmed. "Someone once told me that we all spend most of our time hiding from ourselves or pleasing others. I did both. He, Reed I mean, also said that if I looked directly at myself, despite everyone else, that'd I'd know what I wanted. And he was right."

"He should take his own advice," Deli said, more to herself than to the woman sitting across from her.

"I...I don't understand."

Deli inspected Mariah's soft features and the distinct frown that curved her forehead. She couldn't count the times Chestnut said her gut gave the best advice. If that were the case, Mariah was genuine.

Still...

Undecided, Deli took a wavering breath.

"Reed needs to take a look at himself," she said upon exhaling. "Then he'll see what a mistake he's made in marrying me."

Mariah's mouth fell open.

Deli glanced at the door to be sure they were alone. "I think he's married me for all the wrong reasons."

"Then you don't know him very well."

"I never claimed to."

Mariah paused then shook her head. "I don't understand."

Irritated, Deli let out a furious sigh. Did she have to print it up for her? "Reed and I are not the same kind."

Mariah shrugged.

"We're different," Deli clarified.

"In what way?"

"Every way."

"Such as?"

"Everything." Fidgeting with the tip of her hair, Deli clenched her jaw. "He's...And I'm...W...We're nothing alike."

"I certainly hope not," Mariah said smartly. "It'd be rather boring to marry yourself, don't you think?"

"That's not what I meant. You know, for a lady that may be good lookin', you sure are thick."

"I've been called worse," Mariah said, standing. She peered down at Deli, then brightened to her usual glow.

"I have an idea," she said. "Come with me."

"What for?"

"I think I see exactly what the problem is here."

"Hell, no. You aren't one of those do-gooder, make sure everyone is happy people, are you?"

Mariah opened the front door and glanced at Deli. "No. I'm your sister-in-law." Facing outside she called, "Time to eat!"

"We're coming!" Deli heard Luke answer.

Closing the door, Mariah said in a soft, matter-of-fact tone, "I can see in your eyes that you don't care whether I come or go, stay or leave, but for now, we're staying. You may not like it, but it's a fact. So, while I'm hear you'll just have to get used to me, and maybe eventually trust me, or Lord forbid, like me."

"I don't dislike anyone," Deli said, taken aback.

"Maybe not. I couldn't say because I don't know you. But I am a woman, and I know there's one thing you need that all women need, and we're going to take care of that right now."

The door opened, startling Deli.

"Breakfast is ready," Mariah said, her voice returning to its happy pitch. "Luke, honey, I'm going to have you watch the baby while Deli and I go out."

Halfway to sitting, Reed froze. "Out?"

Mariah lifted her eyebrows. "Well, you do allow her out, don't you?"

Mariah's cheer had become somewhat contagious and Deli pursed her lips to keep from smiling. Where were they going?

"And take care of the dishes for me, will you?" Mariah added sweetly.

"Dishes," Reed laughed. He glanced up at Luke's face, but when the amusement wasn't returned, he sobered. "Are you serious?"

"It's 1878, Reed. Not 1850. Luke's quite capable of taking care of a few chores while I'm gone."

Luke laughed at his brother's expression. "Don't worry. You'll be helping me."

Once again out of their world, Deli stepped away from the table. She could tell they exchanged jests, and almost liked it, but it also felt so foreign. So different from what she'd grown up around.

"I'll need my bag and we'll be on our way," Mariah said. She approached Shyla and kissed her forehead. "You'll be a good girl for daddy, won't you?"

Shyla laughed and batted at Mariah's nose with her tightly wound fist.

"Of course, she will," Luke said. He touched Mariah beneath the chin and stroked her lips with his thumb. "You be careful."

Deli quickly looked away, but the light peck of their kiss echoed in her ears. Feeling her cheeks warm up, she hurried out the front door.

She had a lot to learn about being married. It had to do with so much more than what she and Reed almost did last night. It had to do with the trust and care Luke and Mariah exchanged with a look, the same love that Deli longed to share with Reed. If only she knew how. If only he could show her.

Taking a deep breath, Deli started toward the barn. Should she have kissed him goodbye? Had he wanted her to?

There was a hell of a lot more to this marriage thing than just land and making love. She could feel it. She wanted it. Wanted it more than she wanted Gold Farm. Almost.

~ * ~

"Just sit very still," Mariah whispered.

Deli kept her eyes closed and tried not to move. Whatever it was Mariah was doing to her felt like the hairs were being yanked straight from her head. It'd been hours, or at least felt that way, since they'd left the farm.

Mariah went directly to the inn and purchased a room for the night. She'd mumbled something about she and Luke needing it anyhow.

Then she'd taken Deli to the bath house, which Deli had insisted was ridiculous since she had a perfectly good tub at home.

"It's nice to let someone else do all the work for once," Mariah had said, but Deli still felt guilty about the moneys being spent.

She could think of a thousand and one better uses for it. And she'd almost died of embarrassment when old lady Frans saw her stark naked in that tub, scrubbing her toes and fingernails.

"I always said you'd clean up well," the old bat remarked.

The comment made Deli blush. Who exactly had she said that to?

"Almost done," Mariah breathed.

Deli kept her eyes closed and reached up to feel the twines of her hair crossed over the top of her head. It felt...elegant. Funny. Unnatural.

She smiled to herself. Mariah's clothes felt just as strange.

She'd generously offered everything Deli needed to be "comfortable and feminine," as Mariah said.

Mariah also said most women would be wearing trousers like men in no time at all. After a while, it was near impossible not to cling to everything Mariah said. She had a thought on every subject, and most of it made sense. Most of it Deli had thought of before but never considered saying out loud. They weren't things Travis would never have wanted to hear.

But Mariah didn't seem to care who heard or what they thought. She just smiled sweetly, and no one ever wanted to argue.

Though they were so different, Mariah reminded Deli a bit of Debra. Both so wise with the ways of women and men, and neither afraid to let it be known.

"Is it too tight?" Mariah asked, bringing Deli back to reality and the edge of the inn bed she sat on.

She reached up and touched her hair again. "Feels strange."

"You'll get used to it." Mariah clapped her hands together. "We're all done. What do you think?"

Afraid to open her eyes, Deli sat still.

"You hate it," Mariah concluded.

"I haven't even seen it yet."

"Then open your eyes."

"All right."

"Wait!" Mariah stopped her. "Keep them closed."

Her hands appeared at Deli's shoulders. With a soft squeeze, Mariah encouraged her to stand. She guided her to the left, then abruptly stopped.

"Now open them," Mariah whispered. "What do you think?"

With a deep breath, Deli quickly opened her eyes. Her own reflection startled her.

Mariah had set her in front of the oblong wall mirror beside the door. Deli wished she hadn't for she near surprised herself to death at the sight.

Her reflection, the woman in the mirror, looked like no one Deli recognized. If she stared for long enough, she thought she saw her mother in there, the way she had been before the illness.

Deli gulped. She'd bathed before, but had never come out of the tub looking like this. Hesitant, she touched her face. Her soft cheeks entranced her.

"It's the buttermilk," Mariah said. "Does wonders, doesn't it?"

Unable to answer, Deli lifted her fingertips to the small earbobs decorating her lobes. What a difference they made.

She took a deep breath and wished she could hold the scent of vanilla in forever. Momma used to wear vanilla. Pa used to tell her she smelled good enough to eat. Until now, Deli never understood what he meant.

She shifted her gaze to Mariah's reflection and caught the smile upon her lips. "Think Reed will like it?"

"Your liking it is more important," Mariah said. "Do you?"

Deli touched the thick braid at the back of her head. It shined a dark red and extended down the middle of her back, stopping above her tailbone. She might've been fourteen the last time Momma had braided her hair. Without tendrils of hair tickling her cheeks and neck, her face felt naked to the world. Naked and cold.

Deli drew her attention on the shine of pink tainting her lips. She squinted at her reflection and smiled. Someone should tell Debra that the lighter colors looked prettier than the bright red she wore. Deli pressed her lips together and lifted her brows. She tipped her head to the side and put her hands on her hips. Hell, she didn't look like Deli Gold at all.

"Well, what of it?" Mariah asked.

"I don't think any one will recognize me."

Mariah's contagious laugh infected Deli with a smile and a chuckle she couldn't help.

Slowly, Mariah walked around her. "Are your trousers too tight?"

"Nope?"

"And what about the shirt?"

Deli shrugged. "I'm just happy I don't have to wear a corset."

"You never *have* to do anything," Mariah bit her lip. "You're bigger up top than I am, but if anyone doesn't like it, they can go straight to hell. Just remember, Deli, if you act like a lady, you'll be treated as one, no matter what you're wearing."

Deli sleeked down her long taupe sleeve and adjusted the cuff around her wrist.

"You can tell just about anyone to go to the devil," Mariah said, "as long as you add please to the end."

"And bat my lashes," Deli added.

"That never hurts," Mariah said with a brighter smile than before. "So are you ready to head home?"

"Hell no." Deli turned and examined her backside in the mirror. "I didn't get all fixed up just to sit at home. Let's go do something."

"Like what?"

"Like anything."

"All right," Mariah said with a nod.

"Oh, I'd just love to run into Chance Evens right now."

Mariah eyes darkened. "Let's stay out of trouble."

"Or we can go see Eric Archer. He's a friend of mine. Or Debra. Or Chestnut."

The peach color drained from Mariah's cheeks. "Ames who?"

"Archer," Deli said, growing more excited by the minute. "He's a friend of ours."

Mariah sighed. "For a moment there, I thought he might be a relative of—"

"Of Ames Archer? He is. But don't worry. Reed and Eric told me everything. You can trust Eric. I've known him for many years, and even Reed says he can be trusted."

"R...Reed said that?"

Giddiness bubbled within Deli. She didn't want to talk or think about conflicts and battles. She felt too good. "Yes, Reed said that." She tugged on Mariah's hand and pulled her toward the door. "Let's get something to eat. I'm famished. We can bring something back for Luke and Reed."

Reluctance shrouded Mariah's eyes. "All right, but then we should go home."

"Oh, and my brother too," Deli added, not really listening. "We have to go see Travis. I'll bet he won't even know who I am."

Mariah glanced longingly over her shoulder. "I have a bad feeling since you mentioned Archer. You sure you don't want to go home?"

"Positive," Deli answered, opening the door. "Besides, we'll be among many friends, so don't worry. Please, Mariah, just for a while."

Mariah nibbled on her lip and slowly nodded. "All right. But only for a while."

Grinning, Deli started for the lobby. A while was better than nothing. Funny how a good bath and a scent of vanilla could so quickly change the way a world looked.

Satisfied, Deli filled her lungs with a deep breath. She couldn't remember the last time she felt this peaceful.

Chapter Sixteen

Reed lurched at the sound of a wagon pulling to a stop in the front yard. An hour had past since Luke had taken the baby for a ride to keep her quite. He said he'd head into town and see if he couldn't find the girls. Neither mentioned it, but worry weighed heavily in the air.

Reed opened the door to the quickened footsteps across the porch. He stopped short at the bright eyes and flushed cheeks upon a beautiful woman's soft features. He took a breath and recognized her. Deli Gold?

Shitfire, in her own words, and that was the only thing he could think to say.

Reed peered past her to catch his brother's wagon already pulling out of the gate in the distance.

"We saw Luke in town," Deli explained. "Mariah's heading back. I guess they're staying there tonight."

Stupefied, Reed lowered his gaze. Even her voice didn't belong to her. Those clothes certainly didn't either.

He narrowed his gaze.

Mariah...

He should've sensed she was up to something.

Deli slid between Reed's body and the doorjamb. "What's the matter with you?"

He spun to face her and shut the door. "What's going on here?"

Full of innocence and sincerity, she widened her eyes. "Hmm?"

"You—"

"I almost forgot!" She slapped her hand over her mouth. Dropping it to her side, she did a dramatic turn and ended with a flourish. "What do you think? Didn't you notice anything different about me? You shoulda seen Chestnut's face. It near fell to the floor."

Speechless, Reed nodded. Could it really be new clothes and a little pampering that changed her so?

"Mariah lent them to me," she continued, lifting her foot and showing off her boot. "Aren't they beautiful? Oh, and Travis," she added with a laugh, "he spoke. Shitfire, who'da known it'd take this face to heal him."

Collapsing in the kitchen chair, she stretched her legs out and released a whoosh of air that stood Reed's nerves at attention. What the hell had Mariah done to her? Had all this energy and these smiles been begging forever to be let out?

Deli yawned as complete contentment sobered her features. She laid her head in the crook of her arm and rested her arm along the table. "I don't feel a bit like myself."

Reed blindly found the chair beside her and sat. He couldn't move his gaze from her face. Everything he'd seen a spark of in the past had exploded into view all at once. It overwhelmed and astonished all at the same time.

That look on her face was supposed to be delivered by him after a night of uninhibited love-making. Not because she simply took a bath.

Her brow crinkled and she lifted her head. "W...what's the matter?"

The matter? Reed stared at her as her eyes widened with scant fear.

"What'd I do?" she wanted to know.

"You haven't done anything. I'm just...amazed."

"I do look nice, don't I?" she said smiling.

"I always thought so."

She crooked her head to the side. "You're so full of beans, Reed Becker."

"No, really," he said. "I did. Why else would I have married you?"

"I don't know," she said. "I've stopped asking."

Standing, she stretched her arms over her head and yawned. Her shirt, a dark shade of yellowish-white, stretched taut across her flat stomach and full, fairly obvious breasts.

Reed quickly looked away. Desire stirred within him. She belonged to him, so entirely that it scared him. His brother and Mariah were gone. Deli was willing. Reed certainly was. Yet, something unnamable kept him firmly in his seat. She'd come willingly closer to him, but painfully out of reach.

Reed couldn't explain it, but he kicked himself for noticing.

Love made that much of a difference, he realized. The difference between loving a woman breathless and thoroughly, and loving her for the sake of selfish release.

"Would that be all right?" she asked, her head appearing from out of her room.

Reed leapt to his feet at the sound of her voice. "What?"

"I said I was wondering if we could get me some clothes like these," she repeated. "Or don't you like them?"

Reed pulled his senses together and shook the blur from his mind. Trousers fit Deli better than silk and lace ever would.

"I don't know," he said skeptically. "Let me take another look."

She narrowed her eyes with suspicion and stepped out of the room. "Well?"

"Come further out."

Two steps away from him, she paused and held her arms out at her sides.

"Turn around," he said.

He could barely keep the smile from his face as she did as he asked, slowly turning, her eyes locking with his.

He looked her over. "Come a little bit closer."

Every muscle in his body demanded that he reach out and take her, but the obviously thick air growing between them said to wait. For now, temptation and anticipation stirred candid desire in Reed. A desire and lust he wasn't ready to give into. It'd come...in time.

"So, what do think?" she asked again.

"I think that smirk on your face tells me you already know the answer to that."

Her smile widened and, for a moment, her innocence eluded him. Her eyes made it quite clear that although she had much to learn, nature's law and woman's intuition had already started its course.

Slowly, Reed reached up and touched the top button of her shirt. Her hand appeared over his. She slipped her fingers beneath his and hastily released the button from its hole.

Her eyes withdrew as if she'd surprised and pleased herself with the simple gesture. Reed lowered his touch to the second button. And again her hand followed. She set the button free with the twitch of her fingers and guided his hand down to the third.

"I think I like these clothes just fine," he murmured.

"Really...?"

He nodded and glanced at her room.

She turned and followed his gaze. Reed worried that she paused for too long, that her trepidation might have returned.

Instead, her fingers folded over his hand, and without looking at him again, she guided him toward the doorway. Reed swallowed his voice. For someone so full of naïveté, she had a way of surprising him.

Inside her room, she stopped at the foot of the bed. Immediately, her gaze hesitated on the wall to the left.

Reed followed her lingering attention to the mirror beside them. Her eyes lowered, inspecting each of their bodies as she did a sweeping once over. She lifted her gaze and pierced him with an all-knowing passion. Her eyes darkened with more than the anger he'd seen in the past, darker than when she'd been embarrassed, darker than when frustration turned her features to stone. They spoke a different language to him today, an unspoken tongue with words that transcended the conflict that had found a place between them in the past.

With her eyes still locked on their reflection, she swept her fingers along her shirt buttons, magically releasing them with a touch. Reed swallowed down the sudden intimidation that had captured his heart and limbs. As if they'd momentarily traded places, he held his breath. He couldn't have felt any more ignorant if this had been the first time a woman had disrobed in front of him.

Just as deliberate, she slowly pulled the tucked shirt out of her trousers. Reed didn't want to leave the seductive world of her eyes, but he had to lower his gaze. He had to see her, free and uninhibited.

Subtly parted in the middle, her shirt clung to each breast. A path of soft white flesh guided Reed's eyes to her stomach. He wished she would pull the shirt further apart, but his hands refused to move.

Reading his mind, she hitched her fingers along each sides of the open shirt and brazenly pulled the cloth from her breasts. Reed took a deep breath. His chest tightened at the first glance of her pure skin, her full rounded breasts. They swayed slightly when she turned to look him in the face.

Reed drew his attention from her reflection to her actual body. Careful not to startle her, he slipped the shirt from her shoulders.

Deli shivered when her shirt slithered down her back. Reed's warm hands caressed her shoulders and inner elbows. She lifted her arms from her sides, as he moved the gentle touch to the underside of each limb and smoothed down her sides.

She smiled at the dizzying sensation and struggled between the desire to hold him against her and the pleasure he gave touching her with her eyes and hands. She watched his face as he did, reveling in the expression in his eyes, an expression that said he liked and longed for what he saw, an expression that told her he wanted to make love to her.

His fingers slipped into the waist of her trousers and traced her flesh. This time, she realized no one would stop them, not even themselves. Faint, she allowed herself a shallow breath. His hands never stopped...experienced palms and dancing fingertips waltzing across her bare flesh. She thought she might sway back onto the bed, but his strong hands gently caught her waist and held her still.

"Do you know how much I love you?" he asked.

Deli nodded. She *did* know. Finally, she understood that he did, and what he meant when he said it. She felt it between them and deep within her being. Love...

She could never explain the word, but felt it throughout her own self. It was more than his kisses that made her heady and uncertain and swept her into unknown worlds. It was more than wanting him, yearning for his body to answer the questions her body asked. It was needing him beside her and hoping he'd stay close. It was never knowing the pain of the past because wouldn't allow her pain. It was knowing she was safe, and knowing she was loved, and knowing he cared not for her faults, but cherished her nonetheless. It was her that Reed loved. The true her. The self she never would've discovered if he hadn't cared to show her the way to begin with.

Slowly, Deli nodded. She absolutely knew he loved her, and would never deny him or herself of it again.

She closed her eyes as his fingers gracefully moved up her back, each digit sending a distinct sensation throughout her body. She lifted her arms and pressed her palms against his chest. She'd felt him against her before, but now his body seemed harder, towering, more eager and demanding than before. Yet, he hadn't spoken a word.

Deli licked her lips and drew her hands to his waist. She tugged lightly on the shirt. With ease, it escaped the restraints of snug denim.

Reed's narrowed eyes sent another parade of chills up her spine. She loved that expression and the way it drilled into her and made her feel helpless and guarded all at the same time.

He moved to unbutton his shirt, but she stopped him. "Let me do it."

Gently, she placed his hands at his side, then flicked his collar button out of its hole. She took a breath and held it as the second and third came open.

She paused on the fourth. She'd never seen him naked, she suddenly realized. Now that she thought about it, she'd never seen any man without his clothes. Not that any other men mattered.

She'd thought of Reed before, so many times that it made her mouth dry when she dwelled on it. She wondered and wished and hoped she'd see and feel him the way her body had demanded, but now that she stood on the threshold of that moment, her hands refused to move.

Reed's finger came under her chin and tipped her head upward. Deli searched his beautiful eyes. Immediately, she separated the next two buttons.

The corner of his mouth twitched at that, as if wanted to smile. She didn't want to laugh. Nothing was funny. But some part of her, for a reason she couldn't explain, wanted to grin like an idiot. What was it? Excitement? Accomplishment?

Refusing the urge, she pursed her lips. The gleam she'd grown to love in his eyes filled her with comfort. He wasn't just any man. He was her husband...

Drawing her hand along the warm flesh of his stomach, she finished unbuttoning his shirt. Just as quick, she smoothed the shirt off his shoulders and let it fall behind him.

Deli felt her legs moving backward, though she'd never told them too. Dark and tempting, nothing she thought would trigger her trepidation, his broad solid chest and large arms dwarfed her. The back of her legs hit the bed and she sat.

Reed had moved steps forward as she had moved back. Though she was trapped on the bed, he remained an arm's length away.

"Are you scared, Deli?" he asked softly.

"Scared?"

Concern etched his features.

"Do I look scared?" she managed.

He nodded and offered his hand

She couldn't have stayed sitting if she wanted to, not with the tone of his voice practically luring her to lay back. Fainthearted, she took his hand and stood. The breath left her body as her rear left the bed.

"Turn around," he whispered, nodding at the mirror.

Deli did as he asked and caught her reflection as she turned. She blinked at it, not recognizing the eyes of the person she saw in there.

Reed moved behind her, his hands settling at her waist, lingering for a moment on her belt buckle before he unhitched it and tossed it on the floor.

Deli flinched at the loud clank it made.

"I'm not going to ask you to trust me," he whispered in her ear, "because I already know you do."

Hypnotized by his hands in the mirror, Deli steadied her legs as he unbuttoned her trousers and slid his thumbs into the sides of the waistband.

"Just relax," he breathed.

She had no other choice. There was nothing else she could do, not with her curiosity and his eyes guiding the way.

Instinctively, she stepped on the back of one boot and slid it off. The second one quickly followed.

Torturously slow, Reed moved his hands over her hips, down her thighs, bringing her new clothes with him. Deli abruptly looked up before she could see her nakedness in the mirror.

Warm inviting air breezed over the back of her thighs. She took a sharp breath when she realized it was Reed's breath. Rising, his bare chest stroked against her back.

Her heart sped up. She ached for him to touch her, to quell the desire that screamed a demand she couldn't pin point. Still standing behind her, Reed's eyes searched hers in the looking-glass. He fumbled with his pants, brushing his knuckles against the middle of her back, but with her body blocking his, she could only guess what he was doing.

His pants answered her question when they landed at her feet. Deli pulled her lower lip between her teeth and lowered her gaze in the mirror. Reed's dark flesh contradicted her pale body. His hands slid seductively over her shoulders, skimming past her arms as if she'd only imagined his touch.

Gliding his hands to her hips, Reed bent and buried his mouth in the crook of her neck. A gentle pressure rubbed against her throat. Deli swallowed and inspected her reflection. A dizzying sensation heavied her eyelids, but she forced them to remain focussed. Her breast looked different now. Fuller. Rounder. Harder. As if they knew exactly how she felt. Reed ran his tongue against her neck, causing the soft pink flesh in the center of each breast to tighten and tingle.

Deli thought she'd lost her breath, but it returned in yielding raspy strokes.

Giving in, she let her eyes fall shut. Her skin became completely aware of all the places his body pressed against her. His hands moved, slowly at first, toward her lower stomach. They lingered for a moment until she thought she'd have to scream for him to keep on course. Every movement tortured her. Every pause left her begging for more. Torn between both, Deli slid her hands over his. Desperate to find release, she pressed his palms and fingers harder against her skin.

She folded her hands over his and moved them upward, stroking her ribs, then cupping her breasts. She gasped. Gratification blanketed her desire, but only for moment. The longer he touched her, the more his fingers fondled and caressed, the stronger her hunger grew. Stronger and harder. More desperate.

She knew he'd only just begun.

Losing her breath, she flashed her eyes open and locked them with his in the mirror.

Their images, one behind the other, sent a new river of pleasure over her limbs. Deli stilled at what she saw. The longer she stared at her face, the less she recognized herself.

Sensuality and desire hardened Reed's features. But she saw something more within his eyes. Something both scary and urgent. She'd seen that look before. On the faces of Debra's customers.

Deli's heart skipped at the thought. The words in his eyes betrayed his need more than his voice ever had.

She lowered her gaze on the dark red patch of hair below her lower abdomen. Even her body looked different. Thoughts of what he would do, what she *knew* he would do, made her suddenly desperate.

Hard and hotter than a mid-summer day, his manhood pressed into her lower back. She didn't need to guess at that. Even she knew the ways of a man. At least she hoped she did.

His arms tightened around her, but somehow Deli managed to move to the side. She wanted to see him, needed to see him. She wouldn't let this moment pass her by without knowing every inch of her husband's body.

Daring herself into brevity, she looked deep into the looking glass and allowed her gaze to lower. She wondered, for a moment, if she could stop it if she'd wanted to. Somehow, now, her eyes had a mind of their own.

Overwhelmed and surprised, she stared at the domineering shaft of flesh that had somehow managed to hide itself in Reed's trousers until now. She gulped at its size and the attention it demanded.

Quickly, she glanced over her shoulder and caught him staring intensely at her. Catching her breath, she swallowed again.

Was it too late to change her mind?

"Just relax, Deli," he said as if he could read her mind. His voice soothed her, but couldn't completely erase her suddenly intrusive fear.

"That's easy for you to say," she answered. "You haven't seen what I have."

A grin tugged at the corner of his lips. "Likewise."

Leaning forward, his mouth hungrily took hers. It diminished all doubt and doubled her ache and passion.

Instinctively, Deli spun and linked her fingers behind his neck. She didn't want to wait anymore. She couldn't. Uncontrolled, her breathing quickened. His tongue moved sensuously over her lips, retreating when she needed more, teasing her to the brink of insanity.

With a deep breath, she pulled away. Her heart's rampant beats pounded in her ears and her hands clenched into fists she couldn't control. If she didn't calm down she'd fall over altogether! She peered into his eyes and prayed he knew what he was doing. Surely, he knew how to save her from the reckless agony seizing her entire body.

Pacing her breaths, she gathered the remnants of her senses. Somehow, he'd managed to steal them away. Timid, she stepped away, her gaze traveling across his dark chest. Without a word, he lowered his arms to his sides.

Easing behind him, Deli inspected the spread of his back. His muscles tightened when he looked over his shoulder at her.

The movement stole Deli's breath again. This, all of this, belonged to her. Just as she belonged to him. But for once she wouldn't have to fight to keep what she wanted. Reed would always be hers.

Like the rest of her body, her hand took on a mind of its own. She flattened her palm against the center of his back and drew her fingertips down his spine. Not waiting for his objections or encouragement, she moved her hand lower still, caressing the silken flesh that grew taut under her touch.

Entranced by his subtle movements, she grated her nails over his skin. Peering around his shoulder, Deli examined his reaction in the mirror. A tuft of dark hair had fallen across his forehead and shadowed his eyes. Deep within them she read his thoughts. He wanted her to continue just as desperately as she did when his hands had done the roaming. Inching her way back around him, Deli drew her touch across top of his thigh and released the breath she'd been holding. Her fingertips raked through a thicket of coarse hair. Her wrist brushed against the stretch of his manhood. Both tempted her to explore further.

Biting her lip, Deli lifted her gaze. Reed's eyes had darkened.

They searched hers for a moment before he softly said, "Go ahead, Deli."

She held onto the challenge and rubbed her fingertips over the extended flesh.

His jaw clenched.

Deli couldn't have stopped her smile if she wanted to. Finally, she had him.

His eyes narrowed, but a spark within betrayed his amusement. "Something funny?"

Slowly, she nodded and increased the pressure of her hand, firmly wrapping her fingers around the organ. She wouldn't have thought it possible, but it seemed to harden under her touch.

He cradled her chin in his hand. "And what's that?"

She rounded her fingers over the unbelievably smooth tip, only to watch him suck in a quick breath.

Deli bit harder on her lip, but couldn't rid herself of the smile. Thrill surged through her. Finally, she'd done something right, or so his expression said.

"You think you have the upper hand here, honey?" he asked.

"Oh, I know I do."

"You sure?"

Again, she nodded.

Before she could stop him, Reed crouched and swept her easily into his arms. He stepped toward the bed and laid her gently across the center.

Deli pressed her lips together to keep from giggling. Reeling and eager, she eyed the bold contours of his body as he slid beside her.

"Give me your hands," he said.

Offering her hands, she frowned. "What are you going to do?"

Reed locked her wrists within one of his large hands and gave her a small smile, and smile that answered nothing. Lying on his side, he held her arms above her head.

"Don't move," he said, a subtle warning warming his tone.

Don't move?

She couldn't if she wanted to. And she certainly didn't want to. A strange and entirely new urge rippled over her flesh and weighed heavily in her lower abdomen.

He could do whatever he wanted, and she wouldn't care as long as he promised to never stop. It was a request Deli knew she didn't have to speak aloud.

Reed's hand flattened against her stomach, gently at first. "Don't move," said again.

"I won't..."

His fingers had already begun an upward trek to her breasts. An unexpected giggle escaped her.

"You're moving," he warned.

Every hair on her body stood on end, waiting to be touched.

The back of his knuckles caressed the underside of her breast, but this time Deli couldn't smile. Her warmth had returned, the warmth she'd reveled in before they'd started this game.

With Reed's probing hands came heat. Desperately, she wanted to wrap her arms around him, but he held her hands firmly above her head.

She wiggled slightly, but he didn't seem to notice.

Unable to move, Deli relaxed. Her eyes drifted closed. She felt Reed beside her, adjusting himself. Before she could predict his actions, pleasure ripped through her body. She felt his mouth, hot and torturously soft warming the center of her breast. His tongue roamed with experience. His breath increased the inescapable pleasure.

Deli thought she heard herself make a sound, but it came from somewhere so deep she couldn't be sure. His mouth moved higher on her chest, followed by his hand.

"All right," Deli gasped. "I...I don't want to wait any longer."

Reed pressed his lips against hers. He tasted the flavor he'd dreamed for so long about. Her demand hardened every muscle in his body.

She returned the kiss, lifting her head from the bed and pressing against his lips with a passion he never would've predicted. Reed smoothed his hand down to her stomach, over the knoll of velvety hair shadowing her sex, and directly between her thighs.

She wriggled and crossed her legs, locking his hand into place. "Reed...please..."

He pressed his palm harder against the moist heat. Every moment, no matter how slight, increased the heaving in her chest.

Her eyes opened and drilled into him. "Reed, we have to—" She searched his face. "I mean, I...I need—" Narrowing her gaze, she wiggled her wrist. "Let go of my hands."

If Reed didn't know her, he'd have thought the devil himself had just given him an order. Deli didn't want to play games anymore.

And neither did he.

Immediately, Reed let her wrists go.

Her body rose against his as she sat up. Their legs tangled. Their mouths met.

Stealing his breath, she moved between his thighs and laced her legs on each side of his hips. The action brought her womanhood dangerously close, only a hint of space separating their bodies.

Reed felt himself growing desperate. He'd waited long enough already. He'd waited patiently. He'd waited forever. And he could wait no longer.

Instinctively, she lifted her rear off the bed and balanced over his rigid organ. Reed caught the intent in her eyes and pressed his hand at the small of her back.

Slowly, she lowered herself.

"Wait," he stopped her.

She shook her head.

"It might be better if we lay down."

"No."

She touched the tip of his manhood with the moist flesh between her thighs. Reed clenched his teeth. His body demanded him to shut up and fulfill the emptiness that belonged to her. But his heart knew he should warn her. That first stroke wouldn't be as pleasant as she thought.

"I already know," she said in a voice he didn't recognize.

With one hand locked behind his neck, she used the other to balance herself over him.

"You do?" he asked.

"Debra told me."

Slowly, Reed nodded. "Well, she would know."

"And I'm not scared," she breathed against his mouth.

"You're not..."

"Because I do trust you, Reed, and I love you."

The warmth of her sex engulfed the smooth tip. Simultaneously, they took a quick breath. Reed dug his fingers into the small of her back as she eased herself lower.

Her eyes widened, then closed.

"I can feel it," she breathed. "Almost there..."

Reed felt it too, though he couldn't find the words to speak.

Despite her objections, he moved her back onto the bed and poised above her. She balanced herself on her elbows and caught his eyes with her own.

Gently, Reed eased himself into her. His hand traveled to the apex of her thighs. Craftily, he circled the moist area with his thumb. If only he could keep from hurting her. Roping his control, he lowered his hips.

She gasped and fell back on the bed, nodding as if he'd asked her permission. Not waiting, Reed pressed deeper into her, then hesitated. He didn't want to hurt her, but he wasn't the one who wrote nature's law.

She tightened her thighs. "Almost there..."

Reed gripped the blanket on the sides of her head and glided beyond the resistance.

Her weak cry stopped his heart. Balancing over her, he peered into her alluring eyes. "All right?"

Her tongue appeared to dampen her lips and she nodded. "You're not stopping, right?"

Reed released the breath that pained his chest. "Not even close."

For a moment he recalled the night they met, the way her eyes pierced him with promises of death. Now they promised something else, although he was sure she didn't know what. She touched his cheek with her fingertips and drew a soft line across his lips. Her hips shifted and hardened his desire.

Reed kissed the tips of her fingers before she lowered her hand to his chest. She was as silken and as ready as he'd hoped, tightly sealing him within her.

"D...Do it again," she murmured.

Reed didn't wait for a second order. He withdrew himself and entered her again with less hesitance and than before. The embrace she had on his organ brought him back a third and a fourth time.

Afraid that movement might chase away her desire, Deli held her breath. She hadn't expected chaos to twist her thoughts at this moment, but it had. She couldn't think about anything. She couldn't remember how they'd come to this place. She couldn't recall if the sun shone outside or if she'd left the door unlatched.

And none of it mattered.

Reed's movements, the torturously smooth strokes that dipped and teased deep places she'd been unaware of, surrounded her with a drunken dizziness.

She licked her lips and tasted him, took a breath and smelled him, moved her hips and felt him. He enveloped her. On her skin and in her soul.

Every stroke added a layer to her desire, until she thought she'd beg him to stop. Their chests, slick with perspiration, glided in rhythmic motion. Something told her that he'd created a mountain of passion within her for a purpose.

Dancin' Debra had never said anything about a man feeling this way...

Reed parted their bodies and balanced on his hands. Looking deep into his eyes heightened her awareness.

"How could you wait?" she gasped.

Reed pulled out at the question and hovered above her sex. Wiggling her hips, Deli searched for him.

"I knew you'd come around," he said in a throaty whisper.

Still searching for him, Deli scooted down the bed. "If I'd known...I couldn't have waited..."

"No?"

She shook her head.

His rigid organ, that which had brought her waves of pleasure, eased partially into her. Ecstasy shook her body, but the craving only increased.

She lifted her hips, but somehow he kept her at bay.

"Please," she finally rasped. "Don't stop now..."

A coy all-knowing smile parted his lips. "I hadn't planned to."

He drove into her with force that ripped an indistinct moan from her throat. Deli nodded and covered her eyes.

"Yes," she managed, "like that."

"I know..."

Powerless, her hand fell beside her head. She couldn't have moved if the house had been on fire. She didn't want to.

Greed and passion engulfed her lower belly. It spread rampant and boldly to her stomach and chest. It tightened her hands into fists. Her breasts grew hot and demanding.

He felt larger inside her now, if that were at all possible. His movements increased, touching deeper with every stroke.

Afraid he might leave her, Deli secured her arms around his back and her legs around his.

He drove into her with a finality that shook her limbs and blinded her with explosive bliss. Somehow, he'd reclaimed her wrists in one hand and held them above her head. His other hand cupped her breast and fondled the hard pink core.

The gesture shattered her thoughts.

All right, you win! she wanted to scream.

He could've asked anything, made her say anything, made her do anything...and she would've complied. For once, she'd have given him his way.

The rioting vibrations pulsed to a slow, steady rhythm and matched her thumping heart. Heaviness relaxed her entire being. With each gentle movement, Reed pulled the last of her strengths from her body.

Weak and trembling, her breathing returned.

Gradually, carefully, he lowered his body upon hers. The hand entrapping her wrists eased away.

Her legs fell from around his back, though she couldn't remember even putting them there. Reed's warm lips pressed against her cheek, then her neck. And carefully, as if she might break, he slid to her side.

Deli took a choppy breath and faced him.

There he was. She had planned to fight him to the end, to win a battle that seemed so unimportant and useless now. She should have caught on from the beginning that Reed wasn't the kind of man that lost graciously, if ever.

His hand slid across her cheek and around her ear. "What's the matter?"

Deli smiled. Had her expression been that obvious? "I'm trying to think of something clever to say..."

Reed chuckled and swept a gentle kiss over her lips. "Always thinking..."

Turning on her side, Deli moved closer to him, needing his warmth more than ever. He sat up and dragged the blanket from the foot of the bed. It fanned over their bodies and settled with a flick of his wrist.

Deli closed her eyes. She could stay like this forever, completely content, forever safe.

Slowly, she opened her eyes to find Reed still staring. She touched his full soft lips, his chin, then drew her finger down his neck.

Thoughtfully, she frowned at the glaring scar at the base of his throat.

"What's wrong?" his voice caressed.

"It's like you said, I'm always thinking."

He smiled. "What is it this time?"

"Just something Eric told me."

His brows lifted teasingly on his forehead. "Now of all times, you're thinking about Eric Archer?"

Hesitant, she touched the scar. "About when you were shot, when you almost died." She thought she felt his pulse quicken, but couldn't be sure. "If Eric's sister had succeeded, you wouldn't be here now."

His Adam's apple bobbed when he swallowed. "Who told you it was his sister?"

"He did. That day you thought you wanted to kill him. He said you were angry with him for what she'd done. Even though he hadn't seen her in years. I guess there was bad blood between them." Ignoring the warning in her gut, she cuddled closer to Reed's chest. Something was wrong. "I can't imagine getting so angry at Travis that I'd never speak to him..."

Reed tightened his grip around Deli. Her breath fanned the breadth of his chest, but he barely felt it. Her words, though softly spoken and innocently delivered, weighed like saddlebags on his mind. Had he heard her correctly?

Eric told her he hadn't seen Sierra in years?

But hadn't Eric told him that he didn't know his brothers and sister at all?

Reed held Deli closer. For her sake, he had wanted to believe Eric. But now he knew...with such a simple lie, Eric Archer was not a man to be trusted.

As if she sensed a change in him, Deli lifted onto her elbow. Her eyes shifted between each of his.

"I didn't mean to bring it up," she said with a frown.

Reed swallowed the curse in his throat. How could he be so blind?

"It's fine," he managed.

Obviously bewildered, she lowered her body beside his.

Shitfire, as Deli might've said. He'd been duped. He couldn't be sure, and he wouldn't say it out loud until he was, but something told him that Chance's boss had been dancing right under their noses. Something told him that he'd played more than one game of poker with the man that had been trying to kill his wife.

Chapter Seventeen

Deli would never forget the anger slashing Reed's fine features as he'd left their bed...and her side. He said he didn't have a plan. He had anger and certainty and his brother at his side, but no plan.

Now they stood at the base step leading up to Archer's finely kept establishment. Deli had been here a thousand times before and never a nerve wilted. At this moment, however, she couldn't breathe. She wanted to reach out to Reed, to hold his hand, to bury her face against his chest with his arms around her. What she didn't want was to be here.

Beside her, Mariah glanced over her shoulder at the saloon. Debra would take care of the baby, Deli wanted to assure her, but her jaw only tensed at the thought of speaking. Against Luke's demands, Mariah had insisted on coming along. He couldn't force her to stay behind anymore than Reed could convince Deli.

Unable to tolerate the retreating sun's heat against her back, Deli adjusted her shoulders. Just a step in the lead, Reed and Luke's stern shoulders blocked her view of Eric's place. Full of guilt and regret, she bit her lip. Her beautiful, much-awaited moment with Reed had been destroyed with the mention Eric. Eric...Her friend.

Growing more nervous by the second, Deli linked her arm with Mariah's as they fell into step behind their husbands. Vaguely, she felt Mariah's cool hand over her own.

"How the hell could you *not* know?" Luke demanded.

Deli flinched at the unnatural hate in his voice. "I told Reed Archer was a friend. It's not his fault."

Both men paused. Luke glanced at her with irritation.

"Get that glare out of your eyes," Mariah warned him. "It's not her fault either."

"She could have been killed," he answered simply.

Deli swallowed at the thought. Would Eric really harm her?

That

question brought her here. If Eric had betrayed her, she wanted to know. She wanted to see it in his eyes. And then she wanted to see his eyes close when he died. If he'd been responsible for Travis's pain, she definitely wanted him dead. And she wanted to be the one to pull the trigger.

Closing her eyes, she hoped the gun in her boot wouldn't go off. She'd never actually brought herself to using one, but for Travis's sake, she wouldn't hesitate. Not this time.

If it were true, how could Eric do this to her?

The sun kissing the tops of the mountains sent a chill up her spine. It'd be dark by time they got home. With Chance on the loose, dark was never a good time to be out.

Without knocking, Reed opened the door to Eric's place. The tinkling bell rang Deli's senses alive. Her heart pounded loudly in her ears. It was possible the Beckers were wrong. Despite their convictions, they could be mistaken.

Deli's stomach churned.

"Maybe we should stay out here," Mariah whispered.

"No." Deli shook her head. "I'm going in there."

"Stay by the door," Reed's quiet voice ordered.

Deli nodded and entered the small room a step behind the men. If Mariah hadn't been holding her hand, she knew it'd be trembling.

An obnoxious laughter, so familiar and loud, held the breath in her throat. She'd been in Eric's office enough times to know every corner. A second room tagged off of the first. And stairs from there led to his sleeping quarters above.

The laughter came from up there. Chance's laughter. Right in Eric's place!

Tears stung Deli's eyes, but she blinked them away. Reed was right. Eric was responsible. It'd been his order that placed Travis at death's door.

The heavy stomp of footsteps echoed in the next room. Voices swapped words. The footsteps yielded.

Deli tightened her grip on the hand within her own.

"Ouch," Mariah whispered.

The steps approached, followed by Eric's womanly laugh echoing on the other side of the closed door. Ashamed, Deli lowered her head. Her stupidity could have killed them all.

"I say two weeks," Eric said, swinging the door open.

"Two weeks for what?" Reed asked.

Eric froze in the doorway. The color drained from his soft pink cheeks. Dumbly, he blinked at the four of them.

"Keep on coming in here," Reed said with death on his tongue. "And Chance too."

Eric tugged on his collar and cleared his throat. "Isn't this interesting?"

He stepped into the room with a grace that didn't match his uneasiness. Like a lone mutt, Chance strutted in behind him.

"Well, ain't this a pleasure," he laughed. "All of us meetin' together."

Deli threw Mariah's hand down and ripped across the room toward Eric. Reed caught her by the waist and pulled her to his side.

"You coward," she growled. "You damn coward bastard, Eric! I'll kill you!"

"I told you to stay by the door," Reed whispered against her ear.

"I trusted you!" Deli screamed. "How could you! You tried to murder me! You could've killed my brother!"

Eric blinked at the accusation. "Me? Deli, my dear, surely you don't think *I* had anything do to with that."

"I know you did," she ground out.

"My dear," he said, patting his brow with a white kerchief, "I am a businessman. Not a murderer."

"I know you did," she repeated. "I know it."

"Surely, you can understand business," Eric told Reed. "You come from a family of—"

"But why?" Deli asked.

How could he? How could he manipulate her and slink in the background to steal her dreams?

"For the mountain, my dear. Why do you think?"

Deli felt her chest collapsing against her heart. She stilled her fight and peered deeply into Eric's eyes, hoping to find the man she'd thought he was. "The mountain is dead, Eric."

"I believe I'd like to see for myself," he said solemnly.

She clenched her teeth. Who was this man?

"It's like watching a good caviar go untouched," he added.

Deli stared in disbelief. "You can go straight to hell wondering about it because you'll never see the inside of that mountain. *Never.*"

Eric nodded at Chance. "Mr. Evens tells me otherwise."

Casually, Eric sashayed to the desk in the corner. Keeping Deli at his side, Reed took two steps toward Archer and cornered him.

"Let me show you something," Eric said. He withdrew a large map and waved it before them. Reed snatched it out of his hands and scowled that the four boxes drawn on the map. A small square of land in the center glared back at him. It was Gold Farm. He knew without asking.

"As you can see I own the surrounding acreage. Most of it once belonged to Dylan Gold, if I'm not mistaken. But the worth of this land has been neglected for sometime now, and I'm quite eager to possess it."

"You'd murder for it?" Deli asked. "You'd murder a friend?"

"Absolutely not. I'm not handy with a pistol of any kind. And murder is not in my blood. I'm simply a—"

With a flick of his wrist, Reed let the map sail across the desk and drift to the floor. "A businessman."

"You are correct," Eric said.

"A dead business man."

Stepping behind them, Luke nodded and pulled Deli out of the way. Immediately, she felt Mariah's arm around her back.

Reed reached for the pistol in the waist of his pants behind his back. It weighed cold and heavy and familiar in his hand, melding to his palm with a contempt he hadn't felt since Matthew and he had retired.

"Your last kill is the one you'll remember for the rest of our life," Matthew had once said.

Deliberately, Reed brought the gun, barrel first, in front of Eric's face. If he had to remember killing at all, this was the one he wanted. A capture that equated justice.

Archer paled.

Reed licked his lips.

One for Archer and one for Evens.

He just couldn't decide which he wanted to remember the most.

A hollow click echoed too close to his ear. The sound made him flinch.

A second click, further off, parroted the first.

Reed stilled. He couldn't take his eyes off of Archer to see what had happened behind him. But he didn't have to. Chance obviously wasn't about to let his boss, his paycheck, die.

The unmistakable barrel of a pistol touched Reed's ear.

"I *will* kill him," Chance said.

"And I *will* kill you," Luke answered.

Out of the corner of his eye, Reed saw his brother's pistol planted firmly against the back of Chance's skull. Reed tightened the grip on his own gun.

"Wait!" Deli rushed forward. "Just wait a minute."

She gulped at Chance then glanced at Eric.

"You want a better view to watch your sweetie drop dead to the ground?" Chance asked.

"Please, Eric, tell Chance to put it down," she said softly.

Reed shook his head. He wanted to laugh at her innocence that for once seemed out of place. Eric would never do such a thing.

"Please," she repeated.

Her eyes shifted to Reed's but he found it hard to look in them. A touch of surrender blinked in the dulled pools of blue.

"You can have it," she said with a nod. "All of it. We'll leave." When Chance didn't lower his gun from Reed's head, she bit her lip. "I'm giving it to you, Eric. Take Gold Farm."

After everything she had fought against to keep those measly twenty acres of dirt, she was giving it up? For him? Reed gulped down the realization and thought he might lose the gun in his hand.

A slow smile stretched Eric's lips. He sucked air through his teeth and seemed to consider the offer.

Reed lifted his jaw a notch and steadied his hand. Archer wouldn't touch a grain of sand from Gold Farm, not as long as Reed still had breath in him.

The gun at the back of his head said that might not be much longer.

"Isn't that what you wanted, Eric? Isn't that why you betrayed me?" Deli asked. "Tell Chance to lower his gun."

"Love is a wonderful thing, isn't it?" he answered.

Reed glowered at him.

"Six months ago you would've died for that mountain," Eric laughed. "Life is quite ironic that way."

"I don't know why you're looking so smug," Reed said. "Gold Farm isn't hers to give."

A disappointed frown pointed Eric's features south.

"Yes, it is," Deli said, a weak desperation tainting her words. "You gave it to me, Reed. You said it was mine."

Reed couldn't bring himself to look at her. Her gaze burned against the side of his face, screaming her exasperation.

"You lied," she suddenly said. "You never talked to Sault about it. You never *really* gave it to me."

"I didn't have a chance," he answered.

"How despairing," Eric said. "Paradise has fault after all. It's tragic, really."

Reed tightened his grip. "Shut up."

"And, Deli, my dear, you're quite the clever actress, aren't you?" Eric smiled and tucked his kerchief into his cuff. "What would your loving husband say if he knew you only married him for Gold Farm?"

"He'd say he already knew," Reed said, clenching his jaw.

"And you still married her? How gallant of you, Mr. Becker."

Reed's finger itched to pull the trigger, but he couldn't. Chance would be just as quick.

Like a child on Christmas, Eric clapped excitedly. "I have it. Let us finish this game once and for all."

"It's not a game," Deli said.

"But it can be." Eric wagged his finger. "As I said, I am a businessman." He waved at their weapons. "This does not interest me. But a game of chance might."

"Involving Gold Farm, no doubt." Deli had stepped away from them, but her glare hadn't moved from Reed's face. "What kind of game?"

"You're favorite game of all, my dear. A few hands of cards, a small wager, a winner in the end."

"No." She shook her head. "I won't lose Gold Farm that way."

"It's fate," Eric chuckled. "Hereditary, even. Following in the steps of your father and grandfather." Fervently, he nodded. "Yes, I do believe I like the sound of this."

"I already told you, it's not hers to give," Reed said.

"If you love her as you claim, let her have it," Eric challenged. "Let Ms. Gold play me for it."

"Mrs. Becker," Reed corrected. He switched his gaze to Deli, then back to Eric. "What do you think, honey?"

Her hesitance weighed heavily in the air.

Poker...

The game she swore she'd never touch...

The thought shook her shoulders with a ghostly chill.

"Let me help you decide," Eric said. "I'll stake two—no, five hundred dollars per acre."

"You're nuts," Chance laughed.

Eric nodded at him. "Confident."

On command, Chance lowered his weapon. Reed and Luke didn't move to follow.

"No," Deli finally said. "I won't do it."

"You're taking this personally, my dear. Gold Farm will be mine. I'm simply offering you a fair opportunity to keep it."

Deli turned to Mariah. "At five hundred an acre, what's Gold Farm worth?"

Mariah bit her lip and stared thoughtfully at the ceiling. "Ten thousand dollars."

Deli thought she'd misheard. Ten? Ten thousand dollars?

Was her pride, her fight, her history worth ten thousand dollars?

Gold Farm certainly wasn't.

Before she could answer, Reed lowered his gun from Eric's face. "Done."

"What do you mean done?" Deli echoed.

"I'll play you," Reed said, tucking his gun into his waist. "And after I win, you leave. For good."

"Those aren't the terms of our agreement," Eric said.

"I'm making them the terms. After this, you don't come near this town again. If Deli's horse so much as bucks her off, I'll hunt you down and rip out your throat."

"Ew." Eric wrinkle his nose. "Must you be so crass?"

"You aren't gambling with my land," Deli said.

Was no one hearing her?

"I'm sorry, Deli, but I have to. I won't let you throw it away."

Deli stared at him with disbelief. Didn't he understand that keeping Gold Farm wasn't worth looking over their shoulders for the rest of their lives?

Frozen in place, she vaguely felt his arm around her waist. She glanced up at him, imploring him to understand that Gold Farm didn't mean anything to her anymore.

His gaze lowered upon her. "You've fought too hard for it. I won't let you give it up."

Deli knew there was nothing she could say to tilt his mind in another direction. He'd decided, and that was that.

Déjà vu washed over her as Reed guided her out the front door. Once again, her fate and her home were on the scales, decided by men and their greedy game of chance...

Chapter Eighteen

Deli folded her damp hands in her lap. It'd been a long, tiresome night. A long, stressful game. And its end didn't appear to be in sight.

Against her wishes, Travis had pulled himself out of bed and took a seat beside her. Word had spread like a plague that Eric and Reed were playing for Deli's precious acres. Though many were friends, thick air filled the saloon. For years, there had been talk about Gold Mountain, and now if Eric won, the stories would come to an end.

Was it or wasn't it made of gold?

Deli blinked at Reed's hand of cards. She cringed at the pair of sixes he held. Eric would win this hand...again.

Beneath the table, she'd already slipped her boots off. But there was no way to fetch the gun hiding inside the one on the right.

Trying to appear inconspicuous, she felt the pistol's cool metal against her toes. It mattered not that they won, but that Eric paid the price for what he'd done. Eric *and* Chance.

"Need anything?" Mariah asked from behind them.

Deli shook her head. Beside Mariah, Debra held tightly onto little Shyla. Her coos were the only sound in the room at times. Her coos and statements to "raise" or "fold."

Growing impatient, Deli sighed. Across from her, Chance glanced at Eric's hand and grinned. She didn't trust that grin.

"Poker is nothing like life," Reed had said. "In poker, you trust no one."

Deli touched the gun with her toe. She should've done the same in life. But then, she wouldn't have Reed.

"Fold," she heard him say.

Luke cursed behind them.

Chance laughed.

"How much is that?" Eric asked Chestnut.

Chestnut answered him with a hateful glower before checking with the paper in his hand. "Twelve acres."

"Deal," Reed told Darrell.

The young bartender had been more than willing to let off of work for the game. He nodded and divvied out the cards.

Reed swept his hand up.

Holding her breath, Deli slid the gun up her calf with her bare foot. She held it there for a moment, and slowly exhaled.

Checking Reed's cards, she slid the gun to her knee. Before she could drop it, she caught it with her hand and guarded it in her lap.

Successful, she gulped a breath of air.

Reed continued to stare thoughtfully at his cards. A three, a seven, two twos, and a queen.

Deli clenched her teeth. Shitfire! This had gone on for long enough. And it'd become painfully obvious that Eric would win, just as he'd predicted.

She glared at the pair of twos. How could they win with hands like this?

The baby squawked.

"All of it," Deli whispered.

Eric blinked up at her. "What was that, my dear?"

"I said we're betting all of it. If we keep on this way, we'll be here all night." She took a shaky breath. "Starting over. Your ten thousand dollars for my, I mean *our*, twenty acres."

Eric smirked. "You must be predicting quite a hand. You haven't received your new cards yet."

"I don't care." She lowered her gaze to their two. "All for all," she managed.

Reed tipped his head to the side, trying to peer into her eyes.

Deli met his gaze and smiled. "I'm done fighting. It's all right."

His arm tensed against hers, but he gave no objection. Deliberately, he pulled the three odd cards from his hand and placed them face down on the table. "All for all."

Relieved, Deli sighed. This was it.

Darrell dealt the three cards that would determine their future. Where would they live, Deli wondered?

Something told her it didn't matter. Reed would take care of them. She wanted to stand and walk away, pretend she didn't care about the fate of her father's land, but the gun in her lap weighed heavier than she remembered. It kept her pinned on the chair.

Shaking the blur from her mind, Deli shifted her gaze to the cards Reed held. She blinked lamely at the extra set of twos God must have dealt them.

Four of a kind.

Her hands shook against the gun in her lap.

Four of a kind...

A grin tugged at the corner of her mouth.

Don't look up, she warned herself.

"Three kings," Eric chirped.

Deli's eyes flashed open. By the grin on his face, he thought he really had them.

Reed glanced at her, his eyes shining with triumph, but his features remaining solemn.

Turning to Eric, Deli casually lifted her shoulder. "Too bad, Archer, you sorry son of a bitch."

Behind her, Mariah let out a laugh.

Eric's whitened faced widened Deli's grin.

One by one, Reed dropped the cards face up on the table. "Easiest ten thousand I've ever made."

Straitening, he rose from the chair and extended his hand toward Deli.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" Chance asked. He stared intently at them both. He leapt to his feet and aimed a small gun at Deli. "I shoulda followed my gut and taken care of you long ago."

"For heaven's sake," Eric said. "This isn't at all businesslike. Put that weapon away, you fool."

Chestnut glared at Darrell. "I thought you searched them."

The kid shrugged. "I did."

Chance cocked the pistol and extended his arm. Deli gulped, but fear eluded her. Chance Evens was nothing more than a loud mouthed bully.

"Who's going to stop me?" he growled.

Gripping the gun in her lap, Deli withdrew her hand. Suddenly, her weapon disappeared.

"Don't do it," she heard a voice.

Beside her, Travis rose to his feet, his arm extended toward Chance and in it...her missing gun.

Deli lost her breath. Oh, God, not again! "Give it to me, Travis."

"No."

His voice no longer belonged to the little brother she'd always protected. It sounded deeper, more sure. Somehow grown-up.

"I won't let you become a murderer," he said. "You don't know the weight that puts on a person."

"Will you look at that?" Chance's rounded shoulders shook when he laughed. "Little Travis Gold thinks he's man."

Travis glared at him with an intensity that sent chills up Deli's spine. Without so much as recognizing Chance's gun on his sister, he stepped away from the table. Favoring his bad leg, he limped closer to their nemesis.

"Put that gun down, boy, before you shoot a hole in your foot."

A quirky smile twitched the corners of Travis's mouth. Inches away from Chance's ear, the weapon steadied. Unaffected, Chance's grin took up the lower half of his wide face.

"You want another beatin'?" he asked. "Cuz after I land a bullet into your sister, I can give you just that."

Reed pulled Deli into a protective embrace, but Chance's aim followed her.

Slowly, Chance turned to face Travis. The barrel landed between his eyes.

"This is the last time I'm gonna tell you," Chance said in a grumbling tone. "Get that outta my face."

Travis's eyes were not his own. They'd become glazed and distant...as different as the rest of him. "Go to hell..."

A blast exploded.

Reed turned their bodies away from the table.

Eric screamed.

Opening her eyes, Deli saw black. Reed's heart beat brutally against her cheek. She took a deep breath, and lifted her head from where he'd had buried it against his chest.

The gunshot still rang in her ears, but her eyes wouldn't focus. The unbalanced tap of Travis's limp, brought her attention to the other side of the table to where he still stood.

Leaning forward, she focused on Chance's large body slumped on the floor.

"Maybe now I can sleep," her brother said in a dead tone. He tossed the gun on the table, startling them all. "I'm going home."

Deli swallowed the heat of his anger. She'd never seen his eyes so black and unreadable.

"By the way," he said, glancing at Eric. "You owe my sister ten thousand dollars."

"W...Well, of course," Eric stammered, scrambling to his feet. "That goes without saying."

"And then you leave."

Deli couldn't bring herself to turn around and face the boy she no longer recognized. She clutched Reed's stomach, and took a deep breath.

"Someone should've done that along time ago," Chestnut said quietly.

Deli nodded, but couldn't speak her thoughts aloud. Once again, her unthinking actions had caused Travis to murder.

She never should've brought that gun...

~ * ~

"You didn't make him pull that trigger," Reed said.

He glanced down at the cross that marked Matthew Gold's grave. He'd found her out here, staring at the ground, not willing to share her thoughts.

"But I wanted him to do it," she answered.

"We all did."

She took a deep breath and looked up at him. "Travis looks different now, doesn't he?"

"No different than you do," Reed said. "People grow Deli, that's all."

"But I made him grow up. I made him grow up too fast."

"Eighteen is not too fast," Reed chuckled. "He's a man now, Deli. Like it or not. No more worrying and fretting over him like a baby."

He slipped his arms around her waist and turned their bodies together. Instinctively, she slid her arms up his chest and linked her hands behind his neck.

"Come on, Travis! You're falling behind!" a voice called in the distance.

Deli turned toward where their shack once stood, now replaced with the skeleton of a house to come. A dozen men scampered over the frame like spiders on a web.

"Are you sure you all know what you're doing?" she asked.

Travis handed a hammer up to Chestnut then swung onto the top beam and stood with grace.

"I'm sure," Reed said.

Frowning, she looked up at him. "I still don't know why it has to be two stories."

"Bedrooms. Lots of them." Leaning down, he pressed his forehead against hers. "I told you, I want children."

Deli tilted her chin up and brushed his lips with a tender kiss. "Don't I have a say in the matter?"

"No rush," he answered her. "You'll see that I'm right."

"Is that so?"

"Always." Straightening, Reed lifted her feet just off the ground. "You know what I predict right now?"

Deli searched his eyes, but didn't have to look long for the answer. "We don't have a house, Reed, let alone a bedroom. How are we suppose to do that?"

His smile widened as he started away from her parents' graves. "The barn."

"Oh, now you don't mind taking me to the barn?"

Catching her off guard, he lifted her legs into the crook of his arm and cradled her against his chest. "Nope. I don't mind at all."

Laying her head on his shoulder, Deli smiled.

Silence is quiet approval, Chestnut would have said. And for once, she wouldn't have argued.

–THE END–

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As a small child, Cass Andre earned the reputation as the "one who never shuts up." It wasn't until a relative refused to travel in the same car as Andre's mouth that Cass opted to put those words to paper. Her first attempt never reached novel status and she quickly returned to her fast talking, story a minute method. A decade later Andre returned to the world of pen and paper and tackled novel-dom again, this time completing her first book...then quickly hiding it under the bed. Three novels later, she realized her dream and contracted two of her historical romances with Hard Shell Word Factory. *Déjà Vu*, a time travel romance, soon followed suit. Andre's current release, *Remembering You*, available from Wings ePress, is a historical romance brewed in the same fashion as the stories she told as a child—a mix of people she knows and loves in situations they'd never be caught dead in.

Now married and the mother of four young children, Andre divides her time between penning her next novel and designing websites for other writers. She and her husband currently live in Arizona where she's working toward the long awaited THE END on her fourteenth book.

Shrouded Hearts is the sequel of Veiled Hearts (Luke and Mariah's story). Veiled Hearts is available from Hard Shell Word Factory. More information about Veiled Hearts, as well as Cass Andre's other novels can be found at www.booksbycass.com

Cass loves to hear from readers. Email her at

read@booksbycass.com