

RELENTLESS DESIRE

by

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Dedication

To my husband, Wade—You are the spice in my life that
could never be described in any book...stay hot, baby.

Chapter 1

A bead of sweat slid down the tanned cheek of the young lad. The back of his hand automatically wiped it away. Almond-shaped sea-green eyes with long, dark lashes stared out across the vast body of water. The water was so clear, one could almost see the bottom. Over a dozen mountains towered around the lake, closing in like a trap. Although far from home, well over a hundred miles, he couldn't help but wonder if it was far enough.

A gust of wind caught the sombrero and it flew off and away, landing on the wheat colored sand behind him. Raven hair spilled out in subtle waves to his waist. It almost looked blue at different angles. He reached back and scooped the hat, placing the torn heap back in its rightful spot, and gazed back at the towering mountains. A grunt from behind reminded him of reality and he turned to smile at Rogue, whose hooves were sinking in the sand. His teasing laughs agitated the stallion, so he jumped up and gently ran his hand over the horse's nose, speaking quietly into his ear. Their unbreakable bond got them this far already, there was no turning back now.

Rogue grunted again, and pointed his ears back in warning. The young lad tilted his head at that moment,

hearing something like thunder coming towards the beach. No sooner had he grabbed the reins, looking back at the trail, than his heart skipped a beat in response. The chase wasn't over yet.

Four men on horses suddenly appeared along the shoreline. They wore the navy blue and orange of the Randall guards. A short curse escaped as he contemplated a way of outrunning them. Even though Rogue was the fastest horse he had ever seen, he knew his luck had a limit. One by one they lined up and trotted toward him. In his mind, he knew that the disguise wasn't enough, but there was no way in hell he would go down without a fight. The cold metal of the gun tucked into his belt eased some of his fears, though it would take a miracle to take them all down without being injured or killed himself. He stood so still that time didn't dare move. Memories of the past nagged at him like a dagger cutting flesh. Escaping the great Vincent Randall was much harder than expected.

"Well, well! What do we have here? The little lass is dressed in men's clothing!" The man with the curly black beard and mustache sneered through hidden lips. Beady brown eyes stared at the troublesome girl. "Did you really think you'd get away with it?" He stood a breath away, reeking of whiskey and sweat and wet horse. "You'll be whipped when you get home, skipping out on your wedding."

"I don't care! I'll never marry a man like him." Brenna Summers looked right at him with all the mettle she had, visibly placing her hand over her gun. She wasn't afraid to use it. The defiance in her startling green eyes could not be mistaken; she wasn't going down easy. Black Beard snarled

at her disobedience. If he had his way, he'd bury her in the sand and tell Randall she killed herself rather than return with him.

He noticed what she did and began laughing, loud and hearty. The rest of the men did the same as though it was their duty to follow. Suddenly he swung his arm back, catching her completely off guard, and his fist connected with her jaw. She flew back and landed by the water, gulping for air. A mass of black hair tumbled over her eyes, and she struggled to wipe it away. She steadied herself and ran her tongue over the cut in her lip, tasting blood. Her vision blurred just a little, but anger took over completely. She closed her eyes tightly, fighting back at the surging rush of dizziness.

Brenna looked up a second later and saw him coming toward her. His gait had a purpose. Without any reason or thought of the consequences, she pulled out her gun, cocked it, aiming right at his shocked eyes and pulled the trigger. He was dead before he hit the ground. The other three, somewhat surprised by the woman's careless act, wasted no time jumping down and darting toward her. Each man felt their own burning desire for this hot little number in front of them. Two of them grabbed her, hauling her down to the ground, kicking and screaming. She spit at the man kneeling down in front of her; he slapped her hard across the face. He looped his dirty fingers around her belt and ripped it away in one hard motion. The greed and lust in their eyes made her cry out for any kind of help, but there was nobody around to protect her virtue. There was nobody around to hear her screams.

“I don’t give a damn what Vincent says. It’s been months since I took a woman, and I don’t much care if you’re willing. Hold her tight,” he commanded. They eagerly complied, both excited, knowing they would get a turn. They pulled her legs apart, giving the other man freedom to remove her pants. She kicked her legs and struggled against their strong arms, but to Brenna’s dismay, the pants were removed quite easily.

“Look at that black velvet nest, boys!”

It was at that moment that a shot came whizzing from the tree line. The three men jumped up, suddenly realizing they were open, easy targets, and ran behind a row of bushes, pulling their pistols out of their waistbands. They left the girl to fend for herself. Brenna stumbled as she picked herself up, clad only in the ripped work shirt, and whistled for Rogue. She felt almost delirious, trancelike, as she fought for control of her emotions. She had almost been raped. Rogue barreled towards her at an alarming speed, and Brenna mounted the big stallion in one quick leap over his backside and headed for the cover of the tree line. Tears of fear and relief blurred her vision as she dug her heels into Rogue’s flanks, pushing him harder. But just as she thought to get the hell out of there, she knew that going anywhere dressed in just a shirt was looking for trouble.

She ignored the firing of guns behind her, and headed for the abandoned cabin, hidden in the bushes past the beach. She would wait until it was safe before returning for her pants and boots. She hoped she had a chance to thank her rescuer. After she was dressed, of course.

* * * *

Jake Hudson halted in his boots when the young boy laughed innocently at his horse. At first it was the prime horseflesh that caught his attention. The boy was in rags, but the horse should belong to a king, or the general of an army. Probably stolen, but that was none of Jake's business. When the hat blew off the lad's head, Jake was stunned, speechless. How could a man have such beautiful, lustrous hair? It looked like black silk. Sexy black silk that made a man fumble for words. He watched from the bushes a short distance from the beach, squinting his eyes for a better look, but the boy put the hat back on his head.

Jake couldn't make out a face, but when the riders came, the boy visibly shook. Angry words wafted up. Jake slid off his saddle and eased his rifle up to his shoulder.

Any thought of being nosy quickly turned into the need to offer protection. Jake had never viewed himself as a hero, but the thought of those thugs touching that hair toughened his resolve to help. The horse probably belonged to them, or whomever they worked for.

It took every bit of willpower not to crash through the trees to the rescue. Three to one wasn't good odds, and it could easily be four to one if the young lad misinterpreted his intent to help. So he waited, watching, until the situation became fatal. The kid was just a boy, but obviously these men didn't give a damn. Another day, another death. Jake felt the rush of excitement, that fear and adrenaline pumping through him like a lion, when the first man went down. He couldn't believe how the boy handled the situation. But when the other men began ripping his clothes off, bile stuck in his throat at the thought of what they were doing. And then it hit him like a slap in the face, when he

realized they weren't trying to rape a boy, but a young woman. That's when the wave of raw power ripped through him to do something. He fired his gun at the men in a fit of rage worthy of a warrior, keeping his aim far from her. Each bullet cut flesh as he listened to the screams of agony and cursing. He continued firing. There was no mercy; in Jake's eyes, any man who could rape a girl deserved to die.

Most women would cry and beg for mercy in a situation like this, but she didn't. In one exquisitely perfect jump, she mounted the stallion and commanded him to listen. She was in total control of the black beast. Her silky hair whipped around her waist, tangled over her shoulders as she jerked the reins to steady the stallion's movements. Jake imagined that she probably couldn't stand her hair always getting in the way. He would love it to be in his way, draping across his naked chest. Tickling his shoulders as she kissed him. *Oh yes.* Her magnificent thighs held on for dear life, as she maneuvered the tall steed through the commotion. The simple work shirt clung to a body he knew was athletic, powerful. The tomboy didn't even look back to see who had helped her. She didn't even stick around to retrieve her jeans or boots, but he knew exactly where she was headed. Jake watched, completely distracted and stunned as her glorious black hair whipped in the wind, riding away. He whistled out loud. Now why couldn't more women be like that?

Women. Most were dainty as a lamb and needed to be showered with gifts until a man went broke and insane. He grabbed the boots and jeans and walked his mare, thinking about all that heavenly blue-black hair.

He wondered if a woman like that, one who killed a man to keep her freedom, could be tamed.

Jake approached the old barn, walked through the door, keeping his gate slow and steady so as not to alarm her too much. He waited a moment for his eyes to adjust in the darkness, and he scanned the room. There she was, in the corner, with her shapely legs tight to her chest, her arms wrapped around her knees. She was crying with silent tears as she stared at him. Her body was shaking, and her disheveled hair made her look like a wounded cat. He didn't want to scare her, so before he got too close, he held out the pants and boots. Besides, he had seen the lengths she was willing to go not to be touched.

"I'm not going to hurt you. But I thought you might want these," he said softly.

A teary-eyed smile was his reward, and Jake couldn't help but smile back. She had to be the most beautiful woman he ever had the pleasure of laying eyes on, and he had seen plenty.

"Thank you," she whispered, reaching out to take her things. He tried to get a better look at her, but the shadows hooded her eyes, and the sweep of her thick, long lashes hid their depths. He would bet a pan of gold that a woman like this could easily trap him; she was just too interesting to ignore. She had a small oval face with delicate, high cheekbones, and a golden complexion similar to a native woman. And all that gorgeous black hair held his gaze, and he realized once again he wasn't breathing. She stood there waiting, her face angled to the side. He realized that she wanted to dress, so he turned his back, apologizing for being so rude.

"If you don't mind me asking, what were those men doing chasing after you?" he questioned thoughtfully.

"Mm, I don't know." As much as she would like to tell this man the truth, considering he saved her life, she couldn't afford to have anyone know who she was.

"You can turn around now. I'm done." This man didn't scare her, even when his eyes changed with a heated gaze; like he was undressing her again in his mind. She blushed when his crooked smile sent a ripple of anticipation through her lower extremities. This stranger saved her life. He had beautiful light blue eyes and sandy blond hair that hung to his wide shoulders. His fine, sharp nose was a perfect accent to the hard, square line of his jaw. And he was so damn tall, she felt like a mouse in front of him.

"Every woman should have a handsome man like you for a savior." She said the words so innocently, that Jake chuckled.

"I wouldn't call me a savior. Many would argue that point with you. How did you learn to use a gun?"

"I taught myself so I could protect my horse!"

His throaty laugh was quite amusing, and she had to admit that the sound was adorable. It flowed from his fine mouth like a warm summer breeze. It was enlightening for somebody like her, who hadn't heard a laugh for many years.

"Thank you for coming to my rescue. How can I ever repay you?"

Her eyes caught his, and she blushed again at his raised eyebrow. God, she felt like an idiot, an adolescent girl who had never seen a man before. To her relief and disappointment, he didn't charge forth and demand what

she was afraid of. Steely blue eyes never left hers as he reached out, gently grabbing her chin. She didn't shy away, although her mind was screaming to get a grip, thank him nicely and tell him to be on his merry way. He lowered his head with a smile on his wicked lips. Her heart raced with the speed of wild horses when his lips brushed hers. They were so soft and full, that she easily slipped into another world where his mouth was the only thing that existed. A feather couldn't have been softer, and she moaned against his sweet kiss. His other arm went around her, steadying her trembling body. Hard muscles flexed around her, holding her so close that it was almost impossible to breathe. His body was so warm against the coolness of her own. She could have been in his arms forever; a feeling of safety is what his embrace promised. Her lips parted, and he slipped his hot tongue inside, exploring every recess of the hidden Eden behind those lips. A groan vibrated from mouth to mouth. He couldn't tell if it was her or himself, but he knew he had to keep things together, especially knowing that she might change her mind and shoot him between the eyes. Regrettably, Jake pulled away, looking into those seductive green eyes that seemed to shine even more as she smiled up at him. *Vixen!*

"If I continue, I'm afraid I wouldn't be any better than those men. What are you doing in this town? Where are you from?" He felt like a lovesick jackass. Jake rolled his eyes, unimpressed with himself. He shouldn't be prodding this girl for anything. She obviously wasn't the type to reveal a thing. That kiss spoke volumes, but he grinned at her innocent shrug.

“If I tell you, I’d have to kill you!” she teased, her face suddenly sobering. “Thank you again, but I must leave. I’m afraid that I’m late for an engagement.” Her eyes changed then, causing him to doubt she was late for anything. Well, it wasn’t his business. But as she walked away from him, and his eyes followed that exquisite body and gorgeous hair, he felt a stab of something in his stomach. She mounted her horse and waved back to him. Her horse trotted about as she steadied him with the strength of her thighs and hard grip on the reins. Full, lovely breasts bounced in that damn work shirt that made him long to rip it off and struggle with her in a game of cat and mouse. He imagined how feisty she would be, how intense her passion would feel, and he found himself wondering if she loved as well as she fought for control. She smiled back at him, and when she rode away, he wished he had asked if he could see her again. He didn’t even know her name.

* * * *

The music and laughter erupted through the big double doors as Jake made his way into *The Velvet Lounge* late that afternoon. He needed a stiff drink. This afternoon had been quite exciting, to say the least. A thrilling rush swept through him, remembering the tomboy high on her horse, smiling down at him. She could have been a damn dream for all that he knew. The way those strong thighs clung to her mount made him wonder how tight they could wrap around his waist. The way she fit so snugly in those revealing jeans, made him think how warm and tight she would mold around his throbbing dick. Damn it all to hell! What was wrong with him? Women never affected him like that before, and especially from such a slip of a thing!

“Darling! You made it. I’m so happy that you’re home safely!” Lita Carlisle, owner and madam of the hotel, rushed over to wrap her arms around his neck. One might think they had something going, but in fact, she was like a mother to him. She was there when he lost his family, and the only one he could admit at a drop of his hat that he trusted.

“It’s good to see you too, Lita. I need a drink.” He hugged her back with equal force.

“Of course. Harry!” she yelled with a squealing pitch, startling Jake. “Jake is home. You know what he wants!”

“It’s great to be home,” he managed to say as Lita led him to the counter. He looked around, hoping there were still some half decent, eager women in this town. Eight months in the wilderness carved a needy man out of him. He wished he could taste that tomboy again, and he felt like a bloody idiot for being rattled over one simple kiss. Maybe it was best if he didn’t run into her again.

Jake knew he was a good-looking man. All of the women told him so. He loved hearing their sweet voices, moaning and crying out his name as they clawed his naked back. All women were the same. They all wanted to feel sexy, needed, loved. But Jake didn’t know how to love. Physically, hell yeah...emotionally, he felt empty.

A flash of black caught his attention and he turned to see a young woman appear beside him, as if a gust of wind flew her in by its wings. Her unusual green eyes and shiny black hair instantly attracted him. She was breathtaking. The woman smiled up at him, and then he realized that it was the tomboy! She looked so different. His eyes took in every little new detail about her. The loveliness a dress could do for a woman like her was amazing. Her eyes

glowed brightly, with proud determination. He couldn't help but remember that she killed a man that very afternoon. Her shot got him right between the eyes, and Jake was still smiling in admiration. The scarlet-red dress shimmered in the light, making her hair seem even blacker, if that was possible. The form fitting garment hugged her slim curves and pushed up her breasts in a way that made him long to cup them in his hands and pull her body into his. He couldn't help but flash a wicked grin, showing his white, even teeth. Where the hell did this girl come from?

Clearwater Bay was a bustling little town, but women were few and far between. Mostly whores, or happily married women. Oh sure, there were a few whose name held scandal. But that was none of his business, not anymore. Jake was trying hard to stay out of trouble. Jumping out of a man's kitchen window, buck naked, was hard on the knees. He definitely wasn't going to repeat that again. Tipping his hat, reckless blue eyes searched her innocent gaze as he suddenly felt a slap on his ass.

"Hey, honey! Did you come here to see me? I'm free for a little while!" Noela teased, wanting badly for Jake to avert his gaze to her. His first night back in town and the little black haired bitch was stealing the only man who knew how to please her feisty appetite. Jake Hudson fucked like a wild mustang! And he didn't stop until a woman was completely, utterly satisfied, and breathless in his arms. But this girl caught his attention, and it was bad for business. Lita treated her as if she was her own daughter. Some of the girls were already jealous over the affection she gave the girl. It seemed odd that she appeared out of nowhere, all

alone. Noela glared at her, making it overly obvious what she felt.

“Excuse me, ladies.” Jake looked directly into the tomboy’s eyes and winked. He wanted so badly to tell Noela to shut the hell up and leave him alone, but his manners got the best of him. So he simply took her arm and jerked her away. There was no doubt in his mind that he would be meeting the new girl very soon. If he would have known she was headed here, he could have brought her himself. He would have paid to have her the entire night, and if luck would have it, maybe she was still available!

He looked so intimidating with his dusty cowboy hat sitting low over his brow, shading most of his face. He looked taller, somehow, but then again, she hadn’t paid much attention earlier. He was a Roman God, and Brenna was eager to know what other godly features he possessed. A tall stance and broad shoulders made her feel so vulnerable, so tiny next to him. But she would never forget how sweetly and gently he had treated her. He walked slowly, and she held her breath as he approached her. She felt as if time stood still and they were the only two people in the world. Wood smoke and pine lingered around him, forcing her imagination into a sexual escapade in the deep wilderness. On a rock, or even against a stump—she was sure the devil would move with ease in any situation. That lopsided grin only heightened the gorgeous dimples at each corner of his mouth. Funny that she hadn’t noticed the dimples before. But it was those eyes that she couldn’t tear her gaze from. Intense clear blue eyes searched right through her, and Brenna could sense an overwhelming desire to know this man. He was a man to reckon with. A

man who was powerful enough to win any battle, and protect his woman. She wanted a man like him.

“I see that you noticed Jake’s rugged good looks,” Lita murmured behind Brenna. She smiled at her niece lovingly. Jake was a charmer all right, but Lita felt uneasy about Brenna’s obvious interest in him. When Brenna had appeared out of nowhere, scratches on her face and bruises on her arms, looking like she was beaten, Lita couldn’t help but feel overprotective. While Brenna took a bath and put on a dress Lita found for her, she gave her aunt the highlights of how Vincent Randall had treated her, and how she had escaped.

Brenna was just a baby when Lita left. Knowing now that the girl’s mother had passed, there was no way in hell Lita would allow her to return home. She remembered what it was like. Vincent was a cold-hearted bastard, and family didn’t mean shit to him. Lita wondered if Brenna told her everything, but she doubted it. She had already discovered the stubborn streak Brenna had, just like her mother. Brenna needed a husband to take care of her, to keep her away from the Randalls. A man like Jake would only break her heart with his animal lusts. Jake did not fall in love, and although Lita loved him like a son, she knew how he treated women.

“Don’t pay him too much attention, dear. Jake can be a very dangerous man, and he isn’t the kind I want you being compromised with.”

Brenna shifted her attention back to Jake, with Noela’s arm wrapped possessively around his. She watched his broad form tower over many of the men around him, and she found she didn’t care what Lita said. Those wide

shoulders tapered to a hard, slender waist, and she couldn't help but notice how perfect his ass molded into those pants. It was an ass meant for squeezing and biting! A smirk curved Brenna's lips as she secretly decided that she wanted to know more about this handsome stranger, dangerous or not. The funny thing about this particular situation was that Brenna knew her innocence wouldn't last long. Vincent always said she was a little devil, and lived by nobody's rules. That was true, thank you very much. Brenna had a mind of her own and didn't plan on changing anytime soon, if at all. A man like Jake would be an exciting challenge, and what better way to be introduced to womanhood than with such a gorgeous man.

"I think I'll take a drink up to my room, Lita. I'm quite tired." Faking the best yawn possible, she smiled at Lita's chin, avoiding her prying eyes, and ordered a drink. As long as Brenna was here, and under Lita's protection, she could do as she pleased. Her beautiful aunt turned out to be quite the eccentric! She didn't care what anyone thought of her, and didn't follow rules. Lita Carlisle did as she pleased and let it be known. Brenna decided that she liked the way her aunt lived her life. For once in her life, Brenna felt in control, although the thought of it happening so soon made her nervous all over again.

She walked up the stairs, exploring each hallway inside the large hotel. Lita did very well for herself, for a woman in this day and age where men were in control of everything. She wondered how Lita managed to escape the curse of the family, but assumed she had run away, as Brenna had. She made a mental note to ask her.

Beautiful erotic paintings, displayed with sconces on each side, glowed along the halls as she walked. Lush red carpeting stretched down the halls, and the dark stain on the paneling enhanced her erotic senses. She couldn't help but feel sensual and empowered. A rush of excitement swept through her, remembering the devil's arms around her, his steel blue gaze making her drunk with anticipation. Just knowing that guns were tucked into his belt, knives hidden in his pockets, and the power within that hard body, sent shivers down the back of her neck. Being held by him was like watching a flower grow in the middle of a war. Deadly and beautiful rolled into one adventurous picture. She paused.

One painting in particular caught her attention near the end of a hallway. It was a woman and a young boy posed together in a field surrounded by colorful flowers. The woman was Lita, but who was the boy? She lit a thin cigar, tracing her fingers across the painting's rough surface. It was quite a magnificent piece. A circle of smoke drifted around her, causing her to exhale with a slight moan.

"He has your eyes."

Brenna spun around with a choking cough, surprised by the low sensual voice murmuring over her ear. There he was, the devil himself, standing above her like a magnificent stud, his hot breath fanning her cheek. His dimpled grin caused a stir in her blood, while his blue eyes held her gaze without distraction. She knew that he was aware that his presence was making her nervous but she refused to allow her emotions to show.

"I suppose you're shocked." She turned to put out the cigar, but his fingers caught her hand, holding her still.

Brenna was sweetly surprised that hands so hard and calloused could touch her so softly, so delicately. His pointer finger traced a hot line across her knuckles, then along her wrist.

“No. I don’t mind at all. I find it very amusing, actually!”

“Thank you. Not many people appreciate a fine cigar. I enjoy them.” Brenna smiled shyly, feeling very nervous beside his sensuously male body. She beamed at the thought of this gorgeous hunk of a man touching her, holding her, loving her. Clad all in black and tailored to perfection, he could have been the devil, but he was too cute to resist.

“A beautiful woman shouldn’t be alone in a dark hallway. It’s a good thing your savior has arrived!” His devil-may-care grin forced her own to appear, but she pretended to be casual with his close proximity.

“You didn’t tell me your name,” he murmured. His eyes raked over her thoroughly.

“Bobby Richards. Jake...”

“Hudson, ma’am. I take it our mutual friend informed you? May I be bold and ask if you are already spoken for tonight?”

“Yes. I mean, no,” she blurted out. Brenna found herself at a loss of words. What did he mean by, tonight? Did he think she was a prostitute?

“You look beautiful in a dress, love. But I must say, you could wear just about anything and make it the height of fashion! Tell me, what do you prefer, pants or skirts?” She chuckled sweetly, and his eyes took in the lushness of her lips.

Women must throw themselves at this man. Even a nun would be tempted to throw away a lifetime of celibacy. “You’re too kind. You look pretty damn good yourself. Almost edible, in fact!”

“Almost? You break my heart!” He tapped his chest playfully. “Would you care to join me for a drink, Bobby Richards?”

“Thank you, but I must decline. I have a very busy day ahead of me tomorrow.” She didn’t want him to know that she was just a young woman, barely twenty, with absolutely no experience with men like him. But at the same time, Brenna didn’t want to be a little girl any longer. For years, she had naughty visions, and often masturbated to curb her unrequited desire. She was tired of having to please herself. “Maybe we will meet again soon. I might decide to stay in this lovely town.”

That coy look on her face made Jake not want to let her just walk away. “Then you must allow me to walk you to your room, ma’am. For your safety, of course!” His eyes locked with hers, stirring the pot. He knew just how to tease women, but Miss Richards seemed smarter than most. A breath of fresh air compared to what he was used to. He liked the blondes, all nice and round and plump, full of energy and eager to please. She was different. He could sense in the pit of his stomach that she was the kind of woman who didn’t bend for anyone, but the thought of her bending in all sorts of sexy positions caused his cock to twitch in excitement.

“Well if it’s for safety purposes, it would be rude of me to refuse!”

She smiled, and Jake thought he noticed a spark of something hot in her eyes, like she wasn't convinced herself that she wanted to leave. There was definitely something wild within her from the kiss they had shared only hours before.

They walked in silence to her room, neither one short in thought. He was so close, she could feel his hand graze her skirts ever so lightly; Brenna wished she was wearing pants to feel his hand touch her thigh directly. His eyes reflected a darker, more sensual appeal, and then he winked again. "Is there something in your eye, Jake, or do you always wink at the ladies?" Suddenly they were at her door.

Jake took her hand gently and kissed it, still chuckling from her comment. He pushed her against the wall, not even realizing his actions, being too caught up in wanting to kiss her haughty mouth. She didn't fight him, but the look in her eyes showed surprise, and if he thought correctly, wanting. The lovely full peaks of her breasts pushed against the material of her dress, quivering with her hard breathing. Why did he lose control with her? Why could he not feel this delirious over Noela or somebody else? She glanced to the side, worried somebody would find them, and before she could stop him, he took the opportunity to dip to kiss her neck. She wanted it, that much he could tell.

His tongue darted out, lapping the soft silk of her skin; he was getting harder by the minute. God, how he wanted to have her! He never wanted a woman so fiercely that it drove him mad. He continued caressing her neck, moving over to the tiny lobe of her ear, forcing himself to be gentle although inside, he was raging to bring it on full tilt. The

last thing he wanted was to scare her with his growing need for release.

Jake cupped her breasts, tweaking her puckered nipples with his thumb and middle finger. The material of her dress was soft and thin, and he was delighted she wasn't wearing undergarments. Her body, so curvy and lush, heightened his arousal. The strength of her feminine muscles against his raw power was a heady mixture. She was meant for a man's eager hands. He groaned against her midnight hair, lifting his face to capture her mouth. The sweet scent of her perfume rose and lingered around them as her body heated. Her response to his ardor was surprising, so he continued, believing his gentle invasion won her over. His tongue touched the spot where a tiny rip scarred her slightly swollen bottom lip. When he caressed it, she stiffened under the pressure where that man had hit her. Jake was so gentle, he surprised himself. Slowly he drew back to peer into her incredible green eyes. She looked smug. "Remind me why you're here again," he murmured.

"I didn't say why I was here, you just assumed," she murmured, still ablaze from his hot kisses.

He took his index finger and traced it along her jaw, and then her lips. His cock throbbed in his pants just from the sweet torture of her soft skin. He wanted to kiss her again, take her in her room and spread her legs, but he pushed that thought aside. This woman was Lita's friend, dammit! Between these two women, he'd be lucky to live through the night. Bobby and her lush body tormenting his dreams, and Lita with her glaring eyes and dollar signs over

this stunning woman. He'd be lucky to get her for a reasonable price.

He lingered in front of her face for a moment, just staring at her. The butterflies in her stomach hadn't settled yet, and she drew in a shallow breath. Jake kissed her again. This time it was rough and demanding, bruising her with his raping lips. Then it was over again so quickly, leaving her breathless and confused. Before Brenna realized his intentions, he pulled back, tipped his hat and strolled away. She was stunned by his sudden departure, but before he disappeared around the corner, Jake turned, capturing her full attention with his meaningful gaze.

Her eyes lingered over his warrior's body. She wouldn't have said no if he wanted to go into her room, but then again, throwing herself at a man who was used to easy women wasn't her cup of tea. He must have read her eyes because a lopsided grin widened his face. She blushed and licked her lips. "About your question earlier. The answer is pants."

Jake chuckled, revealing those dimples again. He already knew the answer, but to hear the words come from that lovely mouth made him decide quite quickly that they would be out riding together very soon. Then he could fulfill his wish and remove those sexy pants himself!

"Until we meet again, Bobby." He tipped his hat and walked away, leaving her thinking about his mouth, and other hard, provocative things. When he turned the corner, she sighed in tortured surprise, tracing a finger along her bottom lip, feeling the wetness leaking down her thighs.

Chapter 2

Jake returned downstairs and spent most of the evening playing poker with old friends. Normally he didn't drink when he played, but tonight he felt a restlessness he didn't want to think about, and needed the relaxation the whiskey offered. He barely remembered being led upstairs by Noela and spending the rest of the night with her. His mind imagined a lovely black-haired beauty with hungry green eyes claiming his willing body, as he pounded fiercely into another. Twisted memories invaded his thoughts of flesh slapping flesh, hazy visions of a woman barely controlling her passionate screams from his brutal sexual appetite. He didn't want blond hair and brown eyes playing catch with his own, begging like a slut for his attention. But he gave it, falling back into his old ways, unable to stop his thirst for sex.

When he woke up early the next morning with a pounding headache and a naked leg wrapped around his, he realized this wasn't what he wanted. Sure, enjoying the fruits of an eager woman was always his desire, but deep down, he longed for a woman who was his alone. Somebody to really belong to, to feel excitement with in so many ways. He wanted to share his hopes and goals with a woman who felt the same way. So many years and so many

nights were spent with courtesans; he wondered if he should be looking for something better in his life. Last night with Bobby was quite the experience, and their first confrontation at the beach caught his interest. He wanted to pursue the new girl.

Jake honestly thought she worked here, after they found each other again. But the two kisses they shared were enough to make him wonder just how experienced she was. Either she never had a man who enjoyed pleasing a woman, or she was still a virgin, and the thought of what it would be like to have one of those was very tempting. And what about love? Was there love in the world for a man like him, or was life exactly what his sister told him it was. Disappointment. That was definitely true, but deep down, he wished there was something more. Then again, he probably didn't deserve a woman like Bobby Richards or the treats that came along with a woman like that.

* * * *

For days after that first meeting with Jake, Brenna couldn't get her mind away from that smile and confident cockiness she found so amusing. Just the thought of his hot kisses and his hard body pressed up against hers caused a heated reaction to race through her thighs. She wanted him. But didn't Lita warn her firsthand that he was dangerous? Was there something about him that she couldn't trust? He sure seemed like quite the gentleman, and she could never forget that he saved her that day. He deserved a chance.

Brenna returned to the beach at the same spot where the twisted driftwood sat alone. Although the last confrontation in this very spot was a terrible reminder of that day, the beach was quiet and peaceful. It reminded her

of the dreams she often had growing up about a place that never was. Brenna wanted to be in a peaceful place. The thought of living on this beach in a cozy cabin, maybe with a family of her own, was a dream to bring hope to her life. She left Rogue along the shoreline for him to graze and made her way to the water. This time she went in. It flooded around her pants, making them cling to her slender legs. She threw off the old sombrero, giggled and splashed around. Whitecaps crashed along the beach and all around her as the wind seemed to pick up. Tilting her face up to the sky closing her eyes, she breathed deeply, inhaling the mountain fresh scent. It was so different here from life at the estate. She felt free, like a woman with power. What so many people took for granted, she felt awed to even grasp a small portion. Running away didn't really solve anything.

It seemed like only yesterday when Vincent gave her the news of her arranged marriage to a business partner of his. It made her sick to think that he would send her away with an old man. A lord from England, here to take her away to a country she knew little about, and to spend her days in London society. Tomboys didn't belong at tea parties. Brenna Summers didn't belong in a bed with an old man, and she would be damned if she would allow that to happen. She would never forget the years of violence, the brutal force of Vincent's hands thrashing her. Her own grandfather was so callous that his violence nearly cost Brenna her life.

What was it about her that he hated so much? She shouldn't care anymore. After her mother's death, she found a box of letters, and discovered the truth about her father. He didn't abandon them, as she was forced to

believe for so many years. Raw anger would explode from her grandfather's face speaking Jonathan's name. The hate in his eyes brought tears to her own every time she thought about it. And all this time, he was forced away from his family, for reasons unknown to her. She left the Randall estate to find her father, and find out the truth. She wanted to start fresh.

A tiny raindrop splashed on her chin and she opened her eyes to watch the angry sky. Dark clouds were quickly forming at the north end of the lake and she could see the line of heavy showers coming her way. A loud clap made her jump as a bolt of lightning crashed to the ground not too far away. The light was so intense Brenna squinted against the zigzag explosion. A beautiful afternoon quickly turned into a storm. She knew making it back to the hotel before the storm hit was impossible. The rain was coming down hard now, soaking her shirt until it clung to her heaving breasts. She headed to the abandoned shack, whistling for Rogue as the daylight quickly faded and the thunder rumbled in with another loud clap.

Brenna gathered whatever was lying about that would burn, preparing a fire inside the shack in a safe area. If she had to spend the night, at least she wouldn't freeze. Next time she would be much more prepared with blankets and other provisions. Rogue was tied up outside, under a large fir that provided adequate cover. She had no choice but to use his saddle blanket to sit on.

Staring into the flames for what seemed like an eternity, Brenna thought she heard the snap of a twig outside and quickly got to her feet. It could have been Rogue, but she wasn't taking any chances. She ran to the

door, crouching in the dark corner away from the firelight. The thunder and rain made it hard to hear any footsteps, but she waited silently, her nerves jumping at every sound. Suddenly the door creaked open, squeaking for what seemed like forever before a tall figure walked passed her toward the inviting fire. With all her might, Brenna slugged him in the back of the head with the handle of her gun, sending a limp body crashing to the floor. A splash of light flickered across a hard-boned jaw; sandy colored hair clung to a handsome face. She gasped and put her hand over her mouth, completely stunned. It was him! Had he been following her the whole time? She knew he wasn't hurt badly. A headache would be his only worry, but now she had to worry over his reaction to what she did.

* * * *

Jake groaned loudly and rubbed his throbbing head. An orange glow loomed around him and he suddenly remembered being knocked out by something. He looked around, squinting from the searing pain invading his eyes, but to be so foolish was worse than dealing with a little headache. His eyes found their mark. The tomboy. Such a confusing, mysterious woman. Did she always run around, changing clothes, being dainty one minute, and murderous the next? That dirty work shirt clung to her soaked body, glued to every sultry curve. He thought about what it was like feeling her ample breasts in his hands the other night. The way she responded with such honest passion made him feel oddly proud to find such a woman. *What a woman!*

Droplets of water ran off the bill of her sombrero. It was like slow motion watching her. He wanted to know who she was, and why the hell she had to disguise herself.

Brenna shifted uncomfortably and noticed that he was watching her. "Why were you following me?" she asked in a hard voice, although she couldn't stop trembling inside.

"Why did you hit me?"

"Because you were following me!" she snapped back. Their eyes locked for a moment, battling in a 'try me' staring match.

"This is my property. I should be asking you what you're doing here." He watched her ridiculous shrug. A proper young woman dared not wander alone around here. And he couldn't help feeling the urge to take her outside and peel off her soaked clothing as the rain tangled her hair and goose bumps kissed her skin. Her soft, golden jaw twitched under his perusal. Either she was nervous or she was angry. He wished he knew her most intimate secrets.

"I think this time I deserve an, *I'm sorry* kiss!" he teased.

"Why the hell would I be sorry?" she asked, incredulously.

"For hurting me in more ways than one," he murmured. "Such a temper on you, vixen!"

Brenna stood up, suddenly afraid of the consequences of being here, alone, at night, with this dangerous man. She grabbed her saddle and blanket, ready to leave, but he wasn't allowing that to happen. He jumped up, blocking her exit, grinning down at her. "Bobby, Bobby. Do you have any idea what you do to a man?" He put his arms around her waist, pulling her toward him. The saddle and blanket dropped to the ground. He took her hat and flung it on the ground at their feet, running his fingers through her raven tresses. In the firelight, her eyes danced like those of a gypsy princess, asking him to take her. The blue-green

depths of her eyes seduced him. He couldn't help himself. Jake dipped, capturing her mouth in a way that no woman could deny, and just as he hoped, she didn't argue, or fight, but trembled in his arms. He felt the heat from her body melt into him; his urgency took over completely. Groaning when her timid little tongue found his, her sigh of pliancy gave him all the convincing he needed. Jake squeezed her ass, molding his strong fingers into the soft curves, feeling her shudder with delight. He teased the nerves along her spine with his fingertips, feeling every taut, feminine muscle. He massaged her breast until the nipple hardened and puckered under the experience of his touch. She moaned into his mouth, as his tongue danced circles around hers, taking her breath away. His other hand roamed up her spine again, stopping to take a handful of hair, pressing her deeper into his kiss.

When he was touching her like that, she couldn't help but respond, although it was insufferable to think that she had no control. A knot the size of her fist twisted in her stomach and lower. She wrapped her arms around his neck, nearly mauling him with the selfishness of her desire. Brenna was panting now, so afraid of what was next, yet so thrilled by it at the same time. But she knew better than to sell herself, and pushed away from his embrace, trying to stop the shaking, trying to ignore the wetness gathering between her nether lips and soaking the crotch of her pants.

"No, we can't do this!" she panted, hugging her chest tightly. Her eyes glazed over with fear, and yet a hint of need was visible. What a confusing woman.

"Why not?" he teased, obviously confused and a bit annoyed from her response. "Are you trying to deny that

you want it? Tell me, love, do you tease every man like this?"

The hard slap across his cheek changed his grin into a scowl. The little vixen went too far that time. A woman who played games with a man's lust was no better than a prostitute. "I told you before. I ain't a savior." He grabbed her roughly this time, holding her hard against him, although he knew for some reason, he could never hurt her. His nimble fingers ripped the buttons away from her shirt, and his breath caught at the luscious breasts bared before him. Heavy, round tits meant for a man's mouth and hands. She was shaking now, afraid this would go too far. But Jake wasn't going to rape her. She asked for it, and now he was going to finish it.

He pulled her down to the ground, ignoring her angry protests. He laid her back after removing her shirt, forcing her body upon it but with gentle movements. He took her hands and molded them into one of his. They fit easily in his large grip. Jake held them above her head, giving him access with his free hand. Even with one hand, he was too strong for her to fight him. Tears sprang now, running across her temples, wetting her ears. She was more terrified that the man who saved her was now going to hurt her. She was such a fool to believe that there were good men in the world.

Jake scanned the length of her exquisite body. Her golden skin shivered in response to his shameless gaze. He traced a finger along her belly, loving the way she writhed and sighed. The muscles in her washboard stomach jumped and tensed, as his fingers played along every contour and dip in her skin. He continued tracing it around each nipple,

under her breasts, and then down to her waist. “God, you’re beautiful, vixen,” he murmured, before leaning down and tracing his tongue where his finger had wandered. She moaned, shaking slightly from the torment of his mouth. New sensations took over her resolve. He gently tugged her pants down, staring in wonder at the silky black nest tucked in between those lithe legs. *Man, her body was perfect, strong, soft, lovely.* He groaned just looking at her, knowing that he was a lucky man to sample such exquisite femininity.

“What are you going to do with me?” she half-panted, half-cried. “Please don’t hurt me.”

“It won’t hurt you as much as it will me,” he commented, knowing in his own way that she wasn’t as innocent as she acted. Her eyes spoke volumes of sex, and red lace, and erotic dungeons. She was probably Lita’s prized mare, used only for the rich men. Not today. Today she was all his.

Brenna laid in silence, trying hard not to cry and give her inexperience away. She shivered, knowing damn well that her nipples were getting harder by the minute, just from the waiting. Knowing the unknown was about to happen, a warm sensation was building in her body. She didn’t know what to think, or do. Something inside her wanted to explore, to be had, but there was always that nagging little voice that reminded her who and what she was.

Jake removed his pants quickly and kicked them aside. “When I take my hand away, you better not hit me, woman. I’ll get what I want either way, but I promise, you’ll love every minute of it, too,” he purred in her ear.

He slowly let her hands go, waiting for the moment that her hand would connect with his face. But it didn't.

He positioned himself between her legs, spreading them wide apart. Her soft bronze lips glistened from the wetness his touch provoked. He took himself in hand, nudging the tip against her soaking pussy, basking in that lovely feel of her hot body ready to take him. He looked into her wide eyes and winked, and then he thrust in with a grunt, reaching the end of the hot, extremely tight tunnel. She cried out, her body a solid wall of virginity. He could feel it. He stopped, wide-eyed himself, knowing what just happened, what he just did, but couldn't stop. Not now.

"Oh, fuck, love. You're a virgin?" he muttered, feeling like a total ass for hurting her. *What incredible odds to have a virgin!* She nodded her head, ashamed to look at him now. Jake stayed still within her for a moment, until the resistance faded, his warm lips on her cheek. She turned her face and kissed him back, to his surprised relief. He kissed her softly, rocking slowly to ease her discomfort but continued his pleasure. *Gentle, be gentle*, he reminded himself over and over again. She was so tight around him that he groaned into her mouth. Black silk wrapped around his fingers above her head, as he leaned on his forearms. Their bodies began moving as one. His kisses moved to her neck now, and further still, until he took a nipple into his mouth and sucked it urgently. His tongue played wet circles around her engorged nipples, and goose bumps perked the rosy buds, teasing his senses. Just knowing that he slowed down and moved more gently for her was enough to make her respond. In no time, she was panting and sighing and meeting his demanding body with every thrust.

“Oh God!” she cried out. Her hands clung to his back, raking him with her nails. He was so large inside her, but it wasn’t painful anymore; it was hot and wild, like in her dreams. He pulled back and thrust back in, repeating the motion, building the rush of sexual bliss. Their bodies slapped together beside the crackling fire.

It was a wonderful feeling for Jake to have a woman so passionate and honest in her loving that he nearly lost himself. He couldn’t help how his body used her so completely, with such demand that it was frightening. Full breasts bounced, flickering fire danced golden shadows across that bronze skin. Strong thighs held his hips tightly to hers, forcing his rhythm to her own pitch. She was guiding him to be what she wanted and needed, and for once in his life, Jake gave it to her. Suddenly he felt her grow hot and flex around his shaft, the rush of silky juices flow around him, as her face contorted in ecstasy and she cried out her song of orgasm. His large hands molded to her slender hips, holding her up to meet his deep strokes.

“Please!” she panted through clenched teeth, grabbing him by the shoulders and pulling him down to her. She grabbed his face, seeing his reaction to her release, knowing that he was stunned. He thrust his tongue into her mouth, just like he drove his cock into her throbbing pussy. She couldn’t stop how her body and her soul seemed to burst into a red-hot inferno, a once innocent young lady now begging him not to stop.

Jake couldn’t believe such a wild reaction would come from an inexperienced woman. But he couldn’t deny her anything at this point. He slowed down, pulled her up and leaned back, so she would ride him. His hand slid behind

her head, taking her lips in a hot, biting kiss. She rode him like she was born to fuck a man. His magnificent tomboy lifted high and plowed down, panting and moaning, as he groaned and kissed her neck and fondled her breasts, which fit perfectly in his warm hands. He filled her so completely, like a second skin. The hot, wet glide of his cock made her shudder in response. His hips rocked with hers, and his hands cupped her ass. Their bodies just seemed to react naturally with each other, as if they had been like this for years. She suddenly began raking and pulling at his hair like a ravenous cat in heat, until he finally grabbed her hands. “Jesus! Take it easy!”

“Oh, ah, yes, yes! More. More. Oh God!” she panted. He chuckled hoarsely, not knowing what to make of this wild adventure.

There was a savage, needy hunger within this woman. They rocked like the waves of an angry ocean, meeting every crash of impact like the rocky shores of the coast. Anybody a mile away could hear their panting and moaning, echoing across the mountains, but they didn’t care. He held her up high, and plowed her down with the strength of his arms and shoulders; her tiny frame taking everything he had to give. Jake felt himself swell again, forcing his way inside her body. He was almost there. It was building, and it was building hard. He pushed her back and mounted her. She eagerly spread her legs for him, smiling up at him, whispering hot sex words as if she was a whore making her first tip of the night. He grunted in return, thrusting in deep, then deeper again, with a fierce animal need. Never in his life had Jake experienced a woman like this. *A demanding virgin!* It was nerve rattling. He couldn’t deny

that she easily trapped him, and it didn't bother him one bit. He held his weight on his hands, easily rocking his hips in a slow steady rhythm, his face just above hers, watching every passionate response of her wicked mouth and revealing eyes. Her body shook, convulsed, and she moaned like a contented feline. Then he felt the heat rush to his face, setting his balls on fire, and with a loud shuddering grunt himself, exploded deep inside her. He buried his face in her tangled hair, squinting his eyes to keep from fainting on top of her. God, he never came so hard in his life.

He should have died at that moment. He couldn't believe that sex could be so fulfilling. He felt odd. Totally satisfied, but odd. Propping himself up on his elbow and smiling down at her, the last wave of satisfaction flowed through him. "Such a wildcat, love! Who would have guessed?"

"Surely not a rogue like you!" she teased. Their hearts were beating like a hammer, and they both felt quite pleased with the result of the day. Both were unaware the storm outside had passed long ago. Brenna giggled, watching the satisfied smirk on his face, and Jake lowered his head, capturing her lips in yet another passionate kiss.

* * * *

Jake strolled into *The Velvet Lounge* the next day, feeling unsure of himself. How could he come here and pretend nothing happened between them? Normally, his escapades were forgotten by the next morning, but not today. Today, he couldn't stop thinking about it. Lita would be furious with him, but he couldn't imagine why. Bobby was just a friend staying at her hotel, quite capable of making her own

decisions. He slammed his first shot of whiskey, then took another, scanning the room.

“Hey, Hudson! Join us for poker?”

Jake turned his attention to the familiar voice calling to him. Andrew Jackson sat at a corner table with a group of men, playing cards. He had been meaning to just pop in and say hello, but the idea of a good game of poker was even better. “Hey, Andy! It’s been a little while, eh? How’ve you been?”

“Better. I’m losing,” his friend answered morosely. Jake made his way through the crowd. He automatically searched the room for the black-haired temptress. She was not in the saloon.

“Deal me in, boys.” The men muttered their hellos and grunts at the new guy. Two of the men looked drunk already, but they seemed to handle themselves well enough. The game went on for some time, and Andrew finally won a couple of hands, to the others’ surprise. Before long, all that remained were three of them.

“I got three of a kind.” The man answered with a knowing smile. He was positive his three kings were enough to beat the hands of his two friends sitting across from him.

“I fold,” Jake answered, slapping his cards down angrily.

“Well, guys, I got a flush.” Andrew spread his cards on the table, and waited. Both men stared at him, Jake surprised, the other suspicious. His cold gray eyes squinted with a frown.

“You’re cheating. Let’s see those sleeves,” he grabbed a hold of Andrew’s arm.

"I don't think so. He's not a cheater," Jake replied for his friend, removing the man's arm from Andy's.

"Then maybe you're in on it, too. I don't like cheaters."

"I'm not a cheater, you bastard! Come on! Fight me like a man, you son of a bitch!" Andrew argued from beside Jake, ignoring his friend's wise words to leave without a fight. "Come on!" The crowd quieted down, watching every move, ready for the inevitable.

"No." Jake turned Andrew around forcefully and pushed him toward the door. "Let's go. You're gonna get yourself fucking killed! We're sorry, sir, no winnings here." Jake led Andrew near the door and pushed it open. He didn't hear the man refuse his apology and he didn't hear the man pull his gun and cock it from the noise around them. But he did hear the shot, and he felt the bullet graze his neck before his body suddenly went limp and he fell right into Andy's arms. He thought he heard a woman scream, and wondered if it was Bobby.

* * * *

"Jake lost a lot of blood." Lita sat on the edge of the bed close to Jake's resting body, worried about her dear friend. He tried to stop the fight and Andrew's foolishness almost caused his death. "Look at him," she said through tear-filled eyes. "My poor boy. He doesn't deserve this. Oh, honey. Jake has been through so much."

Brenna watched her aunt through troubled eyes. *It was just a graze in the neck. He'll survive.* She looked so worried over him. *Lord, he was gorgeous though. The perfect man.* Handsome, strong, and chiseled features to make a woman yearn for his touch. She couldn't stop thinking about their

stormy afternoon. His solid jaw seemed almost soft and childlike as he rested, flexing every once in a while from feverish dreams. She imagined running her fingers across his face ever so gently, and kissing him. Those full, masculine lips. His bedraggled sandy-blond hair clung to his ears and neck, curling from the sweat that beaded down from his forehead. She looked at his closed eyes, wishing he would look at her so she could see their magnificent blue color. Brenna regretted knowing that she would give anything to see him open his eyes and wink at her. She wanted him, but he was the most arrogant, conceited man she'd ever known, and she was sore as hell today.

"Let's leave him, dear. He needs rest," Lita said, breaking Brenna's spell.

"I can watch over him. I need to do something to keep busy." She looked toward Jake again, thinking she saw him smile at her words, but she was just imagining it, of course. Why did she blurt that out without thinking? Brenna secretly watched Lita, wondering if her aunt was suspicious of her motives, but she didn't show it.

"All right, darling. You can take care of him, but you make sure that you let him rest fully. He can be very stubborn and I know that when he wakes up, he'll want out of that bed. Don't let him."

"Of course. The room next to his is empty. I'll stay there just in case he wakes during the night." Brenna grinned at the thought of bathing that hard body with cold cloths if a fever hit.

* * * *

Early the next morning, Brenna tapped lightly on the door before entering. She looked toward the bed right away

and stopped midstep at the sight of a lean, naked body. He was lying on his stomach and all of the covers were scattered on the floor. Knowing that she should have covered her eyes, it was impossible to look away. She felt like a naughty little girl. His long muscular legs were spread out almost covering the entire bed. He had a fine, tight ass that she couldn't tear her gaze from. Brenna felt the heat rise in her cheeks to her forehead and back down to her toes. It wasn't right to be staring at him like this, but she couldn't help it. All she wanted to do was jump on him and kiss and lick him all over. Him, naked in broad daylight, unaware of her standing there thinking about that hard rod below his waist, burned her cheeks. She sighed, still staring like a fool. She shook her head, picked up the covers, gently easing them back over his wonderfully hard body. She had to keep herself busy.

"Mmm, water," he moaned, eyes still closed. Brenna walked over to the bed and stood there, awkwardly. He flicked open his red-rimmed eyes a few times and looked at her. "Water, please." She turned around and left the room to fetch his water. When Brenna returned, the blankets were back on the floor, but this time he was on his back in all his glory for her to see! Her eyes focused on the curly blond wisps around his nipples. His skin was unusually dark for a fair-haired man, which made his eyes all the more piercing in their blue depths. The light trail of hair tapered to his hard stomach, and a thin line continued to a thick patch of curls right at his...she covered her eyes this time, embarrassed by his lack of modesty and walked toward the bed, blind. A sharp intake of breath caught his attention.

Jake chuckled, watching her stumble around the bed, trying not to look at him. "Haven't you seen a pistol before? Or are you my tomboy's angel twin?!" He grinned like the devil, both dimples teasing Brenna.

"Oh, be quiet you!" She blushed. "You are unbelievably rude! Now, cover yourself and take this water before I fall down," she answered. Jake was still feverish, but he seemed to manage teasing her anyway.

"You're going to spill my water, woman!" He watched her in amusement. Her hands were shaking so badly, the water was spilling over the rim. "All right. The covers are back on. Shy this morning, are we?"

Brenna opened one eye, making sure he wasn't lying. When she confirmed he was covered up, she continued to the bed. Jake's eyes never left hers. Light pools of blue followed her body around the foot of the bed, until she stood beside him, water in hand. He reached out to grab the glass, but let his fingers caress her soft skin. His own hand was twice the size of hers. He was stunned to realize that she must be terrified of him. She was just a tiny little thing, to his over six foot stance. He could tell she was nervous, but he didn't care. If he didn't feel so tired, he would grab her and haul her onto his lap right now and see if she would react the same as she did the first time. Why did this one woman have to bother him so much? Had he finally met his match? Pushing those thoughts aside, Jake winked at her, watching her face glow with a beautiful blush.

"Every man should have a savior like you!" he commented in a shy voice similar to her own. She smiled and giggled. "How can I ever repay you?" he mimicked of

their first confrontation in the shack. "A kiss? Or a romp on my cock?!"

"Excuse me? I think you need to sleep!"

"Do you really expect me to sleep when you're in a see-through robe, teasing me? My cock is hard right now, woman! And I can still be very dangerous, even with a fever!" Jake reached out for her, easily scooping her up, their bodies landing roughly on the bed. He felt her heartbeat accelerate, matching his own.

"Somebody might catch us," Brenna whispered fiercely. "Jake!" She pushed at his chest, not wanting to accept the fact that her struggles were useless.

"So what? I'm a grown man. You're a grown woman. A lovely, grown woman." *God, she was beautiful.* All dark skin with bright green eyes. He tilted his head and captured her lips in a tender kiss. She was soft and warm, but hard at the same time, if that were possible. Her lips seemed to melt against his, giving in. He wanted her underneath the covers, naked against him, straddling his dick...whatever; he would take anything at this point. Right now, he didn't give a damn what Lita thought. He could deal with her later.

Brenna's heart was racing faster than a mad dragonfly, and her mind was thinking very dirty thoughts. Thoughts that her mother would have beat her for if she knew, but Brenna was a woman now. It didn't matter what anyone thought. She wrapped her arms around his neck, mindful of his wound, and deepened the kiss, her hips automatically rubbing over his hard shaft beneath the sheets. She imagined waking up like this every morning, with a horny, handsome man next to her.

Time seemed to stand still as Jake's mind began spinning. Moaning from the heat and the dizziness, the image of his beautiful tomboy began swirling around. Her beautiful midnight hair spilled across his shoulders, then suddenly became liquid pools in hell. The heat wave of fever rushed through his mind and body, making him shake and sweat, sending him deeper into the gates of hell. He sagged back, releasing his grip.

Standing in front of the long mirror a moment later, Brenna smoothed her robe and checked her hair. Thank God it was still early morning. Everybody else should still be in bed. She stared at the mirror, seeing his fingers tangled in her mass of hair. She loved the way he toyed with her hair. It almost felt like he was mesmerized by it; like he loved to touch it. Smiling to herself, Brenna thought of their wild escapade two days ago. She didn't think her first time would be amazing; but it was exactly how she dreamed. Then she couldn't help but remember home, and how Vincent would react if he found out what she did. She looked back at Jake's sleeping body again and decided to leave. He needed time to recover, and she needed a cold splash in the face.

Chapter 3

Randall Estate, Washington

“Have they found her yet?” Charles Livingston couldn’t hide the bitterness in his voice. They had made a deal, and he didn’t like being made a fool. A runaway bride was intolerable. “We had a deal, Vincent. If you do not return her to me, your little money problems will ruin you. Roberta played a nasty trick on you. So if you are unable to retrieve her daughter, then that fortune is all in her hands. You didn’t expect her mother to poison herself and leave her half of the fortune to her only child. Your half, unfortunately, was used foolishly.”

Vincent stared out over the landscape, fuming over his own stupidity. He shouldn’t have allowed her that much freedom. The little chit was acting strangely ever since her mother died, but he had no idea what made her accuse him of lying about the past, about John. How did she know? And what exactly did she know? “She was seen up north in the Canadian mountains. A place called Clearwater Bay. Don’t worry, Charles, she will return. She has no choice.”

“Then let us go to this town, Vincent. Obviously your guards can’t manage to return her to us. How hard is it to find a young woman of her breeding? I need security. If you don’t agree with me, you will lose everything. Remember

what I said. If she becomes my wife, and I am in control of her inheritance, I will gladly give you a hefty allowance. When you wrote to me about her, I couldn't imagine her beauty. But now that I've seen her, I must have her. She will produce many strong-willed and beautiful children. She'll have everything a wife needs."

"Of course, Charles. We'll leave in the morning." He couldn't believe he was doing this. How did he let himself get this far? And before Roberta took her life, she had tricked him. She had him sign a contract that allowed him custody of the girl, but under his nose, she fooled him. The paper he signed so freely to his unforgiving daughter was her own inheritance, knowing all along she would take her life. Roberta found out about his little secret.

"You better hope she is still innocent. I will not marry a woman who has been soiled by some northern barbarian. She has responsibilities. Do you understand how important she is to me?"

"Yes, Charles, I do. Don't worry. That stubborn girl wouldn't know what to do with a man even if she tried. She'd much rather fight with a man than fuck him. She's a spitfire. Good luck!" A man of Charles' caliber would never handle her anyway. But the fact remained that Brenna had a duty to him, and by law, he was her guardian. After all, Jonathan Summers no longer existed, and Lita had long since disappeared.

"Then it's settled. When we find her, I want her examined. Only then will your problems be over."

Vincent stared at the family cemetery, focusing on Roberta's cross. The little bitch would be rolling in her grave if she knew what he was doing to save himself. But

why, of all places, did Brenna have to go to Clearwater Bay? David was there. And David was trouble.

* * * *

He tossed and turned, trying to reach Maria, but she faded away into the dark. She didn't look back and Jake called out to her for what seemed like forever, but she was gone. He collapsed onto his knees, trying to force his headache away, but nothing worked. A haze floated around him, spinning and spinning and then everything went very bright. He saw someone walking, begging him to come for her, to save her. What could he do? He was tied to something. His body couldn't move, but he was hot, so hot. He was melting. "Wait," he called. It was Maria again, but she looked different. Her hair was black now. She came towards him, dancing in the moonlight. Swaying her hips like a gypsy, calling for him to love her. He tried to pull away from the restraints but he wasn't strong enough.

"Jake? Jake!" Brenna held a cold cloth on his forehead. He was calling out in his sleep and it woke her up. She threw on her robe and ran to his room right away. He was calling after somebody, but she didn't know who he wanted. Whoever it was had to be important, because tears flowed down his cheeks and he was becoming hysterical. Brenna held him tightly, rocking him as she would a small child.

Suddenly his arms wrapped around her in a fierce hold and she couldn't pull away from him. His eyes were dark and angry, and she suddenly feared being alone with him. He reached for her face and brought her mouth down to his. She was stunned, but she couldn't pull herself away even if she tried. She moaned against his hot breath, mind

racing, heart pounding. Fear turned into raw desire, and that became something she couldn't quite explain.

His hard hands held her tightly, roaming, massaging, kneading until she felt bruised. Hard fingertips traced circles around her nipples, instantly perking their rosy peaks. He cupped and squeezed her breasts almost painfully, until she whimpered, closing her eyes. The fabric of her nightgown clung to her sweaty body, and her nipples suffocated beneath the material. Her body cried out for release as his eager hands went further and further down the curves of her flesh. Brenna could feel herself getting wet, her desire now flowing between her legs. The madness of needing to be fulfilled burned deep in her core. All that separated his hard demanding body from hers was the thin sheet and her even thinner robe.

He toyed with her pubic hair, tugging on it, twisting it, curling the softness around his fingers. Her hips seemed to have a mind of their own, rubbing against his, feeling the hard length of him nudging her belly. She pushed him further and further into the bed, rubbing his shaft like a wanton tigress. She couldn't help it. Brenna naturally moved with him, on him, surrounded him. She dug her nails into his chest, unaware that he was bleeding from the raking she gave him. She couldn't control her body, or the desire building like a heat wave inside her. Obscene images were playing in her mind; her body was warming with every touch. She imagined his body submissive beneath her, holding her hips as she impaled herself upon him. She imagined him calling out her name, throwing aside all cares of a man to move himself inside her. She was eager, but she didn't care. Her hand reached between them, grasping his

hard cock, having no idea of the sweet torture she was giving to the man laying beneath her.

He moaned against her neck when he felt her fingers wrap around him and trace the tip of his steel head. It was almost painful holding himself back, as a hiss escaped his mouth. The red haze of fever surrounded him and the black-haired goddess was seducing him again. Her lips were like fire and her eyes, those of a cat. The sweet seductress tamed him over and over again. His chest and arm muscles rippled from the intensity of the moment. He burned in her arms, enjoying every minute of being with the erotic vixen she had become. And it was so damn hot.

Brenna ached from the way he touched every part of her body. His mouth savagely took hers, but she didn't, wouldn't, fight him. Her mind was clear and she felt like a woman at the top of a mountain. In an instant, he flipped her beneath him and pushed her into the soft bed, covering her softness with his demanding frame. He looked at her for just a second, towering above her, trapping her like prey. His eyes were like those of a demon, but she wasn't scared. She didn't care about anything but finding fulfillment.

He found her mouth again while his hands expertly raised the slinky gown to her breasts revealing that silky black mound of wet curls. Swollen pink nipples teased his wanting lips; he wouldn't deny himself the pleasure of sucking those lovely peaks and diving into that sweet, throbbing pussy. Her body writhed beneath him and he massaged her strong hips and waist, reveling in the erotic way she moved, breathed, moaned like music. He traced his tongue down to the delicate junction between her thighs. Her stomach was almost as hard as his own, and he

marveled at the way it seemed to ripple with each move of her hips, every breath from her lungs. Fuck, he was raging to be inside her.

Brenna froze, shocked, when his tongue darted out and lapped at her wet folds. Her legs shook violently, surrounding his neck, squeezing him, as his tongue circled and circled, sending her into a spiral of ecstasy. It was a painful sweltering heat that was exquisite torture. Her hands massaged and cupped her breasts, toying with her nipples, as each flick of his tongue melted her bones. She had no idea that a man's mouth was made for more than just kissing, and she was almost ashamed of wondering what it would be like kissing him with her taste on his lips. Rough hands burned her flesh, gliding down her thighs and up again until he grasped her bottom, moving her higher until she was above the mattress. Her thighs tightened around his neck; her hips moved in circles around his tongue. The burn started deep within, flowing inside out, until she cried out and trembled, gushing her molten release onto his lips and tongue.

The pleasure of his wicked tongue still racked through her body. She didn't even realize he was above her again, until the hard length of him rubbed against her tingling heat. She wanted to devour him and never let go. Jake lowered his head to capture her lips and plunged in fiercely at the same time, his hard length reaching her breaking point. Automatically, her hips began to rock with him in one fluid motion. He slowed down, easing in and out with long, lingering strokes. The glide of his shaft was incredible. Within moments of his steady thrusts, she felt herself slamming against him, meeting every hard impact. Almost

instantly, she released in a hot wave crashing through her body, flexing around his hard cock.

Her body glowed from the uncontrollable warmth swimming within. She felt like a sweet goddess, being loved by her warrior. The wicked rush was almost too much to bear. Brenna panted and moaned like a ravenous cat, scratching and clawing the hungry beast above her until he grabbed her hips, swinging her around to stretch her out on her belly. He placed himself between her cheeks, rubbing his engorged meat between her delicate cheeks...a promise for more. Jake thrust along the hot ridges of her sodden lips, igniting her desire once again. She could feel his hot breath fanning her back, as he licked his way up her spine until he reached her neck. His tongue found her ear, biting the lobe; at the same time, he thrust in hard from behind. She cried out again as he pumped her, feeling his hips thrusting against her ass. It was a whole new sensation for her, and she instantly felt her body pulse and quiver at how deep his penetration had gone. Brenna pushed herself up on her knees and slammed against him, loving the way his body slapped against hers. She reached down to her throbbing center and played her fingertips in circles around her clit, enhancing the friction and throbbing glide of his strokes. And then it came, like a thundering crash of lightning, burning her flesh like a heavenly hell. She cried out, bucking her body as the orgasm ripped through her like a stampede.

He pounded with the force of conquering a new land, taking his black-haired goddess to the gates of heaven. She panted beneath him, urging him to show her the way. The orgasms ripped through her body. He could feel it through

the hard swell of him inside her, loving every inch of her wet flesh. She swallowed him like she owned him, taming him to be the beast she desired. He gladly bowed to her command, and felt himself rise and swell and explode into her hot demanding heaven. And then his goddess was gone.

Jake opened his eyes to the strange surroundings and stretched. He looked around and recognized the room in Lita's hotel. He felt heavy and satisfied for some reason; a strange smile forced its way across his lips. He never felt so damn great in all his life. Then he remembered the card game and something hitting his neck. He touched the skin under his jaw and felt the bandage. A bullet must have grazed him, lucky bastard. He felt something move and mumble beside him. He stopped in his thoughts and looked beside him. Another smile curved his lips.

Bobby Richards had one arm around his chest and the other above his head. Little wisps of his nipple hair were wrapped in her fingers. He chuckled to himself, wondering what she had been up to. Did she have bad dreams and need comfort? Not a bad thought, really. She looked so sweet and innocent lying there. Jake smiled, oddly happy at the knowledge of her wanting or needing to be here, with him, of all people. Long black lashes shaded those incredible ocean-green eyes, and that black hair was all loose and messy like she was freshly fucked. He wanted to touch it and smell every inch of it and twist it around his fingers.

A rap on the door startled his imagination and suddenly Lita rushed in. "Have you seen—" She stopped in her tracks at the sight of Bobby lying beside him.

"Br-uh, Bobby? Bobby!" Lita called out to her louder than was necessary, clapping her hands fiercely. Anger was

beating red all over her face. “Wake up!” she screeched. Jake’s eyebrow quirked, but he didn’t move. Interesting situation.

Brenna’s eyes slowly opened, hazy and worn-out. When she realized she was not in her bed, she knew what Lita was thinking. Hiding the embarrassment burning in her cheeks was harder than she thought, but Brenna refused to admit to what she had done, and so eagerly! “Wait. No, it isn’t what you think,” she replied quickly.

Too quickly, in Jake’s opinion.

“Well, what is it then?” Lita exploded.

Jake watched with amusement. It seemed odd that Lita would be so furious. Bobby had a life of her own. Why be so angry? Did Lita not want her with a man like him? He frowned at Lita’s impossibly high regard of her, over him. Did she have any idea how crazy and intense her friend really was?

“Uh, his fever was really bad last night and it woke me up. I kept him cool and rocked him back to sleep. I must have fallen asleep myself.” She laughed nervously. Brenna looked at Jake, who was staring at her with an eyebrow raised, and a wry grin on his face. She forced herself out from under the warm covers. “I should go.”

Jake didn’t say a word, only stared at her departure. Something besides lust overcame him. It was surprising that he was actually sorry for not saying something nice in her defense. And he was even more sorry that Lita interrupted his attempt to wake her himself. He could feel himself rising beneath the blankets. Thank God for thick covers!

“Did you touch her?” Lita questioned with hostility, both fists resting on her hips.

“Does it matter if I did?” he teased. Then he turned serious over the threatening look in her eyes.

“Yes. It does. You could be in serious trouble if you did. Oh God! For your information, my dear Jake, Miss Richards is spoken for and her future husband wouldn’t take too lightly to his young bride being soiled.” She didn’t bother to tell him that she would never allow her to marry that man anyway, but still, Brenna was too much of a lady to be messed up with the likes of Jake Hudson. Even if Lita did love him like a son. “No, it can’t be. I must find her a husband now. I have to do something, before he finds her.”

“What? What the hell are you rambling about?” he asked, suddenly very interested in the mystery of this girl.

“Nothing, dear. Nothing.” Lita turned absentmindedly and stalked out.

Jake lounged in bed, thinking of Bobby. He was angry now that she had used him, so easily, so freely. He was played by his own game. Or was he upset that she didn’t really want him after all? Was she using him as an escape from this future husband? When he attempted to get up, Jake couldn’t help but notice the scratch marks all over his chest, proof that she indeed used him while he was...what? Did she take advantage of him while he slept? He didn’t realize a woman could be so callous. Just what he needed; a jealous husband chasing him, yet again. He didn’t pursue her this time, he didn’t even remember anything. Just hot crazy dreams of a black-haired goddess, riding him into oblivion...oh, hell! It was the little vixen herself who started it. Jake took his time getting dressed, wondering if Miss Richards enjoyed her free ride.

* * * *

After last night, she needed to get drunk. Any other woman would be ashamed of herself at this point, but not Brenna. She was a natural rebel. And her most recent actions proved that all along, a wolf had been living in sheep's clothing. On the other hand, she was not a common whore. Being with Jake was intense beyond belief, so she accepted a bottle of scotch, hoping the rich amber liquid would give her some liquid courage to confront these issues. She didn't just want a lover to satisfy these baser urges; she wanted a man to love. Brenna refused to be embarrassed about last night. It wasn't as if she had ruined herself. That deed was done a few days earlier.

The letter to her missing father lay on the night table, and a hot bath by the fire summoned her exhausted body. She undressed and submerged herself in the mass of bubbles. Maybe she should become a whore, considering she had nothing left to lose. Who would marry her now, besides a dirty old drunk? She closed her eyes, imagining Jake's strong hands caressing her so tenderly. Steel-blue eyes stared into hers as he pumped her full of his relentless desire. God, he was so passionate. His voice, his smile, it was all like a dream. But she reminded herself that he had a fever, and he couldn't possibly have felt what she had.

But what about the other day, in that abandoned shack? Brenna stared through the bubbles at her full-grown, womanly body. She tingled all over remembering his touch, his demanding mouth, and his extremely hard body. He had used her completely and utterly. She enjoyed every minute of it. Now that she thought about it, the taste of her on his lips was very kinky, very hot. She giggled aloud through the light haze of the scotch. It was working!

Brenna lathered up her legs and wiggled her little toes against the tub. She was just about to lather up her hair when the doorknob rattled. They were probably bringing extra towels up.

“Just leave them by the door and I’ll get them in a minute,” she yelled.

Suddenly the door swung open and smashed against the wall, the doorknob leaving a gaping hole in the paneling. She was halfway out of the tub, screaming when a man lunged at her, but the noise downstairs was too loud for anyone to hear her. He stopped for a moment, eyeing her wet soapy body, as droplets of water cascaded between the valley of her full breasts and descended slowly, right down to the curls between her thighs. His obvious arousal swelling in his pants was revolting. She looked for some kind of weapon, and seeing the half bottle on the stand, she lunged for it. He darted forward, stopping her. The only option now was to plead with him.

“Please, sir,” she cried. “I won’t say anything if you just leave.”

“But I just got here, wench, and I ain’t leavin’. We know who you are! And you could bring us a lot of money!” He slurred his words, proceeding toward her. An ugly white scar jutted out from under his eye. It was white against his sunburned skin and it was the ugliest thing she had ever seen.

“You must be mistaken. I don’t know you.” Anger and disgust was apparent in her voice. He, however, wasn’t moved by her speech. He came toward her, lunging side to side. Trying to avoid his grasp, she ran around the tub. He caught her arm, causing Brenna to lose her balance and

stumble to the floor. She kicked and clawed at him, scratching his face, screaming bloody murder. The man was strong, but his strength wasn't at its peak, probably due to the alcohol she could smell on his breath. She pushed with all her might, refusing to allow this brute to have his way with her. Brenna slapped, kicked, and punched everything she could touch. He swore under his breath and hit her hard across the face. Her head snapped back and hit the floor in a loud thump. The last thing on her mind, before everything faded away, was that this horrible man was going to take her right there on the floor, conscious or not.

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Brenna blinked several hundred times before realizing she was in bed. Her mind blurry and head pounding, she groaned, trying to focus. Damned scotch. Suddenly, she remembered the man and her head hitting the floor. She scanned the room, making sure she was really awake. Then she saw his body, twisted and bleeding, with no sign of life at all. How did he end up like that? She looked toward the window and saw a figure standing alone, looking out at a far-off place. His strong jaw flexed and his eyes narrowed as if he was angry over something. Powerful arms crossed over his chest, stretching the fabric of his shirt. He didn't notice that she was watching him. Her mind traveled back to last night, when she was in his capable arms. She could feel the heat rising in her cheeks. But what was he doing out of bed? Did he hear her scream?

"Are you okay, Bobby? You don't have to worry about him anymore." He turned to glare at her. He was so angry about what happened, and about her using him so easily. But he didn't want to see her hurt, and that man was going

to do just that. Those vixen eyes were staring at him. She was scared. But all he could think about at this point was that she was not the kind of woman he should be messing with. She was trouble. Getting drunk and allowing a man like him up to her room was asking for it. "I have to admit that your choice of men confuses me. Wouldn't you much prefer a man with tender hands?" He couldn't help the sarcastic tone.

She wanted to slap him! How dare he accuse her of putting herself in this situation! "You bastard! How dare you even think such a thing? Look at the wall. He forced his way in here!" Storm clouds invaded those sultry eyes. She jumped off the bed and headed for the door, naked and all. "I saved your life when you were injured and fevered, and this is how you thank me? By accusing me of wanting this man? That's disgusting!" Her arms flailed in his face, making her lovely breasts bounce and move in provocative ways. Her bright green eyes shot through him like a silver bullet and he couldn't help but feel his pants tighten, knowing the wild little vixen she truly was.

Any hot feelings Brenna had for Jake quickly smoldered into dry ash.

Jake frowned, knowing she was right. He did notice the hole in the wall. It was obvious she had been taken by complete surprise from the amount of water all over the floor. But it didn't mean he was going to apologize and admit she was right.

"I wouldn't go anywhere looking like that!" he answered, angry only with himself for being too hard on her. *So much for her shyness!* There was no way in hell he'd let her leave this room naked. It was bad enough finding

that man in here, with her golden body struggling beneath him, and that beautiful patch of black silken heat between those thighs. Jesus, that man must have thought he died and went to heaven. It didn't take much to kill that man, considering how angry he was. "Get dressed. I'll fetch Lita for you." Jake tried to pass by her to the door, but she stopped him.

"Wait. Don't leave me alone with him. What if he wakes up?"

He wanted to laugh at her pitiful outburst. The man was dead. But he reminded himself just to stay calm before he did something he shouldn't. His blue eyes lingered over her body. Maybe it would make him feel better to use her right back. What bothered him the most was Lita's reaction this morning. What was the meaning of marrying the girl off, if she already had a man? Something was going on, but with Bobby's lush body standing in front of him, that problem would have to wait. All he could think about was getting some kind of revenge on his little vixen.

He had heard the scream while getting ready to go downstairs. For some stupid reason, he felt responsible. The little witch was a virgin before he put his greedy hands on her, but she used him anyway, so how should he feel? Either way, his fingers flexed as he recalled bashing the bastard's face in with a fire poker. He never could control his temper.

Brenna cleared her throat, interrupting his thoughts. She had quickly donned a baby blue day dress, and was standing quietly, watching him. Her hair was loose, tumbling over her shoulders and her breasts. All he could think about was her golden naked body. How voluptuous

her breasts were. She had a perfect, round ass. That delicate black silk draped over his bed like a blanket of darkness. She was a witch casting her spell on an already eager man. All she had to do was say the word and he'd be glad to oblige whatever her little body desired. Her green eyes flickered with something like amusement. She was laughing at him!

"You're drunk," he accused, hiding his amusement.

"What? I only had two drinks," she retaliated.

"Bullshit! Half of the bottle's gone, unless you were sharing it with somebody." He noticed her surprised look at the half-empty bottle, and like clockwork, she hiccupped. He hid his smile again, continuing to watch her suspiciously.

"Go into Lita's room until someone comes to get you. I'll find Lita." He forced any lingering thoughts out of his mind, and watched Bobby's back stiffen before he stalked out and walked down the hall.

Brenna did exactly what she was told, but she couldn't hide the smile that formed on her lips when he left. He may think that he didn't want her or that she didn't deserve him, but dammit, he wasn't going to ever forget her. If Jake Hudson could use her so easily and just discard her, then two could play that game.

When Lita came to her room, she held out a bottle of whiskey to her niece. Brenna grabbed it eagerly and took a few swigs.

"Are you all right, dear? You don't have to say anything. Jake told me everything."

"Well, what did he say? Nothing bad happened to him!" she snapped. She couldn't believe the change in his attitude. One minute he was practically ripping her clothes off, the

next, he was ordering her around. She didn't like anyone telling her what to do, even if he was a blue-eyed god who could invade her dreams.

Lita stared at her, surprised by the snippy attitude. Something was going on here. Even Jake was acting strange. She couldn't help but feel suspicious. It wouldn't take much for an experienced man like Jake to convince an innocent girl like Brenna that sex was something to be casually enjoyed. She wanted the best for her niece. She deserved that much. She ignored the small measure of responsibility she felt; after all, Brenna was living in her aunt's whorehouse.

"Don't worry, Brenna. Jake only said that a man had attacked you, and that he arrived in the nick of time. He's really worried about you, although he won't admit it. He's disposing of the body right now."

"Jake had the nerve to accuse me of actually wanting that man. What an arrogant bastard!"

"Oh shush, he's just jealous! Jake is used to having the women flock all over him, dear. Having a beautiful girl such as you, who is smart and not spreading her legs every moment she gets, is a challenge to him." Lita raised her brow in question over that comment, but Brenna showed no sign of embarrassment. "He's usually attracted to the tarts. They're much easier to direct, darling! A woman who knows what she wants only confuses a man like him."

"Really?" Well then, he's going to be more confused than a bird in a cage when she was through with him. She would not be treated like a tart. And if he wanted to play games, she would be glad to oblige him!

Chapter 4

Bobby Richards was different, smart and extremely sexy. Like a breath of fresh air, and now that he thought about it, nobody could hold a candle to her charms. His mind was playing tricks on him. Why would she be here, if she was supposed to be marrying somebody? Then he thought about sex. How her body felt against him, so soft and inviting. She was rough, too, when she wanted to be! And God, she was passionate! The way her face looked crying his name that first night made him think of more nights to come. But that wasn't possible. He must walk away, but a nagging feeling made him wait. For some reason, he had a feeling about her. Her presence pulled him to her.

What about this future husband of hers? If she was Jake's bride, he'd be damned if he'd let her out of his sight for one minute! She belonged in a man's bed. Something about her wasn't adding up. Why was she running away? And why wasn't she telling him the truth?

* * * *

Brenna tried to keep to her room after the incident, but she had to get outside. Sometimes, the thought of somebody recognizing her wasn't that bad. Anything was better than being locked up. Rogue grunted happily when

he saw her approach his stall. Brenna was grateful that at least somebody loved her and was happy to see her.

“Hello.” Brenna turned, and was startled to see a young boy standing there. It was the young boy from the painting. She recalled Jake’s comment on his eyes. She stared at him, then suddenly her heart hammered.

“Are you Brenna?” His innocent smile forced hers in return. He was such a cute little boy.

“How do you know my name?” she questioned him, surprised by his knowledge of her. She couldn’t deny a feeling of uneasiness that welled up inside her heart, and ripped the very breath from her lungs.

“I’m Billy. Lita is my mother.”

Lita has a son? She couldn’t believe it. Lita hadn’t said anything about a son. Why would Lita keep that from her? “Hello, Billy. It’s nice to meet you.” She extended her hand and shook his. His pale green eyes were full of adventure and mischief. The boy had shiny black hair; just like her. Bronze skin. His smile was a little crooked—

Oh my god! Could he really be— “How old are you, Billy?” she asked, almost bitterly.

“I’m twelve, going on thirteen,” he answered her proudly.

And then she remembered what Lita said that first day, when Brenna asked when she had seen her father last. It was thirteen years, she said. And Lita had an odd look on her face when she said it. Now everything was beginning to make sense. Billy was John’s son, and her brother—half brother. Brenna didn’t know what the hell to think. It was bad enough that she came all the way here to find her father, only to discover that she had a little brother as well.

A brother that was Lita's son. John probably didn't know. How was she supposed to accept this? So many betrayals in her life.

"Well, Billy. I'm going for a ride, but I'm sure I'll see you again real soon, okay?" She forced a smile, knowing that he was just an innocent boy, undeserving of her anger.

"Sure. But can I come with you?"

"No, sorry. Maybe next time." Brenna watched as he walked away, obviously sad that she said no, but it wasn't safe and she needed time alone. At this point, she didn't care what Lita or anyone else thought. She hurried to saddle up Rogue, and they galloped out of the stables with a speed that made Billy squint from the dust, wishing that the beautiful girl had taken him with her.

* * * *

Shooting back the remainder of his whiskey, the man at the counter winked at his two friends. The trio mounted their horses and headed in the same direction as the young woman. The boss was desperate for this girl; they had trailed her this far, and heard tales around town about Lita's beautiful new visitor. Their bet that it was her paid off. They had ridden hard after her, knowing that if they failed it would be the last thing they ever did.

Billy watched everything from his hideout. He saw how those men looked at Brenna. He knew they were up to no good, and he liked Brenna. He ran to his mother right away to give her the information firsthand.

* * * *

Jake was going crazy. He couldn't get her out of his mind. What was so damn irresistible about Bobby Richards? He felt like an idiot! He couldn't even fuck another woman,

not now. He was standing nearby when Billy ran in and told Lita about the three men who followed the young woman; he had to try and get some answers. There was something about her that he couldn't put his finger on, but deep down, he knew that it wasn't something he wanted to hear. "If she's supposed to be getting married, why is she here, Lita?"

"Her grandfather arranged the marriage to a man who's old enough to be her grandfather. She ran away, Jake." Lita stared at the shadow of beard growing on his handsome face. She knew that something was going on. And it was quite pleasing to see that he was affected by her niece. *Does Jake Hudson really have a heart? Does he want Brenna more than he admits?*

"I can understand that. But why all the secrets?" He felt like such a fool over the other night. What was he thinking? He hadn't been thinking. He couldn't help being captured by her lying eyes and body that molded so perfectly to his own.

"Her grandfather is a very important man." She didn't want him stuck between their family issues. He didn't deserve it. And Billy. Brenna knew about her son now, and she thought to herself shamefully that the girl probably hated her right about now.

Jake saw Lita's face turn ashen. There was so much more to it than she was admitting, he knew. So who is this grandfather of Bobby's? And why is everyone so afraid of him? He wondered if that was why she was so upset about finding Brenna in his bed. Guilt got the best of him. Lita deserved a friend she could trust and he wasn't going to let her down. She stood quietly on the steps as Jake mounted

his sandy gray mare. He detected something more than just a friendship between the two women. That look in Lita's eyes explained everything; it was a look of responsibility and love. Jake didn't feel that way about anybody anymore. "Who is Bobby Richards, Lita? And why does she look like Billy?"

"He's her brother." Lita admitted that much, regrettably.

"What? You mean to tell me—"

"No, I'm not her mother. Please don't ask me anything else. She's in a lot of trouble, Jake, and I swear I don't want you to get hurt. But I don't know who I can trust. Nobody knows where her father is, and she hasn't seen him since she was a child. Please, Jake, be careful. The law is no match for the enemy we'll have if she is harmed. Mark my words. Her grandfather is the devil himself."

"Then why are Morgan's men after her?"

"I honestly don't know." That was the truth.

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The deep woods seemed to swallow her into its black embrace as Brenna mindlessly followed a trail she suddenly came upon. Huge firs towered above her in a wide canopy shading away most of the daylight. Rogue held his head low, sniffing at the ground and the air around him. He didn't seem comfortable in this dense area of the forest. She pushed him further, ignoring her own uneasy feelings in the pit of her stomach. She just needed time away on her own to think about these new revelations. Risking her life to get away from her grandfather's wrath, just to come to this, was too much to bear. All she ever wanted was to be loved and appreciated; to enjoy life as a young woman should.

Her mind traveled back to what that man said. “*We know who you are.*” *Who was ‘we’?* Lita explicitly told her that nobody around here knew who she was, and that they were safe, but Brenna conveniently avoided telling Lita about her and Jake’s run-in with the guards. She thought about Jake risking his own hide to protect her. He was so gentle with her, the way he looked at her that first day on the beach with those beautiful blue eyes. But these games they were playing wouldn’t solve anything. She couldn’t marry him. Vincent would surely kill Jake if he ever discovered that his ‘bought and paid for’ granddaughter was no longer the virgin he expected her to be.

They came across a small creek flowing through the woods and Brenna stopped to allow Rogue a drink before turning back. The wind whistled through the treetops that cut into the blue sky. Every once in a while, a gust of wind would break the spell of her trance. Did she hear something? Or was it just the wind? Rogue’s ears pointed back and he grunted, warning Brenna that they weren’t alone. Frantically searching for a spot to hide, she quickly realized there was nowhere to go and no way to hide her horse. She led herself right into a trap.

“I see that we found our girl! I have to give you credit, wench. You sure make a man work for his money!”

Brenna swung around to the eerie voice that seemed to sneak up out of nowhere. Sweat beaded over thick dark brows as the man scanned every inch of her. How did he manage to sneak up on her? He was standing directly in front of her as if he snapped his fingers and suddenly appeared. She was a fool for not protecting herself. Taking off out of anger was careless, and she didn’t consider

anybody may have followed her. But she didn't recognize this man, or the two others with him. A strange feeling warned her to be careful. He was a menacing looking man. Terrifying, actually. A round, dirty face, potbelly, and brown teeth. She shuddered at the gleam in his beady eyes.

Darrel Johnson nodded to a young lad, and he grabbed Brenna, locking her arms behind her back. It was hard trying to hold the kicking and screaming woman. Johnson slipped the tip of his barrel into the cleavage of her shirt. Her chest was heaving from panic, and he grinned, watching how her body squirmed before him.

"So, Miss Summers. What, may I ask, are you doing way out here in Clearwater Bay, of all places?" He sneered. "A sassy little bitch like you could get hurt!" The cold pistol pressed hard against her breast. He began rubbing it around her nipple in a circular motion.

"What do you want from me?" She tried hard to sound tough, but her voice betrayed her.

"Luckily, you have an admirer in our dear town. And he expects us to bring you to him, unharmed." He brushed his cracked lips against her ear and whispered. "Although we would love to have a piece of you, the boss man doesn't want us touching you. Such a pity. I would love to see your thighs spreading just for me!"

With all the guts she could muster, Brenna spit in his face.

"In your dreams," she told him quietly. His smile melted and his brown eyes darkened with hatred. "I wouldn't get too smart, darlin'. I might just keep you for myself."

Brenna snapped into action, jumping up and kicking her legs out at the man, painfully aware that he had no intention of bringing her to anyone. The young man holding her struggled to get a better grip, bruising her arms as he pulled her closer. The man with the beady eyes grabbed a fistful of her hair and yanked her head to the side, forcing her to watch and listen. Her eyes fought against the tears building, glaring at this man who had every intention of raping, then killing her. Jesus Christ! Why was she the one tossed into the mess of men and constant abuse? He yanked her back to reality, forcing her to look at him.

“I may not be able to sink myself inside your furry little hole, but I sure as hell can make you swallow my waste, pretty girl.” He shoved her down to the ground right in front of his crotch. Brenna gulped down her fear of what he was thinking. *Never*. She would never do that, not to him. The only reason in her mind she could use to save herself, flashed before her eyes, and instead of begging for him to stop, she used another tactic. She looked up to him from her position before him and snapped her teeth together several times, showing him exactly what she planned to do if he ever tried to stick his cock in her mouth. She would bite the damn thing off!

He didn’t have time to react. A shot erupted from the bushes and the third man crumbled to the ground. The boy who was holding her down was now using her as his shield. His shooting hand shook violently, the tip of his barrel right against her temple. At any moment, his nervous finger might pull the trigger. She swallowed. At the gunshot, Johnson escaped to the trees, coward that he was, leaving the boy to fend for himself.

“If you harm her, you will die a slow, painful death, boy.”

The young man looked around him, unsure where the words came from. Johnson was nowhere to be found and the other guy was already dead. Then he saw a man come out of nowhere, like a ghost—or something worse. He came toward them with an arrogant, lazy walk. The man was not at all afraid of his gun.

Jake couldn't take his eyes away from the terrified expression on Bobby's face. She was shaking, and rightfully so. He saw everything, and he wanted to skin Johnson alive for even thinking of kneeling his woman before him. *My woman? Shit!* Why did he suddenly think that? She sure as hell wasn't his woman. He looked back at the boy.

“I'll make you a deal. If you leave now, I won't put a bullet in your head. Just put her down and walk away. You have my word.” Jake watched the boy through troubled eyes. This man was just a kid; he should have a full life ahead of him. He pushed her in front of him and took off without a glance behind. The boy made a smart decision.

Jake approached Bobby slowly. He didn't know what the hell to do. Every time he was around her, all that went on in his mind was sex and irritation. Men seemed to come out of nowhere to get a piece of her. “You're lucky Billy was watching. Who knows what would have happened to you? Lita was worried.”

Jake looked at her carefully, and Brenna wondered if there was something more to it. Was he worried about her as well? He sure came walking through the bushes with a purpose.

“Who the hell cares? Nothing makes sense anymore.” She was confused, and now she had a headache.

“Tomboy,” he whispered, stroking his thumb along her beautiful jaw. “Why did you lie to me? You have a brother. Lita is related to you. Anything else you want to tell me so I don’t have to find out for myself when it could be too late?”

“Shit!” she said through clenched teeth. “How did you know?” His fingers clenched her jaw, lifting her chin. It was almost painful, but the way he was looking at her was strangely gentle.

“Why do you lie to me, Bobby? So far, a group of guards were after you, now Morgan’s men. And you were disguising herself. What else am I going to find out about you?” If she wanted to play games and keep secrets, fine. He reluctantly let go of her chin, regretting how hard his grip was.

“Why do you think I took off?” she yelled. “I just found out about Billy, and I can’t believe it. There are a lot of things you don’t know about me and it’s best that way. It’ll just cause you trouble.”

“I live for trouble,” he replied quickly. What happened only moments ago was already forgotten. He wanted his black-haired goddess to touch him again. He wanted to spread her legs and take her right here. Jake was already falling, hard. “I admire that you used me as your first victim. When do you figure you’ll be done with me?” He regretted the words as soon as they came out, but in all honesty, that’s how he felt. *Used*.

“Oh, I hate you!” She pushed his chest, sending him back just a little. His cocky attitude was getting very annoying. But for some reason, heat was barreling through

her. Why was it suddenly so hot? She just had to be near him to feel reckless.

“When my fever was at its highest, you took advantage of me, tomboy! Did you enjoy it?” Sparks glittered his eyes.

“Oh, you. No! It must be hard for you to find out, for the first time, that a woman told you she wasn’t falling for your charms, eh?” She wasn’t very convincing, with flushed cheeks, bright eyes and heaving breasts. He knew she was turned on.

“You’re lying. You melt under my touch.” He winked at her, an arrogant smirk on those full sensuous lips. She loved that big bottom lip. “As a matter of fact, you were quite the feisty little cat in my arms!”

“Never!” She pushed him away further, trying to ignore the heat that already burned through her thighs. He was right. But instead of pushing him away, she grabbed his hair, pulling his head down and took his lips roughly. His ragged moan gave her power beyond control. Her fingers dug into his shoulders, her teeth nipped at his lip. She couldn’t control herself. She jumped up and wrapped her legs around his waist, squeezing him still. Brenna tore at his shirt, as her legs held her straight up. It didn’t occur to her that she was ready to have sex in front of a dead body.

Jake was stunned, and awed at the same time.

“Jesus! What the hell is wrong with you?” He grabbed her wrists, and pushed her away. There were tears in her eyes, her lips trembling. “Why do you get so crazy? Is that how you plan on fucking your husband, too?” She crumbled at those words, sagging against him. He held her up, cradling her in his arms. Jake was even more confused now. “What’s going on with you, love? Tell me.”

“No! Please don't send me back there.” And then she broke down into ragging sobs. He couldn't help feeling sorry and ashamed. His tough, vicious tomboy was just a woman who needed comfort and protection. He never saw her like this before and it worried him, more than he thought. “What do you want from me, Bobby? Do you want my help, or not?”

“You can't help me, Jake. Nobody can.” And she crawled back into her depressing hole, wishing that calling her 'love' was exactly how he felt toward her.

They rode hard into the night, not saying a word to each other. After that argument, Jake let her be. It was obvious that she didn't want his help, and he was angry with himself for falling so hard for a woman who didn't give a damn about life and love. *Love?* Did he really love her? *No. It wasn't possible.* The best thing to do was just ignore what went on before. It was best that way. But a fire for her burned in his blood. He was hungry for action about something he couldn't even figure out. Damn, she knew how to irritate him. Although Lita's words definitely helped, Bobby was a mystery, a beautiful, bad puzzle. It wasn't just the obvious that made him slap his mare into a rapid gait. It was the need for excitement and adventure. There was a drive for victory that ran through his veins.

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The warm glow of the fire was casting a spell on Brenna as she stared into the flames later that evening. What was she going to do with herself? *Run away forever?* It was more than the average girl could handle.

“What are you thinking about?” Jake asked. It was too boring ignoring each other. If they were going to be alone

in the bush, they may as well talk like normal human beings, or damn it all to hell.

“This mess.” Brenna looked into his eyes again, hoping to catch one of his reassuring smiles. Although she was angry, ignoring him forever was impossible. His thick blonde eyebrows narrowed as his gaze looked right through her. It was an uneasy feeling. His dark gaze was mesmerizing. He knew parts of her she was trying to forget. He knew how to read her eyes. And then she noticed the scratch across his face, and cursed herself for hurting him. What was wrong with her?

“Sorry, but I can’t do anything if you won’t tell me what the problem is. That’s just how it works.” Then he turned his back to her, and prepared his bed.

It was a slap to her bruised heart. *So this is how it’s going to be?* They enjoyed the fruits of love and it was all over in the blink of an eye. If only she could trust him enough to tell him everything. Then what? How would he feel if he knew she was being sold? Like a common serving girl, a slave. Would he care? Or would he want his own cut as well, and make a huge profit? Her mother had been at the mercy of men with power and money. She swore she wouldn’t live the same life.

Long after she was asleep, Jake sat up and looked into the darkness surrounding him. Why was Morgan after her now? Morgan was a very dangerous man, and killed for fun. He had everything, and if he wanted something new, he wouldn’t stop until he got it. Could Morgan want Bobby? She sure was a beautiful woman. Any man would take her to bed, marry her, give her children. Just not him. Jake

wanted to help her, but if she couldn't trust him, then what was the point? What does she have that they wanted?

* * * *

Brenna was awake just before dawn. It was impossible to get a good night's rest. She stretched widely atop her blankets briefly watching Jake's immaculate form sprawled out a short distance away. His faded jeans tightly hugged his hard ass, and she recalled touching him, squeezing those tight muscles. His large body loved her without shame, and with reckless abandon. She warmed at the pulsating sensations between her legs just thinking about it. She was alone with Jake Hudson of all people, and she was beginning to like it. The sweet sound of moving water lingered nearby. Quietly moving off the blankets, not wanting to wake him, Brenna took the opportunity to have some time to herself to freshen up.

An eagle soared high above her, circling in the bright morning sun, searching for prey. Her heart ached to be free like that. To know where she was going. To know what stretched ahead. Vincent always said that she would never be free, that she would end up like a used slut if she kept being so unruly. And it was true, she supposed. She was no better than a whore for throwing herself at a man who didn't care about her. Sure, he may have offered to help her, but it was at Lita's request, not out of any desire to aid her.

It took a moment for Jake to realize that Bobby wasn't around. Her makeshift bed was deserted. Immediately, he assumed that she had taken off again. He sat up and listened for any noises and looked toward the creek, finally noticing her perched on a rock watching the sky. He didn't move a

muscle; nothing would distract him from watching her quiet pose. Bobby was becoming a problem. The large round hat shaded her exotic face while she stared out to nowhere. Thick black lashes fluttered up and down, catching him in their web. He couldn't stop staring. What was the truth about her, the mysterious tomboy? Or the sweet feminine vixen? She obviously used what she could out of him those two nights, and he suddenly felt angry over the tables being turned. The woman had actually used him! She played him for a fool. But what if those men hurt her? Could he forgive himself for walking away? Never. He couldn't let her get hurt, not now. But he could find a way to make her listen. How could he get her to trust him?

"A penny for your thoughts," he asked through sleepy eyes.

"Good morning. How did you sleep?" she asked, still facing the water, and not him. She needed to think about other things, like how she was going to face the obstacles in front of her. She was a fool to give herself to him so easily, so boldly. But in truth, she wanted more. Brenna wanted the impossible.

"All right I suppose," Jake replied. "And you? Are you ready for another long day?"

"Where are we going?"

"To Lita's cabin. She wants you to hide out there for a little while. And lucky me gets to stay with you," he said sarcastically. He felt a slight tug of guilt at the flash of pain in her eyes. Jake wasn't at all thrilled about the idea. How was he going to share a little cabin without lusting after her? The devilish look in her eyes didn't help either. She was a witch.

Jake was watching her with that deep, dark look again. He wasn't at all shy about watching her in full view, like he owned her. Like he wanted her, but couldn't admit it even to himself.

"And for how long will I have the privilege of your company?"

"Until you tell me the truth, I suppose."

"Well, you'll be waiting a long time, my dear Jake. I don't plan on telling you anything."

"What kind of life is that, tomboy? You can't pretend forever."

"Why do you keep calling me that?" She tilted her head toward him; the sun splashed across her cheek and lighted her lips. He decided to stare at her lips.

"No reason. What's the name of the man you're supposed to marry?"

"Why do you want to know that?"

"In case I run into him someday." But she took it the wrong way.

"What? You better not turn me in, Jake, I beg you. I don't ever want to go back there. Never." Tears stung her eyes and she buried her face in her hands. She felt completely ridiculous in front of him. What was wrong with her?

Jake got up right away and went to her, instantly regretting his stupid words. He knelt between her legs, holding her hands, blue eyes focused on hers. The normally tough, reckless girl actually had a heart. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it in a bad way. I only meant that I would like to challenge the man, that's all! It's just a joke. Besides, I

don't believe in arranged marriages. A woman should marry a man she loves and that's that."

He was looking through her eyes like a crystal ball and Brenna felt herself relax into him.

"Thank you for understanding." He wiped away her tears with a rough hand and they stared at each other for a moment, but it was Brenna who looked away. She was more frustrated than ever at how easily she became emotional in front of him. He was probably laughing at her weakness. "I just want to enjoy life and not be hurt anymore. Is that wrong, Jake?"

Her tears warmed the deep green of her eyes to light moss. It was odd how his resolve shattered in her liquid depths.

"Never, tomboy. There's nothing wrong with enjoying life. I've always lived by that rule. And as long as you're with me, nobody will punish you for that." His lips grazed hers, his index finger caressed her chin, and for the first time since her mother died, she felt a few stones come crumbling down from her wall of despair and loneliness.

Chapter 5

Jo Bradley tipped his tattered black Stetson over his brow and looked across the landscape. The mountains towered above him, trapping those who wandered within its walls. The valley was large, with Clearwater Lake nestled right in the middle. Colorful blooms spread like a blanket along the foothills above the river, almost distracting him enough to forget why he left in the first place. His guilty conscience punished him for leaving Lita so abruptly. But he always paid his dues, and he owed David Morgan a favor. Either way, he would be seeing Lita soon enough. He hoped she might be happy to see him, but deep down, he knew that she probably wouldn't be too anxious to open her arms.

Jo lived the life of a killer. The money made him do his job well and he didn't allow himself to get tangled up in personal problems. He had seen many a good gunslinger taken down because he felt sorry for the wrong people. But the power—now that charged his determination to do something with himself. The feel of raw power in his hands thrilled him like nothing else he had ever dreamed. This life, he knew too well, was meaningless at times, and on more than one occasion, he wished that it would just end. The idea of a bullet ending his life didn't seem all that bad.

Every day, he missed his little girl, but that was out of his control. He wished he had closed his eyes that day, so many years ago. His life changed in the blink of an eye, and he lost his family. Because of that bastard, Vincent Randall, there was nothing left to live for. There were too many secrets. And Roberta followed her father around like a little puppy. She wouldn't even believe that her husband was innocent. Poor Brenna. He wished everyday that he could see her, hold her, and tell her that he was sorry he didn't fight harder for her. His beautiful baby girl, only three months old when he was forced to leave.

Jo headed down into the valley, unaware that returning would change his life forever.

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"Could you please slow down a little? My back is killing me with all this riding." Brenna was tired and hungry. Her back ached and her hips were jarred stiff. She couldn't stop staring at Jake riding in front of her.

"Unless you want to meet up with those men again, you better keep up." Jake was getting extremely irritated with her. It wasn't like Brenna to whine. They still had at least a full day's ride before reaching the cabin. Then what? Would he have to tuck her in and spoon-feed her? "We'll be stopping shortly for a meal and you can rest for a little while. A few more minutes won't hurt your precious little ass!"

"My ass is just fine, thank you!" She'd show him. Brenna could handle anything. She had the guts and the drive to get what she wanted, and Jake Hudson wasn't going to get in her way. They bickered quite frequently and

Brenna found herself wanting to slap him ridiculously, then kiss him sorry.

Jake glanced back at her, thinking he would like to whack that sassy ass. He tried his best not to watch Bobby bending over to collect pieces of dried wood for the fire the previous afternoon, but it was useless. He had traveled with many women, and he had to admit that she was pretty tough, and she looked incredible in a tight pair of jeans! The top button of her work shirt was undone, baring that exotic golden skin he loved to feel and taste. Tight pants hugged her curvy bottom, displaying those cheeks just big enough to accommodate his hands perfectly. She was trying to provoke him, the little vixen! But those eyes revealed everything. The pale green seemed to shine every time she smiled. She had the eyes of a whore and the heart of an angel, if that made sense. *Unbelievable.*

Bobby Richards was unaware of what she could do to a man. Or maybe she wasn't. He imagined that amazing midnight hair spread across crisp white sheets, those *take me now* eyes demanding attention to her luscious body. He shook his head for the third time that day. He couldn't allow himself to be drawn in by her sexual powers. She was like a witch or a gypsy calling to him, urging him to touch her. He was afraid to lose control. Never, ever had he let his strength escape him over a woman.

Brenna knew she was being watched. It was pretty clear that his concentration was elsewhere when he dropped a heavy log on his foot. It took everything not to laugh in his face, but she hid her amusement well. She also knew he was the type who had women chasing after him, which was funny, considering he was the one losing his cool

over her. But if he was expecting her to be a mindless tart and swoon every time he looked in her direction, he was dead wrong.

His bottom lip was just a bit fuller than the top, soft and experienced. And she had to admit it wouldn't be hard to swoon over those incredibly sexy dimples! But he wasn't a man who stayed in one place, and that wasn't something she was willing to overlook. And what about Sir Charles Livingston? Could she be in serious trouble for running away? Would he lock her up in a dungeon for her betrayal?

By the time Jake returned with an armful of wood, Bobby already had a roaring fire going. To his surprise, the coffee pot was perched on a log and meat was frying in the pan. "Smells good," he commented, standing beside her, smelling the aroma of her faded perfume instead. His nostrils flared, his blood began pumping in his throat and much lower.

"It does smell good, doesn't it? Would you like a cup?"

"I wasn't talking about the food or coffee," he said, eyeing her up with that knowing grin.

That sweet voice pierced at his dark mood. Bobby sure had a way of making a man fail to remember who he was, but never forget her. Her long, impossibly black hair dangled around her waist. What was it about that hair? She bent down and grabbed the pot with a cloth. He couldn't help but see how her bottom was squeezed in her pants, almost too tight to bend over. *Stop it. Stop thinking about her or you'll break your foot this time!* He swore to himself.

"Well? Would you like a cup?" She was facing him now, knowing exactly what he had been doing. The smug

look on her face proved everything. She thought about pinching him.

“I’ll take anything you give me!” Two could play her game, and he knew he was more experienced. His devilish smile revealed those sexy dimples again, knowing he had her right where he wanted her. But to his amazement, she just handed him the cup and returned to the sizzling pan. It was like a slap in the face. Or was it a challenge? He was confused. And that ass again, bent over and lovely and—he couldn’t help himself.

Jake’s hand connected to her ass cheek, making her stumble with hot coffee spilling all over the ground. “Hey!” She turned around, glaring at him. Those dimples caught her attention, and she laughed instead of what she was thinking of doing. Smart ass, that’s what he was, and she couldn’t help liking it anyway.

“Since we’ll be spending so much time together, you might as well fill me in on your little secrets.” He gave her a look that challenged her to give in.

“There are no other secrets to tell you, Jake. I ran away from my responsibilities and I’ll never return.” With all the confidence in the world, she gave him a smile that would put the sun to shame.

“What are you going to do about your fiancé? Are you planning on running away forever?”

“If I have to, yes.”

“So who’s your grandfather to say who you marry? Isn’t that your father’s job?”

“I never met my father, and my mother is dead.” Although it was a painful topic, she wouldn’t allow herself to cry in front of him again. “I was told that he abandoned

us just after I was born. Then I discovered letters after my mother's death from him. He didn't sound like the imbecile my grandfather said he was. He wanted to come home, to see me. But they wouldn't let him. I don't know why. I guess I'm hoping that if I find him, he'll help me and protect me from them. Something must have happened to make them force him away, and I plan on finding out what."

"I know what it's like, you know. To lose someone you love. Savages killed my parents, and my sister disappeared years ago. I never did find out what happened to her. I know she had somebody, but she never told me who. I've been searching for years." *Now, they were getting somewhere,* he thought with an ounce of hope.

"Strange how we spend our lives searching for the truth, when it isn't what we want to hear," she replied, unaware of the meaningful look in his eyes.

"You're very right." Jake needed to change the subject. He spent too much time living in the past. "That's quite the horse you have there. He's fast."

"Yes. He was trained by the best. Do you know much about horses?"

"Sure. I'm working toward getting my own ranch. That building at the beach was our old home when I was growing up. I'd like to fix it up and start a family, maybe. Someday."

"Well, I hope you get what you desire, Mr. Hudson." Her eyes seemed to shine all the more when she spoke the words, and Jake almost thought she wanted an invitation. But, of course his stubborn little mule was quite the little liar. She'd probably burn his ranch down and say that the devil did it.

“Thank you. So, have you had many suitors?”

“A few. Why is that so important?”

“You seem to have a lot of experience fooling people into thinking you’re an innocent girl. But I see right through you. I know you’re a tigress eager to sink your claws into any unlucky man!” Brenna slugged him in the shoulder, sending him back just a little. Surprise widened his eyes at the power behind that tiny fist. “Are you always this violent?”

“Only with foolish men. Why would a man be unlucky to have someone like me?”

He was watching her with that cocky grin again.

“Because you’re a sassy little devil! Bad luck follows you, I think.”

“You are despicable, Jake Hudson!”

“You love it, tomboy! So why aren’t you married then? If other men asked for your hand, you should have accepted one of them. This arrangement wouldn’t even be a concern.”

“I wasn’t interested in any of them. I want excitement. Not sitting in drawing rooms sipping on tea, fluttering a pink feathered fan. No. I want a man who is...never mind.”

“What? Tell me. You want a man who—” She turned away when he questioned her. More secrets she wasn’t going to tell him. “What are you and Lita hiding?”

“Nothing.”

He shifted on the ground and stared at the fire for a moment. “Why can’t you tell me who you are? How can I help you if I don’t know? Tell me something, Bobby. The truth. Did you use me to get back at your fiancé?”

“No. I wasn’t using you. I never would. But I’m not telling you anything else.” Her ocean-green eyes darkened as she stared at the fire, ignoring his odd look. Jake wondered what went on in that pretty little head of hers. Her long lashes flickered, her silky black hair glowed in the fading afternoon sun. *How could any man ignore her? How could a man force his beautiful granddaughter to marry half a man?* She should have the world to choose from.

“You can trust me. Have I not proven myself?” His voice was rising. His frustration at not getting answers fueled his temper. He didn’t want to be cruel, but how else would she listen?

Tears were blurring her vision. “Every person I’ve trusted in my life has hurt me. I ran away from it all. And I will keep running if I have to.”

“Did your grandfather hurt you? Did that other man hurt you?” He didn’t want to know the answer. Jake felt something odd inside. Was it anger that someone hurt her? Or was it jealousy that she wasn’t crying on his shoulder and begging him to protect her and look after her?

“It’s better that you don’t know anything. Do you understand?”

“I understand to a certain degree.” But it wasn’t enough to calm his nerves. “Have you ever cared for a certain man?” His eyes turned into dark pools of liquid steel. He was imagining his black-haired goddess begging him for more. He wanted to forget real life for just a little while.

“I met a man once who threatened me with his pistol. But I quickly showed him that his weapon was no match for mine!” She looked right at him with those sexy eyes,

unaware that she was biting her bottom lip, thinking how his mouth would taste. Her body was warming to his nearness. She was beginning to tire of the battle.

“And what weapon was that?” Leaning in closer, Jake could smell lilacs in her silky hair. Just the scent of her was intoxicating. He reached for her chin and drew her mouth to his, grazing his tongue across the spot she was biting. He had enough of waiting. Maybe that was her weapon. She knew he couldn’t keep his hands off her.

Brenna tensed against the strong male body she wanted so badly. It was like fire boiling her blood. His tongue searched for hers. It was a perfect start to a boring afternoon. She returned the kiss; wrapping her arms around his neck, holding him as if to possess him, own him.

He would let her do anything to him right now. He kissed her throat, basking in the sweet taste of her. Her nipples hardened under the flimsy fabric of her work shirt. It was impossible to ignore the power they had over him. Jake sent the coffee cups flying off the blanket and easily tossed her underneath him. She didn’t stop him. His hands touched her as if they had belonged together forever. He smiled at the expressions on her face, the desire exploding from her exquisite mouth. “Let’s just forget everything for this moment,” he murmured. “I go crazy just thinking about you. I want you—”

Jake put his hands under her back and flipped her on to her belly. He removed her pants gently, massaging her bottom and kissing the soft cheeks as he slipped them off. Memories exploded to life, his cock swelling from the sweet recollection. Her wild reaction to his erotic touch

threw his lust into a new dimension. She had taken him fully. He was her first. He wanted to be her only.

Jake spread her legs, leaving her vulnerable to his needs. If she could trust him with her body, why not her mind and her heart? He toyed with the delicate folds of her wet heat, loving the moans of delight and wonder, feeding his need to fondle her to a thundering peak. There was no stopping him now. He stroked with his fingertips, preparing her for the desperate hunger he possessed; wanting, needing to take her. His mouth sought her out from behind, kissing her pussy like he would her mouth. He caressed her tiny bud until he felt her pulsating wave of ecstasy flow wet on his fingers and tongue. Her whole body tensed with the shock of orgasm, and as much as he wanted to eat her the entire afternoon, his soldier needed satisfying as well. He pulled up, kissing her back, rubbing his shaft along her thighs, feeling the wetness gather around him.

Brenna reached behind, grasping on to that large erect part of him that she knew would fill her completely, perfectly. He was so hard, yet so smooth, and she whimpered from the knowledge that soon he would be using that part of him to throw her into the orgasmic world of sex a third time. He knew just how to please her, make her beg for more, and it didn't matter who they were anymore. She just wanted to be loved by him.

Jake tensed, causing his muscles to flex at her sudden boldness. He finally admitted he liked it, needed it. He wanted her to feel free to touch him whenever she pleased. He pulled her back until she was positioned on her knees, ready to take him from behind. His hard length glided along the ridge of her folds, electrifying every nerve he felt, her

desire running wet down her thighs. She was ready for him, he knew. Jake reached around, cupping her breast, tweaking the rosy nipple until it hardened. He entered slowly, smoothly.

She shuddered at his fullness, gliding within her, filling her as he should. He groaned, holding the rising swell of energy. She tightened around him, moaning from the magnificent feelings flowing down to the deep depths of her core. She flexed and tingled all around him.

Her body slammed against his, the action he knew to be that of a woman who wanted exactly that; a hard fuck. Her moans became shuddered cries, high-pitched and ragged as she peaked through the gates of sexual bliss and back again.

He was becoming more impatient now, more demanding of her tiny body, and she welcomed how he used her completely, with such need. Brenna massaged the other breast until her nipple hardened like stone, then she moved her hand down to where he had fondled her bud, and she too circled it, moaning from the exquisite tension building within. "Oh, yes, Jake! Harder!" she cried out. "Love me!"

The words echoed through him like thunder. He didn't know what to think. But he couldn't stop now. He pumped harder, flesh slapping flesh, echoing through the tranquil wilderness, matching the height of her cries. He wanted to explode, to yell out his fulfilled desire by this one woman. His tomboy. Jake's hands molded around her hips as he positioned himself farther back to watch his shaft penetrate in and out of her sleek tunnel. His massive cock stretched her to the maximum; the feeling was sweeter than any he

ever remembered. He tugged on her hair, pulling her head back, kissing her neck, licking her earlobes. Whispering hot sex words to her as his fingers toyed with her hair, circling it around and lightly pulling her head back more, and he knew he was lost. When he felt her shudder again and call out his name, her flexing walls of heat did him in. One last thrust and he released, groaning roughly into her hair. His body weighed heavily upon her as he relaxed against her red cheeks, squeezing that sweaty golden skin, all hot and loving beneath him. His little vixen trapped him again.

“I’m not done with you yet!” Brenna moved away from him, sighing from the tingling of his shaft leaving her soaking hot pussy. He sat back, not surprised by her eagerness. She turned around and pushed him back so he sat on the blanket, his rod still rock hard. Brenna positioned herself on top of him, and guided him deep within her. She clung to his shoulders, and he held her hips tight to him, as they both moaned and sighed to the ecstasy burning in their hearts. She thrust her tongue into his mouth, and twirled around it, sucking his tongue, biting it, all the while, riding him into oblivion. Her hips moved like tidal waves on his rigid cock. It was the best fuck he ever had. He couldn’t believe she had been a virgin when he was with her just a few short days ago. His little vixen was made for love.

The growing heat began to build, high in her belly, then moved down until she tensed and cried out, raking her nails down his back as she released in a thundershower of tremors, bucking and shaking in ecstasy. Jake held her tightly to him, basking in the quivering flexing of her tunnel, and when she almost pulled away, she slammed down hard and flexed her muscles. “Here it comes!” he

grunted into her neck. Jake bit down on her neck and pulled her down hard, as he exploded into her so fiercely, he could have dropped dead. They sat there, still molded together, as they sighed and kissed and fell back onto the blanket in wonderful release. They laughed and lingered, and the heat rose again. They couldn't help the overwhelming desire that erupted through their bodies with equal passion. Brenna was happy. Jake was satisfied, yet confused.

* * * *

Jake shook his head violently trying to erase the sweet memory of her luscious body, and almost fell off the saddle. That damn woman would be the end of him! He watched her approach a steep incline ahead. The forest was becoming more dense and much harder to pass through. It was very quiet. No birds chirping. The sound of a slight breeze whistled in the treetops. He had an uneasy feeling in his gut. He couldn't decide if it was her words of love or the fact she had taken him so fiercely. But any thoughts quickly vanished when he heard something out of the ordinary. Then it came. A loud, whoosh, as an arrow sliced right into Bobby's shoulder. Jake froze, eyes wide, as his mind raced over what to do. *No, not Bobby.*

Her ears were ringing, the pain was so unbearable. Brenna sagged on her horse and fell to the ground. Dizzy and confused, she moaned helplessly, barely noticing Jake's handsome face above her. He was saying something to her, but she couldn't hear. Were those tears in his eyes? What was he saying?

All sound and feeling escaped. She was in another world, completely unaware that Jake was begging her to

hold on, that she couldn't leave him, because he loved her more than life itself.

* * * *

Jo Bradley took a deep breath and pushed open the double doors. The saloon was fairly busy but it wasn't booming. He looked around at the familiar surroundings, breathing in the smell of smoke and whiskey, sweat and woman. Lita hadn't changed a thing, and he smiled to himself, knowing that she always knew how to take care of business. His heart skipped a beat, wondering how she would react to his presence after years of not bothering to reach her. Harry smiled and hauled out a bottle with two shot glasses, knowing just what Jo needed. "Well if it isn't our old friend, Jo! How've you been, buddy?"

"I'm doing good, Harry. I need to speak to Lita. Where can I find her?" Jo took off his dusty hat and beat it against the counter. He'd been living in filth for weeks now and needed a bath.

"I'm afraid she's out of town, my friend. Won't be back for a couple days. You want a room? We got some cute new gals since you left!"

"No thanks. I'm here on business. Do you recall a Miss Richards that came through here a few weeks ago?"

"Who could forget a woman like that? She was a goddess, that one. Yeah, she left in quite a hurry. Why?"

"It's important that I find her, Harry. Does anyone know where she was headed?"

Harry pointed to a pretty blond playing a game of cards by herself. "Miss Noela, there, she might know. These girls here are always flappin' their gums at each other."

“Thanks, Harry. I appreciate it. When Lita returns, will you tell her I was here?”

“Sure thing, Jo. Anything for you!”

Noela Mathews watched as the dirty man came to her table. There was no way she was going upstairs with him. He was filthy, and smelled worse than horseshit. But under all that grime there was much potential, in his stunning green eyes and wickedly handsome grin. She continued laying out her cards, ignoring his gaze.

“If you think I’m going to go upstairs with you, sir, you are sadly mistaken. I don’t offer myself to men who smell worse than a working horse!”

Jo busted a gut laughing. *This woman had balls!* “Thank you for the wonderful comment, my lady!” he joked. “My name is Jo. Do you know where a young woman by the name of Bobby Richards may be?”

Just the sound of that woman’s name was enough to make her face turn red. That bitch stole her man. Jake went chasing after her like a lost little boy and Lita refused to explain why. Her delicate eyebrow arched in curiosity.

“Why are you looking for this woman?”

“I’ve been hired to bring her home.”

Noela held back a smile. Maybe if she helped this man, Bobby would be out of the picture. “I do remember her. But I’m not sure where she went. I’m just a working girl, not a detective, sir,” she answered, giving him her warmest, most seductive smile.

“This man that is with her. Do you know him too?”

“What does he have to do with anything?” she snapped.

She was fond of this man; he could see it in her eyes. Maybe he could use that to his advantage. “Mr. Hudson

could be in a lot of trouble, ma'am. If I track down Miss Richards, he might feel that he needs to protect her. If he gets in the way, I'll shoot him. And I never miss."

Noela swallowed hard. Her mouth suddenly went very dry. She had to get to the cabin and warn Jake. Noela peered into his unusual green eyes. "You remind me of someone, but I can't put my finger on it. Do you know Lita?"

"That isn't important at the moment."

"Have you been here before? Your eyes, they look familiar. Yes, now I know. Just like Billy, as a matter of fact."

"Who's Billy?"

"Lita's son, of course." Jo's eyes widened. Lita had no child when he was here before.

"How old is this child of hers?" His heart skipped a beat and the collar of his shirt seemed to tighten suddenly.

"Twelve, I believe, almost thirteen."

"Well, I'm happy for her," he managed to choke out. He couldn't believe it. How could Lita keep something like that from him? He loved her with all of his heart, and if he had known better, he would have married her, not Roberta. He had a son. And for the second time in his life, he didn't get to see that child grow. It was one thing to make mistakes and look away at a time when he was young and confused, but knowing what happened in his life thus far, he wouldn't be making that same mistake again.

"Look, I have to get ready for tonight. If Mr. Hudson is in trouble, it has nothing to do with me. Now if you don't mind, I'm needed elsewhere. Good day."

Jo watched the young lady hurry upstairs. Only a fool would think she wasn't up to something. He had her right where he wanted her. That woman had a thing for this Jake Hudson fellow. He wondered what was so special about him to make a whore want him.

His light green eyes watched his surroundings, wondering why bad luck and heartache always followed him. Men laughed and drank all around him, completely unaware that a killer sat among them. He sat alone for some time before he collected himself and yelled out to Harry that he would be taking a room after all.

Chapter 6

Bobby ran a high fever for several days while Jake did his best to keep her cool. She downed a whole bottle of whiskey before he was able to pull the arrow out of her shoulder. He never saw a woman drink so much in his life. Luckily there was enough whiskey left to clean the wound. It was a messy ordeal, but it had to be done to save her life. There was risk of infection and being way out here, they would never make it to a doctor. When she fell off her horse, the arrow went deeper in her flesh. It was almost through the other side.

Jake laid her on the bed delicately as to not hurt her precious body, and started a fire in the stove. The fever started during the first night. Having no choice but to strip the clothes off her back, Jake cooled her down with a cloth and plenty of cold water from a nearby spring. Her pale, clammy body sent shivers up his spine. He couldn't stop thinking that she might die, and that worried him more than he would expect. He wanted to take her in his arms and protect her. It didn't matter anymore who she was. He desired her like he needed air to breathe. During the morning of the fifth day, she opened her eyes and stared at her surroundings. A huge weight lifted from his shoulders.

“Good morning, tomboy!” Jake said excitedly, relieved they were through the worst of it. He watched her lovingly, as she stretched and yawned like a well rested feline.

“How long did I sleep?”

“A few days.”

“Are you serious?” She couldn’t believe it. Brenna looked at him closely, surprised at his show of compassion. The usual cocky attitude didn’t tease her in his smile; the crooked grin wasn’t there. Just a sincere smile and clear blue eyes that looked different somehow. He was concerned about her. “I can’t believe you stayed with me. I would have thought you’d toss me out to the wolves!” For some reason, his warmth and caring stirred in the pit of her stomach, and her heart swelled. What would it be like to be married to him? He was strong and virile. Handsome and sculpted like a warrior. But then she remembered that Lita said he was dangerous. This was it. This was the danger. She was falling in love with a man she could never have.

“Of course I stayed. Who else would take care of your stubborn ass?”

“Watch it, Mr. Hudson!”

“Do you trust me, Bobby? Tell me what’s going on with you.” His large body towered over her, warming her with his nearness. His strong presence made her feel safe and secure. She didn’t want to imagine being anywhere else. Regrettably, Brenna admitted to herself that she could run forever, as long as Jake was with her.

“I can’t.”

“You’ll have to tell me someday.”

“That’s when I’ll do it,” she snapped, totally losing her patience.

“Are you always so nasty?” He leaned in and kissed her lightly on the lips, recalling the passion that stormed between them. It was too strong to ignore.

“You don’t even know me.” Brenna wanted to tell him who she was. But the truth was, she didn’t really know the truth herself.

“I know you more than you think. I know that when you love, you do so fiercely.” Jake reached out and gently grabbed her chin, forcing her mouth open. He leaned in and kissed her harder this time. He wanted to lose himself in her, to forget that she lied to him.

At the same time, Brenna wondered how he knew about her love. Did he know that she loved him fiercely?

Brenna opened up, hesitantly at first, knowing that she shouldn’t allow this to happen. She was ashamed of herself. The sweet fantasy would be over soon, she knew.

Her perfect naked body was back to its healthy vitality. He wanted to feel her against him, hear her cry his name in ecstasy. He wanted to feel her shake with desire while he made love to her. But it was too late. She would probably never see it his way. And what of her future husband? If he wanted her badly, as Jake was sure the man did, then he would stop at nothing to get her back. So he pulled away from her, instantly regretting it.

“I’m sorry. I should get more wood so we have enough to last through the night.” He got up quickly and went to the door. Jake hesitated for a moment and turned to look at her. She leaned up on her elbows, watching him innocently. He wished he hadn’t turned around.

“Please don’t go.” She looked so innocent and lovely. His tomboy. Instead of telling her what he felt, he pushed

her away. What was he doing getting tangled up with her? The last thing he needed was another mistake. When this was over, he should pack his bags and return to work in the mountains. Hadn't the crew boss offered him another eight months with double pay? Being with Bobby Richards was more dangerous than building the railroad through the mountains. A blast of dynamite would seem minor compared to her savage love and devilish eyes.

The sky was clear and the sun was beating down in a warm, reassuring embrace. Ever since the day he bumped into Bobby Richards, his life had flipped upside down. Not only did he allow her charms to get in the way of searching for Maria, he also allowed her to find a way into his heart. He should be desperate for revenge. He should be focused on Maria. But he couldn't help thinking that searching for her would be useless. Too many years had passed already, and if she was alive and happy and just didn't want to contact him, then he would accept that. But damn, did he ever miss her beautiful smile, and heartwarming laugh. It was so damn confusing. Bobby and Maria. The only two women in his life that made everything else fade away into what didn't matter. How could Bobby, who completely drove him mad, be constantly on his mind? Why couldn't he just let her go?

It took every ounce of his will not to drop the wood all over when he walked back into the cabin. Bobby was facing the other way, giving him a spectacular view of that perfect naked ass, as she scrubbed the floor. Enticing hips swayed provocatively as she wiped and wiped in a continuous motion. The thought of that wonderful motion muddled his brain and desire exploded to life. When he realized what

she was doing, anger took over his already bruised pride. She was being careless with her wound.

“What the hell are you doing?” he blurted out, sounding much harsher than what he wanted. His heart was pounding strangely.

“What does it look like? I’m cleaning the floor,” she snapped back. Her washing continued.

“Get up before you hurt yourself,” he thundered. She didn’t move.

“Why would you care if I hurt myself? You made it perfectly clear when you walked out on me, Mr. Hudson,” she yelled back with equal hostility.

“I do care,” he huffed.

“You have a funny way of showing it!” Brenna stood up and faced him; unaware that the shirt she was wearing displayed the outline of her figure underneath. The dark circles of her nipples peeked through the white fabric.

“Do you want me to show you how I feel, tomboy?” His eyes changed then, and he looked at her with that all too familiar hot gaze. How could he ever deny her anything? And how would he be able to leave her and never look back?

Jake dropped the wood right on the floor and walked over to her, easily scooping her up to lay her gently on the bed. He was more than ready to show her exactly how he felt. He couldn’t say the words, but he would show her. Show her how his body needed hers. His heart ached, seeing the faraway look in her eyes.

Brenna looked up at his towering form. His blue eyes penetrated her soul, causing a heated reaction to flow from her cheeks right down to her toes. She was so mad, but she

couldn't ignore how he made her body react. Anger was no match for her passion. She shivered with delight while his expert fingers slowly unbuttoned her shirt. It slipped to each side revealing the full buds of her young breasts. Large rosy nipples perked instantly as his strong hands cupped and caressed their perfection. Twirling her nipples with his thumb and pointer finger, the delicate skin puckered under his touch, swelling to the fire of his fingertips. He was in awe of her beauty, and how he knew her body reacted to his.

"You are so perfect. God, you drive me nuts, but I can't get enough," he whispered into her mouth. He was already losing control, but he couldn't stop. She arched against him as he traced circles down her quivering stomach with his fiery tongue. He kissed every delightful inch of her. He could spend years right here. Want and pure need burned in his hazy eyes as he looked up at her briefly. Their eyes met in a way that only lovers understood. He smiled at her then and suddenly those dimples were hidden below, ravaging every hot, wet taste of her.

Brenna moaned and let her head fall back, breathless from the amazing torture. Her body betrayed her again, pulsating through his tongue and onto his eager lips. It was infuriating really, that he could make her come so easily. She stared frantically when she felt his tongue dive into her pussy; he entered and withdrew just as he had with his cock. She froze in a wicked rush of fire and ice. Shaking violently with every thrust of his tongue, Brenna released like lightning exploding to the earth. She let go and soared.

"Oh my god, Jake!" she cried. Brenna pulled him up, needing him to fill her right now. She massaged and

kneaded his back harder and harder, grabbing his ass, pulling him more tightly to her. She couldn't possibly get him close enough. The shock wave of heat still glowed hot on her skin. She bit his shoulder, panting from the need building higher in the depths of her core.

"Take it easy, love. You're gonna have this finished before we even start. Just enjoy it." Jake captured her lips with his, and he entered her fully, reaching as far as possible in one long, hard thrust. She tightened around him as he eased in and out with long deep, thrusts. Maintaining his rhythm, waves of ecstasy flowed through her veins as their bodies became one. It wasn't rough, and it wasn't crazy like before. Today it was soft, tender, and emotional. Both felt the height of their desire.

It took all his energy and strength not to spill his seed inside her instantly. Tight and wet and surrounding him like a blanket of pure fire. Her cries echoed through the cabin as Jake began pumping harder and harder with each stroke. He cupped her bottom and wrapped her legs around his neck, pulling her closer, deeper. He was losing himself inside her. The scent of her desire drove him insane. He penetrated deeper and deeper until he honestly thought he was hurting her, then slowed again, gliding smoothly. He couldn't get enough of her, and he would never let another touch her.

"You were made just for me, tomboy." Jake kissed her, whispering words through her hot panting. She raked her nails down his back crying out his name. "I need you so badly."

Before he felt that rush of release, Jake knew he heard something outside.

“Shh, I hear something,” he whispered hoarsely, as they both were out of breath. It took a moment for him to gain his composure. Jake pulled out from the wild heat of her body. The hard swell of him lingered in front of her eyes, as Jake peered through the small window. The sweat beaded down his chest traveling down his hard chiseled stomach. She couldn’t take her eyes away from that gorgeous body, and without thought of what she was doing, Brenna moved up to kneel in front of him. Her eyes gazed meaningfully at his beautiful dick standing proudly before her. She reached out, touching the hard mushroom-shaped head. Never in her life could she have imagined wanting to taste a man, but she sure did now. He tensed suddenly and looked down at what she was doing. Her lips kissed the tip of his cock, hesitantly, unsure of herself, but she continued when he groaned. Her hands gripped his waist, and boldly, she took him into her mouth. Nothing could have prepared her for the blended taste of them in her mouth, or the power she felt over how he was reacting to this simple action. She moaned, exciting him further as she suckled harder, moving down as far as her mouth would allow. It wasn’t painful; it didn’t feel disgusting, and she enjoyed the pleasure it gave him.

Jake continued to watch in wonder at how amazing it felt having her mouth wrapped around him, taking him in this way that many women did not enjoy doing. But he loved every minute of it. He groaned again when her tongue tickled the sensitive area beneath his shaft. Her fingers now massaged his balls. Jesus, he was going to come soon. He could feel it building quickly. She was so good. How the hell could he let any woman go who could suck

cock this good? Imagine what would happen when she got a little bit of experience. He was in heaven. He angled his head to the side for a better view of her gorgeous mouth inching its hot way back and forth on his raging shaft, when a glimmer of light caught his eye through the window. He had completely forgotten about the noise he was investigating when Bobby totally blew his mind and other hard things.

All hope of returning to Bobby's incredible mouth and pussy was shattered.

Raymond warned him to stay away from the girl, but when did he ever listen? This time, however, could put him out of his misery. He spotted the carriage and frowned. He wasn't expecting that bitch to come here. "Shit! You have to stop. We have company." He pushed her away, regretting how rough his action was, and the look of hurt in her eyes.

They rushed to get dressed and Brenna had to splash her cheeks with cold water before allowing anybody to see her this way. God, how could she talk to anyone knowing that a man's penis was just in her mouth? Jake rushed over and took her lips in a demanding, possessive way. "Until later, tomboy!"

"Quit calling me that," she said, frustrated that he could be so easily distracted from their lovemaking.

He was happy up here. Happy with Bobby Richards, or whoever she was. He couldn't even concentrate half the time, knowing that the smart, cool woman was such a tiger in bed! Though they argued more than the sun shined, they had something that couldn't be explained. Almost like a mutual understanding without having to speak. Bobby

would smile at him often and tease him, throwing punches. He would tickle her almost to death. He knew she would match him as an equal partner in everything they did. Just these little things were growing on him, and he found himself needing her approval and opinion. And the love! Man, they knew how to love each other. Every soft spot, every beauty mark, every breath had a power of its own. It was amazing.

As the carriage drew near, Jake realized with much regret that this could be the end of the journey, the end of a great love affair. Well, he wasn't going to let her go that easily. He couldn't now, and the realization of what he could lose was too much to bear. He knew what he had to do, but now wasn't the time.

"Hi, Raymond. How are you?" Brenna called out excitedly, ignoring the blush that rose up in her cheeks. Her body ached from Jake's loving. But she was happy beyond words. She just had to tell him now that she loved him, and that she wanted to be the woman who gave him the family and the ranch. She would buy it all for him, she didn't care about the cost. But then she frowned. Jake didn't know about her money. He didn't know her grandfather's name. He didn't know the secrets. *Oh, no. He'll never forgive me for lying.* She lied more than the sun shined.

"Hello, Miss Richards. I'm doing well. This here is Noela Mathews, one of Lita's friends." He couldn't help but notice how ravishing and happy she looked. Jake had obviously taken her to bed. Raymond turned his head to Jake. "So, Jake, I see that things are going very well here. We should have a little talk later. But right now," he said,

looking back at Bobby, "I'd love some coffee, if you don't mind?"

"Of course. Come on in. You both must be exhausted from your travels." Brenna invited them in, applauding herself for making the bed after they got up. She didn't want Raymond to think that she threw herself at Jake like a common tramp.

"I'm going to get an armful of wood for the stove. I'll be right back."

"You're not going anywhere," Jake piped up from behind her, grabbing her good arm and yanking her back. "Are you forgetting about your shoulder? Quit being muleheaded! I'll get the wood. You just sit right there." He sat her back down with complete care that only a princess would require, unaware of the baffled looks from Raymond and Noela.

"Muleheaded? How dare you! I should slap you." Neither Brenna nor Jake saw the look of humor written all over Raymond's face, or the rage in Noela's. It was plain to see that the two cared deeply for each other.

"What's wrong with your shoulder, Bobby?" Raymond asked, putting aside his disappointment in Jake for now.

"It's nothing, Raymond. I'm fine," she answered, flushed. She could still feel Jake's lips all over her. His body taking her, his hands—

Jake interrupted the conversation after getting an armload of wood. He couldn't help but look in Noela's direction. She was staring right at him. He could almost see the anger brewing in her big brown eyes. She didn't like him staying here alone with another woman. Especially Bobby Richards.

“Jake and I need to speak privately. Maybe we can find us a few partridge for dinner.” Raymond was hell-bent on giving Mr. Hudson a piece of his mind. If Jake was just using her, then he better drop her fast before more shit started.

“Sounds good to me.” Jake was anxious to get away from the tension in the cabin. Noela always knew how to ruin a good moment. He was enjoying Bobby’s company, and he was afraid that all of his escapades would come back to kick him where it hurts. Could Bobby be the one he was waiting for? Was Maria trying to tell him that it was okay for him to love again? There were so many questions in his mind that needed answering. He couldn’t truly accept life until he accepted his sister’s death and moved on. If she was dead. He wasn’t sure if he was ready for a steady relationship. What if she was using and manipulating him? She had already lied to him more than once. Raymond would probably laugh in his face and tell him that he deserved it, and he probably did.

* * * *

“So, Bobby, are you enjoying your time with Jake? He’s an excellent fuck, isn’t he?”

Brenna choked on her coffee, stunned at her forward remark. She didn’t know what to say. “That’s none of your business, and I warn you to not speak of him that way.” They sat across from each other at the table, in a staring match.

“He doesn’t give a damn about you. I hope you realize that. He uses every woman. They mean nothing to him.”

“Stop it,” Brenna threatened. “I don’t want to hear it.” She stood up and paced the room, thinking about their

moments together. She didn't want to believe that he used her. But what if he did? Noela got up and approached her. A dark look penetrated her gaze. She looked evil.

"Stay away from him. He's mine. He's always been mine," she yelled.

Brenna swung her arm around and slapped Noela hard across the face. "Shut up!"

Noela came back at her, screaming. They both tumbled to the floor. Brenna punched her in the jaw. Noela's head snapped back, hitting the floor. Brenna jumped on her, trying to hit her again, when the door burst open. Both women jumped up, stunned by the interruption.

Jo Bradley stood in the doorway of the little cabin, watching the women in amusement. Another man came through the door behind him, waiting for instructions. The two women were speechless, but Noela should have expected this. He knew she would lead him right to the other. And Bobby Richards was a beautiful girl. No wonder David Morgan wanted her. She had dark hair and skin, which made her eyes stand out even more. Beautiful bright green eyes filled with hatred. Such a waste to bring her to a man like him.

"What's going on here? Who are you?" she yelled, trying to break free of the man who grabbed her without warning. It was that Johnson fellow who attacked her before. Something was seriously wrong here. She looked around for Jake and Raymond, but they were nowhere to be found. Was this a set-up? Did Raymond have a part in this? Did Jake betray her and use her, just like Noela said?

"My name is Jo Bradley. I'm here to bring you in to the Morgan Ranch."

“What? Who?” *Who was this man? What was he doing with Johnson?* “I didn’t do anything wrong. Don’t make me go with him, please.”

“That’s none of my business, ma’am.” Jo ordered his men to put her on a horse and bring her in. He looked up at Johnson, who was already on his horse, staring darkly at the girl. Jo almost regretted leaving her with him, but he had other things to take care of. Morgan wanted Mr. Hudson dealt with, and he always kept his promises. Now there was another man to deal with.

The young woman was terrified of Johnson. She kept her distance as much as possible and Jo couldn’t help but wonder if they had tangled before and maybe she gave him a run for his money. But then again, none of this was his business. If she couldn’t be trusted, like Morgan and Johnson told him, then who was he to argue?

“Take her away. I’ll stay and deal with Mr. Hudson.”

Brenna stared at him, tears stinging her eyes, blurring her vision. Noela was screaming hysterically. Why did they want to deal with him? Were they going to kill him? *Oh God, they are going to kill Jake!* He saved her life. He didn’t deserve to die. Brenna held her head in her hands, filled with regret and heartache, tears rolling down her cheeks as she realized that this was the end. This was how it was going to end. The romance was over.

* * * *

Jake and Raymond didn’t return to the cabin until near dark. Raymond had a few choice words for him in warning. He didn’t need to get messed up with a girl like Bobby Richards. Too many bad things happened since she came to their town. But he knew there was something more, and

that Jake had feelings for her. When they entered the clearing everything looked fine. A thick cloud of smoke sailed out of the chimney. Bobby's horse was grazing out in front.

When the two of them walked in, Noela and a stranger were sitting at the table. There were bruises on Noela's face, and he wondered what the hell happened. At the same time, whatever the bitch got, she deserved. Another man stood in the corner with his gun pointed right at Jake's head, and Bobby was nowhere in sight.

"What the hell's going on here? Where's Bobby?" he questioned suspiciously.

"She's been taken away, Jake," Noela answered. She rushed over to put her arms around him, but he quickly threw her off, ignoring her desperate pleading. "I told you she couldn't be trusted."

"Get away from me. I told you before, leave me alone."

"Miss Richards is none of your concern any longer, Mr. Hudson," Jo answered, amused at the man's outraged behavior. He could sense that he cared about the pretty girl. He couldn't blame him. What a funny situation. Miss Mathews here was in love with the man, and he was in love with the other woman.

"Where is she?"

"Your little lover is on her way to meet her destiny as we speak, Mr. Hudson. That will teach you not to mess with someone else's property."

Jake looked at Noela with hatred gleaming in his eyes. "You led them right here, you whore."

“No, I had no idea, Jake. I swear. I was trying to help you. I was trying to get you away from here,” she sobbed. “I love you. She was just using you, I swear. I tried to reason with her, and she did this to me!” She pointed to her face.

Good.

“I wish she would have finished you off. Because of you, Bobby is in trouble.”

“That’s enough. Miss Mathews has nothing to worry about. You should have stayed away from that girl, Jake. Unfortunately for you, it will cost you your life.”

“Wait. You told me that he would only be hurt if he got in the way. You already have Bobby. Just let him go.” Noela begged him. She was on her knees, pulling at his jacket. He pushed her aside, and they led Raymond and Jake out of the cabin with their hands behind their heads.

Kneeling in the grass, Jake prayed that Bobby was all right. He looked up at the sky, picturing her beautiful face. He should have told her how he really felt. “Wait, please. I have something in my pocket that has to be delivered. You can grab it yourself. I won’t fight you.” It was the letter Bobby had on her nightstand the night of the incident at the hotel. He grabbed it when he went back to the room to deal with the body. It might have been something very important.

Jo Bradley dug in the man’s pocket, pulled out the letter and froze. Written on the front was the name, Jonathan Summers.

“Who wrote this?” he bellowed. “What are you doing with this letter?”

“I don’t know who wrote it, but I found it in Bobby Richards’ room.” The man seemed very angry about the

letter, but Jake didn't really care. All he could think about was a bullet going through his head.

"Get up, Mr. Hudson. We're going to find out where this letter came from. And you better hope I get some answers."

* * * *

There was only one person in Clearwater Bay who knew his real name and this wasn't Lita's handwriting. His heart pounded violently and butterflies filled his stomach. Jo took a seat far away from prying eyes and broke the seal. Tears blurred his vision when he saw Brenna's name at the bottom.

Dearest Father,

How I have longed to know who you are, and feel your strong arms around me. Mother is in heaven now and I am beginning my new life, away from Grandpa Vincent. All these years, he lied to me about you. Until the day I found your letters to Mother, I believed him. Everything is different now. All I want is to see my father again, if you'll have me. I don't blame you, I love you. Lita is taking care of me now, and I really have grown to love her. I await your response eagerly in Clearwater Bay.

Love, Brenna.

Jo broke down when he read the words. His little girl was here, and she still loved him.

* * * *

Lita felt it in her stomach before she even saw him. She watched out the window hoping to get a glimpse of Jonathan Summers. What would she tell him? How could

she explain everything? At least she had warning that he was in town. Harry told her all about his visit, and that he was asking about Bobby Richards. Her heart skipped a beat, knowing that he was asking about her for all the wrong reasons.

The heat was terrible today and gusts of sand blew across the streets, blinding anyone roaming about. When a rider appeared at the end of the street, Lita ran out, excited to see who it was. What she wasn't expecting to see flashed before her weary eyes. Raymond and Jake were being led behind, tied to their horses, and Brenna was nowhere in sight. She threw herself in front of the lead horse, already hysterical.

"Jesus, Lita! Get out of the way before you get hurt. I'm happy to see you too!"

"Where's Bobby Richards? Where John?" Lita's voice rang in his ears, piercing like an eagle's screech.

"Settle down, woman. I don't have time for games," he replied impatiently.

"What did you do with her?" She already knew. John was on the ground beside her. She beat her fists against his chest. Hot tears rolled down her rosy cheeks.

"I did my job by bringing her in, Lita. Stop it." He grabbed her fists, stopping her punches.

"Oh God, John. Do you realize what you've done? Did you not look at her?" she screamed, unaware of the people watching them. Jake and Raymond eyed her curiously.

"Look at who? What are you talking about?"

"Bobby Richards is Brenna, John," she cried out. "You just turned in your own daughter!"

Chapter 7

Late that afternoon, Brenna watched in horror as the first man went across the river. He let his horse guide him through the water as he hung on to the saddle and reins. She reminded herself over and over again to be calm. The horse would do all the work. All she had to do is hold on for dear life. But drowning was a welcome thought. These past weeks with Jake were dangerous and exciting, just like she had wanted, but the ending was the nightmare. She should never have allowed herself to fall for him. He didn't love her and that hurt like hell. To make things worse, she was positive she had a baby growing inside her. She missed her last period, and knowing this, she cried.

Brenna stood beside the excited mare, ready to take the challenge. The man she hated waved from across the raging waters. It was time for her to take the plunge. Frigid water raged around her shaky legs, pushing and pulling her all at the same time. She was doing well until halfway across. She heard a loud snap and faintly heard the men yelling something to her but she couldn't make out what they were saying. The water splashed around her ears blocking out all sound and vision around her. She turned her head to the side and noticed a large portion of a tree floating down the river toward her. Brenna pushed her horse trying to get her to swim faster, but it was too late.

The tree hit Brenna and she let go. The last thing she saw were the men running along the shores trying to reach her, then the water was pulling her down into its watery claws.

* * * *

Vincent Randall stared down at the watery mess of his granddaughter, impressed with himself for finding her. But it was Charles who saw the trio headed to the river crossing, and it was Brenna they were leading by rope. They watched a short distance away as the brave young woman swam across with her horse. All gasped and held their breath as her body was ripped from the safety of the horse and she was swept away. The two men escorting her didn't bother to go in search downriver. They didn't expect her to make it. But Vincent knew his granddaughter was stronger than they could imagine.

"Well there you have her, Charles. Isn't she the shining example of a lovely soon-to-be bride? The deal still stands."

Charles Livingston peered at his friend with contempt at such disregard for his granddaughter. Sure, he didn't really love the girl, but at least he would give her a stable home and plenty of children. It must irk him like hell to know that his granddaughter had everything, thanks to his smart but deceased daughter.

"The deal was to have her examined, Vincent. And I will not wait any longer. We'll stay the night in Clearwater Bay, see the doctor and depart in the morning. It is as simple as that." He watched Vincent's haggard face frown even more at his words. But Charles Livingston wasn't taking any chances. He looked down at Brenna again. She was barely conscious lying there on the floor of the carriage. Vincent hadn't even tried to rescue her himself.

He only watched as the two coachmen scampered to the water's edge and fished out her limp body. And when they tossed her in front of him, he scowled at her filthy appearance. He was afraid to touch her, afraid to get dirty.

"All right men, let's go." Vincent rapped on the door, urging them on. He didn't feel comfortable in this barbaric land. And there were other shadows lurking in the dark around here. Demons that could ruin him.

The carriage swayed and rocked as it headed towards Clearwater Bay. Vincent and Charles were both asleep when Brenna finally built up enough strength to come up with a plan. She heard everything they said about the examination, and had no other choice but to escape them. If Vincent discovered her pregnancy, he would surely beat her to death. But her musings were quickly distracted when she heard a scuffle outside. The coach halted, startling Vincent and Charles awake. There was no time to defend themselves. No time to try and run away. Brenna sat in the corner, curling up into a ball, as she knew who would be opening that door. And when she saw Johnson's weather-beaten face, she had no faith that she would be rescued this time. Brenna knew that her luck was quickly running out.

* * * *

A warm gust of wind fluttered the white lace that hung from the canopy above him. He couldn't get his mind off Bobby Richards, or Brenna Summers. Whoever she was. Lita gave him Brenna's room, unaware of the feelings that would haunt him, lying in her bed, remembering these past weeks. She had lied to him and played him for a fool several times now. What the hell was wrong with him? He couldn't

help but wonder what was worse, loving a stranger, or living without her?

Jake never felt this way about a woman before and he would not forgive himself for falling under her spell. The ocean swam in her eyes. He was stuck on her. Stuck on her luscious body and mesmerizing eyes. Jake rolled on his side, propping himself up on his elbow, contemplating what to do. Those guards at the beach worked for her grandfather and he was obviously eager to marry her to some old man. What a disgrace. He honestly couldn't blame her for running. She deserved a man who would take care of her and love her. He loved her.

After the incident this afternoon, John released Raymond and Jake right away. He had no desire to fulfill David Morgan's wishes any longer. Now they just had to figure out why Morgan wanted Brenna. It was money, of course. Yes. And she had a lot of it. He never would have imagined her to be a rich girl. She could handle a gun and smoke cigars and she looked incredible in a pair of pants. She killed a man. Her head was thicker than those of most men. How could he take care of a woman who already took care of herself? She didn't need him. Didn't need any of his money. Now he felt weak. What could he possibly offer her that she didn't already have?

But if John had a plan, Jake wanted to be a part of it. He knew that he should forget her and move on, but something told him to hold fast. Brenna needed him. Even if she lied to him, he decided it was for reasons beyond her control. He knew that now, and he couldn't let her go. Didn't she say that everyone she trusted let her down? Well, he wasn't going to allow that to happen. Jake was

going to change everything. Brenna would never have to wonder if she was cared for, or loved. He would spend a lifetime loving her, and never stop.

He sat on the edge of the bed, letting the wind whip his messy hair. Stubble itched along his jaw, but he paid no mind to it. If he would have gotten drunk the night before, he probably would have felt better, considering the circumstances. At least he could say that he accomplished something. He was more frustrated than ever. He hoped Jonathan Summers could come up with a plan to save his daughter, before Jake did something drastic.

* * * *

John couldn't believe he let her slip away. He had her in his grasp at the cabin. Her jet-black hair was long and shimmered in the afternoon sun. Her green eyes pleaded with him to let her go. If he weren't so pathetic, he would have recognized her. He would have seen that she looked just like him. He was a fool. His eyes narrowed, as he remembered how terrified she was of Johnson. Did he hurt her in the past? If so, he would die a very painful, long death. Just like Morgan. Now John knew everything. He knew why. The past was finally catching up to them.

Jake had been a godsend to him. He held the key in his pocket that day that steered John in the right direction. When he first captured the notorious Bobby Richards, he assumed she was wanted for something, but Morgan didn't say anything. The only person who made sense at all was Jake. John recognized right away the way he reacted to anything about Brenna that the young man was in love with his daughter. He too felt that way once in his life.

Jake couldn't wait any longer and practically burst into John's room. He peered into the eyes of his new friend, trying to convince himself that he would know what John was thinking. They both were a terrible mess of nerves and lost pride. They both needed her back home. They both looked like shit.

"I feel like such a fool, Jake. I should have known it was her. How could I not know?" John just couldn't understand anything, and he was angrier than ever over his ignorance. "What's wrong with me?"

"You had no way of knowing. She was just a baby when you left. She told me that. Brenna didn't recognize you either. Don't blame yourself, John." Jake stopped for a moment, putting his words together. "I better tell you this right away. The Randall guards have been searching for her. We shot them down."

"We? You mean my daughter?" His pale green eyes searched Jake's serious gaze, he couldn't believe what he was saying.

"Yes. As a matter of fact, she's a good shot. Right between the eyes, she got one of them. Mr. Randall arranged a marriage for her she didn't want, so she ran away." Jake couldn't help but notice how alike John and Brenna were. How they talked, how they smiled, the black hair and light green eyes. It was quite unsettling, considering the love of his life was out there. He prayed she wasn't being hurt.

"Oh, Jake. My poor girl has had to fight all her life, I'm sure. She's beautiful. If Randall ever touched her, I'll kill him."

“Is he that sick?” Jake barely held his anger in check. The thought of some old man—any man—touching his woman fueled pure rage within him.

“Yes, son. He is.”

“Well, I will protect her with my life. If anybody touches her, I’ll kill them myself. I never thought I would ever admit it, but I love her, John. More than you could ever imagine.”

John grabbed Jake’s hand and shook it fiercely. Then he grabbed the young man and held him in a big bear hug. John knew that Jake loved his Brenna from the first moment he looked into Jake’s eyes. An imbecile could see right through his tough exterior. “My daughter needs you. And I plan on making things right as well. For nineteen years, I’ve waited to hold her and love her and protect her. Now I finally have my chance, thanks to you. Learn from us wise men who learned too late what love is. I’ll tell you a little story. Brenna’s mother was a beautiful, wonderful woman. But she lived by her father’s rules. I learned quickly that she would never fully trust me, or love me. It was because of Vincent. He’s sick. He sexually abused his own daughters. But nothing I said could convince her to leave. Many years passed before I turned to Lita for comfort. She was the daughter Vincent couldn’t rule. She was strong enough to leave, just like Brenna, I suppose. And I’m thankful. I’ve loved Lita for many years now.” He winked at Jake, making it obvious what he meant. “Billy is my son. I just recently found out. And from what I’ve been told, Brenna found out the day she took off.”

“I know. They look a lot alike. I was beginning to wonder if Lita was her mother.”

“That’s why it must be so hard for her to accept everything, knowing that her cousin is also her brother. Odd, isn’t it? I hope she can forgive an old man.”

“I can’t speak for her forgiveness, but I do know she misses you, and she came here looking for you. When are we gonna do this?” Jake asked, filled with a new determination. “I can’t wait anymore. I worry about her so much, I’m going crazy.”

“I’m waiting for someone with information. He knows everything about Morgan’s ranch. Every building. He’ll tell me where they’re keeping her, then I’ll decide how Morgan and Johnson are going to die.”

* * * *

Noela Mathews looked out through the side of the carriage, catching a glimpse of the rolling countryside. Morgan’s ranch was located a good thirty miles out of Clearwater Bay. The valley was large enough to accommodate thousands of cattle, with a river running right through it. The scenery was breathtaking. She wouldn’t be surprised to find a waterfall in this secret oasis.

Hoping David Morgan appreciated her efforts, Noela checked herself for the third time in her pocket mirror. She was dressed very appropriately today. For once in her life, she looked like a respectable woman, not a whore. If Lita and Jake thought that they could just get rid of her, they were sadly mistaken. After the fight with Lita and Jake today, her mind was made up. Bobby or Brenna, whoever she was, was going to suffer. Her days at the *Bay Hotel* were over, and Noela wasn’t planning on ever returning to *The Velvet Lounge*. If Morgan paid her, she would use the money to leave town. She knew that somewhere out there,

Jonathan Summers and Jake Hudson were headed in the same direction, to find Brenna. *Lucky bitch*. She slapped her hand against the carriage wall for the driver to pick up speed. Morgan wouldn't take to kindly over Jo Bradley betraying his trust.

* * * *

"Excuse me, sir, there is a woman to see you. She says she has valuable information about the girl."

"Then send her in." His hard blue eyes watched the carriage through the window. It was Mrs. Carlisle's hired coach. He wondered what the hell the woman wanted. Something better go right before his headache returned.

Noela Mathews sat across from the man many feared. She was shaking, but reminded herself over and over again that the bitch deserved it. "I came here to tell you firsthand that the man you hired to capture Bobby Richards is her very own father. They hadn't seen each other in years. He found out who she is and now all hell has broken loose. He's on his way here, as a matter of fact, with Jake Hudson. Apparently Jake and Brenna are in love."

Morgan stared back, his mind spinning with thoughts only he could understand. Noela was a pretty little thing and he remembered she was one of Lita's girls. This woman needed to be paid for her services. Services that he knew she craved. Guaranteed, she was lying to him. They all lied. And they all deserved to be punished. Jo Bradley had been a trusted friend for many years. He did excellent work, and hadn't failed him once. How could this whore come here and tell him this?

She's here for money, that's what. They all wanted money. And they all wanted to get fucked.

“You did a good thing coming to me with that information, Noela. Now I have something for you.” He smiled sweetly, not wanting to scare her. She reluctantly smiled back.

He opened the door to a cabinet behind his desk, grabbing a bottle of brandy, along with two crystal glasses. After several drinks, only to calm her nerves, Noela began to loosen up a little. Then he took her hand again, and led her down a long hallway. She giggled a little, and he smiled down at her. She didn’t noticed that the smile didn’t reach his eyes. At the end of that hallway, a single door led to a dark, cold room. A bed covered in black silk sat in the center of the room, like an ornament for a dungeon.

“I ask that you do one more thing for me before I pay you for your very valuable information.” He reached into the small closet and pulled something out and handed it to her. “Put it on.”

Noela looked up at him, suddenly feeling uneasy with his request. “But I...I shouldn’t.” She began backing away, but Morgan kept coming forward. The warm haze of the alcohol was affecting her vision. It appeared like she was looking through a tunnel. She giggled again, suddenly forgetting the scary feeling. He was touching her now, very softly. It was warm, fuzzy.

“Do you not work for Mrs. Carlisle? I would think you would be used to this kind of request. I will pay you very handsomely. You will thank me.”

“No. I no longer work there. I’m a free woman now,” she replied breathlessly.

“You will do as I ask if you want payment for your good deed. Would you like a reward, Miss Mathews?” Morgan teased her, smiling with his devilish eyes. He was a good-looking man, with golden tanned skin and light brown, wavy hair. But it was those brooding blue eyes that looked so frightening.

“Put it on and dance for me. Then I’ll give you whatever you want.” Morgan pointed to the screen, not once allowing his eyes to leave her incredible body. He would get what he wanted tonight, whether it was from Brenna or Noela. He didn’t care.

A few minutes later, Noela walked out from behind the screen, revealing the flowing gown. He could see every curve of her body, the fullness of her white breasts. Her hips glided smoothly as she walked. She had full hips.

“Take your hair down,” he demanded, sounding a little too harsh. He cleared his throat.

Noela almost jumped out of her skin. She fumbled with her hair clip and loosened her golden locks, allowing them to fall in a curly mess at her waist. She forced herself to remain calm. After all, it wasn’t that strange of a request. Morgan was smiling at her, rubbing his palm over the crotch of his pants. She could see the swell in the leg of his trousers. It was obvious what he wanted.

“Dance.”

Noela held her arms up like a gypsy girl and swayed her hips, thrusting round and round, making him imagine what she could do with them. Her eyes remained closed, pretending she was dancing for the man she loved. She caressed her breasts and hummed as she pretended to make love to herself. Caressing, fingering, anything to keep him

happy. She looked up to the ceiling, feeling Jake's strong hands fondling her skin.

"Come here," Morgan said in a low, raspy voice. She walked over and stood just above him, unsure of what to do next. It suddenly felt very cold in the dark room. She felt like an animal being tamed by a man with a harsh whip. Shaking all over, she tried to ignore his cold beady eyes. That look in his eyes caused her to take a step back. It was that motion that made him jump up and grab her.

"Don't ever walk away from me." He held her arms so tightly, the circulation was cut off. When she tried to pull away again, he no longer had any patience. He took a step back and with all his weight and strength, backhanded her across the cheek. She let out a muffled scream and landed on the bed.

He thrived on hurting people. Making them pay for his pain.

She tried to crawl away, but he was on top of her, ripping away the flimsy material, revealing her round, shapely bottom. He held her face down on the bed, almost suffocating her with the pillow, ignoring her grunts and struggles.

"Now you will take me. And if you try to escape, you will beg me to kill you." He couldn't help himself. The demons inside always took over and all else faded into the dark.

Noela screamed with everything she had inside her as Morgan viciously took her again and again, like a savage beast. Hot tears rolled down her cheeks onto the bed; the pain was so unbearable, she was near fainting. He just forced his way in, penetrating so deeply without any

lubrication, that she could feel herself tearing and bleeding from his rape. Never in her life had she imagined this happening to her. Lita kept things very safe at the lounge. No man dared to strike a woman there. But she wasn't there anymore. She was on her own, just like she thought she wanted.

When his disgusting rampage was over, she curled her knees up to her chest and wept. It was a mistake to come here. It was a mistake to get revenge. When the door slammed shut, Noela tried to pull herself together. The simple see through robe did nothing to hide her ashamed body. She sat at the end of the bed and hung her head in her hands, sobbing. A sound by the door averted her attention.

No, it wasn't over. The demon was gone for now, but another stood waiting for his turn.

* * * *

A thick mist formed a canopy over the Morgan Ranch as dawn slowly emerged. Staring ahead toward the ranch, Jake saw a woman running. It had to be Brenna. The big cowboy hat hid her hair, but he knew it was her. He kicked his mare into action. His heart was pounding as fast as the horse's hooves but he couldn't seem to reach her fast enough. He couldn't bear to see her hurt again. He loved her.

Just a few more yards and he could sweep her off the ground and ride away with her.

"Brenna, wait," he yelled, but she kept running. She was running away from him. A shot fired and his mare collapsed under him. They fell to the ground in a tangled mess. Jake looked up from the cloud of dust forming around him to where he last saw Brenna running. Her

lifeless body lay sprawled out a short distance away. He struggled to get up, disoriented and heartsick, staggering toward her with all the passion that ached inside him. His beautiful tomboy was dead.

Chapter 8

David Morgan watched from a short distance away as Jake Hudson ran to the woman he loved. It was quite funny seeing him crying like a child as he ran toward her body. “Go get him, Johnson, before he reaches her.”

It took four of them to hold the hostile man. Morgan rolled his eyes. What a disgrace. By the time they returned with him, Jake was a bloody mess. His one eye was so swollen, it was swollen shut. Blood trickled from his nose, over his lips, dripping onto his large chest. Although he looked beat, Morgan knew that at any moment, Jake may turn into the raging beast his men feared. They had no idea that Jake Hudson had already given up hope.

“Bring him into the barn, boys. Chain him to one of the beams. Make sure he can’t escape.” Morgan watched as the men hauled him into the barn. Then he looked in the direction of the body that was clad in a work shirt and faded jeans. He had known she would lure Jake Hudson into his hands.

Miss Mathews turned out to be useful after all.

* * * *

Whoosh-whoosh, crack! Raw flesh sliced open from the heavy whip bearing down on his tortured back. Jake didn't have the strength to struggle any longer. “Just finish

me, you cowards,” he barely let out. There was no life left for him anyway. Why were they determined to keep him alive? His dazed mind reflected on her body, sprawled out before him. He didn’t reach her in time. Once again, he let love slip away. What the hell was wrong with him? He narrowed his eyes, thinking about Morgan with hatred deeper than the blackest hole on earth. *The bastard is going to pay.* Jake no longer felt the pain. But when he looked up and saw the ugly eyes of the man he hated, another kind of pain engulfed him. “You’re gonna pay for this, Morgan,” he said through clenched teeth. “You’re gonna pay with your life.”

Morgan laughed bitterly. “Do I look scared, Jake?”

“You will be.”

“Will I be as scared as your sister?” he sneered.

Jake looked up at his enemy, sweat and tears stung his eyes. “What?” He struggled against the chains that held him to the post. *Maria.* “What did you do to my sister?” His mind was playing tricks on him.

“It took a while for me to figure out just who you were. Then I remembered her last words.

“Please. I beg you, don’t hurt me, I’m all my brother has left. My little Jake needs somebody to care for him, please,” he mocked. “Maria was mine. She betrayed me. I wanted to marry her. Then one day, I found her in the arms of my best friend. They were fucking in my bed!” he thundered. “I killed them both. I made them suffer for what they did to me, just like the Randalls. They’ll pay, too.”

“I’ll kill you first.”

Morgan dug into his breast pocket, ignoring his last words. “Unfortunately, you are in no position to take your

revenge, boy. You'll be gone soon enough." With that, he threw his prize on the ground in front of Jake's battered face. The little gold angel sparkled in his eyes. It was the chain that their parents gave Maria when she was a little girl. Jake slumped to the ground, staring at the delicate piece, unable to pick it up. He knew now that his sister was lost to him forever. For years, he tried to believe that she just went away. Jake looked at the angel spreading its wings before him. Maria did bring Brenna to him, he realized. He didn't know how, but he knew why. Loving Brenna Summers meant finding Maria.

* * * *

Twice now, a man came in and beat her. Bruises and cuts marred her once beautiful face, but she didn't care. Death would come soon enough. Brenna heard the whipping from somewhere on the ranch, and feared she was next. There was no escape. *The baby must surely be dead from the beatings and starvation.* At that moment, the door opened and in walked a tall, important looking man. Brenna assumed this was the man her mother was trying to uncover.

So they met at last.

"Hello, Brenna. My name is David Morgan. This is my ranch." David smiled at the young woman. The tattered mess wasn't afraid of him at all.

"What the hell do you want from me?" With all the strength she had left, Brenna put her fists up. If he wanted a fight, she'd give him one. Another bruise wouldn't mean a thing.

"I have to give you credit, Miss Summers. You almost had everyone convinced you were Bobby Richards.

Including your father!” Morgan casually walked around her, enjoying her shocked look at his last words. “When I saw you at the hotel, I knew right away. How could anyone mistake a Randall? Do you see the resemblance?”

Brenna looked at his face trying to figure out what he meant. There was nothing familiar about him. His eyes were deep and narrow, a light blue color. He had light brown hair and a tanned complexion. Nothing familiar. Then she saw his nose. A small sharp nose, just like her own. Just like her mother and Lita, and Vincent. “Who are you?”

“Vincent didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what? What’s going on?”

“Once upon a time, I found out that I had a father who was still alive. My mother tried to keep me away from him, but I had to know who he was. It was a mistake to think that he might want me. He already had two beautiful daughters, and a wife. Vincent Randall refused to acknowledge me.”

Brenna’s head snapped up. Her mind must have been playing tricks on her.

“Yes. You heard right, Brenna. Vincent is my father.”

Nothing in the world could have prepared her for that. She had no idea that Vincent even had a son. Roberta or Lita hadn’t said anything. *How many secrets did this family have?* She had to admit that he looked like Vincent, and the Randall nose was unmistakable.

“Your mother doesn’t know, and I never saw the other one.” He almost broke down right in front of her. So many years of neglect molded a demon inside David Morgan, but he laughed off his bitter pain.

“My mother is dead,” Brenna said immediately. She didn’t feel sorry for Morgan. She was a prisoner because of him. He would be the perfect son for Vincent. “She took her own life because of your father.”

Morgan shook his head and tried to forget what she said. She was lying. His headache was coming back again. The same headache he always got from the past. Blacking out came often to him and it wouldn’t be the first time he woke up next to a dead woman. The past was bitter and unmerciful. For many years, he suffered. Living in filth and sickness while his father wined and dined in luxury. Brenna grew up in luxury, the lucky little bitch. He stared into her wide eyes and smiled. “You’re beautiful. You remind me of a young lady I once loved. If you’re smart, you won’t end up like her.” She meant nothing to him. His eyes went dark again. Women couldn’t be trusted. They were all liars and deceivers.

“What do you want with me?” she yelled.

“Look at you. You’re a mess. What man would want you? Be thankful that I haven’t allowed my men to have their way with you. Maybe I should sell you to the highest bidder!”

“Go ahead,” she screamed. “Anything is better than this.” Tears streamed down her cheeks, but she stood tall and proud. “Do you want money?”

“I’ll leave that up to Vincent, and he’ll pay handsomely to get you back.”

“You’ll be waiting forever. He has nothing!” she screamed.

“Bullshit. Shut up!” He yelled back.

“I’ll give you whatever you want. Just let me go.”

“Anything? I should take you myself. Right here, right now.” He sauntered toward her, ignoring her obvious disgust.

“How could you? You’re my uncle. That’s the most disgusting thing I’ve ever heard. Keep your hands off me!”

She struggled against him, kicking and screaming. He shoved her hard against the ground, holding her back with his forearm. He was ready to take her right this second. Morgan panted heavily above her, ripping apart the opening of his pants. She could feel him against her thigh. With the speed of a cat, Brenna pulled away from him with just enough space to kick him hard, in the last place a man would think in his state. He slumped down, instantly releasing his hold on her.

“You stupid bitch!” He awkwardly got up, holding on to his damaged goods. With each step he took forward, Brenna stepped back, ready to do it again. A knock on the door interrupted his untimely revenge. Pulling on his pants, David yanked it open.

“It can wait. I’m busy,” he snapped.

“That Randall fellow is calling for you. He wants to talk.” David scowled at the young man. When he turned to Brenna, his villainous eyes stabbed her already trampled spirit. Morgan made his way out the door and the young man stepped through the threshold, rope in hand, ready to throw Brenna right into the lion’s den.

* * * *

It took a moment for Raymond’s eyes to adjust from the darkness in the large barn. The smell of bloody flesh reeked all around him and he knew for some odd reason that Jake wouldn’t be in any state to walk. He tiptoed

through the dust floating in the air, and then he heard a muffle to the side of him. When he turned to look, it took all of his strength not to lose his supper at the poor sight of his friend.

Jake was hanging from a beam; chains were wrapped around him at every angle, like he was some beast from hell. A large pool of dried blood lay below him and the shirt on his back seemed a part of his flesh.

"Jake? Oh my god. Can you hear me? Can you understand what I'm saying?" Raymond feared he was already dead, but his head slowly lifted and his awkward smile eased some of Raymond's fears. Jake was a tough bastard. He raced over and unbuckled the many chains and laid the big man on the dusty ground.

"Brenna's dead. I can't believe I failed, Raymond." He couldn't hold the tears that trailed down his cheeks, and he didn't give a damn if it made him look weak. "I lost her."

"You're wrong, Jake. Brenna's fine, except for some cuts and bruises. I should get you home. You've lost a lot of blood, my good man." Raymond couldn't hide the concern in his voice.

"No. I saw them shoot her. I saw her die," he moaned.

"Jake, you saw Noela die. Morgan used her to lure you in. Brenna's in the main house, Morgan is making a deal with her grandfather and that other man. The man she is supposed to marry is buying her, Jake. Vincent Randall is selling her to make a hefty profit, like she's some prized mare. Who knows what the other guy will do with her."

"What? No. What?" His mind must be playing tricks on him. *Sell Brenna?*

"You heard me."

"I'm not going anywhere until I see her. I'm never letting her go again." Jake was barely able to stand on his own, but he refused to give up. All he could think about was holding her in his arms and reassuring her that nobody would ever hurt her again. Morgan and everyone working on this ranch would pay with the skin on their backs.

* * * *

An uproar of yelling and objects crashing to the floor came from Morgan's office. There were no guards watching the halls, so it was easy to maneuver through the house. John recognized Vincent's voice right away. The old man didn't sound too happy over his visit with David Morgan. He didn't like it when people used money against him.

"I don't give a damn what you do with her, she's a disgrace! But I will not have you punish me for your sick intentions, David." Vincent Randall glared into the eyes of his bastard son. "How dare you threaten me with this? What do you want from me?"

"Can't a man talk to his own father?" David yelled, one foot away from his face. His skin was turning red and he could feel a massive headache forming. "If you won't have me, then you'll pay to get her back!"

"Haven't I paid you enough to keep your big mouth shut? I'm broke because of you. Brenna has everything. Roberta made sure of that. All of my investments, everything. I have nothing!" he yelled.

Charles Livingston stood in the corner, terrified beyond belief over the crazy situation. He looked back at Brenna, who just stood there, looking as if she gave up on life completely. Her beautiful green eyes stared at the floor. He visibly shook.

“You will do whatever I say, Father. I could kill you right now if I wanted to. Your weak body is no match against mine. I could make you beg for mercy.” David’s head was pounding with fury; he could barely remember what he was saying. He shook his head violently. “Where’s my mother?” He started screaming. His eyes turned black with rage, his nostrils flared like an angry bull. He shook Vincent by the collar, nearly choking him to death.

“What’s wrong with you, David?” Vincent cried. He knew now that his son was crazy.

“Why don’t you tell him where his mother is?” Everyone spun around instantly and looked to the figure leaning against the doorframe. Vincent’s wide eyes stared incredulously at Jonathan Summers. It couldn’t be. His broad shoulders leaned casually against the doorframe, a wicked grin played across his mouth. There was a gleam in his eyes that revealed his hatred.

“What are you doing here?” Vincent’s calm voice suddenly went very shaky.

“Did you already forget, Vincent?” John wasn’t worried at all how the situation would turn out. He was happy to see Vincent Randall squirm. His thin white hair made him look old and haggard. A once broad strong body was now slumped and tired. He should have died long ago. John should have killed him long ago.

Morgan watched from behind his desk, interested in what he had to say.

“Well, Vincent? Are you gonna tell him what happened to his mother?” John repeated. He took out his pistol slowly, pointing it at Vincent and pulled back the hammer.

"Tell him what's been weighing on our shoulders all these years. And why you took my daughter away from me."

"Oh my god!" Brenna exhaled, as the impact of his words finally hit her. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she stared at the man who brought her here in the first place. He was the man from the cabin. But he didn't know her. "What did you do with Jake? Did you hurt him?" He shook his head, keeping his gaze now on Vincent.

"Tell me what? Tell me. Where's my mother?"

"She's dead, Morgan," John answered for him. "He killed her nineteen years ago. I remember it quite vividly. Agnes Morgan. She was a pretty thing. They were having an affair. I knew that much, but I never would have guessed he was your father. He blamed the incident on me. That's why I had to disappear and change my name. He's why Roberta refused to let me see my own daughter." He looked directly at Brenna with teary eyes. *They had so much to talk about.*

"Yes. My mother told me to stay away from him. Then one day she went into town, never to return. I thought she abandoned me. She always complained of how I was a big mistake." Morgan slugged Vincent hard in the nose, sending him crashing to the floor.

"You son of a bitch! You'll pay for what you did." He lunged for him, ready to fight to the death.

Shots rang from outside. David ran to the window and looked outside at the raucous goings-on around them. The Randall guards were everywhere, fighting against his own men in a raging battle.

Morgan tried to do good all his life, but reasons beyond his control turned him into an animal. He couldn't stop the killing. He couldn't stop himself. Blood was everywhere.

Dead men and dead horses littered his beautiful land. The war flashed before his eyes, fueling his angry thirst for blood. He turned around and faced Vincent. Hate burned in his blue eyes as he watched Vincent stumble to get up.

“Take out your gun.”

“No. I won’t shoot you,” Vincent said, pleading to his crazy son.

“If you want a chance to live, you better pull it out. Because without a doubt, I will shoot you.”

Vincent reached for his gun with shaky hands and held it pointed at his son, who had already aimed, waiting. A second seemed like forever as the two men stared at each other, recalling years of bitter secrets, before they both pulled the trigger.

John stood in the middle of the room, speechless. He wanted so badly to be the one who avenged his daughter’s pain and suffering. He didn’t get a chance. There were other forces higher than his own. Vincent Randall and David Morgan spent a lifetime leading to their deaths. Morgan got his answer. His own father killed his mother. Now he could die knowing he had avenged her death. Vincent was dead, and David barely pulled himself up to lean against his desk. A pool of blood gathered around him. He pulled out a cigar with shaky fingers. He lit a match and held it to the tip of the cigar. The match suddenly fell to the floor, the flame still flickering with life. John stared into the desolate blue eyes of David Morgan. The demon was dead.

“Step back.”

John snapped his head up to see Charles Livingston holding Brenna, with a gun to her temple. He couldn’t allow her to be hurt again. “Wait. You don’t need to hurt

her; she's innocent in all of this. Please. Don't hurt my daughter." Tears were stinging his eyes. Father and daughter stared at each other. They were both unsure of what to do or say to each other. So many years spent away from the other, for what? For Brenna to be killed before they could hold each other and say that all was forgiven? That she still loved him? "Brenna," he whispered. Tears ran down her cheeks as well. "I didn't know—"

"It's okay. I love you." And she was hauled out of the door and around the corner before John could shoot the bastard. His heart squeezed tightly in his chest. Why did this have to happen? He ran toward the door they exited and stopped dead in his tracks.

Outside on the lawn, the man with the gun held Brenna as Jake stood there, barely able to hold himself up. He was a bloody mess, but he never faltered, never gave up. John watched in awe at the man who was strong and capable, and held his daughter's heart.

"Let her go before I put a bullet between your eyes." Jake's hand shook from the weight of the gun. His fingers, which were swollen, held on with everything he had. His aim was right on the man's head. The bruises on her pretty face alone drove him mad. Nobody had the right to touch his woman. Nobody would ever harm her again.

"You'll shoot her if you try. This is my bride. How dare you get in my way!"

"Try me, old man. She's mine. If you hurt one hair on her precious body, I'll skin you alive."

"Oh, Jake! I love you," she cried. She didn't care anymore about anything. Just that she knew she was meant for him. He didn't have to say the words, she knew it. She

knew that he loved her. How could any man, looking the way he did, scarred and bleeding, come to her defense like this without loving her? She stared into his eyes. He looked so terrible, but so strong, so angry. "Remember at the cabin, when you asked me if I trust you?"

Jake narrowed his eyes wondering what that had to do with anything. "Yes."

"I do." She smiled at him through tear-filled eyes, hoping he understood why and she winked at him. With all the force she had, Brenna slammed her elbow against Charles Livingston's stomach, and threw herself to the ground, just as Jake fired.

Brenna watched Charles fall to the ground, staring at her with such deep fear in his wide eyes. She looked back at Jake, and saw that he was watching her intently as if nothing happened. As if it was another beautiful day, and he wasn't bleeding to death. She lifted herself up, and tears stung her eyes just looking at him. God, he looked deathly pale. But she couldn't be more happy or more in love with him than at this moment. He kept his promise. He didn't let them take her. His beautiful blue eyes had such a deep, warm look that she smiled, her lips and chin quivering.

Jake held his arms out to her and smiled that cocky, wicked grin she loved so much, and she ran to him. Before she reached him, Jake put out his hand in a motion for her to slow down. "Careful, honey. I'm in no shape to be hugged too hard right now. Put your arms around my neck." She did. They stared at each other for an eternity before Jake took her lips in a hard, wet kiss that tingled right through her body.

The sun beamed down upon them in all of its glory as they held each other. They could have been in paradise, and were blissfully unaware of the bloodshed around them. The Randall guards were clueless to their mission, and eventually gave up the fight to return to Washington. Morgan's men were considered free now; they too left without looking back.

Jake smiled down at Brenna, thankful she was safe and in his arms. "I thought I'd lost you. When they shot Noela, I thought it was you. I felt like my life was over. I love you so much, tomboy! I'm never letting you go again. No more lies, okay?"

"No more lies. I'm so sorry, Jake. I didn't know what to do. I didn't want you to get hurt," she cried.

"I know that now, but it sure made me angry at the time. How was I supposed to know that anything you said was true? I was beginning to doubt that you would ever love me."

"That isn't possible. I knew I loved you when you were shot in the *Lounge*. It scared me to death, almost. I knew I had to have you. That night when you were feverish, I gave myself to you, heart and soul."

Jake laughed, wincing slightly from the cut on his lip. "I thought you took advantage of me. I can't seem to remember that night at all!"

"Well, if I didn't give myself to you, then who else could be the father of my child?" She let the words sink in, watching his eyes widen, then she took his bloodstained hand and placed it on her belly. It was a lot to deal with in one day, but instead of feeling awkward, Jake grinned with that knowing look she knew as lust. How could a man be

horny when he learned of a child? She didn't think she'd ever figure out what was on that man's mind.

"Wow! I'm gonna be a dad! I'm the luckiest man in the world." He kissed her again. Not hard, not demanding, but so urgently that Brenna wondered why the hell she didn't come to this town years ago.

Jake squinted as a stab of pain ripped through his back, and he leaned against Brenna. She held him close, supporting his weight. Then she looked up to the steps, and her smile faded. John stood there watching them, with a longing gaze.

"He's been waiting nineteen years for you." Jake nudged her, and Brenna looked back at him. "I'll be okay. Just don't take forever. I don't care who it is, you're not leaving my side for long." His possessive order didn't bother Brenna one bit. She wanted to be his. She wanted to be loved by her warrior. She looked back at John and ran up the steps, throwing herself into his embrace, as they both laughed and cried over their late reunion.

Epilogue

“Shit, Brenna, be careful! You’ll be the death of me, woman!”

“I thought you liked it when I was rough!” she teased, straddling his hips. “I want you right now.” She held him down with the strength of her thighs. His eyes narrowed in reaction, and she eased her grip, sorry she had hurt him. He suffered so much at the Morgan’s hands because of her. She allowed her fingers to trace each scar along his back, touching him softly, showing him that she would never forget what he did for her.

“Not until you promise me something,” he said, grinning like the devil at her suspicious look. Jake reluctantly let her go and walked over to his secret compartment between the floorboards. He lifted a board, reached in and pulled out a little black box.

“Promise you what?”

“Promise me that you’ll never leave my sight, or my bed!” He grinned wickedly. “And marry me, tomboy!” He came back to her, placing the box in her hand, as his tongue flicked at her engorged nipple through her gown. She opened the box and stared in amazement at the beautiful sapphire ring sitting in the velvet casing.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered, trying to mask her tears.

“Not nearly as beautiful as you.” He sucked the nipple into his mouth, expertly twirling it around his tongue and lips. Spirals of heat barreled up her thighs. He chuckled against her breast from the kick he felt through her belly.

“Jake! The baby doesn’t like it when you do that!” she joked.

“Well, I guess he’s gonna be a very unhappy baby!”

“Oh, you!” She slugged him in the chest playfully. He grasped onto his chest, pretending to faint. Brenna rubbed her belly, giggling at his usual cockiness. Those dimples she loved so much appeared with another one of his knowing smiles. Her eyes roamed over his hair, which was a few inches below his shoulders now. The stubble along his jaw and chin made him look so rugged and rough, that she couldn’t help but long to be smothered by him. They’d have a dozen kids for sure, if they continued to have sex at this rate. *The swell of her belly was proof enough*, she thought, grinning to herself.

The log home by the beach was perfect. It was his family’s land and she was happy to be a part of it. There was plenty of money to do whatever they wanted, although Jake hated the fact that it was hers. He wanted to be the one supporting her. But he didn’t realize yet that he had already given her what she wanted. He gave her his heart, his trust, and their baby. In return, she bought him everything needed to build a ranch, and rebuild his childhood home.

The rundown shack was just out back as a reminder of their first meeting, when she tried so hard to fake being a man. But the rogue, Jake Hudson, saw right through her, and to think of it, it was a blessing. Brenna stared out into the garden, smiling at the sight of her father bent over,

picking weeds. The autumn leaves fluttered around him, a lovely pose for a painting.

When her father and Lita married next month, another painting would be added to the wall in *The Velvet Lounge* in that particular hallway, right next to the one Brenna would never forget. Jake told her that the boy in the painting had her eyes. That boy turned out to be her brother. Her cousin too, but she didn't love him like a cousin. Billy was her brother in her eyes, something she would never take for granted. She looked back out to see her father cursing over something he had in his hand. It was adorable to see such a fierce, gun slinging man tackling the war of the vegetables! How she had longed for years to know her father and now the dreams were coming true. She had a loving family now, the only thing she ever wanted.

Jake circled his arms around her belly. "So?"

"What?" She pulled back from his grasp, looking at him in a daze, unaware of the beautiful picture she portrayed. Being very much pregnant with midnight hair lazily twisted in a bun, and those stunning green eyes gazing at him so sweetly, Jake felt that rush of heat sweep through him. She was totally his.

"Marry me, tomboy."

"Why do you keep calling me that? Can't you think of something more romantic?" She pouted.

"No." He bent down and kissed her hard, unleashing her hair to fall over her ass, then he grabbed it to pull her to him. "Well?"

"I'll marry you." She hugged him as much as her belly would allow, then quickly stepped away from him running her tongue over her bottom lip. Jake's eyes promised

sensational delights as he watched her bite her lip playfully. His eyebrow arched at the look in her eyes. His insatiable wife. Who knew she'd become this horny little devil?!

"But you'll have to catch me first!" She let out a whoop of excitement, darted around him and flew through the doorway. Laughing and bouncing, holding tightly to her belly to try and hold it still, Brenna couldn't run fast enough.

Jake chuckled at her spontaneous burst through the door, and never imagined a woman looking so beautiful, so vibrant as his stubborn little mule! She was happy now. He loved seeing her all round and fussy, full of life.

John whirled around from the commotion whizzing past him, and he too, looked back at Jake. A tangle of weeds filled his hands as the two men exchanged a silent look of understanding. John winked, angling his head in the direction where Brenna was running. She always ran to the water, to feel the sand between her toes while she waded out, rubbing the cold water on that poor child. No wonder he kicked her so much.

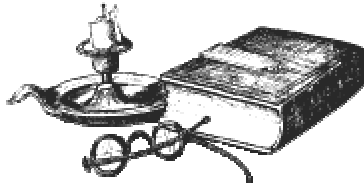
Every day Jake was thankful that he ran into a young boy on this beach, changing his life forever. He took one last look at those long, silky black tresses running away from him, and imagined twisting them around his fingers while he laid her back in the sand, those wild green eyes begging him to mount her. He let her have a head start, knowing damn well that he could easily catch his tomboy and give her everything those sexy eyes asked for, and so much more!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

To me, there are no boundaries when it comes to writing a lover's quest, stepping into a time where love and lust are an extremely fine line. Where men and women journey great lengths to fulfill desires that drive them through dangerous territory and mind-boggling tension just for a taste. This world I live in plays like a movie in the back of my mind, urging fingertips to make their move. I absolutely love to write.

In the real world, I'm chasing after my boy and listening to conversations of crank shafts and ball bearings from my mechanic husband, and somehow, it all molds into something imaginative! I love to hear from my readers...so drop me a line at blouclarke@yahoo.ca.

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