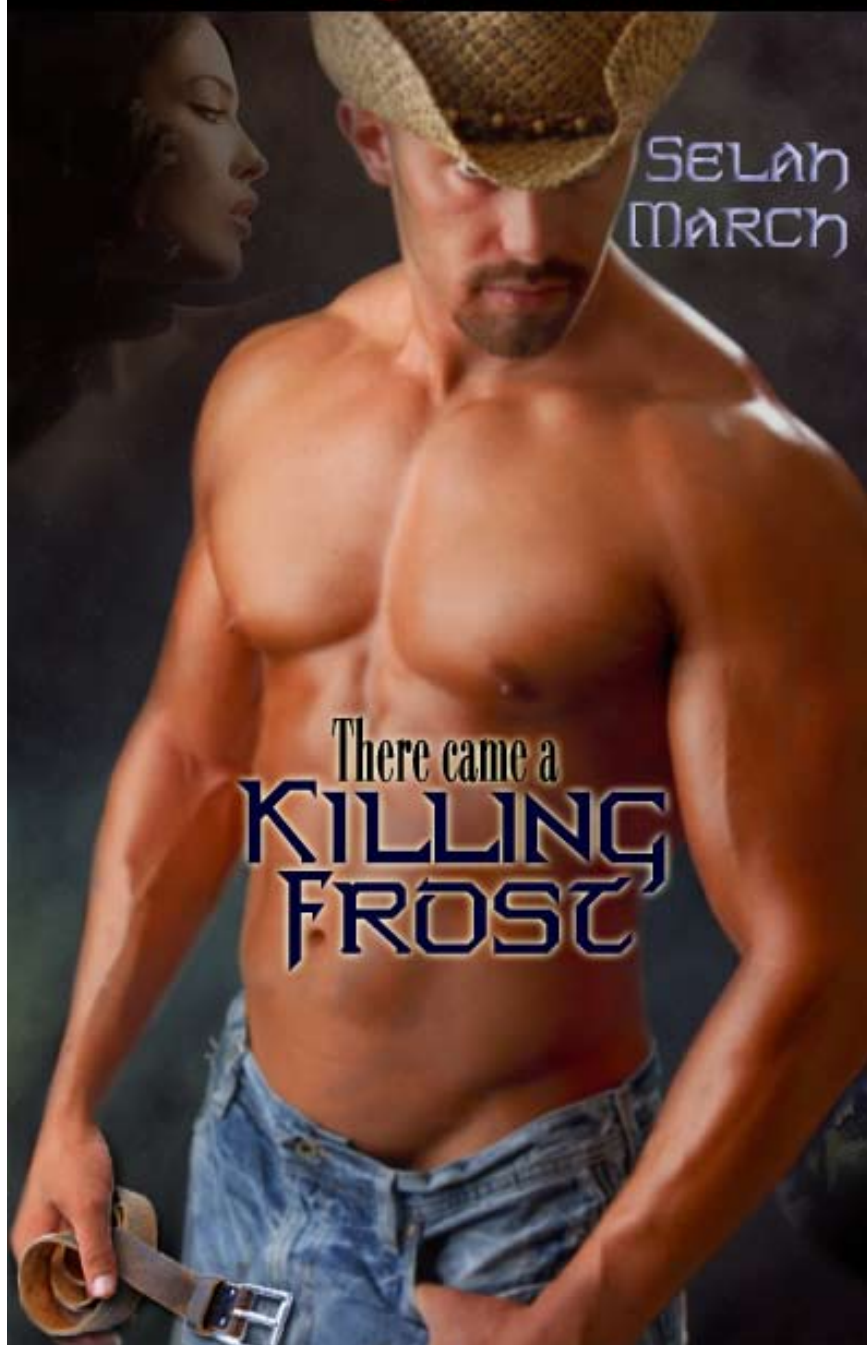


Red Sage Presents

SELAH
MARCH

There came a
**KILLING
FROST**





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Information:

Red Sage Publishing, Inc. • P.O. Box 4844 • Seminole, FL 33775
727-391-3847 • eRedSage.com

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ISBN: 978-1-60310-198-1 • 1-60310-198-5 • There Came a Killing Frost • Adobe PDF

ISBN: 978-1-60310-199-8 • 1-60310-199-3 • There Came a Killing Frost • MobiPocket

ISBN: 978-1-60310-200-1 • 1-60310-200-0 • There Came a Killing Frost • MS Reader

ISBN: 978-1-60310-201-8 • 1-60310-201-9 • There Came a Killing Frost • HTML

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There Came a Killing Frost © 2008 By Selah March

Cover © 2008 by Rae Monet, Inc.

Printed in the U.S.A.

Book typesetting by: Quill & Mouse Studios, Inc. • quillandmouse.com

*There Came a
Killing Frost*

* * *

by Selah March

To My Reader:

Despite its futuristic setting and hot scenes of “capture and bondage,” *There Came A Killing Frost* is really just a story about a man who finds himself lost in a time not his own and the woman who comes to trust and love him despite herself. I hope you enjoy reading about Kit and Lourdes as much as I enjoyed creating them.

There Came a Killing Frost: Chapter 1

30 September 2123

New Houston, Sovereign Republic of Texas

Kit Frost valued his balls above most things in this world or any other. So when Maxie Corbass pressed the muzzle of her Smith and Wesson radiation pulse-pistol into his crotch and flicked off the safety, Kit stood up straight and paid attention.

“I’m sorry,” Maxie said, her voice sticky with fake charm. “Is there a problem?”

He cleared his throat. “I reckon so. I’m here to collect a package for Thierry DuSourde.”

He made a quick inventory of the squalid boardinghouse room. Not much here he could use to his advantage. Coming here unarmed had been a mistake. The muzzle of the pistol shifted against him, and he let his gaze return to Maxie’s face. Her smirk told him she was liking this a little too much.

Fine-looking woman, Maxie—all canary-haired and creamy-skinned, with curves made for breeding champion stock. Pity it was wrapped around the personality of a black widow spider crossed with a sidewinder and cursed with an eternal case of the monthlies.

“You’re in the right place, Frost. The goods are right over there, like I said.” She inclined her head toward the cot in the corner. He could see the outline of a body beneath the ratty blanket, looking to be female by its shape and the spill of black hair over the edge of the thin mattress.

Maxie grinned at him. “I see you’re still working that Wild West bullshit. It’s getting old, man—real old.”

He sighed and let his hands drop a bit. “You mind removing your pistol from my privates? Would make this negotiation go a mite smoother.”

“Nothing to negotiate,” she replied, but holstered the weapon just the same. “You took a cash advance, Frost.”

“I don’t traffic in flesh. You tell DuSourde—”

Her shrill laugh cut him off. “Is that what’s got your gonads in a twist? Never fear, cowboy, nobody’s asking you to make a slave drop.” She stalked over to the corner, the heels of her boots leaving dents in the dirty floorboards. When she reached the cot, she grasped the shoulder of the sleeping woman and shook it hard.

“This one’s been shackled up with DuSourde a long time. She was stupid enough to let herself get snatched right off the San Joaquin Valley compound last month. You’ll be doing her a service by returning her to her *lover*.” The nasty tone in Maxie’s voice cut through the thick air.

“And I guess I’m gonna believe that... why, just exactly?”

“Because if you refuse the job, it’ll be my pleasure to melt that pretty face of yours right off your skull.” Maxie turned back to the woman, buried one red-tipped claw in her tangled curls and pulled her upright on the cot. “Wake up, chicken. You’re going home.”

She yanked back on the woman’s hair, lifting her face into the light. The woman opened her eyes, and Kit stared, like his momma had taught him never to do.

Not beautiful—no, not like a sunrise layin’ yellow and wild rose-pink over a stretch of spring pasture. Not like a mellow August moon rising full to tempt a song from every coyote in the valley. But the woman was a stunner just the same, with those black eyes and brows that swooped above them, and that skin that seemed to glow golden in the light of the bulb hanging from the ceiling.

“Say hello to the Killing Frost, chicken,” Maxie said. “The baddest *hombre* since Billy the Kid, and your escort for the next two days. *Comprende?*”

The woman blinked at him. “*Sí*,” she said. “Killer.” Her voice caught him hard in the gut. Husky and colored with a Spanish accent. All slick *S*’s and rolling *R*’s.

Maxie laughed and shoved the woman back down to the mattress.

Kit took half a step in the direction of the cot. “What’s wrong

with her?”

“Little tranq action. Keeps her quiet, out from underfoot.”

“You drugged her?”

Maxie shrugged and moved to stand in front of him again.

“Won’t hurt her. And it gives us time to get reacquainted.” She ran her hand down the length of his arm.

“What’s her name?”

Maxie made an annoyed sound. “DuSourde calls her Lolly.”

She slid her hand over his hip. He could feel the heat of her palm through the worn denim. “Never mind her. Let’s talk about you and me.”

“Huh?” He dragged his gaze away from the form on the cot. Lolly? Not much of a name for a grown-up gal. He looked at Maxie. “You and me?”

“Sure,” she said, her voice gone all breathy. “We were good together, once upon a time. Before you had your ‘hallelujah-I’ve-seen-the-light’ moment and turned your back on your friends.” Her hand slipped over the bulge in the front of his jeans, pressing on the spot the muzzle of her pistol had only just vacated.

“And you’re thinkin’ we could recapture those glory days, are you, Maxie?”

“Why not? You’re not a bad fuck once you loosen up a little. And I’ve heard rumors.”

“Rumors?”

She nodded, her smile gone mean and poisonous. “They say you’ve been a solitary man for going on two years now—living alone, sleeping alone. Part of your little self-redemption scheme, I guess.”

“What of it?”

Her grin got wider and nastier as her hand squeezed his balls.

“You must be tired of playing the poor, wayfaring stranger.”

“It does get wearisome.” He leaned in close, pressing his cheek against hers and sending his breath down the side of her neck. He felt the hard muscles in her shoulders quiver at the distraction. It was nothing at all to reach around with his other hand and pluck

her pistol from her holster. “But not near as wearisome as you, darlin’.”

Quick as a rattler she struck out, talons aimed at his face. Kit caught her wrist in his hand and fought the urge to snap it in two. She looked at him, her absinthe-colored eyes almost regretful, if you let yourself see past the hate.

“Aw, Maxie,” he whispered, “I ain’t that lonely yet.”

There Came a Killing Frost: Chapter 2

Lourdes opened her eyes in time to see the big, scruffy-looking man yank Maxie's pistol from her holster and press the muzzle against a spot just under that hateful *puta's* ear. Then he leaned in close and whispered something that made Maxie flinch. The sight made Lourdes smile. She shifted on the cot, feeling itchy and unclean under the dirty blanket, and thought about sitting up and looking for a drink of water.

"You wanna turn around and walk outta here nice and slow, Maxie," the man said, his voice a deep, even drawl.

Lourdes blinked the effects of Maxie's tranquilizer from her eyes and focused on him. Not really so scruffy—not when you looked close. The sharp angles of his jaw and the cleft in his chin were covered in what looked like three-days' growth of beard, and his sandy-blond hair curled low on his forehead and over the collar of his gray denim shirt. But his clothes and the fingernails on the hand that held Maxie's weapon were clean, and when he spoke, the teeth between his full lips gleamed white and straight.

Then he turned to look in her direction, and the ice-blue of his eyes washed over her. She could taste it in the back of her throat, like the water she'd been craving.

She tried to pull herself up to sit. When she looked again, he was moving toward her, Maxie's pistol tucked in the waist of his jeans, to the right of his silver belt-buckle. Maxie herself was nowhere to be seen.

"You feelin' all right?" He knelt by the cot. "You need a doctor?"

"Water." It hurt to speak, and her head pounded.

He glanced toward far corner of the room where stood a filthy sink and stinking commode, a grimace pulling at his lips. "I sure wouldn't drink anything that came from here, ma'am."

"Lourdes Carterro," she croaked. "Call me Lourdes."

He raised a brow. "Not Lolly then? Reckoned that was a silly name for a..." He looked away, letting his words trail off.

Whore. That's what he was about to call her, if the guilty expression on his face was any proof. Which was fine, because that's what she was—a whore in need of a drink at the moment.

“Por favor,” she said, and coughed to clear her throat.

“Please—”

“Right. Let's get you outta here.” He slid an arm beneath her and hauled her up against his chest. She let herself relax into the hard wall of muscle. Something warm unfurled low in her belly at the manly scent of him... which reminded her, did she smell bad? It had been a week or more since she'd had the chance for anything other than a quick swipe at the sink.

“Put me down. I can walk.”

His arms tightened around her. “Don't doubt it, but I'd wager Maxie's on her way back here with blood in her eye. I'd just as soon be gone, if it's all the same to you.”

Her head jolted with his every long, purposeful stride through the door and down the dark hall. “Are you really taking me back to the compound?” A tiny ember of hope flared inside her as she awaited his answer.

“Sure am. Now I know what you've been through—kidnapped and all—I'll make it my business to see you home right quick.”

The ember blinked out. She let her head fall against his shoulder, feeling defeated by her own weakness and stupidity. She'd let her one chance at escape slip through her fingers. Now the only options left were life with DuSourde—which was no kind of life at all—or death.

The big man's voice rumbled again beneath her. “But first we'll see if we can't find somewhere to get you fed and watered and cleaned up some.”

And the ember of hope sparked to life once more.

The hot water felt like some lesser version of heaven against Lourdes' skin. She took a deep breath, relishing the steamy scent of honeysuckle shampoo, and let the torrent from the shower-head beat down on her shoulders.

She'd expected her escort to take her to the nearest dive motel for a bath and a meal. Certainly not New Houston House, with its luxury accommodations and big-name holographic entertainment in the main ballroom. Yet here she was, standing in a marble shower stall within one of the finest suites the hotel offered, waiting for DuSourde's hired man to return with a new set of clothes she could wear to dinner.

"Burn them," she'd said when he'd asked her what he should do with the reeking, stained rags she'd stripped off her body and tossed out of the bathroom to land at his feet.

She'd left the door open a crack and peeked through, watching him bend to retrieve the bundle. He handled it with care, as if it were worth something. A strange one, this man who called himself Frost. Strange speech, strange ways, like a cowboy—a *vaquero* from her childhood storybooks, riding the range beneath the open sky. He'd bear watching, if only because he was too damned pretty to ignore.

She'd listened for the click of the door locking behind him, fighting the urge to run just as she was, shoeless and wrapped in a towel. But that would be stupid. No, she'd wait for a better opportunity. She could be patient, after all these years.

To nobody in particular she said, "I'll be leaving him a bad spot with DuSourde. Probably get him killed."

But she couldn't afford to feel guilty about that, could she? Every man for himself—or every whore, as the case may be. "The Killing Frost," Maxie had called him—a bad man, just like any of DuSourde's other henchmen, and in no way deserving her sympathy. Just because her body flushed with heat when he touched her—just because the twist of his mouth made her want to *bite*—that was no excuse to go all soggy in the head. And yet when she closed her eyes he was right there in front of her, licking a drop of water from that perfect lower lip...

She let her soapy hands slide over her nipples, sending a rush of sweetness through her that weakened her knees. She savored the knowledge that for once, no one was watching her, spying on her

every move, ready to report back to *El Jefe*. All alone, free to touch herself any way she damn well pleased. Her palm glided between her thighs and pressed hard against her mound.

In her mind, Frost reached for her, grasping her wrists and pushing her back against the cold tiles with his steam-slicked body. He smiled and it was fierce, promising exquisite pain and pleasure in equal measure.

He'd be muscular beneath his clothes—*sí*, she was sure of it. And he'd take charge, holding her hands above her head in one of his own and using the other to manhandle her, rough and unmerciful. Just how she liked it. Just how she'd been *taught* to like it, trained to *take* it, back at Señorita Josefina's...

Her fingertips found her clit and began to work it in circles as her other hand pinched at a nipple with enough pressure to make her moan echo against the walls of the shower. She could feel her imaginary *vaquero*'s erection push hard against her thigh. Could feel his breath hot on her neck when he whispered, "Reckon I can make you beg for it, darlin'?"

Her fingers moved faster. She squeezed her eyes shut, imagining the blunt head of his cock pushing in, relentless... stretching unused muscles to the point of pain—

The knock on the bathroom door made her jump. She braced herself against the shower wall to keep from falling. Her heart pounded in her ears and her aborted orgasm made her cunt ache like a bad sprain.

"Miss Lourdes? You all right in there?"

She tried twice to make her voice reach over the sound of the rushing water. "*Sí*, I'm fine. Be out soon."

There was a pause. Then he called out again. "I'm leavin' your things on the bed. I'll meet you downstairs." The low, lazy sound of his twanging drawl made her drop her head and bite her tongue to keep from sobbing with ungratified need.

She reached out and turned off the water.

There Came a Killing Frost: Chapter 3

Kit waited forty minutes before DuSourde's little mistress finally showed up in the doorway of the hotel's vast main hall. The three shots of Jim Beam he'd tossed back burned in his empty gut, but not near as hot as the sight of her in that shiny purple skirt that barely hugged her hips before falling away to the floor, or that little white shirt that didn't cover enough flesh to be called decent. He'd done a downright half-assed job judging her sizes, that was for certain.

He crossed the floor to meet her, weaving in and out of the crowd. When he reached her, he said, "Awful sorry, ma'am. We can return the clothes and get you somethin' that suits you better."

"No, *gracias*. These will do fine for tonight."

"But you can't be at ease in those things." She smelled like honeysuckle and something else he couldn't name. Something darker, richer. He kept his eyes trained on her face and his fists clenched at his sides, fighting the sudden, sharp wave of *want* that nearly knocked him backward.

She laughed. "The skirt's a little longer than I'm used to, but other than that..." She glanced around the room and then at him, a question in her eyes. "The décor here is... colorful, *sí*?"

He shrugged. "Likely the management's idea of Old West atmosphere." He felt himself sneer as the words left his mouth. Huge electrified chandeliers, red velvet draperies and waitresses dressed like giddyap-girls were not what he recollected. But after ten years, who could say if his memories were accurate?

A moment later, the holographic image of some long-dead performer appeared on the stage at the far end of the hall. The band behind him—made up of live people playing real instruments—launched into a song Kit didn't recognize, and the singer's image picked up the tune in a sliding baritone. Something about "friends in low places." Kit shrugged again and went back to looking at Lourdes. She had dark smudges beneath her eyes. She wore no paint to cover them or to make herself look better than she did.

But she seemed to glow just the same. Again he fought the urge to touch her.

“We’re due in the dinin’ room at eight,” he began, and then a hand came down hard on his shoulder. He turned. Before him stood a short, red-haired man with a thin mustache and murder in his eyes.

“Kit Frost, you cocksucker. I oughta cut out your liver right there where you stand.”

Kit considered the man. Did he know him? He couldn’t be sure. So many men—so many *dead* men—and the vows of vengeance from their brothers and fathers and cousins and sons just kept dogging him. Too many to recall, even if he wanted to. Mostly, he didn’t, though he knew he didn’t deserve to forget.

His hand went to Maxie’s pulse-pistol, where he’d hidden it beneath his dinner coat. The heavy butt of the lead-lined weapon felt hot and rough against his fingers. Maybe the threat of it would be enough, since he had no intention of following through.

“I’m not lookin’ to char anybody’s innards tonight, mister,” he said, “but if you’re determined, why don’t we take this outside?”

The man’s gaze went to Kit’s hand, where it rested in the coat’s inner pocket, then flicked back to his face. The fury in his eyes clouded over with fear.

“But I thought... they told me you’d taken a... a vow,” he stammered. “Told me you didn’t even carry a piece anymore.” His voice squeaked on the last word.

“Gossip’s a tricky thing, mister.”

The man backed away, his hands up in a gesture of surrender. An instant later, he turned tail and ran. Kit relaxed and glanced at his companion. Her eyes were huge and accusing.

“It’s true. You’re a killer,” she said. A grim smile lifted the corners of her mouth. “That *cabrón* DuSourde sent a killer to bring me home.”

Cabrón? Kit didn’t know the word, but it didn’t sound like a term of endearment. He closed a hand over her upper arm, and bent his face to hers. “No, ma’am. That ain’t the right of it. I don’t know

what was in DuSourde's mind when he hired me to bring you home, but I'm no killer." All at once, it seemed the most important thing in the world that she understand. "At least, not anymore."

Her eyelids flickered as she looked up at him. At the other end of the room, the baritone finished his song to sparse applause, and another performer—or his three-dimensional image—appeared in his place. A fiddle mourned low and sweet, and the singer launched into a ballad about lonesome whippoorwills and whining midnight trains. All around them, couples swayed to the music. Kit and DuSourde's woman stood still in the center of the dance floor and stared at one another.

Finally, she nodded, never taking her eyes from his. Then she turned in his arms. "Dance with me, Mr. Frost." It didn't sound like a request so much as the demand of a spoiled, overindulged pet. Still, he felt no desire to resist.

"Call me Kit." He took her around the waist, holding her lightly, and they moved together.

"Kit," she said. Her tongue slipped out and swiped over her lower lip as if she were tasting the word. "Short for Christopher?"

"Yes ma'am, but that's what my momma calls my daddy."

"And where are they? Your family?"

He stared over her head at the wall. "Dead, I reckon."

There was a short pause. Then she asked, "You don't know for sure?"

"Mighty lot of questions you have."

She shrugged. "What should we talk about, then? The weather?"

"No." He framed the next words carefully. She wanted to ask questions? She'd get answers, dammit. "I reckon my folks are gone because nobody lives two hundred and twenty-five years, and I ain't seen 'em in at least that long."

She stumbled and he caught her. When he looked down into her face, she was frowning.

"You want to make jokes? Fine. We don't need to talk *or* dance." She tried to pull away, but he held her against him, still-

ing her struggles with a hand pressed hard against the small of her back.

“Let me go.”

“No,” he said again. “You think I’m jokin’, do you?”

She laughed, but it was more like a groan in his ears. “Of course not. Your family’s been dead over two centuries, *st*? Nothing funny there.”

He squeezed her tighter against him. The hard-on he’d sported since taking her in his arms pulsed in time to the music. He clenched his jaw and tried to be angry. Angry was safer than horny as a young bull.

“I didn’t say they’d been dead that long. I said I ain’t seen ‘em since then. How the hell would I know when they died, or what they died of, or where—” He stopped and sucked in a deep breath. Damn that scent rising from her skin and hair. Between that and the whiskey, he was a short step away from making a fool of himself.

Her hand moved on his arm. When he glanced down, he saw her face had softened. “I’m sorry. You... you maybe want to talk about it, or...?” She looked embarrassed, her eyes not quite meeting his.

It had been a long time since he’d felt like telling anyone. Years. Mostly because nobody ever believed him anyway, and it put him in a killing mood when folks laughed and called him a liar. Maybe it was the whiskey in his empty gut, or the way her dark eyes seemed to see right down inside him, but he found himself wanting to take a chance. If he didn’t let some of it out soon, he’d likely end up eating the muzzle of Maxie’s pistol, if only to quiet the voices in his head.

On the other hand, he wasn’t sure if he could stand to see that look of scorn and disbelief on this woman’s face a second time.

“It’s comin’ up on eight,” he said. “Let’s get some supper and see how it goes.”

Kit knew he was staring again. He made himself look away from the way Lourdes’ throat worked as she swallowed. “More wine?” he asked.

She smiled at him over the rim of the almost-empty glass. Her plate lay on the table before her, scraped clean of every morsel and crumb.

Kit shifted in his chair. If holding her close had set him to yearning, watching her eat and drink had given him a powerful need to see her spread out on some clean, white sheets. Spread under him, to be exact about it. Maybe trembling—maybe begging. Because he was a twisted sonofabitch that way.

“No, *gracias*,” she said, and her smile deepened. “You’re not getting out of it that easily.” She set the glass down and leaned back in her chair. “Tell me.”

He ran a hand over his face, all at once unsure. “It’s a long story. Why don’t we dance, instead?” The music from the main hall spilled into the dining room—another ballad, heavy on the fiddle.

She squinted at him. “You promised.”

“Beggin’ your pardon, I did no such thing.”

She inclined her head, making the candlelight play across her features. Had he thought her not quite a beauty? He must’ve been looking cross-eyed at the time.

“Please?” she said and blinked at him. Just once, slow and drowsy.

He sighed. “I don’t rightly know where to start.”

“The beginning won’t do?”

“Which beginning?” He fought back the surge of anger this subject always roused in his gut. “The one where I was born and grew up and had a life, like any other man? Or the one where I got ripped outta that life and dropped here, like some sack of camp-leavins ditched along the trail for the buzzards?”

“What are you saying, exactly?” Her voice was pitched low, as if she didn’t want to rile him further.

“You won’t believe it.”

“Try me,” she said. “*Por favor*... please, Kit.”

He signaled the waiter and asked for another shot of Jim Beam. When it had been delivered and tossed back fast, and his throat burned with the aftermath, he looked at her and said, “The summer

I turned twenty-one, I was movin' a small herd of Texas Longhorns for my daddy. We were down in the Moreno Valley, in New Mexico Territory. In the place the Indians called '*Angel Fire*'."

"All by yourself?"

He shook his head. "Me and Jimmy Goshen, our hired hand. We meant to be out on the trail three days. Two, if the weather held."

He ran the back of his hand over his mouth and thought about calling for another shot. But that would be reckless, and he had responsibilities. The first of which was sitting across from him, listening close and careful to his every word.

"Go on," she said.

"It was maybe ten o'clock on the first night. Dark as the inside of a dog's ass... beggin' your pardon again."

She smiled and made a quick gesture of forgiveness.

"Anyway—a new moon, and so many stars, hangin' just over the mountains. More than I'd ever seen, or have seen since. I was lyin' back on my bedroll, listening to the herd settling down to sleep."

"Where was Jimmy?"

"Relievin' himself, if I recall just right. Gone a ways off from camp to do it, so I'm guessing the beans I'd made for dinner didn't agree with him." Kit cleared his throat. This was no fit talk for the supper table.

"So you *were* alone?"

He nodded. "And almost asleep myself, with the fire burning down to nothin' and the stars all in my eyes. They looked like they were waltzin', those stars. I swear I could see 'em move, sorta swirl and dip down close to the mountains... it was downright pretty, except for being wrong and strange."

"*Si?* And then?"

"And then there was a flash of light, but a funny color—a green like sage grass. And the smell of somethin' hot, like the air itself was cookin'." He swallowed against the tightness in his throat. "And then a bang like thunder, but not. More like buckshot, except it shook the ground under me. I think I yelled." He laughed. "Hell,

I know I did.”

She met his smile with one of her own. “Go on. What happened next?”

He shrugged. “Ain’t rightly sure. Next thing I knew, I was lyin’ in an alley in New Houston. Which is about as fucked as things could get, since I’d never even been to *old* Houston.” He stared at her, waiting for her to laugh. “They told me the year was 2113.”

“Ten years ago,” she said, as if she were pondering it. “And when were you in that valley, moving those Longhorns, Kit? In that place called *Angel Fire*?”

He fought the urge to look away. If she was going to call him a liar, she’d have to do it right to his face.

He took a breath and said, “The summer of 1898.”

There Came a Killing Frost: Chapter 4

The ice-blue of his eyes washed over her again. Lourdes could see defiance there, daring her to laugh at him. But something else, as well... something that made her want to rise from her chair and kneel at his feet and press kisses against his hard, square hands. A cowboy's hands. An honest-to-God man of the land. Maybe the last of his kind.

She leaned forward and rested her elbows on the table. "I always wanted to meet a *vaquero*—a real cowboy, not just a pretty *niño* from Dallas in boots and a hat. And now I have."

He stared at her. A muscle ticked in his jaw. "You believe me?"

She shrugged. "I was raised in a whorehouse in Havana. The madam of the house, Senorita Josefina, she rolled the bones, you know? *Santería*? Like what you call voodoo, but different."

He nodded.

"I saw a lot of strange things growing up there. The people in the fields, the dark magic in the jungles. I learned to take nothing for granted." She sat back in her chair. "Your story—it's strange. But *yo creo*... I believe."

She let her gaze wander over him, taking in the details of his broad shoulders stretching the wool of his dinner coat and the loosened tie that hung beneath his collar. What would he look like looming over her, taut and lean and hard? How would his eyes change if she clenched her cunt around him? Would he whisper her name when he came? Would she feel safe in his arms, like she hadn't felt safe in so long? Would he want to know her, and care about what she thought and felt... maybe even listen when she spoke?

"I... *perdoname*, I need to use the ladies' room."

He rose from his chair when she did. When she reached the door of the dining room, she looked back. He remained standing, watching her.

She had to go. To run.

Now.

Before it got any worse. Before she let herself be captured and trapped by her sudden weakness for this beautiful killer.

She hurried along the corridor to the back of the building, turning corners and lifting her too-long skirt as she ran. Regretting the lack of time to explain. Wanting to tell him to watch his back, because Thierry DuSourde would not forgive or forget. Wishing there was time for anything other than grabbing her last chance at freedom.

She stopped to catch her breath within sight of the back exit of the hotel. Past the French doors lay the darkened streets. She looked behind her, but the corridor was empty. He wouldn't follow. She'd played her part too well. He'd wait there, at the table... for how long? Twenty minutes? Thirty? A pang of guilt shot through her, and she shook it off. "Better I should wonder where I'll sleep tonight," she murmured and lifted her skirts once more.

Before she could move, a hand closed on her neck. A familiar touch. The cowboy... who, she guessed too late, was smarter than his drawl and antique manners made him seem.

He wrenched her around to face him. The blue of his eyes had gone cold like a fall of icy rain. "Reckon you think I'm plenty stupid, huh?"

She could feel his fury in the press of his fingers on her flesh, and hear it in the way his polished black boots struck the carpet as he escorted her to the elevator.

She licked her lips. "I—"

"Hush up."

When the elevator doors opened, he propelled her through and crowded her into a corner. She didn't know whether to be relieved or terrified when she saw they had the car to themselves.

"Kit—"

"I said hush up." He pressed his body against her, squeezing her into the corner. When he spoke, he directed his hoarse whisper into the knot of hair he'd grabbed and twisted around his fingers. "You think I couldn't see it on your face? Not much of a cowboy if I can't tell when a half-broke filly's fixin' to bolt."

Damn him. And damn herself for being so transparent. And for loving the way his hips felt, pushing against her. “Will you let me explain?”

“Why should I? After you lied about believin’ me?”

“I didn’t lie. I *do* believe you.”

He snorted. “Save it for your lover, Lolly. Just—” He grunted when she kicked him in the shin.

“Don’t you call me that. Don’t you *ever*.” She struggled to put some space between them, arching her neck backward so she could look into his eyes. Maybe spit in his face, the bastard. “Let me explain,” she said through gritted teeth.

He nodded. “Just as soon as we get to the suite. You can talk my ear off all night long. I might even pretend to listen, for the sake of bein’ polite.”

When the elevator opened, he slid his hand from her hair and used his grip on her neck to guide her out of the car and down the hall. She moved without resistance. He pressed his palm against the scanning panel on the wall, and the door to the suite slid silently open. As he shifted his weight to escort her inside, she pivoted sharply to the left and ducked, wrenching out of his grasp and heading blindly down the hall at a run.

He would’ve caught her anyway. She knew that, even as her four-inch heels tangled in the hem of her skirt and she fell, catching herself on her outstretched hands.

He was beside her in an instant. “Damn fool woman.” He lifted her against him, his arms feeling like stone around her as he stalked back to the suite. She closed her eyes and let her head fall back, defeated.

“You need to use the bathroom?” He stood in the center of the room, still clutching her tight to his chest. The air was muggy and thick. She’d forgotten to switch on the air-conditioning before she left.

She shook her head.

“Give a holler if that changes,” he said and carried her to the bed, where he dropped her. “Lie still, or you’ll wish you had.” She

watched as he unbuckled his belt and whipped it off. Panic surged through her... and something hotter.

“You can’t mark me. You don’t dare.” Before she could react, he’d looped the belt through the intricate iron-work on the headboard and then wrapped the ends around each of her wrists. He tugged hard, dragging her arms above her head, then re-buckled it. The soft, well-worn leather pinched only slightly. The silver of the buckle felt cool against her flesh.

“I don’t flog women, as a rule,” he said, his arms crossed over his chest. “However sorely they tempt me.”

She pulled at the belt. It held fast. *Ay Dios mío*, how long had she missed this feeling? Like a drug, it coursed through her bloodstream, making her want to writhe and twist. She clamped her thighs tight against her traitorous cunt. This stubborn *vaquero* was the enemy—the only thing that stood between her and freedom. No matter how much she burned for his touch, she couldn’t surrender.

“Go to hell.”

“You first, missy.” He moved away from the bed and took a seat in the well-padded chair a few feet away. “You’re the one who tried to cheat me.”

“Cheat you?” She pulled on the belt again, using her feet to push herself up to a sitting position, ignoring the low, delicious pulsing that radiated out to her limbs.

“Cheat me. Take yourself back to DuSourde with some outlandish tale and collect my fee for yourself.”

She rolled her eyes. “And you call *me* a fool,” she said. “You think DuSourde lets me keep money of my own?”

He shrugged. “The way I figure it—”

“The way you figure it is wrong.” She bit her lip and looked away. What if she begged for her freedom? He’d only refuse. She’d met enough mercenaries to know their code of ethics didn’t extend beyond what was best for their own prosperity and continued good health. Neither of which would be served by letting her go.

But maybe she could employ her long-unused talents to some advantage and get him to let down his guard? Maxie’s sneering

voice floated through her head.

“They say you’ve been a solitary man for going on two years now—living alone, sleeping alone...”

She glanced at him. A sheen of sweat made his face glow in the light from the bedside lamp. She watched his eyes track a line from her feet to where her hands were bound. Something in the way his jaw tightened... *sí*, she recognized that look. He liked what he saw. Liked seeing her helpless. It did something for him.

He shifted in the chair and cleared his throat. “You comfortable? Anything you... need?”

Her gaze wandered over the room ‘til the sight of a newly-filled ice bucket on the credenza caught her interest. “May I have a piece of ice, *por favor*?”

His frown deepened. “You think this is a game?”

“Sí. The kind we both win.” She let her voice drop into a husky rasp. “Question is, have you the *cojones* to play?”

It was a calculated risk. He might laugh at her brazen attempt at seduction. She watched as he rose from the chair and crossed the room. She inhaled the saturated air, sweat trickling between her breasts. The silk blouse clung to her back.

And then he was standing over her, the ice bucket in his hand. “Open your mouth.” The gruff texture of his voice rubbed at every nerve she had.

She closed her eyes and complied. An instant later, she felt him deposit a single sliver of ice on the end of her tongue. She opened her eyes in time to catch the way he stared at her mouth before lifting his eyes to hers.

“Anything else?” His body seemed to vibrate with tension.

“My shoes. If you could—”

“Don’t think so.” He set the ice bucket on the edge of the mattress and reached out to touch her ankle. “I like the shoes. Like you in ‘em.”

His hand moved up her leg to her knee, pushing the fabric of her skirt along before it. The calloused palm felt like hot iron against her skin. She let her thighs fall apart under the satin. “A cowboy

with a shoe fetish? That's—"

"Hush." He lifted the hem of her skirt and rolled it up on itself. The air, which had felt so thick and humid just a moment before, rushed in cool breeze against the flesh he exposed. She watched his face change as he saw she wore nothing beneath the skirt. His eyes narrowed and he said, "You think you can sucker me with ready pussy? Maybe tell DuSourde I raped you?"

She snorted. "He wouldn't care if you did, so long as you made sure to humiliate me while you were at it."

Doubt etched lines around his mouth. "Maxie said you were his lover."

"Maxie knows less than she thinks she does. DuSourde has no use for me or anyone else in his bed. Some lucky bastard shot off his balls nine years ago in a little war over water rights." She couldn't help taking joy in her next words. "He hasn't been able to do much but think dirty thoughts ever since."

"Then why keep you?"

She shrugged as best she could with her arms bound above her head. "I'm window-dressing, so nobody guesses he's half a man. He keeps me on a short leash like I'm this precious prize. And then when we're alone..." She let her voice trail off, shame bringing a rush of blood to her cheeks.

"What?" Frost's scowl had returned, marring the hard beauty of his features. "He beats you?"

She shook her head. "I could almost live with that. Or die from it, eventually."

His grip on her leg tightened. "What then?"

"He... he mocks me.Laughs at me. Calls me names, and makes me repeat them back to him. Makes up little jokes and rhymes about 'Lolly,' his pathetic little whore." She closed her eyes and concentrated on keeping her voice even. "But what's worse? He won't let anyone come near me. He's hired people to watch me, escort me wherever I go inside the compound, but they're not allowed to talk to me or touch me for any reason, ever. He installed cameras in my bedroom and bathroom. No privacy. No friends. No

one to talk to but him. No life.”

Frost grunted. It sounded vaguely sympathetic.

She glanced at him and had to look away. His gaze was too sharp, pinning her to the bed. “Do you know what it is to go seven years without human touch and nothing but vicious insults for conversation? Before, when we danced, it was the first time in so long...” A sob bubbled up out of nowhere, breaking her voice, making it impossible to finish. A second later, she felt his hands working at the belt that held her wrists.

“No! Don’t.” The words were out of her mouth before she could recall them. So much for catching him with his guard down.

He stared at her as if she’d lost her mind. “I shouldn’t ever have tied you. If I’d known—”

“Please,” she said. “Remember I said I was raised in a whore-house?”

He nodded.

“I was trained there, too.” She stopped and licked her lips. Would he understand? Would he be disgusted? “Trained to be... to enjoy—”

“Bein’ trussed up like a prize heifer?”

She laughed. “To play games with ropes and scarves. To like the feel of a man’s hands on my body when I’m helpless.”

She watched his face change again. His pupils dilated, the black eating up the blue. His nostrils flared. There was no mistaking that reaction. Maybe there was still a chance to use this to her advantage. “*Por favor*, Kit... it’s been too long. Please touch me.”

When he kissed her, she tasted anger and whiskey in equal parts. No gentle adoration, no sensuous glide—this was a rough-and-ready tongue-fuck. If he took the rest of her like he was taking her mouth... but no. She couldn’t think that way. This was about escape. Freedom.

He pulled away and stared at her. “You really want this?”

She nodded, not trusting her voice.

He reached out and yanked apart the edges of her silk blouse. The pearl buttons fell like raindrops on the coverlet. He froze, glar-

ing down at her exposed breasts, his hands fisted in the torn fabric.

“They’re not just for looking at, you know,” she said, infusing her voice with a sense of challenge.

He made a sound like some starving, feral beast. Then his fingers found her nipples. The first caress was soft, shading quickly into *harder* and *more*, and then the far, sweet side of *too much*. Still she arched into it, making noises that should have shamed her, but didn’t. Her hip bumped the ice bucket, drawing his attention there.

He reached into the bucket and came up with a slippery, half-melted fistful of ice. He held it over the skin exposed by the torn blouse. A wet sliver slipped between his fingers and landed just above her navel. The breath she took sounded like the hiss of a cat.

He dropped the rest squarely on her midriff. The sensation was like an explosion, making her bite back a scream and curl in on herself. He pressed her flat with one hand, forcing her to lie still—though she couldn’t help the shuddering. She watched his face, fascinated with the play of emotion from a mischievous half-smile to a dark, glowering brow and a twist of lips that looked like *need*. He used his other palm to spread the ice upward, between her breasts and over her nipples.

“Ay *Dios mío*, you bastard.”

He laughed then, low and dirty. She felt it deep inside, where she was hollow and empty. Where she wanted him to be.

“Turn over.” The tone of command in his voice made her flush with heat, even beneath the ice. She struggled to move herself, pulling on the belt. There was just enough slack to let her flip onto her stomach. She felt him tear the rest of the blouse from her body and shove the skirt up and over her hips. Then he was lifting her to her knees, his hands cold and wet on her thighs as he spread her apart.

She could feel his gaze on her and imagined what she looked like—naked, except for her shoes and the yards of lavender satin hanging from her waist and pooling beneath her on the soaked sheet.

There was a moment of perfect stillness, as if the world had

stopped. Then came the shock of another piece of ice tracing its way down the line of her spine, making patterns against her skin. He chased it with his mouth. The contrast between freezing and burning made her bite her tongue to keep from crying out. Goose-flesh rose and receded with the waves of shudders.

“Grab onto the headboard.”

She could barely make out his voice over the roaring in her ears. He gripped her hips and gave a shove, propelling her up and forward. The ironwork was warm where she curled her fingers around it, and the new arch of her body made the melting ice pool in the small of her back.

He pressed his lips at the base of her spine at the same time his hand slurped and rattled inside the bucket. She knew what was coming and tensed against it, but nothing could prepare her for the shock of *cold-wet-please-yes* against her wide open spread of slick flesh. A whining rasp crawled up from her chest, scouring her throat raw on its way out into the air. His fingers, coated with icy water, push inside her cunt. She felt her inner muscles close down hard even as her knees slipped on the satin skirt.

He caught her with one hand on her thigh and held her steady. “You still want this?”

She turned her head and looked at him over her shoulder. “For a smart man, you can be so pretty.”

There was a pause. When he spoke again, his voice was edged with irritation. “What the hell does that even mean?”

“It means fuck me, *vaquero*.”

He laughed. It didn’t sound friendly. “Got a lotta sass for a girl in your position.” His fingers surged inside her, opening her up. Then his thumb found her clit, slipping and sliding against the hard pulsing swell. She let her head fall against her arm and gritted her teeth to hold back the cries building in her throat.

“Come on, Frost. I know you want to.”

“You know that, do you?” The sound of fabric moving against skin made her look again. He was pulling at the button-fly on his jeans. An instant later, his cock appeared between his hanging

shirt-tails. It looked big and angry, just like him. He pressed his thumb harder against her clit and said, “Maybe you’re not ready just yet.”

She pushed back into his hand, lifting her hips instinctively. “I’m ready. Do it.”

“Don’t think so. Not yet.”

The voice in her head—the one wired to her cunt—was already begging. She concentrated on not letting it have its way. There would be no coming back from pleading with him to fuck her... no taking advantage of his lust-addled brain. Once he broke her that way, she was done.

“What’s the matter, Frost? Afraid you won’t be able to satisfy me? Scared you’re no more of a man than DuSourde?”

His hand stilled. When he spoke, his voice had dropped half an octave, at least. “I’d gag you if I didn’t have a powerful desire to hear you beg.”

Her bones felt like they were melting, even as the muscles in her thighs began to complain. “In your dreams, *vaquero*.” Some part of her knew her bravado wasn’t helping her ultimate goal of escape, but she couldn’t help but goad him. She burned to know how far he’d go.

An instant later, she felt her inner muscles clench onto nothing as he withdrew his hand. A mewling sound of protest rose in her throat. Then the mattress dipped behind and something wet and *Dios-mío-hot* pressed against her open flesh. His lips, his tongue, his *mouth*... on her clit and then pushing inside her and back on her clit again, teasing and tasting and *slippery-soft-yes-right-there-don’t-stop*... She couldn’t help it... *Madre de Dios*, she couldn’t hold it back...

“Yeah, just like that,” he said, his face still pressed against her. The muttered words sent a vibration through her that made her groan even as her orgasm bore down and engulfed her, making her twist and buck against his hands at her hips. The jolts of pleasure overlapped, cresting one on top of another. Hard to breathe. Couldn’t think. Could only rock against his slick, circling tongue

and shake and make noises that sounded like agony.

Her fingers burned where she gripped the headboard. The rest of her body felt limp and achy by turns. He'd gentled his touch for a moment, as her climax faded to flutters, but now he was spreading her labia wide with his fingers and blowing a jet of cool air against her that made her jitter and writhe. "That's one," he said. "Now let's see about two."

"No. I can't."

She felt the mattress move again as he straightened. His hands squeezed at her hips, massaging her. The caress felt almost comforting. "But you will."

His voice sounded like wet gravel in his throat—broken and rough. She tucked her chin into her shoulder and strained to look at him. "No. *Es demasiado*... too much." She panted in between the words. "You have to stop now."

"Don't think so, darlin'" he said again. "Could watch you wriggle and hump all the ever-lovin' night long."

It sounded like a cross between a promise and a threat. She bit her lip and whimpered like his words had pressed a brand into her flesh. She felt the tip of his finger slide down over the end of her tailbone... down and down again, stopping to touch and tickle and circle at her back entrance. "Can you take it there?"

It had been years, and the thought sent a prickle of fear through her. He wouldn't be gentle. Could she...?

But then the teasing touch moved again, lower. Three fingers inside her cunt now, stretching and twisting and curling as if he was on a hunt for all the gold in Texas. The hand at her hip tightened, nails digging in. She rocked back, fucking herself on his fingers. It wasn't enough—wasn't what she wanted. Wanted to come on his cock. Wanted to feel him breaking apart inside her. His fingers pressed down, into that hot spot that always made her writhe. No, it wasn't enough, but it was damned good.

"Look at you. All strung out and sweaty like a bad fever. Runnin' wet and slick all over my hand." The bed shifted again as he leaned over her to whisper down her neck. "You wanted this,

missy. You got it now.”

She tried to answer him, but the words wouldn't make sense in her head. She heard herself panting again, sounding raw and helpless. Somehow, she missed the rattle of his hand in the bucket. When he slid his fingers out of her and replaced them with the ice, she screamed... and screamed louder when he swiped again and again at her clit with a cold, wet finger.

She came so hard it hurt. The muscles in her thighs shrieked right along with her, and the spasms made her pull on the belt, wrenching her arms. She rode it out with her jaws clamped shut, vaguely hoping her teeth wouldn't crack under the force.

No respite. He'd meant that part. She felt something larger and hotter and less flexible than his fingers push against her, and then he was inside, feeling like an overheated bar of solid iron melting the leftover ice. There was no way to stifle the pleading noise that came ripping from her throat. But he wasn't listening, or didn't care. He just kept pressing in, slow and steady, 'til she felt the scratch of coarse curls brush against her.

“Gonna fuck you now,” was all he said. And then he did, with slow, deep strokes that made her want to cry with frustration. Such a tight fit that she could count the pulses of his cock when he paused for a moment at the peak of his thrust.

“Harder.” It took her three tries to push the word past the grit of her teeth. “Faster.”

He ignored her, rolling his hips and humming low in his chest. “Look at that. So pretty to watch you take me in... sweet little... wanna watch that all night.” He slid one hand around and down to her clit, to play and pinch and tease. She bit back another scream, fighting to process the overload of sensation after too many years of nothing.

Faster now, finally. And faster still, driving into her so hard it nearly knocked her off her knees. She was just a passenger, and whatever thoughts she'd had of taking advantage and making her escape were obliterated by the swivel of his pelvis and the dip and grind of his fingers against her clit.

She was at his mercy. And he had none.

There Came a Killing Frost: Chapter 5

Kit was getting mighty close to the end of his self-control. Lourdes' every shuddering cry carved itself into his hide, like a tooled-leather saddle. But he couldn't afford to lose it now—not when she was so near to breaking.

He pulled in a deep breath, thrust once more and held deep inside her. Then he moved his fingers off that place where she was slick and swollen, and fastened a tight grip on her outer thigh. It took every bit of his will to put his thoughts into a sensible question. “You wanna tell me the rest of it now?”

Her breathing sounded raw and painful. She shook her head. “Don't know what you mean.”

“Sure you do.” He eased out slow and teased her with the head of his cock, letting it slide forward over her hot little button and dragging it back when she moaned. “I know there's more to your story, and you're gonna tell me or I'm gonna walk away. Leave you here, ready to blow like a box of old dynamite.”

She strained against his hold on her. “You're bluffing. You want to come inside me, just like any other man.” Her words sounded like bravado, but the pleading note in her voice said different.

“Yeah, that's a natural fact. But I'll take my own right hand if I have to.” He leaned over her, fighting the urge to pin her to the bed with his cock, and whispered in her ear. “Tell me. You're not goin' anywhere 'til you do.”

The effort it took to string the words together made his head ache as hard as his balls. If she didn't give soon, *he* was the one liable to explode.

He knew the moment she gave in. Felt it as sure as he'd ever felt a green mare finally settle into his touch. The fine trembling of her body under his hands fell away to nothing, and the muscles in her back twisted once and relaxed. She made a noise like the wind through sage grass. “You're a rotten sonofabitch, Frost.”

“We can talk about my mamma later, darlin'. Tell me.”

She sighed again. “I set up the kidnapping to get myself off the

compound. Dangled a big ransom in front of one of DuSourde's foot-soldiers, *st*? Told him we could split it. Worked like a charm."

"And?" He pressed into her, slow and steady, as a reward for her truthfulness. And because his balls felt like they were fixin' to cry.

"And the bastard *idiot*a dragged me over Arizona, New Mexico and Texas before he got cold feet and dumped me with no money in that boardinghouse where Maxie found me."

"Where is he now?" He let his hand wander from her hip to the place where their bodies were connected. When his fingertips grazed her, she made a sound like a cat in heat.

"Probably dead," she said, panting around the syllables. She pressed her face into her arm, muffling her next words. "That's all I've got, Kit."

He believed her, and the reality of her breaking beneath him snapped his last splinter of control. All at once he was pounding her like it was their last hour on earth. Stray thoughts, like cows gone wandering through a busted length of fence, drifted across his brain as he pumped into her—thoughts like *never-been-like-this* and *nothing-so-hot* and *so-wet* and *Christ-almighty-so-fucking-good*.

She sobbed and rocked into him against the pull of the belt. When she finally peaked, her cunt felt like the hand of heaven closing on his cock and yanking the come right out of him. A yellow starburst exploded behind his eyes, and his hips humped against her like they belonged to some other man. He heard himself grunting her name, but it was all far away and past his caring. All that mattered was the *now-yes-God-so-good* of it, for both of them.

Then it was over, and he was lying on her like a wet sack of feed. She made a noise that sounded like distress, and he pulled himself off her. He thought about getting her untied, but had no faith in the notion of making his hands work. "You all right?"

"*St*." The rasp in her voice made his cock pulse, like it had some idea of making another stand. "Yes."

He scrubbed at his face and thought about warm, soapy water. "Come on. Let's get you un-trussed."

She looked at him over her shoulder. Was that really a smile she was sending his way?

“Moo,” was all she said.

The bathwater lapped at his knees where they rose out of the tub on either side of her legs. “How old were you?” he asked her. His words bounced off the marble tiles.

“When DuSourde took me from Senorita Josefina’s?”

He nodded and pressed his chin into the top of her head.

“Twenty. I thought I was lucky. I was going to be a princess,” she said. “That was seven years ago.”

He tightened his arms around her and let the subject drop.

“What about you?” Her voice was slow and lazy, sounding like they’d just fucked each other stupid. Which they had.

“What *about* me?”

“You know all my secrets, but I think I haven’t heard all yours, *sí*?” She lifted a soapy washcloth and squeezed it over her breasts.

“That man in the ballroom mentioned a vow, and Maxie said—”

“You don’t want to hear about that.”

She stiffened in his arms, her hands freezing around the washcloth. He sighed and held her closer, pressing a kiss to her hair.

“You always so mulish?”

“Says the last do-or-die *vaquero* on earth.”

He took a moment to gather his thoughts. Then he shifted so that he could look into her eyes, reckoning he owed her that much.

“You recall what I told you over dinner—the part about ridin’ herd in Angel Fire and wakin’ up in New Houston?”

She nodded.

“Told the same story to a man in San Antone. He called me a liar. I knocked his dick in the dirt, but he came up swingin’ a pig-sticker, looking to cut me. I took it away from him and finished him.” The memory of the man’s face skittered across his mind.

“That was the first.”

“And then?” She settled her head against his chest, plainly ready to listen.

“And then I used the red-backs I won at poker to buy a pulse-pistol. Daddy always said I was a hell of a shot.” He shifted again, sloshing water against the side of the tub. “Got drunk on whiskey and plain meanness. Full of hate for anyone who crossed me, and half the folks who didn’t. Worked as a hired gun for whoever could pay. Got a reputation as a man to be feared.”

“The Killing Frost.” She whispered it. Her voice no longer sounded lazy. Just sad. “But what about the vow?”

She wasn’t going to let it go. The best thing to do was tell it quick and get it finished. Maybe get in one more good fuck before he sent her on her way. Tie her face-up this time, if she wanted, so he could look at her eyes when she came. He thought maybe he’d like that.

He cleared his throat. “Two years ago, I was in New Orleans. Heard tell of a fortune-teller with a knack for knowin’ what she shouldn’t.” He closed his eyes and remembered the inside of the woman’s apartment—how it smelled of smoke and blood and magic. “Wanted to see if there was any way back to New Mexico Territory. Any way back to my folks.”

“And?”

“And she lit a candle and laid out some cards. Then she started talkin’ in my Momma’s voice.”

“She channeled your mother?”

“Near as I could tell.” It sounded crazy. He knew that. Was she thinking he was insane, after all?

“What did your Momma say?” she asked, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. When he didn’t answer, she sat up and turned to look at him. “Kit?”

He glanced away. “Momma was cryin’. Said it grieved her to see how her good boy had turned into a stone killer. Said I was in peril of losin’ my soul.” He felt his throat begin to close and coughed again. “Momma always did have a powerful feeling for right and wrong.”

The woman in his arms stared at him a long moment. Then she leaned forward and pressed a kiss to his jaw. “I bet she still loves

you. No matter what you did. Mothers are like that.” Her voice was quiet and even, and he could tell she meant every word. It gave him what he needed to finish his story.

“After that, I started havin’ bad dreams. Her voice every night, beggin’ me to go straight.” The familiar pain started low in his belly and spread through his chest. He took a deep breath to clear it. “I lost my taste for killin’. Made a vow in front of a preacher from Phoenix that I’d never take another life, no matter what.”

“And?” Her body felt tense next to his.

“And I haven’t. It made the bad dreams go away.”

When Lourdes’ spoke next, her voice was barely above a whisper. “You think it’s enough? To send you back to your old life, I mean. To make the *Angel Fire* magic work again?”

He laughed and knew it sounded bitter. “I gave up on that a long while back. There’s no fix for the fix I’m in—but that don’t mean I can’t try to deserve it.”

They were quiet for a while. The water began to cool around them, and a fine rash of gooseflesh rose on her shoulders. He lifted her out of the tub and helped her dry off, loving the feeling of her skin beneath his hands. She moaned low in her throat when he pressed his fingers into the marks around her wrists. It made him want to bend her over the tub... but she had to be sore. And tired. And there were things that needed talking about.

“You got a place to go?” he asked her. “If I give you money to get there?”

She nodded, as if she’d been expecting his question. Then he felt her fingernails dig into his arm. “I’ll never be able to repay you—”

“Hush.”

Her face creased with worry. “But DuSourde—”

“You let me fret about him. I’ll return the advance he paid me and tell him you gave me the slip. If he sees reason—”

“He won’t. He’ll kill you just to watch you die.” Her nails pressed deeper into his arm. “You have to promise me you’ll run. Don’t go to DuSourde. Go... anywhere. Canada, Australia, the

moon if you have to.”

She stared at him, her eyes black as a bad-luck kitty. He couldn't look away. Finally, he nodded, hating the lie in the gesture.

Then he lifted her into his arms, carried her to the bed and set her down. “We should sleep. Tomorrow's lookin' like a long day.”

Her hand reached out to caress the belt where it lay coiled on the bed. It made his cock twitch to see it.

She smiled at him, slow and dark like sweet sin. “We can sleep when we're dead.”

There Came a Killing Frost: Chapter 6

Lourdes shifted in her seat and winced at the soreness between her legs. She felt well-used— well-fucked, to be precise. It would be days before the discomfort faded. The memory would last longer. With any luck, maybe forever.

Closing her eyes, she let the forward motion of the rocket-train soothe her and tried to quit thinking about Frost. Better to focus on her destination—Miami. Not home, but close enough. She could get lost in a city like that. She could make friends who would help her... women like her who were hiding from dangerous men. Miami was full of them.

She was almost free.

So why did she feel more empty and alone than ever before? And what was that sensation of dread gnawing at the edges of her nerves? Something left undone. Or unsaid. Or... said but not meant?

Frost's face flashed inside her head. The way he'd looked when they'd said goodbye at the station—cold and stiff, his mouth a hard line. He'd refused to meet her eyes. Had barely touched her after they'd awakened tangled together on the bed. Had called her "ma'am" and "miss," but never "Lourdes," when she'd grown so fond of her name on his lips as he spilled in her twice more after their bath.

Wrong... something in the way they'd parted felt... so wrong. When it came to her, she cursed herself for a fool.

He'd lied. He had no intention of going to Canada or Australia. No thought of avoiding DuSourde. Not Kit Frost, the last remaining cowboy. He didn't run and hide from anyone.

"Damn him, *el cabrón estúpido*."

He would die. Slowly and after suffering days of the most brutal torture, if DuSourde could manage it. The realization made her hands tremble. Made her teeth clench and her insides go cold with fear.

And why did she care, exactly? Why was her belly threaten-

ing to twist itself inside out at the thought of the stubborn *vaquero* facing that monster? It wasn't like she owed him anything... more than a life worth living. Guilt and obligation? Was that it? It felt like something more, but she had no time to examine her heart for answers.

She grabbed the arm of a passing porter. "What's the next stop?"

"New Orleans, ma'am. Five minutes."

When they eased to a halt at the New Orleans station, she bolted. Maybe, if she was quick enough to board the next west-bound train, she could still catch him. Maybe... if she was very lucky. And maybe she was a fool walking into another trap. But the ache of fear and loss building in her chest said she didn't have a choice.

She paused at the corner of the platform and was digging in her bag for the cash Frost had given her when a hand closed around the back of her neck.

"Hello there, chicken. Fancy meeting you here."

She caught a single glimpse of Maxie's evil grin before the stab of a hypodermic needle made the world tilt and darken and fly up, up and away...

There Came a Killing Frost: Chapter 7

“I’m very disappointed, Mr. Frost. Very disappointed indeed.”

Kit stood on the veranda of the San Joaquin Valley compound, facing DuSourde and flanked by six of the man’s soldiers. A fleet of state-of-the-art quadcoptors and mini-jets sat on the strip behind him. They’d taken Maxie’s pistol off him, first thing. Which was fine. He had no use for it.

DuSourde wasn’t what he’d expected in someone so rich and powerful. In his late sixties, with a face like a dried apple and a voice like a mosquito’s whine, the man didn’t inspire a lot of fear. But you could see the snake-mean spitefulness under his smile and fancy clothes.

“I’m right sorry to have made you unhappy, Mr. DuSourde.” Kit knew he didn’t sound sorry, but he didn’t much care. Didn’t care about anything, in fact. Not the men with their weapons drawn and pointed at him, nor the threats DuSourde made when Kit couldn’t tell where his “Lolly” had run to.

“Don’t tell me where you’re goin’,” he’d said to her, back at the train station in New Houston. “Just make the ticket and... go.” Because if he didn’t know, he couldn’t tell. No matter what they did to him to make him talk.

“Promise me you’ll go, too. Far, far away,” she’d said. “You have to promise, *vaquero*.”

He’d nodded again, afraid to look at her. Afraid she’d see the lie in his eyes. He’d looked up instead, at the sky beyond the clear dome that covered the city. The clouds there still looked choked with green poison from the chemical plant explosions a generation ago. Why was he still drawing breath in this dirty, broken world? Better he should go out now. In a blaze of glory, like a song he’d heard on some jukebox, in a bar he couldn’t recall.

“Take care of yourself, you hear?” he’d said to her.

She hadn’t answered. Just squeezed his hand once and slipped away. He tried not to take it to heart. She was just Thierry DuSourde’s whore, after all. That’s what he told himself. The hollow

place in his chest didn't mean a thing.

And now here he was. He'd come to the compound to try and make DuSourde see reason. And if he couldn't? Well, he reckoned there were some folks who just needed to bleed out in the dirt. And maybe he—Kit 'Killing' Frost, who couldn't seem to find his way back to that simple cowpoke he'd lost ten years ago—was one of 'em.

No, he didn't care... didn't care about anything... right up to the point where Maxie appeared around the corner of the building, dragging Lourdes with her.

Then he cared a bunch.

"Look who I found sneaking around the New Orleans train station, boss." Maxie looked as happy as he'd ever seen her. Cold-hearted bitch. Lourdes's face had that slack, drugged look to it.

Kit's heart thumped against his chest like an ornery mule at a closed barn door. When he spoke again, he didn't have to try to make his voice hard and cold, like he meant business. It echoed across the veranda like stone dug from under the North Pole. To himself, he sounded like the old Kit Frost—the one who killed without a second thought. And maybe that's who he was, in that moment.

"Let her go, DuSourde," he said. "I'm only tellin' you once."

"You're a very funny man," DuSourde said. "Isn't he funny, Maxie?"

"Hilarious." Maxie gave Lourdes a shove that landed her in a heap on the floor. "You guys better watch yourselves. This is the Killing Frost we've got here. A truly dangerous *hombre*."

He sensed rather than saw DuSourde's soldiers shift closer to him. Keeping his eyes on Lourdes, he said, "I got no quarrel with you boys. Put your weapons down and walk away, and you won't get hurt."

They all laughed at him, like he was the best joke they'd heard in a month. The air on the veranda crackled with the threat of death. If he didn't make a quick move, he'd be the one dying—which was fine. But Lourdes would have it worse. She'd have to go

on living. With DuSourde.

“You’re an armed intruder on my land, Mr. Frost,” DuSourde said. “There’s no one to stand up for you and say different. The law says I can do anything I wish to you, here in the Valley of the Gun.”

Kit nodded. “That’s so. I guess a man with no balls has to get his kicks where he can.”

DuSourde’s smile fell away. He made a noise like a stomped chicken, and a gesture that could only mean one thing—*kill him*.

In Kit’s experience, there came a time when thinking just got in a man’s way. When everything narrowed to grabbing the nearest weapon—in this case, a pulse-pistol from the hand of a soldier who was an instant too slow on the uptake—and taking out seven men and a woman. A time when killing for the sake of killing became killing for a reason, and that reason had the blackest eyes he’d ever seen. Eyes that saw down deep to the truth of him, and didn’t blink. If he’d ever had a reason to kill before, Lourdes beat them all.

And then they were all down, and DuSourde himself was nothing more than smoking pile on the floor of the veranda. Kit moved toward Lourdes, where she sat in the corner looking dazed, but alive. A moan to his right made him stop. Maxie’s yellow hair was spread out across the floorboards. She wasn’t dead, but the scorched, oozing hole in the center of her chest told him it wouldn’t be long.

She looked up at him with her absinthe eyes and tried to smile. “Damn you to hell, Kit Frost.”

“More than likely.” He knelt beside her. “I’m sorry, Maxie.”

“Take me with you, Kit.” Her voice was an ugly rasp. “I can fuck you better than that little whore from Havana. She’ll only dump you when she’s done with you.” Blood bubbled between her lips. Her body heaved and writhed on the floor. When she stilled, he knew she was gone.

“Still ain’t that lonely, Maxie.” He reached out and gently closed her eyes.

“She’s wrong, you know,” Lourdes said from where she stood

behind him. He turned and looked up at her.

“Is she?”

“Sí.”

He nodded. “You all right?”

“A little thirsty. But I think we’d better go before the rest of Du-Sourde’s men show up.” She leaned down, reached into the pocket of Maxie’s vest and fetched out a set of keys. “You know how to pilot a quadcopter?”

He stood and pulled her against him, that hollow place in his chest flooding with something he didn’t dare name. “I reckon I can give it go.”

There Came a Killing Frost: Chapter 8

He used a length of drapery cord to tie her hands this time, and lifted her legs over his shoulders. Then he fucked her like a man fucks a woman eight hours after they've both survived certain death.

"Ay, *Madre de Dios*, so good. Don't stop."

He smiled and breathed hot against her face. "You might live to regret that, missy. I can go a long time." He ground himself into her, slow and hard, then teased her with shallow thrusts that made her writhe in frustration. Used his fingers on her clit to push her so far... but no farther. She felt used, and somehow cherished, even when she begged him to let her come and he laughed at her, the merciless bastard.

She found herself babbling nonsense in Spanish. Pleading with him one moment, telling him she loved him the next, and hoping he was too far gone to understand. When he finally let her come, she lost control—sobbing, calling his name and feeling wrung out with pleasure. Then his muscles locked and she felt the wet heat as he shot inside her. He mumbled something in her ear. It sounded like "*I love you, too.*"

Later, after he'd untied her and they lay pressed together on the hotel bed, the raucous sounds of the French Quarter drifting through the open window, she sorted through the questions in her head.

"What about your vow, Kit? You broke it." She cleared her throat. "You killed those men, and Maxie and DuSourde. Because of me."

There was a long pause. She wondered if he'd fallen asleep. When he finally spoke, his voice was quiet. "Sometimes you have to do a bad thing for a good reason. The right reason." He reached over and tilted her chin up so she could see his face. "The only reason."

"But—"

"I killed DuSourde on account of his bein' an evil sonofabitch.

His men and Maxie—well, they could've set down their weapons. Can't say I didn't give 'em that chance." He gathered her close to him and rested his chin on the top of her head. "Besides, I reckon there's all manner of detours on the road to redemption."

"Is that what I am to you?" She held her breath, afraid of his reply. What if this had only been a victory fuck—fun but meaningless? What if his "*I love you*" had been her own wishful thinking? What if he was gone when she woke in the morning?

"You need me to prove somethin'?" His voice held an edge of amusement. "Give me ten minutes, and I'll tie you to that balcony out there. Give the locals a show." He shifted and twisted 'til he could grin into her face. "You're a sight to see when you're all hot and bothered, and pullin' on those ropes. Bet I could charge a buck a head—"

"Answer the question, Kit."

His grin faded. "You wanna know if I think you're a detour on my road to redemption?"

She nodded. Tears had collected in the corners of her eyes. She willed them to stay put and not spill, determined to suffer the breaking of her heart with some small bit of dignity.

"You're more like what I'd call a shortcut, darlin'." He gathered her against him, tucking her head into his neck and stroking his hand up and down her back. "That sound about right?"

The whore from Havana blinked away her silly tears and smiled a secret smile. "I reckon so, *vaquero*. I reckon so."

About the author:

Selah March was born, grew up, and continues to reside in the northeastern United States. She holds a degree in English literature, and has been writing fiction for several years. A wife and mother of three, she enjoys solitude, long walks after nightfall, and the bracing rigors of a six-month-long winter.



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